



## Syria and U.S. Policy

Syria is in the midst of a political transition shaped by the legacies of decades of authoritarian rule and more than a decade of unrest and conflict that displaced millions and killed hundreds of thousands of Syrians from 2011 through 2024. Ahmed Al Sharaa, whose movement ousted the Iran- and Russia-backed regime of Bashar al Asad (alt. Assad), leads Syria as president under a five-year transitional constitutional declaration developed with limited input from Syrian communities. Sharaa has renounced his former ties to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Asad fled to Russia. U.S. officials have cultivated ties with Sharaa and his partners, but questions persist about governance, security, foreign influence, and minority rights in the emerging new Syria.

Transitional leaders have focused on reasserting security control over Syrian territory, securing relief from sanctions imposed during and before the conflict, pursuing regional and global diplomacy, attracting investment, and creating conditions for economic recovery and return of displaced persons. As of May 2026, an estimated 15.6 million Syrians were in need of humanitarian or protection assistance, 3.6 million Syrians were refugees in regional countries, and 5.9 million remained internally displaced. The World Bank in 2025 estimated Syria's post-conflict reconstruction needs at \$216 billion.

Security remains a principal U.S. and Syrian concern. U.S. military forces deployed to Syria in 2015 to fight Islamic State (IS/ISIS) militants in partnership with Syrian armed groups. U.S. forces withdrew from Syria in April 2026, as the Syrian government forcefully reasserted security control over areas held by Syrian Kurdish forces that had long received U.S. training and support. Episodic violence between government forces and members of ethnic and religious minority communities has marred the transition and attracted international scrutiny of the government's intentions and capabilities. As of mid-2026, Turkish forces operate in some areas of northern Syria with the permission of the Syrian government. Russian forces remain at facilities in western Syria, subject to ongoing Syrian-Russian discussions. Since December 2024, Israeli forces have conducted periodic strikes on Syrian government targets and have unilaterally asserted control over territory in Syria near the Golan Heights (**Figure 1**). Threats from the Islamic State and other extremist groups in Syria pose continuing risks to civilians and officials. Syrian leaders have condemned attacks by Iran and Iran-backed groups on Arab states during the 2026 U.S./Israel-Iran conflict.

Since December 2024, multiple high-level engagements between senior U.S. and Syrian officials have focused on counterterrorism, regional security, and sanctions, including meetings between President Donald Trump and Sharaa. The executive branch and Congress have provided conditional sanctions relief for Syria and its transitional leaders. U.S. officials and Members of Congress continue to monitor Syria's transition, including implementation of agreements

for the integration of former U.S. partner forces into Syria's security sector, as well as the transitional government's inclusiveness, posture toward neighboring countries, and treatment of ethnic and religious minorities. Congressional consideration of Administration requests for FY2027 defense and foreign assistance funds could provide opportunities for oversight and influence over resources and authorities shaping U.S. engagement. Congress also may consider proposals to further amend U.S. sanctions (S. 3172) on Syria and on Syrian groups and individuals.

**Figure 1. Syria**



**Source:** CRS, using ESRI and U.S. State Department data. UNDOF—UN Disengagement Observer Force.

### Conflict Legacies Shape Transition

Conflict in Syria destroyed communities, damaged infrastructure, displaced millions, fragmented territorial control, empowered extremists, eroded trust and cohesion, and attracted foreign military intervention. As the country transitions from decades of authoritarian rule, Syrians continue to grapple with these issues. Under the leadership since January 2025 of President Sharaa—the former head of the now-disbanded Sunni Islamist coalition Hayat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)—authorities have focused on reconstituting national security forces and extending the state's remit to areas that were initially outside of interim government control. Instances of sectarian violence involving members of minority communities, security forces, nonstate armed groups, and vigilantes have threatened stability. A five-year transitional constitutional framework, developed with limited popular consultation, is being implemented, and indirect elections for a national parliament that has yet to convene have been held in most areas. Years of war,

corruption, and misrule hollowed out Syria's economy, and transitional leaders are working to attract investment and revive domestic growth amid limited basic services and uncertain regional security. Cooperation with the United States and others has yielded sanctions relief and new investment, but recovery has been gradual and uneven. Ethnic and religious divisions and unresolved debates over centralization, conflict-era accountability, transparency, and inclusivity may continue to constrain Syrian leaders.

### Security, Governance, and Outlook

Security and governance questions pose difficulties for Syria's transitional government. U.S. defense intelligence assessments suggest Syrian forces have integrated some extremists and foreign fighters and exhibited weaknesses in command and control. The Islamic State and other extremist groups do not control territory, but have attacked minorities and Syrian and U.S. personnel. UN officials estimated 3,000 IS fighters were active in Syria and Iraq (most in Syria). In early 2026, thousands more IS detainees and IS-linked individuals escaped or were released as the national government took control in northeastern Syria.

Since U.S.-backed integration agreements were reached in January 2026, some elements of the largely Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have been absorbed into state security bodies. The SDF was the principal U.S. partner force in Syria from 2015 to 2026. Turkey opposes Kurdish autonomy in Syria and has clashed with the main Kurdish group within the SDF because of that group's links with the now dissolved Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Turkish forces provide training and equipment to Syrian personnel. Turkey-Israel rivalry for influence may affect U.S. efforts to encourage post-conflict stability in Syria.

Southwestern Suweida governorate, home to the Druze religious minority and site of deadly clashes that involved Israeli airstrikes in 2025, is largely under the control of rivalrous Druze armed groups, some of whom reject Syrian government control. Thousands of Druze remain displaced.

Transitional leaders have made overtures to Kurds and others to promote unity and have taken initial, limited steps to deliver accountability for violence against Alawite and Druze minorities since 2025. Indirect parliamentary elections in eastern Syria had been delayed but were held in March and May 2026. Elections in Suweida have not been held. In May 2026, senior UN officials noted economic hardship-fueled protests and said humanitarian gains to date are "real but fragile." They also assessed that "responsive governance remains a work in progress, and wider inclusion is essential to ensuring legitimacy and stability."

### U.S. Relations and the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress

The Trump Administration has affirmed U.S. support "for a Syria that is stable, at peace with its neighbors, and protects the rights of all its ethnic and religious minority groups."

#### U.S. Diplomacy

The U.S. Embassy in Damascus has been closed since 2012, and the position of U.S. Ambassador to Syria is vacant. Czechia serves as the protecting power for U.S. interests in Syria in the absence of a U.S. mission. In May 2026, President Trump named U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Tom Barrack as Special Presidential Envoy to Syria and

Iraq. The State Department's Syria Regional Platform includes personnel in Turkey and Jordan. The Administration has informed Congress of its efforts toward the possible phased restoration of a U.S. diplomatic presence and is requesting \$20 million in related funds and more than \$54 million for diplomatic security in Syria.

#### U.S. Military Departure and IS Prisoner Transfer

U.S. forces operated inside Syria from 2015 to 2026 as part of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), supporting local partners in sustaining the defeat of IS forces through the Syria Train and Equip program, authorized by Congress since 2014 and funded via the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF). In April 2026, U.S. forces completed an "accelerated departure" from eastern and southern Syria after the national government reasserted control over areas of northeastern Syria that had been secured by the U.S.-supported SDF and amidst U.S. operations against Iran as part of Operation Epic Fury. Prior to their departure, U.S. forces transferred more than 5,700 IS prisoners who had been detained in SDF-secured prisons to Iraq. U.S. forces under Combined Joint Task Force-OIR now operate from Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, and U.S. plans envision continued coordination and cooperation with Syrian forces against IS threats.

#### U.S. Sanctions Relief

As of June 2026, the United States "no longer maintains a comprehensive Syria Sanctions program." Executive actions waived the applicability of several sanctions laws and rescinded terrorism designations related to transitional leaders, and Congress has repealed the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act. Syria remains designated as a state sponsor of terrorism but has joined the Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State and has been removed from a list restricting assistance for states that do not cooperate with U.S. counterterrorism efforts.

#### The 119<sup>th</sup> Congress and FY2027 Requests

Congress has authorized train and equip programs for Syrians screened under congressionally mandated vetting requirements through 2026, and has appropriated related defense funds available through September 2027. The Administration's defense request for FY2027 seeks \$130 million to support vetted Syrians, including forces that have integrated or are integrating into the security sector. An emerging issue is the future of U.S.-Syrian security cooperation. The report accompanying the House Armed Services Committee-reported version of H.R. 8800 requires an assessment on the potential for U.S. cooperation to "build the capacity of and professionalize vetted, cross-sectarian, and cross-ethnic Syrian security forces."

The Trump Administration's 2025 foreign aid review ended some U.S. aid programs in Syria and preserved others. The Trump Administration has not requested a specific amount of foreign assistance for Syria in FY2027, but seeks authority to continue nonlethal stabilization assistance, which the House Appropriations Committee-approved version of the FY2027 National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs appropriations bill (H.R. 8595) would authorize, and provide for aid to Syrian minorities.

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