

# Russia Is Not Leaving Syria

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**While it no longer enjoys primacy in Damascus, the Kremlin has proven itself able to adapt to the new reality, and Washington must play the long game in response.**

**T**oday, Syria is a fundamentally different country from the one where Moscow intervened in September 2015 to preserve the rule of its ally President Bashar al-Assad. Since his removal nearly a decade later, Assad's portraits have disappeared from the streets and his name is not spoken. Even more telling, Syria's new president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, has avoided replacing those images with his own—and he has opened the door to freedoms unknown to Syrians in more than half a century.

Earlier this month, President Trump [announced \(https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-says-he-thinks-he-will-remove-syria-us-terrorism-sponsor-list-2026-07-08/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-says-he-thinks-he-will-remove-syria-us-terrorism-sponsor-list-2026-07-08/) his decision to remove Syria's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism, following the 2025 lifting of broad U.S. sanctions. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has framed this step as opening "a new chapter (<https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/07/initiating-rescission-process-of-syrias-designation-as-a-state-sponsor-of-terrorism>)" to encourage much-needed reconstruction and investment. Yet as Washington reengages with the new Syria, it is worth remembering that Russia remains committed to having a significant role there.

## Enduring Strategic Interests

**A**lthough Russia's military and political capabilities in Syria have declined since Assad's overthrow, Moscow's strategic interests remain unchanged and will likely outlast the rule of President Vladimir Putin. Specifically, the Kremlin seeks to preserve a foothold in the East Mediterranean, and it also needs military infrastructure to support its wider objectives like sustaining operations in Africa, moving forces across multiple theaters, and maintaining its reach along NATO's southern flank.

A continued presence in Syria, in turn, will facilitate Russia's long-term power competition against the United

States. To this end, Moscow has kept its bases at Tartus and Hmeimim since Assad's fall—if at reduced capacity—allowing for [sustained \(https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/russia-syria-air-base-c068ea9e\)](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/russia-syria-air-base-c068ea9e) naval and air operations in the East Mediterranean and possibly facilitating deployments beyond. As of earlier this month, according to [Reuters \(https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-eyes-mid-july-start-commercial-logistics-hub-syrian-port-2026-07-09/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-eyes-mid-july-start-commercial-logistics-hub-syrian-port-2026-07-09/), Russia plans to use its military facility in Tartus as a commercial logistics hub. For the Kremlin, such economic engagement is not solely about profit but also a tool for pursuing broader state objectives. Finally, Russia's presence raises questions about its future ability to covertly support U.S. adversaries such as Iran and its proxies in the region.

## A Deft Hand

**H**aving been the guarantor and enabler of the Assad regime, Moscow is now adapting to its new role as one of several actors shaping Syria's future. Russia showed its adaptability after Assad's fall in December 2024, when it quickly dispatched a delegation to Damascus with contracts ready to be signed. Even as the new Syrian authorities did not put pen to paper, they were apparently impressed with the speed and organization of Russia's pivot.

Accordingly, Russia's new role in Syria must not be underestimated. According to officials and experts in Damascus, there is no evidence or expectation of a Russian exit from the country. Instead, Moscow appears to be adapting to the changed political environment while negotiating with political elites to keep its military bases and develop economic, diplomatic, and to some extent cultural ties. An example of the latter is the [reopening \(https://dailybeirut.com/en/world/russia-and-syria-agree-to-reopen-russian-house-in-damascus/\)](https://dailybeirut.com/en/world/russia-and-syria-agree-to-reopen-russian-house-in-damascus/) of the Russia House in Damascus, which closed after Assad's fall. Russia's cultural centers are notorious as [fronts \(https://smallwarsjournal.com/2025/06/26/russian-house-moscows-global-propaganda-machine-disguised-as-a-humanitarian-organization/\)](https://smallwarsjournal.com/2025/06/26/russian-house-moscows-global-propaganda-machine-disguised-as-a-humanitarian-organization/) for intelligence gathering.

Now more oriented to the West, Damascus appears to be striking a careful balance between Russia and other external actors in the country. Yet officials are largely unified in their view that alienating Russia does not serve Syria's interests. After all, Russia wields diplomatic clout on the UN Security Council and other bodies, which can be used to uphold the decades-long military relationship with Syria, including its purchase of relatively low-cost Russian weapons. And Russia is a [top supplier \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-relies-russias-oil-despite-pivot-west-2026-05-01/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-relies-russias-oil-despite-pivot-west-2026-05-01/) of Syria's oil and wheat, creating a relationship of food and energy dependence.

There is also the question of conditioning support on improvement of human rights. The United States is not doing so now, but a future administration might, and Russia can be relied on to not condition its support. Moreover, Syrian officials will remember that Russia shielded the Assad regime with vetoes on the Security Council, allowing for the systematic blocking of humanitarian aid.

Syria's prioritizing of economic recovery also requires sustained ties with Russia, even if Damascus is simultaneously eager for investment from the West and the Gulf states. Alongside the food and energy relationship, Syria has turned to Russia for the printing of currency, including a [shipment \(https://www.reuters.com/world/syria-gets-new-cash-shipment-russia-sign-warming-ties-2025-03-06/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/syria-gets-new-cash-shipment-russia-sign-warming-ties-2025-03-06/) this past March—even as later reports indicated Syrian plans to print its currency in the [United Arab Emirates and Germany \(https://www.reuters.com/markets/currencies/syria-plans-print-currency-uae-germany-ending-russian-role-2025-05-16/\)](https://www.reuters.com/markets/currencies/syria-plans-print-currency-uae-germany-ending-russian-role-2025-05-16/). Russia also [retains ties \(https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5259949-expert-asharq-al-awsat-zelenskyy-offered-syria-phosphate-wheat-drones-deal\)](https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5259949-expert-asharq-al-awsat-zelenskyy-offered-syria-phosphate-wheat-drones-deal) to Syria's vital phosphates industry, which has taken on increasing importance amid rising fertilizer prices driven by the Iran war. And Russia can claim leverage in citing the Sharaa government's [debt \(https://syrianobserver.com/foreign-actors/the-last-meeting-russian-general-demanded-37-million-in-cash-from-the-assad-regime.html\)](https://syrianobserver.com/foreign-actors/the-last-meeting-russian-general-demanded-37-million-in-cash-from-the-assad-regime.html) inherited from the Assad regime,

estimated (<https://www.occrp.org/en/scoop/russia-threatened-to-halt-syrian-oil-operations-if-assad-regime-didnt-pay-debt>) at \$1.2 billion by the World Bank. There are finally personal and leadership connections: Bashar al-Assad himself continues to live in Russia, and Sharaa's brother Maher is married to a Russian and lived for a time in Moscow.

As for Russia's bases, their maintenance appears to help Syria achieve its desired balance with the West, serving as a low-cost way to keep up the strategic relationship despite providing no direct benefit. Furthermore, since the Syrian military was built largely on Soviet and then Russian hardware, Damascus remains largely dependent on Moscow for spare parts and maintenance, even if it does purchase weaponry from other sources.

## Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Russia's role in Syria is evolving rather than ending, and it would be a mistake to measure Russian influence by past metrics. In today's Syria, observers should assess this influence based on a combination of military access and economic and diplomatic engagement, along with intelligence access.

To counter Russian activity in Syria, the United States should take the long view, mirroring Moscow's strategic patience. An effective approach could focus on:

- limiting Russia's ability to translate its presence into renewed political leverage
- raising the costs for Russia to remain in Syria

On a broad level, limiting Russia's political rise would require deepening U.S.-Syria political, economic, and institutional ties, thus rendering Russia less indispensable to the country. More specific measures could include: (1) building ties with Syria's civilian ministries by offering governance expertise and expanding educational and professional exchanges; (2) increasing scrutiny of Russia's logistics operations in Syria and highlighting Russia's failure to deliver on deadlines or produce high-performing weapons; and (3) investing in educational programs to expose Russia's role in helping the Assad regime kill more than a half-million citizens.

Post-Assad Syria is not a representative democracy, but public opinion still matters to some extent, and Syrian citizens tend to have a negative view of Russia. Efforts such as those just outlined will help reinforce this trend, creating another guardrail against Russian activities. A broader campaign could raise Russia's reputational costs for being in Syria. Russia remained committed to staying in Syria despite setbacks. The United States should similarly remain committed to its own engagement with Syria.

Another component of U.S. involvement could be bolstering the Ukrainian role in Syria. Even as Syrian officials may not yet perceive Ukraine as a replacement for Russia to provide resources like wheat and phosphates—along with diplomatic and cultural ties—Damascus is willing to engage with Kyiv, and such a switch might be imaginable in the future. Washington can help build on bilateral engagement with the goal of investing in Syria's long-term success.

To date, the West has largely avoided conditioning its engagement on Syria's relationship with Russia. Over time, however, it should consider using its diplomatic and economic leverage to encourage Damascus to gradually reduce its dependence on Moscow while cultivating alternatives, whether in Ukraine, among other European partners, or in the Middle East. Areas of focus should include military, energy, and infrastructure activities, where Russia seeks particular influence.

President Sharaa wants engagement with the West. The West can and should take advantage of this source of leverage. Associated investment in Syria's success will help the United States counter Russia's influence in southern NATO countries and sharpen its advantage in the larger geopolitical contest.

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