

AFTER ASSAD: NAVIGATING SYRIA POLICY

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Since Hamas' heinous attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East has shifted dramatically. Yet many of these changes are tentative or incomplete – Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon will seek to rebuild with Iran's help, and Iran itself will look to Russia and China as it aims to rearm. In each place, whether the changes wrought by a year-and-a-half of war are lasting or fleeting depends heavily on the actions and determination of local and external actors.

In Syria, on the other hand, change is not only certain, it is unfolding swiftly. More than fifty years of Assad family rule has come to an abrupt end. It is cause for satisfaction in Washington – the Assad regime sponsored terrorism against the United States and Israel, served as a base of operations for Iran and Russia, brutally repressed the Syrian people, employed chemical weapons and clandestinely sought nuclear weapons, and in recent years became a leading trafficker of illegal narcotics. Whatever Syria's next chapter may hold, it will be a sharp break from the past five decades.

Yet there is good reason for unease regarding what Syria's future holds and its implications for American interests. The new government in Damascus is dominated by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a US-designated terrorist group whose roots lie in the global jihadist movement spearheaded by Al-Qaida and whose leader – now appointed as Syria's president - spent time in prison for fighting against US forces in Iraq. Even if the group's intentions are good, the task facing it is enormous – Syrian history between its independence in 1946 the rise of Hafez al-Assad in 1970 was marked by numerous coups and communal violence, and since 2011 the country has been effectively divided into statelets and occupied by foreign forces. The divisions which Syrians will need to surmount if they are to come together and rebuild their society and economy are deep indeed, and extend beyond the country's own borders.

While putting Syria on a better path may be a daunting challenge, it is also an opportunity – not just for Syrians themselves, but for the Middle East, the West, and the United States. The Assad regime was implicated in many of the most serious national security threats emanating from the region and contributed to threats globally. The United States should, through pragmatic but cautious engagement, explore whether the Assad regime's collapse could represent a meaningful reduction in these threats.

Threats to US Interests

In a world full of conflicts, the war in Syria has long stood out for the threats it posed to US interests. As detailed in the September 2019 report of the Congressionally mandated Syria Study Group¹, numerous threats have long originated in the country. ISIS, Al-Qaida, and other terrorist groups – including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which has historical links to both – have long operated out of Syria. Though ISIS is diminished, it continues to mount attacks. Syria has also been a forward operating base for Iran, which used the country both to coordinate with regional terrorist proxies and for the transshipment of arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon and groups in the West Bank; and for Russia, whose 2015 intervention in Syria

¹ The Syria Study Group report can be found here: <https://www.usip.org/syria-study-group-final-report>

aimed to thwart US objectives there and reestablish Moscow as a regional player. The conflict saw the open use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime and raised questions about the disposition of any residual elements of Syria's nuclear program, which was largely destroyed by Israel in 2007.

Nor were the Syrian conflict's effects confined within the country's own borders – Syrian refugees flooded and imposed a significant economic burden on the region and Europe. The conflict drew in Turkey, Israel, and of course the United States, among others, and placed US partners like the Syrian Democratic Forces into direct conflict with Turkish and Russian-backed forces, the latter of which also used Syria to project power into the Mediterranean and Africa. More recently, Syria has also become a major global narco-trafficking hub, producing eighty percent of the world's captagon supply and generating illicit revenues worth three times those earned by Mexican drug cartels, according to the British government.²

These threats have evolved but not disappeared with the collapse of the Assad regime. Several risks stand out in the current situation:

- *The Rise of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.* The Assad regime's overthrow came at the hands of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which had for several years ruled over the city and province of Idlib in northern Syria. HTS presents a complex case for US counter-terrorism policy, and in many respects a novel one, though its rise has parallels to the Taliban in Afghanistan. HTS' leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, at one point fought with Al-Qaida in Iraq (which later became ISIS) against US forces, subsequently spending seven years in an American-run prison. From there, he traveled a circuitous path, breaking from ISIS and affiliating with Al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, with whom he also subsequently broke ties pursuant to his decision to focus on fighting the Assad regime rather than engaging in international terrorism.

While HTS and Sharaa eschewed attacks abroad, their record governing Idlib gives cause for concern. Though the group acted against jihadists in its territory who sought to mount overseas attacks, HTS fighters also clashed as recently as 2022 with US forces pursuing ISIS leaders. In addition, Sharaa and HTS have praised the use of terrorism elsewhere, such as Hamas' attacks against Israel. In addition, Sharaa in the past characterized HTS as defending not just Syria, but defending Sunni Muslims globally, and the HTS government in Idlib persecuted non-Sunni minorities, executed dissenting Sunni scholars, repressed women, and even imprisoned and tortured Western journalists. Furthermore, the HTS government of Idlib was essentially authoritarian, with Sharaa as its unchallenged leader.

In recent years however – even before taking control of Damascus in December 2024 – Sharaa and HTS have sought to project moderation. The group reportedly provided assurances to US envoys in 2018 that it did not consider the United States an enemy, softened its policies towards the Christian and Druze residents of Idlib, denied plans to enforce a harsh Islamist agenda, and since assuming control of the Syrian government placed women in a handful of senior positions and welcomed envoys from the West and elsewhere. Yet there is reason to worry that HTS' shifts may simply represent new means for accomplishing longstanding ends. HTS ideologues have compared the group to the Taliban, with Washington Institute scholar Aaron Zelin noting, "The Taliban's successful negotiation of the United States' exit from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the prior talks that occurred in Doha, Qatar, provide a

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/tackling-the-illicit-drug-trade-fuelling-assads-war-machine>

potential example of new strategies that jihadist groups might employ to further their ultimate goals.”³

- *A Possible Resurgence of ISIS.* While ISIS no longer controls significant territories in Syria, the group is not defeated. Indeed, as of June 2024, ISIS was on track to double the number of attacks it conducted in 2023, according to Centcom.⁴ There is good reason to worry that ISIS may seize upon current events to mount a broader comeback. In the days following the fall of the Assad regime, ISIS reportedly seized significant numbers of weapons in formerly regime-held areas. Among other purposes, those weapons could be used in any effort to free the thousands of ISIS fighters imprisoned in northeastern Syria, of the tens of thousands of ISIS family members – spouses but especially children – from the Al-Hol and Roj camps. These prisons and camps are guarded by the US-partnered Syrian Democratic Forces, who have already come under new pressures since the regime’s collapse.

There is also a risk that Syria could become a safe haven for other terrorist groups. In its campaign to oust Assad and focus on Syria first and foremost, HTS did not just break from but clashed with AQ, ISIS, and other externally-focused groups in recent years. Now that it has accomplished its proximate goal of overthrowing Assad, however, its will and ability to persist in this approach will be tested. Western policymakers will doubtless be mindful of the fact that the Afghan Taliban also pledged not to permit territory they controlled to be used in overseas terror plots, but has not honored that promise. Nor is it clear that HTS, now that it is in control of Damascus, will adopt the same disapproving attitude toward Palestinian terrorist groups active there as they have done toward jihadist groups targeting the West, especially given Sharaa’s past praise for Hamas attacks on Israel.

- *Renewed Intra-Syrian Conflict.* In abolishing Syria’s constitution and declaring himself president, Ahmed al-Sharaa also called for the dissolution of the country’s numerous armed groups. While this putatively included his own group, HTS, it also implied that groups such as the Turkish-supported Syrian National Army (SNA) and US-partnered Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) should cease to exist as independent entities and somehow be integrated into a national military. While talks are reportedly ongoing between the new government and the SDF, it is not clear whether an agreement will be reached; Syria’s Kurdish minority not only faces possible attack by Turkish-backed forces and ISIS remnants, but has a history of persecution at the hands of Damascus which will likely diminish its willingness to disband its forces.

Other flashpoints in post-Assad Syria include the Syria-Turkey border, where Turkey and its local partners have sought to expand the territory they control; the Golan Heights, where Israel has moved into territories previously controlled by forces allied with the Syrian regime; and the Iraq-Syria border, which remains closed by the Iraqi government and patrolled by Iranian-backed Iraqi militias.

Role of Iran, Russia, and China. The fall of the Assad regime was a blow to Russia, for whom Syria was a traditional locus of Soviet influence in the Middle East and then a last bastion of post-Soviet Russian influence. Syria was also touted by Moscow as an example of Russia’s steadfastness as an ally, something US partners in the region were quick to echo when seeking commitments from Washington. Syria also served more pragmatic ends for Russia – it provided both an air base and a warm-water port,

³ <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/sites/default/files/pdf/PolicyFocus175Zelinv2.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3840981/defeat-isis-mission-in-iraq-and-syria-for-january-june-2024/>

a showcase for Russian arms sales, and a proving ground for Russian commanders, many of whom subsequently fought in Ukraine. Despite Assad's fall, however, the new Syrian government and the Russian government have already held multiple high-level contacts, and Sharaa has expressed a certain pragmatism in approaching Moscow, noting the Syrian military equipment and energy facilities are Russian in origin. If Syria cannot obtain what it needs in the defense, energy, industrial, and other sectors from the West – or cannot do so at a competitive price – it may turn to Russia despite Moscow's past support for Assad.

For Iran, Syria even more important than it was for Russia. Damascus was the closest thing that Tehran had to a state ally in the region, its other key partners all being nonstate actors. Syria provided strategic depth to Iranian efforts in Lebanon and the West Bank: a transshipment point, operations room, and source of revenue all in one. When the Syrian revolution erupted in 2011, Iran provided the Assad regime with the shock troops it needed to survive, in the form of Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon, militants and conscripts from Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, and even officers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps itself. The loss of the Assad regime is grievous for Iran's so-called "forward defense" model, interrupting the land and air bridge from Iran through Iraq and Syria into Lebanon and the West Bank. Without a compliant government in Damascus, Iran will be hard pressed to rebuild Hezbollah or liaise as it did before with Palestinian terrorist groups.

It seems unlikely that any new Syrian government will want to replicate Assad's cozy relationship with Tehran. While Sharaa has called for normal relations with Tehran, this is in itself something of a rebuke, as it carries the implicit accusation that the prior arrangement disrespected Syrian sovereignty. More significantly, the Iranian embassy was ransacked during the storming of Damascus, and the new Syrian authorities have reportedly seized Iranian weapons bound for Hezbollah on more than one occasion. More likely than a close Syrian-Iranian security relationship under HTS rule would be Iran seeking to capitalize on security and governance vacuums in Syria by working with non-state actors in poorly governed regions or in the Lebanese and Iraqi border regions where Iranian proxies are influential, or even seeking to use them to weaken or destabilize a fledgling Syrian government.

While China has not been nearly as involved in Syria as either Russia or Iran, it may perceive economic and strategic opportunities in Syria – as it has in Iraq and Afghanistan - if the country seems to be stabilizing to the point where Chinese officials and businessmen could operate safely. China frequently used its Security Council veto to protect the Assad regime and reportedly engaged in intelligence cooperation with Syrian counterparts, but is likely not nearly as associated with the former government as are Russia or China in the minds of Syrians. While Beijing may be discomfited by HTS' past associations with Uyghur foreign fighters, it will not consider HTS' ideology an insurmountable obstacle to good relations, especially if it can crowd out Western influence in cultivating them.

Considerations for US Policy

The fall of the Syrian regime is a vindication of a sustained, bipartisan US policy opposing Assad's continued rule and supporting his opponents. US sanctions undoubtedly helped to weaken Assad, as did American pressure on his key supporters – Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia. At the same time, American support for and partnership with Syrian opposition groups not only isolated the regime, but helped to suppress ISIS and other terrorist groups.

Nevertheless, US policy must now inevitably shift in response to events and in order to ensure the advancement of American interests.

- *Engagement with HTS.* It is not the case, unfortunately, that simply because the Assad regime was an enemy of the United States that the new Syrian government will be a friend. Even if HTS maintains its opposition to international terrorism having accomplished its proximate goal of overthrowing Assad, it remains an Islamist movement with a record of intolerance, repression, and authoritarianism. How – and if – it will work with other groups and factions in Syria and US partners in the region remains to be seen.

In approaching HTS, the US should be patient, pragmatic, and interests-focused. This was the approach of the Trump administration in its first term toward HTS in Idlib, when then-Special Envoy Ambassador Jim Jeffrey held back-channel talks with Ahmed al-Sharaa. This pragmatism also characterized the initial approach the Biden administration took toward HTS and Sharaa, lifting the bounty on the latter but otherwise insisting that US policy would be based on HTS' actions, not its words.

In our dealings with Sharaa and his government, the US should look for areas of common interest where HTS' intentions can be tested and trust can be built. These include sharing intelligence on border security, drug trafficking, terrorism, and the Iranian threat network, against which the new Syrian authorities have already reportedly been acting. When it comes to issues of Syrian governance, Washington should be patient and take our lead from Syrians themselves. While a Syria that is governed in an authoritarian or sectarian manner is unlikely to be stable, prosperous, or friendly to the West, the US should avoid seeking to impose our views regarding precisely what form of government Syria must have or how it should arrive at it. Likewise, it should be up to Syrians to decide how to balance backward-looking accountability for the many heinous crimes committed during a decade-plus of war against the need to move forward as a unified society.

- *Sanctions.* The highest-priority request of the new Syrian government has been for the US and the West to lift sanctions, and understandably so – Syria's economy and infrastructure have been devastated by war, causing the previously middle-income country to descend into wrack and ruin. The Biden administration provided modest initial sanctions relief, largely to support humanitarian relief and the provision of essential services in Syria. Yet extensive sanctions remain targeting both the Syrian government and HTS itself.

Washington should adopt a phased and performance-based approach to relieving sanctions – as HTS and Syrian authorities demonstrate that the original grounds for the sanctions no longer apply, Congress and the Trump administration should consider waiving or lifting them. Sanctions that were intended primarily to isolate the Assad regime might be the first to be eased, whereas those prohibiting sensitive defense and related exports might remain in place for some time, for example.

Just as importantly, however, the US approach to sanctions relief should be tied clearly to US interests rather than to any well-intentioned efforts at political engineering. While Washington would be wise to use sanctions to incentivize the Syrian government to break from extremism, shun Iran, and govern inclusively, placing too many conditions on sanctions relief, especially those not clearly connected to US national security interests, risks alienating the new Syrian government and pushing them toward US rivals. Conversely “Not Assad” is an

insufficient condition for sanctions relief, and moving too quickly would risk setting a precedent that extremist groups elsewhere might hope to emulate.

- *Counter-terrorism.* Sharaa has called the US presence in Syria “illegal” and has called for the US-partnered Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to dissolve, disarm, and integrate into the new Syrian military. At least superficially, Sharaa’s apparent goal of a unified Syria under a single authority could well align with US interests; in the long run, the best way to prevent an ISIS resurgence or the establishment of terrorist safe havens is for Syria to be well and capably governed, to cultivate professional and effective security forces, and to eschew the use of terrorism as a policy tool. The US should support Syria’s movement in this direction, for example by encouraging the SDF to reach appropriate understandings with any new government in Damascus whose legitimacy is internationally recognized. But in the meantime the US should continue to prioritize counter-terrorism operations in order to prevent a resurgence of ISIS or related groups.

- *Geopolitical Concerns.* While the Assad regime’s collapse has been followed by popular expectations that Syria’s diplomatic alignment would shift, the reality is likely to be more complex. While the new Syrian government may, as noted above, have pragmatic reasons for good relations with Moscow and Beijing, it is important to US interests that Syria durably leave the orbit of Iran and its proxies.

While Sharaa and HTS have reached out to Arab neighbors – many of whom were in the process of normalizing with Assad before he fled to Russia – their strongest regional relationship is with Turkey, whose influence in Syria is resented by Arab Gulf states in particular and which may yet harbor designs on portions of Syrian territory occupied by Turkish forces or proxies. The Arab states themselves, which regard political Islamism as nearly great a threat as they do Iran, are likely to be wary in their own engagement with Damascus. This has been demonstrated by the divergent approaches that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have adopted toward Sharaa thus far, with the former offering aid and the latter holding back. For its part, Israel acted swiftly after Assad’s fall to defend its interests, but Sharaa and other Syrian officials have suggested an openness toward better relations with Jerusalem.

It is up to HTS to satisfy their neighbors that they pose no threat, but the US has an undeniable stake in the outcome. Assuming Damascus can assuage their concerns, Washington should encourage its Arab allies to partner closely with Syria in order to avoid a repeat of post-2003 Iraq, which was shunned by fellow Arab states and became easy pickings for Iran and other malign actors. For Washington, several priorities stand out:

- 1) Ensuring that Syria never again becomes a conduit for Iranian power projection in the region, working as necessary with the Syrian government to this end;
- 2) Limiting the security and defense relationship between Damascus, Moscow, and Beijing, while recognizing that, as elsewhere in the region, these relationships are likely to be cordial ones;
- 3) Coordinating with Arab partners to present Damascus with common benchmarks for sanctions relief and economic and security partnership and Syria’s eventual integration into regional security frameworks;
- 4) Ensuring that Turkey respects Syrian sovereignty and does not seek to capitalize on this transitional period in ways that undermine the country’s future stability or US interests;

5) Brokering Israel-Syria non-aggression understandings that could lead to eventual peace and normalization, as well as working to improve Israel-Turkey relations to prevent the two US allies from increased friction; and

6) Working closely with US partners in Europe – particularly France – and elsewhere to ensure a common Western approach to the Syrian transition.

Conclusion

The fall of the Assad regime in Syria is a watershed moment for the Middle East and could be a boon for US interests and those of our regional partners. In recent years the US has been torn between excessive intervention and exasperated neglect in our approach to the Middle East. The current situation in Syria calls for neither, but instead requires policymakers to recognize that vital American interests are implicated there, and advancing them will require patience, pragmatism, and US leadership.