

Syria Is Feeling the Fallout from the Iran Crisis

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Brief Analysis

The war's effects on Syria have largely fallen below the radar, yet no one should forget how much has changed there since 2024, nor how important it is to preserve the government's accomplishments against Iran and its partners while acknowledging the conflict's local economic consequences.

Had the Iran war occurred a mere year and a half ago, Syria would have been a frontline state helping its patron in Tehran fight back against the United States and Israel. Now that Bashar al-Assad's regime is gone, Damascus has been careful to avoid direct involvement on either side of the regional crisis. Yet this quiet response should not be mistaken for internal quietude—the war has still forced Syria's young government to contend with challenges such as casualties from rockets and interceptors falling through its airspace, disinformation campaigns about its military intentions, increased border threats from Iranian proxies in Iraq and Lebanon, and energy and economic fallout that could affect its post-Assad transition and rebuilding efforts. Syria remains one of the bright spots of the Trump administration's foreign policy, but to keep it so, decisionmakers must pay close attention to how the still-fragile state is navigating the war, and how it might be affected by the spillover.

Addition by Subtraction

Prior to Assad's fall, Damascus was a linchpin in Iran's regional strategy, enabling Tehran to complete its "land bridge" across Iraq and Syria to Lebanese Hezbollah, the crown jewel of its militia proxy network. From the start of Syria's civil war, the Assad regime welcomed Iranian forces and their Shia militia proxies from Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Pakistan to fight on its behalf. The lack of such proxies in Syria today means that no rockets are being launched from its territory during the current war, giving Israeli and U.S. forces one less front to worry about.

The Assad regime also gave Russia free rein to flex its airpower across Syria beginning in 2015. After Assad's fall, however, Moscow's military presence was confined to western coastal bases with little freedom of movement. This gave Israeli forces even greater airspace access, enabling them to destroy most of the regime's major military

capabilities in the days after Assad's fall and establish air dominance—much to the chagrin of Syria's revolutionaries and their supporters, who felt they had nothing to do with Assad or his policies and therefore should have been permitted to keep that weaponry. In the current war, this continued dominance has enabled Israel to fly over more territory with less risk of enemy fire, and to use Syria's airspace as a de facto interception zone against munitions launched by Iran and its proxies. In short, the current U.S.-Israeli campaign against Iran would have been even more difficult if Assad were still in power.

Energy and Economic Effects

Syria's energy sector has faltered since the Iran war broke out. On February 28, Israel suspended natural gas exports to Egypt and Jordan indefinitely under a force majeure clause in their [recently expanded supply deal](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/building-egypt-and-israels-uneasy-gas-deal) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/building-egypt-and-israels-uneasy-gas-deal>). Consequently, Egypt cut the exports it had been sending to Syria via Jordan—a situation that is steadily reversing the progress Damascus had made on bolstering the country's electricity sector over the past year.

The suspension of oil and gas operations in Gulf countries has not helped Syria's situation either. Moreover, the memorandums of understanding that Damascus signed with Saudi Arabia and other countries late last year—covering projects in multiple sectors worth more than \$60 billion—may be in danger. Given the damage to civilian, energy, and military infrastructure in the Gulf, these governments may decide to focus on domestic recovery after the war and shrink the funds they are willing to devote to Syria's reconstruction. This is especially true for medium- and longer-term projects, many of which are essential to maintaining the momentum of Syria's post-Assad economic recovery.

Disinformation Campaigns and Fake Groups

Throughout the war, Damascus has had to contend with various elements using media leaks and disinformation campaigns in a bid to draw the country into the fighting and/or undermine its stability. For example, Iran and its proxy network have pushed stories about fake groups inside Syria conducting fake attacks against allied targets—the supposed Syrian jihadist group “Hayat Ansar al-Tawhid al-Islamiyah” falsely claimed responsibility for launching rockets at Israeli targets in the Golan Heights, while “Ajnad Bayt al-Maqdis” claimed to strike U.S. forces at al-Shadadi military base in northeast Syria, even though all American personnel left that facility well before the war. Online operatives sought to further obfuscate the situation by making it appear as if al-Qaeda-related groups had conducted these fake attacks.

Iran and its proxies have also pushed a narrative that Syria is planning to invade Lebanon alongside Israel in order to fight Hezbollah. Indeed, Tehran and its proxies are desperate for Damascus to get involved because they see this as a way to destabilize Syria and reopen it as a corridor for moving people and weapons between Iraq and Lebanon.

Border Security and Regional Diplomacy

Over the past week or so, Syria's Ministry of Defense has sent more forces to the Lebanese and Iraqi borders to make sure that Hezbollah and the Iran-backed militias that dominate Iraq's al-Hashd al-Shabi do not infiltrate the country for destabilization operations. Notably, recent U.S. airstrikes hit Hashd targets in al-Qaim right over the border, while Syrian Interior Ministry units have busted weapons smugglers near border locations in the provinces of Homs and Deir al-Zour.

Syrian officials have been careful to emphasize that their heightened security activities on both of these borders are a defensive measure, and that Damascus has no intention of getting involved in the war offensively. Such messages have been conveyed via state media and through direct phone calls with Iraqi and Lebanese leaders, including by President Ahmed al-Sharaa, Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani, and Syria's charge d'affaires in Beirut.

At the same time, Sharaa has [publicly stated \(https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/us-encourages-syrian-action-against-hezbollah-damascus-is-hesitant-sources-say-2026-03-17/\)](https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/us-encourages-syrian-action-against-hezbollah-damascus-is-hesitant-sources-say-2026-03-17/) in meetings with Lebanese President Joseph Aoun and other regional leaders that he supports [Beirut's efforts to disarm Hezbollah \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanons-failure-disarm-hezbollah-comes-price\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanons-failure-disarm-hezbollah-comes-price). He has also reached out to Gulf governments to express support and offer help on bypassing volatile maritime trade routes, proposing potential overland routes across Syria to the Mediterranean region. He even called for the creation of a [joint military operations room \(https://www.almodon.com/politics/2026/03/13/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D9%8A%D8%B7%D9%85%D8%A6%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%AD-%D8%B1%D8%A4%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%87-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84\)](https://www.almodon.com/politics/2026/03/13/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D9%8A%D8%B7%D9%85%D8%A6%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%AD-%D8%B1%D8%A4%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%87-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84) between Gulf and Levantine states—partly to strengthen Arab unity against Iran, but also to make sure that Israel cannot impose its will over the region if Tehran is permanently weakened after the war.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

However the war evolves, the new reality in Syria remains a net positive—the Assad regime is no more, and Iran and its proxies can no longer use the country as a platform to undermine the region. Yet Syria's long-term stability and freedom from Iranian interference are by no means guaranteed, so Washington should use the current crisis as an opportunity to work even more closely with Damascus on the following issues:

- **Coordinate against the Iraqi Hashd.** Given that many of Iran's militia proxies in Iraq are based close to the Syrian border, Washington and Damascus should coordinate closely whenever the U.S. plans strikes against these elements. Joint efforts could help limit Hashd attempts to infiltrate the border, destabilize post-Assad Syria, or smuggle weapons to Hezbollah.
- **Build on Syria and Israel's mutual interest in border security with Lebanon.** Damascus is intent on making sure that Hezbollah does not infiltrate its borders, so U.S. officials should use this as another avenue to show Israel that Syria is not a threat. Building trust on this issue and emphasizing the two countries' shared security interests can help foster renewed diplomacy once the war cools off, hopefully creating a basis for an Israeli-Syrian border security agreement sooner rather than later.
- **Provide technological help on public safety and disinformation.** The U.S. government should encourage American tech companies to help Syria's Ministry of Communications and Information Technology establish early warning systems that civilians can use when interceptors or missiles are falling over population centers, since many areas lack sufficient shelters. For instance, the government could send text messages or app notifications to local residents when such risks are imminent or elevated. U.S. companies and the Syrian Ministry of Information could also work together on anticipating and countering disinformation campaigns by Iran and other actors. As part of this effort, Washington should push tech companies to enforce their terms of service and take down content that violates their rules on disinformation.
- **Engage partners on alternative energy routes.** Similar to Sharaa's overland trade proposal, Washington should reach out to Saudi Arabia and Jordan about alternative trade and pipeline routes that go north toward the Mediterranean rather than south through vulnerable Middle Eastern waterways. This could help enhance future trade resiliency and provide potential stopgaps if problems arise again in the Strait of Hormuz or Bab al-Mandab.
- **Be realistic about near-term economic prospects.** At the moment, not much can be done to alleviate the war's economic fallout in Syria; much of that effort will have to wait until after the crisis abates. In the meantime,

Washington should advise Damascus to stop giving Syrians high expectations of large economic changes anytime soon. Painting a more realistic and transparent reality today would help avoid getting the public's hopes up too much, only to be disappointed if big infrastructure announcements do not come to fruition because of external factors.

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Gloria and Ken Levy Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of its 2025 report *'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>).” ❖

RECOMMENDED



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