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After Assad: the Future of Syria

Chairman Lawler, Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick, honorable members, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

With the fall of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, the United States has a once in a generation opportunity to reshape the balance of power in the Middle East. The fall of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad opens a window, but it will not stay open for long.

Syria is an integral part of great power competition. It is in the best interest of the US to ensure Russia does not re-establish a foothold in Syria, because what happens in Syria historically does not stay in Syria.

The Eastern Mediterranean is vital to Russia. That's why the goal of control there is a consistent and centuries-old goal for Russia. It will long outlast Vladimir Putin.

My testimony focuses on three key issues of vital importance to the US: First, Russia's longstanding commitment to control of Syria is a crucial part of Moscow's strategic positioning with the West. Second, Syria's importance to Russia is key to these objectives across the Middle East, and to that end I highlight Russia's economic interests and potential. Third, Russia is strengthening its hand in Syria and future ability to threaten NATO's South by positioning itself as a false protector of minorities.

This is why the United States must act now to prevent Russia from re-establishing a strong foothold in Syria, as Moscow continues to strengthen its partnerships with Iran, China and North Korea.

Longstanding competition for Syria

So, how did we get here? For over half a century, Syria has been a thorn in our side. Damascus, allied with Moscow, has stood as the crucible of regional conflict that draws in great powers. During the Cold war, it emerged as the Soviet Union's most loyal Middle Eastern client state. The Eastern Mediterranean theater has been and remains central to Moscow's global confrontation with the United States.

Syria was key to Soviet positioning and influence in the Middle East. It enabled regional turmoil and conflict that repeatedly drew the United States into the region. US-designated state sponsor of terrorism since 1979, Syria emerged as the pillar of the Tehran-led, anti-Western, anti-Israel "axis of resistance." Iran's tentacles deeply entrenched into Syria's political, cultural, and economic spheres. Even with the end of the Cold war, Damascus gave strength to terrorists, not only to Shia but also Sunni groups such as ISIS and al-Qaida.

Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin began Russia's return to the Middle East soon after taking over as Russia's president in May 2000. It culminated with Moscow's military intervention in Syria in 2015 to save Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad from an eminent collapse, at a time when the Syrian civil war reverberated across the Middle East and Europe.

That intervention solidified Russia's influence in the region and brought the Russia-Iran partnership to new heights. Even traditional U.S. partners and allies in came to accept Russia's presence as a reality they had to deal with. The Kremlin used its position in Syria to undermine US interests. It has fanned the flames of regional conflict across NATO's southern flank and Europe and expanded into Middle East and Africa. Russian diplomats cried crocodile tears about humanitarian suffering in Syria as Moscow helped Assad commit war crimes against his own civilians. Prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Syria was the largest global displacement crisis, and Moscow used it to its own ends.

For Putin and other former KGB officers that came to dominate the Russian state, Syria isn't really about Assad or even about the future of Syria itself. This is about using Russia's position in the country to achieve larger, strategic objectives mainly, to undermine US influence.

Vladimir Putin's Russia had been waging a proxy war with the US. A case in point is Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Before using Ukraine to force a realignment of the international order, Putin used Syria towards achieving this end. And Syria remains a primary theater for this confrontation with the West.

Even as Russia continues to wage its war against Ukraine, its military industrial complex remains remarkably resilient. Moscow has no interest in ending the war. Russia's position and interests across the Middle East and in Syria should be seen for what it is: part of Russia's global confrontation with the United States.

Russia retains influence across the Middle East

Last December, the Kremlin made a quick and calculated decision to cut its losses and let Assad flee to Moscow rather than continue trying to keep him in power. Turkey had outmaneuvered Russia in Syria.

Assad nonetheless has always been a difficult partner for the Kremlin. Putin's behavior over the years suggested he has little respect for him. Last December commentators observing events in Syria focused on whether Moscow had the resources to continue supporting Assad. The more likely reason Moscow let Assad fall was that the costs of supporting him simply had outweighed the benefits.

With Assad safely in Moscow, Putin claimed Russia had reached all its goals in Syria and refused to call Assad's removal a defeat.¹ While that comment seems a transparent effort to save face, it's not entirely wrong—Russia did achieve a number of its key objectives in Syria. Rather than Putin's original statements that Moscow had gone into Syria to prevent Sunni terrorism from reaching Russia, it's clear Putin did so for Russia's own positioning in the region, since Moscow never targeted terrorists with any consistency, and in some cases indirectly helped strengthen them. Russia in 2025 has more influence in the Middle East across the DIME (diplomatic, economic, information and military spheres) than a decade ago, and that's due in large part to its strategy in Syria.

¹ "Путин заявил, что РФ достигла своих целей в Сирии," Interfax, December 19, 2024
<https://www.interfax.ru/russia/999556>

The Middle East overall has been at best ambivalent to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It did not for instance, support Western sanctions on Russia. No Middle East state rescinded any major agreement with Russia since its invasion of Ukraine. To the contrary, Russia's ties to the region have only grown, both with adversaries to the US and US partners. Russia's partnership with Iran and its proxies continues to deepen as Russia wages war on Ukraine. Russia and Iran signed a treaty on comprehensive strategic partnership, which involves among other things the transfer of dual use military technology. Moscow is also training Houthi forces in Yemen. At the same time, Russia's partnership with China and North Korea is growing.²

Saudi Arabia over the course of the war moved closer to Russia, choosing not to use its leverage to lower global oil prices. Recent indications are that Russia's relationship with Sudan's Abdel Fattah al-Burhan have deepened, allowing Russia to keep a toehold in Sudan, and move toward securing a long sought military port in the Red Sea. Libya as well has gained in importance as Russian naval bases in the Mediterranean are now held at risk by the new Syrian government with Moscow relocating many of its assets there.

Economic potential

With all eyes on the future of Russia's military bases in Syria, fewer are paying attention to Russia's economic potential and interests as a tool to achieve state objectives. Russian commercial enterprises cannot be separated from Moscow's geostrategic approach to conflict with the West. It is not about commercial interest for their own sake.

After Russia's military intervention in Syria Russian companies backed by the paramilitary group Wagner, (now rebranded as AfricaKorp) gained access to Syria's resources. That includes energy, phosphates and telecommunications.

The new Syrian government has recently inked major trade deals worth billions with Turkish and Qatari firms, while the UAE and Saudi Arabia look to bolster ties with the new Syrian government. Russia now has strong relations with all of these countries, and has improved its business ties with each in recent years. This is important context for UAE's DP World recent signing an \$800 million agreement with the new Syrian government for Tartus port development.

In fact, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its trade with the UAE and Turkey increased. Trade with UAE in particular had allowed Russia to circumvent sanctions and obtain dual-use goods, which better enabled Russia to fight its war in Ukraine.³

And to underscore how Russia is building its commerce in the region, the majority of Russian oligarchs who fled after the invasion now operate in Turkey and the UAE. In fact, the UAE is now Russia's largest Arab trading partner. As these countries bolster business ties with Syria, Russia has increasing opportunities to influence policy through those business ties that are difficult to trace.

² Garrett Campbell, The Trump Administration's Pursuit of a Sino-Russian Schism - Foreign Policy Research Institute Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 10, 2025

<https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/04/the-trump-administrations-pursuit-of-a-sino-russian-schism/>

³ "US, allies press UAE over Russia trade, sanctions," The Business Standard, May 1, 2024

<https://www.tbsnews.net/world/us-allies-press-uae-over-russia-trade-sanctions-840851>

Moreover Russia's military industrial complex remains remarkably durable. Pre-war, Russia's defense industry represented a large portion of their exports; and today Russia's entire economy remains optimized geared towards military production. A potential peace deal in Ukraine, sanctions relief, or even a lengthy cease fire could provide Russia with an opportunity to resume arms sales and security assistance to the Middle East, Africa, and select client states in the Indo-Pacific. Again, we can see that Moscow's interests lie in war, not peace. And Russia has a real opportunity to emerge from the war with Ukraine with far more to offer to potential arms buyers in the Middle East than before the war. ⁴

Russia is still in Syria. It is positioning itself as a protector of minorities.

Assad has been defeated but Russia is still in Syria. Russia is part of the UN Security Council and remains a signatory to UN Resolution 2254, the only international document which outlines a post-Assad transition roadmap for Syria. Unlike after US military withdrawals from Vietnam and Afghanistan where US embassies ceased operations, the Russian embassy remains open in Damascus. Russia had significantly downgraded its military presence in Tartus and Khmeimim but it retains a nominal presence there.

It would be easy for Moscow with its deep ties in the region and decades-long Soviet and Russian support to Syria's military infrastructure to restart military support to Damascus should it ask for it, as Syria's military equipment remains largely of Russian make. There is a pragmatic inclination for the Syrian government to retain a relationship with Russia to keep its military functional.

Even if the new Syrian government may prefer to work with other actors Russia could end up being the only power willing to provide that support. Russia could lay the groundwork for such an outcome through economic influence. Indeed, in March, as Syria's energy crisis continued to grow, Russia reportedly shipped diesel to Syria aboard a known US sanctioned tanker, the first such known direct supply of Russian diesel fuel to a Middle East country in more than ten years.⁵

Russia has much to offer to Syria, and even as the Syrian government is currently looking for alternatives to Russia for printing currency, the overall relationship has purely pragmatic gains for both sides. Syria's current de facto leader Ahmed Al-Sharaa noted "deep strategic" interests between Russia and Syria.⁶ The Kremlin had helped Assad commit war crimes in Syria. But because Russia's presence in the country had been limited, few Syrians have a full understanding of the scope of Russia's crimes in their country, and focus instead on Iran, whose involvement was far more visible and pervasive. Israel for its part has already expressed that it sees Russia's presence as a counter-balance to Turkey in Syria. Saudi Arabia may do the same.

In early March this year, former Syrian regime insurgence ambushed the transitional government's security forces on the West coast and in response, government forces killed hundreds of civilians, the majority of whom were Alawites, minority from which the Assad family originates. During these events,

⁴ Anna Borshchevskaya and Matt Tavares, "Russia's Defense Ties in the Middle East Poised to Rebound," June 2025 Jerusalem Strategic Tribune <https://jstribune.com/borshchevskaya-tavares-russias-defense-ties-in-the-middle-east/>

⁵ Noam Raydan, "Syria's Quest for Oil May Include Russian Shipments," The Washington Institute, March 5, 2025 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrias-quest-oil-may-include-russian-shipments> "Map Tracks U.S. Sanctioned Russian Oil Tanker to Syria," Newsweek, March 7, 2025 <https://www.newsweek.com/map-tracks-us-sanctioned-russian-oil-tanker-syria-2041122>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNEMrMCroBk>

Moscow acted immediately. It condemned the violence and according to Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Russia had reportedly provided shelter to over 8,000 people in Khmeimim. Thus Moscow used these events to position itself as a protector of minorities. It is a role Russia fashioned for itself in the Middle East during the Arab Spring in 2011. And in Syria, for years, Russia fashioned itself as the only actor who could talk to all sides of the conflict.⁷ Russia is again defaulting to its narrative as a protector of minorities and potential mediator; Russian narratives left uncontested by the West typically tend to take hold. In reality, rather than provide genuine protection or mediation, Moscow is likely to use its relationship with Syria's minorities as part of an effort to keep Syria weak and divided, which will make it easier to manipulate.

Policy Recommendations

The US must ensure that Russia does not re-establish control in Syria. To that end the US could utilize its influence, through a carrot and stick approach, to block Russia's ability to leverage its power.

The US can achieve this through:

- Tapping into the strength of Ukrainians in Syria and further empowering them all across the MENA region
- Continual engagement with the Syrian government
- Limiting Russia's resources through additional sanctions and tackling Russia's so-called "ghost fleet"

Here is what each of these recommendations entails.

- **In Syria, the US could help empower Ukrainians in economic and diplomatic spheres.** Both Ukrainians and Syria's current leadership have already expressed an interest in a strategic partnership. The US can help facilitate these ties. Until recently, Russia was the largest provider of wheat to Syria — grain that Russia largely stole from Ukraine. With Assad's fall, Russia's supplies have been suspended. To be sure, with the recent easing of European sanctions, wheat from Europe has just begun to arrive to Syria from Europe. Still, the US could help make sure that Ukrainian wheat reaches Syria and work with European partners to do so Ukraine could expand other commercial interests in Syria, like telecommunications, shutting out Russia. If Ukraine also expands diplomatic influence in Syria along with a commercial one it can also build cultural ties to further strengthen its position in the country and help counter Russian narratives.
- **Across the MENA region outside of Syria, US can facilitate a push for Ukrainian technology, arms trade, and information/narrative projection.** Over the course of Russia's invasion in the last three years, the Ukrainian military has integrated Western and post-Soviet military systems, made impressive innovations in the arms industry and has significant resident expertise in modernizing and maintaining Russian equipment. There is now significant opportunity to partner with Ukraine to help transform and modernize Middle East states that have been traditional Russian client states. The US can help facilitate a push for Ukrainian technology and other advantages in the Middle East to prevent further Russian encroachment on traditional

⁷ Anna Borshchevskaya and Andrew J. Tabler, *Triangular Diplomacy: Unpacking Russia's Syria Strategy* The Washington Institute, July 7, 2021. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/triangular-diplomacy-unpacking-russias-syria-strategy>

U.S. and Western partners in the Middle East. Such an effort would also prevent further Russian profit-making for its arms industry. Furthermore, the US can help Ukrainians better project their narrative across the Middle East to counter Russia in the information space. The Middle East needs to hear and understand Ukraine's side of the story when it comes to Russia.

- **Engagement with Syrian government and limiting Russia's resources** As the US and Europe ease, or suspend economic sanctions against Syria, they must balance the need to help Syria recover with the need to block Russia's ability to profit from this recovery and use its economic tools to gain control. This should include continual engagement with the Syrian government and demonstration that if this government meets certain guideposts, it will be able to unlock aspects of a normalized relationship, which they desire. This could also include additional sanctions against Russia and entities that work with Russia. The United States could also see how it can work constructively with Turkey to block Russia's influence such as tackling Russia's so-called "ghost fleet" of illicit oil tankers by cracking down on the fleet's legal violations and ecological threats, especially given the massive oil spill in the Sea of Azov in December 2024.