



THE TAHRIR INSTITUTE
FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY



U.S.-Syria Policy: What's Next Post-Caesar Repeal?

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This policy paper was authored by TIMEP Executive Director Mai El-Sadany and Advocacy Manager Douglas Christensen, with expert review offered by several TIMEP staff members and fellows. The TIMEP team would like to extend its sincere gratitude to the Syrian advocates and policy experts who participated in the convening that helped inform this paper and who lent their time for one-on-one follow-up conversations and interviews. TIMEP would also like to recognize former Advocacy Intern Gabriela Saba for her research contributions.

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Introduction

On December 8, 2024, the brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad fell, ushering in a historic moment of immense potential for Syria and the Syrian people. In the one and a half years since then, the country has undergone an eventful transition that will likely impact its trajectory for many years to come. How the international community, key among it the United States, engages with the new Syrian authorities and in Syria more generally will play a determinative role in the country's trajectory.

More than 15 years ago and as protesters organized in other capitals across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, Syrians took to the streets in March 2011 to peacefully demand freedom. Assad responded with a harrowing brutality, pitting his police and military forces against Syrian civilians and contributing to a security breakdown that would ultimately invite the rise of militant and terrorist groups, like the Islamic State (ISIS) and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), as well as foreign intervention, namely by Russia and Iran. The situation on the ground would devolve into a devastating war that [claimed](#) the lives of over 500,000 Syrians and [displaced](#) more than 6 million outside of the country and over 7.4 million inside.

Across this period, the international community [largely isolated](#) Assad, closing embassies in Damascus, imposing a wide array of targeted and sectoral sanctions, pursuing United Nations Security Council resolutions in response to mass atrocities, supporting political negotiations and other efforts to plan for a "day after," and playing host to key trials of Assad regime officials. Attempts to normalize the Assad regime [only began](#) to gather more momentum in later years, but were ultimately not adopted en masse.

Since the regime's fall in December 2024, much of the international community has pivoted from a largely isolationist strategy to one of engagement. A number of states, multilateral institutions, and private actors have rushed to stake a claim in the country's political and economic future, while others have adopted a more wait-and-see approach.

The U.S. approach to Syria has surprised many. In January 2025, President Joseph Biden [issued](#) a six-month license to ease sanctions prior to the end of his term, but in May 2025, President Donald J. Trump took U.S.-Syria policy to entirely unexpected levels when he [announced](#) that the United States would lift all sectoral sanctions on Syria in a historic speech in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The groundbreaking announcement was politically significant as it sent a clear signal that Trump was supportive of U.S. engagement at a time when many in Washington had been much less willing to take that step, particularly given the Syrian authorities' past. Internationally, both foreign governments and business communities saw the Trump announcement as a "greenlight" to deepen engagement with the Syrian authorities as well. In the time since, the European Union and Canada [have also eased](#) sanctions; Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa has traveled to [New York for the UN General Assembly](#) and to [Washington, DC for a meeting with President Trump](#), in addition to other key capitals globally; and the [World Bank](#) and [International Monetary Fund \(IMF\)](#) have taken serious steps toward engaging on technical advice and future financing

for Syria. Responding to long-standing demands by Syrian advocates, allies of the new authorities, and Congressional leadership, President Trump [signed](#) in December 2025 a law permanently repealing one of the most prominent sources of U.S. sectoral sanctions on Syria: the Caesar Act.

Up until that point, Syrian advocates and allies had been quite intensely focusing their efforts on the repeal of the Caesar Act. With the repeal in effect, many in the U.S. are now left wondering what U.S.-Syria policy should and will look like post-Caesar.

In this policy paper, the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP) seeks to offer insights to inform the various possible answers to this question, taking its cue from the priorities of Syrian experts and civil society across five key files: (1) humanitarian, (2) the political transition, (3) economy, (4) security, and (5) justice and accountability. TIMEP lays out a high-level presentation of some of the key developments within these five areas for policymakers to monitor and presents a series of recommendations for U.S. officials seeking to navigate the country's delicate, yet critical transition. The paper is informed by open source research, anonymized findings from a convening of Syrian civil society partners and advocates, and a series of follow-up interviews with Syrian policy and humanitarian experts.

Despite the challenges and uncertainties that the current moment presents, TIMEP writes this paper to advocate in favor of close and careful engagement with the Syrian authorities, highlighting the critical importance of structuring this engagement in a manner that can help direct the Syrian transition toward inclusive governance while delivering on the needs and demands of the Syrian people.

The Humanitarian Situation

Over the course of nearly 14 years of war, violence, and repression, Syria became one of the world's most challenging and protracted humanitarian crises. By the time the Assad regime fell in December 2024, more than half of the country's pre-war population had been made into either internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refugees. A total of nearly 13.4 million Syrians [were displaced](#) throughout the conflict. Of those, more than 7.4 million were internally displaced inside the country and more than 6 million became refugees abroad. Syrian refugees [sought safety and security](#) across 130 countries globally, though the vast majority fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Germany, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt.

Sustained levels of sieges, strikes, and bombings, including the systematic targeting of civilian infrastructure, [resulted](#) in high levels of devastation to health, school, housing, and water systems. As a result, some of the greatest humanitarian challenges facing Syria today [include](#) limited access to healthcare, widespread destruction of homes, insufficient access to clean water and sanitation, and unreliable infrastructure and electricity access. Today, only 57 percent of hospitals and 37 percent of primary healthcare centers [are operating](#) at full capacity. More than 7,000 schools [have been damaged and destroyed](#); at least 2.5 million children are out of school, with [another 1.6 million](#) at risk of dropping out. According to United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), two-thirds of water treatment plants, one-third of water towers, and half of all pumping stations across the country [are no longer functioning](#), which both reflects and exacerbates a serious water and sanitation crisis in the country, [made worse](#) by over-extraction of groundwater, leakages, and insufficient rainfall. In 2025, Syria [experienced](#) some of the worst drought conditions in 36 years and in 2026, flooding across the Euphrates River presented a different set of climate-induced challenges. Many years of war have also left Syria highly contaminated with landmines, unexploded ordinances, and cluster munition remnants. There are an estimated 324,000 explosive remnants of war [scattered](#) across the country and since December 2024, at least 725 people [have been killed](#) as a result of explosives that were in need of urgent clearing.

More than 90 percent of the population [lives](#) below the poverty line; malnutrition is widespread and 12.9 million people are considered food insecure. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) [estimates](#) that 15.6 million people inside Syria [are in need](#) of humanitarian assistance. These needs [have been estimated](#) to cost \$2.92 billion in 2026, but only 20.4 percent of that total cost has been committed by international donors through the OCHA coordination process; that translates to \$594.7 million. An additional \$68.3 million has been committed outside of the OCHA process. The United States has [contributed](#) to the pooled fund through two tranches of funding. Amid a global funding crisis and funding cuts across the board, the reality of these remaining unmet needs present serious challenges for the Syrian authorities and the Syrian people.

Looking beyond humanitarian assistance, the World Bank estimates that the country's reconstruction costs [stand at around](#) \$216 billion (nearly 10 times Syria's GDP in 2024); this includes \$75 billion for residential buildings, \$59 billion for non-residential structures, and \$82 billion for infrastructure.

Despite the immense challenges on the ground, many Syrians hope to return to the country. A survey conducted two months following the fall of the regime [indicated](#) that nearly 80 percent of refugees hoped to return to Syria one day; of those surveyed, 27 percent [had an immediate intent](#) to return to the country within the following 12 months, with the vast majority preferring to conduct “go and see” visits to determine whether and when return may be possible. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and as of June 11, 2026, an estimated 1,682,041 Syrian refugees [have returned](#) to Syria since the fall of the regime; of those returning, 40 percent have returned from Lebanon and 39 percent have returned from Turkey. Also as of June 11, 2026, an additional estimated 1,958,968 IDPs [have returned](#) to their places of origin or preferred alternative homes within the country.

Meanwhile, pressure is mounting from host countries who are eager for Syrian refugees to return home and this has begun to be reflected in asylum, refugee, and immigration policies and practices globally. This is despite the fact that experts across the board have stated clearly and unequivocally that Syria [is not ready](#) for mass returns and that any returns that do take place [must be](#) “voluntary, well-informed, and carried out in safe and dignified conditions.” In the fall of 2025, then-U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem announced that Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Syria [would be terminated](#), and in June 2026, the U.S. Supreme Court [cleared](#) the way for the U.S. government to proceed with its TPS terminations, including in Syria.

The challenges facing IDPs and refugees who are in the process of returning home or who have already returned are massive. Some do not have homes to return to in the first place and others seek to return to neighborhoods that have been entirely decimated or, at best, lack sufficient infrastructure to support daily life. Without a mechanism to resolve the [large](#) number of housing, land, and property (HLP) disputes, the challenges [facing returnees to secure housing](#) are substantial, while the threat of [localized violence](#) is tangible and real. Meanwhile, and as other forms of violence continue across the country, new displacement flows [also continue to occur](#); for example, approximately 150,000 Syrians moved across the northeast to flee conflict in Aleppo in 2025.

In January 2026, Syria’s Finance Minister [announced](#) a “Syria Without Camps,” initiative, committing the new authorities to close all IDP camps before the end of the year and to offer permanent housing and recovery programs for IDPs. Toward the end of February and after having taken control of it from Kurdish forces during the month prior, authorities [closed](#) Al Hol detention camp in Al-Hasakeh, which housed roughly 22,000 people at the time, including Syrian IDPs and Iraqi refugees. The process was not without its challenges and has raised questions on the ambitious nature of the “no camp plan” more generally. In March, President Ahmed al-Sharaa articulated a [Statement of Recovery Priorities for International Cooperation](#), which lays out 15 areas and is intended to help inform priorities for reconstruction, restoration of services, support for livelihoods, and economic recovery. Also in March 2026, President al-Sharaa issued Decree No. 59 establishing a committee to rehabilitate infrastructure in damaged areas, particularly in preparation for the return of IDPs to their homes. According to [the text of the decree](#), the committee has been tasked with preparing and restoring basic infrastructure in affected areas to enable returns and with improving services for Syrians who remain in areas of internal displacement.

The Political Transition

With Syria emerging from 54 years of Assad family rule, the country is now undergoing a massive political transition. While the new authorities have taken steps to create a new, transitional political structure in the country, certain governing moves by the authorities raise questions about whether a genuine political opening will emerge.

In January 2025, following the dissolution of HTS and his appointment as transitional President, al-Sharaa [announced](#) the launch of a National Dialogue in his first national address since the fall of the Assad regime; the National Dialogue would be made up of two weeks-worth of listening sessions across the country, followed by a two-day national conference in Damascus. While the Syrian president [promised](#) to create a direct platform for Syrians of all backgrounds to share their points of view on the political future of a country where citizens had been strictly denied access to political life under the Assad regime, what followed was rather a rushed process which failed to meet the moment. The Syrian authorities [announced](#) a seven-member preparatory committee, appointed by al-Sharaa on February 12, 2025; an estimated 4,000 Syrians ultimately participated in listening sessions with committee members across the two week period. The preparatory committee was [dominated](#) by former political figures from HTS and [lacked diversity](#), excluding Alawite and Kurdish representation. Listening sessions were [rushed](#), tackling complex issues such as transitional justice and constitutional design with a top-down structure. Many Syrians reported receiving invitations last minute, which impeded their participation. Listening sessions for Raqqa and Al-Hasakah were [held](#) hundreds of miles away in Damascus, which the preparatory committee attributed to the Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) control of the northeast at the time, raising additional questions on the ability of the dialogue process to meaningfully engage the population as a whole.

Following these rushed two weeks, the National Dialogue took place in Damascus across two days on February 24 and 25, 2025 with around [900](#) Syrians participating. The dialogue conference itself was announced only one day in advance, prompting criticism from Syrians both in and out of the country who were unable to travel to Damascus on such short notice or prepare properly. Syrian women were [notably underrepresented](#). The National Dialogue was made up of six participatory working groups focused on transitional justice, the constitution, state institutions, personal freedoms, the economy, and the role of civil society. Discussions were [confidential](#), and nearly a year and a half later, [a report](#) promised by the Syrian authorities summarizing the debates and recommendations made during the dialogue has still not been released. Rather than build a strong foundation for dialogue following decades of a closed political space, the National Dialogue left many Syrians wanting; in the time since, some Syrians have continued to make calls for a [new National Dialogue](#) which is inclusive, transparent, and genuinely participatory.

As the National Dialogue came to a close, authorities announced [the formation](#) of a committee to launch a constitutional process, with promises of a forthcoming Constitutional Declaration which would include "a balance between authorities, establish justice, freedom and equality, and lay the foundation for a state of law and institutions." In the weeks that followed, a seven-member committee produced a draft document intended to govern the

next five year period. The 53-article Constitutional Declaration was ultimately signed by President al-Sharaa on March 13, 2025. Syrian human rights organizations [critiqued](#) the drafting committee for lacking the right experience and political diversity for such a project, and the declaration itself has been criticized by both [Syrian and international](#) human rights organizations.

Experts note that the Constitutional Declaration [adopts](#) a “conservative and traditional approach to governance” that parallels Syria’s prior system with only minor changes. The document [concentrates power](#) into the executive branch at the expense of an independent judiciary or legislature. The document, for example, grants al-Sharaa executive authority over the appointment of the government, the appointment of the constitutional court, and a significant portion of the Syrian parliament. [Critics](#) have raised other concerns about the Constitutional Declaration’s provisions on emergency powers and decentralization across Syria’s diverse 14 governorates. The document does notably emphasize transitional justice, a point of importance given the context from which the country is emerging.

Amid these criticisms of the Constitutional Declaration, Syria’s parliamentary elections became an important test for the country’s political transition. According to the Constitutional Declaration, Syria’s People’s Assembly holds power [to pass](#) new legislation, amend or repeal existing legislation, ratify international treaties, and approve the state budget. Two-thirds of the People’s Assembly are to be [indirectly elected](#) under an electoral college system established by an 11-member committee appointed by the President, while the remaining one-third is to be directly appointed by the President. Though a direct vote would have been impossible to implement at such a precarious moment in Syria given the country’s security, financial, and infrastructural challenges, observers have noted their concerns on whether or not the legislature will be able to meaningfully represent the public given the selection process of candidates.

Parliamentary elections began in Syria in October 2025, with [follow-up elections](#) in Northeast Syria concluding in May 2026 following the region’s reintegration earlier that year. President al-Sharaa named his 70 appointments on July 1, 2026. Parliament [convened](#) on July 11, though elections have not occurred in Suwayda and the three seats associated with the governorate remain vacant, given earlier mass violence in the area. The elections themselves have failed to deliver a parliament which represents Syria’s diversity. Women and minorities are notably [underrepresented](#). This lack of representation is particularly concerning as the People’s Assembly will take on files which are critical to Syria’s successful transition, such as key legislation on transitional justice, humanitarian aid, and reconstruction.

Ultimately, it is noteworthy that one and a half years since the fall of the Assad regime, the new Syrian authorities have hosted a National Dialogue, issued a Constitutional Declaration, and conducted parliamentary elections. However, the rushed nature of these steps risks box checking in a manner that is unlikely to deliver the good governance and rule of law necessary to facilitate a political opening after decades of authoritarian rule. Additionally, [the lack of political parties](#) amid a need for political pluralism, the [abuse](#) of Assad-era legislation to [stifle criticism](#), and the heavy presence of former HTS officials in the government at the expense of a more diverse cabinet are additional files that are necessary to address for a genuine political opening to take place in Syria.

The Economy

Over a 14 year period, the war absolutely devastated Syria's economy, [resulting](#) in the destruction of nearly one-third of the country's productive assets, displacing and destabilizing the country's workforce, creating immense humanitarian and emergency needs, and isolating Syria from the international community, which imposed sanctions as a tool to further isolate the Assad regime. Throughout the war, Syrians [experienced](#) "high inflation rates, housing and commodity shortages, cuts in energy and food subsidies, and declines in the provision of public services." Seeking to bring in income, the Assad regime levied extensive taxes and fees on independent arms of the private sector, decimating them in the process, eating away at competition, and leading to the shuttering of numerous companies. Meanwhile, the regime [turned](#) to Captagon and other illicit activity to cover revenue shortfalls, transforming the country into a narco-state in the process. All the while, a small group of economic elites with ties to the regime [were incentivized](#) to uphold it and partake in the larger structure of repression which kept it in power.

By the time that the regime fell, "GDP [had] [cumulatively contract\[ed\]](#) by more than 50 percent since 2010" to approximately \$21 billion and "Gross National Income per capita [had fallen] to just \$830 in 2024." Looking ahead, the country is now faced with the aforementioned hefty \$216 billion reconstruction bill and the need for an economic vision that [addresses](#) decades of cronyism and corruption and that revitalizes the economy, [including](#) by grounding economic policies and practices in the rule of law, establishing the necessary regulatory and investment frameworks, integrating Syria into international payment systems and the banking sector, modernizing logistics and transport infrastructure, and investing in the digital infrastructure necessary to bring the country forward. The previous working assumption was that regional Gulf partners and Turkey [were expected](#) to foot a significant portion of the reconstruction bill, but new questions have arisen given the impact of the regional war on key players including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar.

In the face of a daunting set of challenges before them, the Syrian authorities have signaled to the international community that they are open for business and that they are keen on high levels of international engagement and investment. Following sustained requests made by Syria and allies like Turkey and Saudi Arabia, President Trump [announced](#) that U.S. sectoral sanctions on Syria would be lifted in May 2025, opening the door for a number of decisions that have since followed, including the easing and lifting of sanctions, previously imposed by the United States, Canada, and Europe. These steps have been critical to alleviating a number of key pressures on the Syrian economy. Economic experts caveat however that these steps are necessary, but insufficient for a robust recovery and that their impact will not be felt overnight. Further, they continue to advocate for other measures, including steps to ensure that bank de-risking does not restrict Syria's access to global financial institutions; lifting designations that impede further business activity [including](#) the State Sponsor of Terrorism (SST) designation; and supporting the reforms necessary to remove Syria from the Financial Action Task Force grey list. Congress will also have to continue to take [steps toward](#) full sanctions relief, with the Senate [advancing](#) some in June

2026. In early July 2026, President Trump [informed](#) Congress of his administration's intent to lift the SST, a designation that is subject to a 45-day review period. To support American businesses exploring investments in Syria, the U.S. Embassy [has published](#) an Investor Handbook and Investor Guides for a number of key sectors.

The Syrian authorities are also engaging closely with the World Bank and the IMF. The World Bank [has already allocated](#) a \$200 million grant for railway infrastructure projects, an additional [\\$20 million to strengthen public financial management](#), and a \$146 million grant for electricity and economic recovery. The IMF [has conducted](#) a number of staff visits to Syria and its engagement has centered around providing technical assistance and policy advice to the new authorities to rehabilitate Syria's economy and economic institutions. Syria has reportedly [attracted](#) a number of promising foreign investment deals and MOUs, [including](#) a \$4 billion deal for the expansion of Damascus airport and a \$2 billion contract for a new subway system. However, transparency around the details of these deals has been limited; no criteria on how these opportunities are being considered and assessed has been shared; pledges and promises have not always materialized in practice; the implementation of projects has been slow and unequal across regions, with a heavy focus on Damascus; and the impact for everyday people remains largely unmaterialized.

One of key state bodies slated to contribute to reconstruction, recovery, and public investments, the Syrian Sovereign Fund, has had [major opacity challenges](#) regarding its leadership, decision-making processes, its funding, and its disbursement of funds. While Syria's Finance Minister has insisted that the Syrian Sovereign Fund is part of the state's treasury funds, the government has not published a detailed budget, and in its simplified "[people's budget](#)," there is no reference to the fund whatsoever.

As authorities [transition](#) an economy formerly grounded in a centralized socialist understanding of the state to a free market system, pursuing privatization, trade liberalization, and a smaller role for the state in the economy, the challenges are real, particularly as more than 90 percent of the population [continues](#) to live in poverty. Cuts by the authorities to universal energy and food subsidies, while the state lacks the capacity to offset these measures with other forms of social protection, risk exacerbating poverty and food insecurity. After the transitional government [cut food subsidies](#) in January 2025, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) stepped in with a bread subsidy program. However, it has had to significantly reduce coverage from 14 governorates to only seven due to funding shortages. The WFP [warns](#) that further cuts to food subsidies will have "serious implications for food security, social cohesion, and stability." Indeed, the lifting of electricity subsidies and high prices for key goods [have resulted](#) in protests [around](#) worsening living conditions and declining purchasing power.

Authorities [have](#) unified tariffs across the country; liberalized oil imports; and promised to privatize state-owned ports and factories. In mid-2025, the authorities [raised](#) the pay for public sector workers by 200 percent. Months later in January 2026, the Central Bank [released](#) a new national currency in order to [build public confidence](#) and address years of hyperinflation. The Central Bank [has also been](#) "tightening fiscal financing practices, stabilizing monetary policy, and partnering with global financial services players

to modernize payments,” [helping](#) stabilize the exchange rate and reduce inflation as a result. However, the Central Bank has stopped publishing monthly inflation data and independent analysts [warn](#) that inflation is creeping back up due to subsidy cuts and rising remittances. The regional war has likely further contributed to inflationary pressure as well.

Looking to 2026 more generally, Syrian authorities [expect](#) GDP to range between \$60 and \$65 billion and Syria’s Finance Minister [has stated](#) that he expects public revenues to rise to about \$8.7 billion, with oil and gas constituting about 28 percent of that figure. The Ministry of Finance [is also in the process](#) of pursuing gas exploration in the Mediterranean, with a number of locations still unexplored. Speaking about offshore gas exploration plans, the CEO of Total has [explained](#) that the current security situation has prevented Total from considering onshore exploration. In May 2026, the Finance Minister [unveiled](#) a broad package of tax changes and anti-corruption measures that will be important to monitor.

The new Syrian authorities [are also coming](#) under criticism for a lack of transparency in how they are handling the files of former Assad-era economic elites, including the determination of whose assets get frozen and who is allowed to settle their files with the new authorities. Additional concerns [exist](#) regarding a lack of transparency over the size of these settlements and where the funds are allocated.

In January 2026, Syrian businessman Mohamed Hamsho completed a financial settlement with the new government as part of a [voluntary disclosure program](#) led by Syria’s National Committee for Combating Illicit Gain that is responsible for “settling financial statuses related to suspicions of illegal enrichment.” Victims and survivors, concerned by the potential rehabilitation of someone like Hamsho with no accountability for his abuses, [protested](#) the move and sparked a popular conversation on the seemingly competing questions between economic progress and justice.

In June 2026, British-Syrian activist Hassan Akkad [was arrested](#) in relation to a defamation suit brought against him by Syrian journalist Moussa al-Omar under the Assad-era Cybercrime Law for his “Give Us the Money That You Owe” campaign, which asked questions around the money being pledged to support relief and reconstruction efforts in Syria and why it had not yet been received. Though he was ultimately released and the defamation suit against him was dropped, the incident raised concerns on the priorities of Syrian authorities, the chilling effect of such an arrest on the ability of Syrian citizens to ask questions around the economy, and on whether the new authorities would be able to offer respect for the rule of law in a manner commensurate to invite and encourage foreign investment.

The Security Situation

Across 14 years of war, Syria's security situation collapsed as the Assad regime; various militant and terrorist groups such as ISIS, HTS, and Hezbollah; and foreign actors, such as Russia and Iran, fought over the country's future, targeting Syrian civilians and leaving them to bear the brunt of mass violence. While Syria's security situation has vastly improved since the fall of the Assad regime, the country's transition still faces key challenges amid a regional war, continued Israeli incursions into the country, the presence of ISIS and other extremist groups, the implications of U.S. military withdrawal amid SDF integration, sectarian violence, and popular anger around key unresolved files.

In February 2026, the United States and Israel launched a joint war on Iran which quickly spiraled, including across the Gulf and Lebanon, resulting in regional and global instability. While Syria has largely avoided being caught in the crossfire, it still faces a number of related security challenges. The interception of Iranian missiles over Syria has [resulted](#) in temporary airway and school closures, including Damascus International Airport which was [closed](#) until June 2026, and falling debris has resulted in several civilian casualties.

The war in Lebanon has also posed [direct challenges](#) to Syria's security: Hezbollah shelling has [targeted](#) Syrian army positions and landed in Syrian territory. Over [200,000 people](#)—180,000 of them Syrian and an additional 28,000 Lebanese—have crossed into Syrian territory to flee Israeli bombardment. Despite tensions on the Syrian-Lebanese border associated with the war, the Syrian authorities have positively [engaged](#) with the Lebanese government. The Syrian authorities have also continued to crack down on Hezbollah networks in Syria as the regional war has unfolded, [thwarting](#) attacks, assassinations, and weapons transfers. While neighboring Lebanon and the region have been embroiled in the regional war, Syria has remained largely stable; President al-Sharaa has [rejected](#) repeated attempts by President Trump to press Syria to intervene against Hezbollah in Lebanon. Still, should the current U.S.-Iran negotiations and the current U.S. brokered Lebanon-Israel talks not result in durable ceasefires and security arrangements, Syria may be impacted.

Outbreaks of sectarian violence have continued to pose serious risks to Syrians. Massacres in the coastal areas in March 2025 and in Suwayda in July 2025 resulted in disproportionate targeting of Alawi and Druze civilians, including at the hands of Syrian government forces and other armed militias. In addition to the risks of social tensions that such incidents underscored, they also drove home the urgent need for broad-based security sector reform and the [urgent need](#) for Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs, likely requiring [international support](#). While these massacres may have subsided, the files have not been fully resolved. Syrian authorities have [failed](#) to address the [kidnappings](#) of Alawi women and have [not brought about justice](#) for the coastal violence. A fragile ceasefire remains in Suwayda one year after an outbreak of violence which [UN officials](#) say may have amounted to war crimes, and more than [150,000 people](#) remained displaced as of March 2026. The Syrian authorities launched a [roadmap](#) to end the violence in Suwayda in

September 2025. However, they have not reintegrated the region amid calls for secession from some Druze leaders, [continued clashes](#) and [violations](#), Israeli [military](#) intervention, and a booming of the region's drug trade. The area has instead [become](#) "Syria's Narcotics Capital," which has resulted in Jordanian military intervention, including airstrikes, to stifle drug trafficking toward the Jordanian border which has surged by [more than 325 percent](#). Continued conflict in Suwayda, as well as sectarian violence more broadly, remains a security threat requiring urgent attention by Damascus.

In addition to its intervention in Suwayda and its role in the regional war, Israel has been a central security threat to Syria throughout the transition. Israeli forces [entered](#) Quneitra and western parts of Daraa less than one day after the fall of the Assad regime and launched 480 airstrikes across Syrian territory. The near-immediate Israeli response was an alarming sign of what was to come: the Israeli military has since launched [airstrikes](#), including on the Syrian Ministry of Defense in Damascus, [ground incursions](#), and [artillery shelling](#). Syrian civilians, particularly in Southern Syria, have faced [the brunt](#) of this Israeli aggression: they have been subjected to Israeli military checkpoints, [detention](#) and [kidnappings](#), and Israeli [occupation and demolition of property](#) inside an Israeli-established "buffer zone." Despite [U.S. mediation](#) between Syria and Israel, and despite the fact that Syria has never once responded to Israel's military incursions, Israeli officials have [made clear](#) that they do not plan to withdraw from southern Syria.

In March 2025, months after the fall of the Assad regime, the Syrian authorities entered into negotiations with the SDF, resulting in the [March 10 integration agreement](#) which is meant to govern how SDF-controlled civilian and military institutions will eventually be integrated into a centralized Syrian state. While the initial agreement called for implementation by the end of 2025, negotiations ultimately stalled. After fighting [erupted](#) between Kurdish militias and the Syrian army, the Syrian army advanced into northeast Syria, seizing control until the United States brokered a 14-point ceasefire on January 18, 2026, followed by a more comprehensive [agreement](#) on January 30, 2026. This agreement not only suspended hostilities in the Kurdish-majority areas, but also included SDF military and civilian administrative integration into the Syrian military and the Syrian government. While the agreement continues to be in place, key security questions remain around its implementation. [Positive signs](#) include the [integration](#) of SDF leadership into the Syrian Defense Ministry and the return of Kurds who were displaced by the fighting, whereas worrying signs include the [mass escape](#) of ISIS fighters following the Syrian military's takeover of Al Hol camp and unresolved questions about accountability for abuses committed by [the SDF](#) and [the Syrian authorities](#) against the civilian population in the northeast.

Another key security challenge for Syria's transition will be the need to combat terrorism. In June 2025, Syria's Christian community faced a harrowing attack when [Saraya Ansar al-Sunnah](#) [attacked](#) Mar Elias church in Damascus, killing 25 people and injuring an additional 60. Attacks such as this devastating incident and more recent attacks like the July 2026 bombings [near the Palace of Justice](#) and again [during French President Emmanuel Macron's visit](#), serve as a grim reminder of the presence of extremist groups throughout Syria, chiefly amongst them ISIS. In November 2025, following President al-

Sharaa's historic visit to Washington where he met with U.S. President Donald Trump at the White House, Syria formally [joined](#) the U.S.-led Coalition to Defeat ISIS. Just months later, the United States [completed](#) its formal military withdrawal from Syria, though the Syrian Ministry of Interior and General Directorate still [collaborate](#) with the United States on intelligence sharing and joint operations under the coalition's framework. Notably, ISIS attacks in Syria hit a [record low](#) in May 2026 since the group first emerged in 2013, though attacks do [continue](#) and analysts emphasize that [risks](#) have not fully subsided.

Justice and Accountability

Syria entered this transition having witnessed extensive mass atrocities and serious human rights abuses committed by a diverse set of perpetrators against a diverse group of victims. Meaningfully addressing Syria's legacy of abuses to articulate a path toward peace and justice will be at the heart of any way forward. While the majority of abuses have been committed by the Assad regime, others have been committed by HTS—the formerly-designated terrorist organization from which the new authorities originate—ISIS, the SDF, and other actors. In looking to the path ahead, Syria is in need of a transitional justice vision that offers a diverse menu of transitional justice mechanisms, from domestic and international trials to truth-seeking, reparations, commitment to non-recurrence of abuses, and institutional reform. A 2025 survey [found](#) that 91 percent of Syrian respondents consider justice to be necessary to achieving peace, with 85 percent affirming that survivor participation as part of the process would be “very important” or “important.”

Syria's new authorities have established a [National Commission for Transitional Justice](#) and a [National Commission for the Missing](#) to serve as key independent institutions to shepherd the country through the most important justice files. Authorities have yet to articulate a national transitional justice strategy, nor have they finalized a transitional justice law. Early drafts of the law as circulated have raised concerns that transitional justice [would only be afforded](#) to victims of the Assad regime. The country's first domestic transitional justice trial [began](#) in April 2026 and features Atef Najib, whose name has been widely associated with the 2011 crackdown on Daraa. The trial's symbolic importance has been celebrated and the trial itself has helped personify the authorities' commitment to challenging the former regime's sense of impunity. However, the fact that it occurs in the absence of a broader transitional justice strategy [has raised](#) structural and technical questions alike, including how Najib will be prosecuted for war crimes and crimes against humanity when the Syrian Penal Code does not yet recognize such international crimes. The recent arrest of Amjad Youssef, known to be complicit in the 2013 Tadamon Massacre, [indicates](#) that the Najib trial will not be a one time occurrence, but also drives home the importance and urgency of establishing rule of law, justice, and accountability practices that are not mere continuations of the laws, decrees, and institutions of the Assad regime.

Shortly after Assad's fall in December 2024, survivors and family members returned back to the country for answers, particularly around the fate of the more than 100,000 Syrians who had been disappeared by the regime. The new authorities were not equipped to meet the moment. They and the international organizations trained to prepare for a “day after” were slow to protect detention centers and mass graves as key sites of evidence and to protect the plethora of regime documents necessary for future prosecutions. Syrian President al-Sharaa was further criticized for failing to meet with the families in a timely fashion commensurate with the significance of the file.

The authorities' record in response to atrocities and abuses occurring within their tenure has also been mixed. When violence perpetrated by Assad regime remnants and government forces in the March 2025 coastal attacks disproportionately targeted the Alawi population in the country's coast and brought the country to the brink of sectarian breakdown, the Syrian authorities set up a fact-finding committee to investigate the incidents. Though the commitment to investigate and prosecute those involved in the harrowing incidents was welcome, the process [was criticized](#) for failing to produce a public report and for failing to sufficiently recognize the government's responsibility for certain crimes and the [sectarian nature](#) motivating the crimes in question. When 14 suspects were referred to trial, many [recognized](#) the significance of seeing a Syria in which security forces would finally be held to account before the courts, though some concerns were raised around the rushed nature of logistics which prevented some victims from participating in the proceedings, as well as the fact that the Syrian Penal Code had not yet been adapted to recognize the nature of crimes that may have unfolded on the ground.

In July 2025, fighting between Bedouins and members of the Druze community in Suwayda [devolved](#) into a massacre that disproportionately targeted the civilian Druze population, raising concerns once more on the now-emerging patterns around sectarian violence. The authorities responded [by setting up](#) another fact-finding committee that ultimately did opt to release its full findings in a welcome step and course correction. On July 1, 2026, a number of defendants accused in the Suwayda violence [began to be tried](#) in public sessions, with others still under investigation. Though the choice to hold public trials is welcome, the judicial action was again announced with very little notice ahead of time. Reports suggest that 23 security and army members involved in the violence [have been arrested](#) and are now being tried, and continuing to monitor this file will be critical.

The response to incidents like the coastal attacks and Suwayda underscores the critical role that the authorities must play in proactively communicating with the public and in rejecting any sectarian language that could exacerbate harms against civilian populations, including minorities and underrepresented groups. Beyond the scope of these two massacres, incidents of torture [have continued](#) to occur post-Assad inside detention centers, which raises the necessity of prompt investigations in response to civil society and victim complaints.

Given the high levels of coordination and organization among victims and civil society organizations in exile throughout the Assad years and the creation of a number of international justice entities working on Syria over the last 14 years, another key priority area for the Syrian authorities will be the degree to which they collaborate and engage with justice processes and institutions that do not belong to them. For example, high levels of productive engagement with the three existing UN justice entities working on Syria—[the Commission of Inquiry](#), [the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism \(IIIM\)](#), and [the Independent Institution on Missing Persons \(IIMP\)](#)—[will be essential](#) to ensure that technical assistance is capitalized on, that knowledge is shared, that evidence is properly preserved and acted on, and that victim-centric justice can be realized.

As the justice conversation continues to unfold across the transition, the role of independent media, civil society, and survivors and families of the victims will continue to be extremely important. The degree to which all of these stakeholders will be able to continue organizing freely will impact the justice process. For example, in October 2025, the Minister of Social Affairs and Labor [issued](#) a directive to civil society organizations warning them that they should not be accepting funding and donations from external sources without obtaining prior approvals. The directive cites a restrictive Assad-era law which impedes on the right of freedom of association and has been used for decades to restrict independent civil society activity. In another example, in May 2026, the Ministry of Interior [issued](#) a communique on the right to peaceful protest which adopts a model in which prior authorization for a demonstration must be sought and in which approval is deemed implicit if no response is offered within a requisite time period. Other provisions, including a requirement that each protest be driven by an organizing committee, impede the ability of individuals to organize spontaneous demonstrations, and another imposing criminal penalties on protests deemed to threaten public order can easily be abused. Given these concerns, legal experts highlight the importance of addressing these shortcomings in any future legislation issued once the Syrian Peoples' Assembly sits and in monitoring how such directives and communiques will be implemented in the interim.

Public discontent with the pace and breadth of accountability and transitional justice efforts by the authorities, as well as the rehabilitation of some Assad-era business elites and former regime officials in government roles, has resulted in a number of "[accountability protests](#)" across the country, as well as [vigilante attacks](#) on individuals believed to have ties to the former regime as well as minority groups, such as Alawis, for their perceived ties to the Assad regime. The UN Commission of Inquiry has [noted](#) that the absence of a clear legal framework for justice is one of the drivers of continuing violence in Syria, reflecting how transitional justice and accountability cannot be separated from efforts to secure and stabilize the country.

Recommendations for U.S. Policymakers

Since the fall of the Assad regime, the United States has taken a leading role in supporting Syria's integration back into the international community following years of isolation. Now, the United States is faced with a unique and unprecedented opportunity to help ensure that the transition in Syria is successful. Doing so will yield not only peace and progress for Syria and the Syrian people, but will also help bolster a key U.S. partner in a volatile region.

By structuring its assistance, engagement, and investments in Syria in a manner that delivers on the needs and priorities of the Syrian people and advances a "Syria for all Syrians," the United States can achieve these objectives and more.

In line with this, the United States should:

1. Surge humanitarian and early recovery funding for Syria. Syria faces a massive humanitarian crisis, and only 20.4 percent of the country's needs in 2026 have been covered by UN OCHA funding from international donors. The United States should build on its existing contributions to humanitarian relief in Syria while ensuring that aid reaches all of those in need throughout the country without discrimination.

2. Take measures to complete the full lifting of sectoral sanctions on Syria, as well as to implement sanctions relief in practice. Both Congress and the Trump administration should take necessary measures to complete the full lifting of U.S. sectoral sanctions on Syria. Additionally, the Trump administration should continue to actively engage with banks, investors, and the business community to encourage investment and commercial activity in Syria. This includes prioritizing a review of any designations or legislation which are actively hampering business activity in Syria. It also includes working to reduce harmful bank de-risking policies and practices, by addressing and reducing concerns regarding the legal and regulatory exposure of financial institutions over sanctions and other instruments.

3. Engage proactively with the IMF and the World Bank on Syria's reconstruction and economic recovery. The United States is the largest shareholder in both the IMF and the World Bank, and it should leverage its voice and vote to press for policies which support an inclusive reconstruction and economic recovery process in Syria. U.S. policy, including through the IMF and the World Bank, should encourage the Syrian authorities to take full advantage of sanctions relief by leveraging good governance, transparency, and the rule of law to create conditions to attract investments, rebuilding an economy which delivers on the needs of all Syrians, while supporting financing and public spending on social protection and public services to strengthen public buy-in in the transition and reduce the risk of unrest over economic hardship and poor services.

4. Congress should place conditions on U.S. security assistance and cooperation with Syria that ensures respect for human rights standards, advances accountability, and requires progress on DDR and security sector reform. Any U.S. security assistance to Syria should be structured to encourage meaningful inclusion of all of Syria's diverse communities at all ranks and across all agencies, as well as robust governance of security bodies to deliver security sector reform, strengthen professionalism, and combat politicization or allegiances to parties outside the state. Security assistance should be suspended when abuses by security forces are committed without credible investigations and accountability.

5. Press for meaningful inclusivity in Syria's transition. The United States, through both public and private messaging, should press the Syrian authorities to take concrete steps on inclusivity to live up to the promise of delivering a "Syria for all Syrians" which is grounded in genuinely inclusive governance. The Syrian authorities' implementation of inclusive reforms and practices and their commitment to robust governance and rule of law standards are critical to strengthen public support for the political transition. Such steps are also essential to help reduce the risk of a breakdown in Syria's unity or a return to violence. Moreover, they are needed to create a political, legal, security, and investment environment suitable to bring the country out of the shadow of sanctions relief and economic crisis and into reconstruction and recovery.

6. Support justice, accountability, and civil society efforts in Syria. The United States should designate funding for Syrian civil society which has been a key U.S. partner on issues of justice and accountability during the Assad era and which will continue to play a critical role in holding the Syrian authorities to account during the transition. The United States should also make voluntary contributions to key UN bodies such as the IIIM to support existing international justice efforts for Syria. Finally, the United States should encourage the Syrian authorities to commit to a transitional justice strategy and process that delivers on justice for all Syrians and to collaborate with Syrian civil society and existing international justice actors as partners in the country's transitional justice process.

7. Provide technical assistance in support of state institutions. The Trump administration should provide technical assistance to the Syrian authorities on DDR, security sector reform, public administration, and governance.

8. Ensure that Syrians are not prematurely forced to return to Syria Conditions in Syria today preclude safe, voluntary, and dignified returns of Syrians in the United States. While some progress has been made inside the country, Syria is not yet capable of absorbing a large influx of returnees who could exacerbate tensions over shortages of housing, jobs, and commodities. U.S. policymakers should restore Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Syrians and direct immigration officials to continue to assess asylum cases from Syrians on a merits-based, individual review. U.S. policymakers should also lift measures restricting the entry of Syrians into the United States.

9. Press Israel to immediately halt all military operations in Syria and withdraw from Syrian territories. The United States should use its leverage over Israel, including through arms sales, to press for an immediate end to all Israeli military operations in Syria, including ground incursions and airstrikes. This includes pressing for a full Israeli withdrawal from Syrian territory in line with Syria's internationally-recognized sovereign borders as well as the release of detained Syrian citizens.

10. Pursue a region-wide ceasefire and uphold the ceasefire in Lebanon. Syria's transition will be most likely to succeed in a region that is stable and secure. The United States should pursue an immediate ceasefire and a lasting diplomatic end to the war with Iran and the regional conflict at-large. Furthermore, the United States must ensure that a durable ceasefire holds in Lebanon to reduce the risk of spillover that threatens to destabilize Syria's transition. This includes a full Israeli withdrawal from Lebanese territory. The United States should encourage continued Syrian cooperation with the Lebanese government and abstain from pressing for any Syrian military intervention in Lebanon.



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