

# Testimony Before The House Foreign Affairs Committee

February 10, 2026

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## **SYRIA POLICY**

### INTRODUCTION

Today, Syria is the most important front in the American and overall international community's effort to stabilize long-term the Middle East following the two year war begun by Hamas' horrific terrorist attack on Israel. The victory gained by Israel, the U.S., and regional allies over Iran and its proxies opens the door to possible sustained peace and development in Syria, as laid out in President Trump's Riyadh speech. The administration, building on the success of the Biden and first Trump administration's Syria policies that helped bring Assad down, is pursuing generally an effective policy towards that end.

The U.S. should continue leading the international community to unify and stabilize the new Syrian state. That requires ending internal conflicts, building the economy, keeping Iran and proxies out, the Islamic State (ISIS) defeated, and the Russian presence contained. This effort does not need massive American resources, but needs sustained American attention, particularly to ensure the international community follows common policies. Damascus will only take the difficult but necessary steps to reconcile war-hardened internal animosities and rebuild destroyed infrastructure if those giving support speak with one voice on approaches and requirements. In contrast, competing approaches by outside states likely will produce chaos and failure, as

seen during the 2011-2024 civil war. It is better to have a mediocre lowest common denominator policy followed by all involved states and organizations than to have three or four allegedly perfect policies colliding with one another.

## BACKGROUND

Syria has not only been the epicenter of Iran and its proxies' march through the region and the scene between 2011-2024 of the most horrific regional conflict since the Iran-Iraq war, but long before a unique threat to the region. Under the Assad's and predecessors, it attacked Israel in three wars, invaded Jordan in 1970, and occupied Lebanon for decades. It fed thousands of Jihadist fighters into Iraq after 2003, and hosted Abdullah Ocalan and thousands of anti-Turkish PKK terrorists. During its civil war, Syria spawned diverse terrorist groups, notably ISIS, spread captagon drugs through the region, and with its Iranian and Russian allies rained bombs and chemical shells on its own population, killing approximately 600,000, disappearing, torturing and interning tens of thousands more, and driving half of its population, some twelve million people, from their homes, six million as refugees stressing neighboring states and much of Europe. In short, as a purveyor of violence and instability it has been in a class of its own in the Arab world, not due to its decent, courageous population but to its atrocious leaders.

## POLICY

U.S. interests in the region over administrations, and most recently articulated by President Trump in Riyadh last year, include promoting

peace, prosperity and regional cooperation by, with and through partners, with strong American business, diplomatic and if necessary, military support, while resetting overall priorities towards Asia.

Syria is essential to achieving these outcomes, given its centrality and the destabilizing role it has played previously. U.S. policy should thus aim for a Syria:

- fully unified;
- responsive to its citizens including minorities;
- committed to economic reconstruction and development supported by international cooperation;
- enjoying friendly relations with all neighbors including Israel;
- supporting regional efforts to complete the defeat of ISIS, roll back remaining Iranian influence in the Levant, and contain Russian destabilizing actions;
- in short, advancing stability, not strife, within and around Syria.

To achieve these ends, the U.S. should continue its lead diplomatic role in Syria and ensure the full coordination of states involved in Syria's development for unified effort and common messaging to the Syrian government on economic, political and security policies.

Initial policy priorities for the U.S. and Syria should be to:

- reconfigure the Defeat ISIS coalition given Damascus' entry into the coalition and the SDF's changed status, and block any Iranian or proxy presence;
- finalize a security agreement between Syria and Israel;

- implement the January 29<sup>th</sup> agreement between Damascus and the SDF;
- advance individual rights and constitutional reform by building on the quasi-election of a National Assembly, to include formalizing the January presidential decree regarding Kurdish identity and language rights, and extending tolerance to other groups;
- prioritize early recovery, energy deliveries, and infrastructure refurbishment in coordination with international donors, investors and assistance sources;
- recognize that international reconstruction efforts and other economic and diplomatic support levels must be directly linked as leverage to the Syrian government's success on the priorities above.

## IMPLEMENTATION

-The al-Sharaa Government: The United States has dealt indirectly with al-Sharaa and the force he led in Idlib province, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), for almost a decade, despite its—and his—terrorist designations. According to the New York Times, the US has been in indirect contact with al-Sharaa since 2016. In September 2018, the Trump administration approved waivers to continue sending USAID assistance to millions of needy Syrians in Idlib despite HTS's control of the province. That same month, the administration, including the president personally and Secretary Pompeo, demanded publicly, and in messages to the Russians, a halt to an Assad regime-Russian-Iranian offensive into Idlib. Those actions resulted in the October 2018 ceasefire in Idlib that allowed HTS to maintain control, and the three

million displaced persons in Idlib along the Turkish border to remain in Syria. Control of Idlib and HTS's effective operations against the Assad regime and ISIS made it an unofficial ally in resolving the Syrian conflict. The author maintained indirect contact through western NGOs with al-Sharaa, then known as al-Joulani, between 2018 and the end of 2020.

As president, al-Sharaa has taken steps to rein in some of his more extreme supporters and limit conflict with minorities, including Alawites, Druze and Kurds. While fighting has broken out between the Damascus government and those groups, al-Sharaa in each case brought his forces eventually under control and so far has ensured no repeat of major violence against any of those groups.

He has established an indirect elected assembly and new constitutional provisions, and decreed cultural and linguistic rights for Kurds that should be formalized, and apply to all Syrians. These are all at best imperfect half measures. But these measures, and Damascus efforts to curb internal fighting, should be contrasted not with best case scenarios but the reality of a Syria emerging from a decade plus of horrific internal war, and with our experiences elsewhere in the region. In fact, Syria today is more stable and less violent than Iraq was in 2004 during this author's tour there.

-Relations with the Syrian Kurds and the fight against ISIS: Given the effective and heroic role the SDF played against the still-dangerous ISIS, the SDF's successful integration into a unified Syria is imperative for both counterterrorism and internal security purposes. Washington also has a moral obligation to ensure its Kurdish allies are not mistreated by Damascus.

The U.S. has long viewed the Kurds as an effective partner in the fight against ISIS, but understood that its core, the YPG, was the Syrian branch of the anti-Turkish terrorist PKK, although the YPG was never formally designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. The U.S. position toward the SDF, as stated repeatedly publicly, was that relations were “temporary, tactical and transactional.” This policy was established to avoid antagonizing NATO ally Turkey and interfering in the future internal structure of Syria. As officials stressed to everyone, including the SDF, the U.S. position towards Syria’s future was based on UNSCR 2254 (2015), which called for ceasefire, reconciliation, new constitution and eventually a government, refugee return, and respect for human rights. Importantly, the U.S. limited its commitment to defend the SDF militarily only to threats from ISIS, Assad and his allies, not to Turkey, the Syrian opposition, or subsequently the al-Sharaa government.

With the fall of Assad and the establishment of the al-Sharaa government, much of Resolution 2254 was or is being implemented, including arrangements between the SDF and Damascus for the unity of Syria. The U.S. thus has not changed its position toward the SDF; rather, the overall situation in Syria changed for the better, the US now has two partners, Damascus and the SDF, and the chance, with the Syrian people and the international community, to implement the principles of Resolution 2254.

-Governance: particularly after the tyranny of the Assad regime, domestic stability will require a high level of citizen participation, protection of human rights, and local governance, of particular importance to win the loyalty of the Kurds and other minority

groups. The al-Sharaa government has taken some initial steps, from avoiding a repeat of serious violence against the Alawite and Druze minorities after initial outbreaks, investigating related allegations of government forces' illegitimate uses of violence, and announcing civil and linguistic rights for the Kurds. The government also initiated indirect elections for a provisional parliament, but it needs to do much more to promote true democracy, internal stability, and local self-governance. (Articles 122 and 123 Of the 2005 Iraqi constitution offer successful examples of local governance authorities.) Measurable progress toward those ends should be a precondition for major reconstruction and other economic support from the U.S. and other key states.

-Foreign Relations:

Israel: Securing an agreement with Jerusalem is a critical step for regional peace. Such an agreement should include limits to militarization in areas close to the Israeli border, analogous to the Sinai arrangements; the pullback of Israeli forces from areas seized after December 2024; “understandings” on Israeli military operations against third countries in emergencies; channels of bilateral communication short of diplomatic recognition; and tolerance for limited Israeli support for the Syrian Druze population. While resolution of the Golan Heights issue and related diplomatic recognition are not on the table now, the two sides should be willing to deal with these issues as relations further improve.

Russia: Russian willingness to provide oil to Damascus, supply arms to a Syrian army long wedded to Russian equipment, and maintain its two military bases in Syria, will complicate Syrian relations with Washington. However, the two biggest outside actors in Syria after the US, Turkey and Israel, appear not to see removal of the Russians as a

priority, and some in both countries see a Russian presence as a stabilizer given the rivalry between Ankara and Jerusalem (see next). But Russian interference in Syrian domestic affairs or sponsorship of Iranian involvement in Syria must be redlines for both Washington and Damascus.

Turkey, Israel and Syria: The rollback of Iran and defeat of ISIS have brought the two remaining major regional military powers, Turkey and Israel, for the first time into direct proximity in Syria. Given the natural friction between these major states and their deep differences over Gaza, the two American partners could stumble into confrontation without Washington's sustained high-level coordination between Jerusalem, Ankara and Damascus. An Israel-Syria arrangement as noted above would help calm the situation, but eventually Turkey and Israel must deal directly with each other to manage inevitable tensions.

Iran: Iran and its proxies must remain physically and diplomatically removed from Syria. This must be a sine qua non for US-Syrian relations and to the extent possible between other regional states and Damascus.