

The New Syria, Year Two: Rebuilding Institutions and Governance

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Ambassador James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. Previously, he served as U.S. special representative for Syria engagement and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey and Iraq.



Brief Analysis

A former U.S. envoy to Syria joins an expert on President Sharaa's ruling faction to discuss how Damascus should approach governance issues one year after the fall of Assad.

On December 4, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Aaron Y. Zelin and James Jeffrey. Zelin is the Institute's Gloria and Ken Levy Senior Fellow and author of its new study '[Institutions and Governance in the New Syria: Continuity and Change from the Idlib Model](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/institutions-and-governance-new-syria-continuity-and-change-idlib-model)' (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/institutions-and-governance-new-syria-continuity-and-change-idlib-model>). Jeffrey, the Institute's Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow, formerly served as U.S. special representative for Syria and ambassador to Turkey and Iraq. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Aaron Y. Zelin

Now that the United States is poised to remove its Caesar Act sanctions in order to alleviate Syria's economic strain, the transitional government's main focus in year two should be institution building and governance development. Despite progress on these fronts over the past year, concerns persist about the emergence of a shadow government and informal economic network similar to the wartime model established in Idlib province by President Ahmed al-Sharaa's former group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). In particular, the government's opaque economic system and concentration of decisionmaking within the Foreign Ministry's General Secretariat for Political Affairs have impeded transparency and heightened the risk of corruption.

For example, the government has made visible progress on rebuilding roads, removing excessive checkpoints established by the former regime, and rehabilitating water pipes and other infrastructure. Yet many Syrian citizens have had to invest inordinate personal efforts to restore damaged property, exemplifying the gaps in national reconstruction policy. Additionally, despite efforts to increase transparency in reconstruction financing, the government still lacks robust accountability and monitoring mechanisms for such funding. Another big challenge is ensuring transparent transitional justice following a deeply traumatic civil war and decades of abuses during the Assad era.

As the new government enters its second year, it should prioritize expanding its institutional capacity and minimizing corruption. For instance, Damascus should empower lower-level officials rather than micromanaging them, since this can help develop its governance process and allow local populations to feel like they are part of the system. Moreover, if further sanctions are removed in the coming months as expected, the resultant influx of money will test the government's ability to avoid corruption, making transparent financial reporting and budgeting all the more critical.

The United States can encourage the development of Syria's institutional capacity and transparency by providing technical assistance that Damascus has requested. For example, the Treasury Department should help Syria's Central Bank with tasks such as combating institutional corruption, establishing a Financial Intelligence Unit, and developing anti-money laundering/counter-terrorist financing policies. If complications emerge in the partnership, Washington should not fall back on sanctions that were devised to deal with the Assad regime; instead, it should design new tools appropriate to the new Syria. In the meantime, U.S. officials should encourage the new government's development, giving it an opportunity to demonstrate responsibility at home and abroad.

James Jeffrey

Following the degradation of Iran's regional power projection capabilities, stabilizing Syria is the most critical issue facing the Middle East. As demonstrated under the Assad regime, continued instability there could result in expanded international terrorist threats, unfettered smuggling of Captagon to neighboring countries, and major foreign intervention in Syrian affairs, which must not be repeated. The United States will play a crucial role in helping Damascus guide its domestic and international affairs toward stability. In year two of the transition, Syria's most important benchmarks for such progress include reaching a security agreement with Israel, integrating the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into the national army, expanding efforts to counter the Islamic State, and preventing sectarian violence.

Toward these goals, Washington must lead the international community in supporting Syrian government efforts to consolidate authority over various ethnic and religious groups—a task that requires coherent messaging and deft on-the-ground diplomacy. This means coordinating with the most important external actors (i.e., Turkey, Israel, and key Arab states) and speaking to the new government with one voice, including on vital Druze and Kurdish issues. Helping Damascus with local and national governance issues will be especially crucial for enticing minority groups to integrate; in return, these groups must recognize the state's sovereignty by ceding control over border crossings and oil exports.

Washington's diplomatic successes in Syria over the past year have been considerable, but now these achievements must be institutionalized with the help of international partners. A good first step would be to align these partners with U.S. policy by establishing a Syria contact group that includes select European and Arab countries. Washington should also provide technical support to key Syrian institutions in the oil and banking sectors.

As U.S. relations with the new Syria deepen in year two, Israel will need to clarify its own strategy there. Thus far, its military operations in Syria (including strikes in Damascus) have been incongruent with its political aims—namely, enhancing border security, preventing Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies from returning, and gaining access to Syrian airspace. Addressing this inconsistency and explaining its true objectives would serve both Israeli and regional interests.

Regardless of strategic clarity, however, Israel is unlikely to collide with Turkey over their increasingly divergent Syria interests. In addition to safeguarding their relations with the United States, both countries tend to prefer the status quo, and both share security concerns regarding the risks posed by terrorism and Iranian proxies.

This summary was prepared by Colette Smith. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family. ❖

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Aaron Y. Zelin

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