

Cutting Through the Fog of War (and Peace) in Syria

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Articles & Testimony

Clear-eyed recounting and a detailed roadmap can give U.S. officials and the American public a better view of what security and governance measures the new Syrian government has taken so far, and what gaps and pitfalls remain in the path of lasting stability.

The following testimony was submitted to the House Foreign Affairs Committee for its February 10 hearing on “[Syria at a Crossroads](#)” (<https://democrats-foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearings?ID=49AF7F7A-7AF1-48D6-88E9-19CB835A5EF4>).”

Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on the challenges facing Syria fourteen months following the dramatic collapse of the Assad regime. Since assuming office in January 2025, the Trump administration has sought to transform Syria’s government from a longtime foe into an ally capable of stabilizing a country that has seen considerable instability for over a century and, in doing so, cut off Iran’s power projection to the Mediterranean and across the Middle East.

U.S. policy has centered on considerable top-down engagement, including three meetings between President Trump and Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa and record-breaking administration-led efforts to lift U.S. sanctions. Such engagement has been successful at diminishing Iran’s

presence in Syria and fighting the Islamic State (IS), even while Sharaa’s fulfillment of President Trump’s May 2025 five points of engagement has been more **mixed** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sharaa-trumps-five-points-six-months>). During times of crisis concerning the new government’s military moves against minority-dominated armed groups in Syria, U.S. policy has been punctuated more recently by calls from Capitol Hill to reimpose sanctions in defense of the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Kurdish civilians in the northeast, as well as military strikes by neighboring U.S. ally Israel in defense of Druze in the south near Suwayda.

This overwhelmingly “good cop,” selectively “bad cop” approach has helped the Sharaa government consolidate control over more Syrian territory while averting the often uncontrolled sectarian strife that characterized the Syria war and that many feared would follow Assad’s fall. Government moves against the SDF last month, against the Druze National Guard last July, and against Alawite-dominated Assad regime remnants and civilians last March have caused considerable concern in Washington and elsewhere that the emerging Sharaa government in Damascus will be unable to include and accommodate the interests of Syria’s sizeable minority communities. Some have gone so far as to say that the Sharaa government is replacing Assad’s minority-dominated authoritarian regime with one dominated by the country’s majority Sunni Arab population.

Fortunately, we are not yet in that situation. By continuing Washington’s approach while much more closely watching and evaluating developments on the ground, the United States has a hope of achieving President Trump’s vision of giving Syria a chance to succeed, stabilize, and, in doing so, defeat IS and deal a strategic blow to America’s adversaries in Tehran and elsewhere.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in evaluating progress is the myriad of information and disinformation campaigns by supporters and opponents of Sharaa—which, along with recent developments in Syria’s northeast, is why I suspect you have called this hearing. Even people in my hometown of Oil City, Pennsylvania, are beginning to ask questions about what is going on in Syria, why U.S. troops are still there, and who we are handing the country over to.

The committee has asked witnesses to focus on four issues by which to judge progress in Syria and U.S. policy challenges there at this critical juncture, including the Sharaa government’s actions on security force integration, inclusive governance, minority rights, and justice and accountability. I focus my written testimony on the first two issues in support of my oral testimony on all four as an attempt to help you and the American people cut through the fog of war—and hopefully emerging peace—in Syria.

Security Force Integration

Since December 2024, Syria’s interim authorities under Sharaa have pursued rapid security sector consolidation following the collapse of the Assad regime. The stated objective has been to dissolve armed groups and unify them under state institutions, principally the Ministry of Defense (MoD). In parallel, former Assad-era soldiers and officers were offered pathways to demobilize or reenlist using national identification.

While these steps have produced visible institutional architecture, it is unclear if they have resolved the underlying fragmentation of coercive power. Instead, Syria’s security sector now reflects centralized labels layered over unclear factional autonomy.

Integration by reflagging. The December 2024 **agreement** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-al-sharaa-agrees-with-ex-rebel-factions-merge-under-defence-ministry-2024-12-24/>) to dissolve rebel factions and consolidate them under the MoD was presented as a decisive break with militia rule. In practice, armed groups were absorbed largely **intact as units** (<https://www.syriarevisited.com/p/the-new-syrian-army-structure-and>), retaining internal command structures and cohesion. The **Institute for the Study of War** (https://understandingwar.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/The-New-Syrian-Army-Order-of-Battle_final.pdf) describes this as “reflagging” rather than genuine dissolution, and this model has produced uneven discipline and weak command and control, allowing powerful factions to bargain with the MoD rather than submit to it. Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) factions exemplify this dynamic, remaining formally subordinate while exercising significant autonomy.

Reintegration of regime personnel. Authorities also opened channels for former Assad-era soldiers and officers to demobilize or re-enter service. Thousands participated, and by August, officials **reported** (https://understandingwar.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/The-New-Syrian-Army-Order-of-Battle_final.pdf) that roughly 3,000 defected officers had applied or returned to duty. However, vetting procedures remain opaque, and reintegration has been politically sensitive, particularly in coastal and minority regions. Official distinctions between defectors who actively fought for the regime and those excused from service have not translated into clear accountability standards.

The MoD–MoI divide. In mid-2025, a sharp divergence emerged between the approaches of the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior (MoI). MoD units initially deployed for local security performed poorly during the March coastal clashes and the violence in Suwayda—events that included massacres. These incidents severely damaged the army’s legitimacy. Although army conduct seems to have improved during later operations against the SDF, distrust remains widespread.

The MoI followed a different trajectory. It rapidly established the General Security Service (GSS) and a civil police force, drawing initially on former opposition security personnel from Idlib. By the second half of 2025, MoI forces had assumed responsibility for most local security nationwide. Detailed field **research** (<https://www.syriarevisited.com/p/syrias-integration-of-alawi-police>) by analyst Gregory Waters suggests civilians now view the MoI as more professional and responsive than the army.

Accountability and human rights. Authorities have introduced accountability **mechanisms** (<https://understandingwar.org/wp->

[content/uploads/2025/11/The-New-Syrian-Army-Order-of-Battle_final.pdf](#)), including Military Police, Military Intelligence, and codes of conduct. The MoI also [established \(https://www.u4.no/publications/anti-corruption-efforts-in-syria-security-sector-reform-and-economic-governance/fullversion#3-anti-corruption-efforts-in-security-sector-reform\)](https://www.u4.no/publications/anti-corruption-efforts-in-syria-security-sector-reform-and-economic-governance/fullversion#3-anti-corruption-efforts-in-security-sector-reform) a Security Complaints Office with branches in major cities. However, investigations lack transparency, judicial oversight is unclear, and fear of reprisal discourages civilian engagement.

Substantial human rights risks remain. In May 2025, Human Rights Watch [documented \(https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/05/14/syria-turkiye-backed-armed-groups-detain-extort-civilians\)](https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/05/14/syria-turkiye-backed-armed-groups-detain-extort-civilians) ongoing detention, mistreatment, and extortion by SNA factions integrated into the armed forces. Appointments of commanders implicated in serious abuses triggered protests, condemnation by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and European Union [sanctions \(https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32025D1110\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32025D1110).

Minority inclusion. For most of 2025, security forces remained overwhelmingly Sunni Arab. Analysts report that only in late summer did the MoI begin [systematic recruitment \(https://www.syriarevisited.com/p/syrias-integration-of-alawi-police\)](https://www.syriarevisited.com/p/syrias-integration-of-alawi-police) of non-Sunni personnel and reintegration of vetted Assad-era police officers, particularly in Alawi areas. Earlier minority participation was largely ad hoc and volunteer-based. Symbolic steps—such as the January 2026 rehiring of a regime-era Alawi police officer in Qardaha—have not yet translated into structural inclusion.

Policy implications. As of early 2026, the exact makeup of the national army remains unclear. One report [estimated \(https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/2025-11-28/ty-article/.premium/syrias-army-aims-for-unity-but-still-waits-for-al-sharaa-to-reveal-the-enemy/0000019a-ca9d-db55-a7bb-efdd77ff0000\)](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/2025-11-28/ty-article/.premium/syrias-army-aims-for-unity-but-still-waits-for-al-sharaa-to-reveal-the-enemy/0000019a-ca9d-db55-a7bb-efdd77ff0000) that roughly 85 percent of militias have joined or agreed to join the national army, now numbering around 150,000 troops. Yet dozens of armed groups retain autonomy, the deal to integrate the Kurdish-dominated SDF is in its early stages, and many Druze factions continue to [resist full disarmament \(https://understandingwar.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/The-New-Syrian-Army-Order-of-Battle_final.pdf\)](https://understandingwar.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/The-New-Syrian-Army-Order-of-Battle_final.pdf).

Inclusive Governance

In 2025, Syria's interim leadership under Sharaa rapidly constructed a new transitional political architecture. This process included the dissolution of the former legislature, a tightly managed National Dialogue Conference, issuance of a Constitutional Declaration, creation of a National Security Council, formation of a transitional cabinet, and an indirect parliamentary election. While framed as inclusive and transitional, the process consistently concentrated authority in the presidency, limited meaningful participation by key constituencies—especially Kurds—and relied on appointment-heavy institutional mechanisms.

The result is a system that has achieved procedural momentum and institutional coherence, but whose political legitimacy remains contested due to executive dominance, limited or tokenistic minority representation, opaque decisionmaking, and unresolved security integration—particularly with the SDF. Civil society space has expanded relative to the Assad era but remains fragile and uneven.

Transitional authority: presidential declaration and legislative dissolution. On January 29, 2025, armed factions declared Sharaa president for a transitional phase: dissolved the former People's Assembly, suspending the prior constitutional framework. This move reset Syria's institutional order and vested authority in the presidency pending the creation of new governing structures. The following day, Sharaa [pledged \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-leader-sharaa-named-president-transitional-period-state-news-agency-says-2025-01-29/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-leader-sharaa-named-president-transitional-period-state-news-agency-says-2025-01-29/) to preserve civil peace through transitional justice and embark on a political transition that included a national conference, an inclusive government, eventual elections, and the rebuilding of military and security institutions.

On February 12, Sharaa announced a seven-member preparatory committee for a National Dialogue Conference, [described \(https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/02/al-sharaa-forms-preparatory-committee-for-national-dialogue-conference/\)](https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/02/al-sharaa-forms-preparatory-committee-for-national-dialogue-conference/) as a platform for consultations and deliberations on Syria's political future. Several members were linked to then-U.S.-designated terrorist organization Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), alongside two women and figures associated with the former political opposition.

Kurdish actors immediately criticized the process. The Kurdish National Council [stated \(https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/130220251\)](https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/130220251) it had not been consulted and questioned the committee's representativeness. These concerns were reinforced when a committee spokesperson [stated \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrian-groups-must-disarm-take-part-national-dialogue-official-says-2025-02-13/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrian-groups-must-disarm-take-part-national-dialogue-official-says-2025-02-13/) that armed groups must disarm to participate and that the SDF “do not represent our people,” signaling conditional or exclusionary participation.

National dialogue and parallel political tracks. The National Dialogue Conference convened on February 25 and [produced \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/national-dialogue-historic-opportunity-syria-interim-president-says-2025-02-25/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/national-dialogue-historic-opportunity-syria-interim-president-says-2025-02-25/) eighteen nonbinding “outcomes,” including [provisions \(https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/02/with-18-points-national-dialogue-conference-concludes-its-work/\)](https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/02/with-18-points-national-dialogue-conference-concludes-its-work/) related to political participation and governance. Observers and [analysts \(https://mei.edu/publication/national-dialogue-syria-step-forward-or-concerning-trajectory/\)](https://mei.edu/publication/national-dialogue-syria-step-forward-or-concerning-trajectory/) widely criticized the conference as rushed, opaque, and insufficiently representative, arguing the dialogue appeared designed to legitimize predetermined outcomes rather than build genuine political consensus.

Two days later, authorities in northeast Syria hosted a [separate dialogue \(https://hawarnews.com/en/national-dialogue-forum-in-raqqa-\)](https://hawarnews.com/en/national-dialogue-forum-in-raqqa-)

kicks-off in Raqqa. While smaller, the event underscored the persistence of competing legitimacy tracks and the failure of the Damascus-led dialogue to integrate Kurdish-led governance structures meaningfully.

Constitutional design and centralization of power. On March 2, a seven-member constitutional drafting committee was **announced** (<https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20250302-syria-forms-committee-to-draft-transitional-constitutional-charter>), including two women. The Constitutional Declaration issued on March 13 established the legal framework for the transitional period. The document concentrates power in the presidency by granting authority to appoint the cabinet, ambassadors, and all seven members of the Supreme Constitutional Court; propose constitutional amendments; ratify international treaties; and declare states of emergency. The declaration also structures the legislature indirectly: the president appoints a committee that selects two-thirds of the People's Assembly while directly appointing the remaining third. It **retains language** ([https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025.03.13%20-%20Constitutional%20declaration%20\(English\).pdf](https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025.03.13%20-%20Constitutional%20declaration%20(English).pdf)) referring to the "Syrian Arab Republic," Islamic jurisprudence as a source of legislation, and recognition of "divine religions." Legal and human rights organizations **warned** (<https://syriaaccountability.org/a-problematic-constitutional-declaration/>) that the declaration weakens separation of powers, undermines judicial independence, and **risks** (<https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/discussing-syrias-constitutional-declaration-interview-with-zaid-al-ali/>) constraining rights through broad national security exceptions.

The previous day, Sharaa **established** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-interim-president-sharaa-forms-national-security-council-2025-03-12/>) a National Security Council comprising the ministers of foreign affairs, defense, and interior, the director of general intelligence, and two advisory seats appointed by the president. While formalizing coordination, the body further centralized security authority under the presidency.

A less understood but formidable indicator of the centralization of power and the future functioning of the state is the Foreign Ministry's General Secretariat for Political Affairs (GSPA), headed by Foreign Minister Assad al-Shaibani. One analyst **described** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/institutions-and-governance-new-syria-continuity-and-change-idlib-model>) the GSPA as "akin to the Assad-era Baath Party," albeit with less emphasis on ideology and more on management and control. Both Syrians and foreign officials dealing with Syria have voiced considerable concern about certain "bottlenecks" that the GSPA has created, which they say are to blame for extremely slow decisionmaking on festering political and economic issues facing the country.

Transitional cabinet and minority representation. On March 29, Sharaa **announced** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-president-al-sharaa-forms-new-transitional-government-2025-03-29/>) a twenty-three-member transitional cabinet that included one Christian, one Alawite, one Druze, and one Kurd, alongside a large Sunni Arab majority. Analysts widely described these appointments as tokenistic. One Kurdish analyst **argued** (<https://www.meforum.org/mef-observer/tokenism-is-a-feature-of-al-sharaas-rule-in-syria>) that the ministers did not represent the interests of the communities they were drawn from. Supporting **examples** (https://understandingwar.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/The-New-Syrian-Army-Order-of-Battle_final.pdf) included the cancellation of Kurdish-language instruction in Afrin despite a Kurdish education minister, and public backlash against Druze and Alawite ministers following massacres against their communities in mid-2025. At the same time, another analyst **assessed** (<https://www.syriaweekly.com/p/assessing-syrias-transitional-government>) that roughly 60 percent of cabinet members had no links to HTS, while 40 percent had some form of association, indicating partial diversification alongside continued Idlib-based influence.

Parliamentary election and electoral architecture. On June 13, Sharaa **issued** (<https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/06/al-sharaa-issues-decree-forming-supreme-committee-for-peoples-assembly-elections/>) Decree 66 establishing an eleven-member Supreme Committee for People's Assembly Elections. The committee formed **district-level** (<https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/syrias-parliamentary-elections-explained-six-key-issues-to-watch/>) subcommittees and electoral colleges. On October 5, approximately 6,000 electors selected 119 representatives for a 210-seat legislature. Twenty-one seats remained vacant, while 70 were to be appointed by Sharaa. The **resulting legislature** (<https://syria-report.com/explainer-syrias-upcoming-parliamentary-elections/>) was overwhelmingly Sunni Arab and male, with six women and limited minority representation.

Civil society: openings and constraints. Human Rights Watch **reported** (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/12/08/syria-one-year-since-assads-fall>) increased openness to international NGOs and greater civic activity but also cited registration hurdles, harassment, and aid-delivery restrictions. Amnesty International similarly **described** (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/12/syria-a-year-after-assads-fall-rights-of-survivors-must-guide-transition/>) a "blossoming" civic space but warned of inconsistent approvals and bureaucratic control.

Policy implications. Syria's 2025 transition produced a functioning but highly centralized interim political system. While institutional coherence has improved, the process has thus far prioritized executive control over broad-based legitimacy. Minority participation, security integration, and decentralization remain unresolved, leaving the transition vulnerable to renewed fragmentation absent more inclusive and negotiated next steps. ❖

RECOMMENDED



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[Syria at a Crossroads: U.S. Policy Challenges Post-Assad](#)

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James Jeffrey

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