



Securing Syria's Transformation by Diminishing Russia's Influence

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Chairman Wicker, Co-Chairman Wilson, honorable members, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. As a daughter of Jewish refuseniks, this is a special honor for me. For many families like mine living in Moscow and dealing with the weight of antisemitism, the United States was a beacon of hope that shone even through the Iron Curtain. Vladimir Putin's message to us for over two decades has been consistent: there is no democracy in America. Talk of human rights in the United States is just rhetoric, according to Putin, and there really is no difference between the United States and Russia on this issue. Even as a child, I knew that couldn't be true.

So it's a special privilege to speak with you today as you continue elevating the importance of human rights and fundamental freedoms on the world stage. I'm here to underscore why it is so important to get Syria right, as Ambassador James Jeffrey, former U.S. special envoy to that country, emphasized.¹

First, it's been over a year since the fall of Moscow-backed dictator Bashar al-Assad ushered in a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape the balance of power in the Middle East in favor of the United States. Russia's position in Syria temporarily weakened with the fall of Assad. But this brief window may now be closing; Assad's fall was not the turning point for Russian influence in Syria many in the West thought it might be. Failure to realize that and to counter Russia in Syria will harm U.S. strategic interests.

I'll focus on three key points:

1. Russia is quietly reconsolidating influence in Syria as it lays low and plays the long game.
2. There is no indication that Damascus will abandon Russia.
3. There are things we can do to counter Russia's influence.

¹ James Jeffrey, Michael Herzog, Michael Jacobson, Anna Borshchevskaya, and Andrew J. Tabler, "Sharaa Goes to Washington," Policy Forum, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 7, 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sharaa-goes-washington>

Syria Is a Vital Link Between the Middle East and Europe

To my first point, we all understand that Syria stands at the crossroads of a strategically vital region. The East Mediterranean is a critical link between the Middle East and Europe and a key arena of tension between NATO and Russia. As such, it is ripe for conflict.

The Kremlin is keenly aware of Syria's vital role. Putin is only the latest in a long line of Russian rulers to understand this. Syria's warm water ports, role as a central energy hub, and overall trade security and maritime infrastructure have long been a priority for Russia even before their importance to Russia's war in Ukraine. There's no reason to suspect this would change with or without Putin in power.

No other country enables Russia to project power into multiple directions like Syria: toward NATO's southern flank, along with all of southern Europe, the Middle East, and deep into Africa. The East Mediterranean is a crucial maritime chokepoint that connects the Black Sea and the Suez Canal. About one-third of all global trade goes through this route. Global commerce then depends on one of the most highly unstable corridors in the entire region.

There is no reason to suspect Russia won't continue to weaponize its efforts to maintain and grow its presence or its aim to weaken Europe. The region is simply essential regardless of having to navigate strained relations between NATO allies Turkey and Greece or their neighbors Egypt, Israel, and Libya. Now with Russia's war on Ukraine, there is even more incentive to protect strategic assets like undersea cables and pipelines, even though this requires added resources and coordinated responses from the United States and its NATO allies.

Russia Is Quietly Reconsolidating Influence in Syria

Let me speak to the Russian long game I mentioned. Moscow is quietly reconsolidating influence in Syria to encourage dependence on the Kremlin. When Assad's regime fell, Russia did not leave Syria entirely, it just downgraded its presence. That has begun to change. Russia remains a presence in Syria's military, economic, and diplomatic rebuilding. Syria still depends on Russia for military equipment, along with economic and diplomatic support, even as it tries a more pro-Western orientation. I will address each of these factors here.

Military dependence. Russia retains access to Syria's military bases in Tartus and Hmeimim. This in itself is unusual given that Moscow backed the regime that fell to the opposition. It's an indication of just how strong a foothold Russia is able to retain in Syria even after a regime change. By contrast, the Soviet Union did not get to keep its bases in Afghanistan after its 1989 withdrawal. The United States likewise had to abandon its military bases as part of the withdrawal from Vietnam before a final exit in 1975.

Russia not only kept its bases in Syria but resumed military flights to Hmeimim in late October of last year. Moscow has also indicated that it may repurpose its military bases for additional tasks like serving as hubs for (ostensibly) receiving and processing humanitarian aid (e.g., to Africa). Yet Moscow's objectives are not chiefly humanitarian; it has a long history of wrapping its weapons in bandages to make such deliveries more palatable, and these operations clearly undermine U.S. interests. We can expect Russia to maintain that strategy and use its entrenchment in Syria to work against Western interests in the Middle East and Africa.

Given Syria's decades-long dependence on Russian military equipment, it will be difficult to wean

Damascus from this hardware, especially in the absence of other alternatives. Reports in November indicated that Russia may play a role in supporting and developing Syria's civil security and police sectors as well, possibly through joint security agreements. Even legacy Russian systems will need continuous maintenance unless the Syrian military simply allows them to fall into disrepair. Syrians can perform some of this maintenance themselves, but for "depot"-level maintenance they will almost certainly require Russian assistance.

Moreover, by the end of 2025, Russia had redeployed its military police to southern Syria, ostensibly to act as a mediator and buffer between Israeli forces and Damascus. Yet we know that southern Syria was the cradle of the 2011 anti-Assad uprisings that led to the civil war. This area is especially important because it opens the road to Damascus. Together with its military presence on the coast, the bases in the south give Russia at least two points of access to vulnerable areas in Syria, whereas Damascus lacks full control. This opens future opportunities for Russia to increase the Syrian government's dependence on Moscow, whether by acting as a "stabilizing force" or by applying pressure through these points. Meanwhile, Russia recently withdrew from Qamishli in the north, but this move is not an indicator of any waning influence.

Economic engagement as leverage. Russia remains important to sustaining Syria's economy. It prints Syria's currency. It is the primary supplier of oil to Syria; Damascus has no viable alternatives despite international sanctions on Russian ships. Moscow also resumed shipments of wheat to the country following Assad's fall, and further discussions on agricultural agreements have begun. In early September, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak led a delegation to Syria, offering aid and energy cooperation as well. Syria also invited Tatneft, Russia's fifth-largest energy company, to resume operations. All of these cooperative steps have happened while the Russian embassy remains open in Damascus.

Moscow is well positioned to cement even stronger ties using opaque business intermediaries that will be difficult if not impossible to monitor. These include deepened ties with the Gulf states currently investing heavily in Syria's reconstruction. Russia's potential for creating economic dependence in Syria is an underappreciated part of its long-term influence strategy.

As of late 2025, Syria owed approximately \$1.2 billion directly to Russia. This figure does not include unofficial obligations. Traditionally, Moscow has used debt and debt forgiveness as leverage to cement influence, so Syria's outstanding debt is another pressure point Moscow holds over Damascus.

Diplomatic double game and "protector of minorities." Russia is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, but unlike Western powers, it is not bound to the same degree of legal constraints or reputational considerations. This gives President Ahmed al-Sharaa's government in Syria a practical reason for cultivating Russia's favor as a diplomatic ally, in contrast to democracies that are more likely to delay certain aid until human rights demands are met.

Unlike other actors currently playing a more dominant role in Syria (such as Turkey), Russia also retains the advantage of ties to all sides, including the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Alawites, the Druze, and Christians. Moscow will presumably use these ties to exacerbate ethnic and other tensions that keep Syria weak, divided, and thus easier to control. An in-depth Reuters report in December described how Assad's cousin Rami Makhlouf and his former intelligence chief Kamal Hassan—both currently exiled in Moscow—are spending millions on competing efforts to

build fighting forces that would lead a revolt against Sharaa's government along Syria's coast.²

Last March, former regime insurgents ambushed the transitional government's security forces on the coast. In response, government forces killed hundreds of civilians, mostly Alawites—a minority that includes Assad's family. Russia condemned the violence, and provided shelter to over 8,000 people in Hmeimim, according to Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova. Moscow used these events to position itself as a protector of minorities, but this is a double game. It is to Russia's advantage to have Syria's various communities weak and divided at a time when the West is looking to keep things stable. Such a country is easier for Russia to manipulate.

No Indication Damascus Will Abandon Russia

A September 2025 interview with Sharaa helps clarify why Assad's fall has not dealt Russia the fatal strategic blow that many thought it would.³ Sharaa revealed that when his forces led the military offensive that toppled Assad in December 2024, they entered into secret negotiations with the Russians to reach an understanding. When Sharaa's forces moved into the city of Homs, Russia "stayed away from the battle," he said, while his forces avoided attacking Russia's Hmeimim airbase. In an extensive November 2025 interview with *Al Majalla*, Syrian Foreign Minister Assad al-Shaibani also discussed at length how Sharaa's forces chose to "neutralize" Russia at a pivotal moment that allowed them to bring down Assad. Senior Russian officials were told, "Bringing down the Assad regime does not mean Russia must leave Syria."⁴

So, Moscow chose to abandon Assad, and in exchange retained access to Syria through its new leadership. After the fall of Assad, Sharaa repeatedly emphasized the necessity of ties with Russia. Subsequent top-level official exchanges followed throughout the year. Sharaa also appointed as secretary-general of the presidency his brother Maher, who lived and worked in Russia for over twenty years and is married to a Russian businesswoman. When Moscow proposed redeployment of its military police in southern Syria, Sharaa expressed interest. It is not an issue Russia had to push.

Moreover, prior to meeting with President Trump in November 2025, Sharaa met with Putin in Moscow and sought to "redefine" relations with Russia. Upon the conclusion of the meeting, he pledged to honor all past agreements with Russia and signaled intent to expand bilateral ties. This meeting not only ensured that Russia's military bases remained safe, but also preserved the energy and reconstruction contracts that the Assad regime had previously awarded Moscow. In effect, this outcome suggests that rather than "redefining" the relationship with Russia, many of the core elements established during the Assad regime remained in place.

Profiting from War Crimes While Russia Is Well-Positioned for a Resurgence

Putin and Assad are both indicted war criminals—Assad for crimes in Syria, and Putin for crimes in Ukraine. American policymakers have long said that Russia cannot profit from war crimes in Syria, but it is already profiting by expanding economic and other ties post-Assad. Neither Assad nor

² Feras Dalatey and Timour Azhari, "Assad's exiled spy chief and billionaire cousin plot Syrian uprisings from Russia," Reuters, January 14, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/investigations/assads-exiled-spy-chief-billionaire-cousin-plot-syrian-uprisings-russia-2025-12-05>

³ "Sharaa says Syria, Israel negotiating deal that would see pullback of Israeli forces," *Times of Israel*, September 13, 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/sharaa-says-syria-israel-negotiating-deal-that-would-see-pullback-of-israeli-forces>

⁴ Ibrahim Hamidi, "Asaad Shaibani on how Syria untangled its Russian knot," *Al Majallah*, November 18, 2025, <https://en.majalla.com/node/328370/politics/asaad-shaibani-how-syria-untangled-its-russian-knot>

Putin were held accountable for the war crimes their forces committed in Syria, including the use of torture and indiscriminate bombings of civilians; indeed, the Kremlin used Syria as a testing ground for military hardware and tactics that it later deployed in Ukraine. Nor is there any indication that Assad (or Putin) will be held accountable for these crimes anytime soon. Sharaa for his part is not prioritizing this issue.

Failure to counter Russia's continuing ties in Syria will impact U.S. credibility with allies and partners in Europe and the Middle East. That Russia is profiting from war crimes is already damaging U.S. credibility.

While Moscow's influence in Syria is severely diminished at the moment compared to when Assad held power, this is a long game for Putin. Moscow is taking a more cautious approach and slowly building ties on multiple fronts, all while presenting itself as a counterweight to other external actors in Syria. Neither Sharaa nor external actors such as Israel are in a hurry to deny Russia this role.

Policy Recommendations

Moscow is well-positioned for a resurgence in Syria in the long run, provided the United States does not counter those ambitions and raise the costs for Russia to be there. Russia is part of the problem in Syria, not part of a solution. Should the Islamic State resurge, Russia will not counter it with any consistency. Rather, Moscow's influence will ensure greater instability in Syria and, by extension, the Middle East. Russia could also exacerbate existing regional tensions with the goal of distracting Western governments, forcing them to expend their resources in future conflicts, and diverting their attention from Ukraine.

Just as the Trump administration seized the moment in post-Assad Syria to provide sanctions relief, the United States now has a brief window of opportunity to counter Russia in Syria. Washington can achieve this by:

- **Widening the view of what “involvement” in Syria means.** While military withdrawal from Syria is premature, it is likely to happen. There is a reason the Russians remain physically present in Syria, even after the fall of Assad; their long history of cultural, humanitarian, and military influence demanded it. It is vital that the United States stay engaged in this region through trade, humanitarian relief, and diplomatic involvement to help mitigate the worsening imbalance between U.S. interests and U.S. engagement. The existing pleas for a full time U.S. envoy to Syria should be heeded.⁵ Having enough full-time staff will also help keep the United States abreast of creative ways we can stay actively engaged in Syria.
- **Bolstering alternatives to Russia while pressuring Sharaa to constrain Moscow.** The United States would be well-served to use Ukraine's strengths to further empower military, economic, and diplomatic ties in Syria and all across the Middle East/North Africa region. Facilitating trade, cultural, and diplomatic ties between Ukrainians and Syrians—especially Ukrainian wheat supplies—serves the dual purpose of shutting out Russian influence in those areas and creating a path for Ukrainian goods, technology, arms trade, and infor-

⁵ David Schenker, testimony for the hearing “The Future of Assad in Syria,” House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, June 5, 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/after-assad-future-syria>

mation influence in Syria and the MENA region. The Ukrainian military has already integrated Western and post-Soviet military systems, made impressive innovations in the arms industry, and bolstered its expertise in the maintenance and modernization of Russian military equipment. Ukraine can help the United States modernize what have been traditionally Russian client states in the Middle East, helping prevent further encroachment on traditional Western partners. That interference would also serve to keep further Russian profit-making from its arms industry in check. The United States could consider conditioning aid to incentivize Syria to give valuable military maintenance contracts and arms sales to countries other than Russia (along with Iran and China). The United States also retains sanctions leverage in Syria and could consider reimposing them in the future for a combination of both carrot and stick approaches.

- **Taking steps to block Russia's likely resurgence across the Middle East.** Russia remains active all across the Middle East outside of Syria and is well-positioned for a resurgence, especially if the war in Ukraine takes a real pause or the United States moves towards normalizing relations with Moscow, as Matt Tavares and I discuss in our recent report.⁶ Russia's influence in Syria does not exist in a vacuum, but as part of its broader influence all over the region. In the past decade, Russia used its position in Syria as a springboard for further power projection and influence building across the Middle East and North Africa. Typically, Russia stays in the influence game over the long term. For the same reasons, the United States should look to extend its own influence as a counterweight in the region, apart from and beyond its military presence.

⁶ Anna Borshchevskaya and Matt Tavares, "After Ukraine: Prospects for a Russian Resurgence in the Middle East," Policy Notes 165, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 23, 2026, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/after-ukraine-prospects-russian-resurgence-middle-east>