

Mara Karlin, PhD  
Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee  
“Syria at a Crossroads: U.S. Policy Challenges Post-Assad”  
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### **Seizing the Opening in Syria**

Chairman Mast, Ranking Member Meeks, and distinguished Members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

Just over a year has passed since transformative events occurred in Syria. President Bashar al-Assad was deposed after overseeing a horrific 14-year war that killed at least 400,000 people and displaced 13 million more. Notably, none of Assad’s backers were able—or willing—to rescue him. Russia was preoccupied with its grinding war against Ukraine, relations between Tehran and Damascus had been fracturing, particularly as Iranian operatives in Syria were targeted by Israel, and Hizballah had just suffered a historic set of attacks by Israel against its entire leadership and operators that left it flailing. Having led U.S. policy toward the Levant from the Pentagon and served on the Congressionally mandated Syria Study Group, I know this constellation is rare—as are the opportunities and challenges it presents for U.S. policy. Syria is moving in the right direction, but its trajectory is not guaranteed and the struggles it faces may get harder.

#### **A Mildly Optimistic Picture. . . But Thorny Problems and Spoilers Abound**

Building the new Syria requires juggling major political, economic, and security opportunities and challenges simultaneously.

**Political Fragility:** The Syrian government is composed of an unusual mix of former jihadists, civil society activists, bright young refugees who spent their formative years away from Syria, and many former government bureaucrats. To date, they have taken a series of pragmatic, largely non-ideological steps in governing domestically and in foreign policy. The leadership does not appear to be pursuing an Islamist approach to governance. However, their writ is weaker the further one travels from Damascus. There have been some troubling instances of restrictions on women’s freedom, for example, and indicators such as these merit close scrutiny for evidence of the Syrian government’s influence and ideology. There does not appear to be a serious alternative to President Sharaa. Minorities like the Kurds and Druze have legitimate concerns about representation and the government’s commitment to pluralism, particularly as it seeks to extend its sovereignty across the entire country.

**Economic Devastation:** The civil war shattered much of Syria’s economy. Today, 90% of Syrians live in poverty. Rebuilding will take more than \$200 billion.<sup>1</sup> Meaningful economic investment and reconstruction support should begin coming to fruition as investors adjust to the recently lifted U.S. sanctions. I saw the major economic challenges firsthand on a recent visit to Syria. While Damascus itself is bustling and largely untouched by the war, just 15 minutes out of town, there is devastation as far as the eye can see. Driving through Eastern Ghouta, where

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<sup>1</sup> The World Bank Group, “Syria’s Post-Conflict Reconstruction Costs Estimated at \$216 Billion,” *The World Bank Press Release*, October 21, 2025.

Assad famously used chemical weapons on his own people (in addition to barrel bombs, cluster munitions, and many other weapons), one can see not only skeletons of buildings littering the landscape, but also groups of school children and families trying to rebuild their lives, set up shops, and imagine their lives in a new Syria.

The human element is inextricably linked to the future of Syria's economy. More than 1 million refugees have returned from countries like Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, and more than 2 million internally displaced Syrians have returned home. Many struggle to find jobs, a place to live, and basic services. Driving across Lebanon into Syria, I met one family as they returned home after fleeing more than a decade ago. Wrapped in Syrian flags, they were giddy about starting their new life. They weren't sure what awaited them—home may lack windows, doors, regular access to electricity and water, may be littered with unexploded ordnance, or have squatters—but they were overjoyed to contribute to the new Syria. Millions of refugees remain outside of Syria. I spent time with some in Lebanon where they had lived nearly a decade in tents, couldn't send their children to school, suffered from malnutrition, and struggled to make ends meet. But as difficult as things are, they still feared returning given uncertainty about whether it will offer safety, livelihood, and dignity.

**Volatile Security:** The security situation in Syria is growing trickier, characterized not by widespread violence, but by worsening violence in certain areas. Many minority groups hold justified fears about what their future will be in the new Syria, particularly given intercommunal violence since the Assad regime fell. There have been spikes of Islamist attacks and vigilantism.

The two toughest domestic security issues in Syria are intertwined: 1) the Kurds' autonomous region and the institutions they've established; and 2) current and former jihadists, including ISIS members, ISIS affiliated family members, and former al Qaeda affiliate members like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

Simply put, the visions of Damascus and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fundamentally differ: one wants a unified Syria; one prefers a fragmented country. Damascus cannot effectively govern and exert its sovereignty throughout the Syrian state with a pseudo state in its territory. To be sure, this issue is much bigger than security; but the recent violence and subsequent military success of the government-aligned forces has brought that aspect to a head as the SDF's territory has shrunk considerably. Outside actors, including the United States, should shape both parties' incentives so that they are bought into envisioning their evolving roles and relationship. In the near-term, that requires all parties restraining from violence. For the Kurds, meaningful integration into the Syrian state requires giving them the confidence that they have a future in a unified Syria, one where they have security and rights. The government's recent steps to recognize Kurdish as a national language, ban ethnic discrimination, require inclusivity by Syrian government institutions, and penalize those who seek to encourage ethnic divisions are important indicators of Syria's trajectory as a pluralistic state.

On the jihadist front, the Syrian military faces daunting challenges. They must responsibly secure thousands of ISIS prisoners and tens of thousands of ISIS-affiliated family members who live in Syrian camps—particularly amidst the SDF's integration into the Syrian military. Syria's government recently became the 90th member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS; it now has ample opportunity to responsibly fulfill this role. The Syrian military must be vigilant in its effort to integrate former HTS members; foreign fighters pose a particularly concerning challenge in this regard and their roles should be circumscribed. Through this transition, the Syrian military should be professional and secular.

**Regional Dynamics Matter:** No discussion of Syrian security affairs is complete without addressing broader regional dynamics. Over the last few months, the Lebanese military has taken historic steps in disarming Hizballah south of the Litani River and establishing operational control in that area, which the Israeli government described as an “encouraging beginning, but they are far from sufficient.”<sup>2</sup> According to U.S. Central Command, “The LAF has successfully removed nearly 10,000 rockets, almost 400 missiles, and over 205,000 unexploded ordnance fragments during the past year.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the Lebanese government has substantially limited Hezbollah’s control of Beirut International Airport.<sup>4</sup> Syria’s security will be shaped in part by the Lebanese government’s progress (or lack thereof) in disarming Hizballah.

More broadly, Syria is part of a dangerous rivalry and grab for influence between Turkey and Israel; this may be the most important regional dynamic influencing Syria’s future. How Israel and Turkey adjudicate their respective roles will have implications for security and stability across Syria. Israel’s uncertainty about post-Assad Syria has resulted in substantial military strikes on Syrian territory. Its concerns about the leadership in Damascus have led it to aid to minority groups, encouraging fragmentation. However, Damascus and Tel Aviv have also engaged in nearly half a dozen rounds of U.S.-sponsored negotiations. Turkey’s regional influence is growing, and the decreasing autonomy of Syria’s Kurdish community echoes its interest in a unified Syria. Both Iran and Russia will shape Syria going forward as well. Tehran is surely nostalgic about Syria as its old stomping ground (particularly as a waystation for getting weapons to Hizballah in Lebanon), although its recent domestic uprising will further distract it from disrupting others. Further afield, Moscow appears likely to maintain access to most of its military bases. Regional actors will either contribute to or undermine Syrian stability.

### **U.S. Policy: Betting on the New Syria is Right, But with Eyes Wide Open**

Over the past year, the United States has made the right strategic choice: engaging the new Syria while remaining vigilant. Congress and the Administration deserve credit for lifting sanctions, removing barriers to cooperation, and welcoming the first official visit by a Syrian head of state to Washington. Going forward, I recommend five priorities.

- 1) **Reopen the U.S. Embassy in Damascus:** Developing a nuanced understanding of the evolving political, economic, and security situation requires reopening the U.S. embassy in Damascus. This should be the top priority for the United States and would provide a crucial platform for coordinating and implementing the following recommendations. Reopening must, of course, be executed in ways that meet security requirements.
- 2) **Monitor the ISIS Threat:** Encourage the Syrian government to meaningfully participate in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, including ensuring that ISIS members are securely detained, and working with coalition members to repatriate ISIS family members from

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<sup>2</sup> Sam Halpern and Miriam Sela-Eitam, “Lebanon not doing enough to disarm Hezbollah despite Army’s ‘operational control,’ Israel says,” *The Jerusalem Post*, January 8, 2026.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Central Command, “Military Leaders Meet on Disarmament Efforts in Southern Lebanon,” *U.S. CENTCOM Press Release*, October 16, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Omer Abdul-Baqi, “Loosening Hezbollah’s Grip on Lebanon Begins at the Airport,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 10, 2025.

Syria. Task the intelligence community to prepare quarterly assessments of the ISIS threat in Syria. Task the Department of Defense to offer a complementary quarterly report detailing its approach to countering ISIS, including the U.S. military's mission and rules of engagement, and the plan to secure ISIS prisoners that are transferred from Syria to Iraq.

- 3) **Launch a Security Sector Reform Program**: In collaboration with key partner militaries, task the Department of Defense to work with the Syrian military on a robust program of security sector reform as it integrates armed groups and is rebuilt to facilitate professionalization.
- 4) **Encourage the Protection and Livelihood of All Syrians**: Urge the Syrian government to protect minorities, including holding those who violate this tenet accountable. Support humanitarian efforts to enable refugees and internally displaced people to return home across Syria. The dismantlement of USAID, particularly the Office of Transition Initiatives, means there are fewer tools available to the United States to help a fragile country. This is not merely a humanitarian concern, but a security imperative. Task the State Department to explore what stabilization and development resources still exist to build capacity in critical sectors. Encourage the United Nations to name a new U.N. special envoy focused on reconstruction, reconciliation, and humanitarian issues.
- 5) **Continue U.S.-Led Regional Security Convenings**: Only the United States can credibly facilitate dialogue on security arrangements between Syria and Israel and Lebanon and Israel. For the former, the United States should work with Israel and Syria to fully demarcate and then protect their borders to prevent arms and other smuggling. For the latter, U.S. leadership in the security mechanism is crucial for Lebanese efforts to disarm Hizballah and the diminution of Israeli military strikes on both countries. Regular U.S. engagements with Turkey appear to have had a moderating influence on Turkey's behavior in Syria and should continue.

In 2012, one year into the Syrian civil war, I testified before Congress that “the longer this conflict lasts, the more bloody, internecine, and tragic it will be.”<sup>5</sup> I had no idea what an understatement that would prove to be. Today Syria is undergoing a moment of transformation, a rare one for a country that has seen so much destruction for so long. With sustained and thoughtful U.S. engagement, the United States can help the new Syria seize this opening.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you. I look forward to answering your questions.

*Mara Karlin is a Professor at Johns Hopkins University-School of Advanced International Studies and a Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution. She worked for 6 secretaries of defense across Democratic and Republic administrations, including leading U.S. policy toward the Levant from the Pentagon and serving on the Congressionally mandated Syria Study Group. She recently participated in a UN High Commission for Refugees mission to Syria and Lebanon.*

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<sup>5</sup> Mara Karlin, “Confronting Damascus: U.S. Policy Toward the Evolving Situation in Syria,” Testimony before the Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs on the Middle East and South Asia of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, April 25, 2012