

# Syria at a Crossroads: U.S. Policy Challenges Post-Assad

by [James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](#)

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.



Articles & Testimony

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**Damascus will not take the difficult steps to reconcile internal animosities and rebuild destroyed infrastructure unless outside supporters—led by the United States—speak with one voice about their expectations and red lines.**

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**T**oday, Syria is the most important front in the American and overall international effort to stabilize the Middle East for the long term following the two-year war begun by Hamas’s horrific terrorist attack on Israel. The victory gained by Israel, the United States, and regional allies over Iran and its proxies opens the door to possible sustained peace and development in Syria, as laid out in President Trump’s Riyadh speech. Building on the success of the Biden and first Trump administration’s Syria policies, which helped bring down Bashar al-Assad, the current administration is generally pursuing an effective policy toward that end.

The United States should continue leading the international community to unify and stabilize the new Syrian state. That requires ending internal conflicts, building the economy, keeping Iran and its proxies out, keeping the Islamic State (IS) defeated, and keeping the Russian presence contained. This effort does not require massive American resources, but it does need sustained American attention, particularly to ensure the international community follows common policies. Damascus will only take the difficult but necessary steps to reconcile war-hardened internal animosities and rebuild destroyed infrastructure if those giving support speak with one voice on approaches and requirements. In contrast, competing approaches by outside states would likely produce chaos and failure, as seen during the 2011-24 civil war. It is better to have one mediocre lowest-common-denominator policy followed by all involved states and organizations than three or four allegedly perfect policies colliding with one another.

## Background

Syria has not only been the epicenter of Iran and its proxies' march through the region and, between 2011 and 2024, the scene of the most horrific regional conflict since the Iran-Iraq War; it was also a unique threat to the region long before then. Under the Assads and their predecessors, it attacked Israel in three wars, invaded Jordan in 1970, and occupied Lebanon for decades. It fed thousands of jihadist fighters into Iraq after 2003, and hosted Abdullah Ocalan and thousands of anti-Turkish terrorists from his Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

During its civil war, Syria spawned diverse terrorist groups (notably IS), spread Captagon through the region, and, with its Iranian and Russian allies, rained bombs and chemical shells on its own population, killing approximately 600,000, disappearing, torturing, and interning tens of thousands more, and driving half of its population (some twelve million people) from their homes, six million of whom wound up as refugees stressing neighboring states and much of Europe. In short, as a purveyor of violence and instability, Syria has been in a class of its own in the Arab world, due not to its decent, courageous population but to its atrocious leaders.

## Policy Priorities

U.S. interests in the region—over multiple administrations, and articulated most recently by President Trump in Riyadh last year—include promoting peace, prosperity, and regional cooperation by, with, and through partners, with strong American business, diplomatic, and, if necessary, military support, while resetting overall priorities toward Asia.

Syria is essential to achieving these outcomes given its centrality and the destabilizing role it has played previously. U.S. policy should thus aim for a Syria that is:

- **fully unified;**
- **responsive to its citizens, including minorities;**
- **committed to economic reconstruction and development supported by international cooperation;**
- **willing to maintain friendly relations with all neighbors, including Israel;**
- **supportive of regional efforts to complete the defeat of IS, roll back remaining Iranian influence in the Levant, and contain destabilizing Russian actions.**

In short, the goal is a Syria that advances stability, not strife, internally and externally. To achieve these ends, the United States should continue its leading diplomatic role in Syria and ensure the full coordination of states involved in the country's development, with the goal of unified effort and common messaging to the Syrian government on economic, political, and security policies.

Initial policy priorities for the United States and Syria should be to:

- **reconfigure the international coalition against IS given Syria's entry into that organization and the changed status of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF);**
- **block any Iranian or proxy presence;**
- **finalize a security agreement between Syria and Israel;**
- **implement the January 29 agreement between Damascus and the SDF;**
- **advance individual rights and constitutional reform by building on the quasi-election of a National Assembly, to include formalizing the January presidential decree on Kurdish identity and language rights as well as extending tolerance to other groups;**
- **prioritize early recovery, energy deliveries, and infrastructure refurbishment in coordination with international donors, investors, and assistance sources;**
- **recognize that to ensure U.S. leverage, international reconstruction efforts and other economic and diplomatic support levels must be directly linked to the Syrian government's success on the priorities above.**

## Implementation

The United States has dealt indirectly with Ahmed al-Sharaa and the force he led in Idlib province, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), for almost a decade, despite its—and his—terrorist designations. According to the *New York Times*, U.S. officials have been in indirect contact with him since 2016. In September 2018, the Trump administration approved waivers to continue sending U.S. Agency for International Development assistance

to millions of needy Syrians in Idlib despite HTS control of the province. That same month, the administration—including the president personally and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo—demanded publicly (and in messages to Moscow) a halt to an Assad-Russian-Iranian offensive into Idlib. Those actions resulted in the October 2018 ceasefire in Idlib that allowed HTS to maintain control and the three million displaced persons along the province's border with Turkey to remain in Syria. HTS control of Idlib and effective operations against the Assad regime and IS made it an unofficial ally in resolving the Syrian conflict. Through Western NGOs, the author maintained indirect contact with Sharaa (then known as al-Jolani) between 2018 and the end of 2020.

As president, Sharaa has taken steps to rein in some of his more extreme supporters and limit conflict with minorities, including Alawites, Druze, and Kurds. While fighting has broken out between the Damascus government and those groups, Sharaa eventually brought his forces under control in each case, and he has ensured no repeat of major violence against any of them so far.

Sharaa has also established an indirect elected assembly and new constitutional provisions, and decreed cultural and linguistic rights for Kurds that should be formalized and applied to all Syrians. These are all, at best, imperfect half-measures. Yet much like the new government's efforts to curb internal fighting, these measures should be contrasted not with best-case scenarios, but with the reality of a Syria emerging from a decade-plus of horrific internal war—not to mention with America's experiences elsewhere in the region. In fact, Syria today is more stable and less violent than Iraq was in 2004 during this author's tour there.

**Relations with the Syrian Kurds and the fight against IS.** Given the effective and heroic role that the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces played against the still-dangerous IS, their successful integration into a unified Syria is imperative for both counterterrorism and internal security purposes. Washington also has a moral obligation to ensure that its Kurdish allies are not mistreated by Damascus.

Although the United States has long viewed the Kurds as an effective partner in the fight against IS, it also understood that the SDF's core—the People's Defense Units (YPG)—was the Syrian branch of the PKK. (The YPG itself was never formally listed as a terrorist organization by the United States, but its PKK parent group was a designated anti-Turkish terrorist organization.) The U.S. position toward the SDF, as stated repeatedly and publicly, was that relations were “temporary, tactical, and transactional.” This policy was established to avoid antagonizing NATO ally Turkey and interfering in the future internal structure of Syria. As officials stressed to everyone, including the SDF, the U.S. position toward Syria's future was based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015), which called for a ceasefire, reconciliation, a new constitution, and, eventually, a new government, the return of refugees, and respect for human rights. Importantly, the United States limited its commitment to militarily defend the SDF only against threats from IS and Assad and his allies—not against Turkey, the Syrian opposition, or, subsequently, the Sharaa government.

With the fall of Assad and the establishment of Sharaa's government, much of Resolution 2254 was or is being implemented, including arrangements between the SDF and Damascus for the unity of Syria. Thus, the United States has not changed its position toward the SDF; rather, the overall situation in Syria has changed for the better. Washington now has two partners, Damascus and the SDF, and the chance, with the Syrian people and the international community, to implement the principles of Resolution 2254.

**Governance.** After the tyranny of the Assad regime, domestic stability in Syria will require a high level of citizen participation, protection of human rights, and local governance—which is of particular importance to win the loyalty of the Kurds and other minority groups. The Sharaa government has taken some initial steps on this front, such as avoiding a repeat of serious violence against the Alawites and Druze after initial outbreaks, investigating related allegations of government forces illegitimately using violence, and announcing civil and linguistic rights for the Kurds. The government also initiated indirect elections for a provisional parliament. Yet it needs to do much more to promote true democracy, internal stability, and local self-governance (e.g., Articles 122 and 123 of the 2005 Iraqi constitution offer successful examples of local governance authorities). Measurable progress toward those ends should be a precondition for major reconstruction and other economic support from the United States and other key states.

## Foreign Relations

**Israel.** Securing an agreement between Damascus and Jerusalem is a critical step for regional peace. Such an agreement should include limits to militarization in areas close to their border, analogous to arrangements in the Sinai Peninsula; the pullback of Israeli forces from areas seized after December 2024; understandings on Israeli emergency military operations against third countries; channels of bilateral communication short of diplomatic recognition; and tolerance for limited Israeli support of the Syrian Druze population. While resolution of the Golan Heights issue and related diplomatic recognition are not on the table right now, the two sides should be willing to deal with these issues as relations further improve.

**Russia.** Moscow's efforts to provide oil to Damascus, supply weapons to a Syrian army long wedded to Russian equipment, and maintain its two military bases in Syria will complicate Washington's relations with Damascus. Yet the two biggest outside actors in Syria after the United States—Turkey and Israel—do not appear to see removing Russia as a priority. In fact, some officials in both countries see a Russian presence as a stabilizer given the rivalry between Ankara and Jerusalem (see below). Even so, Russian interference in Syria's domestic affairs or sponsorship of Iranian involvement there must be red lines for both Washington and Damascus.

**Turkey, Israel, and Syria.** In Syria, the rollback of Iran and territorial defeat of IS have brought the two remaining major regional military powers, Turkey and Israel, into direct proximity for the first time. Given the natural friction between these two major American partners and

their deep differences over Gaza, they could stumble into confrontation without sustained high-level U.S. coordination between Jerusalem, Ankara, and Damascus. As noted above, an Israel-Syria arrangement would help calm the situation, but eventually Turkey and Israel must deal directly with each other to manage inevitable tensions.

**Iran.** Tehran and its proxies must remain physically and diplomatically removed from Syria. This must be a sine qua non for U.S.-Syrian relations and, to the extent possible, between other regional states and Damascus. ❖

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