

Syria: Transition and U.S. Policy

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In December 2024, armed groups opposed to the government of former Syrian President Bashar Al Asad (alt. Assad) forced Asad's resignation and exile to Russia. Since the 1970s, the Asad family had controlled the Baath Party-led Syrian government, privileging members of Syria's Alawite religious minority. The Asad government's hostility to Israel, attempts to dominate neighboring Lebanon, alignment with Russia, partnership with Iran, support for terrorist groups, and development of weapons of mass destruction fueled tensions with the United States for decades. From 2011 to 2024, civil war-turned-international armed conflict in Syria displaced more than half of Syria's population, killed more than half a million people, destroyed critical infrastructure, shattered Syria's economy. The United States called for Asad's departure in 2011, supported United Nations-led negotiations for a transition, and intervened militarily in response to Asad's use of chemical weapons and in response to Syria-based transnational terrorist threats.

In Asad's wake, members of the U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) established and are leading an interim government. The Asad-era constitution has been rescinded. Interim ministers and other officials appointed by HTS and its partners control the residual organs of the Syrian state. Representatives of Syria's ethnically, religiously, and politically diverse population have not formally agreed to a specific transition roadmap: instead, Syria's new leaders convened a national dialogue and have announced plans to appoint a new and more broad-based interim government, with the stated intent to establish an interim legislative body, define a new constitution, and eventually hold elections. Interim authorities have taken steps to maintain order and protect Syria's constituent communities, but reports of rising crime and retaliatory violence, and severe crises in the economy, energy sector, and state services are straining social ties. In March 2025, reported pro-Asad insurgent attacks, security force responses, and unsanctioned attacks on Alawite communities in western Syria underscored the uncertainty and precarity of the country's security environment. As of January 2025, United Nations (UN) agencies estimated that 7.4 million Syrians were internally displaced and reported that 4.7 million Syrians were registered as refugees in regional countries. UN officials expect 1.5 million Syrian refugees and 2 million of those internally displaced to return home in 2025. UN agencies further estimate that more than 16.5 million Syrians are in need of some form of humanitarian or protection assistance, nearly half of whom are children.

Since 2014, U.S. military operations in Syria as part of Operation Inherent Resolve have sought the enduring defeat of the Islamic State (IS). As of December 2024, an estimated 2,000 U.S. military personnel were present in eastern and southern Syria, conducting counterterrorism missions and supporting Syrian partner forces who hold more than 9,000 IS prisoners and administer camps for more than 40,000 individuals from formerly IS-held areas. U.S. forces have operated inside Syria since 2014 pursuant to the 2001 and 2002 Authorizations for Use of Military Force (AUMF), but without the agreement of Syria's former or current interim authorities. The U.S. military warned in 2024 of the potential resurgence of IS remnants in Syria, and U.S. forces have struck dozens of IS and Al Qaeda targets in Syria since December 2024. President Donald Trump has said U.S. interests in Syria are limited and that he will make a determination on the future of the U.S. military presence there.

The interim authorities have disbanded the Asad-era state security forces and are reorganizing them under their leadership. Interim leaders have said that all civilian and armed groups from the conflict period are to be dissolved, including HTS. Security forces aligned with the interim government control much of western and northern Syria but some nonstate armed groups continue to operate, state control of armed groups appears uneven, and the potential for internal conflicts remains. Authorities condemned and have moved to investigate the violence that erupted in western Syria in March 2025. The U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that control areas of northeastern Syria have differed with interim authorities over transition plans and security arrangements, but signed an integration agreement in March 2025. The Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) coalition has clashed with and seized some areas from the SDF. The Turkish government seeks to counter the SDF because of links Kurdish SDF elements have with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK, another FTO).

Since December, U.S. officials and other countries have engaged with Syria's interim leaders to discuss security, recovery, and transition plans. UN agencies and U.S. implementing partners report that recent changes to U.S. foreign assistance policy have caused disruptions in some U.S.-funded initiatives in Syria, including support to counterterrorism, stabilization, and humanitarian programs. Administration officials state they have issued waivers for life-saving assistance. The U.S. government has issued general licenses to allow for some transactions in Syria under U.S. sanctions, but U.S. sanctions that were levied on the Asad government and other entities in Syria have not changed substantively. The 119th Congress and U.S. officials may reassess U.S. interests in Syria and their priority relative to other matters. Congress also may consider legislation and oversight affecting U.S. diplomatic, defense, assistance, and sanctions policies.

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Overview and Key Developments

The fall of the government led by Bashar Al Asad in December 2024 marked a dramatic end to the more than decade-long anti-Asad conflict in Syria and the conclusion of decades of tension between the United States and the Asad family-led, Baath Party-dominated government of Syria.¹ The Asad government's hostility to Israel, attempts to dominate neighboring Lebanon, alignment with Russia, partnership with Iran, support for terrorist groups, and development of weapons of mass destruction fueled tensions with the United States for decades. In Asad's wake, forces and leaders associated with Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS, aka the Organization for the Liberation of Syria, see **Appendix**) have exerted security control over most of western Syria (**Figure 1**) and have asserted leadership of the country's transition. HTS has taken steps to reject its former ties to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, but remains a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization.

In January 2025, attendees at a "Victory Conference" of some anti-Asad armed groups appointed HTS leader Ahmed Hussein Al Sharaa (aka Abu Mohammed al Jawlani/Jolani/Golani), a U.S. Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT), as Syria's interim president. Most individuals appointed to interim national leadership positions (**Table 1**) have been HTS members or previously served in the HTS-backed Syrian Salvation Government that administered areas of rebel-held Idlib province prior to Asad's ouster. Sharaa and other HTS-appointed figures are representing the government of Syria internationally. In conjunction with Sharaa's selection, interim authorities rescinded Syria's 2012 constitution and dissolved the former ruling Baath Party, the Asad-era legislature, and the former regime's military and security forces. The interim authorities further said all military factions, political, and civil revolutionary bodies will be dissolved and integrated into state institutions. Sharaa has said this includes HTS.

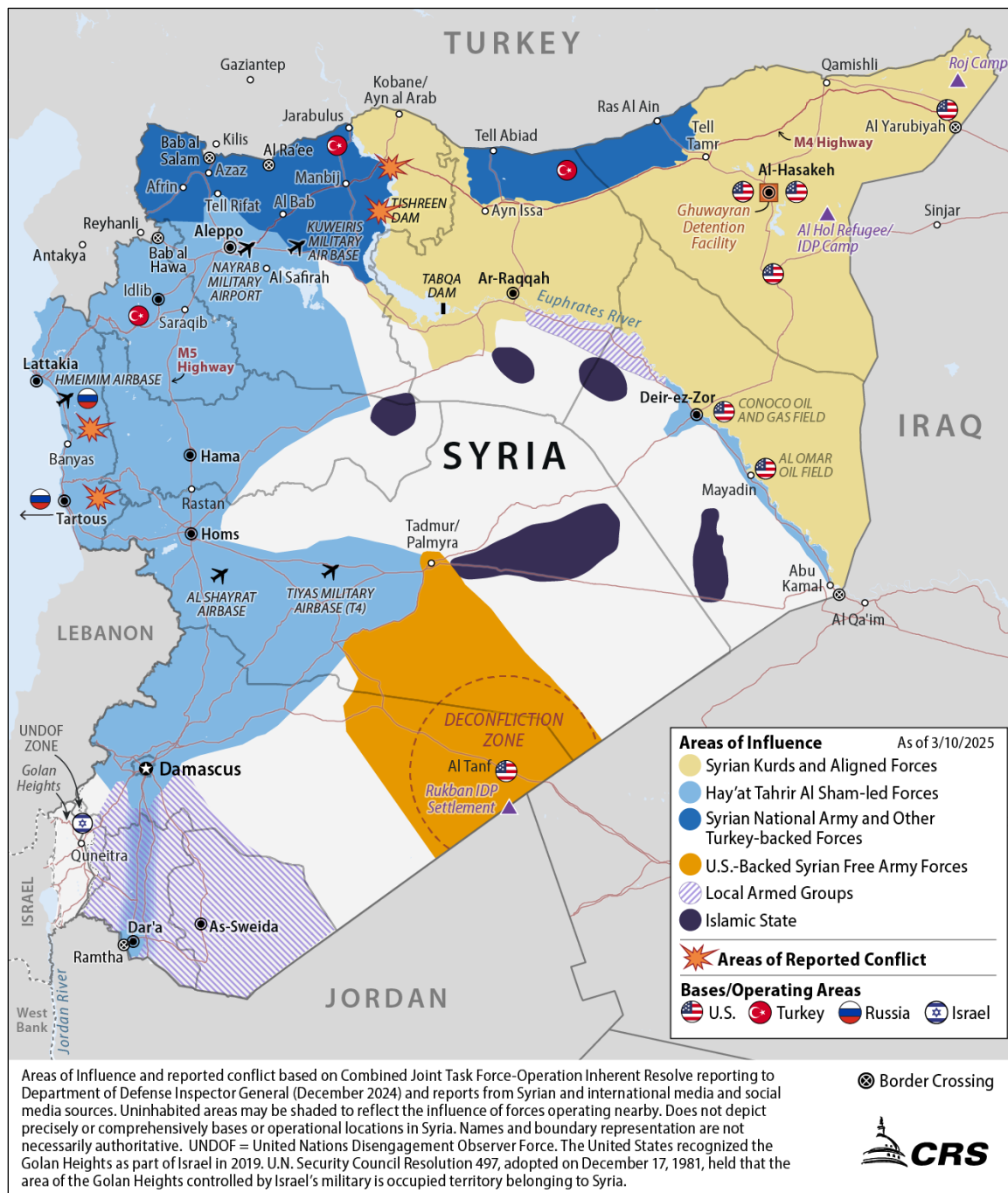
The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—a Kurdish-led coalition of groups that control northeastern Syria in partnership with an Autonomous Administration for North and East Syria (AANES)—have recognized the interim government and in March 2025 signed an agreement affirming their intent to integrate with national security forces in conjunction with a ceasefire and guarantees of constitutional rights. The SDF and interim authorities are to negotiate implementation by the end of 2025 for "integrating all civil and military institutions in northeastern Syria into the administration of the Syrian state, including border crossings, the airport, and oil and gas fields." Threats from Islamic State and Turkey-backed groups and precise terms for security sector management and relations with U.S. and coalition forces may be points of emphasis for SDF negotiators. Armed groups in southern Syria have taken a similar posture to the SDF's by engaging interim authorities and expressing a willingness to integrate with national forces, while declining to immediately disarm.

In March 2025, violence erupted in some predominantly Alawite-populated areas of northwest Syria, as armed groups with ties to the former Asad government attempted to reassert control over

¹ The area that now comprises Syria was long ruled as part of the Ottoman Empire and was administered by France under a mandate of the League of Nations following the First World War. Syria achieved independence from France through the 1930s and 1940s, and its early history as an independent state in the mid-20th century was marked by a series of Cold War influenced coups and regional instability. The Baath (Renaissance) Party seized power in Syria in 1963, and the Al Asad family led the party's control of Syria from 1970 until 2024. Former president Bashar al Asad's father—Hafiz al Asad—ruled the country from 1970 until his death in 2000. The Asad family are members of the minority Alawite sect (estimated 12% of the population), which has its roots in Shiite Islam. They and the Baath party cultivated Alawites as a key base of support, and elite security forces were long been led by Alawites. The government violently suppressed an armed uprising led by the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s, killing thousands from the majority Sunni Muslim community. After taking office in 2000, Bashar Al Asad offered and retracted the prospect of limited political reform, while aligning his government with Iran and non-state actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah in a complex rivalry with the United States and its Arab and non-Arab allies (including Israel).

some rural areas. Clashes reportedly killed more than 1,000 fighters and civilians and drew international attention to unresolved tensions and challenges facing interim authorities and communities long-accustomed to preferential treatment and protection under Asad.²

Figure 1. Syria: Areas of Influence



Source: CRS using CJTF-OIR reporting to Lead Inspector General, media and social media reporting and ESRI and U.S. State Department data. All areas of influence approximate and subject to change.

² Csongor Körömi, "Clashes in Syria kill more than 1,000 people in 2 days," *Politico Europe*, March 9, 2025.

Syria: Conflict Synopsis and U.S. Policy, 2011-2024

In March **2011**, antigovernment protests broke out in Syria, in the midst of a wider trend of regional upheaval and challenges to decades of authoritarian rule. Violence escalated, and, in August 2011, President Barack Obama called on Syrian President Bashar al Asad to step down. Over time, the rising death toll from the conflict and the use of chemical weapons by the Asad government intensified pressure for the United States to assist the opposition. In 2013, Congress debated lethal and nonlethal assistance to vetted Syrian opposition groups, and authorized the latter. Congress also debated, but did not authorize, the use of force in response to an August **2013** chemical weapons attack.

In **2014**, the Obama Administration requested authority and funding from Congress to provide lethal support to vetted Syrians for select purposes. The original request sought authority to support vetted Syrians in “defending the Syrian people from attacks by the Syrian regime,” but the subsequent advance of the Islamic State organization from Syria across Iraq refocused executive and legislative deliberations onto counterterrorism. Congress ultimately authorized a Department of Defense-led train and equip program for select Syrian forces to combat terrorist groups active in Syria, defend the United States and its partners from Syria-based terrorist threats, and “promote the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria.”³

In September 2014, the United States began air strikes in Syria, with the stated goal of preventing the Islamic State from using Syria as a base for its operations in neighboring Iraq. In October 2014, the Defense Department established Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) to serve as the military component of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, a multilateral civil and military coalition of dozens of countries.

In **2015**, the United States deployed military forces to Syria to counter the Islamic State and train local partner forces. Coalition and U.S. gains in Syria against the Islamic State after 2015 came largely through the assistance of Syrian Kurdish-led partner forces, but neighboring Turkey’s concerns about Kurdish forces in Syria emerged as a persistent challenge for U.S. policymakers.

In **2017**, the United States began providing arms to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the SDF, backed by U.S. forces, advanced on IS-held areas, seizing the IS stronghold of Raqqa in October 2017 and asserting control over the last IS-held areas of Syria’s eastern Euphrates River valley in March 2019.

In **2018**, the U.S. intelligence community assessed that the conflict had “decisively shifted in the Syrian regime’s favor.”⁴ Remaining armed opposition forces (including groups linked to Al Qaeda) and civilians actively opposed to Asad were pushed into a shrinking geographic space in and around Idlib province in northwestern Syria. Turkish military forces remained present in Idlib and other areas of northern Syria, limiting advances by pro-Asad forces and preventing further displacement of Syrians to Turkey.

In October **2019**, after President Trump signaled that U.S. forces would withdraw from Syria, Turkey launched a cross-border military operation attempting to expel Syrian Kurdish U.S. partner forces from areas adjacent to the Turkish border. President Trump briefly imposed sanctions on Turkish officials and negotiated a ceasefire that was later supplemented by an agreement reached between Turkey and Russia to establish patrolled security zones. While U.S.-led coalition and partner forces focused on defeating the Islamic State in northern and eastern Syria, support from Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah forces enabled the Syrian government to retake many areas of the country formerly held by the opposition.

The United Nations (UN) sponsored peace talks in Geneva beginning in 2012, but the talks bore little fruit. Over time, military pressure on the Syrian government to make concessions to the opposition was reduced. By **2022**, UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen described the conflict as a “stalemate” with relatively fixed lines.⁵ In Idlib, Haya’t Tahrir al Sham distanced itself from Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, establishing and controlling a Syrian Salvation Government, retraining fighters into more formidable and capable units, and periodically clashing with Turkey-backed groups in control of other areas of northern Syria.

In November **2024**, HTS-led forces launched an offensive in response to escalating pro-Asad attacks, leading to the unexpected HTS capture of Aleppo and the cascading collapse of pro-Asad forces across western Syria. Some southern anti-Asad groups—demobilized under military pressure during the conflict—remobilized as the regime collapsed.

³ For additional background, see CRS Report R46796, *Congress and the Middle East, 2011-2020: Selected Case Studies*, coordinated by Christopher M. Blanchard.

⁴ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community: 2018*.

⁵ UN Security Council, “Amid Stalemate, Acute Suffering in Syria, Special Envoy Tells Security Council Political Solution ‘Only Way Out,’” Meetings Coverage, SC/14807, February 25, 2022.

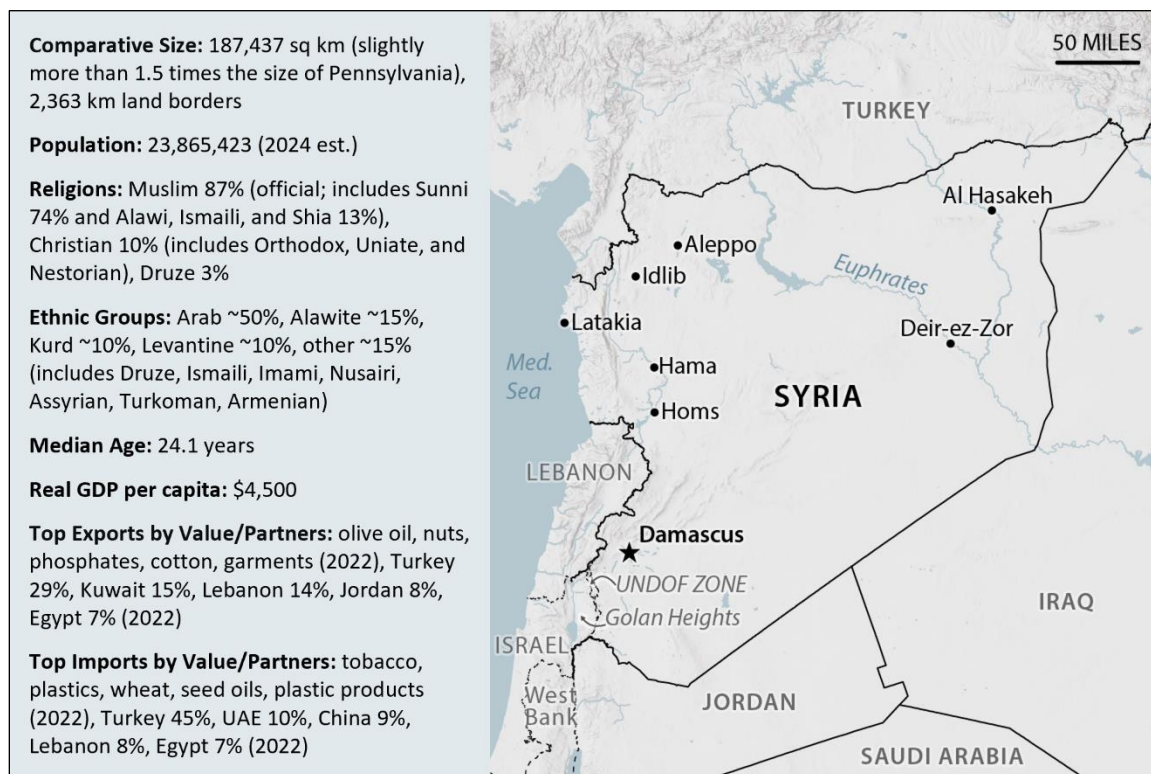
Table I. Syria: Selected Interim Authorities

As of March 10, 2025

Interim President of the Syrian Arab Republic/ Commander-in-Chief	Ahmed Al Sharaa	Prime Minister	Mohammed Al Bashir
Minister of Foreign Affairs	Asaad Al Shaibani	Minister of Defense	Maj. Gen. Marhaf Abu Qasra
Minister of Interior	Ali Keda	Minister of Finance	Mohammed Abazid
Minister of Economy and Foreign Trade	Basil Abdul Hanan	Minister of Justice	Shadi Mohammed Al Waissi
Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources	Ghaith Diab	Minister of Electricity	Omar Shaqrouq
Minister of Transport	Baha al Din Sharam	Minister of Agriculture	Mohammed Al Ahmad
Minister of Health	Dr. Maher Al Sharaa	Women's Affairs Director	Aisha Al Debs
Chief of the General Staff of the Army and Armed Forces	Ali Nouredine Al Nasan	Acting Governor of the Central Bank of Syria	Maysaa Sabreen

Source: CRS, compiled from Syrian and international media reports. Subject to change.

Figure 2. Syria: At a Glance Map and Data



Source: CRS. Using Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook data, February 2025.

Notes: The United States recognized the Golan Heights as part of Israel in 2019. UN Security Council Resolution 497, adopted on December 17, 1981, held that the area of the Golan Heights controlled by Israel's military is occupied territory belonging to Syria.

The United Nations and Syria

The rapid collapse of the Asad government overturned some core assumptions underlying the established UN Security Council consensus about the crisis and conflict in Syria. In a December interview, Ahmed Al Sharaa expressed his hope that Syrians would not be unduly constrained by Asad-era UN resolutions and international sanctions, and he asserted Syrians' collective responsibility for solving their issues internally, while also welcoming international support.⁶ Sharaa argued that Asad's departure obviates international calls for negotiation with Asad-era entities and that the interim authorities' efforts will establish conditions allowing for the return of Syrian refugees and a transition in line with the spirit of UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

The UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen of Norway, has acknowledged that Resolution 2254's specific calls for UN-facilitated negotiations "are no longer relevant," while reiterating the themes of the Security Council's December 2024 statement emphasizing the importance of Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity, and calling for an inclusive and Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process.⁷ Pedersen has highlighted the risks of renewed conflict posed by the unresolved status of northeast Syria, and called for a negotiated solution.⁸ Following a visit to Syria and meetings with interim authorities, Pedersen told the UN Security Council that

the leadership of the caretaker authorities have repeatedly committed publicly and to me that the new Syria will be for all Syrians and built on inclusive and credible foundations. Given the specific road map being laid out as regards governance, the constitution and elections, the words of the caretaker authorities show considerable overlap with the key principles of resolution 2254 (2015). The key will be implementation.⁹

He called the territorial division of Syria and conflict in the northeast "extremely concerning," and said that "many Syrians have expressed serious concerns about the inclusion of foreign fighters in the senior ranks of the new armed forces, as well as individuals associated with violations."¹⁰

Syria's Humanitarian Crises and U.S. and International Assistance¹¹

UN agencies estimate that 7.4 million Syrians have been internally displaced (of whom 2.3 million are in camps).¹² According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 4.7 million Syrians are registered as refugees in regional countries.¹³ UN agencies estimate that more than 16.5 million Syrians are in need of some form of humanitarian or protection assistance, nearly half of whom are children.¹⁴ Disruption to services and energy supplies have followed

⁶ MEMRI Translation #11695, reviewed by CRS, Source - Al-Arabiya Network, December 29, 2024.

⁷ Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria (UN OSES), "Near Verbatim Transcript of Press Conference by United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Mr. Geir O. Pedersen," January 22, 2025; and UN Document SC/15943, "Security Council Press Statement on Situation in Syria," December 17, 2024.

⁸ UN OSES, "Near Verbatim Transcript of Press Conference ... " January 22, 2025.

⁹ UN Document S/PV.9857, Remarks of UN SES Pederson to the UN Security Council, February 12, 2025.

¹⁰ UN Document S/PV.9857, Remarks of UN SES Pederson to the UN Security Council, February 12, 2025.

¹¹ For discussion of U.S. foreign assistance and defense assistance, see "U.S. Interests and Initiatives" below.

¹² IOM, Crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic, data as of January 14, 2025.

¹³ UNHCR Operational Data Portal, Syria Refugee Response, at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>.

¹⁴ UN OCHA, Strategic Steering Group, Humanitarian Response Priorities, Syrian Arab Republic, January – March 2025.

Asad’s ouster, compounding the challenges facing Syrian civilians. Syrian respondents identified shelter, access to food, and electricity as their priority needs in one whole-of-Syria needs assessment conducted by IMPACT in December 2024 and January 2025.¹⁵ A UN official said, “Many Syrians will be measuring success in hours of electricity, the price of food and levels of employment,” and urged sanctions relief, “including in the critical sectors of energy, investment and finance, including the Central Bank.”¹⁶

In northern Syria, fighting between Turkey-backed Syrian armed groups and the SDF—in areas removed from where U.S. troops are reportedly based—has disrupted operations at the Tishreen Dam on the Euphrates River. UN agencies reported in February 2025 that more than 400,000 people have had water and electricity supplies interrupted since December as a result.¹⁷

In January 2025, UN agencies identified humanitarian response priorities for Syria for the period from January through March 2025 and appealed for \$1.24 billion to provide life-saving assistance to 6.7 million of those most vulnerable. The annual UN funding appeal for Syria in 2024 totaled \$4.07 billion, and donors provided \$1.55 billion, not all of which was provided under the UN appeal. The United States provided \$1.179 billion in related humanitarian assistance in Syria and the region during U.S. fiscal year (FY) 2024 (**Table 2**), including more than 27% of the funds directed through the 2024 UN-coordinated plan. Since 2012, the United States has provided more than \$18.3 billion for the Syria humanitarian response.¹⁸

Table 2. U.S. Government Funding for Syria Regional Crisis Response, FY2024

\$s in millions			
Country	State/PRM	USAID/BH A	Total
Syria	\$114.3	\$465.4	\$579.7
Turkey	\$102.1	\$6.2	\$108.3
Jordan	\$125.5	\$58.0	\$183.5
Lebanon	\$215.1	\$53.6	\$268.7
Egypt	\$8.5	\$0	\$8.5
Iraq	\$30.5	\$0	\$30.5
Total	\$596.0	\$583.2	\$1,179.2

Source: USAID, Syria – Complex Emergency, Fact Sheet #10, Fiscal Year (FY) 2024, September 30, 2024.

Notes: Table figures reflect rounding and denote funds committed or obligated, not appropriated, in FY2024. State/PRM - U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. USAID/BHA - USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance.

On January 20, 2025, President Trump signed Executive Order 14169 pausing development assistance for 90 days to conduct a review of the “programmatically efficiency and consistency with United States foreign policy” of assistance programs.¹⁹ On January 28, the U.S. State Department said it had issued an emergency humanitarian waiver for some “life-saving humanitarian

¹⁵ IMPACT, “Unpacking the effects of thirteen years of crisis: A snapshot of humanitarian needs in post-Assad Syria,” REACH Brief, January 2025.

¹⁶ UN Document S/PV.9857, Remarks of UN SES Pederson to the UN Security Council, February 12, 2025.

¹⁷ UN OCHA, Humanitarian Situation Report No. 2 (As of 27 February 2025), February 28, 2025.

¹⁸ USAID, Syria Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #10, September 30, 2024.

¹⁹ EO 14169: Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid, January 20, 2025, 90 *Federal Register* 8619.

assistance” that provided for the temporary continuation of some programs but forbade entering into new contracts.²⁰ On February 26, the Department filed a statement in federal court saying its foreign assistance review was complete for grants and federal assistance—several hundred Department contracts were then still under review.²¹ Based on this review, the Department said that thousands of unspecified awards and programs were being cancelled.²²

Congress could inquire with the State Department and implementing partners to determine whether specific assistance programs in Syria remain active following these decisions. Prior to the announced review completion, UN agencies and U.S. implementing partners reported that recent changes to U.S. policy had caused disruptions to some services, including in SDF-secured camps.²³ In mid-February, UN OCHA reported that “In north-east Syria, the temporary suspension of US foreign assistance funding has led to reduced operational capacities among WASH [Water, Sanitation and Hygiene] partners. This reduction is particularly pronounced in Al Hol and Roj camps, where critical service gaps are anticipated.”²⁴

From December 2024 through January 2025, some Syrian refugees returned, expressed their intention to return, or undertook temporary visits into Syria to assess the viability of return. According to a January 2025 survey of Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt, “an increasing proportion of the refugee population expresses a clear intention to return” relative to survey results from March 2024.²⁵ UNHCR reports that as of March 6, 2025, more than 303,000 Syrian refugees had returned.²⁶ According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as of February 27, there had been “fewer than 100,000 people leaving camps in north-west Syria since December. Damaged homes, inadequate services, and the threat of unexploded ordnance are key barriers to return.”²⁷ Residents of the camp at Rukban near the Jordanian border reportedly have begun returning to their home communities (**Figure 1**).

The Asad government’s collapse obviated the obstacles and bureaucratic restrictions it had imposed on the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Syria. Syria’s interim security authorities have taken control of border crossings with Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, though large areas of northeast Syria adjacent to Turkey and Iraq reportedly remain out of their de facto control. UN agencies report that Syrian authorities are allowing Syrian refugees to enter and exit the country. According to UN surveys, among the obstacles and challenges facing returnees are security concerns, inadequate infrastructure, and limited economic opportunity and financial liquidity in Syria, along with damage to personal property, lack of civil or legal documentation, family relocation, transportation costs, and debts incurred in host countries.

²⁰ U.S. Department of State, “Emergency Humanitarian Waiver to Foreign Assistance Pause,” January 28, 2025.

²¹ Global Health Council, et al. v. Donald J. Trump, et al., Civil Action No. 25-cv-402 (AHA), Documents 42 and 45, February 26, 2025.

²² Global Health Council, et al. v. Donald J. Trump, et al., Civil Action No. 25-cv-402 (AHA), Documents 42 and 45, February 26, 2025.

²³ See “Trump’s aid freeze shocks a Syria camp holding families linked to the Islamic State group,” Associated Press (AP), February 3, 2025; The Syria Report, “Trump’s Sudden Halt of Foreign Aid Wrecks [sic] Havoc on Syria’s Humanitarian Response,” February 4, 2025; Elizabeth Hagedorn, “Trump’s aid freeze forces war-battered Syrian hospitals to halt services,” Al Monitor, February 13, 2025; and, Elissa Miolene and Adva Saldinger, “The mess inside Rubio’s ‘lifesaving’ waivers,” DEVEX, February 17, 2025.

²⁴ UN OCHA, Syria Humanitarian Situation Report No. 1, February 12, 2025.

²⁵ UNHCR, citing findings from a flash survey conducted using the Refugee Perceptions and Intentions Survey (RPIS), as reported in UNHCR, Regional Flash Update #11 - Syria Situation Crisis, January 23, 2025.

²⁶ UNHCR, Regional Flash Update #17 - Syria Situation Crisis, March 7, 2025.

²⁷ UN OCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Humanitarian Situation Report No. 2, February 28, 2025.

The Biden Administration in January 2024 redesignated Syria as a country whose nationals are eligible for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) in the United States through September 30, 2025.²⁸ Nearly 40,000 Syrian nationals had been admitted to the United States as refugees from FY2014 through FY2023.²⁹

U.S. Interests and Initiatives

For decades, U.S.-Syrian ties were strained and, since 1979, the United States has designated Syria as a State Sponsor of Terrorism. The former Syrian government's hostility to Israel, its attempts to dominate neighboring Lebanon, its alignment with Russia, its partnership with Iran, its support for terrorist groups, and its development of weapons of mass destruction all fueled tension between the United States and Syria until the fall of Asad's regime in late 2024. Syria-related counterterrorism, nonproliferation, and regional security concerns may endure and inform future U.S. policy choices.

Congress and successive U.S. Administrations imposed and maintained a range of bilateral sanctions on Syria and targeted sanctions on entities and individuals (see "U.S. and International Sanctions and Syria" below). After the onset of the anti-Asad uprising in 2011 and the outbreak of conflict, the United States and European countries imposed additional, more punishing sanctions on the Syrian government and individuals and entities supporting it. The duration, severity, and effects of conflict in Syria have created some actual and potential threats for U.S., European, and regional security related to terrorism, weapons proliferation, the use of chemical weapons, military intervention, drug trafficking, and mass migration. In this context, successive Administrations and Congress prioritized the following issues:

Counterterrorism. The former Syrian government's support for terrorism and the exploitation of Syrian territory by transnational terrorist groups to recruit, train, equip, raise funds, and plan attacks has been a focus for U.S. policymakers since before 2011. U.S. government reporting has described how Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, Hezbollah and other Iran-backed U.S.-designated terrorist groups, and the PKK have used Syria to further their aims, some with the active support of the Asad government.³⁰ Syria-based members of terrorist organizations, including the Islamic State, have used Syria "to plot or inspire external terrorist operations."³¹ U.S. and partner force operations ended the Islamic State's control of populated territories in Syria in March 2019, but remnants of the group have continued to operate from remote areas in central Syria. IS fighters have attempted to break prisoners and family members out of U.S. partner-secured prisons and camps and have attacked Syrian communities and U.S. partners. In 2024, IS attacks increased in Syria relative to previous years, and, according to U.S. officials, as the Asad regime fell IS fighters "exploited the chaos to acquire some quantities of weapons and supplies from supply

²⁸ The redesignation became effective April 1, 2024 and is slated to last through September 30, 2025. According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services data provided to CRS, as of September 30, 2024, 3,750 nationals of Syria were covered by TPS. In conjunction with the redesignation, certain Employment Authorization Documents (EADs) for Syrian beneficiaries of TPS were extended through March 31, 2025. See U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, "Extension and Redesignation of Syria for Temporary Protected Status," 89 *Federal Register* 5562, January 29, 2024; and, CRS Report RS20844, *Temporary Protected Status and Deferred Enforced Departure*, by Jill H. Wilson.

²⁹ Approximately 250 or fewer Syrian nationals were affirmatively granted asylum in the United States in each of the fiscal years from 2021 to 2023. See U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Homeland Security Statistics, *Refugees: 2023*, November 8, 2024; and, *Asylees: 2023*, October 2, 2024.

³⁰ See, for example, U.S. State Department, Country Reports on Terrorism 2023: Syria, November 2024; and, annual threat assessments of the Director of National Intelligence, 2014-2024.

³¹ U.S. State Department, Country Reports on Terrorism 2023: Syria, November 2024.

depots abandoned by regime forces.”³² Syria’s interim authorities, with reported intelligence support from the United States, have disrupted attempted IS attacks that could have exacerbated sectarian tensions in post-Asad Syria.³³

In January 2024, then-U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Barbara Leaf and other U.S. officials travelled to Syria and met with interim leaders, including Ahmed Al Sharaa. Citing “positive messages,” including a commitment from Sharaa that “terrorist groups cannot pose a threat inside of Syria or externally, including to the U.S. and our partners in the region,” the Biden Administration informed Sharaa that the U.S. government would no longer pursue the \$10 million Rewards for Justice reward offer against him.³⁴ Sharaa remains listed as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist pursuant to Executive Order 13224. HTS remains designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and SDGT entity.

Foreign Military Access and Basing. Since 2011, the presence and operations in Syria of foreign military forces from Russia, Iran, Turkey, Israel, and the United States and its partners have reflected the differing priorities and goals of outside actors in the country. U.S. policymakers may consider whether or how the continued operations in Syria of U.S. and coalition forces, Turkish forces, and Israeli forces affect U.S. interests. U.S. officials also may monitor and seek to shape the policies of Syrian interim authorities toward foreign military forces, including U.S. forces, Russian forces invited to Syria by the Asad government, and Israeli forces operating in and beyond the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force zone in the Golan Heights established in the 1974 Israel-Syria Disengagement Agreement. Syria’s interim authorities say they seek to establish normal diplomatic and security relationships with foreign countries—including their former Russian and Iranian adversaries—on the basis of mutual respect for sovereignty and noninterference. In a February 2025 interview, Ahmed Al Sharaa said “any military presence should be with the agreement of the host state.”³⁵

Weapons of Mass Destruction. The Asad government’s domestic use of chemical weapons against its armed opponents and civilians drew international condemnation and motivated U.S. military strikes in 2017 and 2018. In December 2024, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) said “significant concerns persist regarding the accuracy and completeness” of the former government’s declarations to the agency, “as well as the fate of substantial quantities of unaccounted-for chemical weapons.”³⁶ The OPCW called on Syria’s new authorities to fulfil Syria’s obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention, which remain valid regardless of the change in government. Interim officials have stated their intent to secure related sites and their willingness to cooperate with outside entities.³⁷ Israel has acted to destroy facilities associated with the former government’s weapons of mass destruction and advanced defense research programs, including since December 2024. As of February 2025, there is insufficient publicly available information to assess the security of materials, equipment, and facilities associated with those programs, and the whereabouts and intentions of trained experts formerly associated with them.

³² Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve (LIG-OIR), Report to the U.S. Congress, October 1, 2024–December 31, 2024, p. 11.

³³ Warren P. Strobel, Ellen Nakashima, and Missy Ryan, “U.S. shared secret intelligence with Syria’s new leaders,” *Washington Post*, January 24, 2025.

³⁴ “US removes \$10M bounty on leader of rebel group now in charge of Syria,” Voice of America, December 20, 2024.

³⁵ Reuters, “Syria’s Sharaa aims to restore US ties, no contacts yet with Trump administration,” February 4, 2025.

³⁶ OPCW, “OPCW urges Syria to fulfil Chemical Weapons Convention obligations,” December 12, 2024.

³⁷ “Demands for the destruction of chemical weapons in Syria,” Enab Baladi, December 17, 2024.

Conventional Weapons and Regional Security. The influx of weapons to Syria and their wide distribution in-country since 2011 present enduring threats to Syria's internal security and to the security of Syria's neighbors. Criminal groups, extremist organizations, and non-state armed groups, including some aligned with Iran and Turkey, have benefitted from the proliferation of small arms and military weapons during the conflict. In addition, unexploded ordnance, mines, and other explosive remnants of war pose risks to Syrian civilians and international actors across Syria. Interim authorities' ability and willingness to assert control over weapons stockpiles associated with the former government may be limited or vary in different areas. Israel has acted to destroy advanced conventional weapons and military air defense and air domain awareness systems across Syria since December 2024, citing potential risks to Israel's security.³⁸

Drug Trafficking. The Asad government enabled and profited from the production and smuggling of drugs across the Middle East, especially the drug captagon.³⁹ Congress sought to limit the Asad government's ability to profit from the captagon trade. In the 117th Congress, the Countering Assad's Proliferation Trafficking and Garnering of Narcotics Act (H.R. 6265, also known as the CAPTAGON Act) was introduced by Representative French Hill in December 2021, passed by the House in September 2022, and incorporated into the FY2023 NDAA (Section 1238 of P.L. 117-263). It has required the development and submission to Congress of an interagency plans to disrupt captagon trafficking and build regional counterdrug capacity. Interim authorities have pledged to dismantle captagon production and smuggling networks and cooperate with regional countries to halt the flow of the drug across Syria's borders. Arrests of criminals, including drug traffickers, are being publicized by interim authorities. Criminal networks' loss of captagon trade revenues may add to economic pressures in some areas of Syria.

Human Rights and Syrian Minorities. The Asad government's use of military force to repress demonstrations led many Syrians, the United States, and other countries in 2011 to call for Asad's departure. The Asad government's subsequent use of torture and its mass execution of prisoners continue to drive Syrian and international calls for accountability. Interim authorities have made statements calling for inclusive governance and respect for religious tolerance, and U.S. and other international officials have called on interim Syrian leaders to fulfill these commitments.

Asad's government privileged and was led by members of the Alawi religious minority, and members of Alawite communities could face particular risks of retaliatory violence and discrimination in post-Asad Syria. Syria's Christian, Alawite, and Druze religious minorities, Kurdish and other ethnic minorities, and secular Syrians are monitoring the transition's Sunni Islamist interim leaders and advocating for their respective communities' interests. In March 2025, reported attacks by pro-Asad armed groups drew an apparently disorganized security response that involved members of interim-government forces and mobilized armed groups that may have included foreign fighters and extremists.⁴⁰ Attacks and crimes against civilians in Alawite communities drew international concern. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said

The United States condemns the radical Islamist terrorists, including foreign jihadis, that murdered people in western Syria in recent days. The United States stands with Syria's

³⁸ Emanuel Fabian, "In historic campaign across Syria, IDF says it destroyed 80% of Assad regime's military," *Times of Israel*, December 10, 2024.

³⁹ For more information, see, U.S. State Department Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, 2024; and, Caroline Rose and Matthew Zweig, "What Will Happen to Assad's Secret Drug Empire?" *Foreign Policy*, January 16, 2025.

⁴⁰ Walid Al Nofal and Lara Ezzouqi, "Blood on the coast: Can Damascus pull back from the brink?" *Syria Direct*, March 8, 2025; and, Sarah Dadouch and Malaika Kanaaneh Tapper, "US condemns Syria violence after hundreds killed in sectarian clashes," *Financial Times*, March 9, 2025, and "Syria's sectarian violence prompts reckoning for new president," *Financial Times*, March 10, 2025.

religious and ethnic minorities, including its Christian, Druze, Alawite, and Kurdish communities, and offers its condolences to the victims and their families. Syria's interim authorities must hold the perpetrators of these massacres against Syria's minority communities accountable.⁴¹

The interim government announced the completion of security operations on March 10 and the formation of an investigatory commission and a Higher Committee for the Preservation of Civil Peace to look into the violence, identify parties responsible for attacks on civilians, and advise the interim authorities on measures to prevent similar incidents. Interim president Ahmed Al Sharaa acknowledged that, "many parties entered the Syrian coast and many violations occurred," and said, "We fought to defend the oppressed, and we won't accept that any blood be shed unjustly, or goes without punishment or accountability, even among those closest to us."⁴²

The State Department in 2023 designated HTS as an entity of particular concern pursuant to the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act (P.L. 114-281), and reported that "armed terrorist groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham committed a wide range of abuses, including killings, kidnappings, physical abuse, and recruitment or use of child soldiers."⁴³ The department also noted reports that conditions in HTS-run detention facilities violated international law. HTS leaders acknowledged and pledged to address abuses raised by protestors in areas under their control in 2024 but they also used force to disperse demonstrations. Human rights advocates also have alleged abuses by Turkey-backed armed groups in northern Syrian areas under their control, and by the SDF in eastern Syria in U.S.-supported facilities and camps under their control.

U.S. Diplomacy

Biden Administration officials travelled to Syria in December 2024 and met with interim leaders, but did not extend official recognition to the interim government. Asked about engagement with HTS and the future of U.S. policy in Syria, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said

In Syria, a group has taken over. These are not guys that would necessarily pass an FBI background check, per se. But ... if there is an opportunity in Syria to create a more stable place than what we've had historically, especially under Assad, where Iran and Russia dominated and where ISIS operated with impunity, we need to pursue that opportunity and see where that leads.⁴⁴

Speaking to the UN Security Council on February 12, Chargé d'Affaires of the U.S. Mission to the United Nations Ambassador Dorothy Shea called "ongoing armed hostilities" in northern Syria "concerning," and said, "the United States will continue to pursue a ceasefire that will enable our local partners to focus on combatting ISIS and maintain security of detention facilities and displaced persons camps."⁴⁵ She also said that ongoing U.S. assistance for the operations of the prisons and camps in northeastern Syria "cannot last forever" and "cannot remain a direct U.S. financial responsibility," urging "countries to expeditiously repatriate their displaced and detained nationals who remain in the region."⁴⁶

⁴¹ Secretary of State Marco Rubio, "The Escalation of Fighting and Civilian Deaths in Syria," March 9, 2025.

⁴² Samia Nakhoul, Maya Gebeily and Timour Azhari, "New Syrian leader Sharaa says killings of Alawites threaten unity, vows justice," Reuters, March 10, 2025.

⁴³ U.S. State Department, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 2023, April 22, 2024.

⁴⁴ U.S. State Department, "Secretary Marco Rubio with Megyn Kelly of The Megyn Kelly Show," January 31, 2025.

⁴⁵ U.S. Mission to the United Nations, "Remarks by Ambassador Shea, Chargé d'Affaires ad interim, at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Political and Humanitarian Situations in Syria," February 12, 2025.

⁴⁶ U.S. Mission to the United Nations, "Remarks by Ambassador Shea," February 12, 2025.

The United States suspended operations at the U.S. Embassy in Damascus in 2012; the Czech Republic serves as the U.S. protecting power in Syria. The Trump Administration has not announced any plan to return U.S. personnel to Syria on an enduring basis. In March 2014, the State Department suspended the operations of the Syrian embassy in Washington, DC, and those of Syrian consulates in Michigan and Texas, and expelled Syrian staff.

U.S. Military Operations in Syria and U.S. Partner Forces

President Donald Trump reportedly has stated that he views U.S. interests in Syria as limited and that he will make a determination on the future of the U.S. military presence there.⁴⁷ U.S. forces have operated in Syria since 2014 pursuant to the 2001 and 2002 Authorizations for Use of Military Force (AUMF). U.S. operations in Syria as part of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) seek the enduring defeat of the Islamic State. As of December 2024, an estimated 2,000 U.S. military personnel reportedly were present in eastern and southern Syria, conducting counterterrorism missions against IS remnants and supporting Syrian partner forces. Most U.S. forces have been deployed in northeast Syria in support of the SDF. Some U.S. troops have supported the Syrian Free Army (SFA) near Al Tanf in a former deconfliction zone in southern Syria, along a transit route between Iraq and Syria once used by both IS fighters and by Iran and Iran-backed militias.

Since 2015, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) has conducted periodic military strikes in Syria outside the framework of OIR, including on targets linked to Al Qaeda, Syrian government chemical weapons-related targets, and Iran-backed militias—some of which used Syria-based facilities to monitor and target U.S. forces. From October 2023 to November 2024, the U.S. military conducted strikes on facilities in eastern Syria associated with Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and affiliated militias in response to attacks by Iran-backed militias on U.S. forces in Syria and Iraq. Prior to Asad’s ouster, U.S. officials reported force protection concerns related to terrorist groups, Russia and Syrian government forces, and Iran-backed groups. CENTCOM has conducted dozens of airstrikes and multiple operations against IS targets in Syria since Asad’s ouster, and has targeted Al Qaeda affiliates in northwest Syria in 2025.

The Syria Train and Equip program, authorized by Congress since 2014 and funded via the Defense Department Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF), seeks to sustain the defeat of the Islamic State in Syria by enabling Syrian partner forces in the SDF and the SFA. U.S. officials assessed in October 2024 that the SDF “can execute operations up to the battalion level and maintain counterterrorism pressure on ISIS independently.”⁴⁸ U.S. officials reported in October 2024 that the SFA was well equipped with weapons and ammunition and described it as a “capable, combat-ready fighting force that has proven its abilities,” but judged that “without Coalition support, the SFA would not be able to sustain its position in the deconfliction zone.”⁴⁹ The SFA reportedly has expanded its areas of operation in south central Syria since Asad’s ouster.

FY2024 Funding and FY2025 Proposals

The FY2024 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 118-47) made \$397.5 million available for CTEF through September 2025, including \$156 million for Syria. It also directed the rescission of \$50 million in prior year CTEF funds. President Biden requested \$147.9 million in FY2025 CTEF funds for Syria programs that would remain available through September 2026. In the 118th

⁴⁷ “Trump: ‘We’re not involved in Syria, they got their own mess,’” *Responsible Statecraft*, January 31, 2025.

⁴⁸ LIG-OIR, Report to the U.S. Congress, July 1, 2024–September 30, 2024, p. 34.

⁴⁹ LIG-OIR, Report to the U.S. Congress, July 1, 2024–September 30, 2024, p. 35.

Congress, the House-passed FY2025 defense appropriations bill (H.R. 8774) would have provided the requested amount and recommended the rescission of \$50 million in FY2024 appropriated funds. The Senate Appropriations Committee-reported version of the bill (S. 4921) would have provided the requested amount without a prior-year rescission. The FY2025 National Defense Authorization Act extends through December 2025 authorities for U.S. train and equip programs in Syria.

Local Partner Forces

Since 2014, U.S. operations against the Islamic State in Syria have relied on partnership with local forces. Members of Congress have debated the eligibility of these local partners for admission into the United States in the case of attack by Turkish and/or Syrian forces. Several bills in the 116th Congress would have extended the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program to foreign nationals employed by the U.S. military in Syria, as well as their immediate families. The Syrian SIV programs proposed by these bills generally were modeled on the temporary SIV programs for Iraqis and Afghans who worked for or on behalf of the U.S. government. During the 117th Congress, Representatives Jason Crow and Michael Waltz reintroduced one such bill, the Syrian Partner Protection Act (H.R. 2838), which would have provided SIV status to a national of Syria or a stateless person who has habitually resided in Syria that had “partnered with, was employed by, or worked for or directly with the United States Government in Syria as an interpreter, translator, intelligence analyst, or in another sensitive and trusted capacity, on or after January 1, 2014, for an aggregate period of not less than 1 year.”

U.S. Bilateral Assistance Programs

In addition to humanitarian assistance, through 2024 U.S. bilateral assistance had supported stabilization programs in northeast Syria, funded engagement with civil society and training for local governance and security entities in areas outside of Syrian government control, and contributed to efforts to provide for the secure, humane detention of IS prisoners and for the housing, reintegration, or repatriation needs of internally displaced persons and foreign nationals resident in the Al Hol and Roj camps (see below).

The current status and future of Syria programs is uncertain in light of the Trump Administration’s announced review of U.S. foreign assistance activities, agency reorganization plans, and staff relocations. Fiscal savings or other perceived benefits could result from changes to U.S. assistance policy in Syria. Abrupt or fundamental changes to U.S. programs could affect the operations and financial viability of implementing partners and shape local and international perceptions of the United States. The Biden Administration’s FY2025 request (**Table 3**) sought \$100 million in Economic Support Fund (ESF) monies for “bolstering local governance capacity to provide essential services, restoring critical infrastructure, and improving access to basic health and education services, psychosocial support, and social reintegration activities” including for individuals returning from the Al Hol camp.

U.S. stabilization efforts in Syria have included programs focused on local governance, education, independent media, community security, livelihoods, reintegration, reconciliation, accountability, civic engagement, and the political process. In northeast Syria, U.S. programs have provided support intended to improve the performance and accountability of local governance and security entities and have included initiatives to support the provision of education and the delivery of services. In western Syria, U.S. assistance has supported the activities of the Syrian Civil Defense (SCD), also known as “the White Helmets,” and civil society organizations associated with the SCD.

The United States and the Future of Northeast Syria

Since 2015, the U.S. military has operated in northeast Syria and provided support to local partner forces opposed to the Islamic State group. The main U.S. partner in this effort has been the Syrian Democratic Forces, a coalition of armed groups whose leaders and strongest components are members of the People's Protection Units (YPG), a Syrian Kurdish nationalist militia with links to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization.⁵⁰ In 2017, the United States began overtly arming the YPG and other SDF elements, and by early 2019, YPG-led SDF forces backed by U.S. forces had succeeded in ending the Islamic State's control of territory north of the Euphrates River in Syria. SDF forces took control of captured IS fighters and established security perimeters around camps for persons displaced from IS-held areas. As of January 2025, U.S. partner forces detained approximately 9,000 IS fighters and controlled camps housing approximately 42,600 individuals across northeast Syria. In areas under SDF control, a regional governance structure has emerged known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

The government of Turkey consistently has objected to U.S. partnership with the YPG, characterizing the group and the wider SDF coalition as terrorists.⁵¹ In response to the YPG's consolidation of contiguous control over much of northern Syria's border areas by 2016, Turkey and allied Syrian militias conducted three significant military operations (in 2016, 2018, and 2019) that replaced YPG rule in some areas adjacent to Turkey with Turkish-backed Syrian forces. Turkey-Russia arrangements reached in 2019 and 2020 provided for an end to Turkish advances and joint patrols aimed at limiting the presence of the YPG and SDF in areas near the Turkish border.

As the Asad government collapsed in late 2024, Russian forces implementing Turkey-Russia agreements withdrew. SDF forces moved into areas of the lower Euphrates River valley that had been under pro-Asad forces' control, including the city of Deir-ez-Zor. HTS forces and their local partners subsequently moved to assert authority in these areas, and SDF forces withdrew north of the Euphrates River. To the west, Turkey-backed Arab militia groups operating as part of the Syrian National Army (SNA) coalition expelled YPG and SDF forces from areas north and east of Aleppo and have attempted to claim control over the Tishreen Dam and Qara Qozak bridge over the Euphrates River. Fighting continued in this region into early March 2025. Turkish drone strikes have targeted SDF personnel and locations east of the Euphrates, including in and around the border city of Kobane.

The political future of northeastern Syria and the security of U.S. partner forces are undetermined, though the signing of an agreement between the SDF and the interim government in March 2025 has created a framework for the possible future integration of security forces and administrative entities in the northeast with the national government. The withdrawal of U.S. forces from northeastern Syria or the removal of U.S. assurances of force protection to partner forces could lead the YPG and SDF, Turkey and Turkey-backed militias, and the interim Syrian authorities to change their policies and posture. In December 2024, two Senators introduced sanctions legislation against Turkey (S. 5643), while calling on it to accept a sustained cease-fire and a demilitarized zone that the SDF may seek to have "supervised" by U.S. troops.⁵² Regardless of U.S. posture and preferences and the course of intra-Syrian negotiations, broader conflict could erupt and may exacerbate counterterrorism risks and humanitarian needs. Turkey has warned it may feel compelled to undertake renewed military operations in Syria if its security concerns are not addressed. SDF Commander and YPG leader Mazloum Abdi has said, "We hope that the coalition does not withdraw. We ask them to stay."⁵³

Ahmed Al Sharaa has publicly rejected any future territorial division of Syria or the use of Syrian territory by any entity to threaten Syria's neighbors, insisting on the exclusive control of weapons by state security forces while stating his intent to resolve issues with the SDF through dialogue.⁵⁴ Sharaa claimed that non-Syrian PKK militants hostile to Turkey were present in northeast Syria and objected to a possible federalist solution to questions of Kurdish autonomy. Mazloum Abdi has said the SDF is "not pursuing separatism" and "envision[s] itself as an integral part of a unified Syrian army, as part of a broader political solution."⁵⁵ Abdi has said that the SDF accepts state sovereignty and supports a decentralized, secular governance model.

⁵⁰ See State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2023*; and Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," February 13, 2018.

⁵¹ See CRS Insight IN12473, *Turkey (Türkiye) in Syria: Key U.S. Policy Issues*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

⁵² Senator Chris Van Hollen, "Van Hollen and Graham Introduce Bipartisan Sanctions Against Turkey," December 20, 2024.

⁵³ Bassem Mroue, "US-Backed Commander Says His Kurdish-Led Group Wants a Secular and Civil State in Post-Assad Syria," AP, February 3, 2025.

⁵⁴ MEMRI Translation #11695, reviewed by CRS, Source - Al-Arabiya Network, December 29, 2024.

⁵⁵ "We want change to be the basis for a new phase in Syria" Mazloum Abdi," *Kurdistan24* (Iraq), January 28, 2025.

Table 3. U.S. Bilateral Aid for Syria Programs: FY2021-FY2025 Request

\$s in millions

Account	FY2021 Actual	FY2022 Actual	FY2023 Estimate	FY2024 Request	FY2025 Request
ESF	\$40.00	\$57.45	\$78.05	\$80.00	\$100.00
INCLE	\$0	\$6.14	\$10.00	\$10.00	\$10.00
NADR	\$0	\$7.00	\$8.50	\$7.00	\$8.50
Total	\$40.00	\$70.59	\$96.55	\$97.00	\$118.50

Source: Department of State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs Congressional Budget Justifications (FY2021-FY2025), FY2023 and FY2024 Joint Explanatory Statements, and CRS calculations and rounding.

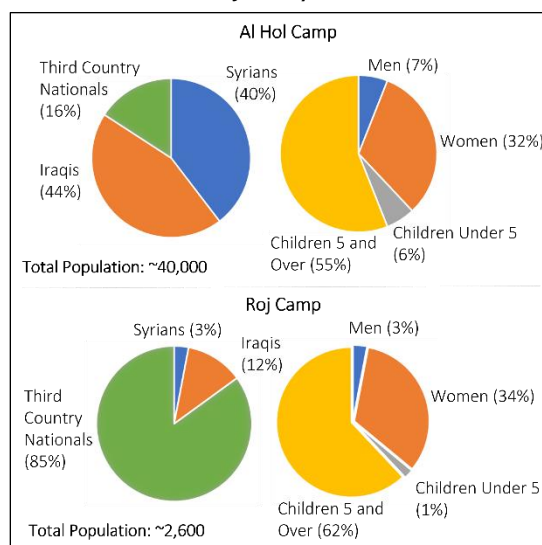
Notes: INCLE - International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement and NADR - Nonproliferation Anti-terrorism, De-mining and Related Programs.

IS Prisoners and Al Hol and Roj Camps

As of January 2025, U.S. partner forces detained approximately 9,000 Islamic State fighters and controlled camps housing approximately 42,600 individuals (**Figure 3**) across northeast Syria.⁵⁶ In late February the AANES reported that the population of Al Hol had declined to 38,209 as a result of repatriations.⁵⁷ U.S. officials and partner forces considered and chose not to pursue plans to construct new purpose-built facilities to detain IS prisoners.⁵⁸ Instead, upgrades to existing facilities have been undertaken with U.S. support, starting with those assessed to have the highest risk. U.S. officials reported in September 2024 that all SDF-run prisons needed upgrades, and that freeing detained fighters remains a primary IS objective.⁵⁹ The Al Hol and Roj camps house IS family members and other individuals displaced from the final areas retaken from IS forces in March 2019. The FY2024 Further Consolidated Appropriations Act directed that not less than \$25 million in ESF monies be made available to implement the “U.S. Government Al-Hol Action Plan,” which has sought to improve conditions in the camp and support reintegration. In January, camp administrators

Figure 3. Demography of U.S. Partner-Secured Camps in Eastern Syria

As of January 7, 2025



Source: CRS, using data reported to Lead Inspector General by U.S. State Department, January 2025.

⁵⁶ U.S. CENTCOM Commander Gen. Kurilla Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, March 21, 2024.

⁵⁷ AANES, “The fifth batch of Iraqi families leaves Al-Hol camp,” February 23, 2025.

⁵⁸ LIG-OIR, Report to Congress, October 1 – December 31, 2023, February 2024.

⁵⁹ LIG-OIR, Report to the U.S. Congress, July 1, 2024–September 30, 2024, p. 33.

announced the first ever departure of Syrian camp residents to Syrian host communities. Iraqi officials say they intend to complete repatriation of Iraqi nationals from Syria by the end of 2027.

The Departments of Defense and State have funded training programs for U.S. partner force personnel serving at prisons and camps in northeast Syria. U.S. support to partner force detention operations has included training in compliance with international humanitarian law and detainee treatment. Nevertheless, human rights advocates have reported widespread abuse and violations of detainee rights across partner force facilities. In April 2024, Amnesty International issued a detailed report alleging that “the principal partner of the US government in north-east Syria is engaged in the large-scale and systematic violation of the rights” of those in its custody.⁶⁰

The Senate Appropriations Committee report accompanying its version of the FY2025 defense appropriations bill (S. 4921) directed the Department of Defense to report to the committee 30 days prior to obligating funds for construction activities, stated that the committee “prioritizes detention facilities repair and construction ahead of any other construction activity,” and directed the Secretary of Defense “to engage with the SDF on ensuring that detainees are afforded all protections due under the Geneva Conventions.”

U.S. and International Sanctions and Syria

U.S. Sanctions. Since 1979, the United States has placed a broad array of sanctions on the government of Syria, Syrian entities and individuals, and third parties providing support to certain Syrian government activities. The United States also has imposed targeted sanctions on terrorist groups active in Syria and associated individuals. Successive Administrations and Congresses imposed and maintained these sanctions as a means of raising the costs to Syrian leaders of a number of policies they deemed hostile to U.S. national security, foreign policy, and economic interests. Specific sanctions actions were taken by different Administrations to address the Syrian government’s support for terrorism, its trade in weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile technologies, its interference in neighboring Lebanon, and its conduct during the country’s 2011-2024 conflict.

Interim Syrian authorities have appealed to the United States to revisit and rescind U.S. sanctions on Syria, citing the end of the Asad government and the interim government’s stated intentions. In a February interview, Ahmed Al Sharaa called U.S. sanctions “the gravest risk” to the transition and said that seeing them lifted was a “top priority.”⁶¹ Welcoming a February decision by the European Union to suspend some sanctions (see below), Syria’s interim foreign ministry said “The Syrian people deserve a country that serves their needs, unburdened by the political calculations of external actors. We urge the international community to take further action to lift all sanctions that impede Syria’s progress and prevent its citizens from rebuilding their lives.”⁶²

The Biden Administration took steps to alleviate economic distress in Syria, in part by issuing general licenses to permit broader categories of economic activities that otherwise would be subject to U.S. sanctions. Following a review of U.S. sanctions policy and in line with a Biden Administration decision to encourage economic activity in areas outside of Asad-government control, in May 2022, the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued General License No. 22, authorizing activities in 12 different economic sectors of

⁶⁰ Amnesty International, *Aftermath: Injustice, Torture, and Death in Detention in North-East Syria*, April 2024.

⁶¹ “An interview with Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria’s president,” *The Economist*, February 4, 2025.

⁶² SANA, “Foreign Ministry press release on the EU’s suspension of selected sanctions,” February 25, 2025.

northeast and northwest Syria.⁶³ In a June 2022 hearing, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf testified that the license was issued “to enhance the opportunities for economic regeneration in the areas liberated from ISIS,” in order to “create resiliency” in formerly IS-controlled areas and reduce the prospects of an IS resurgence.⁶⁴ The license, which notes the specific districts in which it is applicable—as well as subdistricts that are excluded—does not authorize “any transactions involving any person, including the Government of Syria, whose property or interests in property are blocked pursuant to the [Syrian Sanctions Regulations] or the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019.”

In January 2025, the Biden Administration issued a new general license to allow for certain transactions in Syria through July 6, 2025, to include transactions with the government of Syria, transactions related to noncommercial personal remittances, and transactions in support of the sale, supply, storage, or donation of energy, including petroleum, petroleum products, natural gas, and electricity. Underlying U.S. sanctions on the Syrian government and entities in Syria and related regulations have not been changed since December 2024.⁶⁵

As of February 2025, U.S. sanctions imposed on the government of Syria include, but are not limited to

- The Government of Syria is designated as a **state sponsor of acts of international terrorism** under Section 6(j)(1)(A) of the Export Administration Act of 1979, which restricts export licensing for controlled goods and services; Section 620A(a) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, which prohibits most U.S. foreign aid, Peace Corps programs, nonemergency agricultural aid, and Export-Import Bank funding; and Section 40(d) of the Arms Export Control Act, which prohibits sales and transfers of arms and related goods and services.⁶⁶ This designation also deprives Syria of its sovereign immunity under the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act from lawsuits based on certain acts of terrorism (28 U.S.C. §1605a).
- The Government of Syria is **designated as failing to cooperate with U.S. international antiterrorism efforts**, and is consequently denied trade with the United States in defense articles and defense services under section 40A of the Arms Export Control Act.⁶⁷
- National emergencies declared and renewed by successive Administrations since President George W. Bush issued **Executive Order 13338** in 2004 enable authorities under the terms of the National Emergencies Act (NEA), the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), and the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003. Under these authorities, the President may freeze assets, block property, and deny transactions of designated individuals and entities.⁶⁸ Related executive orders cite the Asad government’s

⁶³ U.S. Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), *Syrian Sanctions Regulations*, 31 C.F.R. part 542; General License No. 22.

⁶⁴ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *The Path Forward On U.S.-Syria Policy: Strategy And Accountability*, hearing, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., June 8, 2022.

⁶⁵ U.S. Department of the Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control, Syrian Sanctions Regulations 31 C.F.R. part 542; Global Terrorism Sanctions Regulations 31 C.F.R. part 594; Foreign Terrorist Organizations Sanctions Regulations 31 C.F.R. part 597 - General License No. 24 - Authorizing Transactions with Governing Institutions in Syria and Certain Transactions Related to Energy and Personal Remittances, January 6, 2025.

⁶⁶ 50 U.S.C. App. §2405(j)(1)(A), 22 U.S.C. §2371(a), and 22 U.S.C. §2780(d), respectively. Designation as a state sponsor of international terrorism has implications elsewhere in law, see CRS Report R43835, *State Sponsors of Acts of International Terrorism—Legislative Parameters: In Brief*.

⁶⁷ 22 U.S.C. §2781. The Secretary of State makes this determination annually by May 15; Syria has been designated each year since the provision was first enacted in 1996.

⁶⁸ See Executive Order 13338, “Blocking Property of Certain Persons and Prohibiting the Export of Certain Goods to (continued...) ”

support for terrorism, its policy toward Lebanon, its pursuit and use of weapons of mass destruction, its undermining of stabilization and reconstruction efforts in Iraq, the corruption of senior Syrian officials, human rights abuses, violent attacks on protestors, use of computer technology to violate the rights of Syrian citizens, and sanctions evasion as cause to impose sanctions. The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control administers rulemaking related to the **Syria Sanctions Regulations (31 C.F.R. Part 542)**. As of February 2025, 681 entities and individuals were listed on the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons list (SDN list) pursuant to these Syria programs.⁶⁹

- President Trump in 2019 issued **Executive Order 13894**, which declared a separate national emergency based on U.S. concerns about the actions of the Turkish military in Syria.⁷⁰ In October 2024, President Biden renewed that national emergency declaration.⁷¹ In January 2025, President Biden issued Executive Order 14142, amending Executive Order 13894 of October 2019 to remove specific references to the government of Turkey and preserving provisions allowing the potential imposition of financial and travel sanctions on individuals determined by the President to “threaten the peace, security, stability, or territorial integrity of Syria;” or be involved in “the commission of serious human rights abuse” related to Syria. As of February 2025, 44 individuals or entities were listed on the SDN list pursuant to this Syria program.⁷²
- In 2019, Congress enacted the **Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act of 2019 (“Caesar Act,” 22 U.S.C. §8791 note)**. The act requires the President to impose sanctions on persons the President determines to have knowingly provided significant support or knowingly engaged in significant transactions with the government of Syria, entities it owns or controls, and its senior officials; certain military or mercenary forces; or to be subject to sanctions with respect to Syria under U.S. law; and those who knowingly sell or provide significant goods, services, technology or other support related to a number of economic sectors, including natural gas, petroleum, and “significant construction or engineering services” for the government of Syria. As of February 2025, 26 individuals or entities were listed on the SDN list pursuant to the Caesar Act program.⁷³ Congress extended the sunset of the Caesar Act through December 2029 in the FY2025 National Defense Authorization Act.
- The Syrian government-owned Commercial Bank of Syria (including the Syrian Lebanese Commercial Bank) is found to be a foreign financial **institution of primary money laundering concern**, and U.S. banks are restricted from opening or maintaining correspondent or payable-through accounts with the Bank, under terms of 31 U.S.C. §5318A. In 2020, the Trump Administration added the Central Bank of Syria to the SDN list,

Syria,” 69 *Federal Register* 26751, May 11, 2004. National Emergencies Act (P.L. 94-412; 50 U.S.C. §§1601 *et seq.*), International Emergency Economic Powers Act (P.L. 95-223; 50 U.S.C. §§1701 *et seq.*), and Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-175; 22 U.S.C. §2151 note). If the President does not terminate the emergency or notify Congress of its continuation at least 90 days before the anniversary of the declaration, the NEA provides that the emergency automatically terminates on its anniversary (50 U.S.C. §1622(d)). The national emergency related to the actions of the government of Syria has been renewed annually, most recently on May 8, 2024 (89 *Federal Register* 40335). Subsequent Executive Orders 13399, 13640, 13572, 13573, 13582, 13606, and 13608 all are based on the initial declaration of this national emergency, and build on and expand the scope of the original order.

⁶⁹ OFAC Sanctions List Search at <https://sanctionssearch.ofac.treas.gov/>.

⁷⁰ 84 *Federal Register* 55851.

⁷¹ 89 *Federal Register* 82929.

⁷² OFAC Sanctions List Search at <https://sanctionssearch.ofac.treas.gov/>.

⁷³ OFAC Sanctions List Search at <https://sanctionssearch.ofac.treas.gov/>.

highlighting its blocked status as an entity of the Syrian state under **Executive Order 13582**.⁷⁴

- Sanctions authorities provided in the **Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act of 2000, Arms Export Control Act, and Export Administration Act of 1979** are applied against the Government of Syria, its agents, and individuals, cutting off U.S. trade, government procurement contracts, financial aid to facilitate trade, and export licenses.⁷⁵
- The Government of Syria has been found to be failing to meet minimum standards in deterring trafficking in persons (Tier 3), making it ineligible for most U.S. foreign aid, under the **Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000**.⁷⁶

The actions Presidents have taken pursuant to the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, National Emergencies Act and other statutory authorities, have resulted in the following restrictions on economic exchange with the government of Syria:

- **Arms sales and arms transfers** are fully denied. The Secretary of State denies licenses to export U.S. Munitions List (USML) items; the Secretary of Commerce denies licenses to export Commerce Control List (CCL) items.
- **The export of U.S. products**, other than food and medicine, is denied.
- The import of **Syria's petroleum products** is prohibited, and U.S. persons are prohibited from investing in Syria's petroleum sector.
- **Syrian air carriers are prohibited** from takeoff and landing in the United States.
- Syria is denied most forms of **foreign assistance**.
- **Access to U.S.-based assets** of certain individuals and entities is blocked.
- **Entry into the United States** is denied to certain individuals, identified by the UN Security Council and the U.S. State Department, and characterized in legislation.

U.S. Targeted Terrorism Sanctions. In May 2018, the executive branch added Hayat Tahrir al Sham as an alias of the Nusrah Front, which is designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, and as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) under Executive Order 13224. The executive branch designated HTS leader Al Sharaa as an SDGT pursuant to Executive Order 13224 in 2013. Sharaa has described U.S. terrorism related sanctions on him and HTS as no longer warranted in light of subsequent counterterrorism actions and commitments and their post-Asad decision to disband armed groups, including HTS. The executive branch retains authority to amend or rescind FTO and SDGT designations under current law.

UN Sanctions. Russia and China blocked efforts in the United Nations Security Council to impose sanctions on the Syrian government and Syrian officials related to conduct during the 2011-2024 conflict, but the Security Council has imposed targeted counterterrorism sanctions on some Syria-based groups and individuals, including HTS and Ahmed al Sharaa.⁷⁷ In February

⁷⁴ 76 *Federal Register* 52209 (August 17, 2011), and U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Syrian Regime Officials and the Central Bank of Syria," December 22, 2020.

⁷⁵ Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act of 2000 (P.L. 106-178; 50 U.S.C. §1701 note); Section 73, Arms Export Control Act (P.L. 90-629; 22 U.S.C. §2797); and Section 11B, Export Administration Act of 1979 (P.L. 96-72; 50 U.S.C. App. §2410b).

⁷⁶ Trafficking Victims Protection Act (division A, P.L. 106-386; 22 U.S.C. §§7101 *et seq.*)

⁷⁷ HTS and Sharaa are designated by the UN Security Council Sanctions Committee established pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida, and associated individuals, groups, (continued...)

2025, UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pederson said, “What I’m hoping is that with a truly new inclusive government in place on the 1st of March, this will help us in lifting sanctions” imposed by other countries on Syria.⁷⁸

European Sanctions. The European Union and some EU member states also have placed a range of Syria-related sanctions and counterterrorism sanctions on Syria-based groups and individuals. This includes EU sanctions on Syria’s energy sector, financial sector, and transactions involving the Syrian government. EU-wide counterterrorism sanctions also apply to Hayat Tahrir al Sham and Ahmed Al Sharaa. On February 25, the EU published amendments to EU sanctions on Syria, suspending sanctions on energy, transport, and reconstruction activities, extending humanitarian exemptions indefinitely, and allowing EU-based institutions to establish financial and banking relations with specific Syrian banks, including the Central Bank of Syria.⁷⁹ Funds of the Central Bank of Syria blocked in the EU as of February 2012 are to remain blocked under the announced February 2025 changes. Contrary to some previous press reporting, the sanctions changes were billed as a suspension but were not implemented with a date specific expiration.⁸⁰ In announcing the decision, the Council of the EU said it “will continue to examine whether the suspensions remain appropriate, based on the close monitoring of the situation in the country.”⁸¹

Regional and International Initiatives and Interests

The nature, duration, and effects of the Syria crisis and the intervention of external actors have made the outcome of Syria’s transition and the country’s stability a matter of national security concern for some countries across the Middle East region and beyond. As of February 2025, notable statements and developments involving third parties include

Turkey. Ahmed Al Sharaa visited Turkey on February 4 and invited Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to visit Syria. Turkish military and intelligence officials have visited Damascus several times since Asad’s fall. Turkey’s relationship with Sharaa and his HTS colleagues was forged initially through negotiation when HTS controlled Idlib province. Sharaa welcomed Turkish forces in HTS-controlled areas and some Al Qaeda-aligned groups and other extremists split from HTS. This occurred as HTS attempts to assert control over other Turkey-backed groups posed challenges to Turkey’s priorities. Turkey’s stated principal concerns in Syria as of 2025 appear to relate to the presence and activities of PKK members in areas controlled by the U.S.-backed SDF. Turkey may also harbor a basic opposition to the SDF and enduring concerns about potential Syrian Kurdish autonomy. Turkey has offered military training and support to Syria’s interim authorities, and Sharaa and other interim leaders have adopted positions on the future of the SDF, its integration with national forces, and the political future of northeast Syria that appear to align with Turkish preferences. Closer Syrian-Turkish official ties and an expanded Turkish military presence in Syria may provide Turkey with greater regional influence, and could affect the perceptions and security

undertakings and entities. Sharaa is listed under his nom de guerre Abu Mohammed Al-Jawlani and an alias, with biographical information that does not correspond to his personal stated accounts and other expert accounts of his background.

⁷⁸ Abby Sewell, “UN envoy says creating an inclusive Syrian government could help lift sanctions,” AP, February 20, 2025.

⁷⁹ See Official Journal of the European Union, Council Decision (CFSP) 2025/406 and Council Implementing Regulations (EU) 2025/407 and 408 of 24 February 2025 implementing Regulation (EU) No 36/2012 concerning restrictive measures in view of the situation in Syria.

⁸⁰ “EU cautiously agrees roadmap to ease sanctions on Syria in wake of Assad’s downfall,” AP, January 27, 2025.

⁸¹ Council of the European Union, Council Decision, Regulation and Implementing Regulation concerning restrictive measures in view of the situation in Syria, 6227/25 ADD 1, February 19, 2025.

calculations of Israel, Jordan, Iraq, and other Arab states. UN agencies report that there were more than 2.83 million registered Syrian refugees in Turkey as of February 12, 2025.⁸²

Israel. The fall of the Asad regime brought an end to fifty years of rule by antagonists of Israel that facilitated the transfer of support from Iran to Israel's enemies in Lebanon and beyond. During Israel's wars against Hamas and Hezbollah following the attacks of October 7, 2023, Israel continued air strikes on Syrian territory; in October 2024, it launched a ground operation against Syrian missile factories.⁸³ Israel has conducted military strikes across Syria since Asad's ouster, targeting sites associated with Syrian weapons of mass destruction and defense research programs, conventional weapons, and air defense systems. Israel also has demanded that the interim Syrian government demilitarize three southern provinces, a demand that has been met with public protests in Syria.

As the Asad regime collapsed, Israeli military forces entered the UN Disengagement Observation Force (UNDOF) buffer zone established by the 1974 Israel-Syria Disengagement Agreement. From 1974 until Asad's ouster, most international controversy regarding control over Israel-Syria border areas focused on Israel's 1981 annexation of areas of the Golan Heights it had captured in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Syria's interim authorities report that they have engaged UNDOF officials and expressed their willingness to return Syrian state forces to areas adjacent to the UNDOF zone provided that Israel removes its force from areas within and beyond the zone.

In a letter to the United Nations, Israel stated that it had taken "limited and temporary measures to counter any further threat to its citizens," and that the IDF have deployed temporarily in a few points and in a limited capacity east of Line A."⁸⁴ In December, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the press that Israel's seizure of control over the UNDOF zone was a "temporary defensive position until a suitable arrangement is found."⁸⁵ Subsequent media reports suggest that the IDF has been constructing more long-term infrastructure in the UNDOF zone and beyond.⁸⁶ In January, Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said that Israeli forces intend to remain "at the top of Mount Hermon and in the security zone indefinitely to protect Golan communities, the north and all Israeli citizens."⁸⁷

Israel additionally has demanded that the new Syrian government demilitarize its three southern provinces.⁸⁸ After a reported Israeli strike south of Damascus on February 25, Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said Israel "will not allow southern Syria to become southern Lebanon. ... We will not endanger the security of our citizens. Any attempt by Syrian regime forces and the country's terrorist organizations to establish themselves in the security zone in southern Syria—will be met with fire."⁸⁹ Earlier that day, Syria's national dialogue conference had concluded with a statement

⁸² UNHCR Operational Data Portal, Syria Refugee Response, at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>.

⁸³ "Israeli military says commandos raided missile plant in Syria in September," Reuters, January 2, 2025.

⁸⁴ UN Document S/2024/887, December 9, 2024.

⁸⁵ Israeli Prime Minister's Office, "PM Netanyahu's Statement from the Golan Heights," December 8, 2024.

⁸⁶ Loveday Morris, Zakaria Zakaria, and Meg Kelly, "Israel is building outposts in Syria, raising local fears of occupation," *Washington Post*, February 2, 2025.

⁸⁷ "Syria urges IDF withdrawal from buffer zone in talks with UN observers," AFP/Times of Israel, January 29, 2025.

⁸⁸ "Netanyahu says Israel won't allow Syrian forces 'south of Damascus,'" AP, February 23, 2025; and, Sudarsan Raghavan, "Israel's Demilitarization Demand Tests Syria's Shaky Government," *Wall Street Journal*, February 26, 2025.

⁸⁹ Times of Israel, "Katz confirms Israeli strikes in southern Syria: 'We will not allow it to become southern Lebanon,'" February 25, 2025.

Condemning the Israeli incursion into Syrian territory as a flagrant violation of the sovereignty of the Syrian state and demanding its immediate and unconditional withdrawal and rejecting the provocative statements of the Israeli Prime Minister and calling on the international community and regional organizations to assume their responsibilities towards the Syrian people and to pressure to stop the aggression and violations.⁹⁰

In a February interview, Ahmed Al Sharaa, whose family reportedly was displaced from the Golan region in 1967, said, “The Israelis need to retreat because their advancement will cause a lot of trouble in the future.... There is near-unanimous international agreement that [Israel’s] advancement is not right.”⁹¹ Sharaa did not preclude future Israel-Syria ties, and said “we want peace with all parties,” but called current consideration of the issue premature.⁹²

Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In January 2025, Qatari Emir Shaykh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani visited Damascus and met with Ahmed Al Sharaa. Qatar has pledged financial support to the interim authorities to increase public sector salaries and has offered to lend technical assistance to state entities and invest in Syria’s reconstruction and energy sector. In late February, a report citing an unnamed U.S. official suggested that concern about U.S. sanctions liability had prevented Qatar from following through on its pledges to support public sector salaries, but that Qatari shipments of liquefied petroleum gas were ongoing.⁹³

Sharaa traveled to Saudi Arabia on February 2 and met with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Sharaa said their talks included discussion of “extensive future plans in the fields of energy, technology, education and health.”⁹⁴ The Saudi Foreign Minister visited Damascus in January and said he is in dialogue with U.S. and European counterparts seeking the removal of sanctions on Syria in support of transition and recovery efforts.

The government of the United Arab Emirates joined other Arab states in congratulating Sharaa on his appointment, and the Emirati and Syrian foreign ministers, defense ministers, and intelligence officials met in the UAE in January to discuss bilateral relations. The UAE was a leading proponent of Arab reconciliation with the Asad government, but has reiterated its support for Syria’s transition and the country’s sovereignty and unity since Asad’s ouster.

Jordan and Egypt. King Abdullah II of Jordan extended congratulations to Ahmed Al Sharaa following his selection as interim president. Jordan’s concerns about Syria have included cross-border refugee flows, counterterrorism, counter-drug trafficking, and threats to Jordan posed by Iran and Iran-backed groups. UN agencies report that there were more than 589,000 registered Syrian refugees in Jordan as of January 31, 2025.⁹⁵ Jordan’s government reportedly has retained relationships with armed groups and communities in southern Syria established during the 2011-2024 conflict. Sharaa visited Jordan on February 26, and announced agreements with Jordan on enhancing joint border security efforts. King Abdullah has expressed Jordan’s opposition to some Israeli military strikes in southern Syria.

Egypt’s government similarly has sent congratulations to Sharaa and interim authorities. A Syria-based armed group posted social media messages threatening the Egyptian government in December 2025, but Syria’s interim authorities reportedly detained the group’s leader and have

⁹⁰ Final Statement of the Syrian National Dialogue Conference, February 25, 2025.

⁹¹ “An interview with Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria’s president,” *The Economist*, February 4, 2025.

⁹² “An interview with Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria’s president,” *The Economist*, February 4, 2025.

⁹³ Timour Azhari and Maya Gebeily, “Exclusive: U.S. sanctions hold up Qatari support for Syria, sources say,” Reuters, February 26, 2025.

⁹⁴ *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, “Mohammed bin Salman, Sharaa Meet in Riyadh, Discuss Support to Syria and its Stability,” February 2, 2025.

⁹⁵ UNHCR Operational Data Portal, Syria Refugee Response, at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>.

vowed that Syria will not be used to threaten other countries.⁹⁶ UN agencies report that there were more than 144,000 registered Syrian refugees in Egypt as of January 31, 2025.⁹⁷

Iran. Syria's interim authorities control areas formerly used by Iran and Iran-backed armed groups to move weapons and personnel into and beyond Syria; Asad's ouster severed long-established and important links in the networks Iran has used to project regional power. Syria's interim authorities have reported interdicting some small arms shipments to Lebanon, but have not accused Iran or Iran-backed groups of violating Syrian sovereignty on a broad or recurring basis. This may not prove that Iran is not attempting to do so. In December, Ahmed Al Sharaa expressed his hope that Iran and Syria could have normal relations, based on mutual respect for sovereignty and noninterference.⁹⁸ Interim authorities in Syria have reportedly disrupted attempted Islamic State attacks against the Sayyida Zeinab shrine in Damascus, the protection of which Iran and pro-Iran armed groups used as a predicate and recruiting tool for their presence in Syria. A group known as Syrian Islamic Resistance Front claims to have conducted attacks since December 2024 on Israeli forces in the Golan Heights region from Syria: its statements feature a logo similar to Iran-backed armed groups in Lebanon and Iraq.⁹⁹

Some Iran-aligned Iraqi armed groups and other pro-Iran foreign fighters that were active in Syria fled to Iraq after Asad's fall. Iraq closed its main border crossing with Syria at Al Qaim in December. Negotiations to provide for the reopening of the crossing have occurred, but on February 2, Iraqi officials announced the crossing's indefinite closure. U.S. forces and their Syrian partners remain active in areas of eastern and southern Syria that could be used by Iran or Iran-backed groups to infiltrate Syria, including to transfer weapons or conduct attacks intended to derail or discredit Syria's transition. Changes to the posture or reductions of the presence of U.S. forces could result in fewer direct threats to U.S. personnel, but may reduce U.S. insight into and influence over activities in these areas.

Russia. Russia was Asad's most important military supporter. The presence in Syria of Russian air, ground, and naval forces both bolstered Russia's regional power projection abilities and served as a bulwark for the Asad government. Russia's decision in late 2024 to limit its military intervention on Asad's behalf, and its rapid decision to engage with Syria's transitional authorities, illustrate the enduring nature of Russia's interests in Syria, with continued military access as a key Russian priority. On February 3, nongovernment analysts reported that commercial satellite imagery showed Russian naval vessels, including submarines, were no longer visible at Tartus.¹⁰⁰ Russian personnel and equipment remained at the Hmeimim air base as of early February.

In a December interview, Sharaa described Syria's relationship with Russia as long established and strategic and said the interim government would work to establish a new strategic relationship with Russia based on respect for the sovereignty of the Syrian state. Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov visited Syria on January 29 and met with Sharaa. Reports suggest that Sharaa requested the return by Russia of former Syrian president Asad, who has been granted asylum in Moscow.¹⁰¹ Sharaa reportedly spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin by

⁹⁶ Vivian Yee, "Egypt Fears Syria's Revolutionary Fervor Could Be Contagious," *New York Times*, February 1, 2025.

⁹⁷ UNHCR Operational Data Portal, Syria Refugee Response, at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>.

⁹⁸ MEMRI Translation #11695, reviewed by CRS, Source - Al-Arabiya Network, December 29, 2024.

⁹⁹ Jerusalem Post, "IDF opens fire on armed group in Syrian Golan, pro-Assad group claims responsibility," February 1, 2025.

¹⁰⁰ "All Eyes Are on Russia's Mediterranean Flotilla as it Leaves Syria Behind," *The Maritime Executive*, January 29, 2025.

¹⁰¹ "Russia, seeking to keep bases in Syria, says it held 'frank' talks with new leader," *Reuters*, January 29, 2025.

phone in February 2025. Russia's role in arming and training Syrian military personnel for decades may suggest that Syrian interim authorities could look to Russia as one source of military equipment and support as they rebuild and rearm Syrian security forces. Russia's seat on the UN Security Council gives it influence over international decisions related to Syria.

Accountability and Justice

During more than 13 years of unrest and conflict in Syria, numerous parties, including the armed forces of Syria and Russia, are alleged to have committed atrocity crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law. Syrian and international organizations have documented alleged crimes and attributed them to various conflict parties. Levels of documentation and the specificity of attribution have varied, and the facts of individual incidents often are subject to dispute.

Allegations of war crimes have been made against multiple parties to the Syrian conflict. Most allegations focus on the Asad government, which waged war against a broad range of opposition and extremist groups and utilized military assistance from Russia, Iran, and Iran-backed non-state groups, including Lebanon's Hezbollah. Allegations of war crimes also concern Russian armed forces in Syria and some Syrian opposition groups and extremist groups, such as the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS/ISIL). Reported violations of international law by all parties have been extensively documented by the UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (IICI) as well as by periodic reports of the UN Secretary-General to the Security Council on the implementation of Council resolutions.¹⁰² IICI reporting in 2024 discussed alleged atrocity crimes and human rights violations committed by HTS, the Turkish military and the Syrian National Army militia it supports, and the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces.¹⁰³

In reporting to the Security Council on the Syrian conflict, the UN Secretary General has described a "consistent pattern of civilian harm" and expressed "grave concern" about "continued impunity for alleged serious violations and abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law."¹⁰⁴ The Secretary General also has noted the concern of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) that "the parties to the conflict have failed to respect the key international humanitarian law obligations of distinguishing civilians from fighters and civilian objects from military objectives; refraining from indiscriminate attacks; respecting the principle of proportionality; and taking precautions in the conduct of military operations."¹⁰⁵

Syria's transitional authorities have vowed to pursue accountability in general terms in the wake of the conflict, with most of their statements focused on seeking justice for crimes committed by former government officials responsible for torture, extrajudicial killings, and detention-related crimes. The interim authorities issued a general amnesty in December 2024 that they credit with preventing ongoing violence and insecurity. Ahmed Al Sharaa has expressed his view that the amnesty was critical to the opposition's victory and that transitional authorities should continue to honor it to maintain trust and social peace. A national dialogue conference convened in February 2025, and issued a final statement rejecting extrajudicial revenge, calling for achieving

¹⁰² See reporting pursuant to Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020), 2533 (2020), 2585 (2021), 2642 (2022) and 2672 (2023) March 2014 – August 2023.

¹⁰³ See UN Document A/HRC/55/64 and A/HRC/57/86.

¹⁰⁴ UN Document S/2023/621, *Report of the Secretary General*, August 24, 2023.

¹⁰⁵ Report of the Secretary General, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020), UN Document S/2020/141, February 21, 2020.

transitional justice and accountability for those responsible for crimes and violations, and saying that any political isolation procedures should be implemented according to fair standards.

Contrary to the interim authorities' stated goals, Syrian observers report "signs of escalating lawlessness and violence,"¹⁰⁶ and that a "growing wave of vigilante assassinations and attacks is targeting those accused of past violations. Many of those targeted have included low-level regime commanders as well as seemingly random young Alawi men."¹⁰⁷ UN Special Envoy Pedersen told the Security Council in February that "The caretaker authorities told me plainly that there is no policy of revenge or retribution, and they have reportedly taken some steps to hold to account those responsible."¹⁰⁸ He warned, however, that "There is a risk of a trend of individual incidents developing into a cycle of retribution and revenge."

Longer term challenges to accountability and national reconciliation include a lack of or damage to documentation and evidence of violations and crimes, security disruptions and bifurcated security control, shortages of capacity, expertise, and funding, and the responsibility of multiple parties to the conflict for crimes and violations, including entities leading the transition or controlling areas of the country.

Selected Existing Accountability Mechanisms

Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (IICI). In 2011, UN Human Rights Council resolution S-17/1 established the IICI "to investigate all alleged violations of international human rights law since March 2011 in the Syrian Arab Republic, to establish the facts and circumstances that may amount to such violations and of the crimes perpetrated and, where possible, to identify those responsible with a view to ensuring that perpetrators of violations, including those that may constitute crimes against humanity, are held accountable." The IICI is led by Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro of Brazil and is based in Geneva, Switzerland. It produces two reports a year, provides briefings to the UN Human Rights Council, conducts investigations and interviews, and publishes thematic papers. Visiting Syria in January 2025, a member of the IICI said, "We commend the new authorities for improving the protection of mass graves and evidence in detention centres, and encourage them to pursue these efforts further, also by utilizing relevant Syrian civil society organizations and international actors."¹⁰⁹ An IICI team that visited in December did not name those responsible but stated that it had been "dismayed to see that much evidence and documentation that could assist families to discover the whereabouts of disappeared loved ones and serve as evidence in future accountability processes had been damaged, taken or destroyed."¹¹⁰

International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM or "the Mechanism") to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes Under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011. In 2016, UN General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution A/71/L.48 established the IIIM and gave it two main tasks: 1) "to collect, consolidate, preserve and analyse evidence of violations of international humanitarian law and human rights violations and abuses" and 2) "to prepare files in order to facilitate and expedite fair and independent criminal proceedings." Based in Geneva, the

¹⁰⁶ ETANA, "Syria Update #16," February 3, 2025.

¹⁰⁷ ETANA, "Syria Update #14," January 17, 2025.

¹⁰⁸ UN Document S/PV.9857, Remarks of UN SES Pedersen to the UN Security Council, February 12, 2025.

¹⁰⁹ IICI, "UN Syria Commissioner underscores solidarity with the Syrian people in a first mission to Syria since the Commission's establishment," January 9, 2025.

¹¹⁰ IICI, "UN Commission of Inquiry team visits Syria, welcomes encouraging signs by new authorities to engage on human rights issues, and urges protection of mass graves and evidence," December 20, 2024.

IIIM is led by Robert Petit of Canada. The Mechanism includes a secretariat composed of experts in criminal, human rights, and humanitarian law, in addition to forensic specialists. In June 2024, the IIIM said the institution would scale back its support to investigations because of a \$3.51 million (44%) gap in voluntary contributions.¹¹¹ The United States has provided financial support to the IIIM in the form of voluntary contributions and has supported efforts in the General Assembly to approve regular UN funding for the IIIM over Russian and Syrian objections and Russian sponsorship of proposals to defund the Mechanism.¹¹²

Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic (IIMP). In 2023, UN General Assembly Resolution 77/301 established the IIMP “to clarify the fate and whereabouts of all missing persons in the Syrian Arab Republic and to provide adequate support to victims, survivors and the families of those missing, in close cooperation and complementarity with all relevant actors.” UNGA approved the IIMP’s initial budget in May 2024, and its initial cadre of staff have begun work in Geneva, led by Karla Quintana of Mexico. Quintana visited Syria in February 2025.

Foreign Domestic Courts. According to the nongovernmental organization TRIAL International, “universal and extraterritorial jurisdiction has also played a pivotal role in addressing crimes committed in Syria.”¹¹³ Through 2023, there were at least 49 cases underway in nine prosecuting countries involving 92 suspects; of these, 29 cases involved members of the Islamic State or armed opposition groups, 3 involved members of pro-Asad militia groups, 3 involved Syrian government-aligned economic actors, and 11 involved Syrian government officials or representatives. In total, France has issued 11 international arrest warrants for crimes against humanity and war crimes against former senior Syrian officials, including Bashar Al Asad. In May 2024, a French court sentenced three former senior Syrian intelligence officials to life in prison in absentia.¹¹⁴ In June 2024, the French judicial system confirmed an arrest warrant for President Asad that was issued by French prosecutors in November 2023.¹¹⁵ A second arrest warrant reportedly was issued in January 2025.

International Court of Justice (ICJ). Responding to a complaint submitted by Canada and the Netherlands concerning alleged violations of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the ICJ in November 2023 directed the Syrian government “to take all measures within its power to prevent acts of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and ensure that its officials, as well as any organizations or persons which may be subject to its control, direction or influence, do not commit” such acts.¹¹⁶ In February 2024, the ICJ directed that further filings in the case be submitted by the complainants and the Asad government by February 2025 and February 2026, respectively.

¹¹¹ *The Syria Report*, “IIIM to Scale Down Support to Investigations Due to Funding Shortfall,” June 18, 2024.

¹¹² Balkees Jarrah, “Russia’s Bid to Block UN Financing for Syria Probe Defeated,” Human Rights Watch, January 20, 2020; and, UN Document GA/AB/4450, “Fifth Committee Approves \$3.3 Billion Programme Budget for 2024, Peacebuilding Fund Financing Mechanism, Permanent Anti-Racism Office, Concluding Main Part of Session,” December 22, 2023.

¹¹³ TRIAL International with Civitas Maxima, Center for Justice & Accountability (CJA), Federation Internationale de Ligues des Droits de l’Homme (FIDH), REDRESS, and European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), *Universal Jurisdiction Annual Review 2024*.

¹¹⁴ AP, “French court sentences 3 Syrian officials to life in prison in absentia for war crimes,” May 24, 2024.

¹¹⁵ Reuters, “French court upholds warrant for Syria’s Assad over chemical weapons,” June 26, 2024.

¹¹⁶ International Court of Justice, Press Release No. 2023/67, “Application of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Canada and the Netherlands v. Syrian Arab Republic),” November 16, 2023.

Legislation and Hearings in the 119th Congress

In the 119th Congress:

- H.R. 1327 would direct the Secretary of Homeland Security to conduct a threat assessment of terrorist threats to the United States posed by individuals in Syria with an affiliation with a Foreign Terrorist Organization or a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity.
- S.J.Res. 6 would direct the President to remove U.S. armed forces from hostilities in or affecting Syria within 30 days of adoption and unless and until a declaration of war or specific authorization is enacted.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a full committee hearing on February 13, 2025 entitled “After Assad: Navigating Syria Policy.”

Outlook and Issues Before Congress

Syria’s interim authorities are asserting domestic and international legitimacy based on their leadership of the late 2024 military campaign that dislodged Bashar Al Asad. They are projecting an image of calm inevitability for their continuing leadership of the transition, amid calls from Syrians and international observers for an inclusive process. Regardless of the procedural steps chosen for the transition, any new Syrian national leadership may struggle to reconstruct a functioning state apparatus that can protect Syrian sovereignty, rebuild national infrastructure, and establish a self-sustaining, productive economy.

Interim leaders’ willingness to share power and the durability of the peace that has broadly prevailed in Syria since mid-December 2024 may be tested in coming weeks and months. Stressors may include decisions made regarding the political and security future of northeast Syria; the relative integration and participation in the transition of powerful groups in southern Syria; the protection of the rights of Syrian minorities and women; and the willingness of Syrians to uphold order in the face of severe humanitarian crises, economic deprivation, and vigilantism.

Outside actors continue to approach Syria in pursuit of their discrete interests. Many regional countries have pledged support for the transition in Syria, but the compatibility of their goals and Syrians’ willingness to embrace them are uncertain. Israeli military operations in Syria and the Golan Heights region, and Israeli government demands that Syria’s new government accept limits on Syrian government security and military operations in southern Syria, may lead to confrontation. Outside actors, including the United States, may weigh concerns about the resumption of conflict in Syria and the reemergence of transnational terrorist threats alongside goals of supporting and shaping the political transition, stabilization, and reconstruction efforts.

In this context, Congress and the Trump Administration may reassess U.S. interests in Syria and consider new approaches toward securing them. U.S. policy toward Syria since 2011 has pursued parallel and at times competing interests and has featured a mix of evolving diplomatic, military, assistance, and sanctions efforts. Views in Congress, successive Administrations, and the public regarding how the United States should approach Syria policy have at times been divergent and have changed over time and in response to developments at home and abroad. Looking ahead, the 119th Congress may use its national security tools and authorities to examine and shape U.S. policies toward Syria’s interim government, various Syrian groups, and regional and international parties active in Syria. As it does so, Members may consider and debate three key policy questions:

Should the United States continue its military and counterterrorism operations in Syria?

Eliminating threats to the United States and U.S. national security interests posed by terrorist groups active in Syria has been a consistent goal of U.S. policy toward Syria since the Obama Administration. Through 2024, the United States maintained a military presence in Syria tasked with conducting operations against terrorist groups and supporting local partner forces in ensuring the enduring defeat of the Islamic State organization. This has included the provision of support to partner forces that detain thousands of IS fighters and secure camps housing tens of thousands of individuals from formerly IS-controlled areas. Congress has provided authority and funding to the Department of Defense on an annual basis for these operations, in addition to operational funds for U.S. Central Command and other military components to conduct related activities.

As President Trump considers and makes decisions about the future of U.S. military operations in Syria, Congress may consider whether or not to continue to provide related funding and authorities and, if so, on what terms. The FY2025 National Defense Authorization Act extends through December 2025 authorities for U.S. train and equip programs in Syria.¹¹⁷ While Congress could act independently of the Administration's requests, the expected congressional consideration of defense appropriations and authorizations for FY2026 should provide Members with opportunities to engage on and shape related policies and programs.

The political situation inside Syria in the wake of Asad's ouster raises new questions about the relationships between U.S. partner forces and Syria's national government. Congress may consider whether U.S. assistance should continue, change, or end in light of developments and factors in Syria such as the posture and policies of Syria's interim authorities, the participation of U.S. partner forces in Syria's transition, or any emergent hostility or conflict involving interim authorities, other countries such as Turkey or Israel, and U.S. partner forces. Partner force protection concerns, including questions related to evacuation and immigration, have emerged in other contexts such as Afghanistan and Iraq where the United States has ended military and counterterrorism efforts conducted with partner forces.

Syria's interim president Ahmed Al Sharaa has emphasized that he seeks relationships with other countries, including the United States, based on respect for Syria's sovereignty. In a February interview, Sharaa said, "In light of the new Syrian state, I believe any illegal military presence should not continue. Any military presence in a sovereign state should take place under a certain agreement, and there has been no such agreement between us and the United States of America."¹¹⁸ With the SDF agreeing in March 2025 to begin a process of integrating with the Syrian state, U.S. security relations with both the SDF and interim authorities may face pressures to change.

Possible questions Members may consider for oversight and legislative purposes include

- What is the current nature of Syria-based terrorist threats? To what extent do groups active in Syria threaten the United States directly or indirectly? To what extent are U.S. interests and partners threatened?
- How capable are U.S. partner forces and the interim Syrian government of independently combatting terrorist threats in Syria? On what timeline and with what assistance might these entities be capable of providing security for Syria independently?

¹¹⁷ The act did not include a Senate-reported provision that would have required the Administration to certify the independent capabilities of U.S.-backed Syrian forces before reducing the number of U.S. troops in northeast Syria below 400.

¹¹⁸ Reuters, "Syria's Sharaa aims to restore US ties, no contacts yet with Trump administration," February 4, 2025.

- Should the United States continue to operate militarily in Syria? Should Congress act to support or limit any Administration attempts to change the U.S. military presence or operations in Syria? What viable alternatives to U.S. leadership and resources exist, if any? How long and at what cost should the United States be prepared to combat terrorist threats in Syria?
- Should the United States continue to operate militarily without the consent of Syria's interim government? On what basis and legal justifications should any ongoing U.S. military operations in Syria take place?
- How might the integration of U.S. partner forces in Syria with national forces affect U.S. programs and interests? What changes, if any, should result in U.S. operations or engagement? Should the United States seek a status of forces agreement or counterterrorism and defense cooperation agreement with interim authorities?
- What consideration or protection, if any, does the United States owe Syrian partner forces that have supported U.S. counterterrorism objectives to date? What posture should the United States adopt with regard to the relationships between its Syrian partners and Syria's emergent new government? How might any such obligations best be reconciled with the security concerns of U.S. allies and any broader U.S. reputational interests?

What type of relationship should the United States have with Syria's interim government and other entities in post-Asad Syria?

Having supported multilateral efforts to achieve a negotiated transition in Syria throughout the 2011-2024 conflict, successive U.S. Administrations and Congresses worked toward a scenario in which Syria would have a new transitional government. Asad's abrupt ouster by force and the assertive, swift steps taken since by HTS to empower successor authorities and direct the transition process run counter to past stated U.S. preferences for a negotiated transition.

Syria's interim leaders have engaged with U.S. officials, and some exchanges of security information reportedly have taken place. Syria's interim leaders have called on the United States and other international actors to rescind sanctions on Syria to support the country's recovery and transition process.

The United States suspended diplomatic operations in Syria during the 2011-2024 conflict, but did not sever diplomatic relations or durably transfer recognition to any other Syrian entity. In December 2024, then-Secretary of State Antony Blinken said "The United States will recognize and fully support a future Syria government that results from ... an inclusive and transparent process."¹¹⁹

U.S. sanctions on the Syrian government and Syrian state entities were imposed under the previous Syrian government. U.S. counterterrorism sanctions on entities and individuals now leading the transition in Syria similarly were put in place in prior contexts.

Possible questions Members may consider for oversight and legislative purposes include

- When and on what terms, if any, should the U.S. government engage with and reestablish regular, active ties with Syria's post-Asad government? What diplomatic presence should the United States have in Syria and what costs and

¹¹⁹ Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, "The Syrian People Will Decide the Future of Syria," December 10, 2024.

opportunities might accompany the return of U.S. diplomatic personnel to Syria on a permanent basis?

- When, how, and on what terms should the United States alter prevailing sanctions on Syria, Syrian state entities, or individuals and groups in Syria, including U.S.-designated terrorist entities and individuals? What specific executive or legislative sanctions measures, if any, ought to be altered and how? When and under what circumstances should the United States release any Syrian state funds blocked in the United States? What measures can Congress directly affect and what measures are within the President's discretion?

Should the United States provide Syria-related foreign assistance and humanitarian assistance?

As of January 14, 2025, the U.S. State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development provided a range of foreign assistance and security assistance in Syria, focused on areas outside the control of the Syrian government.¹²⁰ This included stabilization programs focused on essential services and local governance, civil society, support for democratic governance, education, demining, agriculture, support to independent media, community security, livelihoods, and economic growth. U.S. humanitarian assistance supported relief efforts for internally displaced persons in Syria, select Syrian communities, and Syrian refugees in regional countries. Congress may inquire about the extent to which changes to U.S. foreign assistance programs and implementation in Syria instituted by the Trump Administration reflect changes to U.S. policy and priorities there. Congress may consult Administration officials, implementing partners, and other observers to determine whether prevailing efforts are aligned with U.S. priorities and interests in Syria and whether alternative approaches are advisable.

Past congressional and executive branch concerns have focused on obstacles to the delivery of humanitarian assistance in Syria, the potential diversion of U.S. humanitarian and security assistance by entities in Syria, and the extent to which U.S.-funded assistance programs may benefit Syrian entities with whom the United States has policy differences. While many of these concerns were directly linked to the antagonistic relationship between the Asad government and the U.S. government, and Asad's exploitation of international aid and recovery efforts, Congress may also consider these issues when examining proposals for any future assistance programs in post-Asad Syria, or considering Administration requests for authorities or funds.

Possible questions Members may consider for oversight and legislative purposes include

- How have the Trump Administration's 2025 foreign assistance policy changes affected U.S. assistance programs and policies in Syria and regional countries? What specific programs and contracts have changed and how have implementing partners and program beneficiaries been affected? What other countries or entities might replace U.S. funding and/or implementation for programs supported by the United States through 2024? What effects might result if such programs end rather than being replaced or supported by others?
- What are Syria's post-Asad security, economic, reconstruction, and humanitarian needs? To what extent, and how, are such needs being met? What resources and partners are engaging to provide support? What support, if any, should the United States provide? Using what authorities, resources, and mechanisms? For how long, on what terms, and at what cost?

¹²⁰ For a review of these programs see LIG-OIR, Report to the U.S. Congress, October 1, 2024–December 31, 2024, p. 84-9.

Appendix. Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS): Leadership, Insurgency, Terrorism, and Governance

Ahmed Hussein Al Sharaa was born in 1982 to a Syrian family from Damascus.¹²¹ According to Sharaa, his family lived in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and returned to Syria when he was seven. Al Sharaa has said his grandfather was displaced from the Golan Heights amid Israel-Syria fighting during the June 1967 Six-Day War: Sharaa apparently adopted the nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al Jolani/Jawlani/Golani in reference to his family's roots in that area.

Sharaa has said he travelled to Iraq in 2003, arriving just prior to the U.S. invasion, and that, after a brief return to Syria, he again travelled to Iraq in 2005 and joined the organization that would become Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Sharaa claims he differed with the group's anti-Shia Muslim sectarian ideology and targeting of civilians, but Sharaa remained an AQI member and, according to a former U.S. intelligence official, he led an AQI cell.¹²² U.S. forces arrested Sharaa around 2005 or 2006, and imprisoned him in Camp Bucca in southern Iraq until late 2010 or early 2011, when he was released.¹²³ Sharaa reportedly used a false identity while in Iraq. Sharaa says he used his time in prison to develop plans for toppling the Syrian government. Upon Sharaa's release, he sought out former associates, who were then organized and operating as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

Sharaa has said that after the start of the anti-Asad uprising in Syria in 2011, he shared his plans for waging an insurgency in Syria with AQI/ISI leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Sharaa said Baghdadi agreed to provide limited support, and Sharaa departed Iraq for Syria with funding and

Figure A-1. Interim President of the Syrian Arab Republic Ahmed Al Sharaa



Source: Above – Associated Press, 2016. Below – Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), February 25, 2025.

¹²¹ Biographical and historical information drawn from: *Frontline*, “The Frontline Interviews: The Jihadist,” June 1, 2021; Raya Jalabi, “The secret history of Syria’s new leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa,” *FT Magazine*, March 7, 2025; Aaron Zelin, interview with John Haltiwanger, “What to Know About the Man Who Toppled Assad,” *Foreign Policy*, December 11, 2024; Zelin, “Jihadi ‘Counterterrorism’: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Versus the Islamic State,” U.S. Military Academy Combatting Terrorism Center (CTC), *CTC Sentinel*, February 2023; Hassan Hassan, “Two Houses Divided: How Conflict in Syria Shaped the Future of Jihadism,” *CTC Sentinel*, October 2018; and Charles Lister, “How al-Qa’ida Lost Control of its Syrian Affiliate: The Inside Story,” *CTC Sentinel*, February 2018.

¹²² PBS Frontline Interview with Nada Bakos, *Frontline*, “The Frontline Interviews: The Jihadist,” June 1, 2021.

¹²³ Sharaa reportedly was detained while using a false identity.

a small number of AQI/ISI cadres. In late 2011, *Jabhat al Nusra Li-Ahl al Sham* (the Support Front for the People of Syria, or Nusra Front) began targeting the Asad government. According to the U.S. government, from November 2011 to December 2012, the Nusra Front claimed “nearly 600 attacks – ranging from more than 40 suicide attacks to small arms and improvised explosive device operations – in major city centers.” The State Department described the Nusra Front in 2012 as “an attempt by AQI to hijack the struggles of the Syrian people for its own malign purposes.”¹²⁴

Under Sharaa’s leadership, the Nusra Front became a leading actor in the insurgency against Asad, drawing greater support from some other Syrian factions. In April 2013, Baghdadi attempted to reassert direct control over the Nusra Front and announced that Sharaa’s group would be dissolved into the newly announced Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIL/ISIS). Sharaa said he and his group were not consulted on the change, and they pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri and said the Nusra Front would continue its operations.¹²⁵ While Islamic State and Al Qaeda leaders disputed global leadership of the jihadist movement in 2014 and 2015, IS and Nusra Front fighters clashed in Syria, with IS forces expelling the Nusra Front and other armed anti-Asad groups from large areas of northern and central Syria.

Sharaa announced the dissolution of the Nusra Front in July 2016 and rebranded the group as *Jabhat Fatah al Sham* (the Syrian Victory Front). In January 2017, Sharaa merged his group with some other armed Islamist opponents of Asad and established *Hayat Tahrir al Sham* (the Organization for the Liberation of Syria). Al Qaeda rejected Sharaa’s decisions and accused Sharaa of betrayal. Several Al Qaeda ideologues and operatives left the new coalition. Sharaa later directed HTS security operations against Al Qaeda-linked figures.

By 2018, HTS had become the de facto authority in Idlib province in northwest Syria, coopting some rivals and suppressing some groups’ opposition to its leadership through force. Some Al Qaeda-linked elements of HTS opposed reported HTS security cooperation with Turkey and HTS leaders’ emphasis on local security and administration. These elements split from HTS, forming *Hurras Al Din* (Guardians of Religion). As of 2025, U.S. military strikes continue to target Hurras Al Din members.

HTS established the Syrian Salvation Government in Idlib to administer limited services and provide governance. HTS at times clashed with groups operating under the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army coalition, but coordinated with them and other Islamist armed groups under a security mechanism known as the *Fatah al Mubin* (Clear Victory) Operations Room. This network, in coordination with Turkey’s armed forces, resisted pro-Asad forces’ efforts to retake Idlib province. The arrangements were the precursor to the Military Operations Department that launched the “Deterring Aggression” operation from Idlib in November 2024 that seized Aleppo, Homs, and Hama, and ultimately toppled the Asad regime.

¹²⁴ U.S. State Department, “Terrorist Designations of the al-Nusrah Front as an Alias for al-Qa’ida in Iraq,” December 11, 2012.

¹²⁵ *France24*/Agence France Presse (AFP), “Syria’s al Nusra militants vow allegiance to al Qaeda,” April 10, 2013.

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