



**Statement before the House Foreign Affairs Committee
Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee**

“After Assad: The Future of Syria”

Testimony by:

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Chairman Lawler, Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick, and distinguished Members of the Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to participate in today's hearing. I commend the Subcommittee for focusing on this urgent and evolving challenge, and I am honored to be here.

My comments today are my own and should not be attributed to the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Syria is at its most profound inflection point in a half-century. While Syrians successfully overthrew a brutal dictatorship, it remains unclear whether their future will be living under another dictatorship, a theocracy, a democracy, a failed state, or something in between. The questions before Congress are how much we should care about the future of Syria, how much we can do to shape it, and how we should go about doing so.

It is hard to answer "how much" questions, because the scale is never clear. Still, it is a serious mistake to say that Syria does not matter. Syria borders a set of countries that are important to U.S. national security—Israel, Turkey and Jordan for starters—and the country has both an active jihadi movement and a long history of cooperation with Iran.

Syria has been a challenge to generations of U.S. policymakers. For decades, the Syrian government has initiated activities that the United States finds offensive or destabilizing, with the promise to end them if the United States makes concessions to Syria. Much of our cooperation over the last half-century has been in this vein, struggling for a less damaging bilateral relationship rather than building patterns of cooperation. The Trump administration's actions, then, are novel, and they have neither local history nor local institutions to build on.

In all of this, it is important to remember that we are relatively small players in the world view of the Syrian leadership, and of the Syrian people. Their principal focus is domestic, and they are picking through the wreckage of more than a half-century of dictatorship and a decade and a half of civil war. The economy is a shambles, the infrastructure is crumbling, and there is a profound shortage of technocrats who can make any of it work. The civil war came on a country that was already ailing. Twenty-five years ago, Syria had a peculiar East Bloc economy a decade after the Berlin Wall had fallen. The economy worsened in the years since, coming to operate through a combination of bribery, government shakedowns, and sales of Captagon, a narcotic that the Syrian government manufactured and smuggled to neighboring states.

On top of its economic problems, the Syrian government also faces deep security dilemmas. They include both how to deal with the thousands of Syrians who actively supported—and benefitted from—the Assads' repression, as well as how to engage with jihadi movements that include thousands of foreign fighters who were staunch allies of Syria's new leaders.

In this challenging environment, Syria's leaders are deeply focused on their domestic needs. They see all of their foreign engagements through the prism of maximizing the resources they can bring to the task of domestic governance.

In this regard, the Trump administration was right to relax U.S. sanctions on Syria, and to give the new government an opportunity to demonstrate both its intent and its capacity. I was, frankly, surprised, that a president who is committed to using his leverage did not seek to use leverage in this case. If he was motivated by a desire to get resources into an ailing Syria quickly, that may make some sense. But if it was motivated by underestimating the complexity of the Syrian environment, it is a mistake.

One of Syria's unappreciated challenges is the number of countries with a keen interest in what happens there. Turkey sees itself as the dominant external actor, and for years it has been working closely with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the group that currently rules Syria. Turkey not only seeks to advance its security interests in Syria, but it sees the country's reconstruction as a lucrative opportunity for Turkish businesses.

Israel has its own deep interests in Syria, and they are sharply at odds with Turkey's. The Israeli leadership sees Syria's new leaders as either avowedly jihadi or at least sympathetic to such groups. After decades of living with a menacing Hezbollah on the Lebanese border, Israel is committed to ensuring that new adversaries do not lodge themselves alongside Israel's Syrian border. It has been carving out a buffer zone in largely Druze areas while also seeking to weaken Islamist forces in the Syrian government.

I see our European allies as essentially like-minded with us, although their fear of emigration out of Syria makes them a little more focused on ensuring Syria gets back on its feet. Gulf states have an interest ensuring that Iran does not reestablish itself in Syria, although Qatar has a strong bond to Turkey and seeks to advance Turkish interests; Saudi Arabia has a historic connection to Lebanon's Sunni community and may be seeking to help secure it.

Of course, there are abundant spoilers. Iran has an interest in maintaining a foothold in a country that was a strategic ally for decades and into which it invested tens of billions of dollars, partly to help give it a pathway to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Russia similarly is trying to maintain its bases and at least some influence. Both have an interest in sustaining some degree of disorder in the country. ISIS remains both active and capable, although much less so than a decade ago.

Syria faces many dangers, and the one Israel is most worried about is that it becomes a state that is captured by jihadis. But there is an equally important threat, and that is that Syria becomes a battleground for the region's proxy wars, much as Lebanon became in the 1970s.

The biggest challenge is navigating the hostility between Israel and Turkey, which has grown. The Gaza war has exacerbated hostility between the two countries, but the fact is that their strategies in the Middle East are often at odds, and they are rivals as non-Arab powers that seek to influence the Arab states in the region. Each country could adopt some unsavory allies in order to undermine its rivals in Syria, and the effects of those choices would spread outward.

Syria's substantial minority communities, who comprise about a quarter of the country, may become regional countries' tools of division. I could imagine some regional actors seeking to marginalize them, other regional actors seeking to undermine national unity in the name of protecting them, and still others seeking to recruit vulnerable minorities as part of a broader effort to destabilize Syria. Yet, an internally divided Syria is not in the U.S. interest.

It is crucial to recognize that many of the countries competing for influence in Syria are U.S. allies and partners. The United States has an important role to play helping coordinate their efforts and prompting them to do what they might otherwise not do. Appointing a Syria envoy, as the Trump administration did, is a constructive step in this direction. At the same time, having an envoy whose other job is to be ambassador to Ankara makes it harder for the United States to balance between all of the power players and potential antagonists in Syria, since Ankara is the most important of them. It is not hard to imagine how the Syria envoy role and the ambassador to Ankara role will come into tension, and that situation could cause Israel to feel both threatened and alienated.

Additionally, it will be hard to exert influence over allies and partners if we abstain from any aid to Syria while they have made extensive commitments. Admittedly, Syria is a middling issue on the list of U.S. foreign policy priorities, and this isn't to argue that the United States should become the major donor there. But in the interests of influence, we at least need to be present. Syria's humanitarian needs are acute, and a whole host of groups that we struggle against in the Middle East have used distribution of food and social services to build grass roots support. It is prudent that we engage on that front, not out of a sense of charity, but in pursuit of our own self-interest.

I do not think any of this requires us to see deeply into Ahmed al-Sharaa's soul, or to understand his complete motivations. Admittedly, there is much in his background that is troubling. Most worrying is that he managed to persuade a number of shrewd and ruthless people that he was their ally, not least Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Abdel Latif al-Baghdadi.

There are at least three ways to see this: that he is fundamentally like-minded, that he **was** like minded and had a conversion, or he is good at reading people and manipulating them. I would not feel comfortable betting on any of these possibilities, and none are very reassuring. But it is not clear how much this matters. Syria's new leadership, whatever its

ambitions, will need to navigate a perilous path. It is unclear who will survive, and it is unclear how Syria will be successfully governed, or even if it can be.

Rather than try to decide now whether al-Sharaa qualifies for our stamp of approval, it is much better to support him modestly, to test him continuously, and to ensure that our allies and partners in the region remain closely tied to our policy. While that is not a completely satisfactory path, it is better than alternatives where we contribute to Syria's ultimate failure, or where our allies and partners end up on a very different page than us, or with each other.

I should add that pursuing a policy such as the one I recommend will require teamwork from across the administration, and a close partnership between the White House, the State Department, the Defense Department, Treasury, the intelligence community, and others. It will require ongoing coordination to ensure everyone in the Trump administration is rowing in the same direction. As the administration settles in, Congress should press the Trump administration to resolve internal differences over Syria policy, and to ensure that the administration speaks and acts with one voice. Conditions in Syria will get much more complicated before they become less so.

I see great potential in Syria, and I also see serious risks. We need a policy that makes the former more likely, and heads off the second. A modest, conditional U.S. strategy, anchored in coordination with allies and partners, offers the best opportunity to advance U.S. interests. It is too early to say where Syria will go, or where the Trump administration's strategy toward Syria will go. Both show some signs of encouragement, but thus far, both leave room for improvement.