# The U.S. Should Not Encourage Syria to Enter Lebanon

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Articles & Testimony

## A young government working to secure its own territory is poorly positioned to open new fronts outside its borders, and Hezbollah would quickly exploit such a move to its advantage.

On 7 June, US President Donald Trump remarked in an interview that he would "like to see a more surgical attack on Hezbollah…we can help with that, or we can recommend Syria…They have a very good leader (President Ahmed al-Sharaa)…and he would love to help." In the days that followed, multiple reports appeared suggesting that Trump had invited al-Sharaa to Washington for a high-profile meeting on 14 June—Trump's birthday. Both Washington and Damascus now deny that such a meeting is currently scheduled, and Syria has rejected suggestions that it might deploy forces into Lebanon. Lebanese President Joseph Aoun also expressed his confidence that al-Sharaa will not become involved in Lebanon's internal complexities.

The episode is the latest in a series of reports stemming from a 17 March Reuters story that suggested Washington was encouraging al-Sharaa to consider sending Syrian forces into Lebanon to help disarm Hezbollah. Together, these reports highlight a central tension in the evolving US-Syrian relationship. While al-Sharaa's Syria appears willing to partner with the United States and its regional allies in containing Iran and promoting regional stability, it is neither willing nor well positioned to serve as an expeditionary force against Iranian-backed groups beyond its borders, whether Hezbollah in Lebanon or Shiite militias in Iraq. In Lebanon in particular, Hezbollah would almost certainly use such a move to reinvigorate its rallying cry of "resistance." This would likely lead to sectarian conflict between Syrians and Lebanese given the sordid history of Hezbollah's presence in Syria.

The Trump administration can help manage this tension by recognising the limitations of Syria's still-developing government and security institutions. Rather than pressing Damascus to undertake risky military missions abroad, Washington should focus on expanding cooperation in areas where interests already align, including border

security, counterterrorism, regional stability, and Syria's long-term reconstruction.

So far, Damascus has taken a careful, calibrated approach to the war in Iran. It has aligned diplomatically with Arab states and Washington in condemning Iran's actions, reinforcing its borders, and avoiding escalation. Yet it has also kept a wary eye on Israel, which struck Syrian army infrastructure in the south on 20 March to support Druze elements and has significantly expanded its operations next door in Lebanon. This balancing act reflects both strategic caution and the structural limits of a young government.

On the diplomatic front, Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani has held multiple calls with US allies in the Gulf, Turkiye, and Western capitals since hostilities first erupted on 28 February—though notably not with Israel. The foreign ministry also condemned Iranian attacks on Arab states, expressing solidarity with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Jordan.

Al-Sharaa has reinforced this message through direct outreach to regional leaders, including calls with Gulf leaders and coordination with officials in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government. By 1 March, Syria had joined the Gulf Cooperation Council states and Jordan in condemning Iranian strikes "in the strongest terms," placing Damascus firmly within an emerging Arab bloc opposed to Iran.

## Internal Focus

At the same time, however, Syria has restrained its military posture and focused on securing its own territory. In early March, it reportedly deployed thousands of troops, armoured vehicles, and short-range rocket systems to the borders with Lebanon and Iraq. One report indicated that the units sent to the Lebanese frontier included elite Uzbek and Uyghur elements who have been integrated into Syria's armed forces over the past year, highlighting the military's evolving force structure and continued reliance on foreign fighters, some of whom may be affiliated with extremist ideologies.

Syrian officials have consistently framed these deployments as defensive. Military officers described them as an effort to combat infiltration and drug/weapon smuggling by Hezbollah and other Shiite militias. In March, the Syrian Defence Ministry stated that the reinforcements were intended to enhance surveillance, patrol border crossings, and counter smuggling—not to prepare for offensive operations. Similarly, reports of rocket deployments were downplayed as part of a broader deterrent posture, with officials emphasising that Syrian territory would not be used as a platform for confrontation.

At the political level, Damascus has been explicit in aligning with US objectives against Hezbollah, which helped the Assad regime suppress Syrian opposition forces during the civil war, including al-Sharaa's former group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). On 9 March, he publicly backed Lebanese President Joseph Aoun's efforts to disarm Hezbollah. At the same time, he warned that the broader regional conflict poses an "existential threat" to both Middle Eastern and global economic stability.

Al-Sharaa's cautious approach reflects the realities of Syria's still-evolving security sector. The government is continuing to consolidate military and internal security forces after years of fragmentation and civil war. Although former rebel factions have formally joined the defence ministry, many retain considerable autonomy, complicating efforts to establish unified command and control. The incorporation of foreign fighters into certain elite units raises additional questions about cohesion and reliability in cross-border operations.

Meanwhile, internal security challenges remain significant. Over the last few months, Syrian authorities conducted operations against Islamic State (IS) cells in Deir ez-Zor and near Damascus, disrupting planned attacks and arresting operatives. Since the US military withdrawal on 16 April, responsibility for counter-IS operations has fallen increasingly on Damascus.

## Rife with Risk

These demands underscore a basic reality: a government still working to secure its own territory is poorly positioned to open a new front in Lebanon or Iraq. A Syrian intervention in Lebanon would carry substantial risks for both Damascus and Washington.

First, it could trigger a broader regional escalation, drawing in Iranian-backed networks across Syria, Iraq, and beyond. Second, it could inflame sectarian tensions. Hezbollah would almost certainly portray Syrian forces as Sunni jihadists—including Syrian, Uzbek, and Uyghur fighters—bent on targeting Shiite communities, potentially strengthening support for the group among its core constituency. Third, it could undermine the legitimacy of the Lebanese state. Given Syria's three-decade occupation of Lebanon under the Assad regime, a renewed Syrian military presence would likely be viewed as foreign coercion rather than support for Lebanese sovereignty.

Rather than contemplating expeditionary operations, Damascus has pursued a different set of priorities during the current crisis. First, it has focused on preventing spillover into Syria through reinforced border security, surveillance, and patrols along the Lebanese and Iraqi frontiers.

Second, it has sought to maintain political alignment with Arab states and Washington—though notably not Israel. Syria's diplomatic outreach and condemnation of Iranian actions reflect an effort to reposition the country within the Arab regional order after years as a hub for Iranian influence. At the same time, al-Sharaa has reportedly warned Lebanese officials about potential Israeli actions that could heighten tensions between Arab states. Nevertheless, Damascus has largely refrained from publicly challenging Israel's repeated use of Syrian airspace to strike Iranian targets.

Third, the government is managing mounting domestic pressures. The conflict has disrupted energy supplies, fuelled panic buying, and accelerated refugee flows. More than 125,000 Syrians reportedly crossed from Lebanon within days of the outbreak of the conflict, adding further strain to an already fragile economy and state apparatus.

## US Policy Implications

Syria's wartime posture aligns with US efforts to prevent Iran from further destabilising the Middle East. Yet US officials can help insulate Damascus from the conflict's spillover and draw the new government closer to the United States and its regional allies by doing the following:

**Washington should *not* encourage Syrian military intervention in Lebanon.** Even the *perception* of such expectations could create dangerous incentives and miscalculations among various actors, potentially leading them to take actions that threaten US interests. An unambiguous public stance on this issue would help clarify regional expectations and reduce the risk of escalation.

**Do *not* link lifting the US State Sponsor of Terrorism designation or other Syria sanctions to entering Lebanon.** Instead, Washington should focus on ways to help Syria's reconstruction and energy plans. The Trump administration should lay out an incremental path toward removing the SST and other sanctions if Damascus makes measurable progress on political inclusion, security cooperation, and economic reform. This approach would give Damascus a powerful incentive to act while preserving American influence over Syria's trajectory.

**Support Syria's border security efforts.** Recent deployments indicate that Damascus is already focused on preventing smuggling and infiltration, so the United States should reinforce this approach through intelligence sharing, technical assistance, and coordination with authorities in Lebanon, Iraq, and elsewhere. Strengthening border control is a practical way to constrain Hezbollah's logistical networks without triggering open conflict. The Trump administration should also consider more concerted US action against pro-Iran militias in Iraq, especially given recent cross-border rocket strikes on a military base in northeast Syria.

**Integrate Syria into a broader regional framework for containing Iran.** This includes coordination with Gulf states, European partners, and Lebanon during and after the current conflict, covering issues such as refugee flows, humanitarian access, and postwar reconstruction. To this end, Washington should also accelerate efforts to reach a security agreement with Israel. Syria's geographic position makes it a critical node in any regional strategy even if it is not a frontline combatant.

**Avoid overloading the relationship with demands that exceed Syria's capacity**. Pressuring Damascus to take on missions it cannot sustain would risk destabilising the fragile state, potentially creating openings for IS resurgence and undermining broader regional objectives.

## Better Benchmarks

In pursuing such cooperation, a good benchmark for US policy is not whether Syria enters Lebanon or Iraq to fight Iran's proxies, but whether it continues taking steps that support regional stability, such as securing its borders, limiting the flow of Iranian weapons and fighters, coordinating politically with Lebanon and other neighbours, and maintaining distance from Tehran's military agenda. On these measures, Syria's behaviour since 28 February has been broadly aligned with US interests. It has condemned Iran's actions, strengthened its border defences, and avoided actions that might escalate the conflict.

To be sure, this alignment is still fragile and contingent on several factors. It reflects a convergence of interests rather than a formal alliance, and it could shift if regional dynamics change. Yet it is nonetheless a meaningful development—one that Washington should seek to reinforce rather than disrupt as the budding alliance with Damascus grows.

A scenario in which Syria acts as a proxy force against Hezbollah may be tempting in the abstract, particularly given Lebanon's internal constraints. In practice, however, it is a high-risk proposition with limited upside. Syria is not militarily, politically, or economically positioned to undertake such a role at the moment, and encouraging it to do so could hamper the regional order the US is trying to shape.

A more effective approach is to work with Syria as it *is*, not as Washington might *wish* it to be: namely, a new government that is focused on rebuilding the shattered country, securing its borders, cautiously reengaging with regional partners, and avoiding entanglement in regional war.

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