

A New Era: Responding to a Post–Assad Syria

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The sudden transition in Syria presents the United States with significant policy challenges. These include decisions regarding sanctions relief, the presence of U.S. forces and the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, the control of oil resources, and the fate of Syrian Kurds.

BACKGROUND

The upheaval in Syria reflects a profound shift in the regional geopolitical order. This shift was set in motion by the Hamas assault on Israel in 2023. Intervention by Iran and Hezbollah in the ensuing conflict enlarged Israel's war aims to include weakening their respective positions through the use of force. Israel's preparation of the Lebanese battlespace through pager attacks and decapitation strikes against Hezbollah leaders and personnel, and its subsequent ground incursions that pushed Hezbollah fighters north of the Litani River, effectively incapacitated the organization. Israel, moreover, dominated its missile duel with Iran and focused attention on Iran's relative weakness and strategic vulnerability. Turkey had long been concerned to establish a buffer zone within Syrian territory and to use its ground gains to challenge Syrian Kurds eager for autonomy. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is also ideologically aligned with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Syrian rebel group that has ruled over Idlib Governorate, and harbors hostile attitudes toward the recently deposed Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, as well as Israel, whose border with Syria he might wish to occupy.

The Russo-Ukrainian War, furthermore, distracted Moscow from its security commitments in Syria, depriving the Assad regime of its only defense against internal enemies. The Russian army commander who presided over an uncoordinated, slow, and undisciplined response by the Syrian Arab Army, the SAA, was quickly replaced.¹ Russian airstrikes, in combination with the Syrian Arab Air Force, however, failed to stem the HTS advance, which encompassed the M5 highway that links Aleppo and Damascus. Stripped of its expeditionary capacity, Hezbollah was unavailable to backstop the SAA, while Iran, lacking a power projection capability, could only offer assistance with ramshackle Shi'a militias based in Iraq.² Iranian forces in Syria likely had an early grasp of the Assad regime's fundamental incapacity to resist, which would have impelled Tehran to cut its losses and withdraw. In any case, within days of the HTS jump-off, Kurdish forces had taken key border crossings between Iraq and Syria as well as the largest city

¹ "Russia Removes General in Charge of Syrian Operations, Military Bloggers Say," Reuters, December 1, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-removes-general-charge-syrian-operations-military-bloggers-say-2024-12-01>.

² Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Pro-Iranian Militias Enter Syria from Iraq to Aid Beleaguered Syrian Army," Reuters, December 2, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/pro-iranian-militias-enter-syria-iraq-aid-beleaguered-syrian-army-2024-12-02>.

in Syria's east, Deir ez-Zour.³ This strategic site fell to rebels after its SAA garrison was redeployed to the west, where it was ambushed by HTS fighters and dispersed. Iraqi militias were thus blocked from entering Syria.

The speed with which these events unfolded deprived policymakers of the lead time generally necessary to develop alternatives to policies geared to vanished realities.

This Syrian earthquake emblemizes the dramatic shift in regional power owing to the defeat of the so-called Axis of Resistance, amputation of the "Shi'a crescent," and regional ascendancy of Israel. Although the correlation of regional and external forces might swing in another direction in time, the new dispensation will be the context for U.S. policy toward Syria in the aftermath of the current crisis.

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

For the moment, the Russians and Iranians have little recourse but to lick their wounds. They do have the option, in theory, of promoting an insurgency in the mountains by members of Assad's Alawite sect while supporting an Assad-led government-in-exile, although they have expressed no such intent. But given the speed and organization of the rebel forces, it is likely that they will reach the mountain villages and bring them under control before they can be exploited by Alawite insurgents.

Turkey will move to consolidate its gains by arranging for its substantial construction industry to begin work within Syria, seeking military base access and prosecuting its campaign against Syrian Kurds.⁴ Turkey has a well-developed arms sales sector, which could benefit as well, even though HTS will have access to the former regime's weapons stocks, although Israel has targeted chemical weapons production facilities and heavier weapons.⁵

Israel will seek to weaken the new regime to the extent possible. The country's forces have already stolen a march on HTS by seizing the summit of Mount Hermon, which gives it a superb visual surveillance capability. The Israeli Air Force has embarked on sweeping airstrikes targeting both weapons stockpiles left behind by the old regime and the research facilities where, prior to 2013, components of dangerous chemical weapons were manufactured.⁶

³ Orhan Qereman, "U.S.-Backed Syrian Kurds Seize Eastern City of Deir el-Zor, Sources Say," Reuters, December 6, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-backed-syrian-kurds-seize-eastern-city-deir-el-zor-sources-say-2024-12-06>.

⁴ Syrian Kurds refers to the Kurdish-led militias under the banner of the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF.

⁵ "World's Top Arms Producers See Revenue Rise on the Back of Wars and Regional Tensions," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, December 2, 2024, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2024/worlds-top-arms-producers-see-revenues-rise-back-wars-and-regional-tensions>.

⁶ Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Israeli Airstrikes Hit Security Complex, Research Centre in Damascus, Sources Say," Reuters, December 8, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-airstrikes-hit-security-complex-research-centre-damascus-sources-say-2024-12-08>.

Airstrikes have also taken down bridges linking Lebanon and Syria.⁷ Israeli ground troops have moved into the demilitarized buffer zone on the de facto Israeli–Syrian border in the Golan Heights to keep HTS fighters (and presumably Turkish forces) far from the plateau, which has been annexed by Israel.⁸ Whether Israel proceeds to destroy HTS depots and other military assets remains to be seen. HTS leader Ahmad al–Shara, known as Abu Muhammad al–Jolani, has stated he is open to friendly relations with Israel. If so, and if Israel is responsive, the most volatile aspect of the new situation could be defused in short order.

Saudi Arabia will compete with Turkey for influence in the new Syria, especially in reconstruction endeavors and funding for stabilization initiatives. The Saudis will do so in part to protect investments in Lebanon they intend to make now that Hezbollah has been neutered and in part because of their historical interest in Syria.

The United States will have to decide what sort of relationship it wishes to have with the new Syria. This will be difficult to navigate, given HTS’ roots, Israeli interest in hobbling the new regime, prior implicit U.S. commitments to Syrian Kurds, lingering fears regarding an ISIS resurgence, a newly embraced investment in Lebanon’s future, and a troubled relationship with Turkey, a NATO ally.

ISSUES FOR DECISION

Four issues will confront the incoming Trump administration and Congress:

1. **U.S. troop presence.** Abu Muhammad al–Jolani, the head of HTS, has asked all foreign forces to leave Syria. (How Turkish forces will be treated is unknown.) The United States currently maintains about 900 soldiers and Marines in eastern Syria.⁹ The Biden administration has already stated that they will not be pulled out. According to Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Middle East Policy Daniel Shapiro, the mission of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, D–ISIS, will continue. U.S. forces in Syria are essential for this purpose. Heretofore, the U.S. presence was also meant to impede Iranian weapons shipments from Iraq via Syria to Lebanon, to protect Syrian Kurds from attack by Turkey or other adversaries of Syrian Kurdish groups, and to supply the SDF–run enclave with the output of Syrian oil fields under U.S. military control. With the HTS victory, Iran is no longer a factor. ISIS could still pose a threat, depending on the will and capacity of the new Syrian government to suppress or co-opt the group. Syrian Kurdish groups will surely be vulnerable to Turkish pressure in the absence of U.S. forces.

⁷ Emanuel Fabian, “IDF Strikes Syria–Lebanon Border Crossings Used by Hezbollah to Smuggle Arms,” *Times of Israel*, December 6, 2024,

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-strikes-syria-lebanon-border-crossings-used-by-hezbollah-to-smuggle-arms>.

⁸ Barak Ravid, “Israel Captures Syrian Territory after Assad Regime Collapse,” *Axios*, December 8, 2024, <https://www.axios.com/2024/12/08/syria-israel-golan-heights-assad>.

⁹ Tom Perry, “Foreign Armies in Syria and How They Came to Be There,” Reuters, December 6, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/foreign-armies-syria-how-they-came-be-there-2024-12-06>.

2. The Syrian Kurds. The United States assumed responsibility for Iraqi Kurds after the first Gulf War; responsibility for Syrian Kurds evolved much later in the context of the U.S. campaign against ISIS in Syria, from 2014 onward. During this long period of military cooperation on the ground, Syrian Kurds formed strong relationships with U.S. lawmakers in Congress. As a result, the United States has been reluctant to abandon the protection it offers Syrian Kurds. This has been a nettlesome issue in U.S.–Turkey relations because Turkey regards the Kurdish-run autonomous government in northeastern Syria as an adversary. Even Donald Trump was whipsawed by this issue in his first term, first promising President Erdogan a free hand with Syrian Kurds before reversing himself and reaffirming the U.S. commitment to Kurdish autonomy. In 2020, Trump sought to remove U.S. troops from Syria but failed.¹⁰ On Dec. 7, 2024, however, he signaled on Truth Social that, in his incoming term he would proceed, in effect consigning the SDF and Kurdish civilians to their fate.¹¹ Given that the new Syrian regime will likely marshal its forces to expel U.S. troops and that a prolonged fight to keep them there would be disproportionately costly, Trump’s inclination is probably right. But this should be carried out in tandem with a coherent game plan to leverage Syrian Kurds’ territorial gains for the new regime’s promise of protection from Turkish aggression. Work on this would have to begin as soon as possible.

3. Oil. U.S. forces control Syrian oil fields. Since 2019, the United States has supplied the output of the wells to the Syrian Kurdish-run autonomous enclave, who sell it to Turkey and, up until now, the Assad government, while using the remainder themselves. Although compared to major producers, output and revenue are small — as of 2022, output was 32,000 barrels per day, bpd¹² — with the appropriate investment in infrastructure, the fields could produce at least 400,000 bpd.¹³ The impact on Syria’s recovery from its ruinous civil war would be immense. The United States would be well-advised to return these fields to the new Syrian government sooner rather than later and to work with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on improving production as rapidly as the state of the infrastructure permits. This would be a useful gesture of goodwill to the new government, but even more so it would help bring the one-third of Syria’s population living below the poverty line above subsistence level and give Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and elsewhere an incentive to return to their homeland.

¹⁰ Katie Bo Williams, “Outgoing Syria Envoy Admits Hiding U.S. Troops Numbers; Praises Trump’s Mideast Record,” *Defense One*, November 12, 2020, <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2020/11/outgoing-syria-envoy-admits-hiding-us-troop-numbers-praises-trumps-mideast-record/170012>.

¹¹ Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), “Opposition fighters in Syria,” Truth Social, December 7, 2024, <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/113612147757280297>.

¹² Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, *OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin, 58th Edition* (Vienna: OPEC, 2023), 26. https://www.opec.org/opec_web/static_files_project/media/downloads/publications/ASB_2023.pdf.

¹³ This was Syria’s average oil production between 2008 and 2010, see U.S. Energy Information Administration, “International: Syria,” <https://www.eia.gov/international/overview/country/SYR>.

4. Sanctions relief. The Assad regime was subject to comprehensive U.S. sanctions under the Caesar Act.¹⁴ These extraterritorial sanctions were largely duplicated by the European Union. With the removal of the Assad regime, these sanctions should immediately be discontinued. The Syrian population is under extreme stress, lacking electricity, a transportation network, education and medical systems, a functioning agricultural sector, and clean water. Humanitarian aid has not been distributed effectively and has been incomplete. But palliative measures are insufficient for a society that has been so thoroughly pulverized by war, malgovernance, and sweeping economic sanctions. Economic development and employment are essential. Yet these will remain blocked as long as sanctions are in place.

The dilemma facing the United States is that HTS and Jolani are sanctioned as well. While these sanctions could be waived, there will be a temptation to add new ones. Syria's transition will almost certainly entail human rights violations — as video evidence found on social media already attests — and the laws governing the status of women and minorities that the new regime will likely impose could also justify sanctions. If this situation transpires, the impediments to stabilization and reconstruction will persist. In the first instance, therefore, the United States should partner with Saudi Arabia to ensure that the new Syrian regime understands the adverse implications of measures it might take that violate civil and human rights. The United States should avoid imposing new sanctions for a grace period of at least six months. Sanctions should be a last resort, given their negative impact on reconstruction and on positive policy formation in the new Syria.

The collapse of the Assad government creates a lengthy list of policy priorities for the United States. We recommend that the U.S. government proceed with the following steps:

- Establish official lines of communication with the new regime.
- Work with the Syrian Kurds, Turkey, and the new government on arrangements that preserve Kurdish safety and security within Syria. Kurds and Turkish-backed militias have reportedly struck one local truce, a favorable development.
- Prepare for the drawdown of U.S. forces from Syrian territory. Such a withdrawal should take place on a timetable geared to talks regarding the status of Syrian Kurds and the D-ISIS campaign. The challenge for the incoming Trump administration is that Kurdish groups must be convinced the U.S. is withdrawing if they are to seriously negotiate their status with Damascus, while the new government must be convinced that an accommodation to Kurdish concerns is essential to a U.S. drawdown. In addition, the new government should have a plan to manage the ISIS threat.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act: Fact Sheet," June 17, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/caesar-syria-civilian-protection-act>.

- Assure the new government that contingent on its cooperation vis-à-vis Kurdish safety and with the international D-ISIS campaign, the United States will revert control of oil fields to the new government.
- Broker direct talks — possibly with Saudi help — between HTS and Israel and help establish rules of the road that bring an end to Israeli strikes.
- Work with both HTS and Turkey to keep Turkish forces away from the de facto Israeli-Syrian border. This must be a priority.
- Working with Congress, secure a grace period of at least six months during which new sanctions will not be imposed and enforcement of existing sanctions will be suspended by the Office of Foreign Assets Control, OFAC. In general, Syrian reconstruction will not succeed if sanctions continue to be imposed.
- The State Department should prepare for resumed diplomatic relations with Syria.

About the Authors

Steven Simon is a senior research fellow at the Quincy Institute and a distinguished fellow and visiting professor at Dartmouth College. He served as the National Security Council senior director for counterterrorism in the Clinton White House and for the Middle East and North Africa in the Obama White House and in senior positions at the U.S. Department of State. Outside of government, he was a principal and senior advisor to Good Harbor LLC in Abu Dhabi and director of the Middle East office of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Manama. Prior to this, he was deputy director of the IISS in London. He managed security-related projects at the RAND Corporation and was the Hasib Sabbagh Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. Steve has taught at Princeton, Dartmouth, Colby, and Amherst and held fellowships at Brown, Oxford, and the American Academy in Berlin.

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