

Managing the Muhajirin: The Future of Syria's Foreign Fighters

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Congress has sought to condition U.S. support on fighter headcounts, but this approach alone won't address the threats that are actually materializing in post-Assad Syria—in fact, it may wind up repeating mistakes made with past jihadist mobilizations.

The disposition of the foreign fighters who helped topple the Assad regime has become one of the defining tests of Syria's transition, and of the West's willingness to deal with the government that emerged from it. A provision in the Senate's Fiscal Year 2027 National Defense Authorization Act would condition American support for Syria's transitional government on its progress in disarming the foreign fighters and jihadis who remain inside the country. This article argues that the provision misdiagnoses the problem. Since the fall of the Assad regime, Damascus has pursued an "integrate-or-arrest" strategy that has absorbed most of its foreign fighters (*muhajirin*) into state command structures rather than leaving them armed outside them. The foreign fighter population is internally differentiated (pro and adjacent to the new government or Islamic State-affiliated, which the government already fights with U.S. support) and fracturing (between those who integrate versus those who want to remain independent). The threats that have actually materialized in 2026 (an assassination campaign against integrated fighters, the repackaging of grievance toward anti-Israel mobilization, and the arrival of new foreigners exploiting post-Assad openness) cannot be addressed with a disarmament-by-headcount framing. The West's experience in Bosnia, where an externally imposed expulsion clause and a later coerced denaturalization campaign both backfired, offers a direct and cautionary precedent: Ejection exported the threat, while anchoring largely retired it...

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