

# After Assad: The Future of Syria

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Articles & Testimony

## A former Trump administration official outlines the most important steps Washington can take to encourage Syria's new government while systematically verifying that Damascus is living up to its commitments.

**T**he following are prepared remarks submitted to the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa.

The December 2024 fall of Syria's Assad regime represents an enormous opportunity for the region and the United States. Syria under Hafiz al-Assad was an inaugural member of the State Department list of State Sponsors of Terrorism. Over the course of the regime's more than fifty years in power, Damascus under Hafiz and Bashar al-Assad trucked with Palestinian and Kurdish terrorist organizations as well as Russia and North Korea. Worse, Syria counted Iran as a strategic ally, providing assistance and logistical support to Tehran's leading terror proxy, Lebanese Hezbollah.

Equally problematic was the regime's treatment of the Syrian people. For decades, Hafiz al-Assad administered a world-class police state replete with horrific human rights abuses. Hafiz's best known atrocity was the 1982 Hama massacre, when his forces killed an estimated 40,000 armed Islamist rebels, at times employing carbon monoxide gas. He was outdone by his son and successor, Bashar, who in an effort to extinguish a popular uprising between 2011 and 2024 killed more than 500,000 mostly civilians and forced some 14 million other Syrians into exile.

On several occasions during the rebellion, Bashar deployed sarin and chlorine gas and other chemical agents to subdue his opponents. Years earlier, aided by North Korea and perhaps Iran, Assad's Syria attempted to develop nuclear weapons—an endeavor ended in 2007 when Israel bombed the regime's secret facility in al-Kibar.

Along the way, the Assad regime actively sought to destabilize its neighbors as a matter of policy. Syria was a

sanctuary for PKK and Palestinian terrorists targeting Turkey, Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon. Syria brutally occupied Lebanon for nearly thirty years. Then, after departing, the Assad regime backed Hezbollah's domination of that state. Assad also flooded Iraq with al-Qaeda and other flavors of insurgents in the lead-up to the 2003 U.S. invasion, killing American soldiers in addition to thousands of (predominantly Shia) Muslims. More recently, Assad's Syria emerged as a narco-trafficking hub, with disastrous effects for Jordan and much of the region.

The Assad regime was cruel, and its list of misdeeds long. For the vast majority of Syrians as well as Washington and its partners, the regime's demise is a welcome development. Russia, which supported Bashar in his efforts to repress the revolution, is poised to lose influence with the new administration in Damascus—and perhaps its military bases. Iran, too, is unwelcome in the new Syria. Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Iraqi militia proxies no longer have *carte blanche* in Syria. And Hezbollah in Lebanon, which supported Assad's military operations, can no longer use Syrian territory as a logistical center to stock its arsenal.

Notwithstanding the clear benefits of the regime's departure and the potential strategic watershed moment, the picture is not all rosy. Post-Assad Syria faces enormous challenges, and it is far from certain that its nascent president Ahmed al-Sharaa will succeed in transforming Syria into a functional, stable, and successful state. At the same time, notwithstanding a relatively positive first five months leading the country, questions persist about what kind of Syria Sharaa envisions.

## Sharaa's Background and Intentions

The new leader's biography is familiar by now. Previously a Salafi jihadist and member of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Sharaa—then known by his nom de guerre Abu Muhammad al-Jolani—was incarcerated by U.S. forces from 2006 to 2011. Later in Syria, he served as leader of the terrorist organizations Jabhat al-Nusra and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and was listed as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in 2013. Along the way, Jolani killed Iraqis, Syrians, and perhaps Americans.

Jolani broke with al-Qaeda in 2016. In Idlib province, where his HTS governed for eight years prior to Bashar al-Assad's ouster, Jolani seemed to pursue a more tolerant brand of Islamist rule. Not only did Jolani fight both the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda, he pledged not to support foreign terrorist operations. Under Jolani, the administration in Idlib ended the implementation of *hudoud* punishments associated with sharia (Islamic law). Moral policing in Idlib likewise ceased in 2021. To be sure, during this period, there were reports of human rights abuses and little patience for popular dissent, but HTS provided adequate services to the local population through what some scholars have described as a technocratic civilian administration.

Since coming to power, Sharaa has said a lot of the right things. He has raised the need for an inclusive, transparent government and a popular political process to inform the new constitution, and he has spoken about women's rights and human rights. He has also said that sharia restrictions would not be imposed on minorities. So far, there is no forced hijab for women, and alcoholic beverages can still be found in Damascus bars.

Yet concerns about governance and the treatment of minorities remain. Syria's temporary constitution ratified by Sharaa has been widely panned for its lack of inclusivity, absence of protections for minorities, and emphasis on executive powers. Some fear the document will reinforce Sharaa's burgeoning authoritarian tendencies. Minorities are also troubled by the constitution's designation of Islam as the main source of legislation. Still others point to Sharaa's nepotistic inclinations. To wit, in April, he appointed his brother Maher as secretary-general of the presidency; in May, he brought his businessman brother Hazem to Saudi Arabia as part of the official Syrian delegation to meet Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (aka MbS).

While Sharaa initially sought to assuage the concerns of Syria's Christian, Druze, and Kurdish communities, a series of violent sectarian and communal clashes with the new government's forces have exacerbated fears among Syria's

minorities. After former Assad regime elements targeted government security forces in March, armed militias supporting the new government reportedly killed over 1,600 Alawite civilians and armed opposition elements. Less than two months later, government forces and affiliated militias clashed with the Druze communities in Jaramana and Sahnaya. The violence was sparked by a fabricated recording of a Druze sheikh cursing the Prophet Muhammad. At least 100 people were reportedly killed over two days of fighting.

These government-associated militias—reportedly brimming with foreign fighters and unrepentant Salafi jihadists—remain a principal source of concern for Syrians and the United States. Sharaa’s initial incorporation of foreign jihadists—including an ethnic Albanian U.S.-designated terrorist from North Macedonia, a Dagestani, an Egyptian, a Jordanian Palestinian, Tajiks, and Chinese Uyghurs—into key positions in Syria’s new military also raises questions about the future disposition of the military.

Along these lines, Syrian Kurds are also not reassured. The U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led partner force in the fight against IS—the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—entered into an agreement with Sharaa this past March to integrate into the Syrian military. In May, however, Sharaa’s government appointed Abu Hatim Shaqra as commander of the 86th Army Division, responsible for much of the northeast. Shaqra, a militiaman in the U.S.-designated terrorist organization Ahrar al-Sharqiya, was implicated in the trafficking of Yazidi women and children in Iraq, as well as the execution of Syrian Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf. The appointment of Shaqra, whose militia perpetrated significant atrocities against Syrian Kurds, was not a reassuring message of coexistence.

## Policy Challenges

**T**he new government in Damascus faces a host of pressing problems. Social cohesion and communal relations have emerged as a significant challenge. Sharaa appears relatively tolerant and extremely pragmatic, yet his government is replete with Islamist ideologues who appear to have little regard for Syria’s ethnic-religious mosaic. The same goes for reestablishing a semblance of security. Large areas of Syrian territory remain outside the control of the central government, and segments of the population are reluctant to disarm and put themselves at the mercy of Islamist militias associated with the new government. It will be difficult for Sharaa to convince Syrian minorities of his government’s good intentions. It will be even more difficult to compel these communities to disarm by force.

An equally significant challenge is the economy. Today, over 90 percent of Syrians live below the poverty line, an estimated 30 percent of housing has been destroyed, and the state can provide only two hours per day of electricity in the capital. The combination of years of civil war and crippling sanctions imposed on the Assad regime severely constrained economic life in Syria. Sharaa faces the daunting prospect of rebuilding a devastated Syria while jumpstarting a lifeless economy.

Finally, ongoing robust Israeli military actions are complicating Sharaa’s efforts to reestablish control over the state. No doubt, Israel is concerned about the Islamist nature of Sharaa’s government and has taken proactive measures—including occupying some Syrian territory and carrying out more than 700 airstrikes targeting individuals and installations—to mitigate the perceived threat. Recently reported direct talks between Israel and the Sharaa administration could start to alleviate mistrust, help avoid kinetic military activity, and work toward a more normal relationship along the border.

## The Initial U.S. Approach

**T**he Trump administration initially viewed Sharaa with great skepticism. In February, Deputy Assistant to the President and Director of Counterterrorism at the National Security Council Sebastian Gorka expressed doubts about Sharaa’s apparent political transformation. “In my twenty-four years of studying jihadist movements,” he told Alhurra, “I have never seen a successful jihadist leader evolve into a democrat or embrace a representative government.” The view, in short, was “once a jihadist, always a jihadist.” Concerned that continued imposition of

crippling U.S. sanctions with no off-ramp would become a self-fulfilling prophecy—i.e., that abjuring from engagement would ensure the failure and subsequent radicalization of Syria—the administration pivoted to a more nuanced approach.

In March, State Department Deputy Secretary for the Levant Natasha Franceschi delivered a memo to Syrian Foreign Minister Assad al-Shaibani outlining U.S. expectations (<https://syrianobserver.com/foreign-actors/syria-and-the-eight-american-demands-diplomacy-security-and-a-shifting-balance.html>) of the new government in Damascus. For U.S. sanctions to be lifted, Sharaa would have to meet eight demands:

1. The formation of a professional, unified Syrian army with no foreign fighters in key command roles.
2. Full access to all chemical weapons facilities and associated infrastructure.
3. The establishment of a committee to investigate the fate of missing Americans, including Austin Tice.
4. The repatriation of IS family members currently detained at al-Hol camp, under the control of the SDF.
5. Sustained cooperation with the U.S.-led international coalition in the fight against IS.
6. Authorization for the United States to conduct counterterrorism operations on Syrian territory targeting individuals it deems threats to national security.
7. A public declaration banning all Palestinian militias and political activities in Syria, accompanied by the deportation of their members in a bid to address Israeli security concerns.
8. A commitment to preventing Iranian military entrenchment in Syria and formally designating the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization.

Sharaa's government fulfilled some of these requests. Damascus committed to cooperating with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), and OPCW deployed a team to Syria in March. Damascus is said to be working with Washington to investigate the whereabouts of Tice and has helped repatriate other Americans in Syria. Sharaa's government is fighting IS and reportedly has an ongoing, productive liaison with U.S. counterterrorism officers, exchanging information and interdicting threats. In January, Iranians were banned from travel to Syria. There are currently no direct flights between the capitals, and diplomatic relations have been frozen since Assad was deposed. Moreover, in April, Damascus arrested two senior officials of the U.S.-designated terrorist organization Palestinian Islamic Jihad. In May, AFP reported that leaders of several other Palestinian terrorist groups had departed Syria after they were "harassed" by authorities and effectively banned from operating.

However, other important U.S. requests remain unsatisfied, chief among them the matter of foreign fighters (and U.S.-designated terrorists) occupying key positions in the Syrian military. Nevertheless, the administration's policy of conditioned sanctions relief did not last long.

## The New U.S. Approach

**D**uring his trip to Riyadh, Trump met with Sharaa, and—at the behest of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and MbS—made the surprising announcement that the United States would lift sanctions to "give Syria a chance." The May 13 pronouncement suspended, at least temporarily, a raft of U.S. sanctions, some of which had been in place since 1979.

Trump's sudden reversal in policy was reminiscent of his December 2018 decision—also after a phone call with Erdogan—to withdraw 1,000 U.S. troops busy fighting IS from eastern Syria. Only 200 soldiers eventually redeployed, but the abrupt change in course has resonant similarities. In both cases, senior administration officials reportedly were not informed prior to the announcement.

As Secretary of State Marco Rubio later explained, the change in course was necessary, as Syria was only weeks away

from “potential collapse and a full-scale war of epic proportions.” While the secretary’s rationale may have been a bit hyperbolic, he was essentially correct. Absent some sanctions relief, the prospects for a stable, successful Syria were bleak.

The administration is now lifting some sanctions—such as the Caesar Act measures—by issuing waivers and exemptions. Absent congressional action, however, these sanctions are suspended for just 180 days at a time. While the decision will have some positive impact—just days ago, Qatar announced a \$7 billion deal to develop power plants in the energy-starved state—the limited length of the suspension and the prospect of reimposition may disincentivize larger and longer-term private investments in Syria.

At the same time, the administration has pared down its requests of Sharaa from eight to essentially four demands. These include (1) joining the Abraham Accords with Israel, (2) expelling all foreign terrorist groups (including Palestinian factions) from Syria, (3) assisting the United States with preventing the resurgence of IS, and (4) assuming responsibility for managing IS detention centers.

These are reasonable expectations of Sharaa, to be sure. One notable ask seemingly missing from this list is foreign fighters. (Although these personnel might be included under the “terrorist” category in request #2.) In any event, with the sanctions lifted, Washington will have less leverage going forward to press for implementation of the requests. And it will be more unpalatable for the administration to reimpose sanctions should the Sharaa government fail to comply with U.S. requests.

## Policy Recommendations

**T**ime will tell whether suspending the sanctions was the right decision. A gradual process may have had more success at shaping the new government over time. Or perhaps economic pressures would have scuttled Sharaa’s already improbable attempt to stabilize a fractious and scarred Syria. No doubt, Sharaa is a mixed bag, yet Syria remains a pivotal state, and its trajectory matters greatly to Washington and its regional partners.

The administration’s new Syria envoy Tom Barrack recently re-tweeted a line from President Trump’s May 13 Riyadh address. “Gone are the days when Western interventionists would fly to the Middle East and give lectures on how to live, and how to govern your own affairs,” Trump said. Fair enough. But if post-Assad Syria mistreats its minorities and/or empowers Salafi jihadists in the ranks of the military, millions of Syrian refugees won’t return home, and there is a risk that Syria could revert to its former self—a source of regional instability, with negative implications for U.S. partners Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. The same is true of Sharaa’s obligation to fight IS. Syria should govern its own affairs, but what happens in Syria doesn’t necessarily stay in Syria.

Washington need not “lecture” the new Syrian government. But it should engage with Damascus more frequently and systematically, encouraging Syria to live up to its commitments. As the Trump administration contends with Syria in transition, it would be helpful to keep the following points in mind:

**Mistrust and verify.** Washington has had sanctions on Syria since 1979 for a reason. The Assad regime was a human rights abusing, terrorist supporting, WMD state. Sharaa and Syria deserve a chance, but the new Syria—like the former Syria—should be held accountable for its actions. Progress on performance vis-a-vis the administration’s requests should be benchmarked, and notional timelines set. Should Sharaa persist in staffing the government and military with terrorists, for example, the administration should be prepared to reimpose sanctions. This is not meddling, it is U.S. law.

**Downgrade expectations on governance.** Some had high hopes that post-Assad Syria would emerge as a Jeffersonian democracy. It should be clear now that this is not going to happen. This shouldn’t come as a surprise. Aside from Israel, there isn’t a single democratic government in the Middle East. Best-case scenario, Syria will emerge somewhere on the spectrum of authoritarian states that govern the region. Still, Washington has an interest

in the protection of minorities, a modicum of human rights, and some kind of representation of Syria's ethnic and religious communities. The United States has learned the hard way that Salafi and/or Wahhabi influence on the local education system can result in dangerous spillover.

**Focus on foreign fighters.** Assad would not likely have been deposed without the participation of terrorist militiamen and foreign fighters. Now they are in the system, and Sharaa has more pressing short-term objectives than rooting them out. This is going to be a long-term project but needs to remain on the U.S. agenda. At minimum, a new Syrian Army stacked with jihadists will never consent to Trump's goal of Syria-Israel peace. It will also prevent the kind of national reconciliation required for Syrian society to heal from the civil war.

**Ascertain Israel's strategy.** In the aftermath of October 7, Israel is a lot more proactive in its self-defense. This is currently playing out in Syria, where Israel is occupying swaths of territory, targeting government forces south of Damascus, and articulating a newfound interest in protecting minority communities—an inclination that Israel lacked during the entire fourteen years of the Syrian civil war. Israel's concerns about Sharaa's intentions are understandable, but its current actions in Syria appear to be exacerbating instability, undermining what the United States and its Gulf partners are working to achieve. Indeed, it is unclear what Israel's strategy is in Syria. The reported Israeli-Syrian talks could be helpful in building trust and scaling back some of Israel's more forward-leaning kinetic activities in Syria. No one should be asking Israel to return to the 2024 borders just yet, but the administration should be asking some hard questions about what Jerusalem is hoping to accomplish in Syria, where the new government has repeatedly stated that it has "no problem with Israel."

**Prevent spheres of military influence.** One of the reasons why Israel is so active in Syria is that Turkey is active in Syria. Israel and Turkey are not friends; indeed, they are hostiles. The Trump administration reportedly believes that Israel and Turkey should carve Syria up into spheres of influence. Officials of these states recently met in Azerbaijan to come to some understandings about deconfliction. But Israel bordering on Turkey would seem to be a recipe for misunderstandings and heightened tensions. The Trump administration should be engaging with Ankara and Jerusalem to minimize foreign intervention in Syria. More immediately, Washington should be pressing Israel and Turkey to establish a hotline to preempt unintentional escalation.

**Manage competition.** Along these lines, MbS and Erdogan are regional rivals and rarely seem to agree on issues. Together, they convinced Trump to lift sanctions on Syria. That's largely because both Turkey and Saudi Arabia want to play a bigger political role in the state. This competition will be healthy if both states contend to rebuild the devastated country. It could prove more problematic if Syria becomes a political battleground, with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and perhaps Qatar fighting for political influence over a vulnerable new government. Trump has said he wants "regional solutions" for the region's problems. U.S. uninterest won't benefit long-term stability in Syria.

**Keep the Russians out.** Moscow helped Assad murder 500,000 civilians, so it wouldn't be surprising if the new government of Syria is disinclined to strategically realign with Russia. Already, Sharaa has cancelled Syria's 2019 contract with the Russian firm STG Engineering to develop Tartus port and signed an \$800 million deal with Dubai Port World at the facility. This disinclination toward Moscow should be encouraged. The Trump administration and Washington's friends in the Gulf should incentivize Damascus to close Russia's naval and air force bases at Tartus and Hmeimim.

**Recognize Shebaa Farms as Syrian territory.** Damascus is indebted to the Trump administration for lifting sanctions. Washington should seize the moment to ask Sharaa to formally file for recognition of Syrian sovereignty over the Shebaa Farms at the United Nations. Israel currently occupies this territory, which Hezbollah claims is Lebanese. Historic maps seem to tell a different story. If Shebaa is Syrian, it would dramatically simplify the delineation of the Lebanon-Israel border, bringing those two states closer to normal, if not peaceful, relations.

**Full-time Syria envoy.** Tom Barrack may be an extremely capable individual, and he clearly has the president's trust. But Barrack is currently U.S. Ambassador to Turkey, the point man in this critical and complicated bilateral relationship. Ambassador to Turkey is a full-time job. So is the position of U.S. envoy to Syria. Just ask former Trump administration Syria envoy Ambassador Jim Jeffrey. In the coming months and years, Syria will need a lot of attention. The administration should consider whether one man can simultaneously do two full-time jobs well. ❖

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