

Research Briefing

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Syria after Assad: Consequences and interim authorities 2025



Summary

- 1 Fall of Assad, December 2024
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Summary

In December 2024, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that President Bashar al-Assad, who had governed Syria since 2000, had resigned and [offered asylum in Russia](#). Russian media say [he is now in the country](#).

Since Assad's resignation, an interim government has been declared in Syria, led by the leader of the former [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS) group, Ahmed al-Sharaa, which also published a new constitutional declaration in March 2025. HTS was one of the [opposition groups](#), including the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), involved in the offensive against Assad forces which culminated in the capture of the capital, Damascus, in December 2024.

This research briefing describes the key actors in Syria; continuing violence and human rights concerns; the status of Syria's chemical weapons; the significance of Assad's fall to his allies Iran and Hezbollah and the attempts of Russia to retain its Syrian bases; Israeli actions in the Golan Heights; actions by the interim government; and the strength of Islamic State/Daesh. It also sets out UK, US and EU actions and statements, including on sanctions.

The Commons Library research briefing, [Syrian civil war: timeline, UK aid and statistics](#), has a timeline of events in Syria from 2011 to 2025, and information on the humanitarian situation, UK aid, and further resources on the conflict.

Who are the main domestic actors in Syria?

Syria [continues to have several armed groups](#), though the declared Syrian Government reports that [most have now been unified under a single command](#). Those previously members of HTS constitute the dominant group, controlling most territory, the interim presidency and ministries such as defence and the interior.

While it has now dissolved, HTS remains a [proscribed as a terrorist organisation](#) by the UN, EU, UK and others. The United States [removed its designation as a foreign terrorist organisation in July 2025](#).

Other groups are the [Turkish-backed Syrian National Army](#) (SNA) and the Kurdish-led [Syrian Democratic Forces](#) (SDF), backed by the United States. The SDF has been critical of the post-Assad government and constitutional declaration. While [it agreed in March to become part of the new administration, talks on the timing and conditions remain](#). The [SNA has agreed to integrate with the state armed forces](#). During the civil war, HTS, SNA and SDF were all accused of [human rights violations](#).

Humanitarian and human rights situation

Humanitarian need remains high, with [an estimated 16.5 million people in need](#) in 2025. Ongoing violence between the SDF and SNA in north east Syria in early 2025 led to the [displacement of around 1.1 million people](#) and [civilian and combatant casualties](#). There has also been over a decade of [extensive damage to Syrian infrastructure](#), including schools and hospitals. There are around [4.5 million Syrian refugees in the region](#), which [neighbouring states are seeking the return of](#). The [World Bank](#) and [International Monetary Fund](#) have begun to re-engage with Syria in 2025, partly reflecting the lifting of sanctions by the United States and others (see below).

There have also been [incidents of violence against minority groups in Syria](#), including Alawites (associated with the Assad government, [he being an Alawite](#)), [Druze](#) (which [Israel has pledged to support](#)) and [Christians](#). Large numbers of casualties were reported in [Alawite coastal areas of Syria in March](#) and in [Druze areas of southern Syria in July](#). A report commissioned by the interim government on the March violence said that [the origins lay with “remnants” of pro-Assad forces](#) but some groups who had committed violations were members of the interim armed forces, acting with “no official authority”. The UN Security Council issued a collective presidential statement [“strongly condemning” the widespread violence](#) against Alawites.

What is the status of the new government?

In December 2024 HTS, which controls the largest part of Syria and the capital, declared the [establishment of a transitional government](#) and in January the [appointment of its leader Ahmed al-Sharaa as interim president](#).

The HTS-declared interim government issued an [amnesty for those conscripted](#) into Assad government forces, [dissolved parliament](#) (dominated by Assad’s Baathist party), said it wanted to [disarm and dissolve all non-state armed groups](#), and that it would [protect religious and other minorities](#).

The [interim government was replaced](#) by Sharaa in March, and a [temporary constitution declared](#). HTS officials have the most powerful cabinet posts, but it does include one Alawite, Druze, Christian and Kurdish member (though not from the SDF). The [SDF criticised the constitution](#) as “entrenching central governance”. In response, Sharaa said he [opposes greater decentralisation](#).

The constitution says there should be only a single armed force. Sharaa is to directly appoint one-third of the interim legislative assembly and committees to choose the remaining members. [No elections are planned for four to five years](#), with Sharaa citing the lack of a census and number of refugees abroad.

The [UK has welcomed the new government](#) and its commitment to hold elections but wants greater protection for minorities and accountability for human rights abuses under the Assad regime.

What are international attitudes towards HTS?

HTS has [its origins in Al-Qaeda](#) although it says it broke from the group in 2016. Its leader [Abu Mohammed al-Jolani](#) (whose real name is Ahmed al-Sharaa) participated in the insurgency against US and UK coalition forces in Iraq in the 2000s.

The [UN Security Council](#), [UK](#), [US](#), [EU](#), and others have all designated it a terrorist group. All said they will [judge HTS by its actions](#), not words and [they want it to protect civilians](#), minority groups and implement a peaceful transition. In December 2024 Prime Minister Keir Starmer said [it was “too early” to reconsider the proscription of HTS](#) as a terrorist organisation in the UK. However, in July 2025 [the US removed the foreign terrorist designation from HTS](#), stating it had “commit[ed] to combat terrorism in all its forms”.

The [UK](#), [EU](#) and [US](#) have also all progressively removed sanctions against Syria in 2025, though retaining those on military goods, chemical weapons, and individuals linked to the Assad government. The Syrian central bank and energy companies are among those who have had sanctions removed. This is expected to [ease investment by Arab Gulf states in Syrian reconstruction](#).

The US has previously said [the removal of sanctions was conditional](#) on the new authorities making commitments to address terrorism and making progress on normalising ties with Israel.

In July 2025, [the UK formally established diplomatic ties](#) with a visit by the Foreign Secretary. [European](#) and [American](#) officials have also engaged.

What role do Turkey and Israel have?

While Assad has fallen, some conflict and military activity is ongoing. In addition to airstrikes against Islamic State/Daesh (see below), Israel and Turkey are two external actors continuing to be militarily active in Syria:

- The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) have moved from the [occupied Golan Heights](#) to occupy a UN buffer zone and also [operate in southern Syria](#). The Heights are disputed between Israel and Syria. The [UK](#) and a 1981 [UN Security Council resolution](#) call for Israeli withdrawal from them. The [US considers the Heights to be Israeli territory](#).

Israel said its actions in 2024 were a [temporary move to pre-empt possible attacks](#) and reflected the withdrawal of Assad government forces from the zone. In 2025, [Israel said it would remain “indefinitely” at](#)

[Mount Hermon](#) to ensure security for Israel and the Golan and wants the [demilitarisation of parts of southern Syria](#) with no HTS presence. The IDF also [carried out many strikes against chemical weapons and military facilities](#) in Syria in 2024 and [2025](#), and also says it has acted [to protect the Druze minority](#) in the country. Israel has previously [attacked Iranian and Hezbollah forces in Syria since 2013](#). It has also [announced an expansion of settlements](#) in the occupied Golan Heights.

- Turkey continues to back the SNA, who launched operations against the SDF in November ([Turkey has been launching such attacks since 2016](#)). Turkey argues the SDF has links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), who have been waging [an insurgency in Turkey](#) and are considered a terrorist organisation by the EU and UK, among others. Turkey has said it [expects the PKK to be disarmed](#). In March [the PKK leader said the group should lay down its arms](#). The SDF say [this does not apply to them](#).

HTS has also suggested SDF areas [should “gain freedom”](#) but [differentiated between Kurdish groups and the PKK](#). The UK and US say [the SDF’s role in combatting Islamic State should be protected](#) and [acknowledge Turkish concerns](#) on the PKK.

What does Assad’s fall mean for the region?

Analysts judge Turkey, which backed the opposition, as the [most likely beneficiary of Assad’s fall](#). Turkey had been in failed negotiations with Assad to normalise relations in 2023 and 2024, with the [aim of returning Syrian refugees](#) from Turkey. [Turkey hosts around 2.9 million Syrian refugees](#). Turkey has offered to [help train the armed forces of Syria if requested](#).

To Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, the fall of Assad marks [a strategic defeat for Iran’s “axis of resistance”](#). This is a [network of armed and terrorist groups](#) Iran has developed, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza and the Houthis in Yemen, to threaten Israel and others. The loss of Assad cuts a significant land route from Iran to Lebanon. It follows the weakening of Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran as military forces in their [conflicts with Israel](#).

Russia was also a significant backer of President Assad, and its [military bases in Syria](#) were thought to have allowed it to project power across the Mediterranean and the Middle East and North Africa. The HTS interim defence minister says [HTS is open to Russia retaining some bases](#), if it benefits Syria. [Russian withdrawal from some areas](#) has been reported in the meantime.

The consequences for Israel are also uncertain. There was no direct conflict between Bashar al-Assad and Israel, but the two countries have never signed a peace agreement and [fought significant conflicts from 1948 onwards](#). The Israeli government says it [considers threats from Syria to have “intensified”](#) and is [reportedly seeking a Syria with a weak central government](#). However, the US also hopes [Syria and Israel may establish diplomatic relations](#). The

status of the Golan Heights is one challenge to this recognition, but [some analysts judge that a security agreement may be achievable](#).

How strong is Islamic State/Daesh?

[Islamic State lost its last territory in Syria in 2019](#). However, the US warned the group has claimed [double the number of attacks in Syria](#) in 2024 as in 2023 and [may seek to take advantage of Assad's fall](#).

The [US has 2,000 troops in Syria](#), most of which are based in the north east alongside the SDF. The [Trump administration says it will half their number](#). The SDF holds [several thousand Islamic State fighters in detention](#), as well as hosting camps of around 40,000 family and other members. The US has been [seeking their repatriation](#), citing risks of [radicalisation in camps and increased Islamic State activity](#).

1 Fall of Assad, December 2024

In December 2024 Bashar al-Assad resigned the Syrian presidency, thirteen years since the first protests began in 2011 against his rule. This ended over 50 years of rule by the Assad family in Syria, who had taken power in 1971 under Bashar's father, Hafez al-Assad.¹

1.1 Background: The Syrian civil war, from 2011²

Timeline and statistics on the conflict

The Commons Library research briefing [Syrian civil war: timeline, UK aid and statistics](#), December 2024, includes a timeline of events from 2011 to 2024.

Estimates vary, but between 350,000 and 606,000 people are estimated to have been killed in Syrian civil war since 2011. [The Assad government also deployed chemical weapons](#), and [Islamic State/Daesh](#) rose to capture significant territory in both Iraq and Syria before losing its final Syrian territory in 2019.

Six foreign actors were involved militarily: Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia in support of Assad; the US against Islamic State and in support of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces; Turkey in support of the Syrian National Army (both Turkey and the US acting in opposition to Assad); and Israel, targeting Hezbollah and Iranian forces.

In addition, the UK and France conducted airstrikes in 2019 against chemical weapons facilities used by Assad forces. In 2013, the House of Commons had voted against military action in response to the alleged use of chemical weapons.

The military intervention of Russia in 2015 was widely seen as a turning point, allowing Assad forces to expel the opposition from Syria's second city, Aleppo. Most observers increasingly considered that Assad would hold onto power and Syria would become [one of many "frozen conflicts" worldwide](#), with little change in military control. By 2020, Assad forces held around 60%

¹ Brookings Institute, [Assessing a half-century of Assadist rule](#), December 2020; Chatham House, [Syria's transactional state](#), April 2024

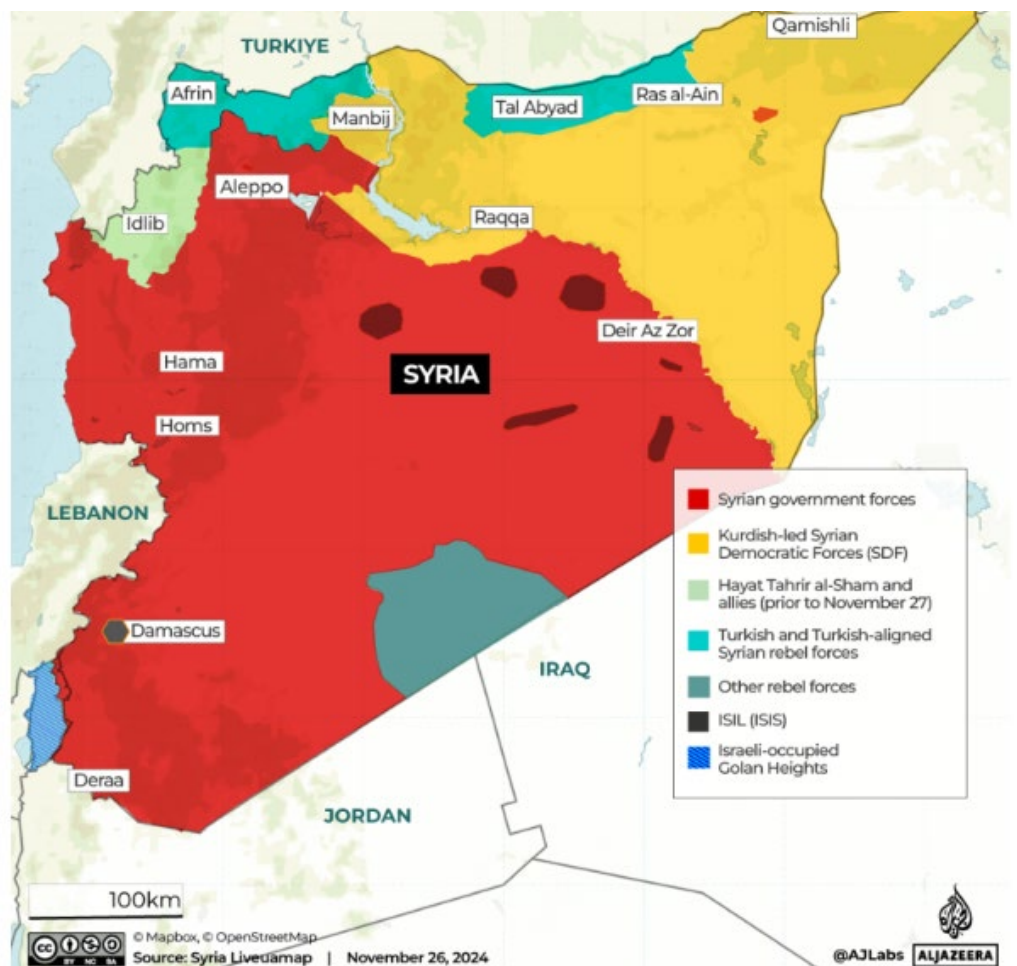
² This section sourced from Commons Library research briefing, [Syrian civil war: timeline, UK aid and statistics](#). See also [Syria back in the Arab League](#), for information on the six foreign actors.

to 70% of Syrian territory and, despite continued violence and fighting, there was little significant change in zones of control again until 2024.

International attitudes to Assad also changed, and regional powers increasingly reached out to his government in the 2020s when he appeared likely to remain in power. Having been suspended from the [Arab League](#) in 2012 (the league consists of Arab states in the Middle East and North Africa), Assad was invited to rejoin in 2023. The significance of this was limited by continuing US sanctions under the [Caesar Syria Protection Act](#), which sanctions Assad government officials, the economy (including the oil and construction sectors) and non-Syrian entities that did business with Assad.³ The legislation remains in place until 2029, unless amended (see section 5.4).⁴

Zones of control in Syria, November 2024

The map below shows regional control in Syria before Assad’s flight.



³ See Commons Library research briefing, [Assad back in the Arab League](#), June 2023, section 3.4

⁴ US Department of State, [Press briefing](#), 9 December 2024; Reuters, [US, UAE discussed lifting sanctions](#), 2 December 2024

Note: Islamic State/Daesh (ISIS) has not held territory since 2019. Source: [The opposition's battles shown in 11 maps](#), Al-Jazeera, 8 December 2024. Image cropped. [CC-BY-SA](#).

1.2

Fall of Assad, November/December 2024

The collapse of the Assad government and military took place rapidly from 27 November to 8 December 2024.

His major allies are judged to be distracted or weakened by other conflicts; with Israel (in respect of Hezbollah and Iran in 2023/24) or with Ukraine (Russia, from 2022).⁵

Loyalty to the Assad government was also likely undermined by the continued weakness of the Syrian economy, which has experienced high inflation, including for food and household gas, the reduction in government subsidies for essential goods, and failure to lead significant reconstruction efforts to repair damage from the civil war (sanctions are cited as one reason for this).⁶

There had also been recurrent protests in southern Syria since 2023.⁷

Timeline of opposition offensive

On 27 November 2024 Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, see section 2.3), one of the largest armed opposition groups in Syria (proscribed as a terrorist group by the UK Government), began an offensive from Idlib, in north-western Syria.⁸ A range of foreign fighters also claimed to participate alongside HTS.⁹

On 29 November HTS began to enter Aleppo, Syria's second city, last held by opposition groups in 2016. Russian and Assad government forces responded with airstrikes and shelling in an attempt to stop the advance.

The Syrian National Army (SNA, see section 2.4), backed by Turkey and centred in northern Syria, also launched attacks. Some its attacks were focused on the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, see section 2.4), a Kurdish-led coalition group, elements of which the Turkish Government considers to be linked to terrorist groups active in Turkey.¹⁰

On 5 December, HTS-led groups captured Hama, Syria's fourth largest city, around 125 miles north of Damascus.

⁵ Engelsberg Ideas, [The Syrian war never really ended](#), 2 December 2024

⁶ Middle East Institute, [Syria's economic freefall continues despite Arab League return](#), 16 August 2023

⁷ Washington Institute, [A year of Suwayda protests](#), 16 August 2024

⁸ Section 1.2 from AP, [How it happened: Two seismic weeks that toppled Syrian government](#), 8 December 2024 Washington Post, [A timeline of the stunning offensive \[...\]](#), 8 December 2024; Reuters, [US-backed Syrian Kurds seize eastern city](#), 6 December 2024

⁹ BBC Monitoring, [Foreign fighters and Syrian factions fighting alongside HTS](#), 24 December 2024

¹⁰ FT, [Rebel groups attack Kurdish-held areas](#), 2 December 2024; [Kurds' dream of self-rule under threat as Turkish-backed forces sweep across Syria](#), 12 December 2024

On 6 December, the SDF said it captured the main crossing point with Iraq, near Deir city.

On 7 December, HTS-led groups captured Homs, the third-largest city, 100 miles north of Damascus. Homs is on a strategic route, linking the capital Damascus with Russian military port facilities and airfields in Latakia and Tartous on the Mediterranean coast.

On the same day, local opposition forces in southern Syria captured Daraa, south of Damascus.

On 8 December, opposition forces entered the suburbs of Damascus. Syrian state media reported Assad left office. The HTS leader moved to the capital.

The number of casualties and civilians displaced from the offensive is uncertain. One estimate published by the UK-based Syrian Observatory of Human Rights (SOHR) was that over 571 people were killed, including combatants and civilians (to 3 December).¹¹ On 12 December the UN estimated that 1.1 million people had been displaced since 27 November due to conflict.¹²

Further reading on Assad's collapse

- Carnegie Endowment, [Why did Iran allow Bashar al-Assad's downfall?](#), 11 December 2024
- Carnegie Endowment, [Anatomy of a military fall](#), 10 December 2024
- Financial Times, [Why Bashar al-Assad's regime crumbled](#), 9 December 2024
- France 24, [Why the Assad collapsed in Syria](#), 8 December 2024
- Foreign Policy, [How the world got Syria wrong](#), 8 December 2024
- Foreign Policy, [Why Assad's regime is collapsing so quickly](#), 5 December 2024

¹¹ Syrian Observatory on Human Rights, "[Deterrence of aggression](#)" calculation, 3 December 2024

¹² UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [Syria-flash update no 5](#), 12 December 2024

1.3

What is the status of Syria's chemical weapons?

The government of Assad confirmed it had chemical weapons in 2012. There were reported and alleged chemical weapons attacks by Assad forces against the opposition in each year between 2013 and 2019. Some attacks were also perpetrated by non-Assad forces. The [Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons](#) (OPCW), which is the international body responsible for overseeing global efforts to eliminate chemical weapons, has confirmed the use of chemical weapons in several reports.¹³

In 2013, Syria joined the OPCW. This brought with it obligations to declare and remove all chemical weapons. The UN Security Council also passed a resolution demanding their destruction.¹⁴ In 2024, the OPCW continued to question whether they had been completely destroyed.¹⁵

On 5 December 2024 the UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Izumi Nakamitsu, said that Syria's destruction or conversion of "large quantities of chemical warfare agencies and munitions" could not be fully verified. Russia accused the representative of attempting to "taint Syria and its allies" and said Assad had been acting in "good faith".¹⁶

The UK Government said in the same meeting in December 2024 that "thousands of munitions and hundreds of tonnes of chemical agent remained unaccounted for" and these weapons represented an "unacceptable risk". It also said the perpetrators of the chemical attacks had to be held to account.¹⁷ On 7 December, before Assad fell, the UK Government said the use of chemical weapons by Assad would be a "red line".¹⁸

The fall of Assad has led to a fear of proliferation of the weapons once held by his government.¹⁹ Israel said in December it launched some attacks targeting suspected chemical weapons facilities (see below, section 3.4). The US and OPCW say they are working with partners to identify and remove chemical and biological weapons.²⁰

In March, the Syrian interim Foreign Minister addressed the OPCW, stating that the interim authorities are committed to "destroy[ing] any remains of the

¹³ Arms Control Association, [Timeline of Syrian chemical weapons activity, 2012 to 2022](#), October 2023; Independent International Commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, [14th report of the Commission of Inquiry, A/HRC/36/55](#), 6 September 2017, para 67

¹⁴ [UN Security Council Resolution 2118 \(2013\)](#).

¹⁵ OPCW, [Syria and the OPCW](#), accessed 11 December 2024

¹⁶ UN, [Syria's declaration on chemical weapons programme "cannot be considered accurate" \[...\]](#), 4 December 2024

¹⁷ FCDO, [No matter how long it takes \[...\]](#), 5 December 2024

¹⁸ BBC News, [UK would take appropriate action if Syria crosses "red line" \[...\]](#), 7 December 2024

¹⁹ Reuters, [Assad's fall brings "the moment" to rid Syria of chemical weapons](#), 9 December 2024; New York Times, [Syria's president has stocks of chemical weapons \[...\]](#), 9 December 2024

²⁰ The Times, [US aims to secure or destroy Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles](#), 9 December 2024

chemical weapons programme developed under the Assad regime”.²¹ The OPCW Director General also met the interim president in Damascus in February.²²

An OPCW delegation was deployed to Syria in March and April 2025, visiting around a dozen sites. Izumi Nakamitsu, UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, said in June that “meaningful progress” had been made to verify the extent of the suspected arsenal but “challenges remain” in identifying potentially undeclared chemical munitions and agents that were established under the Assad government.²³

The UK has announced over £2 million for OPCW’s work in Syria,²⁴ and reiterated that HTS must ensure all Syria’s chemical weapons are destroyed.²⁵

1.4

What is the humanitarian situation?

The Commons Library research briefing, [The Syrian civil war: timeline, UK aid and statistics](#), December 2024 sets out the humanitarian situation in Syria and for Syrian refugees in the wider region. The briefing also sets out UK aid commitments to Syria for 2024/25 and past years.

Levels of need

For 2025, the UN estimates there are 16.5 million people in need, out of a total population of 23.7 million. Most of those to be targeted for assistance are in areas previously held by opposition groups in Idlib and Aleppo provinces. An estimated 14.5 million people are food insecure and 14.4 million need water, sanitation and hygiene services.²⁶

Damage due to the conflict is extensive—between US\$8.7 billion and US\$11.4 billion for 14 assessed cities in 2022, according to the World Bank. Syria’s gross domestic product is estimated to have shrunk by between 54% and 85% since 2010. The cost of living for a family of five is also estimated to have risen up to seven-fold from 2022 to 2025. Inflation, food and fuel shortages, unemployment, and sanctions are among the challenges facing Syria.²⁷

The UN Development Programme’s [The impact of the conflict in Syria](#), February 2025, provides an updated analysis on Syria’s challenges.

²¹ OPCW, [Syria’s caretaker Foreign Minister addresses OPCW’s executive council](#), 5 March 2025

²² OPCW, [OPCW Director General visits Syria](#), 8 February 2025

²³ UN, [UN hails new era of cooperation over Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile](#), 5 June 2025

²⁴ FCDO, [UK announces £50 million new support](#), 15 December 2024; FCDO, [UK re-establishes diplomatic relations with Syria in first ministerial visit for 14 years](#), 5 July 2025

²⁵ PQ 20901 [[Syria: chemical weapons](#)], 8 January 2025

²⁶ UNOCHA, [Syria: humanitarian response priorities](#), January 2025

²⁷ BBC Monitoring, [What are the economic challenges facing Syria?](#), January 2025; Reuters, [Syria’s economy: the devastation impact of war and sanctions](#), 6 January 2025

Access to aid and financing

At an EU-hosted conference in March 2025, around \$6.5 billion was raised in grants and loans for Syria. This compared to \$8.1 billion in 2024. The US did not announce aid.²⁸ The UN reports its work in Syria is underfunded in 2025.²⁹

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has also appointed a mission to Syria, the first in 14 years. The IMF, which provides loans and assistance to states, says it will support reconstruction and the reintegration of Syria into the global economy.³⁰

Qatar and Saudi Arabia have also repaid Syria's debts to the World Bank (around \$15 million). As a result, the World Bank said that it would reinstate Syria's eligibility for new funding, if it can meet its requirements.³¹ In June 2025, the Bank announced its first tranche of funding to Syria for 14 years: US\$146 million for the electricity sector.³²

Changes to US aid in 2025 and UK aid plans

The US has been one of the largest bilateral aid donors to the humanitarian response in Syria (alongside Turkey, Germany, the UK and EU institutions).³³

In January 2025, all US State Department and USAID programmes in Syria were paused in line with [the Trump administration's review into US aid spending](#). As of April 2025, 8 of the 11 awards managed in Syria focused on stabilisation had ended. In addition, the administration ended its funding for the Syrian White Helmets (an organisation that provides first-responders to emergency situations).³⁴

Further reductions in aid budgets from major donors are also planned by France, Germany and the UK in 2025, in addition to the US. It is uncertain how this will affect Syria specifically. The UK Government has made two pledges in 2025:

- March 2025: up to £160 million for humanitarian aid for Syria and the wider region in 2025
- July 2025: an additional £94.5 million package of aid for humanitarian purposes, education and supporting Syrian refugees hosted in regional countries.

²⁸ AP, [Syria donors pledge \\$6.5 billion in aid hoping to encourage its new leader \[...\]](#), 17 March 2025

²⁹ UNOCHA, [At Security Council, UN Deputy Relief Chief calls for greater support \[...\]](#), 25 April 2025

³⁰ Reuters, [IMF to help rebuild institutions, re-enter world economy \[...\]](#), 24 April 2025

³¹ World Bank, [Syria's arrears to the World Bank group cleared](#), 16 May 2025

³² World Bank, [Syria: World Bank US\\$146 million grant to improve electricity \[...\]](#), 25 June 2025

³³ OECD, [Official development assistance at a glance: Syria](#), updated 16 April 2025

³⁴ [Inspector General report on Operation Inherent Resolve, 1 January to 31 March 2025](#) (PDF), April 2025, pp14-16; Atlantic Council, [The foreign aid freeze poses risks to US interests in Syria](#), 31 January 2025

UK aid will be delivered “through trusted UN and NGO partners”.³⁵

The FCDO’s annual report and accounts state that FCDO bilateral aid to Syria in 2024/25 totalled £151 million and it has been allocated £97 million for 2025/26. These figures do not include spending through multilateral agencies or by other UK Government departments.³⁶

1.5

What is the status of Syrian refugees?

In November 2024, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) recorded 4.8 million Syrian refugees and asylum seekers registered in the region, with the largest numbers in Turkey (2.9 million) and Lebanon (768,000).³⁷ The governments of both Turkey and Lebanon have sought the return of Syria refugees, citing economic and other pressures. They reiterated these positions in 2024 and 2025.³⁸ Many Syrian refugees in past surveys have expressed a desire to return, once conditions change.³⁹

There are also many Syrian refugees in Europe. Germany hosts the most, at around 1 million, followed by Austria, at 95,000. Since the fall of Assad, many European countries, including Germany, Austria, France, Greece, and the UK have said they will pause processing asylum applications while they assess the situation. There are around 30,000 Syrian refugees in the UK.⁴⁰

As of May 2025, UNHCR estimate that 501,000 Syrians have returned from abroad since December 2024. It estimates that 1.5 million Syrians may return by the end of 2025.⁴¹

Within Syria, seven million people are displaced. This includes 3.4 million in the northwest, which has seen fighting between the SDF and SNA. UNHCR estimate that 600,000 may seek to return home between March and September 2025, where they will need “housing, jobs, schools, hospitals, electricity and clean water”.⁴²

³⁵ FCDO, [UK pledges up to £160 million to support Syria’s recovery and stability](#), 17 March 2025; FCDO, [UK re-establishes diplomatic relations with Syria in first ministerial visit for 14 years](#), 5 July 2025;; PQ 38983 [[Syria: development aid](#)], 26 March 2025

³⁶ FCDO, [Annual report and accounts 2024–2025](#), July 2025, p268

³⁷ UNHCR, [Response to displacement from Lebanon to Syria](#), 31 October 2024

³⁸ Reuters, [Turkey to work for return of Syrian migrants to return home safely \[...\]](#), 9 December 2024; AP News, [Syria refugees don’t want to return, officials in Lebanon and Syria see exodus as opportunity](#), 9 November 2024; AA, [Lebanese, Syrian leader discuss return of refugees](#), 11 January 2025

³⁹ Center for Strategic and International Studies, [Don’t rush Syrian refugees return](#), 11 December 2024

⁴⁰ BBC News [Syrian asylum seekers in limbo \[...\]](#), 9 December 2024

⁴¹ UNHCR, [Data and statistics: global trends](#), 12 June 2025; UNHCR, [Regional flash update 27](#), 16 May 2025

⁴² UN, [Up to one million people plan to return home in desperation](#), 7 March 2025

In July 2025, UNHCR began a voluntary return programme for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, in coordination with the Lebanese government. Returnees will be provided with a one-time cash grant of \$100 per family member in Lebanon and \$400 in Syria. The Lebanese government plans for between 200,000 and 400,000 returnees in 2025, from a total refugee population of 1.5 million.⁴³

Syrian asylum requests in the UK

On 11 December 2024, the Home Secretary Yvette Cooper told the Commons that the UK would not currently make asylum decisions from Syria:

many claims for asylum relate to the Assad regime, which is clearly not in place now. It would therefore not be appropriate to grant asylum decisions on those cases in the current circumstances. We need to monitor the evolving situation so that we can get new country guidance in place and take those decisions, but we will do that in a sensible and serious way, which is about getting the asylum and immigration systems back under control.⁴⁴

In July 2025, the Home Office announced a change in its position, and that it would allow decision-making on applications to resume. It said that individuals had still been able to register applications during the pause but now there is “sufficient information to make accurate and well-evidenced determinations” on the applications.⁴⁵ The BBC reports around 7,000 applications were awaiting decisions during the pause.⁴⁶

UNHCR has said “the suspension of processing of asylum applications from Syrians is acceptable” in the context of conditions of December 2024, “as long as people can apply for asylum” and lodge asylum applications. The agency said Syrian refugees must be allowed to make voluntary decisions on whether to return.⁴⁷

Further reading on Syrian refugees

- UK Visas and Immigration, [Country notes: Syria](#), July 2025. Updated assessments of the situation in Syria
- Atlantic Council, [Complexities persist for Syrian returnees](#), 20 June 2025
- Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, [The long horizon of returns to Syria](#), April 2025
- Foreign Affairs, [Syria’s biggest problem: how to resettle millions of refugees and displaced people](#), February 2025

⁴³ Reuters, [Syrian returns from Lebanon to start under UN-backed plan](#), 9 July 2025; UNHCR, [Voluntary returns to Syria](#)

⁴⁴ HC Deb, [11 December 2024](#), c903

⁴⁵ HCWS816 [[Decision making for Syrian nationals with outstanding protection claims](#)], 14 July 2025

⁴⁶ BBC News, [UK to start processing Syrian asylum claims again](#), 14 July 2025

⁴⁷ UNHCR, [Comment on asylum processing suspension and returns](#), 10 December 2024

- RAND, [After the Assad regime's fall, will Syrian refugees return?](#), February 2025
- Foreign Policy, [Don't rush to send Syrians back](#), January 2025
- European Council on Foreign Relations, [How European leaders can support sustainable refugee returns in a post-Assad Syria](#), December 2024

2 Leading domestic actors in Syria

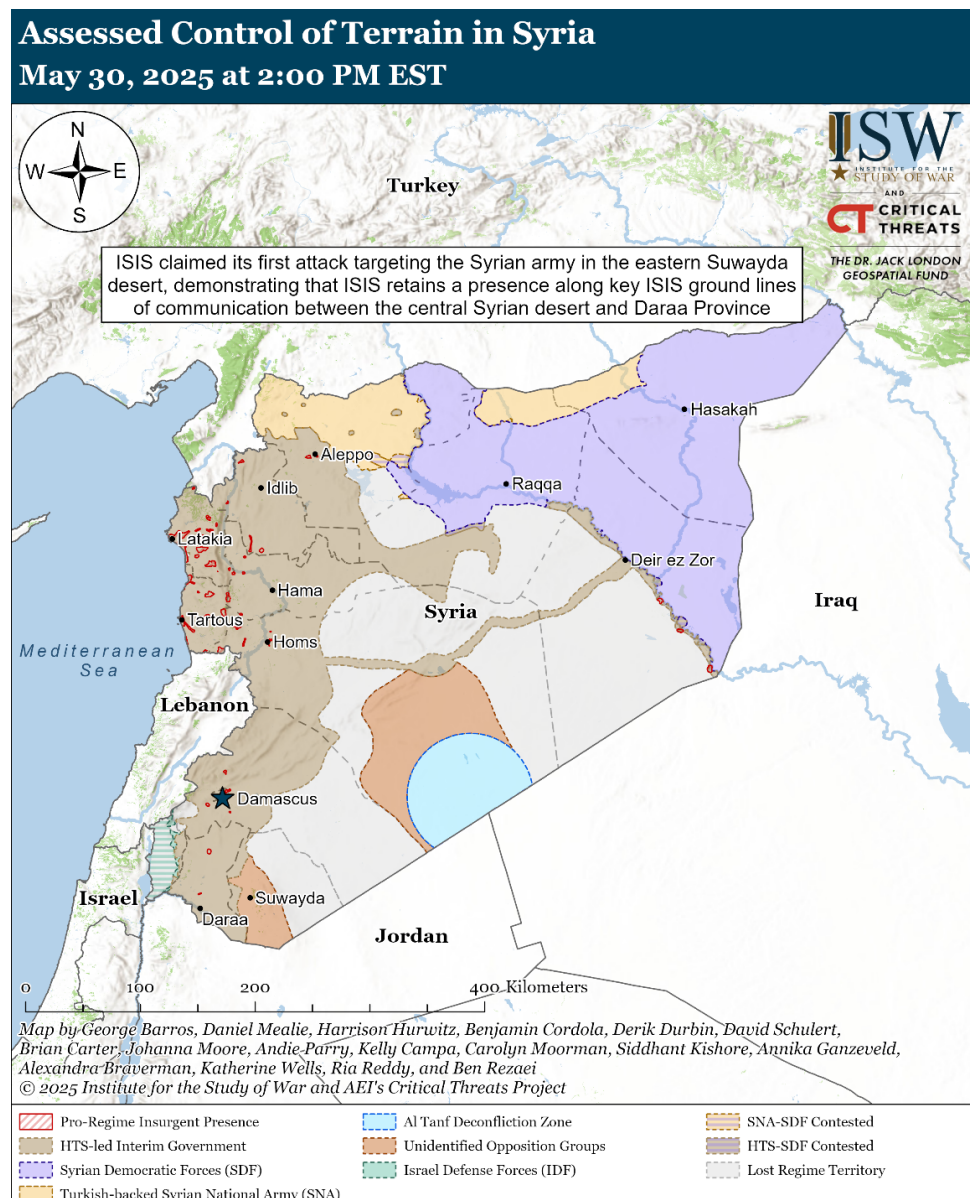
This section looks at the key domestic actors in Syria, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and violence against minority groups such as the Alawites. Section 4 describes the political settlement and constitution of early 2025.

2.1 Areas of control and ongoing tensions

While Assad has fallen, the Syrian opposition is not united, and the country continues to be divided between different armed groups. HTS want them all to dissolve and become part of a single national force. Talks to this effect are in progress. As of May 2025, there are six main areas of control:

- Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which led the November/December offensive and now lead the declared government. They now appear to control the largest area of territory. The group says it has dissolved itself. Since Assad's fall, HTS members have taken control of some areas previously held by Kurdish groups.
- The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), focused in the north-east, where US troops also have a presence.
- The Syrian National Army (SNA), not the army of Assad but rather a coalition of Turkish-backed groups in the north of Syria. After Assad's fall, they continued to fight with the SDF.
- Unidentified opposition groups in areas south of Damascus.
- Israel Defence Forces in the south, centred on the occupied Golan Heights but active in southern Syria (see section 3.4 for Israeli action).
- Small areas of Russian presence, near to its naval and air bases (see section 3.3 for Russian action)

The below map shows areas of control, as of 30 May 2025.



Source: Institute for the Study of War, [Iran update](#), 30 May 2025. © Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project. See updated maps on the [Institute's website](#).

The period since Assad fled also saw the continuation or establishment of some armed groups loyal to Assad and hostile to HTS control. These include in areas with minority groups such as Alawites (see section 2.2).⁴⁸

Conflict monitor, the US-based Institute for the Study of War, reports that pro-Assad groups have been developing in western Syria since early 2025 and warned that the March violence may drive further opposition and

⁴⁸ BBC Monitoring, [Syria imposes curfews in Homs, Latakia, Tartus amid unrest](#), 25 December 2024; Asharq al-Awsat, [Nearly 300 arrested in crackdown on Assad loyalists](#), 30 December 2024; Al-Monitor, [Assad militias clash with Syria security in Latakia](#), 14 January 2025

organisation in Alawite areas. Some Iran-backed opposition groups have also announced their establishment in 2025.⁴⁹

There has also been some conflict on the Syria-Lebanon border, with HTS saying it was combatting drug and weapons smuggling. In February the Lebanese army deployed to the area and local tribal groups withdrew, bringing an end to the conflict.⁵⁰ Iraqi authorities are also concerned about the potential for instability to allow the strengthening of Islamic State/Daesh or for armed groups on both sides of the border to become involved in violence (communities in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon share some tribal and other links).⁵¹ The most extensive armed fighting, however, has been between the SDA and SDF in the initial period after Assad fled. Islamic State/Daesh remains active but holds no territory (see section 6).

2.2

Violence against minority groups in 2025

Minority ethnic and religious groups in Syria

There are many minority ethnic and religious groups in Syria:

Demographics

- **Minority ethnic groups:** Kurds constitute around 10% to 15% of the population (2 million). They are mostly concentrated in the north and northeast.
- **Religious demographics:** Sunni Muslims constitute 75% of the population, with Alawite Muslims (of which Assad was an adherent) 12%, other Muslims 2%, Christian denominations around 10% and Druze 3% to 4%.⁵²

Since Assad fled, monitors have raised concerns for Alawites, Druze, Christians and Shia Muslims and reported the establishment of armed groups seeking to target them. HTS says it will arrest those that incite sectarianism.⁵³

The UK Government has said it expects the interim Syrian authorities to uphold human rights and the rights of minority groups. It has raised the issue directly with the interim foreign minister and via the [UK Special Envoy for Syria](#).⁵⁴

⁴⁹ ISW, [The West must offer Syria's interim government tightly conditioned aid](#), 7 March 2025; BBC Monitoring, [Ex-Assad officer declares formation of anti-government force](#), 7 March 2025; Al Monitor, [New Iran-backed group wants to fight plans to "divide" Syria](#), 5 March 2025

⁵⁰ BBC Monitoring, [Islamists cheer Syrian security 'purification' of Lebanese border](#), 10 February 2025

⁵¹ BBC Monitoring, [Explainer: How Suweida unrest sparks security concerns in Iraq](#), 22 July 2025

⁵² Minority Rights Group, [Syria](#), updated June 2019

⁵³ Washington Institute, [Alawites under threat in Syria2](#), 31 December 2024; Al Monitor, [What future awaits Syria's Alawite community2](#), 11 January 2025; BBC Monitoring, [New militant group in Syria targets Alawites, Assad loyalists](#), 13 February 2025

⁵⁴ PQ 28019 [[Syria: human rights](#)], 12 February 2025; HL Deb, [10 February 2025](#), cc993-5

Human rights reports

Human rights groups have raised concerns about human rights violations by the Assad government and the major opposition groups now in control, including HTS, the SDF and SNA. See the below resources for the human rights situation:

- US Commission on International Religious Freedom, [Religious freedom and US policy in post-Assad Syria](#), July 2025
- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), [The 2022 human rights and democracy report](#), July 2023
- US State Department, [Reports on human rights practices: Syria](#), 2024
- Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, [Human rights violations](#)
- Amnesty International, [Syria](#)
- Human Rights Watch, [Syria](#)

March 2025 violence in Alawite areas

Alawites [are one of several minority religious groups within Syria](#). Bashar al-Assad is an Alawite, and while some Alawites opposed his rule, the group has been targeted due to its association, both during and after the civil war.⁵⁵

In January and February 2025, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom reported that Alawites were among those killed in “door-to-door interrogations and select executions” carried out by HTS.⁵⁶

In March 2025 the most extensive single act of violence in Syria for several years was reported by the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) and Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). Organisations have not been able to independently verify the numbers killed and the SOHR and SNHR report more than 1,000 civilians were killed.⁵⁷ The Reuters news agency estimates a higher number, at 1,500.⁵⁸ Assad loyalists and interim government forces were reportedly killed in Alawite villages in the Tartus, Hamas and Latakia governorates. Monitors estimates the majority of those killed were civilians. There were reports of multiple “revenge attacks” against

⁵⁵ Minority Rights Group, [Alawis in Syria](#)

⁵⁶ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, [Religious freedom and US policy in post-Assad Syria](#), July 2025, p2

⁵⁷ BBC Monitoring, [Why do reported death tolls from recent violence in Syria vary?](#), 12 March 2025

⁵⁸ Reuters, [Syrian forces massacred 1,500 Alawites. The chain of command \[...\]](#), 30 June 2025

non-interim government forces and civilians.⁵⁹ Many Alawites also sought refuge in neighbouring Lebanon.⁶⁰

The violence also resulted in attacks on some Syrians in Iraq by one new Shia militia group. Both the interim Syrian government and the Iraqi government condemned the violence.⁶¹

In July 2025, the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights also reported violations in prisons run by the declared Syrian government, with Alawite detainees among those killed.⁶²

An interim report by Amnesty International said that “government affiliated militias deliberately killed civilians from Alawite minority” and the authorities did not intervene for two days. It called for an independent investigation.⁶³ The Reuters news agency also alleges that HTS groups, now part of the Syrian defence ministry, as well as groups part of the Syrian National Army (SNA—see section 2.5. This is not the post-Assad Syrian army), Sunni armed groups, civilians, and foreign fighters were also involved in the violence.⁶⁴

Interim authorities have argued the Amnesty report “downplays the context”. Sharaa established an investigation in March.⁶⁵ The resulting report in July said that pro-Assad “remnants” had caused the violence, but that some members of interim government forces did commit violations under “no official authority” and had “acted individually”. The report was based on consultation with UN bodies, human rights groups, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and local populations.⁶⁶

The report’s recommendations included prosecuting those involved, ensuring the integration of all armed groups into the interim government forces, and strengthening dialogue between different communities.⁶⁷

The UK, EU, US and Arab states condemned the violence targeting Alawites.⁶⁸ The UN Security Council issued a collective presidential statement calling on

⁵⁹ AP, [2 days of clashes and revenge killings in Syria leave more than 1,000 people dead](#), 9 March 2025; SNHR, [803 individuals extrajudicially killed between 6-10 March 2025](#), 11 March 2025; BBC News, [Syrian leader vows to hunt down those responsible for bloodshed \[...\]](#), 9 March 2025; ACLED, [What happened in Syria last week?](#), 14 March 2025

⁶⁰ New Arab, [21,000 Syrian Alawites “flee to Lebanon” from coastal region](#), 18 April 2025

⁶¹ BBC Monitoring, [Iraq orders arrest of Shia militia members for attacking Syrians](#), 12 March 2025; New Arab, [Fallout from mass killings in Syria’s coastal areas seeps into Iraq](#), 11 March 2025

⁶² BBC Monitoring, [Syrian war monitor reports “violations” in Syrian government positions](#), 3 July 2025

⁶³ Amnesty International, [Syria: coastal massacres of Alawite civilians \[...\]](#), April 2025

⁶⁴ Reuters, [How Syrian government forces and factions linked to the mass killings of Alawites](#), 30 June 2025

⁶⁵ BBC Monitoring, [Syria says Amnesty report on coastal violence “downplays” context](#), 5 April 2025;

BBC Monitoring, [Syria president extends work of committee investigating \[...\]](#), 11 April 2025

⁶⁶ BBC Monitoring, [Fact-finding committee presents findings on Syrian coastal violence](#), 22 July 2025

⁶⁷ As above

⁶⁸ European Council, [Syria: statement by the High representative](#), 11 March 2025; BBC Monitoring, [Arab states condemn violence in Syria](#), 8 March 2025; US State Department, [The escalation of fighting and civilian deaths in Syria](#), 9 March 2025

the interim authorities “to protect all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religion” and “strongly condemn[ed]” the widespread violence”.⁶⁹

The UK Government said that the interim authorities “must ensure the protection of all civilians and set out a clear path to transitional justice”. The Middle East Minister, Hamish Falconer, said that the UK was “constantly emphas[ing]” the need to protect human rights in its engagement with the interim Syrian authorities.⁷⁰

Further violence and discrimination against Alawites were reported in the city of Homs and in Damascus in April 2025. At least one new armed group says it is targeting Alawites and Druze (see below) and in April 2025 the Institute for the Study of War reported some local armed Alawite groups.⁷¹

Further reading on Alawites in Syria

- Crisis Group, [Finding a path through a perilous moment for post-Assad Syria](#), March 2025
- Washington Institute, [Syria’s transitional honeymoon is over](#), March 2025
- US Institute for Peace, [Sectarian violence threatens Syria’s shaky transition](#), March 2025
- Washington Institute, [Alawites under threat in Syria?](#), December 2024

Druze

The Druze constitute around 3% to 4% of the Syrian population, mostly concentrated on the border with Jordan and around Golan. They are less associated with the Assad regime than the Alawites.⁷²

Since the fall of Assad, Israel has said it will act to protect the Druze community in Syria (there are Druze populations in Israel and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights in Syria).⁷³ It also allowed a Druze community to travel on a pilgrimage from Syria to Israel, the first since 1948. Israel has also provided some aid to Druze groups in Syria in 2025.⁷⁴ Some Druze leaders

⁶⁹ UN Security Council, [S/PRST/2025/4](#), 14 March 2025

⁷⁰ HC Deb, [10 March 2025](#), c663

⁷¹ Reuters, [Syria’s Alawites evicted from private homes at gunpoint](#), 30 April 2025; BBC Monitoring, [New Syria jihadist group claims ongoing attacks on Alawites](#), 21 April 2025; ISW, [Alawite insurgency seek to use sectarian violence to destabilise \[...\]](#), 3 April 2025

⁷² Minority Rights, [Druze in Syria](#); Washington Institute, [The Druze and Assad: strategic bedfellows](#), October 2016

⁷³ AP, [Israel’s military is told to prepare to defend a Druze community](#), 1 March 2025

⁷⁴ New Arab, [Syrian Druze leaders make controversial religious visit to Israel](#), 25 April 2025; Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [FM Sa’ar orders transfer of humanitarian aid to Druze](#), 18 July 2025

have said they do not want any Israeli military protection and have called for Israel to stop its actions in Syria.⁷⁵

As set out below, section 3.4, Israel has raised concerns for the new HTS-led authorities in Syria and has been supportive of both Kurdish and Druze groups as part of a reported aim to keep central authority in Syria weak.

There have been two extended periods of violence in Druze-majority areas in 2025.

Violence in April/May 2025

On 29-30 April, sectarian violence in a Damascus suburb largely populated by Druze reportedly killed at least 100 people, including security forces. There are conflicting reports of the actors involved, with both “outlawed groups” and the security forces of the interim government blamed.⁷⁶

On 30 April, Israel said it launched a drone strike against an “extremist group that was preparing to continue its attack on the Druze population” as a “warning operation”.⁷⁷

The interim government had announced on 29/30 April an agreement with local leaders to end the violence. The agreement includes some compensation payments to the families of victims and that some Druze fighters would be integrated into local security forces.⁷⁸

There was reported continuing violence between Druze and Bedouin groups in early May, in which interim government forces also became engaged.⁷⁹

The UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pederson, who said the reported casualties were “deeply alarming” and condemned Israeli attacks, said the Druze community has reportedly been calling for greater autonomy.⁸⁰

On 3 May the UK Government said it was “appalled” by the violence against the Druze and called on Israel to refrain from action that could “risk destabilising Syria” and for authorities in Syria to “take steps to restore calm, shield civilians from violence and hold those responsible to account”.⁸¹ The US said the “interim authorities must stop the fighting, [and] hold perpetrators of violence and civilian harm accountable”.⁸²

⁷⁵ BBC Monitoring, [Syria Druze leaders condemn Israeli strikes, support ceasefire](#), 6 May 2025

⁷⁶ BBC Monitoring, [Syria authorities reach agreement amid fresh clashes](#), 30 April 2025; France 24, [Syria monitor says more than 100 people killed in two days of sectarian violence](#), 1 May 2025

⁷⁷ Times of Israel, [Israel carries out “warning strike”](#), 30 April 2025

⁷⁸ BBC Monitoring, [Syria authorities reach agreement amid fresh clashes](#), 30 April 2025; BBC Monitoring, [Syria official says deal with Sweida Druze leaders to be enforced](#), 2 May 2025

⁷⁹ BBC Monitoring, [Bedouins, Druze clash in Syria’s Sweida province](#), 5 May 2025

⁸⁰ UN, [Syria: UN envoy warns of escalating violence in Syria](#), 30 April 2025

⁸¹ FCDO, [UK statement on attacks against Druze community in Syria](#), 3 May 2025

⁸² US State Department, [Ending violence in Syria](#), 1 May 2025

Violence between Druze and Bedouin, July 2025

Further violence was reported in Druze-majority areas of Suweida/Sweida province in southern Syria from 12/13 July 2025, primarily between Bedouin tribes and Druze groups.

Security forces of the interim government were deployed in response to the violence and some violence occurred between government and Druze forces. While the interim authorities blamed “outlaw groups” for the violence, the local Druze community and UK-based Syrian Observatory of Human Rights (SOHR) described the Bedouin and the interim government as the “attacking” forces and said they had breached previous agreements with the Druze.⁸³

The UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, Volker Türk, said that his office had received “credible reports” that indicated “widespread violations and abuses, including summary executions and arbitrary abuses”. He said among the reported perpetrators were members of the interim government security forces, and Druze and Bedouin armed groups.⁸⁴

The Israeli Government reiterated its call for the area south of Damascus to be demilitarised (for more on its statements on Syria, see below, section 3.4) and its commitment to protect Druze communities in Syria. In response to the violence, Israel launched military attacks on the interim authorities, including in the vicinity of the presidential place in Damascus and on its forces entering Suweida province.⁸⁵ However, Israel did then allow interim Syrian government forces to enter for 48 hours.⁸⁶

While most local Druze leaders called for a ceasefire to be respected and for Israel not to intervene, one leader, Hikmat al-Hijri, called for opposition to continue against the interim government forces and international protection for the Druze.⁸⁷

The resulting ceasefire agreement includes provisions for Syrian security forces to withdraw from Suweida, for Bedouin groups to also withdraw and be evacuated from several areas, and to open relief and medical corridors into the province. UN agencies had reported that demand from local health services had increased significantly, and some health supplies had been unable to be distributed due to security challenges.⁸⁸

The number of casualties is unclear. The UK-based SOHR reports that 1,311 people were killed due to the violence, executions and Israeli airstrikes,

⁸³ BBC Monitoring, [Syrian factions trade blame as Sweida violence surges](#), 14 July 2025

⁸⁴ UN, [Türk calls for immediate steps to ensure protection of people \[...\]](#), 18 July 2025

⁸⁵ France 24, [Israel air strikes on Damascus hit Syrian army headquarters \[...\]](#), 16 July 2025; Times of Israel, [IDF strikes several tanks in south Syria as regime forces \[...\]](#), 14 July 2025; Times of Israel, [Israel says it's allowing forces to enter Sweida](#), 18 July 2025

⁸⁶ Israeli Prime Minister's Office, [Statement by Prime Minister Netanyahu](#), 17 July 2025

⁸⁷ BBC Monitoring, [Senior Druze cleric rejects ceasefire \[...\]](#), 15 July 2025; BBC Monitoring, [How do Druze in Syria's Sweida view government, Israeli intervention?](#), 18 July 2025

⁸⁸ UN, [Syria crisis: hundreds killed in ongoing violence, hospitals overwhelmed](#), 18 July 2025; France 24, [Syrian authorities evacuate Bedouin families from Druze-majority Sweida city](#), 21 July 2025

including 637 people from Suweida province. This includes members of the ministry of defence and security forces, civilians and other fighters, from 13 to 22 July.⁸⁹ The France-based Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reported in a preliminary estimate that at least 558 people were killed from 13 to 21 July in the province (SNHR does not document the killing of armed individuals belonging to groups outside the control of the state).⁹⁰ UNOCHA estimates around 93,000 people were displaced in the province.⁹¹

The Syrian interim interior minister argued that the “absence of state institutions, especially military and security institutions, is a major cause of the ongoing tensions” in the region.⁹² In 2025, the declared-Syrian government has sought to merge all armed groups, including those of the Druze, into a single armed force (see section 4). In July, interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa has said “we are keen on holding accountable those who transgressed and abused our Druze people” and that the Druze would be “protected”. He accused Israeli action of “re-ignit[ing] tensions”.⁹³

The United States said it did not support the Israeli strikes but had engaged with both Syrian and Israeli leaders to reach a “lasting agreement”.⁹⁴

The UK Government said it was “deeply concerned” at the violence, “want[s] to see civilians protected” and those responsible for the violence held to account. The government also stressed Syria’s sovereignty “must be respected” and that it is “not persuaded that [Israeli actions] are conducive to bringing about peace and stability”. The UK has also been involved in the provision of humanitarian support.⁹⁵

The UN Secretary General called for Israel to end its “violations” of Syrian sovereignty and territory and for a full investigation into the violence.⁹⁶

Further reading on Druze in Syria

- Carnegie Endowment, [The Syrian state after Suwayda](#), 22 July 2025
- Washington Institute, [Making sure Damascus learns the right lessons from the Suwayda clashes](#), 21 July 2025
- Crisis Group, [A compromise is urgently needed in southern Syria](#), 18 July 2025

⁸⁹ SOHR, [Al-Suwayda bloodshed in seven days](#), 22 July 2025

⁹⁰ SNHR, [Updated figures: at least 558 Syrians killed \[...\] since July 13](#), 21 July 2025

⁹¹ UN, [Syria: ongoing violence fuelling mass displacement in Sweida](#), 21 July 2025

⁹² Reuters, [Attacks on Syrian security forces sent to quell sectarian clashes](#), 14 July 2025

⁹³ France 24, [Syria’s al-Sharaa vows to protect Druze minority’s rights \[...\]](#), 17 July 2025; BBC Monitoring, [Syrian president urges reconciliation following ceasefire](#), 19 July 2025

⁹⁴ US State Department, [Department press briefing](#), 17 July 2025; CNN, [Trump “caught off guard” by Israel’s actions in Gaza and Syria](#), 21 July 2025

⁹⁵ HL Deb, [17 July 2025](#) cc1994, 1997; HC Deb, [21 July 2025](#), c595

⁹⁶ UN, [UN urges de-escalation, protection of civilians as conflict roils in Syria](#), 15 July 2025

- Carnegie Endowment, [Syria's Druze stand alone](#), 14 May 2025
- Diwan, [Minority retort in Syria: The country's Druze community](#), 9 May 2025
- Crisis Group, [Fighting in Damascus exposes Syria's sectarian tensions](#), 2 May 2025

Christians

Christians constituted around 10% of the Syrian population before the outbreak of civil war in 2011/12. Their population has fallen significantly and are now estimated to form around 2% to 3% of the population.⁹⁷

In June 2025, the Christian community in Damascus was targeted in a suicide attack, which reportedly killed 25 people and injured 63. It is reportedly the [largest attack on Christians in Syria since 1860](#). A Sunni Muslim group, Saraya Ansar al-Sunnah, potentially linked to Islamic State/Daesh, were blamed for the attack. The Sharaa-led government condemned the attack and has made some arrests of Islamic State/Daesh members.⁹⁸

The Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, John Yazigi, criticised the response as insufficient and said the interim “government bears responsibility in full”.⁹⁹ The UK Government “strongly condemn[ed] the horrific terrorist attack” and sent its condolences to the Syrian Foreign Minister. The UK Special Representative for Syria discussed the situation with Syrian authorities.¹⁰⁰

Further reading on Christians in Syria

- Atlantic Council, [Church attack shows transition's fragility](#), 26 June 2025
- Washington Institute, [Damascus Church attack: Who is Saraya Ansar al-Sunnah?](#), 25 June 2025
- Crisis Group, [Church massacre in Damascus indicates trouble ahead](#), 24 June 2025

⁹⁷ Minority Rights, [Christians, Armenians and Assyrians in Syria](#); Voice of America, [What future awaits Syria's Christian minority?](#), 7 January 2025

⁹⁸ Washington Institute, [The Damascus church attack: who is Saraya Ansar al-Sunnah?](#), 25 June 2025; France 24, [Syria announces arrests over Damascus church attack](#), 23 June 2025

⁹⁹ Reuters, [Syrian Christian leader chides president over deadly church bombing](#), 24 June 2025

¹⁰⁰ PQ 63284 [[Syria: Christianity](#)], 3 July 2025

2.3

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

For information on HTS as the declared interim government, see section 4.

Who are Hayat Tahrir al-Sham?

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, or the “Organization for the Liberation of the Levant”), has been the major opposition group in Idlib province, in north-western Syria, since the late 2010s. HTS has its origins in Al-Qaeda, being founded as Jabhat al-Nusra in 2011, before becoming Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in 2016 and merging with other groups in 2017 to form HTS.¹⁰¹

HTS has some contact with Turkey, though not as much as the Syrian National Army (see below), and the group is a designated terrorist organisation in Turkey.¹⁰²

The leader of HTS is Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. Since the fall of Assad, official communiques refer to him by his real name, Ahmed al-Sharaa. He was a member of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, where he was imprisoned for participating in the insurgency against UK and US forces.¹⁰³

How did HTS govern Idlib from 2017 to 2024?

HTS and other opposition groups formed the “Syrian Salvation Government” in Idlib in 2017. The administration took responsibility for health, education, and other social services. There was some local armed opposition and there were protests against its rule up to and including October 2024.¹⁰⁴

In March 2024, it was reported that Ahmed al-Sharaa had offered to resign as leader of the government due to the ongoing protests against HTS. The group

¹⁰¹ Italian Institute for International Political Studies, [Syria's broken status quo](#), 5 December 2024; Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), [Terrorism background: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#), 2018 and ACLED, [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#), 25 July 2023 and European Council on Foreign Relations, [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham \(Syria\)](#), 10 November 2020; [Who's in control of Idlib?](#), BBC News, 18 February 2020

¹⁰² Council on Foreign Relations, [What role is Turkey playing in Syria's civil war?](#), 6 December 2024

¹⁰³ BBC News, [From Syrian jihadist leader to rebel politician](#), 9 December 2024

¹⁰⁴ BBC Monitoring, [HTS accused of violent response to women's protest in Syria's Idlib](#), 21 October 2024; BBC Monitoring, [Anti-HTS protests break out in north west Syria](#), 14 September 2024; VoA, [Protests grow against powerful Jihadist group in Syria enclave](#), 7 March 2024; DW, [Syrian protesters rise up against Islamists in Idlib](#), 25 May 2024; Al Monitor, [HTS makes rival jihadis in Syria's Idlib \[...\] give up weapons](#), 20 November 2024; BBC Monitoring, [Who's behind the "Salvation government" running northern Syria?](#), 13 December 2019

instead pledged reforms to its security forces and prison system, which have been accused of committing human rights violations.¹⁰⁵

Analysts note that the group has sought to present a more moderate stance to appeal to other opposition groups within Syria. Many analysts consider it a [jihadist group](#) that is currently focused on power within Syria, rather than seeking to act internationally, though also note not all its members will share the leadership's rhetoric or stated direction and are uncertain on its long-term objectives.¹⁰⁶

In its 2024 report on freedom of religion or belief, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom noted HTS has been seeking to “reposition itself as a state-like administrative regime that acknowledges religious diversity”. However, it reported violations of freedom of religion in 2023:

The group publicized its tolerance of the first Christian liturgy celebrated in Idlib in over a decade and pledged to redistribute property it had confiscated from Christians and Druze. However, HTS continued to impose its interpretation of Sunni Islam on both Muslim and non-Muslim residents of Idlib. In August, the SSG [Syrian Salvation government] invoked its interpretation of Shari'a in new rules for Idlib's schools, and HTS security forces continued their arbitrary and unlawful detention of human rights advocates and private individuals critical of HTS's “rule or religious doctrine”.¹⁰⁷

In its April 2024 report covering human rights in Syria, the US State Department also noted allegations that HTS in Idlib had held detainees in what it termed “security prisons” without the right to appeal. HTS also arrested groups seeking to protest against its rule and detained political opponents, journalists, activists and civilians perceived as critical of their rule of religious doctrine. Allegations of have torture have also been made.¹⁰⁸

What did HTS say on Syria's future after Assad in 2024?

On 8 December 2024 the leader of HTS, Ahmed al-Sharaa, said that the group would “continue to work with determination to achieve the goals of our revolution [...] to complete the path we started in 2011”.¹⁰⁹

In one media clip, on 8 December he said that Syria had been “abandoned as a playground for Iranian ambitions” under Assad and criticised the “corruption”, “sectarianism” and [trade of the captagon drug](#).¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ BBC Monitoring, [HTS leaders offers to quit](#), 13 March 2024; BBC Monitoring, [HTS linked authority details progress on reforms](#), 2 April 2024

¹⁰⁶ European Council on Foreign Relations, [Guns and governance: HTS](#), 2020; DW, [Syria: HTS Islamists pledge to show tolerance for minorities](#), 4 December 2024

¹⁰⁷ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, [Annual report 2024](#), 2024, p68

¹⁰⁸ US Department of State, [2023 country reports on human rights practices: Syria](#), April 2024

¹⁰⁹ Al Jazeera, [“New history written” says HTS leader](#), 8 December 2024

¹¹⁰ BBC Monitoring, [HTS leader says all Syria “can breathe freely”](#), 8 December 2024

Ahmed al-Sharaa has also criticised Israeli military actions (see below, section 3.4) as “threaten[ing] an unjustified escalation in the region”. He has also been quoted as saying “the Turkish people are our closest friends”.¹¹¹

In a December 2024 interview with CNN, he said the opposition would transition “into a state of governance, institutions and so on” after the fall of Assad. He said “HTS is merely one part of [building Syria] [...] and it may dissolve at any time”.¹¹²

He also suggested that “there will no longer be a need for any foreign forces to remain in Syria” after the fall of Assad.¹¹³

Section 4 details actions by the Syrian interim government declared by HTS in 2025.

2.4

UN designation of HTS as terrorist group

For information on UK, US and EU sanctions and their policies towards the interim Syrian government declared by HTS, see below, section 4.

UN Security Council

HTS is designated as a terrorist group by the UN Security Council.¹¹⁴ Following the fall of Assad, the UN Envoy for Syria, Geir Pederson, said on 10 December 2024 that the designation was a “complicating factor” but said decisions should await HTS actions:

what we need now to see is, of course, that the good statements and what we are seeing on the ground at the beginning, that this is now followed up in practice in the days and the weeks ahead of us. And the most important test, the most important test will be how the transitional arrangements in Damascus is organized and implemented.¹¹⁵

It is for the UN Security Council members to determine whether a group removed from the designation list. The effect of the terrorist designation is to impose an asset freeze, travel ban and arms embargo by all UN member states against the group.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ BBC Monitoring, [HTS chief addresses Israel, Iran, Russia](#), 15 December 2024

¹¹² CNN, [Syrian rebel leader says goal is to “overthrow” Assad regime](#), 6 December 2024

¹¹³ As above

¹¹⁴ For background, UN Security Council, [Consolidated list: Qe.De.137](#), as of 5 December 2024

¹¹⁵ UN Special Envoy Syria, [Statement, 10 December 2024](#)

¹¹⁶ UN, [The de facto authority in Syria is a designated terrorist group](#), 12 December 2024

The UN Security Council adopted a resolution maintaining the exemption for humanitarian providers from the asset freeze measures against some listed terrorist organisations in Syria before Assad’s fall, on 6 December 2024.¹¹⁷

In July, a report to the UN Security Council on ties between HTS and Al-Qaeda is expected to be published. According to the Reuters news agency, the report, which is based on UN member state contributions, cites concerns that “several HTS and aligned members, especially those in tactical roles or integrated into the new Syrian army, remained ideologically tied to Al Qaeda” but Sharaa and Interior Minister Anas Khattab are considered more “moderate”. It says there have been no “active ties” with Al-Qaeda in 2025.¹¹⁸

UN agencies have worked with HTS directly in Idlib for several years to deliver humanitarian assistance. The UN Humanitarian Coordination for Syria, Adam Abdelmoula, has been in contact with HTS since Assad’s fall.¹¹⁹

United States

The United States has listed HTS as a [foreign terrorist organisation](#) (FTO). As an FTO, it is unlawful for any person in the US to knowingly provide material support to the group and any US financial institutions must report any assets they hold. The HTS leader was also subject to a US bounty, until this was removed in December 2024.¹²⁰ In July 2025, the US also announced it would remove the FTO designation.¹²¹

Both the Biden and Trump administration had previously said they had concerns about HTS, its membership, and direction.¹²² Nonetheless, US officials had met with the group from December 2024 onwards.¹²³

United Kingdom

The UK has proscribed the group as a terrorist organisation and has no contact with it. On 2 December 2024 the Middle East Minister, Hamish Falconer said:

We do not talk to HTS, which is a proscribed terrorist organisation—it is proscribed for a reason and remains proscribed, and we are concerned by many of the public statements it has made.¹²⁴

¹¹⁷ UN, [Unanimously adopting Resolution 2761 \(2024\) \[...\]](#), 6 December 2024

¹¹⁸ Reuters, [UN report sees no active Syrian state links to Al-Qaeda](#), 11 July 2025

¹¹⁹ UN, [Syria: top official stresses need for unity \[...\]](#), 13 December 2024

¹²⁰ US State Department, [Foreign terrorist organisations](#), accessed 9 December 2024; BBC News, [US scraps \\$10 million bounty for arrest of Syria’s new leader Sharaa](#), 20 December 2024

¹²¹ US State Department, [Revoking the foreign terrorist designation of HTS](#), 7 July 2025

¹²² CNN, [US left facing difficult situation in Syria](#), 2 December 2024; White House, [Remarks by APNSA Jake Sullivan](#), 8 December 2024; Senate Foreign Relations Committee, [Nomination hearings](#), 15 January 2025, at 2 hours 58 minutes

¹²³ NBC News, [US delegation arrives in Syrian capital for first meetings \[...\]](#), 20 December 2024

¹²⁴ HC Deb, [2 December 2024](#), c64

The UK has subsequently had contact with the group. In December 2024 a delegation of UK officials met with HTS leaders in Syria, and in January the Foreign Secretary David Lammy met the HTS-appointed interim foreign minister in Saudi Arabia as part of regional talks on the country (the US, Germany, France and other states also sent representatives).¹²⁵

On 9 December, Foreign Secretary David Lammy had told the House of Commons the UK would judge the group “by its actions, monitoring closely how they and other parties to this conflict treat all civilians in areas they control”.¹²⁶ In a separate statement, Prime Minister Keir Starmer said the same day that it was “far too early” for a change in policy.¹²⁷

2.5

The Syrian National Army and Turkey

What is the Syrian National Army?

The Syrian National Army (SNA) is a Turkish-backed coalition centred in northern Syrian on the Turkish border. It not an official Syrian state body and was opposed to the rule of President Assad. As a collection of groupings, it has a range of approaches towards HTS and the future governance of Syria.¹²⁸

The SNA was established in 2017. It focused on countering Islamic State/Daesh and the People’s Defence Units (YPG), which form part of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, see section 2.5). Turkey judges that elements of the SDF are tied to the [Kurdistan Workers Party \(PKK\)](#), a proscribed terrorist group in Turkey.¹²⁹ See below, section 3.3, for Turkish action.

The US State Department [report on human rights in Syria](#), covering 2023, also makes allegations of human rights abuses committed by the SNA.

What actions has it taken in 2024 and 2025?

The Syrian National Army joined the HTS attack on Aleppo in November 2024, attacking Assad government forces and those of the SDF. The offensive against the SDF continued until 10 December, when the SDF and SNA reached a temporary ceasefire agreement in the northern city of Manbij as a result of

¹²⁵ BBC News, [UK diplomats meet rebel leader in Damascus](#), 17 December 2024; FCDO, [UK joins key meetings in Saudi Arabia to help build a stable Syrian future](#), 12 January 2025

¹²⁶ HC Deb, [9 December 2024](#), c693

¹²⁷ BBC News, [Too early to remove Syrian rebels from terror list—Starmer](#), 9 December 2024

¹²⁸ BBC Monitoring, [Rivalries and alliances in the Turkey-backed SNA](#), 27 January 2025

¹²⁹ Le Monde, [The Syria National Army, a rebel group loyal to Turkey](#), 6 December 2024; Atlantic Council, [Efforts to tame the Syrian National Army](#), 18 June 2024

US mediation. The SDF were to withdraw from the city.¹³⁰ The ceasefire was later extended to 22 December 2024.¹³¹

In January 2025 it was reported most of the SNA was willing to dissolve and become part of a single Syrian armed force. Turkey has backed the move.¹³²

However, fighting in 2025 continued amid calls for all armed groups to disarm and disband (see sections 2.1 and 4.2). In January the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) said that clashes had been ongoing for a month “without any change in the map of the country”.¹³³ As of 18 February 2025, it reports 625 deaths since December. This includes 56 civilians.¹³⁴ In March, these attacks continued.¹³⁵

2.6

Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces

Who are the Syrian Democratic Forces?

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are a coalition of Kurdish-led forces in north-eastern Syria which also includes Arabic fighters and both Muslim and Christian groups. It was created in 2015 with US support. It operates through an administration known as the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES), which was established in 2018. Among its objectives are seeking greater autonomy for Kurds in Syria (the Kurdish minority in Iraq has an autonomous government under the Iraqi constitution).

The SDF consists of several groups, including the People’s Protection Units (YPG). The YPG was created in 2012 and Turkey judges it to have ties to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a designated terrorist group in Turkey and elsewhere.¹³⁶

The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) is the political wing of the SDF and the AANES.¹³⁷

¹³⁰ Reuters, [Syrian democratic forces, rebels reach US-brokered ceasefire \[...\]](#), 10 December 2024; AA, [Syrian national army besieges Tel Rifiit \[...\]](#), 1 December 2024; Daily Sabah, [Syrian opposition group clears Manbij of US backed PKK/YPG terrorist group](#), 9 December 2024

¹³¹ VoA, [Despite ceasefire, fighting continues in Manbij](#), 11 December 2024; BBC Monitoring, [Truce ends between Syria Kurdish forces and pro-Turkey group](#), 17 December 2024; US State Department, [Press briefing](#), 17 December 2024

¹³² BBC Monitoring, [FM says Turkey seeks “stability” in Syria, asked groups to disarm](#), 27 January 2025; BBC Monitoring, [Rivalries and alliances in the Turkey-backed SNA](#), 27 January 2025

¹³³ BBC Monitoring, [Deadly clashes continue between SDF, SNA in northern Syria](#), 15 January 2025

¹³⁴ SOHR, [SDF attack, Four Turkish-backed militiamen killed \[...\]](#), 18 February 2025

¹³⁵ Al Arabiya, [Turkey’s operations against Kurdish militants in northern Syria \[...\]](#), 12 March 2025

¹³⁶ European Council on Foreign Relations, [Guns and governance: SDF](#), 2020

¹³⁷ BBC Monitoring, [Syrian Democratic Council](#), and Syrian Democratic Council, [Who we are](#)

What role has it played in the conflict?

The SDF was opposed to Assad and has played an important role in combatting Islamic State/Daesh. It holds a large number of Islamic State members in detention and their families in camps. See section 6 for more on Islamic State.

The US State Department [report on human rights in Syria](#), covering 2023, also makes allegations of human rights abuses committed by the SDF.

During the Syrian civil war, the SDF controlled the majority of Syria's functioning oil production.¹³⁸ In 2024, it joined the November offensive and said it captured the eastern city of Deir Al-Zour and Syria's major crossing points with Iraq from Assad.¹³⁹ It lost territory to both the SNA and HTS in December 2024, including Deir Al-Zour to HTS.¹⁴⁰

What are its demands for Syria's political future?

On 16 December the SDF called to an end to military operations in Syria "in order to begin a constructive, comprehensive national dialogue".¹⁴¹

The SDF have also asked the US to ensure that no Turkish-led offensive is launched against the group.¹⁴² In 2025, the US is in the process of reducing the number of troops and bases it has in Syria (see below, section 6).

The Commander of the SDF, Mazloum Abdi, said in February 2025 that the group was seeking dialogue with HTS and wants a united Syria with a central government in Damascus, "based on democracy that preserves the rights of all its [Syrian] components". He said the SDF's aim is not a separate government or parliament for Kurdish areas of Syria (as is the [case in Iraq](#)).¹⁴³

The SDF did not participate in the February 2025 national talks initiated by HTS on the future of Syria. Organisers said all groups must disarm before they are allowed to participate, and that the SDF does not represent Syrian Kurds.¹⁴⁴ One SDF official said it would be bound by the decisions of the national dialogue if it does not participate.¹⁴⁵

In March 2025, the SDF and HTS-dominated interim authorities agreed, in principle, for the two to merge (see next section) and for a nationwide ceasefire. The agreement recognises the Kurds as an "integral part" of the

¹³⁸ BBC News, [Syria war: who benefits from its oil production?](#), 21 November 2024

¹³⁹ New Arab, [Kurdish-led SDF capture eastern Syria \[...\]](#), 6 December 2024

¹⁴⁰ Rudaw, [Syrian rebels claim control of oil-rich Deir ez-Zor from SDF](#), 11 December 2024

¹⁴¹ Al-Arabiya, [Syria's Kurds call for end to all military operations](#), 16 December 2024

¹⁴² Wall Street Journal, [US fears military build up by Turkey \[...\]](#), 17 December 2024

¹⁴³ AP, [US backed commander says his Kurdish-led group wants \[...\]](#), 3 February 2025; Guardian, [Kurdish-led SDF fights for place in post-Assad future](#), 21 February 2025

¹⁴⁴ AP, [The talks shaping Syria's new constitution will exclude Kurdish forces \[...\]](#), 14 February 2025; BBC Monitoring, [US-allied Kurds excluded from Syria 'national dialogue'](#), 15 February 2025; Reuters, [Syrian groups must disarm to take part in national dialogue \[...\]](#), 13 February 2025

¹⁴⁵ BBC Monitoring, [SDF says will 'not be bound' by Syria national dialogue \[...\]](#), 14 February 2025

Syrian state and says the responsibility for airports, oil and gas fields, and other civil and military institutions in northeastern Syria, will be transferred to the interim authority.¹⁴⁶

In July, the SDF and HTS-led government held talks in Damascus, in the presence of American and French officials, on how to implement the agreement, and when.¹⁴⁷

The agreement is intended to be implemented by the end of 2025.¹⁴⁸ The EU and US welcomed the agreement.¹⁴⁹ Turkey, which has continued to support the SNA's attacks on the SDF, welcomed the agreement as supporting the "territorial integrity of Syria" and Syria's "unitary structure".¹⁵⁰

The SDF has continued to emphasise its demand for decentralisation across Syria.¹⁵¹

Will the SDF become part of the interim armed forces?

In February 2025 a senior SDF commander, Abu Omar al-Idlibi, said that the SDF had agreed to integrate into the structure of the Syrian army established by the HTS interim authorities and for foreign fighters to leave the SDF and Syria (a likely reference to PKK members).¹⁵²

However, the wider SDF leadership did not confirm the agreement or how it would be implemented. Issues to be discussed include the security of detention facilities for Islamic State fighters, oil fields, and providing civilian infrastructure and services. There are reports that not all SDF leaders support the move but there is pressure from its Arab members to merge.¹⁵³

Further reading on the SDF in 2025

- Washington Institute, [Kurdish unity efforts gain momentum and an uncertain future in Syria](#), 27 January 2025
- Long War Journal, [Why did Syria's Kurds sign a deal with the new regime?](#), 11 March 2025

¹⁴⁶ SANA, [Agreement signed to integrated SDF into institutions of \[...\] Syria](#), 10 March 2025

¹⁴⁷ Shafaq, [SDF, AANES meet Syrian president in Damascus](#), 9 July 2025

¹⁴⁸ SANA, [Agreement signed to integrated SDF into institutions of \[...\] Syria](#), 10 March 2025

¹⁴⁹ US State Department, [Agreement between the Syrian interim authorities and the SDF](#), 11 March 2025; European Council, [Syria: statement by the high representative](#), 11 March 2025; HC Deb, [10 March 2025](#), c672

¹⁵⁰ Reuters, [Turkey's Erdogan welcomes Syrian deal with Kurdish forces](#), 11 March 2025

¹⁵¹ BBC Monitoring, [Syrian Kurdish unity conference demands decentralisation](#), 26 April 2025

¹⁵² BBC Monitoring, [SDF 'agrees' to integrate into Syrian army](#), 18 February 2025

¹⁵³ Institute for the Study of War, [Iran update](#), 18 February 2025; Asharq Al-Awsat, [Kurdish leaderships reveal details of plan to merge with Syrian army](#), 19 February 2025

- Atlantic Council, [Landmark SDF-Damascus deal presents opportunity, and uncertainty, for Turkey](#), 18 March 2025
- Crisis Group, [A glimmer of peace in Syria's north east](#), 28 March 2025
- Middle East Institute, [The Damascus-SDF agreement two months on: fragile progress or delayed collapse?](#), 9 May 2025
- Arab Center DC, [Syrian Kurds attempt to manoeuvre amid new realities](#), 27 June 2025

What have Turkey, the SNA and HTS said on the SDF in 2024-25?

Since the fall of Assad, both SNA and HTS have taken territory previously controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Turkish statements on the SDF and PKK

On 15 December the Turkish Defence Minister said that his “primary issue in Syria” was “dismantling the PKK/YPG terrorist organisation” and expected the US to “reassess” their position on the issue. He said HTS shared the view.¹⁵⁴

Turkey has also supported integration between the armed forces of the SDF and the HTS-led government, as well as opposing greater regional autonomy.¹⁵⁵

Ceasefire agreement between Turkey and the PKK

In 2025, Turkey and the PKK agreed a ceasefire in [their long-running conflict](#). In March 2025 the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan, called on members of the group to lay down their arms. In May, the group said it would be disbanding.¹⁵⁶ PKK groups in Iraqi Kurdistan are also expected to disband.¹⁵⁷ The SDF says the Turkey-PKK agreement does not apply to them but has welcomed the PKK’s dissolution.¹⁵⁸ For more on the agreement, and its potential significance for the region, see the below:

¹⁵⁴ AA, [Turkey wants dismantling of PKK/YPG \[...\]](#), 15 December 2024; Al Monitor, [Turkey-backed Syrians and US-mediated ceasefire](#), 18 December 2024

¹⁵⁵ Reuters, [Turkey stresses opposition to decentralisation in Syria](#), 1 May 2025; Reuters, [Erdogan says Kurdish SDF “stalling” despite integration deal with Damascus](#), 29 May 2025

¹⁵⁶ AP News, [What to know about the latest effort \[...\]](#), 13 January 2025; BBC News, [Kurdish group PKK says it is laying down arms and disbanding](#), 12 May 2025

¹⁵⁷ AP, [Kurdish fighter in northern Iraq to hand over weapons in first step \[...\]](#), 3 July 2025

¹⁵⁸ Rudaw, [SDF says Ocalan’s call for disarmament, dissolution does not apply](#), 27 February 2025; North Press Agency, [Syria’s Kurdish SDF commander welcomes PKK’s dissolution](#), 12 May 2025

- Chatham House, [The dissolution of the PKK could transform Turkey's domestic politics and foreign policy](#), May 2025
- DW, [What an end of the PKK would mean for the Kurds](#), August 2025
- Amwaj Media, [How Turkey-PKK peace may usher change in Iraqi Kurdistan](#), January 2025
- European Institute for Studies on the Middle East and North Africa, [The impact of a potential Turkish-PKK peace agreement on the Kurdistan region of Iraq](#), January 2025

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham statement on the SDF in 2024-25

On 14 December the HTS-appointed Defence Minister said Syria would “not enjoy security until we put an end to the separatist schemes of the PKK and liberate our people”.¹⁵⁹ HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa also talked of SDF-controlled regions “gain[ing] freedom and com[ing] under the hands of their people”. He has reportedly differentiated between Kurdish groups and the PKK in interviews, however.¹⁶⁰

The HTS military commander, Abu Hassan al-Hamawi, also said in December 2024 that “the Kurdish people are one of the components of the Syrian people...Syria will not be divided and there will be no federal entities”. This suggests a unified Syrian state is intended by HTS, without the AANES.¹⁶¹

In 2025, the HTS-led government has reiterated its opposition to “separatist entities under the guise of federalism or an autonomous administration without a comprehensive national consensus” and said Syrian unity is a “red line”.¹⁶²

What have the US and UK said on the SDF?

In December 2024 Foreign Secretary David Lammy said the UK would work with Kurdish groups to contain Islamic State in the northeast:

We have to work with all groups in an inclusive manner, but I will be really clear that in the UK, we remain concerned about Daesh, and about extremism in camps that we know exist in the north-east. We are vigilant about those issues, and we are happy to—we have to—work with Kurdish minority groups, who will assist us in that enterprise.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ BBC Monitoring, [New Syrian government warns Kurdish ‘separatists’](#), 14 December 2024

¹⁶⁰ BBC Monitoring, [HTS chief addresses Israel, Iran, Russia](#), 15 December 2024; BBC Monitoring, [HTS chief says new government seeks “freedom” for northeast Syria](#), 17 December 2024

¹⁶¹ France 24, [Syria ex-rebel chief says to dissolve armed wing](#), 17 December 2024

¹⁶² BBC Monitoring, [Syrian presidency warns Kurds against calls for “federalism”](#), 27 April 2025

¹⁶³ HC Deb, [9 December 2024](#), c702

US National Security Advisor under the Biden administration, John Kirkby, said that while the US judged Turkey to have “legitimate” security concerns, the SDF must be allowed to focus on countering Islamic State:

we have said publicly in the past that some of these operations elsewhere along that border [between Syria and Turkey], conducted by Turkish military forces, are problematic because it does have that risk of pulling the SDF away from the counter-ISIS mission, which we don’t want to see happen. And those are conversations that we’re having with the Turks as well.¹⁶⁴

In 2024 US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller also said that the US wants a national government in Syria established that “encompasses all the various ethnic groups in Syria” and that there are no subnational militias:

Ultimately, I can say that what we want to see [...] is the establishment of a Syrian national government that encompasses all of the various ethnic groups inside Syria, and that at the end of that you don’t have any subnational militias, any subnational groups who are carrying arms under their own banner. And as part of that we certainly think it’s appropriate to discuss the expulsion of foreign fighters.¹⁶⁵

Further reading on domestic actors in Syria

- Engelsberg Ideas, [The battle for Syria isn’t over](#), 24 June 2025
- Italian Institute for International and Political Studies, [Syria’s new rulers and minorities: clash or compromise?](#), 13 April 2025
- Washington Institute, [How HTS landed on the US terrorist lists](#), 17 December 2024
- New York Times, [Why America’s Kurdish allies are under threat](#), 16 December 2024
- International Crisis Group, [Priorities after Assad’s fall](#), 12 December 2024
- Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, [Domestic and regional impact of the political earthquake in Syria](#), 9 December 2024
- Royal United Services Institute, [Fall of Bashar al-Assad and Syria’s unfinished business](#), 9 December 2024
- Italian Institute for International and Political Studies, [The end of Assad: a new chapter in Syrian history](#), 8 December 2024

¹⁶⁴ White House, [On the record press gaggle with National Security Advisor](#), 10 December 2024

¹⁶⁵ US Department of State, [Press briefing](#), 17 December 2024

3

What has been the response of Iran, Russia, Turkey and Israel?

Further reading on Assad's fall for the Middle East

This section focuses on the actions of Iran, Russia, Turkey and Israel. The sources listed below relate to China, the Middle East region as a whole and the Arab Gulf, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. Section 5 has further reading on the UK, EU and US role in Syria.

China

- Stimson Center, [China struggles to adjust to post-Assad Syria](#), June 2025
- Washington Institute, [Curbing China's influence on the new Syrian government](#), April 2025
- Atlantic Council, [What the fall of the Assad regime really means for China](#), December 2024

Middle East region

- Royal United Services Institute, [The coming fight for Syria](#), January 2025
- Foreign Policy, [What's next for Syria and the Middle East?](#), December 2024
- Crisis Group, [Regional perspectives on Assad's fall](#), December 2024
- Foreign Affairs, [The Middle East's dangerous new normal](#), December 2024
- Foreign Policy, [Assad's fall in the Middle East's 1989](#), December 2024
- Italian Institute for International Political Studies, [Syria, the path forward: regional perspectives](#), December 202
- Atlantic Council, [Rebels have toppled the Assad regime. What's next for Syria, the Middle East and the world?](#), December 2024

Arab Gulf states

- Carnegie Endowment, [The \[Arab\] Gulf shifts policies in response to the "new" Syria](#), January 2025
- Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, [Assad's fall prompts initial Gulf unity but differences and concerns are emerging](#), December 2024

Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon

- Amwaj Media, [How regional shifts may shape the future of the Iraq-Syria relationship](#), July 2025
- Carnegie Endowment, [Beirut and Damascus remain divided](#), June 2025
- Wilson Center, [Syria in transition and implications for Jordan](#), January 2025
- US Institute for Peace, [How Assad's fall could impact Iraq](#), December 2024
- US Institute for Peace, [What Assad's fall means for Lebanon](#), December 2024

3.1

Iran and Hezbollah

Syria as a strategic link for Iran

The fall of Assad is widely seen as a defeat for Iran's strategy in the Middle East. It removes a significant element from its alliance network in the region, which it uses to project power, threaten Israel, and attack US forces.

Syria, under Bashar al-Assad and his father, Hafez, has been one of the longest-standing allies of post-1979 Iran (when the Shah was overthrown and the Islamic Republic was created). Syria formed part of what Iran has called the "axis of resistance", constituted of Iran, Iran-backed Shia militias in Iraq and Syria, the Assad government, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza and the Houthis in Yemen. Syria has been a key land route for Iran to supply Hezbollah and Hamas and threaten Israel.¹⁶⁶

Syria's role in Lebanon

Syria has historically also played an influential role in Lebanese politics. It intervened militarily in Lebanon during the [Lebanese civil war](#) (1975 to 1990), [dominating Lebanon's domestic affairs](#) after the civil war, with final Syrian forces withdrawing in 2005. Hezbollah was one pro-Syrian group in Lebanon, and its political alliances with other Lebanese groups were partially formed on sharing a pro-Syrian outlook.

While the ability of Syria to project its influence fell with its withdrawal in 2005, it continued under Bashar al-Assad. The politics of the two countries

¹⁶⁶ See Commons Library, [Iran's influence in the Middle East](#), updated July 2024

remained interlinked through Hezbollah, Syrians displaced to Lebanon, and [historical divisions in Lebanese politics between pro- and anti- Syrians](#).¹⁶⁷

Iranian and Hezbollah investment in Assad

Iran is estimated to have spent more than US\$30 billion in support of Assad during the civil war, as well as providing his government with subsidised oil and other resources.¹⁶⁸ Iranian militias deployed in Syria were estimated to have numbered between 20,000 and 30,000 personnel, while Hezbollah was estimated to have had 7,000 to 10,000 fighters in Syria (out of a total of 40,000 to 50,000).¹⁶⁹ Certain numbers are unknown.

Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran have each been weakened militarily through their conflicts with Israel in 2023-25. In October 2024 then Israeli Defence Minister, Yoav Gallant, described both Hamas and Hezbollah as no longer effective proxies for Iran.¹⁷⁰ Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said Assad fell because of Israeli military action in 2024 against his allies.¹⁷¹

Iran and Syria

- Commons Library, [Iran in 2025: how strong does it remain the Middle East?](#), 29 January 2025
- RAND, [The fall of Assad could be a turning point for the axis of US adversaries](#), January 2025
- US Institute for Peace, [Iran is the biggest regional loser of Assad's fall](#), 12 December 2024
- Washington Institute, [Don't assume Iran's supply lines to Hezbollah are cut](#), December 2024
- Chatham House, [Fall of Bashar al-Assad is a blow to Iran and Russia—and a boost for Turkey](#), December 2024
- [With Assad's fall, Iran's "axis of resistance" unravels](#), New York Times, 8 December 2024
- Council on Foreign Relations, [Will Iran become more dangerous after Assad's ouster in Syria?](#), 8 December 2024

¹⁶⁷ Royal United Services Institute, [Lebanon in Limbo: No escaping the Syrian gales](#), October 2012 and [Lebanon: the return of Pax Syriana?](#), November 2017

¹⁶⁸ Carnegie Endowment, [Why did Iran allow the downfall of Assad?](#), 9 December 2024

¹⁶⁹ As above and Atlantic Council, [Iranian influence in Syria](#), November 2020; CSIS, [The escalating conflict with Hezbollah in Syria](#), June 2018

¹⁷⁰ See Commons Library, [Middle East instability in 2023-25](#) and briefings on Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah; Reuters, [Hamas, Hezbollah no longer effective proxies for Iran](#), 27 October 2024

¹⁷¹ YouTube, [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's statement from the Golan Heights](#), 9 December 2024

Iran, Hezbollah and Syria after Assad

The Financial Times in December 2024 cited unnamed Iranian officials as saying that Iran was increasingly “frustrated” with Assad, that he had been unable to halt Israeli air strikes in Syria in 2024 (see below) and that he was moving away from Iran in his rapprochement with Arab Gulf States from 2023.¹⁷²

Iran has denied having any military presence in Syria since Islamic State lost its Syrian territory (in 2019).¹⁷³ In December, Iran flew a reported 4,000 Iranians out of Syria. It is unclear whether these were civilians or government or military personnel.¹⁷⁴

Following the fall of Assad, the Iranian foreign ministry said that it would seek to maintain ties with Syria. Statements made by the Iranian ambassador to Syria no longer described HTS as a terrorist group, which it did when Assad was in power, signalling a desire to advance ties.¹⁷⁵

HTS leader Sharaa said in December 2024 that “Syria cannot continue without relations with an important regional country like Iran”.¹⁷⁶

Analysts view Iran as likely to seek influence and presence in Syria’s minority groups.¹⁷⁷ In December 2024 Iran’s supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, said that “a strong, honourable group will [...] emerge in Syria” from “today’s youth”.¹⁷⁸ Some critical voices have been raised in public within Iran over whether its strategy of supporting groups overseas is an effective one.¹⁷⁹

Hezbollah has signalled it will now focus on its position in Lebanon.¹⁸⁰ It has also criticised Israeli military action in southern Syria.¹⁸¹

3.2

Russia

Russian backing for Assad

Russia militarily supported the Assad regime since 2015 when it [intervened in support of Syrian government action against Islamic State](#). Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, said at the time that it was doing so “at the invitation

¹⁷² Financial Times, [Iran “lost faith” in Assad before his ousting](#), 8 December 2024

¹⁷³ BBC Monitoring, [Iran says Assad government ignored advice for ‘political solution’](#), 8 December 2024

¹⁷⁴ FT, [Ayatollah Khamenei defiant \[...\]](#), 11 December 2024

¹⁷⁵ Tehran Times, [Iran on Syria: people will decide the future](#), 8 December 2024; BBC Monitoring, [Iran’s Syria ambassador strikes positive note on post-Assad era](#), 8 December 2024

¹⁷⁶ RFE, [Syria’s de-facto leader wants to maintain ‘respectful’ ties with Iran, Russia](#), 29 December 2024

¹⁷⁷ Al Monitor, [Despite Assad’s departure, Iran sees opportunity \[...\]](#), 13 December 2024

¹⁷⁸ Khamenei.IR, [Courageous Syrian youth will expel Zionists from Syria](#), 22 December 2024

¹⁷⁹ New York Times, [The Syrian upheaval has Iran’s leaders reeling too](#), 13 December 2024

¹⁸⁰ BBC Monitoring, [Hezbollah outlines focus of movement over next stage](#), 15 December 2024

¹⁸¹ BBC Monitoring, [Hezbollah issues first statement since toppling of Assad](#), 11 December 2024

of the legitimate Syrian government”.¹⁸² Observers questioned Russia’s motives, however, and accused the Russian Government of intervening with the primary objective of sustaining President Assad in power.¹⁸³

Russian military presence in Syria and region

By supporting President Assad, over the last decade Russia has been able to expand its existing military presence in the region, securing a permanent naval presence at the Syrian base of Tartus on the Mediterranean coast and at Hmeimim air base in Latakia.¹⁸⁴ According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies’ Military Balance 2024, 4,000 Russian military personnel were based in the country, although there have been reports that many of those personnel may have been re-deployed to Ukraine.¹⁸⁵

Having a strategic military presence in Syria has allowed Russia to project power into Africa, in particular in support of its operations in Libya and the Sahel, and to secure access to the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, thereby pressuring NATO’s southern borders.¹⁸⁶

What does Assad’s fall mean for Russia?

The fall of Assad is widely considered, among Western observers at least, as “a strategic political defeat” for Russia.¹⁸⁷ It raises questions over Russia’s ability to exert and maintain influence in areas of strategic importance and Russia’s reputation as a credible ally and protector.¹⁸⁸

Russia’s military bases

On 8 December 2024, Russian State news agency TASS reported that the government had secured an agreement with armed opposition leaders in Syria for the security of Russian military bases and personnel in the country.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸² New York Times, “[Russian Foreign Minister Defends Airstrikes in Syria](#)”, 1 October 2015

¹⁸³ RUSI Analysis, [Russia’s war plan in Syria](#), 2 October 2015

¹⁸⁴ Russia has had a presence at Tartus since the early 1970s. It was only in 2017 that a long-term lease agreement was signed, and Russia’s military presence was significantly expanded at Tartus and a base established at Hmeimim (see Radio Free Europe, [How Assad’s fall threatens Russia’s military influence in Syria and across the region](#), 9 December 2024); BBC Monitoring, [Importance of Russia’s military bases in Syria and how it could keep them](#), 12 December 2024

¹⁸⁵ International Institute for Strategic Studies, Military Balance 2024; [Rebel gains in Syria put Russia on the back foot](#), Carnegie, 6 December 2024, Politico, [Assad’s downfall](#), 9 December 2024

¹⁸⁶ Russian bases in Syria have been used as a staging post for its Africa operations and as a repair and replenishment base for its naval assets. Institute for the Study of War, [Africa File Special Edition: Syria’s potential impact on Russia’s Africa and Mediterranean ambitions](#), 4 December 2024

¹⁸⁷ Institute for the Study of War, [Russian offensive campaign assessment](#), 8 December 2024

¹⁸⁸ As above. Questions over the reliability of Russia as an effective security partner have already been raised within the context of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 after Russian peacekeepers failed to prevent Azerbaijan’s military takeover of the disputed region (see Commons Library research briefing, [What is happening in Nagorno-Karabakh?](#))

¹⁸⁹ TASS Russian state news agency, [Assad in Moscow, security of Russian bases](#), 8 December 2024

Opposition forces are in full control of Latakia province where both bases are located.¹⁹⁰

However, there have also been widespread reports that plans for the evacuation of Russian military assets in the country are in place. Russia's naval fleet has been moved offshore and preparatory work is reportedly underway at Hmeimim air base and other sites.¹⁹¹ In February, the UK Royal Navy reported that some ammunition had been withdrawn from Syria.¹⁹²

The loss of Russia's military bases in Syria would have significant implications for [Russian military operations in Africa](#), having been used as a logistical staging post, and for its presence in the Mediterranean. The latter has already been undermined by Russia's inability to use its Black Sea fleet in the Mediterranean after Turkey closed the Turkish Straits linking the Black Sea and the Mediterranean at the beginning of the Ukraine conflict.¹⁹³ However, in February 2025 Russia reached an agreement for a new base in Sudan on the Red Sea.¹⁹⁴

In December HTS leader Ahmad al-Sharaa said that "we do not want Russia to leave Syria in the way that some wish", citing the importance of Russian-supplied arms and management of power plants. However, he said he expected Russian forces to withdraw.¹⁹⁵

Reports in February and March 2025 suggest that Russia may be able to retain some of its bases in Syria following negotiations with the HTS authorities. The HTS interim defence minister said that Russia's attitude towards it had "improved significantly" since December and "if we get benefits" from Russia retaining a presence, it would be allowed.¹⁹⁶

Reuters news-agency reports from unnamed officials that Israel has been lobbying the US to ensure Syria remains decentralised, including through keeping Russia bases. This reflects Israeli mistrust of HTS and Turkey. The US and Israel have not commented.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁰ TASS Russian state news agency, "[Functioning of Russian bases \[...\]](#)", 9 December 2024

¹⁹¹ Institute for the Study of War, [Russian offensive campaign assessment](#), 10 December 2024; BBC Verify/News, [Russian ships move from Syria base](#), 11 December 2024 and BBC News, [Russia moving equipment at Syrian bases satellite images show](#), 18 December 2024

¹⁹² Reuters, [UK tracks Russian ships carrying ammunition from Syria](#), 15 February 2025

¹⁹³ Under the terms of the Montreux Convention, Turkey has sovereignty over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits (the Turkish Straits) connecting the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. In February 2022 Turkey closed the straits to all warships (except those returning to their bases in the Black Sea), in an effort to preserve the naval balance of power in the region. In early January 2024, the Turkish government confirmed that it would not allow passage of the vessels through the Straits for as long as the war continues, (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, [Statement regarding disinformation about UK mine hunting ships](#), 2 January 2024). An explanation of the Convention can be found in The Conversation, [What the Montreux Convention is \[...\]](#), March 2022

¹⁹⁴ Al Monitor, [Following Styria losses, Russia seeks to double down on Africa](#), 22 February 2025

¹⁹⁵ RFE, [Syria's de-facto leader wants to maintain 'respectful' ties with Iran, Russia](#), 29 December 2024

¹⁹⁶ Washington Post, [Syria could allow Russia to keep its bases, new defence minister says](#), 6 February 2025

¹⁹⁷ Reuters, [Israel lobbies US to keep Russian bases in "weak" Syria, sources say](#), 28 February 2025

Neither Russia nor HTS have confirmed any agreements.¹⁹⁸

Other Russia-HTS engagement

Foreign Affairs analysts note that a desire of HTS to diversify its allies beyond Turkey and a lack of US engagement (it has not removed any sanctions, for example), has created an opening for Russia to engage with the interim authorities and potentially keep its bases.¹⁹⁹

In January 2025, HTS raised possibly requesting compensation from Russia. The HTS interim foreign minister, Asaad al-Shibani, said Syria owes Russia around US\$8 billion.²⁰⁰

In February the interim foreign minister said that the “Syrian people have wounds and pain that they suffered at the hands of” Russia and Iran and Syria “must feel comfortable with this relationship”.²⁰¹

In February and March President Putin spoke to the HTS leader and HTS-appointed interim president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, offering cooperation on a “whole range of issues”.²⁰² However, there are reports that Russia has privately criticised the new Syrian authorities for the March 2025 attacks on Alawites and the potential rise of armed jihadist groups.²⁰³

In both February and March Russia has also delivered Syrian banknotes to Damascus, assisting Syria’s liquidity crisis.²⁰⁴ However, Reuters news agency reports that Syrian authorities plan to print currency in the UAE and Germany in the future, removing Russia’s role. This partly reflects the lessening of European and American sanctions (see section 5).²⁰⁵

Russia and Syria

- Italian Institute for International Political Studies, [Russia’s evolving footprint in the Middle East and North Africa](#), February 205
- Chatham House, [Russia has lost prestige after the fall of Assad. It has also been freed from a difficult partner](#), December 2024
- [What Assad’s fall means for Russia](#), BBC Monitoring, December 2024

¹⁹⁸ Bloomberg, [Russia set to keep reduced military presence in Syria](#), 17 February 2025

¹⁹⁹ Wall Street Journal, [Russia is chasing a deal to keep its military bases in Syria](#), 6 March 2025

²⁰⁰ Financial Times, [Syria asks Russia for reparations](#), 29 January 2025

²⁰¹ AP News, [Syria’s interim foreign minister says Russia-Iran ties to Assad \[...\]](#), 12 February 2025; Reuters, [Putin offers Syria’s Sharaa support and cooperation](#), 20 March 2025

²⁰² Al Monitor, [Russia’s Putin and Syria’s Sharaa hold first call since Assad fall](#), 12 February 2025

²⁰³ Reuters, [Russia lambasts Syria’s new leaders \[...\]](#), 13 March 2025

²⁰⁴ Reuters, [Syria receives local currency printed in Russia](#), 14 February 2025; Reuters, [Syria gets new cash shipments from Russia amid warming ties](#), 6 March 2025

²⁰⁵ Reuters, [Syria plans to print current in UAE and Germany, ending Russian role](#), 16 May 2025

- Wilson Center, [With Syria's collapse Russian's regional play disintegrates](#), December 2024

3.3

Turkey

What are Turkey's aims in Syria?

Turkey has supported the opposition to Assad, with it primarily working with the Syrian National Army (SNA). In 2016 it intervened militarily in the conflict.

Turkey has been focused on four objectives:

- defeating Islamic State/Daesh
- combatting Kurdish groups it says are tied to terrorist activity by the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in Turkey (see above, section 2.5)
- creating the conditions to allow for the return of Syrian refugees (Syria hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees, at 2.9 million)
- implementing UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015) for a political settlement to the conflict.²⁰⁶

In October 2023, the Turkish parliament voted to extend Turkey's military operations in Syria and Iraq for a further two years.²⁰⁷

In 2023 and 2024, Turkey was in talks on potentially re-establishing diplomatic relations with the Assad government. These failed. Turkey asked President Assad to take steps to contain the Kurdish-led groups that it views as linked to the PKK in Turkey and to allow for the return of Syrian refugees. President Assad asked Turkey to withdraw its forces from Syria and end its support for armed groups in Syria.²⁰⁸

The failure of these talks is reportedly one reason why Turkey backed the HTS offensive in November 2024.²⁰⁹ The Turkish Government has publicly rejected the claim.²¹⁰

²⁰⁶ DW, [Erdogan has interests in Syria's reignited war](#), 4 December 2024; Atlantic Council, [What does Turkey gain from the rebel offensive in Syria?](#), 5 December 2024

²⁰⁷ France 24, [Turkey extends Syria, Iraq operations by another two years](#), 17 October 2023

²⁰⁸ BBC Monitoring, [What hurdles face Syria normalisation?](#), 16 July 2024

²⁰⁹ France 24, [Turkey could benefit from rebel offensive in Syria: experts](#), 12 December 2024

²¹⁰ AP, [Where Turkey stands as Syrian government falls to opposition insurgents](#), 8 December 2024

Turkey and Syria

- Chatham House, [Iran-Turkey rivalry in a connected region](#), 7 July 2025
- Arab Center Washington DC, [Turkey's repositioning in the Middle East's emerging order](#), 17 June 2025
- Foreign Affairs, [The coming clash over Syria: Israel and Turkey are on a collision course](#), 6 May 2025
- Crisis Group, [Turkey's tightrope in post-Assad Syria](#), February 2025
- Foreign Policy, [Turkey hasn't won anything yet in Syria](#), January 2025
- Royal United Services Institute, [Can Turkey stabilise Syria?](#), January 2025
- BBC Monitoring, [What Assad's fall means for Turkey](#), December 2024
- Wilson Center, [What Syria's opposition resurgence means for Ankara](#), December 2024
- Stimson, [What Turkey hopes to gain from the HTS offensive in Syria](#), December 2024

Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)

The [Kurdistan Workers' Party](#) (PKK), has waged an insurgency since 1984 against the Turkish state, seeking greater cultural and political rights and an autonomous or independent Kurdish state. The conflict has resulted in nearly 40,000 deaths. The PKK is proscribed as a terrorist organisation by the UK, United States and the European Union.²¹¹

Although some ceasefires were in place in the 2000s, there were substantial hostilities after 2015 and increased Turkish military activity against Kurdish groups in northern Syria and Iraq, which Turkey argues are linked to terrorist activity in the country.²¹²

As set out above, in section 2.5, the PKK has agreed to disarm in 2025. The SDF says talks will not affect them.

Turkey considers the PKK to have links to Kurdish groups in north-east Syria, including the [People's Defense Units](#) (YPG). The YPG forms part of the wider Syrian Democratic Forces coalition (see section 2.5), though the US, UK and EU consider the PKK a terrorist group.²¹³

²¹¹ Commons Library, [Turkey under Erdoğan: recent developments and the 2023 elections](#), section 1.4

²¹² Washington Institute, [Turkey's war in northern Iraq: By the numbers](#), 28 July 2022

²¹³ SWP, [Turkey's military operations in Syria and Iraq](#), 30 May 2022. Home Office, [Proscribed terrorist groups or organisations](#), 26 November 2021.

In November 2024 the UK Government said it recognises Turkey’s “legitimate security interests in Syria” and says it must “protect civilian lives and infrastructure, and to avoid destabilising activity”.²¹⁴

Statements after Assad’s fall in 2024

In response to a question on whether Turkey would provide military support or training to Syria, in December the Turkish Defence minister said that the country is “ready to provide the necessary support if the new administration requests”. The minister also reiterated Turkey would act against the PKK.²¹⁵

In December 2024 Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said that Syria “will be cleared of the PKK and Daesh [Islamic State] and that the “elements within the YPG/PKK that are not Syrian and have the status of international terrorists [...] must leave” Syria.²¹⁶

In February 2025 Turkey said it would be willing to work with Jordan, Syria and Iraq to counter Islamic State. Its Foreign Minister said this would allow the United States to cut its ties with the SDF.²¹⁷ Jordan and Iraq have not publicly commented on the proposal.²¹⁸ For US-SDF ties, see section 6.

In December 2024 Turkey reopened its embassy in Syria.²¹⁹ In February HTS appointed interim Syrian president, Al-Sharaa, visited Turkey for talks with President Erdogan.²²⁰

Analysts have also noted tensions between Turkey and Israel in post-Assad Syria, where both are seeking greater influence and opposite ends (Israel has expressed concern about the HTS-led Government and is seeking a divided Syria). They also note that both Israeli and Turkish power in the region has risen as Iranian power has fallen, particularly after the Israel-Iran conflicts of 2024 and 2025.²²¹

In early 2025, Israel and Turkey were in discussions on establishing a deconfliction mechanism, to avoid any potential military clashes.²²²

²¹⁴ PQ 15621 [[Syria: Turkey](#)] , 28 November 2024

²¹⁵ Reuters, [Turkey ready to offer military training to Syria \[...\]](#), 15 December 2024

²¹⁶ BBC Monitoring, [What are Turkey’s plans for northeast Syria?](#), 24 December 2024

²¹⁷ ABC News, [Turkey says it will join with neighbours to fight the Islamic State group](#), 2 February 2025

²¹⁸ Al Monitor, [Turkey escalates push to replace Kurds \[...\]](#), 12 February 2025

²¹⁹ AA, [Turkish embassy in Damascus resumes operations after 12 years](#), 14 December 2024

²²⁰ Al Jazeera, [Syria’s al-Sharaa, Turkey’s Erdogan talk Kurdish fighters \[...\]](#), 4 February 2025

²²¹ Financial Times, [Turkey and Israel risk sliding towards confrontation](#), 3 July 2025

²²² BBC Monitoring, [Turkish foreign minister talks “deconfliction” with Israel over Syria](#), 10 April 2025

3.4

Israel and the occupied Golan Heights

History of Israel-Syria relations

Israel and Syria have technically been in a state of war since 1948. There were direct military engagements in the Arab Israeli wars of 1948, 1967, and 1973. They were both also participants in the Lebanese Civil War (1975 to 1990). Syria has not recognised the state of Israel, and talks to do so in the 1990s and 2008 did not succeed (one reason being Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, see below).²²³ There was no direct conflict during the Syrian civil war between Assad forces and Israel, however.

During the Syrian civil war Israel conducted air strikes on Lebanese [Hezbollah](#) and the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC, an Iranian force that works overseas to support armed and terrorist groups).²²⁴

In 2025, there have been reports that the United States and Israel are seeking for the declared government of Syria to establish diplomatic relations with Israel, with one reason being a shared hostility to Iranian influence in Syria.²²⁵ However, the position of the Golan Heights (see below) is likely to offer a challenge to establishing formal relations as Israel says this must be recognised as part of its territory. Engagement may instead focus on reducing conflict in border regions.²²⁶

Status of the Golan Heights and Israeli settlements

In 1967 Israel captured the [Golan Heights](#), in south-western Syria, in the Third Arab Israeli War. The Golan Heights are strategically important, being a site of high ground and adding depth to Israeli or Syrian defences.²²⁷

The Israeli Knesset (parliament) passed a law annexing them in 1980. Around 20,000 Israeli settlers and 20,000 Syrians live in the Golan. Syria, under Assad, said it would not agree to a peace agreement with Israel until Israel withdraws.²²⁸

On 15 December, the Israeli Government said it would expand the number of Israeli settlements in the Golan Heights, doubling its population. It cited the security situation in Syria. Prime Minister Netanyahu said:

²²³ Reuters, [Timeline of Israeli-Syrian relations](#), 2 July 2008

²²⁴ See Commons Library, [Syria's civil war in 2023: Assad back in the Arab League](#), section 2.5

²²⁵ New York Times, [After decades of hostility, Israeli-Syrian relations begin to thaw](#), 9 July 2025

²²⁶ Asharq al-Awsat, [Israel ties Syria normalisation to retaining Golan Heights](#), 29 June 2025; Israeli Foreign Office, [FM Sa'ar meets with Austrian foreign minister](#), 30 June 2025; Reuters, [Syria and Israel in direct talks focused on security](#), 28 May 2025

²²⁷ BBC News, [Golan Heights profile](#), 29 August 2023

²²⁸ As above

Strengthening the Golan is strengthening the State of Israel, and it is especially important at this time. We will continue to hold onto it, cause it to blossom, and settle in it.²²⁹

UN Security Council Resolution 497 (1981) says the Israeli legislation of 1980 is “null and void and without international legal effect” and “demands” that Israel rescind the legislation.²³⁰

In 2019 the US recognised the Golan Heights as Israeli territory. The UK Government does not recognise their annexation by Israel.²³¹

Israel and the separation zone, from December 2024

In early December 2024, Israel Defence Forces (IDF) reinforced their positions on the Golan Heights and occupied some posts in the [demilitarised buffer zone](#) between Israel and Syria. The zone was established in 1974, after the Fourth Arab Israeli War.²³²

The 1974 agreement, endorsed by the UN Security Council, establishes a line of separation in southern Syria, with Israeli forces allowed to remain west of what is termed “line A-1” and Syrian forces to the east of “line A”. The UN Disengagement Observer Force is stationed in the separation area.²³³

Media reports suggest Israel had been strengthening its positions in the frontier area earlier in 2024.²³⁴

In December 2024 Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that Assad government forces had withdrawn from the border, and this marked a collapse of the agreement.²³⁵ In a separate letter to the UN Security Council, the Israeli representative to the UN said the country “remains committed to the framework of the 1974 Disengagement Agreement”.²³⁶

The Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz said some armed groups from Syria had “infiltrated areas near the border” in violation of the agreement. He said the IDF had taken “limited and temporary control”.²³⁷

In subsequent statements, Israel has updated its presence from “temporary” to “indefinitely” in some areas:

²²⁹ CNN, [Netanyahu says he spoke to Trump about need for “victory” \[...\]](#), 15 December 2024

²³⁰ [UN Security Council Resolution 497 \(1981\)](#)

²³¹ Trump White House, [Remarks by President Trump at signing of presidential proclamation \[...\]](#), 26 March 2019; FCDO, [UK position on the Golan Heights has not changed](#), 27 March 2019; PQ 18888 [[Golan Heights: Syria](#)], 17 December 2024

²³² Times of Israel, [IDF deploys in Golan buffer zone](#), 8 December 2024

²³³ [UNSC 338 \(1973\)](#), [UNSC Resolution 350 \(1974\)](#) and [S/11032/Add.1, May 1974](#); UN, [Unanimously adopting resolution 2782 \(2025\), security council renews mandate of force monitoring Israel-Syria disengagement agreement](#), 30 June 2025

²³⁴ AP, [UN force says Israeli work on Syrian frontier saw “severe violations” \[...\]](#), 12 November 2024

²³⁵ YouTube, [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s statement \[...\]](#), 9 December 2024, at 00:40

²³⁶ UN Security Council, [S/2024/887, Letter from \[...\] Israel \[...\]](#) (PDF), 9 December 2024

²³⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [FM Sa’ar briefs foreign journalists](#), 9 December 2024

- On 9 December Israel said the IDF had temporarily deployed “in a few points and in a limited capacity east of Line A, focusing on specific locations where defensive measures are necessary”.²³⁸
- On 11 December the Israeli Defence Minister, Israel Katz, said that he has ordered a “sterile defensive zone” to be created in southern Syria, without a permanent Israeli presence, to limit any potential threats to Israel.²³⁹
- On 13 December, Mr Katz told Israeli troops to be “prepare[d] to remain” throughout the winter.²⁴⁰
- On 28 January, Mr Katz said that the IDF will remain on the “summit of the Hermon and the security zone indefinitely to ensure the security of the communities of the Golan Heights and the north”. He said “we will not allow hostile forces to establish themselves in the security zone in southern Syria” or be reliant on others for Israeli security.²⁴¹
- On 11 March, Mr Katz said that “the IDF is prepared to stay in Syria for an unlimited amount of time. We will hold the security area in Hermon and make sure that all the security zone in southern Syria is demilitarized and clear of weapons and threats”.²⁴²

In February, it was reported for the first time that IDF came under fire when in the buffer zone. Armed groups linked to Assad claimed responsibility.²⁴³

In June, rockets were also fired into the Golan Heights from Syria for the first time since Assad’s fall. Israel shelled an area in response. The responsible group is unknown and Palestinian Hamas has denied any links ([Hamas has had a presence in Syria](#)).²⁴⁴

In July, the IDF also announced the detention of three individuals it said were linked to Iran in southern Syria. The monitoring group Syrian Observatory for Human Rights say they were Palestinians.²⁴⁵

Israeli attacks in Syria from December 2024

In December 2024 the IDF confirmed it conducted aerial attacks on “strategic capabilities left by the Syrian military so it will not fall into the hands of the jihadists”. Prime Minister Netanyahu said that the new Syrian authorities must

²³⁸ UN Security Council, [S/2024/887, Letter from \[...\] Israel \[...\]](#) (PDF), 9 December 2024

²³⁹ Times of Israel, [PM: Israel wants “correct” ties with new Syrian regime](#), 11 December 2024

²⁴⁰ Telegraph, [Israeli troops to remain in Syria over winter](#), 13 December 2024

²⁴¹ Times of Israel, [Defense minister, in Syria buffer zone, says IDF to stay indefinitely](#), 28 January 2025

²⁴² Times of Israel, [Atop Mt Hermon, Katz says Syrian leader will see indefinite IDF \[...\]](#), , 11 March 2025

²⁴³ Times of Israel, [IDF troops operating in Syria buffer zone come under fire \[...\]](#), 1 February 2025

²⁴⁴ BBC Monitoring, [Unknown armed group claims rocket attack on Golan](#), 4 June 2025; AP, [Israel says rocket fired from Syria for the first time since Bashar al-Assad’s fall](#), 4 June 2025

²⁴⁵ Al Monitor, [Israel announces capture of “Iranian cell” in Syria](#), 2 July 2025

not allow Iran to re-establish itself in Syria or allow the transfer of Iranian arms.²⁴⁶

In December Foreign Minister Gideon Saar said Israel had struck suspected chemical weapon and long-range missile sites.²⁴⁷ On 10 December the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said it had conducted 350 air strikes and destroyed between 70% and 80% of former Assad government military capabilities. This included airbases, air defences, weapons, and production sites.²⁴⁸

These were not the first confirmed attacks by Israel in 2024: in September it launched a raid against an Iranian missile manufacturing plant in Syria.²⁴⁹

The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) monitors military activity. From 8 to 16 December, it documented 498 Israeli air strikes across Syria.²⁵⁰ The Armed Conflict and Location Event Data (ACLED) Project records around 100 Israeli air strikes in the first half of December 2024, around a third of the total across the whole of 2024.²⁵¹

In February 2025 the IDF said it conducted an airstrike on an arms depot it linked to Hamas near Damascus and at other sites in southern Syria.²⁵² Defence Minister Israel Katz said Israel was “now attacking strongly in southern Syria as part of the new policy we have defined of pacifying southern Syria”.²⁵³ ACLED reports “at least” 27 Israeli operations in January and February 2025, targeting military and civilian facilities.²⁵⁴

UN statements that the 1974 agreement remains in force

On 10 December the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, said the Israeli action represented a “very troubling development” and “needs to stop”.²⁵⁵

The UN Secretary General has said the 1974 agreement remains in force and said “all unauthorised presence in the area of separation” should end:

The Secretary-General stresses that the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement remains in force, condemns all actions that would be inconsistent with the Agreement, and calls on the parties to the Agreement to uphold their obligations under this instrument, including by ending all unauthorized

²⁴⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [PM Netanyahu at the Kirya in Tel Aviv](#), 10 December 2024

²⁴⁷ Israel National News, [\[...\] Israel temporarily took over Syrian areas \[...\]](#), 9 December 2024

²⁴⁸ Times of Israel, [In historic campaign across Syria \[...\]](#), 10 December 2024

²⁴⁹ Haaretz, [Israeli army confirms elite unit raided Syrian missile production facility](#), 1 January 2025

²⁵⁰ SOHR, [Nearly 500 airstrikes destroy the remaining \[...\]](#), 18 December 2024

²⁵¹ ACLED, [Syria: Israeli airstrikes reach an all-time high](#), 19 December 2024

²⁵² Times of Israel, [IDF says it carried out airstrike on Hamas arms depot \[...\]](#), 8 February 2025

²⁵³ ABC News, [Israel says it is conducting strikes in southern Syria](#), 25 February 2025

²⁵⁴ ACLED, [Regional overview March 2025](#), 7 March 2025

²⁵⁵ UN Office of the Special Envoy for Syria, [UN Special envoy for Syria \[...\]](#), 10 December 2024

presence in the area of separation and refraining from any action that would undermine the ceasefire and stability in Golan.²⁵⁶

The UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) argues Israeli actions in December in the separation zone represents a violation of the agreement:

UNDOF has informed its Israeli counterparts that these actions constitute a violation of the 1974 Disengagement Agreement. UNDOF urges all parties to respect their obligations under the Agreement, cease all military activities in the area of separation, and uphold the terms of the 1974 agreement to preserve stability in the Golan.²⁵⁷

Syrian and international response

On 15 December HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa said Israeli forces “have clearly crossed the disengagement line in Syria, which threatens a new unjustified escalation”.²⁵⁸ He has said he is committed to the 1974 agreement.²⁵⁹

In January 2025 he said he would welcome a UN force to monitor the zone and that the removal of Iran and Hezbollah from Syria means Israel no longer has a reason to remain.²⁶⁰

On 10 December 2024 UK Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, said he had spoken to Foreign Minister Saar on 9 December in respect of IDF operations and said there “are legitimate security concerns for Israel, particularly in the context of a country that has housed [Islamic State], Daesh and al-Qaeda”.²⁶¹

In January 2025 the UK said it expected Israel to adhere to the commitment its presence in the buffer zone was “limited and temporary”:

Israel have said their presence in the buffer zone in the Golan Heights will be limited and temporary, and we have been clear that we expect them to adhere to this commitment. Israel's presence in the buffer zone must not become permanent.

The UK's position on the Golan Heights remains clear: they are occupied territory, and we do not recognise Israel's annexation.²⁶²

France has called for Israel to withdraw from the buffer zone.²⁶³ In December 2024 the US State Department says it wants the 1974 agreement upheld.²⁶⁴

²⁵⁶ UN, [Note to correspondents: Syria](#), 12 December 2024

²⁵⁷ UN Peacekeeping, [UNDOF press statement](#), 13 December 2024

²⁵⁸ Al Jazeera, [Israel intensifies Syria attacks, but HTS leader says \[...\]](#), 15 December 2024

²⁵⁹ The Times, [Jolani: Syria won't be used as a launchpad for attacks on Israel](#), 16 December 2024

²⁶⁰ Reuters, [Syria's de facto lead says country ready to welcome UN forces \[...\]](#), 16 January 2025

²⁶¹ HC Deb, [9 December 2024](#), c700

²⁶² HL 4180 [\[Syria: Israel\]](#), 28 January 2025

²⁶³ Le Monde, [France tells Israel to withdraw its forces \[...\]](#), 11 December 2024

²⁶⁴ US Department of State, [Department press briefing](#), 10 December 2024

Arab states, as well as Iran and Turkey, have been critical of Israeli military action as a violation of Syrian territory and international law.²⁶⁵

Israeli statements on southern Syria

In February, Prime Minister Netanyahu said that “we will not allow HTS forces or the new Syrian army to enter the area south of Damascus”. He said there should be a demilitarization of provinces in southern Syria:

We demand the complete demilitarization of southern Syria in the provinces of Quneitra, Daraa and Suwayda from the forces of the new regime. Likewise, we will not tolerate any threat to the Druze community in southern Syria.²⁶⁶

In May 2025, the Prime Minister reiterated that Israel would not allow the deployment of Syrian forces south of Damascus.²⁶⁷

The February statement led to protests in Syria and criticism by some Islamist groups against HTS for allowing continued Israeli strikes. HTS has criticised Israeli actions (see above).²⁶⁸

Israeli call for attacks on Kurdish-led forces to stop

The Israeli Foreign Minister said that attacks on Kurdish forces in the north east of Syria must stop and the “international community must protect those who fought bravely against ISIS” as well as other minority groups.²⁶⁹ Israel has said there was “no justification for the continuation of Turkish aggression”.²⁷⁰

Israel and the Druze

In March, Israel reiterated that it would act to protect the Syrian Druze community, including in Jaramana, a suburb of the capital Damascus.²⁷¹

As set out in section 2.2, above, Israel launched a “warning operation” against militant groups planning attacks against Druze in Damascus in April and May 2025. This included a strike near to the Presidential Palace. The

²⁶⁵ AA, [Arab countries condemn Israel's seizure of buffer zone in Syria's Golan Heights](#), 10 December 2024; Iran Foreign Ministry, [Iran slams repeated Israeli raids on Syrian infrastructure](#), 10 December 2024; Times of Israel, [Qatar, Turkey, Egypt condemn Israel's activity \[...\]](#), 10 December 2024

²⁶⁶ VOA, [Netanyahu says Israel won't allow Syrian forces 'south of Damascus'](#), 23 February 2025

²⁶⁷ Reuters, [Israel strikes near Syria's presidential palace as "message"](#), 2 May 2025

²⁶⁸ BBC Monitoring, [Protests held in southern Syria against Israel PM's comment on Druze](#), 25 February 2025; BBC Monitoring, [Islamists warn of possible Israeli invasion \[...\]](#), 26 February 2025

²⁶⁹ Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [FM Sa'ar briefs foreign journalists](#), 9 December 2024

²⁷⁰ Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Israel rejects Turkish statements \[...\]](#), 17 December 2024

²⁷¹ Times of Israel, [Netanyahu and Katz direct IDF to "prepare to defend" Syrian Druze suburb \[...\]](#), 1 March 2025; Reuters, [After violence in Syria, Israel says it is prepared to defend Syria's Druze](#), 10 March 2025; Reuters, [Israel says it will let Syrian Druze workers cross \[...\]](#), 9 March 2025

Israeli Government says it has a “commitment to the [Druze] community in Israel and to protecting their brothers in Syria”.²⁷²

Israel and Syria

- Atlantic Council, [Why al-Sharaa’s success in Syria is good for Israel and the US](#), July 2025
- Royal United Services Institute, [Why is Israel escalating its strikes against Syria?](#), May 2025
- Atlantic Council, [Israel is making a miscalculation in southern Syria](#), April 2025
- Carnegie Endowment, [The pull of partition: Israel’s actions in Syria](#), March 2025
- International Crisis Group, [How Israel’s overreach in Syria may backfire](#), March 2025
- Washington Institute, [Avoiding an Israel-Syria showdown: part 1](#) and [part 2](#), March 2025

²⁷² BBC Monitoring, [Israeli army says it conducted “warning operation” in Syria](#), 29 April 2025

4 Political settlement and declarations of interim government

Al-Sharaa, previously leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has been declared interim president. In December, an initial transitional government was declared, which was followed by a further government in March 2025.

International actors have called for inclusive negotiations on Syria's political future under UN frameworks. However, as set out above, the Syrian opposition to Assad was not united, and some violence has occurred.

4.1 UN Security Council Resolution 2254

The UN-led Geneva peace process, based on [UN Security Council Resolution \(UNSCR\) 2254 \(2015\)](#) (PDF), seeks to negotiate a Syrian-led political transition to end the conflict. It also calls for the territorial integrity of Syria to be retained, for a new constitution to be negotiated, and for free and fair elections to be held, supervised by the UN. The Security Council (hyperlinks added):

Reconfirms its endorsement of the [Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012](#), endorses the “Vienna Statements” in pursuit of the full implementation of the Geneva Communiqué, as the basis for a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition in order to end the conflict in Syria, and stresses that the Syrian people will decide the future of Syria [...]

Expresses its support, in this regard, for a Syrian-led political process that is facilitated by the United Nations and, within a target of six months, establishes credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance and sets a schedule and process for drafting a new constitution, and further expresses its support for free and fair elections, pursuant to the new constitution, to be held within 18 months and administered under supervision of the United Nations, to the satisfaction of the governance and to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability, with all Syrians, including members of the diaspora, eligible to participate.²⁷³

Successive rounds of UN-led talks failed to make substantial progress on a peace settlement or the development of a new Syrian constitution. The last talks in Geneva on a new constitution took place in 2022.²⁷⁴

²⁷³ [UN Security Council Resolution 2254 \(2015\)](#) (PDF), paras 2 and 4

²⁷⁴ Al Monitor, [UN envoy urges Syria to rejoin Geneva constitution talks](#), 17 March 2024

The continued failure of UN-led peace and constitutional talks allowed other diplomatic paths pursued by Russia, Turkey and Iran. Since 2017, Russia, Iran and Turkey have participated in talks in Astana (formerly NurSultan, the capital of Kazakhstan). While the US participated as an observer, it criticised them as undermining the Geneva process. The process has had some success in de-escalating the conflict militarily but has not found a political solution.²⁷⁵

Iran and Russia may also no longer have the influence in Syria they had under Assad, limiting their ability to facilitate negotiations.

What has the UK said on the resolution?

On 2 December 2024 the UK issued a joint statement with the United States, France and Germany urging de-escalation and talks under UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015):

We are closely monitoring developments in Syria and urge de-escalation by all parties and the protection of civilians and infrastructure to prevent further displacement and disruption of humanitarian access. The current escalation only underscores the urgent need for a Syrian-led political solution to the conflict, in line with UNSCR 2254.²⁷⁶

The UK representative to the UN Security Council, James Kariuki, reiterated this position to the council on 3 December 2024.²⁷⁷

Astana members and Arab states on the resolution

In a statement of 8 December 2024, the foreign ministers of Astana process countries (Turkey, Russia and Iran) and Arab states, including Qatar, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, said there should be a halt to military operations to prepare for the launch of negotiations under the Security Council resolution:

The Ministers stressed the need to stop military operations in preparation for launching a comprehensive political process, based on Security Council Resolution 2254, to put an end to the military escalation that leads to the shedding of more innocent and defenseless blood and prolonging the crisis, and to preserve the unity, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria and to protect it from slipping into chaos and terrorism and ensure the voluntary return of refugees and the displaced.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁵ Sada, [The Astana process six years on](#), 1 August 2023

²⁷⁶ FCDO, [Joint statements on developments in Syria](#), 2 December 2024

²⁷⁷ FCDO, [Only a Syrian-led political solution will resolve this conflict](#), 3 December 2024

²⁷⁸ Qatar News Agency, [Joint statement by foreign ministers of Arab countries and the Astana process](#), 8 December 2024

What have others said on the resolution?

- European Union: High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Kaja Kallas, has called for all stakeholders to engage with UNSCR 2254 (2015) and ensure an “orderly, peaceful and inclusive transition”.²⁷⁹
- Russia: says it maintains contacts with all Syrian opposition groups and “strongly supports” efforts to establish a political process under the UN resolution.²⁸⁰
- China: backs a “Syrian-owned” process under UNSC 2254 (2015).²⁸¹
- Arab states: Arab League states had begun to re-engage with Assad from 2023. Since his fall, Arab states with embassies have kept these open (these include Saudi Arabia and the UAE) while others have now reopened them (such as Qatar).²⁸² Eight Arab countries have issued a joint statement calling for a transition in line with UNSC 2254 (2015).²⁸³
- Iran: says it backs the resolution and that the “fate of Syria and its future must be determined [...] without foreign interference or imposition”.²⁸⁴

4.2

Transitional government declared, December 2024

Assad Prime Minister initially continues in office

Following the resignation of Assad, his Prime Minister, Mohammad Jalali, said he would manage any transition to opposition forces. He had been appointed in September 2024 by Assad following elections to the Syrian parliament, which were [dominated by the ruling Baath party of Assad](#).²⁸⁵ He remained in office until 10 December 2024, when a new government was appointed.²⁸⁶

The Baath party also announced it would suspend its work and activity until further notice, and that properties and finance would be handed over to the Syrian interior ministry.²⁸⁷

²⁷⁹ European Council, [Syria: statement by the high representative](#), 9 December 2024

²⁸⁰ Russian Foreign Ministry, [Foreign ministry statement](#), 8 December 2024

²⁸¹ AA, [China backs “Syrian-led, “Syrian owned” \[...\]](#), 13 December 2024

²⁸² New Arab, [Bahrain “ready to cooperate with new Syria govt”](#), 13 December 2024

²⁸³ Al- Jazeera, [Eight Arab countries vow to support \[...\]](#), 14 December 2024

²⁸⁴ Tehran Times, [Iran on Syria: people will decide the future](#), 8 December 2024

²⁸⁵ BBC Monitoring, [Syria’s Assad tasks EU-sanctions former minister to form government](#), 14 September 2024; BBC Monitoring, [Syria announces parliamentary election results](#), 18 July 2024

²⁸⁶ Al Arabiya, [Syria’s PM al-Jalali says ready to cooperate \[...\]](#), 8 December 2024

²⁸⁷ Abram, [Syria’s Baath party suspends work](#), 11 December 2024

Some Assad government members have also reportedly left Syria for Lebanon.²⁸⁸

Declaration of transitional government and president

On 10 December 2024 HTS announced a transitional government for Syria. Most of its members were previously administering HTS-controlled Idlib before the fall of Assad. Many regional governors are also linked to HTS.

The transitional government was led by Mohammed al-Bashir, who led the HTS administration, which was called the “Salvation Government”.²⁸⁹

Two women were appointed to leadership positions: Aisha al-Dibs to the Women’s Affairs Office (a ministry), and Maysaa Sabrine as acting head of the Syrian Central Bank (she was replaced in April). Aisha al-Dibs faced criticism for comments following her appointment that women should “not [...] go beyond the priorities of their God-given nature”. In response, the interim foreign minister said “we will work to stand by women’s issues and support their full rights”.²⁹⁰

In February, it was confirmed a new government would be in place from 1 March, which the interim foreign minister says will “represent the Syrian people as much as possible and take its diversity into account”.²⁹¹

In January 2025 the HTS leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, was named interim president of Syria.²⁹²

The transitional government also announced the suspension of the 2012 constitution and the dissolution of the Assad-era parliament, army and security agencies.

4.3

New government, March 2025

Cabinet appointments

On 29 March 2025, a new government was declared by Ahmed al-Sharaa. This replaced the transitional government announced in December 2024.

The transitional government has some overlap in personnel with that previously in place. Sharaa retains the presidency, and HTS-linked figures

²⁸⁸ L’Orient, [Did Syrian officials flee to Beirut?](#), 11 December 2024

²⁸⁹ BBC News, [Syria’s new transitional PM calls for stability and calm](#), 10 December 2024; Al Monitor, [Who’s who in Syria’s first interim government](#), 11 December 2024; BBC Monitoring, [HTS appointees dominate Syria top civilian and military leadership](#), 15 January 2025

²⁹⁰ Al Monitor, [Who is Maysaa Sabrine, first woman to lead Central Bank of Syria?](#), 30 December 2024; New Arab, [Who is Abul Qadir al-Hasriya, Syria’s new bank governor?](#), 8 April 2025

²⁹¹ Al Monitor, [Syria to have new government on March 1](#), 12 February 2025

²⁹² BBC News, [Ahmed al-Sharaa named Syria’s transitional president](#), 29 January 2025

retain key ministries such as defence, interior and foreign. Non-HTS figures were appointed to the ministries of education, information, communication and religious endowment. Of the 23-strong cabinet, there is one woman, who is also a Christian (appointed social affairs minister), and one minister from the Alawite (transport), Druze (agriculture) and Kurdish (education) communities. There is no representation for the SDF.²⁹³

The cabinet has no prime minister role, with Sharaa leading the executive as president. His brother will act as secretary general to the presidency, whose role will include liaising with other departments.²⁹⁴

Sharaa has also appointed a Supreme Fatwa Council, formed of Sunni Muslim scholars, and a Grand Mufti (leading Islamic jurist). Their role will be to “regulate moderate religious discourse that combines tradition and modernity” and issue “fatwas [Islamic legal rulings] on new developments, emergencies and general issues”. The role of Grand Mufti in Syria is long-standing, predating both Assad and Sharaa.²⁹⁵

Plans for legislature

Under the interim constitutional declaration announced in March 2025 (see next section), the president will appoint a third of the legislature, with other members selected by a committee also appointed by the president. The legislature will be in place for five years, when elections are planned.

4.4

What have the post-Assad authorities done and said?

Constitutional declaration

On coming to power, the authorities annulled the 2012 Syrian constitution and parliament (dominated by the Baathist party of former President Assad).²⁹⁶

In December 2024, a national dialogue was announced, to include all members of Syrian society, to contribute to the development of a new constitution.²⁹⁷ Many of those on the preparatory committee for the dialogue were linked to Sharaa or HTS. It contained no Kurdish members, Shias or

²⁹³ Al-Jazeera, [Syrian president al-Sharaa unveils transitional government](#), 30 March 2025; ISW, [Iran update](#), 31 March 2025; Middle East Eye, [Syria reveals new religiously diverse cabinet](#), 30 March 2025; France 24, [What we know about Syria's new government](#), 30 March 2025

²⁹⁴ BBC Monitoring, [Syria's Sharaa appoints brother to key post in presidency](#), 6 April 2025

²⁹⁵ BBC Monitoring, [Syria establishes Supreme Fatwa Council \[...\]](#), 29 March 2025

²⁹⁶ AP News, [Leader of rebels who toppled Syria president Bashar Assad \[...\]](#), 29 January 2025

²⁹⁷ BBC Monitoring, [Preparations begin for Syrian national dialogue](#), 31 December 2024

Alawites, but did include one Christian.²⁹⁸ Assad figures are also excluded.²⁹⁹ The preparatory committee held meetings in late February.³⁰⁰

On 13 March, a [constitutional declaration](#) was made. It will be in place for five years, at which point elections are planned.³⁰¹

The declaration describes Islam as the “main source of legislation”. It protects some faith and belief groups, preserves the position of women “within the family and society”, and guarantees the right of women and girls to work and education. The Lebanon-based Carnegie Middle East Center think tank notes that under the declaration, Syria will implement “all rights” in [the international treaties it has signed](#), which include a wide range of social and political rights.³⁰²

Kurdish authorities in Syria have called for greater decentralisation and argue that the constitution “obstructs” a democratic transition.³⁰³

The non-governmental organisation Human Rights Watch warns that the constitutional declaration “risks consolidating executive control” with substantial power for the interim president (see next section on elections and above on cabinet appointments and the absence of a prime minister post).³⁰⁴

The UK Government “welcome[d] the provisions made in the constitutional declaration on freedom of expression, freedom of belief and women’s rights”.³⁰⁵

The “People’s Assembly”

Ahmad al-Sharaa says elections could take up to four or five years, citing the need to draft a constitution and to take an accurate census of the population (many Syrians are displaced abroad).³⁰⁶

Under the new constitution, the president will appoint a third of the transitional legislature, known as the “People’s Assembly”. The remaining members will be selected by a committee also appointed by the president. The assembly will be responsible for proposing, amending and approving laws and the state budget. The president can propose laws and can object to

²⁹⁸ [Who is on Syria’s national dialogue committee?](#), BBC Monitoring, 18 February 2025

²⁹⁹ AP, [The talks shaping Syria’s new constitution will exclude Kurdish forces \[...\]](#), 14 February 2025

³⁰⁰ BBC Monitoring, [Syria dialogue conference condemns Israeli occupation in south](#), 25 February 2025; Enab Baladi, [With 18 points...national dialogue concludes its work](#), 26 February 2025

³⁰¹ Constitution Net, [Constitutional declaration—Syria 2025](#)

³⁰² Carnegie Endowment, [Syria’s leaders show their intentions](#), 19 March 2025

³⁰³ SDC, [Statement on the interim government’s draft constitutional declaration](#), 14 March 2025

³⁰⁴ Human rights Watch, [Syria: constitutional declaration risks endangering rights](#), 25 March 2025

³⁰⁵ HC Deb, [1 April 2025](#), c137

³⁰⁶ BBC News, [New elections could take up to four years, Syrian rebel leader says](#), 29 December 2024

any laws passed by the assembly, who will require a two-thirds vote to override the presidential veto.³⁰⁷

In June, Sharaa issued a decree establishing an 11-member committee to form the Supreme Committee for People’s Assembly Elections. Under the process, electoral bodies will be created across Syria to nominate and elect two-thirds of the members. Seat distribution will follow the 2010 census. Aleppo will have the largest number of seats, at 20, followed by Damascus, at 11. Rules on candidacy are yet to be confirmed.³⁰⁸

Armed forces

- There will be an amnesty to those conscripted to fight in Assad forces.³⁰⁹ However, not all opposition groups have endorsed the amnesty, and some have called for “revenge attacks” against Assad government officials.³¹⁰ Rights group report some have taken place.³¹¹ In June 2025, the Fatwa Council issued a rule prohibiting “revenge and retaliation outside the framework of the judiciary and the law”.³¹²
- It has dissolved the armed forces of the Assad government and will secure any chemical weapons depots.³¹³
- All armed groups in Syria will be disbanded (including HTS) and only the armed forces of the new Syrian state will be allowed to bear arms.³¹⁴

In May, the Syrian Ministry of Defence said that almost all armed units had been integrated under the ministry, but small groups remained.³¹⁵ As of June, the SDF remains a separate armed group though has agreed in principle to merge with other forces. Talks on this continue.³¹⁶

Foreign states have reportedly warned the HTS on its appointment of some foreign fighters to senior military positions.³¹⁷ However, in June the US envoy to Syria said that “there is an understanding” that some foreign fighters will be allowed to join Syria army units, if there is “transparency”.³¹⁸

³⁰⁷ Constitution Net, [Constitutional declaration—Syria 2025](#), Articles 30 and 39

³⁰⁸ New Arab, [Syria forms election committee for people’s assembly](#), 16 June 2025; BBC Monitoring, [Syria forms supreme committee for parliament elections](#), 14 June 2025

³⁰⁹ New Arab, [HTS-led coalition announces general amnesty for Assad soldiers](#), 9 December 2024

³¹⁰ BBC Monitoring, [Islamists call for retribution against Assad ‘henchmen’](#), [...], 12 December 2024

³¹¹ BBC Monitoring, [Revenge attacks, “sectarian strife”, reported](#), 12 December 2024; Washington Post, [Syria’s new leaders struggle to contain revenge killings](#) [...], 18 December 2024

³¹² BBC Monitoring, [Islamists slam Syrian government decree prohibiting revenge attacks](#), 9 June 2025

³¹³ Reuters, [Syrian rebel leader says he will dissolve toppled regime forces](#) [...], 12 December 2024; BBC Monitoring, [Syrian leadership announces dissolving ‘all’ factions](#) [...], 29 January 2025

³¹⁴ BBC Monitoring, [HTS chief discusses Israel, Iran, Russia](#), 15 December 2024

³¹⁵ AA, [Syria announces merger of all military units under defence ministry](#), 18 May 2025

³¹⁶ ABC News, [Syria’s government and Kurds still at odds over merging forces](#) [...], 9 July 2025

³¹⁷ Reuters, [Western powers warn Syria over foreign jihadists in army](#) [...], 10 January 2025

³¹⁸ Reuters, [US gives nod to Syria to bring foreign jihadist ex-rebels into army](#), 2 June 2025

- The defence ministry has also issued a new code of conduct for armed forces, which include prohibitions such as assaulting civilians and discrimination.³¹⁹
- In June 2025, the [Syrian Civil Defense](#), also known as ‘the White Helmets’, an independent organisation founded in 2014 to provide first-responders to emergency situations in Syria, announced its functions would be transferred to the declared Syrian Government.³²⁰ The head of the organisation has also been appointed as Minister of Environment, Emergencies, and Disaster Management.³²¹

The UK Government is among foreign governments to have provided funding to the White Helmets to support the humanitarian response.³²²

Society

- Women: officials have been told not to interfere with women’s dress or appearance.³²³ Al-Sharaa has faced criticism from some within HTS and other Islamist and Jihadist groups for allowing his wife to visit Turkey when he visited and for not wearing the niqab (full face cover).³²⁴ In June, guidance was issued by the Tourism ministry stating women must wear burkinis (a swimsuit that covers the body except for the face, hands and feet) or other “decent” clothes at public beaches and swimming pools. Men must also wear a shirt when they are not swimming (under Assad, the state did not enforce a dress code on beaches).³²⁵
- Education: in December the interim education minister said the right to schooling for boys and girls would remain.³²⁶ In January the interim education ministry announced a new curriculum, pending further reviews. The interim minister said “inaccuracies” in the Islamic education curriculum had been corrected. Reported planned changes include removal of material on pre-Islamic religions in Syria.³²⁷
- Refugees: Prime Minister Bashir has called for the return of refugees.³²⁸

³¹⁹ BBC Monitoring, [Syrian military issues new code of conduct](#), 31 May 2025

³²⁰ New Arab, [Syria’s White Helmets to integrate fully into government emergency services](#), 4 June 2025

³²¹ White Helmets, [Statement on Raed Al-Saleh’s resignation as president \[...\]](#), March 2025

³²² PQ 146952 [[Syria: White Helmets](#)], 23 February 2023; FCDO, [White helmets international donor group statement on 10 year anniversary of humanitarian efforts in Syria](#), 25 October 2024

³²³ ABC News, [Syrian government services to a “complete halt” \[...\]](#), 9 December 2024

³²⁴ BBC Monitoring, [Islamists criticise public appearance of Syrian leader’s wife](#), 14 February 2025

³²⁵ Al Monitor, [Syria mandates burkinis for women at public beaches](#), 11 June 2025

³²⁶ Reuters, [Syrian girls right to schooling unrestricted \[...\]](#), 19 December 2024

³²⁷ BBC News, [New Syrian government’s school curriculum changes spark concern](#), 2 January 2025; Al Monitor, [After outrages, Syria’s education minister clarifies curriculum changes](#), 2 January 2025

³²⁸ AA, [We want to bring all Syrian refugees home \[...\]](#), 11 December 2024; Arab Weekly, [Interim Syrian PM vows to rebuild country \[...\]](#), 11 December 2024

- Religion and belief: the “political affairs bureau”, affiliated with the Idlib government backed by HTS, has announced it would protect Christians, Shia and Alawite Muslims, and other minorities in Syria.³²⁹

Al-Sharaa has met with minority groups including Christians.³³⁰ A two-day public holiday was also announced to coincide with Christmas. This drew criticism from some Islamist and Jihadist groups.³³¹

- Human rights abuses: the interim authorities have said they will seek accountability for those who committed human rights abuses, including those who have fled abroad.³³² In May 2025, a National Authority for Transitional Justice and National Commission for Missing Persons were announced.³³³ Human Rights Watch have criticised the transitional justice commission for its narrow focus, only including crimes committed by the Assad government.³³⁴
- Trade in Captagon drugs. This remains high, despite the attempts of the new authorities to reduce the trade and seizures of the drug in neighbouring states, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.³³⁵

Economy and sanctions

As set out above in section 1.3, Syria faces extensive economic challenges and costs from recovering from its civil war.

The interim authorities have said they plan to increase public sector salaries, reduce customs fees for external trade, and build ties with neighbouring states to address sanctions, raise funds and promote development.³³⁶

The interim foreign minister says the lifting of sanctions against Syria is “key” to establishing stability and that the “reason for these sanctions [Assad] is now in Moscow”. He said the country would be open for foreign investment.³³⁷

Interim President Sharaa also criticised the “socialist” economic system of Assad as producing corruption. The interim authorities have said they wish to privatise state-owned companies.³³⁸ The number of public sector workers is

³²⁹ BBC Monitoring, [HTS linked body vows to protect Christians \[...\]](#), 10 December 2024; BBC Monitoring, [HTS linked body reaches out to minority communities \[...\]](#), 5 December 2024; BBC Monitoring, [HTS linked authority reaches out to Shias \[...\]](#), 30 November 2024

³³⁰ BBC Monitoring, [Syria’s de facto leader Sharaa meets Christian clerics](#), 1 January 2025

³³¹ BBC Monitoring, [Syrian Islamists condemn New Year outreach to Christians](#), 1 January 2025

³³² BBC Monitoring, [HTS leader pledges to punish ex-government figures \[...\]](#), 10 December 2024; BBC Monitoring, [Syria’s Sharaa gives first address to nation as president](#), 31 January 2025

³³³ France 24, [Syria announces commissions for missing persons, transitional justice](#), 17 May 2025

³³⁴ Human Rights Watch, [Syria’s transitional justice commission: a missed opportunity](#), 19 May 2025

³³⁵ UN, [Despite the fall of Assad, the illicit drug trade in Syria is far from over](#), 26 June 2025

³³⁶ BBC Monitoring, [How is Syria’s government addressing its economic challenges?](#), 31 January 2025

³³⁷ Arab News, [We need Syria to be a place of peace and development \[...\]](#), 22 January 2025

³³⁸ BBC Monitoring, [Sharaa discusses elections, transition first Syrian media interview](#), 4 February 2025; FT, [Syria to dismantle Assad-era socialism, says foreign minister](#), 22 January 2025

expected to half.³³⁹ Currently, 25% of the population is unemployed and 90% live below the poverty line.³⁴⁰

4.5 What human rights concerns have been raised?

Monitors have raised concerns for some violations since December 2024:

- HTS monopolisation of power: in February 2025 several opposition groups to HTS met in Switzerland to discuss the “monopolisation” of power by HTS and argued it is establishing a “new totalitarian regime” with a lack of non-HTS voices. The group, known as the Syrian national meeting, say they will continue to monitor developments.³⁴¹
- Sectarian attacks: the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reports sectarian attacks and incidents across parts of Syria, including against Alawites. Local security forces have reportedly intervened to contain the attacks.³⁴² Reported attacks include on an Alawite shrine and burning of a Christmas tree.³⁴³ See above section 2.2, for violence against Christians, Druze and Alawites in 2025.
- Protests for a secular state and women’s participation: in December SOHR reported that “thousands” of people gathered in Damascus to protest for a “secular state and women’s participation in politics”. The protests were not suppressed by security forces.³⁴⁴
- “Revenge attacks”: SOHR reports 425 people have been killed in “revenge attacks” since the fall of Assad on 8 December 2024 to 11 February 2025.³⁴⁵

Further reading the interim authorities and challenges

- US Commission on International Religious Freedom, [Religious freedom and US policy in post-Assad Syria](#) (PDF), July 2025
- Crisis Group, [What lies in store for Syria as a new government takes power?](#), April 2025

³³⁹ Reuters, [Syria’s new Islamist rulers to roll back state \[...\]](#), 31 January 2025

³⁴⁰ UN Development Programme, [The impact of the conflict in Syria](#), February 2025, p9

³⁴¹ Al Monitor, [Opponents of Syria’s new government meet in Geneva, criticise Sharaa](#), 19 February 2025

³⁴² SOHR, [Attempts to stir up sectarian strife](#), 13 February 2025; [General security cordons sectarian protests \[...\]](#), 14 January 2025

³⁴³ SOHR, [Video footage showing attack on shrine in Aleppo](#), 25 December 2024; BBC News, [Protests in Syria over Christmas tree burning](#), 24 December 2024

³⁴⁴ BBC Monitoring, [Thousands protest \[...\] for a “civil democratic state”](#), 20 December 2024

³⁴⁵ SOHR, [SOHR documents death of 425 people in revengeful attacks](#), 11 February 2025

- Arab Center Washington DC, [Challenges facing Syria's constitutional declaration](#), April 2025
- Foreign Policy, [The new Syria is run like the old](#), April 2025
- Diwan, [Syria's leaders show their intentions](#), March 2025
- Crisis Group, [The new Syria: halting a dangerous drift](#), March 2025
- Chatham House, [Syria needs security—can Al-Sharqa build a united army to provide it?](#), March 2025
- Washington Institute, [Al-Sharqa is better than Assad](#), March 2025
- Foreign Affairs, [Syria's post authoritarian trap](#), January 2025
- Chatham House, [Syria's challenges are even greater than those Libya faced in 2011](#), December 2024
- Atlantic Council, [A blueprint for bringing about a new Syria](#), 10 December 2024
- Arab Center DC, [A new Syria is born: hopes and challenges](#), 11 December 2024
- Chatham House, [While international support is crucial, Syrians must lead their country's political transition](#), 11 December 2024
- Just Security, [Syria's pursuit of freedom and self-governance](#), 12 December 2024
- Human Rights Watch, [Post-Assad transition should centre human rights](#), 12 December 2024

5

UK, UN, US and EU sanctions and statements on Syria's new authorities

International sanctions on Syria

Other than UN sanctions against specific terrorist groups (including Islamic State/Daesh and HTS), there were no UN sanctions against Assad due to [vetoes by China and Russia at the UN Security Council](#). In 2025, there are reportedly talks between UN Security Council members on removing sanctions against Sharaa and HTS, but no formal decisions have been made or draft resolution published.³⁴⁶

When Assad was in power and during the civil war, the United States, EU and UK introduced a wide range of sanctions on Syria's military, economy, chemical weapons, and those accused of human rights violations. These sanctions included exemptions to allow for the delivery and distribution of humanitarian aid.³⁴⁷ In 2025, the United States, European Union and UK all announced a lifting of economic sanctions against Syria. Sanctions against those linked to the Assad government and human rights violations remain.

5.1

G7 and international statements

The G7 reiterated its support for UNSCR 2254 (2015) (see above, section 4.1) in a statement of 12 December 2024 and said they would only work with a transition process and new Syrian government that is:

credible, inclusive, and non-sectarian governance that ensures respect for the rule of law, universal human rights, including women's rights, the protection of all Syrians, including religious and ethnic minorities, transparency and accountability.³⁴⁸

The G7 is formed of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United States and United Kingdom, as well as the European Union.

The UK has also issued a statement alongside European partners, the US, Turkey and the Arab Contact group on Syria (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq,

³⁴⁶ The National, [US prepares UN resolution to lift sanctions on Syria and its leaders](#), 3 July 2025

³⁴⁷ Commons Library research briefing, [Syria's civil war in 2023](#), section 4.2

³⁴⁸ FCDO, [G7 leaders' statement on Syria](#), 12 December 2024

Lebanon, Egypt and the Arab League Secretary General). This reiterated the issues covered in the G7 statement on UNSCR 2254 (2015) and:

Affirmed the full support for Syria's unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty. Stressed on the respect for human rights, including for women and minorities; preserve state institutions that serve the interests of, and provide critical services to, the Syrian people; exist in harmony with its neighbours; provide unfettered access for humanitarian aid and freedom of movement for IDPs and returnees; protect all foreign diplomatic facilities and personnel; secure and safely destroy chemical weapons stockpiles; and facilitate access to regime prisons and facilities for accountability and to determine the fate of missing Syrians and foreign nationals.³⁴⁹

Members of the UN Security Council (including China, France, Russia, the US and UK) have issued a statement in support of UNSCR 2254 (2015), the UNDOF, and for action against non-conventional weapons and Islamic State/Daesh in Syria.³⁵⁰

5.2

United Kingdom

Statements on HTS-appointed interim government

In December 2024 Prime Minister Keir Starmer said that “we must not make the mistake of thinking that what comes next [in Syria] is necessarily going to be different and better”. He said the UK was talking to regional states to ensure Syria “complies with international law and protects the rights of civilians and minorities”.³⁵¹

In the same month, David Lammy also said that the UK will take a “cautious” approach to HTS and “judge HTS by their actions, monitoring closely how they and other parties to this conflict treat all civilians in areas they control”.³⁵²

In 2025, the UK Government has welcomed the announcement of the new Sharaa-led government and some of its actions, including “diverse cabinet appointments and internal agreements, including with the Syrian Democratic Forces” as well as the planning for the People’s Assembly elections.³⁵³ However, in February FCDO Minister Lord Collins also said that the government was “concerned by reports of attacks on minorities, including Christians, and attempts to stoke sectarian tensions”.³⁵⁴

³⁴⁹ FCDO, [Joint statement on Syria](#), 14 December 2024

³⁵⁰ UN, [Security Council press statement on Syria](#), 17 December 2024

³⁵¹ Liaison Committee, [Oral evidence: evidence from the Prime Minister](#), 19 December 2024, Qs 62-3,

³⁵² HC Deb, [9 December 2024](#), c693

³⁵³ FCDO, [A peaceful and secure country is in the interests of all Syrians](#), 17 June 2025; FCDO, [The UK welcomes the formation of the new Syrian government](#), 10 April 2025

³⁵⁴ HL Deb, [10 February 2025](#), c993

UK position on recognising governments

It has been the position of UK Governments to recognise states, not governments. This has been the UK position in relation to the Taliban in Afghanistan (in [2022](#) and [2025](#) statements), Belarus (in [2022](#)), Venezuela ([2019](#)) and Syria when ruled by President Bashar al-Assad ([2016](#)). In response to a question from the Shadow Foreign Secretary in February whether the UK Government recognises Sharaa as the Syrian “head of state”, Middle East Minister Hamish Falconer said:

On 29 January, Ahmed Al-Sharaa was announced as Syrian President for a transitional period. We welcome Al Sharaa's announcement that he will form an inclusive transitional Government, leading to free and fair elections. This is a critical moment for Syria's transition and we will continue to judge Al Sharaa on his actions.³⁵⁵

For a discussion of international law and recognising regime changes, see Just Security, [Should the rebels be recognised as the new government of Syria?](#), January 2025 and European Journal of International Law, [How should government decide whether or not to recognise other governments?](#), December 2021.

Formal engagement with HTS and interim authorities

On 15 December 2024 Foreign Secretary David Lammy said the UK has had “diplomatic contact” with HTS. He said the UK had engaged in order to encourage a democratic and inclusive transition, to secure chemical weapons stockpiles, and ensure an end to violence.³⁵⁶

The UK Special Envoy, Ann Snow, has visited Syria for talks with the interim authorities, including the head of the women’s affairs department. The government said it raised the “importance of including key groups, including women and ethnic and religious minorities” in a peaceful transition.³⁵⁷

The UK Foreign Secretary has also raised the treatment of minorities with the interim authorities.³⁵⁸ The Foreign Secretary met with his regional counterparts, including the interim Syrian minister, in Saudi Arabia in January.³⁵⁹

Speaking in December, the Foreign Secretary said it would be “hasty” to make announcements in reopening the UK embassy in Damascus.³⁶⁰ The UK closed

³⁵⁵ PQ 28023 [[Syria: politics and government](#)], 17 February 2025

³⁵⁶ BBC News, [UK diplomats meet rebel leaders in Damascus](#), 17 December 2024

³⁵⁷ HL Deb, [6 February 2025](#), c804; [UK diplomats meet rebel\[s\] \[...\]](#), BBC News, 17 December 2024

³⁵⁸ HC Deb, [14 January 2025](#), c154

³⁵⁹ FCDO, [UK joins key meetings in Saudi Arabia to help build a stable Syrian future](#), 12 January 2024

³⁶⁰ HC Deb, [9 December 2024](#), c699

its embassy in 2013. European states with embassies in Syria include Italy, the Czech Republic and Greece.³⁶¹

Reopening the UK's embassy in Syria

On 5 July, the Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, visited Syria to meet with interim President Al-Sharaa. Mr Lammy announced that the UK would reopen its embassy there and re-establish formal diplomatic relations.

The Foreign Secretary said that it was in the UK's interests to do so, arguing it would contribute to a more stable Syria and one able to combat Islamic State/Daesh, address irregular migration, and destroy chemical weapons.³⁶² He also said he raised the need for an "inclusive political transition" with al-Sharaa and concerns heard from Syrian civil society on that inclusivity.³⁶³

Mr Lammy also said that the "episodes of brutal violence involving Alawite and Druze communities are very, very concerning, and we will be redoubling our efforts" on their protection.³⁶⁴

The UK and Syria will also establish a business council.³⁶⁵

UK sanctions

Since the UK left the EU, it has continued to apply the same sanctions regime. This included:

- asset and travel freeze against individuals and organisations linked to Assad, the use of chemical weapons, the movement of restricted technologies and goods and their financing, and human rights violations.
- restrictions on UK financial institutions opening bank accounts in Syria or for a company based in Syria
- trade restrictions on military goods and exports, crude oil and petroleum products from Syria, Syrian bank notes and coinage, luxury goods, and services relating to electricity production in Syria
- a ban on Syrian aircraft landing in the UK.³⁶⁶

³⁶¹ Commons Library research briefing, [Syria in 2023: Assad back in the Arab League](#), p30 and Le Monde, [Italy returns to Damascus](#), 31 July 2024

³⁶² FCDO, [UK re-establishes diplomatic relations with Syria](#), 5 July 2025

³⁶³ International Development Committee, [Oral evidence: the work of the FCDO](#), 16 July 2025, Q 51

³⁶⁴ As above

³⁶⁵ HCWS801 [[Foreign Secretary's visit to Syria](#)], 10 July 2025

³⁶⁶ FCDO and others, [Syria sanctions: guidance](#), as of 5 December 2024; [UK's Syrian \(Sanctions\) \(EU Exit\) Regulations 2019](#), Part 7, as amended.

The UK sanctions included exemptions for humanitarian aid delivered by the UN and related organisations participating in UN plans or with UK funding. This included for fuel and petroleum products.³⁶⁷

Lifting of some UK sanctions

In March and April 2025 the Government removed several entities listed under the existing Syrian sanctions regime and made a [new statutory instrument](#), amending the 2019 sanctions regulations on Syria. These amendments are to allow the UK to continue sanctions against those linked to Assad, human rights violations, and undermining stability and security in post-Assad Syria. Prohibitions remain in place against military goods and chemical weapons.³⁶⁸

The government said that it would be removing economic and other sanctions against Syrian institutions and economic organisations “to facilitate essential investment in Syria’s energy infrastructure and supporting the Syrian people to rebuild their country and economy”.

Sanctions were removed from organisations including the Syrian Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Interior and media companies, the Central Bank of Syria, Syrian Arab Airlines, and energy companies.³⁶⁹

UK sanctions on Assad and those linked to him will remain in place. In response to the violence in early and mid-2025 (see above, section 2.2), the government says it will continue to use its Syria sanctions as a “responsive tool, targeting those who bear responsibility for repression and human rights abuses”.³⁷⁰

Frozen Syrian assets in the UK

Media reports suggest around £161 million of frozen Syrian assets are in the UK.³⁷¹ The UK Government says these remain frozen.³⁷²

³⁶⁷ Office of Financial Sanctions implementation, [General license INT/2025/5810196](#), 12 February 2025; [Syria \(sanctions\) \(EU exit\) \(amendment\) \(No 2\) Regulations 2024](#), debated in the Commons: HC Deb, [9 September 2024](#), cc623-32

³⁶⁸ [The Syria \(Sanctions\) \(EU Exit\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2025](#); HCWS612 [[Syria sanctions](#)], 30 April 2025

³⁶⁹ FCDO, [UK bolsters support for Syrian people by amending Syria sanctions](#), 24 April 2025 and [Lifting asset freezes on 24 entities](#), 6 March 2025; Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation, [Financial sanctions, Syria](#), updated 25 April 2025

³⁷⁰ HL Deb, [12 May 2025](#), c234GC

³⁷¹ Just Security, [The UK is failing to recoup ill-gotten gains \[...\]](#), 1 April 2024

³⁷² PQ 24272 [[Bashar al-Assad](#)], 21 January 2025

5.3

United Nations

The UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, said in January 2025 that there must be a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned transition.

He “welcome[d] the many clear commitments and messages” from the HTS-led interim authorities.³⁷³

He also said the transition must be “credible, inclusive, transparent” and move beyond the “emergency conditions” of December 2024.

Envoy Pedersen has stressed the need to lift sanctions to advance efforts towards rebuilding Syria. On 15 December he said he “hope[d] to see a quick end to sanctions” to support Syrian reconstruction.³⁷⁴

The UN Independent Commission of Inquiry into Syria, established in 2011 to investigate all reported violations of human rights since then, remains in place. Its staff have visited Syria since the fall of Assad.³⁷⁵

5.4

United States

Statements: Biden administration

The Biden administration confirmed in December 2024 that it was in direct contact with HTS and other parties in Syria.³⁷⁶ The then US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said that the transition process and new government in Syria must protect human rights and address terrorism:

[it must] fully respect the rights of minorities, facilitate the flow of humanitarian assistance to all in need, prevent Syria from being used as a base for terrorism or posing a threat to its neighbours, and ensure that any chemical or biological weapons stockpiles are secured and safely destroyed.³⁷⁷

He said the US stood ready to recognise and support a Syrian government that is developed by the Syrian people without foreign interference:

All nations should pledge to support an inclusive and transparent process and refrain from external interference. The United States will recognize and fully support a future Syria government that results from this process. We stand prepared to lend all appropriate support to all of Syria’s diverse communities and constituencies.³⁷⁸

³⁷³ UN, [In Syria, top UN envoy highlights international backing \[...\]](#), 22 January 2025

³⁷⁴ UN, [UN envoy calls for increased aid for Syria in Damascus visit](#), 15 December 2024

³⁷⁵ UN Human Rights Council, [Independent commission of inquiry into Syria](#)

³⁷⁶ US State Department, [Secretary Antony Blinken at a press availability](#), 14 December 2024

³⁷⁷ US State Department, [The Syrian people will decide the future of Syria](#), 10 December 2024

³⁷⁸ US State Department, [The Syrian people will decide the future of Syria](#), 10 December 2024

Statements: Trump administration

During his confirmation hearing with the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in January 2025, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said that the history of HTS “is not one that gives us comfort” but:

That said, it is in the national interest of the United States, if possible, to have a Syria that's no longer a playground for ISIS, that respects religious minorities ranging from [Alawites] all the way to Christians, that protects the Kurds and at the same time is not a vehicle through which Iran can spread its terrorism to Hezbollah and destabilize Lebanon, not to mention what's happened in other parts.³⁷⁹

He also said in May, before the lifting of US sanctions (see below), that there was a “historic opportunity” in the region if a stable Syria and Lebanon could be achieved. However, he also warned that it was the US assessment that the newly-declared authorities could be “weeks—not many months—away from potential collapse and a full-scale civil war [...] the country splitting up” due to “deep level of distrust”. But he also said Syria had a clear national identity that could form a basis for unity. The Secretary also said that the authorities needed to help Syrians overseas to return and for sanctions to be lifted to allow neighbouring states to invest, to help rebuild the Syrian economy.³⁸⁰

In May 2025, President Trump met with Al-Sharaa when visiting Saudi Arabia. President Trump raised four issues 1) Syria signing the [Abraham Accords](#) and recognising Israel 2) removing foreign terrorists from Syria 3) working with the US to prevent the resurgence of ISIS and 4) assume responsibility for ISIS detention facilities in north west Syria. The latter are currently maintained by the Kurdish-led SDF (see next section for more on Islamic State/Daesh).³⁸¹

President Trump said he would give the declared government “a chance at greatness” and Syria the opportunity to rebuild.³⁸²

In the same month, the US reopened its ambassador’s residence in Syria, though not its embassy.³⁸³ The Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, said that it was solely security reasons why the embassy has not reopened. He said the security threat was not from the HTS-linked government.³⁸⁴

US sanctions

The US has had an [extensive sanctions regime against Syria](#) and has listed the country as a state supporter of terrorism since 1979. Being listed as a

³⁷⁹ Senate Foreign Relations Committee, [Nomination hearings](#), 15 January 2025, at 2 hours 58

³⁸⁰ Senate Foreign Relations, [Review of the FY2026 state department budget request](#), 20 May 2025, at 39 minutes to 45 minutes

³⁸¹ White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt on Twitter/X, [Today, President Trump, at the invitation of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman \[...\]](#), 14 May 2025

³⁸² White House, [President Trump provides for the revocation of Syria sanctions](#), 30 June 2025

³⁸³ Times of Israel, [US reopens ambassador’s residence in Syria](#), 29 May 2025

³⁸⁴ Senate Foreign Relations, [Review of the FY2026 state department budget request](#), 20 May 2025, at 39:00

supporter of terrorism bans US defence exports, imposes controls over the export of dual use items (goods that could have both civilian and military purposes), financial restrictions and limits certain US aid.³⁸⁵

US measures include the [Caesar Sanctions](#), which were introduced in 2019. These were due to expire in December 2024. The 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) amended the expiration date to December 2029.³⁸⁶

Other sanctions target Syria's oil and gas industry, the Central Bank, and individuals who have committed human rights abuses.³⁸⁷ Since 2004, the export of US goods other than food or medicine to Syria has also been prohibited.³⁸⁸

On 6 January 2025 the Biden administration issued a licence to expand for six months existing exemptions from US sanctions to enable humanitarian assistance relating to essential services, energy, water and sanitation.³⁸⁹

In May and June, the US announced it would remove many of its economic sanctions against Syria, to support stability in the country and “foster a new relationship” between the US and Syria. The administration said it would ensure the Syrian authorities continue to act on US priorities:

taking concrete steps toward normalizing ties with Israel, addressing foreign terrorists, deporting Palestinian terrorists and banning Palestinian terrorist groups, helping the United States prevent a resurgence of ISIS, and assuming responsibility for ISIS detention centers in northeast Syria.³⁹⁰

The administration also announced it would review the potential for a full suspension of the Caesar Act (there is currently a temporary waiver for it, this will require congressional legislation) and review the status of Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism.³⁹¹ In July, the US administration removed the Foreign Terrorist Organization designation from HTS.³⁹²

Sanctions remaining in place include those against those associated with President Assad, individuals who have committed human rights violations or are involved in chemical weapons activity, Iran-backed groups, and Islamic State/Daesh.³⁹³

³⁸⁵ US State Department, [State sponsors of terrorism](#)

³⁸⁶ [National Defence Authorization Act 2024](#), HR5009 section 5123

³⁸⁷ US Office of Foreign Assets Control, [Syria](#); Lawfare, [Our man in Damascus?](#), 13 December 2024

³⁸⁸ US State Department, [Sanctions on Syria: message to Congress](#), May 2004

³⁸⁹ US Treasury Department, [US Treasury issues additional sanctions relief for Syrian people](#), 6 January 2025

³⁹⁰ US State Department, [Ending the Syria sanctions program \[...\]](#), 30 June 2025; US Department of State, [Caesar Act waiver certification](#), 23 May 2025; US Department of the Treasury, [Treasury issues immediate sanctions relief for Syria](#), 23 May 2025; White House, [President Trump provides for the revocation of Syria sanctions](#), 30 June 2025; Reuters, [Syrian letter delivers response to US conditions for sanctions relief](#), 26 April 2025

⁰⁵ As above

³⁹² US Department of State, [Revoking of foreign terrorist organisation designation of HTS](#), 7 July 2025

³⁹³ US State Department, [Press briefing](#), 30 June 2025

5.5

European Union

Statements and engagement

In late 2024, German, Italian and French foreign ministers were among those who have visited HTS interim authorities in Syria, and President Macron met with Al-Sharaa in France in May 2025. The EU has also said it will reopen its diplomatic offices in the country.³⁹⁴

In December, the EU's High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, Kaja Kallas, said that there was consensus on the future of Syria in the EU:

These are the principles of territorial integrity; sovereignty; accountability. Also, inclusiveness of government – taking into account especially the minorities and women's rights in this case. [...]

Extremism, Russia and Iran should have no place in Syria's future. [...]

we all said that we want to see no extremism, no radicalisation, and it going to the right direction. Right now, they are saying the right things, but [not] everybody is convinced that they do the right things [...]³⁹⁵

in June, EU leaders issued a further collective statement, in which they welcomed plans for an “inclusive transition” and called for the “swift formation” of an assembly and drafting of a permanent constitution. They also backed holding elections in three to five years:

We also take positive note of the initial steps taken over the last months to lay the groundwork for a peaceful and inclusive transition, including the holding of a first National Dialogue Conference, the adoption of a Constitutional Declaration, and the appointment of a transitional government. The EU calls for these initial steps and commitments, as well as the key principles enshrined in the Constitutional Declaration, to be fully implemented and put into effect, for the National Dialogue to continue, for the swift formation of the People's Assembly and the drafting of a permanent Constitution both responding to the aspirations of all Syrians, and for genuine elections to be held within three to five years as envisaged in line with international standards, allowing for the full political participation of all Syrians. The EU also calls on the transitional government to work towards the establishment of strong, independent judicial institutions.³⁹⁶

The EU's Syria sanctions

The EU has applied a range of restrictions on trade in goods, services and technology for Syria and against certain individuals and organisations linked to Assad. The EU regime included:

³⁹⁴ France 24, [Macron asks Syria's interim President al-Sharaa to protect all Syrians](#), 7 May 2025; Kaja Kallas on Twitter/X, [We can't leave a vacuum in Syria](#), 17 December 2024

³⁹⁵ EU External Action Service, [Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks](#), 16 December 2024

³⁹⁶ Council of the European Union, [Council conclusions on Syria, 23 June 2025](#), para 2

- restrictions on weapons and technology used for internal repression or monitoring of communications
- prohibitions on Syrian financial institutions, including engagement with EU banks
- an import ban on oil and petroleum products and a ban on EU investment in the Syrian oil industry or electricity power plants.³⁹⁷

On 27 January 2025, EU leaders reached a political agreement for a “roadmap” to ease Syrian sanctions. Kaja Kallas said the EU would lift sanctions that “are most hindering the early buildup of the country and to move from there” in a “step by step approach”.³⁹⁸

EU leaders lifted most sanctions from February to May 2025. These included:

- economic sanctions, starting with the transport and energy sectors
- entities including the Industrial Bank, Popular Credit Bank, Saving Bank, Agricultural Cooperative Bank, Syrian Arab Airlines, and the Central Bank, from the organisations subject to a freeze on their funds
- introducing exemptions on some aspects of banking relationships between Syrian financial institutions and those of EU member states
- indefinitely extending the existing humanitarian exemption
- allowing the export of luxury goods to Syria for personal use.

The EU said it would keep these and potential measures under review. Sanctions based on security grounds, including arms and technology that might be used for internal repression, remain.³⁹⁹ In June, the EU announced new sanctions against individuals linked to the former Assad government and human rights abuses. These included individuals and groups linked to violence in Alawite areas in March 2025 (see above, section 2.2).⁴⁰⁰

Further reading on UK, EU and US policy on Syria

³⁹⁷ EUR-LEX, [EU restrictive measures in view of the situation in Syria](#), 13 September 2024; European Parliament, [Time to lift the international sanctions on Syria?](#) (PDF), 2025

³⁹⁸ [EU cautiously agrees roadmap to ease sanctions \[...\]](#), AP, 27 January 2025; EU External Action, [Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks](#), 27 January 2025; [EU agrees on “step by step” roadmap to start easing sanctions on Syria](#), Euro News, 27 January 2025

³⁹⁹ EU Council, [EU suspends restrictive measures on key economic sectors](#), 24 February 2025; EU Council, [Syria: Council statement on the lifting of EU economic sanctions](#), 20 May 2025

⁴⁰⁰ EU Council, [Global human rights sanctions regime: EU imposes restrictive measures on five Syrian individuals associated with the former Assad regime](#), 23 June 2025; EU Council, [Syria: EU adopts legal acts to lift economic sanctions on Syria, enacting recent political agreement](#), 28 May 2025; [Council Implementing Regulation \(EU\) 2025/1111 of 28 May 2025 implementing Regulation \(EU\) 2020/1998 concerning restrictive measures against serious human rights violations and abuses](#)

- Washington Institute, [Delisting Hayat Tahrir al-Sham: Implications for U.S. Counterterrorism and Syria Policy](#), 10 July 2025
- Chatham House, [The meeting of al-Sharqa and Trump has shifted the balance of power in the Middle East](#), updated 5 June 2025
- Arab Gulf States Institute, [US takes concrete steps to lift sanctions on Syria](#), 27 May 2025
- Washington Institute, [Trump meets Sharqa: writing a new chapter in US-Syria relations](#), 14 May 2025
- Atlantic Council, [Trump just announced the removal of all US sanctions on Syria. What's next?](#), 13 May 2025
- Human Rights Watch, [US, EU, UK: lifting Syria sanctions hindering recovery](#), February 2025
- European Council on Foreign Relations, [Six ways Europeans can urgently support a stable Syria](#), 6 March 2025
- European Council on Foreign Relations, [How Europeans and Gulf Arab states can promote Syria's political transition](#), February 2025
- Carnegie Endowment, [The Europeans return to Syria](#), February 2025
- Centre for European Policy Studies, [Europe is taking a pragmatic approach to Syria. Its origins lie in Kabul](#), January 2025

6 Islamic State/Daesh

[Islamic State/Daesh](#) has its origins in Al-Qaeda groups in Iraq in the 2000s. Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) was founded in 2013. It a designated terrorist group by the UN Security Council, UK, and many others. In the 2010s it launched an extensive campaign across Syria and Iraq. In 2023 the UK Government acknowledged the atrocities committed against the Yazidi people by Islamic State in Iraq in 2014 as [an act of genocide](#).

6.1 How strong is Islamic State?

Since 2019 Islamic State/Daesh no longer holds territory in Syria or Iraq. However, it remains active and in June 2024 the US military said it considered the group is “attempting to reconstitute”.⁴⁰¹ HTS is not allied to Islamic State.

The US and the [Global Coalition to Defeat Islamic State](#) is continuing to target the estimated 2,500 fighters that remain in Iraq and Syria.

US Central Command said that from January to June 2024 Islamic State claimed to have conducted 153 attacks in Syria and Iraq. This was around double the number of claimed attacks in 2023. Around half of attacks in 2024 have been focused on fuel convoys and mostly in the east of Syria.⁴⁰²

Islamic State/Daesh attacks have continued since Assad’s fall, mostly targeting the SDF but also, from May, the newly declared government. The number of attacks is reported to be much lower than 2024. However, analysts warn that rather than the group being militarily degraded, it may be choosing to keep a low profile until any new divisions in Syria can be exploited.⁴⁰³

The most recent UK action under Operation Shader, which is the campaign against Islamic State/Daesh, took place in July 2025.⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰¹ Centcom, [Defeat for ISIS mission in Iraq and Syria for January-June 2024](#), 16 July 2024

⁴⁰² BBC Monitoring, [Can IS capitalise on Syria’s instability?](#), 10 December 2024

⁴⁰³ BBC Monitoring, [The strange dearth of IS militancy in post-Assad Syria](#), 11 April 2025; Washington Institute, [The Islamic State attacks the new Syrian government](#), 19 May 2025, Reuters, [Islamic State reactivating fighters, eyeing comeback in Syria and Iraq](#), 12 June 2025

⁴⁰⁴ Ministry of Defence, [Update: air strikes against Daesh](#), 9 July 2025

6.2

How many fighters and families are detained?

Around 9,000 fighters remain in 20 detention facilities, managed by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). There are also around 44,000 people linked to Islamic State, mostly women and children, [in Al Hol and Roj camps](#).⁴⁰⁵

Those in detention include British nationals. In 2024 the rights charity, Reprieve, estimated there were around 70 Britons in north-east Syria, including 40 children. In 2023 the Home Office had estimated 200 of the 800 Britons who went to Syria remained unaccounted for.⁴⁰⁶

The US has sought the repatriation of foreign nationals held in SDF camps, citing the risk of radicalisation by Islamic State or their release due to attacks by Islamic State fighters.⁴⁰⁷

The UK has repatriated some individuals from Syria.⁴⁰⁸ In 2020 the government said it believed that those who fought or supported Islamic State, “should face justice and accountability through prosecution in the most appropriate jurisdiction: often in the region where the crimes took place”.⁴⁰⁹ It has supported the repatriation of some children as “innocent victims of war”.⁴¹⁰

In January 2025, President Trump’s incoming senior director for counterterrorism said that the UK should repatriate further Islamic State members from Syria. The UK’s independent reviewer of terrorism, Jonathan Hall, had also said in December that:

the numbers are not so great that — at least in the case of women, and children, for whom special considerations ought to apply on humanitarian grounds — the UK’s well-regarded counter-terrorism system could not absorb the risk.

The burden of monitoring could be tempered, in high-risk cases, by phased return. At the very least there should be a presumption of return.⁴¹¹

In response to the US comments, Foreign Secretary David Lammy said that the government would “always put British security interests first and the safeguarding of our population”. The Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, said nationals would be dealt with on a “case by case basis”.⁴¹²

The US Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve (the US Mission against Islamic State) notes that Islamic State “followers continu[e] to

⁴⁰⁵ Centcom, [Defeat for ISIS mission in Iraq and Syria for January-June 2024](#), 16 July 2024

⁴⁰⁶ The Times, [What does the fall of Assad mean for Jihadi brides? \[...\]](#), 9 December 2024

⁴⁰⁷ US DoS, [Secretary Antony Blinken at opening of D-ISIS ministerial](#), 30 September 2024, and below

⁴⁰⁸ Rights and Security International, [Global repatriation tracker](#)

⁴⁰⁹ PQ HL9648 [[British nationals abroad: Syria](#)] 9 November 2020

⁴¹⁰ PQ 2385 [[Syria: British nationals abroad](#)], 17 May 2021

⁴¹¹ The Times, [UK should take back ISIS members in Syria, says Trump’s terror chief](#), 8 January 2025

⁴¹² The Independent, [Shamina Begum ‘not coming back to UK’ says Lammy \[...\]](#), 9 January 2025

indoctrinate and intimidate residents in the al-Hol and Roj displaced persons camps”.⁴¹³ The report also cites the assessment of General Kurilla, the US Central Command Commander, who visited Al-Hol and Roj camps during the review period, who stated:

The training [of the SDF] is key to keeping the residents safe, enabling access for aid organizations, and preventing the spread of extremism. Nonetheless, the longer that displaced persons remain in camps like Al Hol and Al Ro [Roj], the more susceptible they are to ISIS [Islamic State] ideology, making their reintegration into society more difficult. Alongside our partners, we continue to identify and detain ISIS facilitators operating in the camps.⁴¹⁴

Islamic State has also launched attacks on detention facilities holding its fighters. Its most recent, largest, attack was in January 2022 against a prison in Haskah, which lasted several days and in which several hundred guards, prisoners and Islamic State fighters were killed.⁴¹⁵

6.3 What is the position of US forces?

The US has around 2,000 troops in Syria. Around 1,100 of these are on “temporary rotation”, meaning they remain in the theatre for 30 to 90 days. The remainder are considered “core assets” who deploy for 9 to 12 months. They are primarily based in northeastern Syria, alongside the Kurdish-led SDF.⁴¹⁶ US troops have continued to conduct attacks against the group in November and December 2024.⁴¹⁷

The Biden administration said it would retain these troops in Syria “and will take measures necessary to prevent a resurgence of the Islamic State”.⁴¹⁸ It planned to continue to work with the Syrian Democratic Forces.⁴¹⁹

In April 2025, the US Department of Defense announced that US forces would be “consolidated” in Syria to reflect the “significant steps” made against degrading Islamic State. This would result in American troop numbers being reduced to “less than a 1,000 in the coming months”.⁴²⁰ The US special envoy for Syria, Thomas Barrack, has said the number of US troop bases will be reduced from eight to one. The SDF has warned this may be too restrictive to contain the threat of Islamic State/Daesh.⁴²¹

⁴¹³ Office of the Inspector General, [\[...\] Quarterly report to the US Congress](#), May 2024, p9

⁴¹⁴ Centcom, [Statement of General Michael Kurilla](#), 7 March 2024

⁴¹⁵ International Crisis Group, [Containing a resilient ISIS](#), July 2022

⁴¹⁶ US DoD, [DoD announces 2,000 troops in Syria \[...\]](#), 1 December 2024

⁴¹⁷ US DoD, [Press Secretary holds an on-camera \[...\] press briefing](#), 2 December 2024; US Centcom, [Central Command conducts dozens of airstrikes to eliminate IS camps](#), 8 December 2024

⁴¹⁸ Reuters, [US will remain in eastern Syria and seek to prevent IS resurgence](#), 8 December 2024

⁴¹⁹ White House, [Remarks by APNSA Jake Sullivan](#), 8 December 2024

⁴²⁰ US DoD, [Statement from Chief Pentagon Spokesperson](#), 18 April 2025

⁴²¹ Reuters, [US pulls out of two more bases in Syria, worrying Kurdish forces](#), 17 June 2025

During his confirmation hearing before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in January 2025, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said that there would be “implications to abandoning partners” and it was “in the national interest” to ensure Islamic State does not recover in Syria.⁴²²

The Trump administration has also paused most US foreign aid and assistance for 90 days from January 2025, pending reviews. Some exemptions have been introduced. Analysts have raised concerns that the pause may weaken the ability of the SDF to contain Islamic State and maintain detention facilities.⁴²³

In January 2025 the Commander in Chief of the SDF, General Mazloum Abdi, said that the “key factor of stabilisation” in the region is the “US presence on the ground” and there would be a “resurgence” of “many factions, including Islamic State”, if they were to leave.⁴²⁴

6.4 What is happening to the coalition to combat Islamic State?

In September 2024 the United States and Iraq reached an agreement on plans to withdraw US-led “Global Coalition Against Daesh” forces from Iraq. Coalition forces are to leave the majority of Iraq by September 2025, and transition to a bilateral security partnership, which “supports Iraqi forces and maintains pressure” on Islamic State. Coalition forces presence will remain in Iraq to support the US and coalition action in Syria until September 2026.⁴²⁵

The UK Government supported the agreement and said it would advance a new bilateral relationship with Iraq.⁴²⁶

In March 2024 US General Michael Kurilla had told the US Congress that there were risks to a “premature” departure from Syria and Iraq:

We must also prevent a premature Coalition departure from Iraq and Syria. If Iran and Russia were to succeed in their goal of pushing us out before our partner forces can operate independently, it is my assessment that ISIS would reconstitute the ability to seize territory within two years. The Global Coalition’s sustained presence not only helps our partners in their fight against ISIS, it also prevents the reemergence of territorial control and ensures the group does not have a safe haven in Iraq or Syria to plan global attacks. The eventual transition to a traditional security cooperation framework must be

⁴²² New Arab, [Incoming Secretary of State Rubio hints at US role \[...\]](#), 16 January 2025

⁴²³ New York Times, [Despite waivers, US funding freeze sows doubt \[...\]](#), 6 February 2025; Human Rights Watch, [Northeast Syria: camp detainees face uncertain future](#), 7 February 2025; Devex, [How the collapse of USAID could unleash “an ISIS army in waiting”](#), 7 February 2025

⁴²⁴ Guardian, [Kurdish general urges Trump to leave US troops in northeast Syria](#), 9 January 2025

⁴²⁵ US DoS, [Joint statement announcing the timeline for the end of military mission](#), 27 September 2024

⁴²⁶ Ministry of Defence, [UK response to the conclusion of the Global Coalition’s military mission in Iraq](#), 28 September 2024

predicated on Partner Force Development and Security Sector Reform in Iraq, and continued repatriations, secure detention facilities, and a political pathway for the SDF in Syria.⁴²⁷

Further reading on Islamic State/Daesh in Syria

- Washington Institute, [Reducing the US presence in Syria too quickly could help the Islamic State](#), 4 June 2025
- Middle East Institute, [ISIS is on the ropes in Syria. A successful transition in Damascus could deliver a knockout blow](#), 14 April 2025
- Washington Institute, [Syria crisis leaves Islamic State prisons and detention camps vulnerable](#), 9 December 2024
- Hudson Institute, [The Islamic State's operations in Iraq and Syria](#), 5 December 2024
- Counter Extremis, [ISIS redux: the central Syrian resurgence in September 2024](#), 15 October 2024
- Tahrir Institute, [Challenges in repatriation from Al Hol camp in Syria](#), 6 August 2024
- UN Security Council, [Letter from the Chair of the Security Council \[...\] concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, Al Qaida and association individuals, groups \[...\]](#), (PDF), 22 July 2024
- Washington Institute, [One year of the Islamic State worldwide activity map](#), 20 May 2024
- Washington Institute, [Five years after the caliphate, too much remains the same in northeast Syria](#), 19 March 2024
- UK Independent Reviewer on Terrorism Legislation, [Returning from Islamic State: risk and response](#) (PDF), February 2023

⁴²⁷ Centcom, [Statement of General Michael Kurilla on the posture \[...\]](#), 7 March 2024

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