



**JINSA**  
The Jewish Institute for  
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# Course Correction: Getting America's Syria Strategy Right





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The findings and recommendations contained in this publication are solely those of the authors.

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## Preface

No one should be fooled. Despite President Ahmed al-Sharaa's triumphant, even historic, turn at the United Nations General Assembly in late September 2025, Syria is in trouble. The optimism that greeted the sudden collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 has dissipated. The concerns associated with the rise of Sharaa, a former al-Qaeda commander, and his jihadist-adjacent interim government have intensified. Most alarming have been the successive large-scale massacres perpetrated in part by forces aligned with the new regime against two minority religious communities—the Alawites of Syria's central coast and the Druze of Suwayda—in March and July 2025, respectively. Those shocking abuses took place in the context of a series of other troubling moves by Sharaa to consolidate and centralize power in his own hands, and those of his Sunni Islamist followers, largely at the expense of Syria's diverse array of other ethnic and religious groups.

This toxic mix of exclusionary policies punctuated by not just one, but two outbursts of systematic sectarian bloodletting that Sharaa proved unwilling or unable to prevent have unleashed latent reservoirs of suspicion and distrust against the new authorities in Damascus that will be difficult to reign in—no matter how celebrated Sharaa is in foreign capitals. A third mass killing—perhaps this time against Syria's Kurds—could be the nail in the coffin of Syria's future as a unitary state. At stake is nothing less than whether post-Assad Syria can eventually emerge as a more stable, secure, and inclusive sovereign polity that is capable of contributing to regional peace and prosperity, or instead regresses back into a form of sectarian supremacism and dictatorship that exacerbates intercommunal violence and state fragmentation, opening Syria up again to the malevolent influences of Iran, the Islamic State, and other adversaries of the West.

Until recently, the United States has been almost singularly focused on stabilizing Sharaa and his fragile interim government in hopes of making them a productive partner in building a more peaceful and secure region. And not without good reason. Located in the heart of the Middle East and surrounded by some of Washington's closest regional partners, Syria under the Assad dynasty had systematically cooperated with America's enemies for more than half a century to undermine U.S. interests, threaten U.S. friends, sponsor terrorism, build weapons of mass destruction, and—during its 14-year civil war—serve as a breeding ground for escalating violence, chaos, and instability, both within Syria and beyond its borders. The chance to fundamentally alter the strategic orientation of such a geopolitically important country in a region of the world long critical to U.S. national security represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Moreover, to the shock of many, the United States found in Sharaa, a designated terrorist with deep roots in the global jihad, someone that it might be able to work with. Desperate for international support to resuscitate Syria's devastated economy, Sharaa has in fact given Washington real reason to believe that on a range of important security issues, he is prepared to make progress on an agenda that in time could significantly reduce the threat that Syria has historically posed to U.S. regional interests. President Trump's surprise decision to meet with Sharaa in May 2025 and order the dismantling of America's comprehensive regime of Syria sanctions was a powerful manifestation of the U.S. decision to back Sharaa's efforts to transform Syria into a more responsible regional actor while helping the war-torn country recover and rebuild after years of devastating civil conflict.

The potential fatal flaw in this approach, however, was that, left largely to his own devices on matters of Syria's internal governance, Sharaa has systematically pursued a course of

authoritarian power consolidation that, whether he realizes it or not, is actually super-charging the centrifugal sectarian and ethnic forces that could end up tearing Syria apart again—exactly the outcome the Trump administration’s heavy bet on Sharaa was designed to avoid. In the wake of the disastrous massacres of the Alawites and the Druze, and increasingly violent tensions with the Kurds, that threat of an irreversible disintegration is now all too real. Should it come to pass, it would be the death knell for whatever hopes Washington has placed in Sharaa to usher in a post-Assad era that sees Syria acting in ways that advance, rather than threaten, U.S. regional interests.

An urgent course correction is required. Dialogue, decentralization, healing, and patience rapidly need to become the watchwords of Syria’s internal political discourse as its diverse communities are encouraged to chart a peaceful course forward to salvage the country’s fragile future. In the aftermath of the July massacre, there have been hints that U.S. attitudes toward the question of Syria’s internal governance may be evolving, but a more decisive, clear-cut, and sustained U.S. policy shift is badly needed before it is too late and events on the ground make it impossible to stem Syria’s violent unraveling. To do that, Sharaa’s vision of a centralized state, dominated by Sunni Islamists, with near-dictatorial powers concentrated in his own person, should be quickly forsworn and abandoned. The United States, working in close collaboration with a multinational coalition of partners representing the most powerful and influential stakeholders in Syria’s post-Assad success, needs to conduct an urgent intervention to help dissuade Sharaa from the dangerous and self-destructive course he has been on. Syria’s post-Assad trajectory requires a significant reset.

# I. Executive Summary

## A. Strategic Context

The sudden collapse of the Assad dynasty in Syria in December 2024 offered huge opportunities for the United States to advance its interests in the Middle East. In power for more than five decades, the Assads were a consistent and dependable ally of both global and regional powers, as well as terrorist groups, dedicated to undermining and attacking U.S. power and influence. Since 2011, Bashar al-Assad's regime had also been the driving force of a bloody civil war, converting Syria into a gaping black hole of violence, chaos, and human misery. With Assad's downfall, the chance of fundamentally shifting the strategic orientation of one of the region's most geopolitically significant countries was suddenly a real possibility—moving Syria from the Russian and Iranian camp of anti-American antagonism to the U.S.-led coalition of pragmatic states committed to strengthening Middle East stability, security, and prosperity.

## B. The Rise of Sharaa

Any sense of optimism, however, was immediately tempered by the identity of the forces that stormed out of Idlib in late November 2024, triumphantly entered Damascus less than two weeks later on December 8, and declared themselves the new rulers of Syria. In the lead was Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, the one-time al-Qaeda franchise, and its leader, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, a U.S.-designated terrorist whose greatest hits included fighting against the United States in Iraq and introducing the art of suicide bombing to the Syrian civil war. Surrounding HTS were a Star Wars' bar scene line up of other Sunni jihadist groups, many with prior ties to al-Qaeda and ISIS, including foreign terrorists from across the Arab and Muslim world.

Upon assuming power, however, Jolani—who quickly dropped his nom de guerre in favor of his given name, Ahmed al-Sharaa—surprised many by immediately demonstrating a startling degree of pragmatism and willingness to diverge from jihadist orthodoxy. The fact was that close observers had been tracking Sharaa's evolution from fire-breathing jihadist to Syrian Islamist nationalist for several years—the seeming triumph of his own will to power over any self-defeating commitment to ideological purity. Desperate for rapid international support to revive Syria's moribund economy and repair its shattered state and society, Sharaa immediately launched what can only be called a charm offensive to elicit the help of the United States, Europe, and the strongest countries of the Arab world in rebuilding his broken country and bolstering his fledgling regime.

In the face of enormous skepticism, Sharaa quickly said most of the right things. He committed to treat all of Syria's diverse peoples as equal citizens with full rights under the rule of law. He promised to ensure that Syria would no longer serve as a base for the spread of Iranian malign influence across the Middle East or for Palestinian terror groups. Most remarkably, perhaps, he openly declared that he had no desire for conflict with Israel and, on the contrary, would work to ensure that no threat against Israel could emerge from Syrian soil.

More importantly, to Sharaa's credit, real action ensued, particularly on a list of priority security concerns conveyed to his government by the United States in the early spring of 2025. His forces cooperated with U.S. Central Command in combatting ISIS. They worked to evict Iranian influence, including intercepting efforts to smuggle arms to Lebanese Hezbollah. The government cracked down on Palestinian militant groups and worked cooperatively with the international agency

responsible for resolving questions surrounding the Assad regime's chemical weapons program. A dialogue was initiated with Israel to try and reach a new security arrangement that would allow Israel to withdraw from a buffer zone occupied after Assad's collapse and cease a systematic campaign of air strikes aimed at destroying the remnants of the old Syrian military's most advanced capabilities.

### C. U.S. Syria Policy: From Caution to Embrace

Based no doubt on President Trump's long history of aversion to continued U.S. engagement in Syria, his administration's initial approach toward Sharaa's government exhibited real caution. The message was that the crippling regime of U.S. sanctions on Syria built up over decades would only be reduced gradually and in return for significant progress on a list of eight specific security demands dealing with counterterrorism, Iran, missing Americans, chemical weapons, and foreign fighters.

It was a stunning surprise, then, when on the first scheduled foreign trip of his second term, Trump announced in Saudi Arabia in May that at the urging of his host, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, he had decided to remove all U.S. sanctions on Syria and give the country "a chance at greatness." He met personally with Sharaa the next day, praised him, and relayed five requests that had significant overlap with the previous list of eight U.S. conditions, while adding Trump's request that Syria join the Abraham Accords by making peace with Israel.

Upon Trump's sudden shift, the administration moved with great dispatch to pivot from wary engagement to an embrace of Sharaa, including naming the President's close personal friend and U.S. Ambassador to Turkey, Tom Barrack, as its Special Envoy to Syria, and doing as much as possible within the president's authority to chop away at the elaborate U.S. sanctions architecture—including waiving for 180 days the penalties imposed under the 2019 Caesar Act, the powerful piece of U.S. legislation that effectively cut Syria off from all global commerce. The effort culminated in late June with Trump's Executive Order 14312 that not only terminated all previous executive orders penalizing Syria as well as the longstanding U.S. state of emergency but also took steps to waive key penalties under other U.S. legislation. Taking their cue from Trump, a bipartisan group of U.S. senators and representatives quickly launched an effort to repeal the Caesar Act permanently.

### D. Sharaa's Troubling Internal Vision

While Sharaa's continued efforts to show seriousness of purpose on most of Washington's security priorities provided ample justification for the administration's accelerated efforts to engage and bolster his government, it tended to obscure a more disturbing and increasingly problematic feature of Sharaa's rule: his authoritarian and Sunni supremacist approach to matters of internal governance. A series of policies, including an interim constitutional declaration that consolidated near-dictatorial powers in Sharaa's hand for a five-year period, unquestionably had the effect of stoking the suspicions and fears that Syria's important minority communities already harbored in the wake of the seizure of power by Sharaa, HTS, and the robust cadre of Salafi jihadists that surrounded them in Damascus.

Most damaging were two incidents of mass sectarian violence, the first against the Alawite minority along Syria's central coast in March, and the second in July against Syria's Druze minority

in their southern stronghold of Suwayda. In both cases, elements of Sharaa's new security forces, theoretically dispatched to quell violence and re-impose order, joined tens of thousands of alleged Sunni "volunteer" fighters in a days-long spasm of sectarian murder, torture, burning, and looting. While no hard evidence has emerged that Sharaa or his government were directly complicit in ordering the massacres, their inability to prevent them, a lack of transparency and urgency in holding perpetrators accountable, and a failure to move immediately to make reparations and concessions to the victimized communities has super-charged the centrifugal forces increasingly pushing Syria's most well-armed and significant minorities away from Sharaa's centralizing state-building project.

Greatly complicating the situation was Israel's own commitment to its influential Druze community to prevent harm to their Syrian brethren at the hands of the new jihadi-adjacent authorities. As Sharaa's troops moved into Suwayda in July and clashes erupted with Druze militias, Israel commenced significant military operations in Syria, including multiple strikes against the new government's forces, culminating in the bombing of Syria's defense ministry and near Sharaa's presidential palace in Damascus—spurring frantic U.S.-led diplomatic efforts that eventually resulted in a fragile ceasefire.

#### E. U.S. Blindspot

Suwayda underscored the extent to which Sharaa's rigid insistence on an authoritarian and centralizing vision for reconstituting Syria's shattered state was putting at risk the U.S. goal of stabilizing Syria and transforming it into a dependable partner in strengthening Middle East security. The Trump administration's legitimate focus on America's core counterterrorism priorities came largely at the exclusion of any sustained effort to also apply Washington's substantial leverage to influence Sharaa's worst instincts on how to manage the legitimate concerns, fears, and interests of Syria's minority communities. Indeed, in the run-up to the Suwayda disaster, Special Envoy Barrack had not only regularly intoned on the U.S. refusal to engage in "nation building" but had gone substantially further in outright endorsing Sharaa's centralizing approach, including in explicit opposition to the countervailing view of the Kurds of northeastern Syria, America's decade-long ally in the fight against ISIS, as well as the Alawites and Druze.

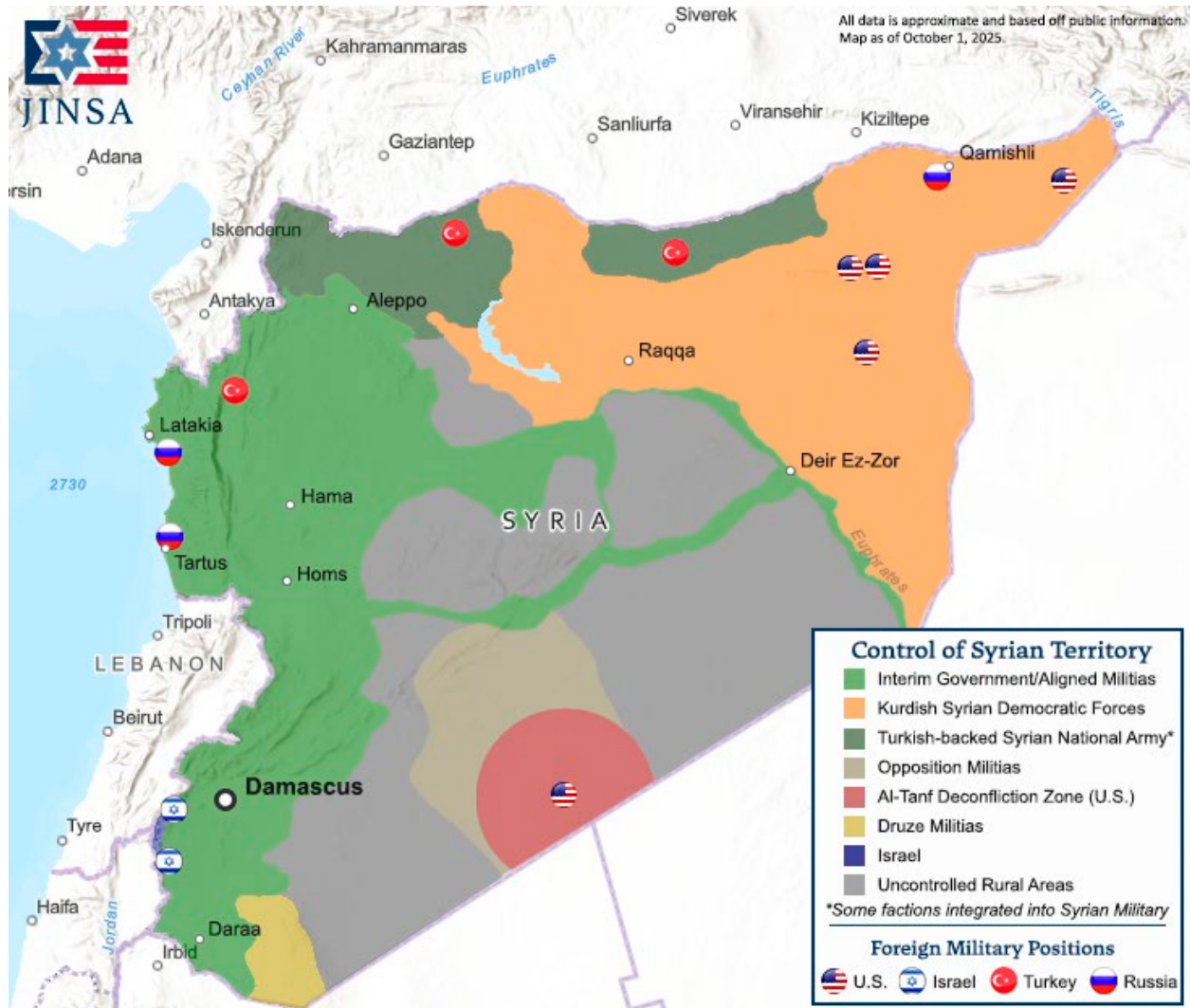
#### F. Recommendations

Even as it continues to engage Sharaa to advance U.S. security priorities, including on fighting ISIS, keeping Iran out, and concluding an historic new Israel-Syria security agreement, the Trump administration should urgently seek to stem the increasingly dangerous dynamic between Syria's new government and its key minority communities triggered by Sharaa's deeply problematic approach to internal governance. The risk that, left to their own devices, events will continue to spiral downward in ways that spur increased violence and chaos that endanger the U.S. goal of building a stable Syrian partner is too great to ignore.

The administration should urgently undertake the following steps:

- **Organize a multinational Syria contact group composed of Washington’s most powerful and influential allies** that will use their combined leverage to advance not only a common set of security priorities with Sharaa, but also a far more accommodating and patient approach toward Syria’s minorities.
- **Re-establish a functioning embassy in Syria that is fully staffed with experienced diplomats and experts** who establish day-to-day contacts with Sharaa’s government and all the country’s communities to provide authoritative and unbiased first-hand reporting and analysis of events on the ground that will be able to better inform U.S. policy, as well as support the international contact group, should it be established.
- **Press Sharaa to take several immediate steps to signal a new approach to issues of internal governance, including:**
  - » Reconvene a more inclusive and serious national dialogue process.
  - » Re-open the interim constitutional declaration to amendments.
  - » Allow the current security status quo regarding the Kurds and Druze to continue, pending good faith negotiations on eventual integration into the Syrian state, including the possibility that some units can be retained as local territorial forces or a Syrian national guard.
  - » Recruit members of vulnerable minority communities into Syrian security units charged with policing their neighborhoods, villages, and towns.
  - » Establish an immediate program to professionalize Syria’s defense and interior forces through Western training, support, and oversight.
  - » Remove foreign jihadist commanders from Syria’s new security forces and disband foreign units that participated in the massacres against the Alawites and Druze.
  - » Accelerate efforts to heal the Suwayda crisis—irrespective of larger political considerations—by ensuring humanitarian aid and the resumption of commercial and civilian traffic between Damascus and Suwayda.
- To maximize the chances of Sharaa paying heed to U.S. concerns regarding Syria’s internal governance, **maintain U.S. economic and military leverage by slowing Congress’s rush to repeal the Caesar Act permanently**, which would void the greatest single incentive Sharaa has to comply with U.S. priorities, **and by keeping a small deployment of U.S. forces in northeastern Syria** working alongside Kurdish-led SDF forces as they negotiate their status with Sharaa.

## Current Control of Syrian Territory



Source: JINSA Research<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Map sources: [The Institute for the Study of War](#), [Congressional Research Service](#), [The Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#), additional JINSA research

## II. Strategic Context

### A. Assad's Collapse: Major Opportunity for U.S. Interests but New Problems

What happens in Syria after the fall of the Assad regime should be a matter of great concern to the United States. For much of the past 50 years, Syria under the Assads, both father and son, was largely hostile to U.S. interests. It served as the primary gateway for the expansion of Soviet (and thereafter Russian) and Iranian influence in the Levant. The regime facilitated the rise of Hezbollah and Lebanon's transformation into an Iranian stronghold on the Mediterranean. It sponsored terrorism and the narcotics trade, built a large Russian-supplied military arsenal, and pursued weapons of mass destruction.

Sitting in the heart of the Middle East, Syria borders key American allies and partners in Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey; over the decades, the Assad regime's policies at one time or another threatened them all. The regime's brutal style of rule, which saw a minority Alawite elite manipulate sectarian fears to oppress a majority Sunni population, eventually precipitated the eruption of Syria's chaotic 14-year civil war, turning the country into a magnet and breeding ground for ISIS while fueling Iranian and Russian interference. The resulting mass refugee flows—at least six to seven million people—greatly burdened Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, and ultimately destabilized the politics of several of America's most important European allies and NATO partners.<sup>1</sup>

The sudden collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime after its key backers in Iran and Hezbollah suffered severe setbacks at Israel's hands in the fall of 2024 opened up major opportunities for the United States—the possibility of achieving a fundamental shift in Syria's strategic orientation and the country's emergence as a stable partner prepared to help advance, rather than undermine, U.S. interests in the Middle East. Any optimism on that score, however, was severely tempered by the identity of the forces that seized control of Damascus in the wake of Assad's departure and rapidly declared themselves the new rulers of Syria.

Ahmed al-Sharaa and the militia he commanded, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), had deeply problematic and worrying backgrounds, with pedigrees steeped in the global jihad, including having once claimed the mantle of al-Qaeda's Syrian franchise. Making matters worse, the *nom de guerre* by which Sharaa was known until the moment he entered Syria's presidential palace—Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, or “the Golani”—seemed a transparent reference to a desire to attack Israel and forcibly re-conquer the Golan Heights. The fear that Syria had escaped the frying pan of Assad's pro-Iranian hellscape only to land in the Salafi jihadist fire was certainly not without foundation.

## B. The Rise of Ahmed al-Sharaa

### i. *The Man With a “Strong Past”*

Sharaa had cut his terrorist teeth by joining the global jihad to fight and kill Americans in Iraq, where he gained the skills of an expert bombmaker and ended up doing time in multiple U.S. detention centers. Upon his release, he returned to his native Syria as its civil war was heating up as the personal emissary of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the man who would soon go on to become the first emir of the Islamic State, or ISIS. After founding Jabhat al-Nusra as the Syrian branch of Baghdadi’s Iraqi group, Sharaa’s early claim to fame was as the man who introduced suicide bombing to the Syrian civil war. Sharaa allegedly took special pride in his ability to groom young boys, women, and men to become martyrs for the cause.<sup>2</sup> The United States soon sanctioned both Sharaa—still known then as Jolani—and al-Nusra for terrorism and in 2017 placed a \$10 million bounty on his head for good measure.<sup>3</sup>

When Sharaa’s star rose too quickly among jihadist circles and Baghdadi attempted to reign him in, Sharaa quickly denounced his mentor and declared his new allegiance was to al-Qaeda’s leader in Pakistan, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Restricted to the northwest province of Idlib near Syria’s border with Turkey, Sharaa proceeded to build and govern the region as a haven for non-ISIS extremist groups, taking as tribute a percentage of the assistance they received from foreign backers like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey. Initially, his treatment of minorities was harsh. Christians were expelled from their properties, their churches closed. Druze faced similar discrimination, and many were killed. Alawites were driven out en masse and frequently tortured if they were caught at checkpoints attempting to enter Idlib.<sup>4</sup>

By mid-2016, as ISIS was being rolled back and the United States began focusing on Idlib as an al-Qaeda stronghold, Sharaa’s extreme pragmatism was on full display. In an interview with *Al Jazeera*, he announced that Jabhat al-Nusra had left al-Qaeda.<sup>5</sup> Months later, he rebranded his militia as HTS, a group narrowly focused on liberating Syria rather than resurrecting the global caliphate. He drove extremist groups not loyal to HTS out of Idlib, cemented his position as the supreme leader of northwestern Syria, and declared the formation of a “Salvation government” that would serve as an “administration-in-waiting” until the final defeat of Assad’s regime.<sup>6</sup>

A security force and army were built. Taxes were collected. His forces controlled the border with Turkey and proceeded to cooperate with the international community to deliver humanitarian assistance to nearly two million Syrian refugees that had found sanctuary in Idlib. He arrested European jihadists wanted by their governments, and his forces stood back when American commandos attacked and killed his ISIS rival, Baghdadi, in October 2019 in the countryside outside Idlib.<sup>7</sup>

As his interactions with Western interlocutors, aid agencies, and intelligence services increased, the worst features of Sharaa’s Salafi jihadist rule over Idlib softened. The morality police were disbanded. Minorities were still barred from participating in his government, which Sharaa personally dominated, but he vowed to protect the religious and cultural rights of Druze. A church reopened, and Sharaa ordered previously confiscated Christian properties be returned.<sup>8</sup> Foreign aid surged in, electricity and cell phone networks were restored, and reconstruction projects surged.<sup>9</sup>

## *ii. Sharaa in Power: Pragmatism Over Jihadist Orthodoxy*

By the time he made it to Damascus, then, Sharaa's capacity for ruthless pragmatism had been on display for several years. As necessitated by his own pursuit of power, he had proven perfectly willing to throw former jihadist allies under the bus and adopt a growing degree of flexibility from jihadist orthodoxy. Once in the presidential palace, he doubled down on that strategy.

To his credit, Sharaa quickly understood that his extremist past was a major liability to the goal of consolidating power and control of post-Assad Syria. He inherited a country that was not just broken, but broke. Ruins dominated the landscape, the Syrian economy had largely ceased functioning, and the price tag of reconstructing the country was typically estimated to be in the range of \$400 billion.<sup>10</sup> International sanctions were smothering, especially the comprehensive and powerful U.S. regime of secondary sanctions designed to deter any country or person from engaging in normal economic interactions with Syria.

Sharaa responded to these desperate straits by almost immediately launching what cynics labeled a charm offensive, but others interpreted as potentially a more strategic campaign of genuine moderation. At the most superficial and cosmetic level, he traded in his jihadist combat fatigues for a well-tailored Western suit and tie.<sup>11</sup> He trimmed his hair and long beard. He welcomed diplomatic delegations from around the world, focusing most intently on building ties with American allies and partners in Europe and the Middle East.<sup>12</sup> While Turkey had been a longtime backer of HTS during the civil war and remains a powerful influence, Sharaa prioritized building ties to Washington's most important Arab partner, Saudi Arabia, and made a point of going to Riyadh on his first trip outside Syria.<sup>13</sup> He explicitly rejected jihadism and articulated the broad vision of a new Syria that would respect the rights of all its citizens, whatever their religious or sectarian affiliation, and live in peace with its neighbors.<sup>14</sup>

More substantively and strategically in terms of U.S. interests, Sharaa's Sunni Islamist background made him a natural enemy of America's main regional nemesis, the Islamic Republic of Iran. Driving the remaining vestiges of Iranian and Hezbollah influence out of Syria, and thereby permanently severing the Iranian land bridge across Syria to Lebanon and crippling the "Shiite Crescent," was clearly one of the major pre-occupations of Sharaa's early agenda.<sup>15</sup> So, too, was a readiness to work with America's Central Command (CENTCOM) in preventing ISIS, with its commitment to perpetual jihad and potential to act as a competitor for the allegiance of Syria's aggrieved Sunni majority, from making a comeback.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps most interesting and unexpected was the extraordinary degree of pragmatism that Sharaa demonstrated early on toward Israel. Starting in the hours immediately after Assad's collapse, Israel seized the opportunity to conduct a broad preventive bombing campaign to destroy all the most advanced air, ground, and naval capabilities of the former Syrian Arab Army, as well as abandoned weapons depots of Iran and Hezbollah, and ensure that none of it could fall into the hands of forces hostile to Israel, including HTS. Israel further seized strategic ground on the Syrian side of the Golan, creating a narrow buffer zone from which to ensure that no hostile forces would attempt to infiltrate southwestern Syria near the Israeli border.<sup>17</sup>

Sharaa responded to these affronts to Syrian sovereignty with remarkable restraint. At best, there was an occasional perfunctory public protest that lacked much real conviction, but no threats to resist Israel's incursions, much less any concrete steps to confront them. On the contrary, what emerged instead was a fairly steady stream of reassuring messages from Sharaa that he had zero desire to enter any conflict with Israel, was prepared to respect fully the 1974 U.S.-brokered Israel-

Syria disengagement agreement that regulated military affairs south of Damascus, and indeed was even ready to entertain additional agreements and understandings that, at minimum, would bolster and stabilize the long-term security situation between the two countries and, at best, might in due course advance the broader cause of Israeli-Syrian peace and normalization.<sup>18</sup>

Based on his initial moves, U.S. friends in Europe and the Arab world relatively quickly came to the conclusion that Sharaa was a man they could do business with. On the basis of his urgent need for sanctions relief, economic reconstruction, and a supportive international environment, Sharaa had already given credible reason to believe that he was prepared to work off a pragmatic agenda largely favorable to U.S. and Western interests, including: stabilizing and rebuilding Syria; keeping Iran and Hezbollah out and ISIS down; and reaching mutually beneficial accommodations with Israel. To advance and consolidate that historic strategic shift in Syria's post-Assad orientation, most U.S. partners in Europe and the Middle East began to recommend that taking some calculated risks to engage Sharaa and strengthen his weak hand by providing economic relief and diplomatic support was the best path forward. Significantly, that was certainly the view of two of Trump's favorite regional leaders, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS).<sup>19</sup>

Thus, by the time Trump arrived in Saudi Arabia for the first scheduled foreign visit of his second term in May 2025, it was already clear to most observers that—whether out of conviction or, perhaps more likely, Syria's desperate circumstances—Sharaa was a far more intriguing, cunning, and pragmatic leader than the standard-issue jihadist ideologue out of central casting that many feared when his troops first stormed Damascus.

### C. Trump and Syria: From Caution to Embrace

#### i. *Nothing But "Sand and Death"*

Trump, himself, had since his first term been notoriously leery of U.S. entanglement in Syria's affairs. After overseeing the territorial defeat of ISIS in Syria in 2017, Trump attempted twice (unsuccessfully) to reduce and even end America's modest military deployment in the country—in no small part at the urging of Erdogan, who wanted to sever CENTCOM's anti-ISIS partnership with the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), whom he accused of being a wholly owned subsidiary of the designated Turkish terror group, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).<sup>20</sup> At the time, Trump famously described Syria as nothing but "sand and death" while observing that the time had come to "Let someone else fight over this long-bloodstained sand."<sup>21</sup>

In December 2024, as Trump prepared for his second inauguration, his hands-off instinct toward Syria was on full display in the immediate aftermath of Assad's downfall. Trump posted on social media that "Syria is a mess, but is not our friend," and that "THE UNITED STATES SHOULD HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH IT. THIS IS NOT OUR FIGHT. LET IT PLAY OUT. DO NOT GET INVOLVED!"<sup>22</sup> Ten days after taking the oath of office in late January, as Sharaa's interim government continued taking shape, Trump reiterated that "Syria is in its own mess. They've got enough messes over there. They don't need us involved."<sup>23</sup> By February 2025, the Pentagon was already drafting plans to withdraw from Syria, and in April reports surfaced that 600 troops (of an estimated 2,000) had begun to depart three of eight U.S. bases in Syria, with further withdrawals likely.<sup>24</sup>

## *ii. Early Trump II: A Conditions-Based Strategy for Engagement*

Early in Trump's second term, the approach toward Sharaa's transitional government of one-time jihadists appeared highly cautious, aimed at maintaining maximum U.S. leverage by testing Sharaa's readiness to accommodate U.S. interests, and doling out sanctions relief and diplomatic support only as part of a gradual step-by-step process in return for concrete actions responsive to America's priorities.

A leaked document that the Trump administration delivered to the Syrian government in March sought to link U.S. economic relief to measurable political and security outcomes on eight primary demands, which the document termed "confidence-building measures:"<sup>25</sup>

1. Form a professional, unified Syrian army with no foreign fighters in key command roles;
2. Provide full access to all chemical weapons facilities and associated infrastructure;
3. Establish a committee to find missing Americans, including Austin Tice;
4. Repatriate ISIS family members detained at Syria's al-Hol detention camp;
5. Cooperate with the U.S.-led international coalition against ISIS;
6. Authorize the United States to conduct counterterrorism operations on Syrian territory;
7. Ban all Palestinian militias and political activities in Syria, as well as deport Palestinian militia members; and
8. Prevent Iran's military buildup in Syria and designate the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization.

Importantly, the document was almost entirely focused on U.S. security needs, particularly regarding counterterrorism issues (both concerning ISIS and Palestinian groups), chemical weapons, Iranian interference, and the fate of missing Americans. While an annex to the demands reportedly mentioned issues related to Syria's internal governance, they were clearly not prioritized.<sup>26</sup> Not surprisingly, in its own efforts to respond to Washington, the Syrian government focused largely on addressing the list of eight security-related demands.<sup>27</sup>

## *iii. Trump's Reversal: Giving Syria "A Chance at Greatness"*

Given Trump's long-time skepticism of Syria, largely reflected in his administration's early policy, it came as no small surprise when the issue of Syria's future and U.S.-Syrian relations emerged as a major topic during Trump's May trip to Riyadh. In a speech to over 1,000 people at the U.S.-Saudi Investment Forum, with MBS sitting in the front row, Trump observed that "In Syria, which has seen so much misery and death, there is a new government that will hopefully succeed in stabilizing the country and keeping peace." Accordingly, Trump said, "That's why my administration has already taken the first steps toward restoring normal relations between the United States and Syria for the first time in more than a decade." Moreover, Trump announced to a sustained standing ovation that "After discussing the situation with the Crown Prince—your Crown Prince—and also with President Erdogan of Turkey who called me the other day and asked for a very similar thing. . . I will be ordering the cessation of sanctions against Syria in order to give them a chance at greatness."<sup>28</sup>

Amplifying the head-snapping nature of the shift in U.S. policy, Trump proceeded (with Erdogan joining by phone) to meet Sharaa in person alongside MBS the next day, describing him later as a

“young, attractive guy. Tough guy. Strong past.”<sup>29</sup> Trump opined optimistically that “He’s got a real shot at holding it together. He’s a real leader. He led a charge, and he’s pretty amazing.”<sup>30</sup>

Trump’s about-face on sanctions was a huge deal. The power of the U.S. sanctions regime had served not only to prevent any bilateral economic activity between the United States and Syria but had extended its reach to include broad secondary sanctions that deterred virtually any international business and financial institution from interacting with Syria. Absent a more lenient U.S. approach, the growing list of countries eager to move quickly to help Syria’s new government stabilize, recover, and rebuild were largely hamstrung from acting. The growing fear by the time of Trump’s Middle East trip was that, in the absence of much greater foreign assistance, trade, and investment, Syria’s dire economic situation was only getting worse and threatening to drag the country back into renewed chaos and violence.

Rubio endorsed that assessment a week after Trump’s decision to lift sanctions when he appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. While acknowledging the worrisome past of the new Syrian leadership, Rubio said that “if we engage them, it may work out, it may not work out.”<sup>31</sup> But, he warned, “If we did not engage them, it was guaranteed not to work out.”<sup>32</sup> Whereupon he painted an extremely alarming picture to justify the far-reaching U.S. reversal of policy, saying that “In fact, it is our assessment that, frankly the transitional authority, given the challenges they’re facing, are maybe weeks, not many months, away from potential collapse and a full-scale civil war of epic proportions, basically the country splitting up.”<sup>33</sup>

Trump’s announcement in Saudi Arabia upended the earlier approach based on strict reciprocity. In explaining his surprise decision to lift all sanctions, Trump did not even attempt to link it to any particular changes in Syrian behavior that had addressed the eight previously articulated U.S. priorities. Rather, he seemed to delight in framing his decision, in the first instance, as a personal favor that he was granting in response to requests from his host, MBS, and Turkey’s President Erdogan.

Regardless of the rationale, the strong impression was that Trump had done a 180-degree reversal from a policy that had been strongly conditioned on providing sanctions relief cautiously and only after the Syrian government had taken concrete steps to satisfy U.S. goals to one that was now prepared to front-load large-scale support virtually without conditions. In other words, lifting sanctions not as a reward for good behavior, but as an incentive for it. Trump and the United States had, for all intents and purposes, gone all-in for Sharaa.

When he met with Sharaa the next day to confirm his policy reversal, Trump coupled (but did not link) his commitment to lift sanctions unconditionally with encouragement for Sharaa to address five issues of importance to the United States. Four of these, with some adjustment, largely echoed (and combined) some of the eight U.S. demands issued earlier in the spring. The previous demand to keep foreign jihadists out of key command positions in the new Syrian army was significantly broadened to “Tell all foreign terrorists to leave Syria.” Trump reiterated the earlier requests to “deport Palestinian terrorists, help the United States prevent the reemergence of ISIS, and assume responsibility for ISIS detention centers in Northeast Syria.”<sup>34</sup>

Likely out of increased sensitivity to Syrian sovereignty, Trump did not restate the stand-alone demand that Syria explicitly authorize U.S. counter-terrorism missions inside Syria. The one request that Trump added in his discussions with Sharaa that had not appeared on the previous U.S. list was urging Syria to “Sign on to the Abraham Accords with Israel.”<sup>35</sup>

Not included in Trump's requests from the earlier eight demands was anything related to Iran's presence in Syria, the fate of missing U.S. persons, or Syria's unaccounted-for chemical weapons. Exactly why is not clear, though it seems probable that those items were simply left out of the White House press secretary's read-out from the meeting, rather than an intentional downgrading of the issues as U.S. priorities.

Indeed, in relaying what Sharaa said at the meeting with Trump, the White House account suggests that Sharaa in fact had been the one to raise the common U.S.-Syrian interest in countering Iran and eliminating chemical weapons. The White House also highlighted that Sharaa had engaged directly on the issue of Syria's relations with Israel—not going so far as to address the Abraham Accords, but rather to affirm his government's commitment to the 1974 disengagement agreement that, since the Yom Kippur War, had regulated the separation of Syrian and Israeli military forces in the area between Damascus and the Golan Heights, including a demilitarized buffer zone. Moreover, Sharaa said that Syria would welcome U.S. investments in Syria's (not insignificant) oil and gas sector—a reflection, no doubt, of Sharaa's own savvy, or the sage advice he got from MBS and Erdogan on how to best ingratiate himself with the highly transactional Trump.<sup>36</sup>

With Trump's reversal, the administration moved almost immediately to deepen relations with the new Syrian regime. The day after his announcement, Secretary of State Marco Rubio held his first meeting with Sharaa's foreign minister, Asaad al-Shaibani, in Turkey.<sup>37</sup> The next week, just 10 days after Trump had initiated the sharp change in policy, his close personal friend and newly installed ambassador to Turkey, Tom Barrack, announced that he had been also been appointed as the U.S. Special Envoy for Syria. Barrack announced that he would support Rubio in attaining Trump's "clear vision of a prosperous Middle East and a stable Syria at peace with itself and its neighbors."<sup>38</sup> Barrack wasted no time, holding his first meeting with Sharaa during the latter's May 24 visit to Turkey, while making his first visit to Damascus on May 29, where he symbolically raised the U.S. flag over the long-shuttered U.S. embassy and held meetings with Sharaa and members of his government.<sup>39</sup>

#### *iv. The Complex Web of Removing Syria Sanctions*

The administration also acted almost immediately to begin making good on Trump's promise of sanctions relief. On May 23, Rubio issued a six-month waiver of mandatory Caesar Act sanctions, the comprehensive and crippling regime imposed by Congress in 2019 that was named in honor of a Syrian photographer who had smuggled out pictures of Assad's atrocities. The purpose was "to ensure sanctions do not impede the ability of our partners to make stability-driving investments and advance Syria's recovery and reconstruction efforts," Rubio explained. The move, Rubio said, would "facilitate the provision of electricity, energy, water, and sanitation, and enable a more effective humanitarian response across Syria."<sup>40</sup>

Concurrent with Rubio's waiver, to further incentivize foreign investment and private economic activity with the new Syria, the U.S. Treasury issued General License (GL) 25 to authorize certain transactions that had previously been prohibited with the Syrian government, including financial transactions with Syria's Central Bank. At the same time, GL 25 explicitly excluded any transactions benefiting elements of the former Assad regime or involving Russia, Iran, or North Korea.<sup>41</sup> Just a few weeks after the issuance of GL 25, Syria announced that it had taken the small but symbolically important step of completing its first electronic transfer in fourteen years with a Western bank using the SWIFT messaging system.<sup>42</sup>

Even more significant U.S. action on sanctions came just a month later when Trump issued Executive Order (EO) 14312.<sup>43</sup> It effectively revoked as of July 1 virtually the entire web of sanctions on Syria that were within Trump's purview to terminate—principally in the form of six earlier EOs that Trump's predecessors had issued over many decades against the Assad regime as well as the official U.S.-declared state of emergency that those EOs were based on. Acting on EO 14312, the Department of Treasury on August 25, 2025, formally published a final rule, "Providing for the Revocation of Syria Sanctions," that removed the Syrian Sanctions Regulations from the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations.<sup>44</sup>

Trump's EO also acted where it could on the authorities conferred on the executive branch by different pieces of comprehensive sanctions legislation that Congress had passed over the years. Under the Caesar Act, he followed Rubio's previous 180-day waiver by directing Rubio to examine whether the new Syrian government had met a set of specific criteria that would allow the Act's extensive sanctions to be suspended for periods of up to 180 days each.<sup>45</sup> Those criteria include conditions like ending the targeting of civilians; permitting the free flow of humanitarian assistance across Syria; releasing political prisoners; facilitating the return of refugees; and holding those who had committed war crimes during the civil war accountable.<sup>46</sup> Importantly, Trump's EO also noted that, should the Secretary of State determine after any suspension of sanctions that Syria's new regime was no longer meeting the Caesar Act conditions, he should reimpose the sanctions. Trump also made the necessary national security-related determinations and certifications under the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act (2003) and Chemical and Biological Weapons Control and Warfare Elimination Act (1991), respectively, that allowed for the waiver of certain export controls on Syria as well as restrictions on providing Syria foreign assistance, U.S. government credit or financial assistance, and loans and credit from U.S. banks.<sup>47</sup>

With respect to Syria's various terrorism-related designations, Trump's EO tasked Rubio with taking all appropriate action to end HTS's designation as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) as well as HTS and Sharaa's designations as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs).<sup>48</sup> Subsequently, on July 7, Rubio made good on the first item, declaring that he was revoking HTS's FTO designation on grounds that HTS had announced its dissolution and the new Syrian government had committed to combat terrorism.<sup>49</sup>

Trump separately tasked Rubio with also reviewing Syria's statutory designation (since 1979) as a State Sponsor of Terrorism (SST), the termination of which would pave the way for substantial additional lifting of sanctions and restrictions under multiple U.S. laws.<sup>50</sup> Doing so, however, would require a presidential certification to Congress conclusively showing that through changes to Syria's policies, personnel, and track record, the new government had unequivocally ceased all support for terrorism.<sup>51</sup> Even then, Congress, through a joint resolution, would have 45 days to block the rescission, should it be able to overcome a subsequent presidential veto.

#### *v. Adding New Authorities for Targeted Sanctions*

Significantly, while the thrust of Trump's EO was overwhelmingly focused on making it dramatically easier for the new Syria to garner international assistance and support, and rejoin the global economy, it also included explicit new provisions for sanctioning certain threatening behaviors.<sup>52</sup> While some of these provisions were primarily intended to target the past and future behavior of former members of the Assad regime or adversarial actors like Iran and ISIS, many were drafted broadly enough that, should circumstances warrant, they could be found to apply

to individuals operating in the new Syria as well, including Sharaa and his regime. As such, they constituted an unspoken but veiled threat that, should members of the interim government fail to live up to its promises of moderation and peace, Trump's gift of sweeping and unconditional sanctions relief could, at least in part, be retracted.

Accordingly, Trump's EO directed the Secretary of Treasury, in consultation with the Secretary of State, to sanction persons found to have "threaten[ed] the peace, security, stability, or territorial integrity of Syria"; committed "serious human rights abuses"; been members of the Assad regime or assisted the Assad regime; materially contributed to the illicit trade in Captagon, a dangerous psychostimulant; or caused a U.S. citizen or permanent resident to go missing during the Assad regime.<sup>53</sup>

Separately, the EO authorized the Secretary of State, in consultation with the Secretary of the Treasury, to sanction any individuals who in the future (after the date of the EO) undertook actions for "the obstruction, disruption, or prevention of efforts to promote a Syria that is stable, unified, and at peace with itself and its neighbors."<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, the specific actions listed as sanctionable were all focused on issues impacting the new Syria's domestic affairs. Specifically in the crosshairs would be those who threaten "the convening and conduct of a credible and inclusive Syrian-led constitutional process; the preparation for and conduct of supervised elections... that are free and fair and subject to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability; or the development of a Syrian government that is representative and reflects the will of the Syria people."<sup>55</sup>

Those criteria obviously set a very high (and almost certainly unrealistic) bar. But if taken seriously and wielded skillfully by U.S. diplomats, they do identify a basket of critical internal benchmarks by which the good faith and progress of Syria's new government could be evaluated and its members held to account by Washington going forward—thereby establishing additional potential leverage to influence and shape the governing actions and behaviors of the transitional authorities.

That said, in previewing Trump's EO, the Special Envoy for Syria, Barrack, appeared to go out of his way to downplay the significance of these domestically focused criteria, underscoring that they certainly were not an attempt by Trump to engage in "nation-building." On the contrary, he insisted, "They're not dictating, they're not requiring, they're not giving the framework of a democratic model that needs to be implemented." Rather, he argued, they at most represented "a bunch of criteria that we want to watch along the way."<sup>56</sup>

#### *vi. Congress Follows Trump*

As extensive as Trump's efforts were to lift sanctions and "give Syria a chance at greatness," permanently eliminating the entire architecture of U.S. sanctions would ultimately require Congress to also take action to repeal legislation, such as the Caesar Act, that had been duly passed into law. While such legislation generally granted the administration the authority to waive or suspend sanctions, it was usually for strictly limited time periods that need to be affirmatively renewed. Thus, in the case of Caesar sanctions, Rubio's waiver in May will only be good for 180 days, and unless renewed before November 19, 2025, sanctions will automatically snap back into place.

Notably, by June, there were several bipartisan efforts in Congress, both in the House and Senate, to take action on repealing sanctions legislation. Multiple bills were introduced, several of which

focused in particular on permanently ending the Caesar Act.<sup>57</sup> In explaining her support for ending sanctions, Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) said that “We can keep the new Syrian authorities accountable without decimating the economy” and that “Sustained diplomatic activity can yield tremendous results.”<sup>58</sup> Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC) launched his bill to terminate the Caesar Act by explaining that “unless Congress permanently repeals the law it will require waivers every 180 days until the law expires in December 2029, thereby creating economic uncertainty which will harm efforts to reduce the massive humanitarian and economic hardship in Syria which has been ravaged by years of war.”<sup>59</sup>

Wilson made clear that his efforts very much reflected the will of the administration. He quoted Rubio as telling the House Foreign Affairs Committee, “So the goal is ultimately to make enough progress so that Congress will permanently repeal those [sanctions under the Caesar Act].”<sup>60</sup> Wilson also quoted Barrack’s statement during his initial visit to Damascus that, with regard to the Caesar Act, “I promise you that the one person who has less patience with these sanctions than all of you is President Trump.”<sup>61</sup> Accordingly, Wilson said, “The Assad regime sanctioned by the Caesar Act no longer exists, and it is time to repeal the law to provide long-term certainty to those who would like to invest in the reconstruction and rebuilding of Syria.”<sup>62</sup>

In late August, Congressmen Wilson and Shaheen joined Barrack on the most high-profile congressional visit to Syria since Assad’s collapse.<sup>63</sup> They met with Sharaa and strongly reiterated their commitment to seeing the Caesar Act repealed before the end of 2025. Wilson stressed that “the time for full Caesar repeal is now,” and said unequivocally that repeal remained a top priority of the Trump administration and is a “bipartisan goal.”<sup>64</sup> Shaheen also reiterated her support for lifting sanctions and emphasized her efforts to repeal the Caesar Act in 2025.<sup>65</sup>

### *vii. U.S. Allies Seize Trump’s Opening on Sanctions*

As intended, Trump’s surprise decision to dramatically scale back and begin dismantling the U.S. sanctions regime served as a greenlight to U.S. partners in Europe and the Middle East who were eager to accelerate their own efforts to stabilize Syria by bolstering its economy and building their own influence with Sharaa’s government. A week after Trump’s May visit to Riyadh, the European Union lifted its remaining sanctions against Syria—except for weapons-related measures.<sup>66</sup> The UAE’s major port operator signed an \$800 million deal to develop the Syrian port of Tartus, theretofore a largely Russian dominion.<sup>67</sup>

In late July, the Saudis sponsored a Syrian-Saudi Investment Forum in Damascus where \$6.4 billion in deals were announced, including \$2.93 billion earmarked for real estate and infrastructure projects (particularly cement plants) to promote reconstruction and \$1.07 billion dedicated to the telecommunications and information technology sectors.<sup>68</sup> In May, the Saudis had joined Qatar in paying off Syria’s debts to the World Bank, clearing the way for new financial backing from the Bank for new projects.<sup>69</sup> Qatar also opened its checkbook in May to help pay for a portion of public sector salaries in Syria for several months, a commitment that they subsequently renewed in late September 2025 and in which they were joined by the Saudis.<sup>70</sup> Qatar had also committed to finance a pipeline that would deliver large quantities of gas from Azerbaijan to Syria via Turkey to strengthen electricity generation as well as financing gas deliveries from Jordan to Syria.<sup>71</sup>

### III. Sharaa Responds to U.S. Security Priorities

Importantly, Trump's decision to invest in Sharaa by front-loading sanctions relief did not occur in a vacuum. The fact is that, with respect to the list of high-priority security issues that the administration has communicated to the interim government, nascent but nevertheless meaningful progress has taken place on most of them.

#### A. Openness to Diplomacy with Israel

Given its jihadist origin story, perhaps the most remarkable thing about the new regime in Syria has been its persistent willingness not only to speak publicly about its desire for a non-confrontational and stable relationship with Israel, but to engage with Israel in negotiations, both indirectly and directly, to try and reach a set of practical accommodations of each side's interests. As context, it is worth noting that prior to Sharaa's ascendance to power, the last time Israel and Syria had engaged in serious negotiations about the future of their relationship was in 2000, during the last months of Hafez al-Assad's life.<sup>72</sup>

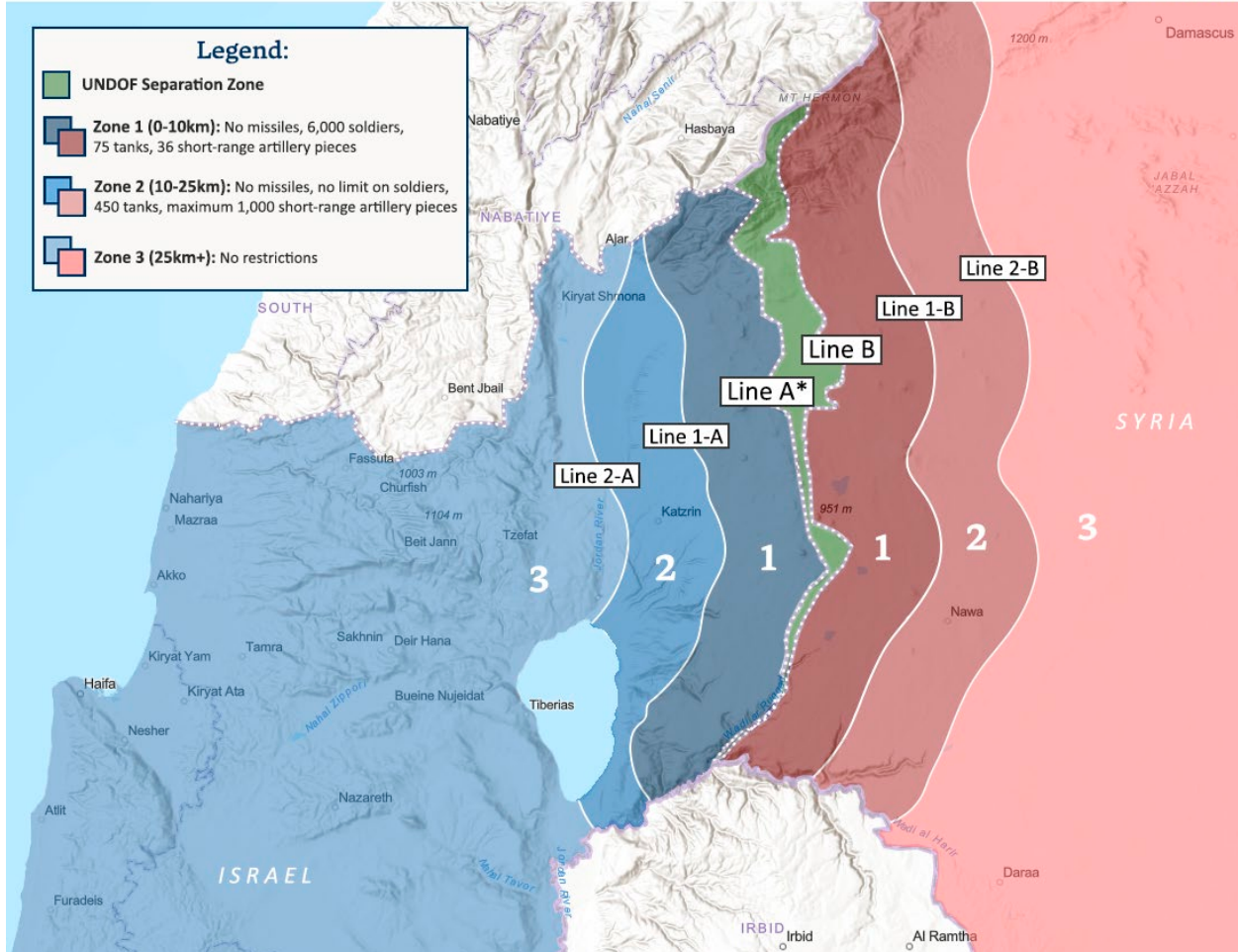
Of course, Sharaa's motivation for finding a modus vivendi with Israel is extremely strong, given Israel's nearly constant military activity in Syria since Assad's fall. Since December 8, 2024, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have not only seized a buffer zone inside Syria of up to 15 kilometers to ensure no hostile forces approach Israel's borders, but it has conducted over 1,000 strikes and ground incursions across Syria, most of them directed at destroying the remains of Syria's most advanced military capabilities to ensure they stay out of the hands of any potential adversary—including Sharaa's new regime.<sup>73</sup>

Those attacks had the added benefit of opening Syria's skies as a transit corridor for Israel's Air Force in the months before it launched its 12-day war against Iran in June 2025.<sup>74</sup> Israel has also conducted periodic strikes against Sharaa's security forces when they have clashed violently with Syria's Druze community (first in April 2025 and—far more brutally—again in July), as part of Israel's commitment to the interests of its own Druze minority, which forms an integral part of Israeli society and a bulwark within the IDF. In both instances, the Israeli attacks extended to symbolic strikes in Damascus in close proximity to regime targets, including the presidential palace.<sup>75</sup>

For Sharaa, whose main priority has been to stabilize and consolidate his rule and power over Syria, the drumbeat of Israeli attacks and disregard for Syrian sovereignty have been deeply problematic. They are an affront and humiliation for which he has no military response in light of the weakness of his own forces relative to Israel. As such, the attacks have become ammunition against Sharaa for the even more radical jihadist groups that make up Syria's post-Assad security ecosystem, as well as Iran and its allies.

As a result, Sharaa has not been coy about the importance he attaches to stemming Israel's relentless military activity. In an interview early in his tenure, he identified "the two most important things" that were endangering Syria's post-Assad future. The first was the crippling U.S. sanctions regime against Syria. But the second was Israel's military "advancement" since Assad's downfall, which Sharaa feared "will cause a lot of trouble in the future."<sup>76</sup> That sense of urgency obviously goes a long way in explaining Sharaa's readiness to engage diplomatically with Israel and to enlist as many countries as possible, especially the United States, in his effort to restrict the IDF's aggressive military posture.

# Agreement on Disengagement Between Israeli and Syrian Forces (1974)



\*Line A is the approximate 1967 Ceasefire line, the “Purple Line,” with alterations around Quneitra and Rafid.

Source: JINSA Research<sup>a</sup>

Substantively, Sharaa has consistently broadcast two messages to the Jewish state. The first concerns his government’s determination to “not allow Syria to become a threat to any party, including Israel.”<sup>77</sup> The second has sought to underscore the government’s commitment to abide fully by its obligations under the U.S.-brokered 1974 disengagement agreement with Israel.<sup>78</sup>

The first known discussions between Sharaa’s government and Israel reportedly occurred in April after Sharaa’s official visit to the UAE. Security officials from the Emirates set up a backchannel for indirect talks between Syrian and Israeli intelligence officials that focused on “technical” security matters and confidence-building steps.<sup>79</sup> The following month, Sharaa himself confirmed during a press conference in Paris that his government was engaged in indirect talks with Israel via mediators that he described as aimed at “easing tensions and preventing the situation from spiraling out of control for all involved parties.”<sup>80</sup>

Following Trump’s meeting with Sharaa in Riyadh and his request for Syria to join the Abraham Accords, Israeli-Syrian talks appeared to accelerate. A report in late May said that negotiations had moved from indirect to direct face-to-face discussions. The Syrian official in charge of the region closest to Israel’s border was said to be holding regular in-person meetings with Israeli

<sup>a</sup>Map Sources: [UNSC](#), [Israel-Syria: Engagement on Disengagement \(1974\)](#), [Alma Research and Education Center](#), [CIA-NFAC Research Paper](#)

security officials in an effort to calm tensions.<sup>81</sup> The following month, in June, Israel's National Security Advisor, Tzachi Hanegbi, confirmed that he was overseeing a series of direct negotiations with Syria that were broader and more comprehensive than previously believed, allegedly covering not only security issues but political matters as well, and suggested the possibility of Syria joining the Abraham Accords.<sup>82</sup>

Indeed, when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited President Trump at the White House in early July 2025, just weeks after the joint U.S.-Israel 12-day war against Iran, the media was awash with forecasts about the possibility of Syria soon joining the Abraham Accords and the prospects that Netanyahu and Sharaa might meet at the annual UN General Assembly in September—speculation that was premature and unrealistic, but indicative of the novelty and excitement engendered by Sharaa's surprising openness to diplomacy.

In July, on the sidelines of Sharaa's visit to Azerbaijan (one of Israel's closest Muslim partners), the direct Israeli-Syrian channel continued with senior officials from both countries meeting in Baku.<sup>83</sup> That same week, Trump's Syria envoy, Barrack, confirmed that "the dialogue has started between Syria and Israel."<sup>84</sup>

However, just as the Baku talks were underway, a local clash in Suwayda, the Druze-majority province in southern Syria, was escalating into a major clash that would draw in Sharaa's security forces and quickly implicate them in another horrific massacre of a minority community—the second in just over four months, following a similar massacre against Alawite civilians in March along Syria's central coast. Over the course of several days during the week of July 13, Israeli fighter jets would conduct multiple strikes against Syrian forces to compel their retreat from Suwayda, culminating in the targeting of the entrance to Syria's defense ministry in Damascus as well as a military site close to Sharaa's presidential palace.<sup>85</sup> Days of frantic U.S. diplomacy culminated shortly thereafter in a ceasefire and the withdrawal of the government's troops from Suwayda.

Yet remarkably, rather than triggering a break in Israel-Syria negotiations, the aftermath of the Suwayda crisis saw the channel actually intensify, with Special Envoy Barrack taking on the role of mediator in the discussions. Just over a week after the Israeli strikes on Damascus, Barrack convened in Paris the highest-level Israel-Syria meeting yet between Prime Minister Netanyahu's most influential advisor, Ron Dermer, and Syrian Foreign Minister Shaibani. The talks aimed to reach security understandings regarding southern Syria and avoid further conflict. Barrack said that "Our goal was dialogue and de-escalation, and we accomplished precisely that."<sup>86</sup>

Less than a month later, on August 19, Barrack reconvened Dermer and Shaibani for a second meeting in Paris.<sup>87</sup> Interestingly, for the first time, Syria's official government news outlet, SANA, confirmed that direct Israel-Syria discussions were underway. Its report described the talks as focusing on de-escalation, non-interference in Syria's domestic affairs, and reactivating the 1974 disengagement agreement.<sup>88</sup> A Syrian source also reported that Shaibani had expressed concerns that Israel's incursions into Syria risked further destabilizing the region.<sup>89</sup> Separately, other sources indicated that Israel had asked Syria to allow it to open a corridor that would run from Israel across southern Syria to Suwayda in order to deliver direct humanitarian aid to the Druze—a request that Syria reportedly turned aside. Nevertheless, both sides agreed to continue discussions to reach a security agreement.

Days after the second Paris meeting, Sharaa expressed optimism about the talks to a group of Arab reporters, saying that he was "betting that a security agreement between Syria and Israel

will be reached.”<sup>90</sup> Sharaa said the deal would be on the basis of the 1974 disengagement agreement, which he wanted to see renewed. Sharaa sought security arrangements that would bolster Syrian sovereignty and allow Israel to withdraw from the border areas it had seized after Assad’s collapse. Only then, Sharaa claimed, could the two parties proceed to confidence-building measures that might eventually lead to peace talks to end their state of war.<sup>91</sup> While Sharaa cast doubt that a peace agreement was likely in the near future, given the lack of mutual trust (as well as Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights), he boldly told the reporters that he would accept a peace deal with Israel without hesitation should he become convinced that it would serve both Syrians and the region. Moreover, Sharaa said that when that time came, he would gladly explain to the Syrian public why peace with Israel was essential.<sup>92</sup>

Days before the opening of the annual meeting of the UN General Assembly in late September, where Sharaa was due to become the first Syrian president to speak to the world gathering in nearly 60 years, Dermer and Shaibani held their third meeting in as many months in London.<sup>93</sup> It reportedly lasted for five hours and was characterized as very productive, with Sharaa commenting afterward that a deal might come together in “days.”<sup>94</sup>

Reports emerged that Israel had submitted a draft security agreement to Syria outlining its desire for the establishment of several zones east of Israel’s border in which Syria’s military deployments would be extremely limited.<sup>95</sup> The zone closest to a narrow buffer zone would only allow the deployment of Syrian police and internal security units. Israel also wanted the entire area south of Damascus to be a no-fly zone for Syrian aircraft, and to maintain an unimpeded corridor for the Israeli Air Force in the event of another Iran contingency. In return, Israel would undertake a gradual withdrawal from positions inside Syria occupied since Assad’s collapse—with the exception of the Syrian side of Mount Hermon, which Israel insisted it would keep as essential high ground to monitor events in Syria, Lebanon, and beyond. These were characterized as maximalist demands that Syria had countered with its own proposal.<sup>96</sup>

During UN week in late September, Netanyahu, Barrack, and Trump all chimed in with their own optimistic assessments, with Barrack and Trump suggesting a security agreement was imminent.<sup>97</sup> While nothing was concluded as quickly as some of the speculation forecasted, it still seemed likely that some form of initial deal would eventually happen in the not-too-distant future, given the positive commentary from all the leaders involved, the narrow short-term alignment of interest between Israel and Syria in stabilizing the situation, and Trump’s strong desire to be seen as brokering yet another historic Middle East agreement.

## B. Coming Clean on Assad’s Chemical Weapons

With respect to resolving outstanding questions concerning the Assad regime’s chemical weapons complex, Sharaa’s initial nine months have been marked by an openness and readiness to cooperate never exhibited by his predecessor. By early February 2025, for example, the Director-General of the Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) was in Damascus and meeting with both Sharaa and Foreign Minister Shaibani. The OPCW called the talks “long, productive, and very open,” re-establishing working relations between Syria and the organization and marking a break from 11 years of stalemate under the Assad regime.<sup>98</sup>

Shaibani visited the OPCW’s headquarters in The Hague in March, where he pledged without equivocation to destroy all Assad-era chemical weapons while asking for international support to

assist the effort so that Syria could “put an end to this painful legacy, bring justice to the victims, and ensure that the compliance with international law is a solid one.”<sup>99</sup>

Thereafter, in March, April, June, and August, four teams of OPCW experts deployed to Syria. After the April visit, the United Nations said the trips made “meaningful progress” toward verifying the extent of the Assad regime’s CW arsenal, and that inspectors had gone to a dozen sites in and around Damascus taking samples, including the Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC)—long believed to be the heart of Syria’s programs relating to CW and other weapons of mass destruction.<sup>100</sup> According to the UN, Sharaa’s government had extended “all necessary support,” including full access to all requested sites and personnel. But the UN also noted that there remained a long way to go, with 19 of 26 questions remaining unresolved concerning the Assad regime’s incomplete 2013 declaration regarding its CW program.<sup>101</sup> Following the August deployment, the UN further recognized that “the new Syrian authorities’ commitment to fully and transparently cooperate... is commendable.” It also noted important new findings, including that there may be up to 100 other CW-related sites that the Assad regime had failed to declare and that one of the samples collected by the OPCW in April revealed indicators of nerve agents.<sup>102</sup>

### C. Help Locating Missing Americans

On the issue of Americans who went missing under the Assad regime, including the journalist Austin Tice, no visible progress has been made since Assad’s collapse in determining their fates. That said, the interim authorities have shown some signs of willingness to address the issue with greater seriousness.

Very early in its tenure, officials cooperated with the Biden administration’s point person for hostages to search a suspected location where Tice might have been.<sup>103</sup> A month later, in the days just before Trump’s inauguration, Tice’s mother made her first visit to Syria in a decade and met with Sharaa at the presidential palace, where he allegedly told her that the new government was “dedicated and determined” to bring her son home.<sup>104</sup>

In the days after his May 14 meeting with Trump, Sharaa issued Decree No. 19, establishing the independent National Commission for the Missing, with a broad mandate to investigate cases of missing and forcibly disappeared persons (not just Americans), establish a national data base, provide legal and humanitarian support to affected families, and cooperate with state institutions and international bodies.<sup>105</sup> A week later, in his first meeting with Trump’s envoy, Barrack, in Istanbul, Sharaa reportedly formally committed to helping the United States locate and return its missing citizens. Barrack enthusiastically described it as a “powerful step forward” for the two nations.<sup>106</sup>

### D. Fighting ISIS

Since well before Assad’s fall, Sharaa and ISIS have viewed each other as bitter enemies. ISIS, of course, has viewed Sharaa’s abandonment of the global jihad and subsequent turn to pragmatism and engagement with the West, much less Israel, as unforgivable heresy. ISIS launched its first claimed attack on Sharaa’s new government in late May, in southern Syria near Suwayda, when a bomb killed or wounded several soldiers.<sup>107</sup>

In March, Sharaa signed a framework agreement with Mazloum Abdi, the leader of the Kurdish-led SDF, that aimed to reintegrate Syria’s Kurds with the post-Assad central government in

Damascus.<sup>108</sup> The U.S. military (the SDF's main backer for a decade and partner in the fight against ISIS in northeast Syria) was intimately involved in facilitating the discussions.<sup>109</sup> One key point contained in the agreement, subject to further negotiations, committed the central government to eventually taking control of border crossings, airports, oil fields, and—most importantly from the perspective of Washington's security priorities—detention centers under the SDF's control, including the massive al-Hol facility, the main camp holding ISIS detainees from around the world and their families.<sup>110</sup>

In late May, following Sharaa's meeting with Trump, the interim government and SDF, with U.S. military support, announced an agreement on the establishment of a joint mechanism for returning Syrian families from al-Hol back to areas near Damascus under the new regime's control—estimated at up to 16,000 people.<sup>111</sup> As part of the effort, U.S. military personnel from the anti-ISIS campaign took a senior delegation of Syrian government officials into al-Hol for the first time to assess conditions and discuss options for expediting the return of Syrian detainees as a means of easing overcrowding pressures at the camp.<sup>112</sup>

While all positive signs of the interim government's goodwill in working with the United States on assuming responsibility both for ISIS detention centers and for ISIS repatriations, concrete progress on the handovers remains extremely nascent. As a practical matter, of course, until the United States, SDF, and other international actors have adequate confidence in the Sharaa government's competence, capacity, and reliability to secure and administer ISIS fighters at al-Hol, not moving too fast makes great sense. A premature transfer of responsibility to an unprepared Syrian government could risk disaster.

Concerning the new government's willingness to actually join the fight against ISIS, there have also been positive signs. One prominent Syria analyst claims that since the early days after Assad's collapse, CENTCOM established a near-daily channel of communication with the new authorities to deconflict troop movements and coordinate occasional counter-ISIS operations.<sup>113</sup> The same analyst claimed that in the three months after taking power, Syria's new security services foiled eight ISIS terror plots, thanks in large part to its fledgling security relationship with U.S. intelligence and CENTCOM.<sup>114</sup> Syria's interior minister, a former hardline jihadist himself, now speaks openly with Western researchers about his cooperation with his "new friends" at the CIA.<sup>115</sup>

On July 25, U.S. forces led a counter-ISIS raid in Aleppo in cooperation with the transitional government's interior ministry force, the General Security Services. The attack killed a senior ISIS leader and two of his sons, who were identified by CENTCOM as posing "a threat to U.S. and Coalition Forces, as well as the new Syrian Government."<sup>116</sup> U.S. troops were described as being airdropped into Aleppo, while ground forces from both the General Security Services and SDF also participated.<sup>117</sup>

That instance of a U.S.-Syrian joint operation was followed by another attack on a senior ISIS figure in Syria's Idlib province, the former stronghold of Sharaa's HTS. Again, as U.S. forces conducted the main raid, the new regime's troops cordoned off the area and provided support.<sup>118</sup> In late September 2025, Syrian forces again operated in support of a U.S. airborne raid that killed a senior ISIS operational planner in Hama province—this time as part of a trilateral effort in which Iraq's counter-terrorism service were also involved.<sup>119</sup> Notably, the strike in Hama came shortly after CENTCOM's Commander, Admiral Brad Cooper, made his first visit to Damascus on September 12 to meet directly with Sharaa and thank him for Syria's cooperation in countering ISIS.<sup>120</sup> Speculation in advance of Sharaa's historic visit to the UN General Assembly in late September

suggested Syria might even officially become a member of the U.S.-led coalition to defeat ISIS in the near future.<sup>121</sup>

### E. Keeping Iran (and Hezbollah) Out

On the question of ending Iran's influence in Syria, Sharaa was more than a willing participant—most obviously because of Iran's role in propping Assad up and its participation in the slaughter of Syrians (especially Sunnis), but also because countering Iran was a major priority among all the major powers he hoped to enlist in helping to stabilize and rebuild Syria, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and even (to the extent that its military restraint was needed) Israel.

In one of his earliest interviews after taking power, Sharaa left no doubt about his intentions. "Syria had become a platform for Iran to control key Arab capitals, spread wars, and destabilize the Gulf with drugs like Captagon," he said. "By removing Iranian militias and closing Syria to Iranian influence, we've served the region's interests—achieving what diplomacy and external pressure could not." He noted that the success of his forces in deposing the Assad regime had set back Iranian ambitions in the region by decades.<sup>122</sup> Sharaa even went out of his way to explicitly draw out the implications for Israel, noting that Iran and its militias are no longer present in Syria. "We don't want conflict either with Israel or with other countries," he stressed. "Syria won't be used to target other countries."<sup>123</sup>

In the wake of Assad's collapse, Iran, Hezbollah, and other Iranian-backed proxies had in fact withdrawn the bulk of their forces and fighters from Syria, abandoning a large quantity of military equipment—a primary target for subsequent Israeli strikes.<sup>124</sup> Sharaa's government has made sustained efforts to shut down Iranian-backed smuggling to Hezbollah via Syria. Allegedly, by April, government forces had already intercepted more than a dozen Iranian shipments bound for Lebanon and engaged in deadly clashes at well-known Hezbollah smuggling outposts and transit points near the Lebanon-Syria border.<sup>125</sup> In June, at the time of Israel's 12-day war with Iran, the interim authorities reportedly took major action to reinforce their eastern border with Iraq as well, sending up to 3,000 troops to ensure Iranian-backed militias did not try to enter Syria for purposes of using its territory as a staging ground to attack Israel or U.S. forces.<sup>126</sup> In early September, Sharaa's interior ministry forces detained a heavily armed terrorist cell, trained by Hezbollah, that had infiltrated Syria, with the intent of destabilizing the country.<sup>127</sup>

Another fascinating data point reinforcing the seismic strategic shift in Syria's posture toward Iran under Sharaa occurred in August. The newly named head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council and former speaker of the parliament, Ali Larijani, was en route to Beirut when Syrian authorities denied his flight from entering the country's air space. Larijani's plane was forced to alter its route by flying through Iraq and Turkey instead, an unprecedented affront and humiliation of Iran that would have been unthinkable over the past half century of the Assad regime.<sup>128</sup>

### F. Constricting Palestinian Militant Groups

The new government has also acted on the U.S. request to crack down on Palestinian militant groups that operated openly in Syria under the Assad regime, often in alignment with Iran and its proxies. Indeed, well before Washington first raised the problem, HTS forces announced in December 2024—just days after seizing Damascus—that Palestinian resistance groups would no longer be permitted to possess weapons, training camps, and military headquarters in Syria, and that their military formations would need to be disbanded as soon as possible.<sup>129</sup> Concurrently,

Sharaa reportedly told a British newspaper, “We do not want any conflict, whether with Israel or anyone else, and we will not let Syria be used as a launchpad for attacks.”<sup>130</sup>

After the Trump administration passed its list of security priorities to the interim government in March, it visibly increased its efforts against the Palestinian groups. In April, two leaders of the Iranian-backed Palestinian Islamic Jihad were arrested.<sup>131</sup> A few weeks later, in early May (just before Trump’s visit to the Gulf), the same fate befell the leader of the radical Palestinian Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command.<sup>132</sup> Later in May, it was also reported that the interim government had raided and closed the offices of several Palestinian groups.<sup>133</sup> Soon after, it emerged that several leaders of different Palestinian factions had chosen to leave Syria entirely under increased pressure and restrictions from the new government, departing for Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen.<sup>134</sup>

### G. The Continued Problem of Foreign Jihadists

The fate of foreign fighters was the one item on the U.S. list of priorities with Syria that, on its face, stood out as an area where no visible progress by the new Syrian authorities had been made. Thousands of foreign jihadist fighters had flooded Syria during the civil war, most with past links of one kind or another to al-Qaeda or ISIS, but who subsequently had joined alongside Sharaa’s HTS to fight against the Assad regime. The foreign fighter question featured prominently on both the list of eight U.S. demands passed to the new government in March and the list of five concerns that Trump raised with Sharaa in May—albeit in different forms. When raised initially by Washington, the ask had been limited to denying foreign fighters key command roles in the new Syrian security forces.<sup>135</sup> In Trump’s meeting with Sharaa, it evolved into the much broader requirement that foreign fighters be forced out of the country entirely.<sup>136</sup>

Sharaa’s government, by contrast, had largely moved in the exact opposite direction since coming to power. Already in December 2024, Sharaa had appointed at least six foreign jihadists to positions of general or colonel in the new Syrian military and security services, including individuals from Jordan, the Uyghur community in China, Egypt, and Turkey.<sup>137</sup> An official from the Biden administration warned Sharaa in Damascus in early January that “These appointments will not help [Syria’s new government] with their reputation in the U.S.”<sup>138</sup> Disregarding the warning, Sharaa proceeded with additional appointments, including a number of former commanders in the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), at least one of whom had been sanctioned by Washington for human rights abuses against Syria’s Kurds.<sup>139</sup>

Even more startling, just days after Trump’s meeting with Sharaa wherein he asked for the deportation of all foreign fighters, the Syrian defense ministry announced that 3,500 fighters from the Uyghur and Central Asian-led Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) would be integrated into the Syrian army as the core of the 84<sup>th</sup> division.<sup>140</sup> While including some Syrians, the division would be commanded by TIP’s top leader in Syria alongside other foreigners, as part of a special forces unit.<sup>141</sup> TIP (in an earlier incarnation) had been sanctioned by the U.S. government decades ago for its long and close association with al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, where it fought against U.S. forces.

At the same time that Sharaa moved early to appoint his allies among foreign jihadists to significant positions, he also raised the possibility that foreign fighters who had participated in Syria’s liberation would, along with their families, be granted Syrian citizenship—though no public reports have confirmed any follow through yet.<sup>142</sup> In August, a petition was sent to the interim

government formally making the request that foreign fighters be given Syrian citizenship as a reward for their pivotal role in Assad's collapse.<sup>143</sup>

While these moves appeared to be blatant signs of Sharaa's abject disregard of an important U.S. interest, an apparent evolution in Trump's policy complicated the picture—at least insofar as the musings of its Syria envoy, Tom Barrack, could be reliably taken as accurate reflections of Trump's views. In early June, Barrack effectively told the media that, following his discussions with Sharaa about the incorporation of TIP into the 84<sup>th</sup> division, the Trump administration had agreed not to oppose the move. "I would say there is an understanding, with transparency," Barrack explained when asked about the apparent U.S.-Syrian clash regarding the fate of foreign fighters. Barrack went on to adopt as his own the explanation often offered by the interim government, suggesting that it was better to keep the fighters, many of whom Barrack described as "very loyal" to the new government, within a state project than to exclude them.<sup>144</sup>

Specifically, Sharaa allegedly feared that alienating the foreign fighters could result in them joining the ranks of al-Qaeda or ISIS in working to overthrow the new regime.<sup>145</sup> Far better, so the argument went (and that Barrack appeared to accept), to keep those hardened forces inside the tent by giving them a stake in the new Syria's success and stability. It was true as well, of course, that these jihadists had played a crucial role in helping Sharaa and HTS bring down Assad and that turning on them would no doubt be viewed as dishonorable betrayal of their significant sacrifice—especially if they were forced to return to their countries of origin, like China, where they would almost certainly be imprisoned, if not executed. Relatedly, some analysts buttressed Sharaa's policy by arguing that deporting foreign fighters risked having them end up spreading jihad, violence, and instability in other vulnerable countries and continents. More prudent to keep them under wraps in Syria where they could be monitored and controlled.<sup>146</sup>

The shift in the U.S. position on foreign fighters, as reflected in Barrack's statements, was clearly a risky one. It was especially perplexing in light of the large-scale massacre that had been perpetrated against Syria's Alawite minority only a few months earlier. Following a fairly widespread coordinated attack on the new government's forces by a major contingent of insurgents loyal to the former Assad regime, conservative Sunni fighters from around Syria descended upon Alawite communities in the central coastal region. Operating as roving gangs, these forces moved from town to town brutally killing at least 1,400 innocent Alawite civilians, including women and children, in a frenzy of sectarian atrocities between March 6-9.<sup>147</sup> While including many non-government Sunni volunteers, both a UN Commission and an investigative inquiry appointed by Sharaa concluded definitively that some units from the new government's security forces had also actively taken part in the carnage.<sup>148</sup> Instances of "severe violence" were attributed to divisions loyal to the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) that Sharaa had wholesale incorporated into his new military.<sup>149</sup>

# Syria's Report Card: Progress on U.S. Demands



| March 2025<br>Original U.S. Demands                                                                                                    | May 2025<br>Equivalent U.S. Demands                                        | Progress Report:                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                                                                        | NEW Demand #1 :<br>Sign onto the Abraham Accords<br>with Israel            | <br><b>Good<br/>Progress</b>   | Israel and Syria seem close to reaching a security agreement, and Sharaa has generally signaled openness to normalization with Israel.                                                                                  |
| #1:<br>Form a professional, unified Syrian army with no foreign fighters in key command roles                                          | #2:<br>Tell all foreign terrorists to leave Syria                          | <br><b>No<br/>Progress*</b>    | Sharaa has integrated foreign fighters into the Syrian army and promoted them to key roles.<br><i>*Amb. Barrack seems to have condoned this.</i>                                                                        |
| #2:<br>Provide full access to all chemical weapons facilities and associated infrastructure                                            |                                                                            | <br><b>Good<br/>Progress</b>   | The Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has repeatedly been granted the access necessary to conduct investigations.                                                                              |
| #3:<br>Establish a committee to find missing Americans, including Austin Tice                                                          |                                                                            | <br><b>Some<br/>Progress</b> | Sharaa created the Commission for the Missing and committed to bringing Tice home, but without results                                                                                                                  |
| #4:<br>Repatriate ISIS family members detained at Syria's al-Hol detention camp                                                        | #5:<br>Assume responsibility for ISIS detention centers in Northeast Syria | <br><b>Some<br/>Progress</b> | Damascus has committed to assuming responsibility for detention centers and repatriating families. Little action so far, though slow progress is wise.                                                                  |
| #5:<br>Cooperate with the U.S.-led international coalition against ISIS                                                                | #4:<br>Help the United States to prevent the resurgence of ISIS            | <br><b>Good<br/>Progress</b> | Damascus has cooperated with U.S.-led counter-ISIS raids and foiled ISIS terror plots.                                                                                                                                  |
| #6:<br>Authorize the United States to conduct counterterrorism operations on Syrian territory                                          |                                                                            | <br><b>N/A</b>               | Trump dropped this demand from the list of U.S. requests in May, likely out of increased sensitivity to Syrian sovereignty                                                                                              |
| #7:<br>Ban all Palestinian militias and political activities in Syria, as well as deport Palestinian militia members                   | #3:<br>Deport Palestinian terrorists                                       | <br><b>Some<br/>Progress</b> | After calling for Palestinian militant groups to disband in December, Damascus has arrested and expelled some senior leaders of Palestinian militant groups, imposed restrictions, and confiscated offices and weapons. |
| #8:<br>Prevent Iran's military buildup in Syria and designate the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization |                                                                            | <br><b>Good<br/>Progress</b> | Sharaa has clearly signaled opposition to Iranian influence in Syria, and his government has made sustained efforts to shut down Iran-backed smuggling to Hezbollah via Syria.                                          |

## IV. Sharaa's Domestic Policies and the Threat to Stability

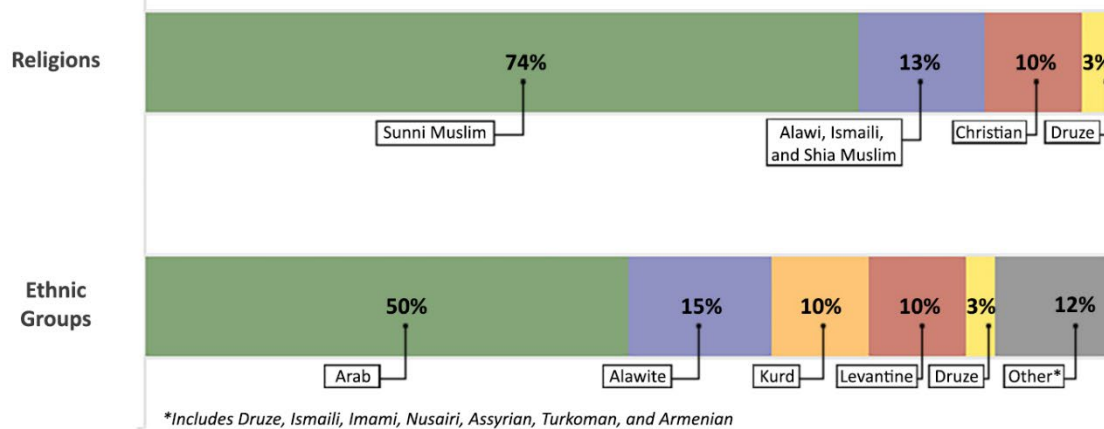
The March massacre against the Alawites was in fact part of a more troubling feature of Syria's new government that has failed to receive the attention it deserves from the international community, including the Trump administration. The natural and understandable tendency of foreign states has been to focus on the interim government's external behavior and the initial steps it has credibly taken to ensure a post-Assad Syria stops being a major exporter of violence, chaos, and instability beyond its borders—by expelling Iranian malign influence, combatting ISIS, not allowing Syria to serve as a platform for attacks on its neighbors, resettling (primarily Sunni) refugees from abroad, and engaging diplomatically with other countries in an attempt to build trust and more constructive relations. That positive effort to address the key security concerns of the United States, Europe, and most of Syria's neighbors (including Israel) has legitimately encouraged the Trump administration and other countries to support the interim government in its efforts to stabilize Syria and overcome the huge economic challenges it faces, while for the most part leaving questions of internal governance to Sharaa to sort out without much oversight or accountability.

Unfortunately, the potentially fatal flaw in this hands-off approach to questions surrounding Syria's post-Assad internal governance has increasingly come into focus over the last nine months.

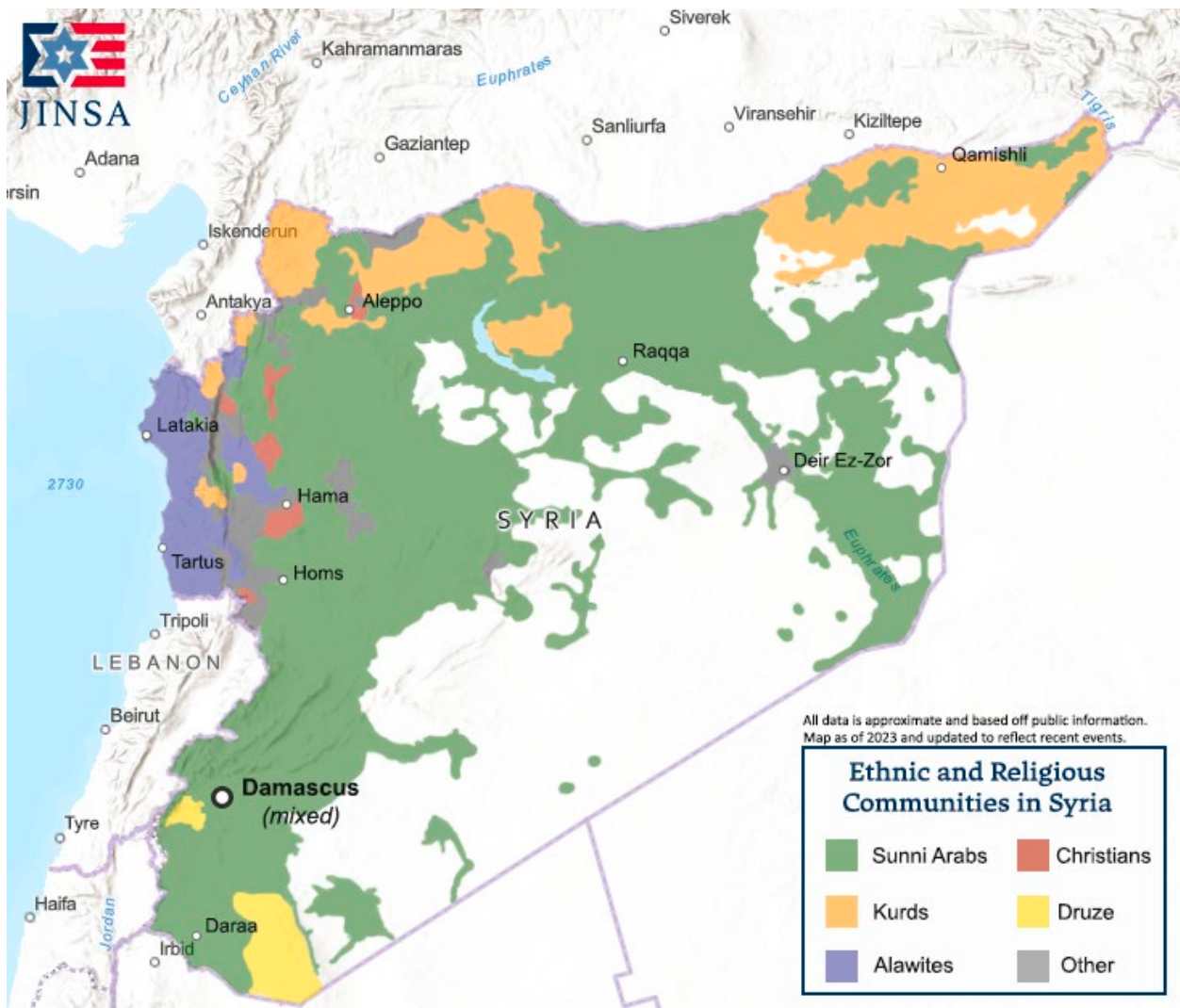
The fact is that Syria's inescapable history as an artificial construct assembled by colonial powers out of the ashes of the Ottoman empire's collapse has come roaring back to haunt it. For more than 50 years, the Assad regime—through brute force, sectarian manipulation, and ideological indoctrination—sought to force the country's disparate religious and ethnic groups into a coherent entity. Its eventual failure and implosion in a spasm of violence and prolonged civil war have now reopened first-order questions about how best to build a real Syrian nation-state from among its mosaic of peoples that can serve as a source of stability and prosperity for all Syrians and the broader Middle East. What seems increasingly apparent from Sharaa's first nine months in office, however, is that a Syrian government that is either unable or unwilling to pursue genuine peace and accommodation with its own population, in all its diversity, and simply reverts to some version of the Assads' authoritarian playbook in different sectarian guise, will find it very hard to sustain Syria over the long term as a viable security partner for the United States.

The relative ease with which Sharaa in foreign policy matters was able to adopt, both in language but also in action, a relatively moderate and pragmatic posture free of overly ideological baggage from his Sunni Islamist past has, unfortunately, been far less evident in his approach to Syria's internal governance. Since coming to power, he and his supporters have, with relative consistency, tended through their actions and policies to exacerbate rather than mitigate the worst fears of the significant portion of Syria's population that harbors profound suspicions and even dread about the intentions of the former jihadis that seized power in Damascus. The accumulation of transgressions in this regard, punctuated by the two massacres against first the Alawites and then the Druze, have set in motion an unvirtuous dynamic that raises real questions and doubts about Sharaa's ability to reconstitute Syria as a stable and unified multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian state.

# Syrian Population by Ethnic Groups and Religions



Source: JINSA Research<sup>a</sup>



Source: JINSA Research<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Chart sources: [The CIA World Factbook: Syria](#), public reporting

<sup>b</sup>Map data sources: [Izady \(2011\)](#), [New Lines Institute](#), [Jerusalem Strategic Tribune](#), public reporting

## A. Sharaa's Drive for Power

On the domestic front, unlike in foreign policy, the disconnect between Sharaa's positive-sounding language and his actions has been significant. Sharaa has spoken regularly about his support for building a government that is inclusive and based on the participation of all segments of society in running the country.<sup>150</sup> He signed an interim constitutional declaration that declared the new Syria to be a state where all citizens enjoy "fundamental freedoms" and "equal rights under the rule of law without discrimination based on race, religion, or gender."<sup>151</sup> Alas, the reality has fallen well short, with liberal-sounding declarations serving largely as window dressing for what in reality constituted an aggressive agenda of Sunni supremacism and Sharaa's own consolidation of near-dictatorial powers.

### i. *The National Dialogue*

More than two months into its reign, the interim government convened in late February 2025 a National Dialogue that was supposed to initiate an inclusive discussion among the diverse elements of Syrian society about their post-Assad future and the nature of the new state that they hoped to build together.<sup>152</sup> Whatever Sharaa's intentions, the dialogue's execution in practice fueled more disappointment and cynicism than optimism. The committee planning the conference was dominated by Sharaa's allies and did not include any Druze or Alawites.<sup>153</sup> The government monopolized who would be invited to join, unilaterally selecting the hundreds of participants and purposefully excluding some of Syria's most well organized and powerful groups—most notably including the Kurdish-led SDF autonomous administration in Syria's northeast.<sup>154</sup>

Those who were invited received notice of the dialogue only a day or two in advance, leaving participants with little to no time to prepare.<sup>155</sup> Once convened, the dialogue lasted one day with no real opportunity for serious discussion, debate, and voicing of legitimate concerns.<sup>156</sup> For far too many, especially those not part of the new conservative Sunni Islamist ruling class, the result—an 18-point declaration of relatively unobjectionable, but non-binding platitudes—felt far too rushed, pre-determined, and imposed from above.<sup>157</sup> More of a box-ticking exercise to please Western observers than the genuine start of a profound national conversation about first principles for building a more just, inclusive, and free Syria.

### ii. *The Constitutional Declaration*

The subsequent issuance of a constitutional declaration on March 13, 2025, intended to serve as a temporary constitution during a 5-year interim period, did nothing to calm rising concerns about Sharaa's intentions.<sup>158</sup> On the one hand, it included reassuring provisions guaranteeing that "Citizens are equal before the law in rights and duties, without discrimination based on race, gender or lineage," and that "The State guarantees freedom of opinion, expression, information, publication and the press." On the other hand, it also declared that the State "criminalizes calls for division and secession, and requests for foreign intervention or external support," and confers broad powers on the President to declare a state of emergency when he decides there exists "a serious and immediate danger . . . that threatens national unity or integrity."<sup>159</sup> In the wake of the Assad dictatorship, it was certainly not paranoid for minority groups and others outside the Sunni Islamist powers-that-be to worry about the myriad ways those relatively sweeping carve-outs might be abused to silence, punish, and repress those legitimately arguing for a more

decentralized form of governance, with greater powers devolving to localities, and enhanced legal protections for the rights of smaller religious and ethnic groups.<sup>160</sup>

Despite well-known objections from Syria's non-Arab minorities, especially the Kurds, the official name of the state (as it was under the Assads) is declared to be the "Syrian Arab Republic," and the only official language is Arabic.<sup>161</sup> Despite the fact of Syria's multi-sectarian religious identity, the declaration provides that the president of Syria can only be a Muslim and Islam is "the"—rather than merely "a"—principal source of legislation.<sup>162</sup> Despite having full knowledge that major components of Syrian society—Druze, Alawites, Ismailis—have historically been targeted as heretics and apostates by Sharaa's fellow travelers in Sunni jihadist circles, the declaration goes out of its way to suggest that only "divine" religions—mainstream Abrahamic faiths—merit state protection for their freedom of belief.<sup>163</sup>

The declaration itself was the result of a deeply problematic process. It was written by a seven-member committee. All were appointed by Sharaa and HTS. All were Sunni. None of Syria's other religious or ethnic groups were included or, it appears, seriously consulted. The drafting occurred out of the public eye, largely in the shadows and without real transparency until it emerged and was signed by Sharaa.<sup>164</sup>

The document sets out what can only be described as a highly centralized government, with huge powers vested in the president, and virtually all authority emanating from Damascus. Sharaa will directly appoint his vice presidents and all members of the cabinet. He will also directly appoint one-third of the members of an interim parliament (scheduled to convene in October 2025), while the remaining two-thirds are to be selected by a Supreme Committee that Sharaa controls. Similarly, all seven members of the country's Supreme Court will be appointed by Sharaa.<sup>165</sup> One could easily be forgiven for thinking how comfortable the Assads would have been with all these constitutional articles. Notably, the word "democracy" makes no appearance in the interim constitution—not even as a future aspiration.

Unsurprisingly, minority groups harshly condemned the declaration. The Kurdish-led Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) said the document does "not reflect the diversity of Syrian society," and the Syrian Democratic Council, the SDF's political wing, said that it "reproduced authoritarianism in a new form."<sup>166</sup> Druze spiritual leader Hikmat al-Hijri said in an interview that "we and all of Syria's components did not agree with most of its articles. What it lacks in rights is ... for all sects, spectrums, and components."<sup>167</sup>

### *iii. The Ruling Clique*

The troubling flaws in form set out in the constitutional declaration found their echoes—some would say confirmation—in Sharaa's actual exercise of power. While efforts were made to appoint a single Kurd, Alawite, Christian, and Druze to Syria's cabinet, none held a key ministry, and all were widely viewed by the minority communities themselves as more symbolic than substantive. All meaningful authority in fact has been concentrated in the hands of Sharaa, a few of his family members, and a small and insular group of one-time jihadis who ruled alongside him in Idlib during the civil war.<sup>168</sup>

For all Sharaa's talk to Western interviewers about moving with dispatch to expand Syria's governing tent to include all segments of society, there are precious few signs of it in practice. Sharaa's inner circle is largely limited to six men—four of whom made up Sharaa's most powerful advisors in HTS and the two others being Sharaa's brothers. One of Sharaa's brothers, Hazem, has

extensive authority over Syria's economy and business community, including new Syrian investment and development funds created by Sharaa. This inner circle is reported to have established a shadow set of appointees and secret committees across all public-facing ministries and administrative bodies, allowing them to exert direct control over every critical sector of the state, largely without formal accountability or oversight, much less transparency.<sup>169</sup>

Charitably, Sharaa might be said to have established a form of “benevolent despotism,” a necessary evil in the immediate post-Assad period for purposes of rapidly stabilizing and reunifying Syria after years of civil strife, kickstarting its economy, and escaping the international isolation and sanctions stifling its recovery. Less charitably, his approach has also given ample fodder to those who fear that Sharaa is in fact laying the ground for replicating Assad's model of centralized dictatorship—only this time with a Sunni supremacist and majoritarian twist.

## B. Inflection Point? The Massacres of March and July

For all the suspicions and concerns they stoked, Sharaa's early moves to consolidate authoritarian powers in his own hands were not, on their own, the stuff that would likely have triggered an immediate existential crisis for the new Syria. Rather, it was the fact that these steps were joined inextricably to two separate explosions of horrific sectarian violence committed, in part, by forces aligned with the new regime. These massacres had the effect of making all too real the worst nightmare of jihadist slaughter that Syria's minorities had always feared might come to pass should extremist Sunnis ever seize power in Damascus. With these events, any inclination on the part of Syria's minorities to give the interim government the benefit of the doubt largely evaporated.

### i. *The Attack on the Alawites*

On March 6, about 2,000 pro-Assad insurgents launched a coordinated attack against government troops deployed in the Alawite regions of Syria's central coast.<sup>170</sup> Hundreds were killed or injured in the attacks.<sup>171</sup> In response, hundreds of thousands of private Sunni volunteers from around Syria, together with additional units from the interim government, poured into the region and proceeded to engage in a frenzy of murder, looting, burning, and displacement.<sup>172</sup> When the massacre finally ended on March 9, at least 1,400 people were dead, predominantly civilians.<sup>173</sup>

According to the UN Commission that investigated the massacre, the perpetrators consistently asked civilians whether they were Sunni or Alawites.<sup>174</sup> Alawite men and boys were then taken away to be executed, usually with a gunshot to the head or the chest.<sup>175</sup> Survivors repeatedly testified that, prior to being killed, victims were subjected to dehumanizing taunts of being “Alawi pigs,” “unbelievers,” and “dogs.”<sup>176</sup> Prominent social media platforms were found to have mobilized Sunnis using explicitly sectarian language targeting Alawites. Sunni mosques across Syria issued calls for religious mobilization and religious war that were directed against the Alawite population at large.<sup>177</sup>

While males between 20 and 50 years old made up most of the murders, women and children as young as a year old were also killed during invasions of their homes.<sup>178</sup> Homes and shops were looted, damaged, destroyed, and/or set on fire, as were farms and warehouses.<sup>179</sup> The perpetrators filmed, photographed, and posted on social media their atrocities, abuses, and humiliations.<sup>180</sup> Thousands fled their villages and towns for the mountains or a nearby Russian air base, with another 40,000 ending up in Lebanon.<sup>181</sup>

Though not all forces from the government participated in the illegal violence and in some cases even sought to protect civilians,<sup>182</sup> their efforts were woefully insufficient. Once the massacres had clearly started, Sharaa announced that anyone who attacks defenseless civilians and holds people to account for the crimes of others will be held strictly accountable—although it took another two days before the government actually regained control and brought the rampage to an end.<sup>183</sup>

Importantly, the UN Commission discovered that the March massacre had in fact been preceded by multiple incidents of smaller scale violence targeting Alawites. Interim government forces had regularly engaged in so-called “combing operations” in Alawite areas since coming to power, ostensibly searching for high-level security and intelligence officials from the old regime—whose ranks had been dominated by the Assad dynasty’s Alawite co-religionists. In several cases, these raids resulted in illegal detentions, beatings, looting, and killing of civilians—all for purposes of punishment, intimidation, or discrimination in violation of international human rights law.<sup>184</sup> There appears to be no evidence that the interim government took any action after these earlier incidents of gross abuses against the Alawites to hold accountable any of the perpetrators from among its ranks.

Similarly, the UN Commission found that in the immediate aftermath of the March massacre, a steady stream of ongoing abuses by security forces had continued in Alawite areas, including looting, property violations, abductions, arbitrary arrests, and enforced disappearances.<sup>185</sup>

#### a) Sharaa’s National Inquiry

To Sharaa’s credit, he immediately moved to create a national commission to investigate the events.<sup>186</sup> Even more remarkable in a Syrian context, he also cooperated with the independent UN Commission investigating the massacre and granted it unfettered access.<sup>187</sup> Sharaa originally gave his national inquiry 30 days to report its conclusions, but quickly extended it for an additional three months.<sup>188</sup> The inquiry finally delivered its report in mid-July. It identified 298 perpetrators among individuals and groups aligned with pro-government military factions, as well as 265 individuals associated with the pro-Assad insurgents.<sup>189</sup> Some detentions of pro-government forces have allegedly occurred, though the process for holding those arrested accountable has lacked transparency. In late September, it was reported that the inquiry had referred all 563 individuals identified to the judiciary.<sup>190</sup>

#### b) The UN Commission’s Findings Against Government Perpetrators

The UN report found among the Sunni fighters who had rushed into the coastal region were “forces under the control of, or affiliated or at least nominally associated with the caretaker Ministry of Defense, including foreign fighters, in addition to unaffiliated groups taking up arms spontaneously.”<sup>191</sup> Among the groups associated with the new government that were found to have committed atrocities were SNA militias long backed by Turkey and subsequently incorporated into the Ministry of Defense. These included the 62<sup>nd</sup> Division (the former Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade), the 76<sup>th</sup> Division (the former Al Hamza division), and Ahrar al Sham. Also implicated were the 400<sup>th</sup> Division, composed of units formerly part of HTS, as well as the interim authority’s internal security forces, the General Security Services.<sup>192</sup>

The Commission concluded that the government forces that it had identified “engaged in acts that amounted to violations” of “international humanitarian law, including acts that may amount to war crimes, as well as serious violations of international human rights law.”<sup>193</sup> They were found to have committed murders of all kinds, torture, looting and pillaging, and cruel, inhuman, and

degrading treatment—including “adverse distinction founded on religion or faith,” and “outrages upon personal dignity,” including humiliations such as desecrating, burning, mutilating, and posing for celebratory videos with bodies of the dead. These atrocities by government forces were found to be “widespread and systematic” and their targeting of Alawites based on religious affiliation “not random or isolated.”<sup>194</sup>

Importantly, the Commission acknowledged that it had “found no evidence of a governmental policy or plan” to carry out the illegal activities that made up the massacre.<sup>195</sup> However, it also noted that the violations were in some cases so systematic that they raised legitimate questions about the “organizational policy” to kill Alawite civilians on the part of several of the jihadist factions that Sharaa had only recently granted entry to Syria’s security forces.<sup>196</sup> Ultimately, with respect to all the atrocities committed, the Commission judged that the interim government had failed to fulfill its obligation to exercise due diligence and protect the right to life and ensure freedom from torture and ill treatment.<sup>197</sup>

Notably, a later investigatory report published by Human Rights Watch added further texture to the issue of the new government’s culpability.<sup>198</sup> While also not finding evidence that the massacre was ordered by Damascus, the report underscored that the overall military operation along the coast was very much centrally coordinated, with the Syrian defense ministry mobilizing tens of thousands of fighters, assigning different factions to different sectors, and facilitating joint deployments across the region. Fighters from units integrated into the Syrian military reported receiving direct orders from the defense ministry, participating in shared operations rooms with other factions, and eventually handing over responsibility of areas to Syria’s internal security forces.

The Human Rights Watch report further found that the fighters mobilized by the defense ministry included unaffiliated “volunteers” who the ministry actively recruited, armed, organized, and deployed alongside its own official forces. The report concluded that efforts by Syrian authorities to distance themselves from the violations committed by so-called “unorganized elements” lacked credibility given that evidence indicated that the Ministry of Defense had been responsible for embedding these fighters into its official operations and, in some cases, issuing direct orders to them. In doing so, the defense ministry “assumed responsibility for forces it failed to meaningfully supervise.”<sup>199</sup>

#### c) The UN Commission’s Recommendations

Warning that tens of thousands of Alawites had been displaced, the Commission stressed that “Urgent action is needed to end the cycle of revenge and retaliatory violence” lest Syria risk “long-term implications for social cohesion.”<sup>200</sup> Among its recommendations to the interim government, the Commission called for:

- Clear communication by the government to the victimized communities and the broader public on the steps being taken to increase their protection and to bring to account those responsible for the massacre;
- Expanding training of security forces in human rights standards and humanitarian law;
- Diversifying the security forces to include all groups (not just Sunnis) and to have units deployed in various ethnic and sectarian communities include members from those localities;
- Launching a public strategy for the protection of the civilian population and the restoration of confidence, taking into account the perspectives of all communities;

- Establishing independent oversight bodies to guarantee a professional and responsible security sector;
- Rebuilding trust between and within communities by arranging inter-communal dialogues led by trusted interlocutors and civil society figures aimed at promoting national reconciliation;
- Ensuring relief measures to victims and families such as cash payments, medical and psychological support, and rehabilitation of destroyed property; and
- Expanding efforts to ensure inclusivity of all communities in the new Syrian government.<sup>201</sup>

#### d) Reports Too Late to Avert the Next Disaster

Alas, both Syria's own National Inquiry and the UN Commission did not deliver their reports until the second half of July—too late for their findings or recommendations to have helped avoid or mitigate the mid-July massacre targeting Syrian Druze in their southern provincial stronghold of Suwayda. After the March massacre, Syria's interim government apparently took action to start detaining perpetrators even before the National Inquiry delivered its report, but made little to no effort to inform the broader public that it was already moving to hold individuals accountable—at least in part out of concern for angering elements of its own Sunni extremist constituency.<sup>202</sup>

In retrospect, that lack of transparency was almost certainly inadequate to the historical moment and a major strategic mistake, lacking in sensitivity to the larger underlying problems and sectarian fears that the massacre was sure to have fueled among Syria's other minority groups well beyond the Alawites. The government's apparent failure to inform the broader public about any punitive action it had taken on the heels of the crisis, as well as its apparent lack of a strategy to reach out and make amends quickly with victimized parts of the Alawite community, risked instilling a broader sense of impunity among Sunni extremists within its own ranks that would come roaring back to haunt it only four months later.

### ii. *The July Crisis*

Exactly how Sharaa, having experienced the disaster his forces helped cause in March, could have thought it was a good idea to dispatch them into another combustible sectarian cauldron shortly thereafter—one that again had at its center a minority group largely condemned by many of his own jihadi adherents as sub-human heretics meriting death—is quite confounding. Even more so given the well-established fact that any clash with the Druze, unlike the case with the Alawites, was likely to trigger a confrontation with the Israeli military that he could not hope to win. Whatever Sharaa thought he was accomplishing in July to extend the authority of his government over southern Syria and bring recalcitrant Druze to heel, or (more charitably) simply restore peace after the outbreak of local clashes between armed Sunni Bedouin and Druze, proved to be a huge strategic miscalculation that only ended up internationalizing the crisis, humiliating his government, and putting the goal of a unified, stable, and inclusive Syria even further out of reach.

#### a) A Crisis Amply Foretold

Even without the March massacre of Alawites serving as a flashing neon warning to Sharaa to tread very carefully with Syria's minorities, July was a crisis amply foretold. By February 23, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu was already putting Sharaa on notice that “we will not tolerate any threat [from HTS or the Syrian army] to the Druze community in southern Syria.”<sup>203</sup>

On March 1, after an incident in Jaramana, a Druze neighborhood near Damascus, Netanyahu and defense minister Israel Katz issued a joint statement ordering the IDF to prepare to defend the Druze there, declaring that they would take “all the steps required” to do so.<sup>204</sup> They and other Israeli leaders consistently emphasized the prized role Israel’s own Druze played in Israeli society (particularly their status within the IDF), the intense attachment they had for their Druze brethren in Syria, and the resulting moral and strategic obligation that the Israeli government had to protect Syria’s Druze from harm at the hands of the newly empowered jihadists in Damascus.<sup>205</sup>

At the end of April, the slow-boiling crisis escalated significantly. On April 28, an audio tape falsely purporting to capture a Druze cleric insulting the Prophet Mohammed circulated online. Despite claims by the cleric, backed up by Syria’s interior ministry, insisting the voice was not his, enraged Sunni security forces aligned with the government entered Jaramana and the neighboring Druze neighborhood of Sahnaya, instigating clashes with armed local militia.<sup>206</sup> Many were killed and injured, including civilians, and the fighting spread south along the main highway leading from Damascus to the Druze stronghold of Suwayda in southern Syria.<sup>207</sup>

On April 30, making good on its promise to protect the Druze across Syria, Israeli jets bombed a group of Sunni fighters in Sahnaya.<sup>208</sup> When clashes nevertheless continued over the coming days, Israel on May 2 sought to make its point more forcefully and conducted what it said was a “warning” strike on a site near Sharaa’s presidential palace.<sup>209</sup> The interim government and various elements of the Druze community negotiated de-escalation measures and local ceasefires, but the four days of fighting may have ultimately killed more than 100 people on both sides.<sup>210</sup>

#### b) The Massacre in Suwayda

Unfortunately, the April-May clashes were merely the warm-up for the July massacre. By virtually all accounts, the July crisis’s proximate cause was a largely local, longstanding rivalry between Bedouin and Druze in southern Syria. On July 11, a vegetable truck driven by a Druze on the Damascus-Suwayda highway was ambushed by Sunni Bedouin gunmen who kidnapped the driver and stole his truck. The next day, Druze gunmen committed retaliatory kidnappings, setting off an escalatory cycle that became increasingly violent. By July 13, sectarian clashes between heavily armed Sunni Bedouin tribal fighters and Druze militias had spread across Suwayda province, with up to 30 dead and 100 injured by day’s end.<sup>211</sup>

On July 14, Sharaa made the fateful decision to send forces from the interior and defense ministries into Suwayda with the stated intent of restoring order and preventing Bedouin-Druze clashes from further escalating.<sup>212</sup>

Again, given the fact that the Druze still had vivid images in their heads of the March massacre of Alawites, as well as their own experience battling sectarian-minded government forces in April and May, exactly why Sharaa thought that they would not recoil at the sight of these same troops descending on their homes in July is baffling—as is the thought that the Druze would take at face value the government’s contention that its forces were merely seeking to act as neutral peacekeepers rather than as invaders on a mission to reinforce their Sunni Bedouin co-religionists and exploit the local clashes as an excuse to bring the heretical Druze to heel. Whatever Sharaa’s actual calculation, by sending his forces south, he was almost surely lighting a fire that he would not be able to contain or control, especially when the near certainty of a hostile Israeli military response is factored in.

Predictably, at the first site of government forces entering the province, Druze militiamen fired first rather than give them the benefit of the doubt. Several troops were taken captive and executed.<sup>213</sup> As matters escalated dramatically on July 15 and 16, enraged government forces seemed to drop any pretense of neutrality and joined with Bedouin fighters in systematically attacking the Druze population.<sup>214</sup> These forces took control of major chunks of Suwayda city and joined in a rampage of executions, looting, and humiliations that rivaled the atrocities seen along the Syrian coast in March. By the end, more than 1,000 people were dead on both sides, including hundreds of Druze civilians. Large numbers were methodically massacred, mostly men but women and children as well. Abductions, disappearances, lootings, burnings, and desecrations also took place.<sup>215</sup>

As was the case four months earlier against the Alawites, the atrocities committed by government forces seemed to be systematically driven by Sunni supremacist biases and hatreds. Repeated accounts of survivors offered one version or another of a similar interrogation that would occur as Syrian government security forces came upon male citizens of Suwayda:

**Government soldiers:** “Are you Muslim or Druze?”

**Response:** “I’m Syrian.”

**Government soldiers:** “What does Syrian mean? Muslim or Druze?”

**Response:** “My brother, I’m Druze.”

**Government soldiers:** *Immediately open fire.* “This is the fate of every dog among you, you pigs.”<sup>216</sup>

Israel monitored the escalating violence closely. Soon after the clashes began, and disturbing videos circulated online of Druze men being ritualistically humiliated prior to execution by having their mustaches shaved off, Israeli Druze took to the streets in protests demanding their government act to protect the Druze of Suwayda.<sup>217</sup> They blocked roads and over the course of July 15-16, more than 1,000 Israeli Druze stormed the border and crossed into Syria with the intent of joining in the defense of their fellow Druze.<sup>218</sup>

Under real domestic pressure and true to the repeated threats that it had communicated for months to Sharaa warning him to not send forces south, especially to confront the Druze, Israel initiated military action against Syrian forces on July 14 as they moved south from Damascus into Suwayda. It began with a strike against tanks in what Defense Minister Katz described as “a message and clear warning to the Syrian regime—we will not allow harm to the Druze in Syria.”<sup>219</sup> Over the course of July 15, Israel launched at least another eight air and drone strikes against government and tribal forces in Suwayda and the neighboring province Daraa.<sup>220</sup> Israeli operations culminated on July 16 in a spectacular (and shocking) strike in the heart of Damascus at the entrance of the Syrian defense ministry, as well as another strike on the grounds of Sharaa’s presidential palace.<sup>221</sup>

Israel’s direct military intervention on a significant scale around Damascus seems to have woken the United States and several neighboring countries to the scale of the crisis they were facing and the need for an urgent diplomatic push to short-circuit a spiraling international conflict that had the potential to crater Sharaa’s efforts to stabilize and rebuild post-Assad Syria. The United States (led by Special Envoy Barrack), Turkey, Jordan, and other Arab states thereupon worked intensively on an immediate ceasefire that eventually resulted on June 16 in Sharaa’s agreement to withdraw his forces to the outskirts of Suwayda.

When militiamen loyal to the Druze spiritual leader most opposed to Sharaa's government, Hikmat al-Hijri, retook control of the province, however, they reportedly conducted widespread retaliatory strikes of their own against Bedouin tribes living in Suwayda, triggering another escalatory cycle of Bedouin-Druze clashes. As videos of Druze abuses and atrocities circulated online, the call went out for tens of thousands of Sunni tribal volunteers from across Syria to mobilize and advance on Suwayda. By some accounts, 50,000 men answered the call. Intense sectarian fighting continued across the province throughout July 17 and 18.<sup>222</sup>

### c) Ceasefire, Sharaa's Response, and Early Efforts at Accountability

Following additional diplomatic pressure and mediation, Sharaa on July 19 publicly announced a comprehensive and immediate ceasefire, to which Bedouin and Druze communities both assented. Troops from the Syrian interior ministry were to maintain order in Suwayda's northern and western countryside.<sup>223</sup> Prisoners were to be released and humanitarian corridors established to allow aid into the region and for the evacuation of the injured and others who wanted to leave Suwayda.<sup>224</sup> Sharaa's government reportedly moved 1,500 Bedouin out of the province for their own safety.

Sharaa's announcement had several features and a few contradictory messages. He demanded that the Bedouin fighters fully commit to the ceasefire and follow the orders of the state, while praising their "heroic stances" and nationwide mobilization to advance on Suwayda against Druze militias that he labeled "outlaw groups."<sup>225</sup> At the same time, and in the context of again vowing to safeguard all minorities, he sought to reassure the Druze more broadly that Suwayda "remains an integral part of the Syrian state, and the Druze a fundamental pillar of the Syrian national fabric."<sup>226</sup> Yet, Sharaa strongly hinted, the protection of minorities cannot be allowed to come at the risk of undermining his narrow vision of Syrian unity. Syria is not a "testing ground for partition projects, secession, or sectarian incitement," he warned.<sup>227</sup> "Today, it is important to... stay on common grounds that will be a platform for building the future of Syria."<sup>228</sup>

Sharaa condemned Israel's military intervention, warning that it had "pushed the country into a dangerous phase."<sup>229</sup> He thanked the United States for its "significant role in affirming its support for Syria at this difficult time," as well as Turkey and Arab states for their mediation efforts.<sup>230</sup>

Importantly, as he had after the March massacre, Sharaa acknowledged and denounced the abuses that had so obviously occurred, declaring "We disavow all crimes and violations committed, whether from within or outside Suwayda," and that "Those responsible for atrocities will be held accountable before justice." Interestingly, Sharaa did not follow his playbook from March and immediately announce the establishment of another national commission to investigate the Suwayda violence. Instead, another twelve days passed before the justice ministry said on July 31 that a seven-person committee had been formed and given three months to investigate the causes of the violence, including persons who had committed abuses, and refer them for further prosecution.<sup>231</sup>

Prior to the justice ministry announcement, however, both the interim government's defense and interior ministries said that they had established their own internal reviews into the behavior of their respective forces in Suwayda. Just days after Sharaa's ceasefire announcement, the defense ministry acknowledged that it was aware of "shocking violations" that had been committed by people wearing military uniforms, with the new minister of defense declaring there would be "no tolerance" for anyone found to have committed human rights abuses in Suwayda, even if they were perpetrated by ministry forces.<sup>232</sup>

Another positive sign emerged in early September 2025, when the national investigative committee formed by the justice ministry announced that several individuals from the defense and interior ministries that it had interrogated about their conduct in Suwayda had already been referred to the judiciary and detained by their ministries while awaiting prosecution.<sup>233</sup> This stood in contrast to the interim government's failure to make public its early efforts to try and bring people to justice after the March massacre, when no announcements of detentions were made for four months until the National Inquiry delivered its final report in mid-July. The committee looking into Suwayda had apparently confronted the perpetrators with video evidence that they themselves had filmed of their crimes, with several confessing on the spot. Rather than wait, the committee wisely acted with dispatch to tell the public in real time that the process was serious and that the guilty would be held to account as soon as they were identified.

## A. Syria's Minorities Respond

### i. *The Hasakah Conference*

Whether any of the government's actions could be enough to start undoing the enormous damage that Suwayda (on top of the March massacre) had inflicted on the hopes and prospects for a post-Assad Syria, remained in serious doubt, however. Just a few weeks after the Suwayda fighting came to an end, on August 8, the SDF-dominated Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, convened most of Syria's minority communities at a one-day conference in the northeastern city of Hasakah. An estimated 400 representatives attended.<sup>234</sup> The most powerful Druze cleric and Sharaa detractor, al-Hijri, as well as his counterpart among the Alawite community, Sheikh Ghazal Ghazal, appeared remotely.

Hijri said that the conference came in response "to the cries of a people exhausted by wars and marginalization."<sup>235</sup> Obviously directing his remarks to Sharaa and the new regime in Damascus, he declared that the Druze "stand with our brothers and sisters from all components of Syria and affirm that diversity is not a threat but a treasure that strengthens our unity and a partnership that builds our future."<sup>236</sup>

Ghazal was even more pointed about all that had transpired in recent months. He told the diverse audience that "We need to unify our ranks to confront the injustice and division that have harmed all Syria's communities."<sup>237</sup> Clearly referring to recent events, he said that "The extremist ideology has turned Syrians against each other; honors were violated and sanctities were taken away."<sup>238</sup> Ghazal underscored the atrocities experienced by his own co-religionists and linked it to the suffering of other minorities, recognizing the violence in Suwayda, a suicide bombing of a Christian church, and the difficulties faced by the Kurds. He then pointed the finger directly at the interim government, declaring that "The blood is one and the perpetrator is one."<sup>239</sup>

In light of all the pain inflicted by the new authorities, Ghazal insisted that there was now "no path to a safe future except through a political solution that guarantees the rights of all components without exclusion," and put forward precisely the counter-vision of a new Syria that Sharaa and his government had consistently ruled as being beyond the pale since rising to power eight months earlier: "We believe the right lies in achieving decentralization or federalism that respects religious and cultural peculiarities and preserves the status of each component," Ghazal said.<sup>240</sup> Further provoking the radical Islamists in Damascus, he made clear that "We want a secular state that separates religion from politics."<sup>241</sup>

Leading Kurdish speakers at the conference echoed the general theme of the imperative for greater diversity and power sharing, as well as criticism of the centralizing, authoritarian course that the interim government appeared set on. The autonomous region's putative foreign minister, Ilham Ahmed, said that "Political pluralism is an essential requirement for building a modern and inclusive Syria," while warning that the persistence of what she disparagingly termed "a unilateral mindset" would only deepen the country's existing crises.<sup>242</sup> A top Kurdish commander from the SDF harshly criticized the interim government at the conference, telling the media that it had continued Syria's decades-old "dictatorship," and that the SDF's willingness to join the new national army could only happen under a government ready to build a democratic state.<sup>243</sup>

The conference issued a statement that highlighted the March and July massacres, as well as a June terrorist attack against a Greek Orthodox church, as rising to the level of crimes against humanity and a crime against "the entire national fabric," requiring open, transparent, and honest investigation and accountability, in addition to a credible, transparent, and non-discriminatory process of transitional justice to ensure that the crimes of the Assad regime would not be repeated.<sup>244</sup> It underscored Syria's diversity as a source of national strength and praised the SDF-led autonomous administration as "a living example of democratic community governance" that the rest of Syria should emulate. It also praised the SDF itself as the foundational nucleus for building an army representative of Syrian society.<sup>245</sup>

Prescriptively, the conference emphasized that "a sustainable solution passes through a democratic constitution that enshrines and enhances ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity" and that "establishes a decentralized state guaranteeing genuine participation."<sup>246</sup> It lambasted the March constitutional declaration signed by Sharaa, claiming it "falls short of Syrians' aspirations for freedom and dignity," and should be reconsidered "in favor of broader inclusion and fairer representation" of minority groups during the transitional phase.<sup>247</sup> The statement also advocated reconsidering Syria's administrative boundaries to reflect "demographic, historical, and cultural realities of local communities."<sup>248</sup>

The statement urged that a sincere effort be made to form a real Syrian consensus by convening a national conference that could help shape "a shared national identity" and build a free, united, democratic, pluralistic, and decentralized Syria governed by law, with human dignity upheld and equal citizenship guaranteed.<sup>249</sup>

## *ii. Hasakah Rejected, Frictions with SDF Escalate*

If anyone hoped that the interim government's searing failures to prevent the massacres of March and July might introduce a degree of pause or doubt into its governing vision, they were disappointed by its hostile reaction to the Hasakah conference. The notion that the government might bear significant responsibility for driving key segments of Syria's population further away from its post-Assad project, and that its wisest course—both morally and tactically—might be to demonstrate a margin of humility and openness to the concerns being voiced by those most victimized by its shortcomings, seems not to have occurred to Sharaa and his ruling clique. Instead, their knee-jerk reaction was a sweeping rejection of Hasakah while assigning traitorous motives to its participants, further escalating the increasingly dangerous cycle of tensions.

The government alleged that the conference's proposals worked to undermine national unity, going so far as to indicate in a statement to the government's official news agency, *SANA*, that the conference was illegal to the extent it failed to come within "the framework of a comprehensive national project that embraces the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria."<sup>250</sup> The

government's statement went on to say that "The form of the state will not be decided by factional understandings, but rather through a lasting permanent constitution approved by popular referendum."<sup>251</sup>

The statement called the participants in Hasakah an alliance of actors disgruntled by "the victory of the Syrians [read Sunnis] and the fall of the deposed regime."<sup>252</sup> It condemned the SDF for hosting "separatist figures and individuals involved in hostile acts," and accused the conference of working to internationalize the Syria issue, invite foreign intervention, and reimpose sanctions.<sup>253</sup> The government charged that the calls for having the SDF serve as the nucleus of a new Syrian army and for Syria's administrative boundaries to be altered were violations of the March 10 framework agreement that Sharaa had reached with the SDF's leader, Mazloum Abdi.<sup>254</sup>

Less than a week later, at a press conference in Ankara alongside his Turkish counterpart, Syria's Foreign Minister Shaibani said that the Hasakah conference had illegitimately sought to exploit the violence in Suwayda, and that its proposals were a violation of the March 10 agreement with the SDF on the imperative of integrating Syria's state institutions.<sup>255</sup> With regard to what had happened in Suwayda, Shaibani suggested that the events had been fabricated by Israel in an effort to foment internal division and erode Syrian sovereignty, while reaffirming that the government was determined to hold those who had committed abuses to account.<sup>256</sup> Shaibani warned against "attempts to divide the country along sectarian and regional lines" and stressed the government's commitment to achieving stability through dialogue with all Syrians.<sup>257</sup>

In response to Hasakah, the interim government canceled talks that had been scheduled to take place with the SDF the next day in Paris.<sup>258</sup> A few days later, there were reports that Ilhan Ahmed from the northeast autonomous zone had gone to Damascus to see Shaibani and reaffirm the SDF's commitment to the March 10 agreement and to further dialogue.<sup>259</sup> Shaibani's harsh criticisms of Hasakah just a few days later in Ankara may have reflected Turkey's significant influence on Syria's interim government and the extent to which it also was angered and feeling threatened (because of its own large Kurdish minority) by the extent to which the conference had highlighted the continued prominence of the SDF and its calls for Kurdish rights and power sharing.

Equally worrisome, August and September saw a significant increase in reports of violent incidents pitting the interim government's forces and Sunni tribal fighters, on the one side, against the SDF on the other.<sup>260</sup> Abdi, the SDF's top commander who negotiated the March 10 deal with Sharaa, warned in late August that the stalled integration talks increased the risk of hostilities breaking out between the interim government and SDF, while emphasizing "we want the talks to succeed" and that "the 15-year civil war in Syria has to come to an end." As the Hasakah conference had underscored, Abdi stressed again that the only way forward is a decentralized system in Syria. He expressed his hope that "all Syrian and international forces will gradually see this as appropriate," since "Another solution for Syria is not possible." The "totalitarian and ultra-central system" of pre-2011 Syria will not be restored, Abdi declared.<sup>261</sup>

## V. The Challenges Facing U.S. Syria Policy

How best to advance U.S. interests in post-Assad Syria presents real challenges to policymakers. It is not hard to understand why the Trump administration, and Trump himself, were increasingly inclined to put their weight behind an effort to support the weak and fledgling interim government, and in particular its leader, Sharaa, as they sought to stabilize Syria and end the chaos, violence, and abuses that had characterized the country's long civil conflict. Syria had been a bleeding wound for more than a decade that had spewed out threats in every direction against important American allies, while serving as a playground and launchpad for adversaries from Iran to Russia to ISIS. Syria under Assad had been nothing but a source of perpetual headaches, trouble, and danger.

### A. U.S. Focus on Security Interests

Given the horrors of Assad's rule, and the jubilation, relief, and hope that greeted his regime's collapse across the vast majority of Syrian society, it made sense for the United States and others to approach the emergence of Sharaa, the one-time jihadist, with an attitude of great wariness but willingness to test the seriousness of his early promises to build a more stable and peaceful Syria. The interim government's desperate need for sanctions relief, economic support and investment also gave the United States and its allies significant leverage that could be used to shape and influence Sharaa's policies in positive directions.

Also sensible was Washington's overriding focus on ensuring that Sharaa took action to end those aspects of Assad's policies that had been most directly threatening to core U.S. national security interests. Those interests were largely encompassed in the lists of demands passed to the interim government in March and Trump's requests to Sharaa in May: Pursue a more peaceful relationship with Israel. Evict Iran. Fight ISIS. Get tough with Palestinian militants operating on Syrian soil. Come clean on chemical weapons. Crack down on foreign jihadists.

Sharaa's quick attentiveness to many of the greatest security concerns of the United States and its allies naturally consolidated the view that he was a leader they could work with. While much remained for Syria to do on a whole range of important questions, there was meaningful action from Sharaa, not just words, on a host of matters of paramount interest to the United States, from counterterrorism to weakening Iran to his openness to finding an accommodation with Israel. Whether due to overwhelming need, weakness, evolution in his own worldview, or some combination of all these things, Sharaa's readiness to engage realistically and seriously on a U.S. and Western agenda in an effort to secure Syria's rejoining the international community and global economy justified U.S. notice and recognition.

While by no means conclusive, it was evidence that the possibility of shifting Syria's strategic orientation in a more fundamentally positive manner—from the camp of Iran, Russia, and state sponsor of terrorism to acceptable partner in a Middle Eastern order favorable to American interests—was real and worth pursuing and investing in. Indeed, when coupled with the desperate straits of post-Assad Syria, especially its dire economic situation, and the real risk (voiced by Secretary of State Rubio in May) that the country could relapse into chaos absent rapid sanctions relief, the case for Trump's sudden decision to offer Sharaa a major economic and diplomatic lifeline and “give Syria a chance” made significant sense—even if one could legitimately differ with the amount of front-loaded support promised, as well as the potential leverage lost.

Concerns over how Sharaa would approach matters of internal governance were clearly secondary in U.S. considerations—if they ranked at all. The fact that he pledged from the start to end the abuses and brutality of Assad’s horrific dictatorship, and to protect the interests of all Syrians, generally sufficed. Human rights, political pluralism, and democracy might be nice to have, but especially after the failed U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, had largely receded from the criteria by which Washington would judge its foreign partners—especially in the Arab world, of course, where it was an indisputable fact that the entire roster of America’s most longstanding and dependable friends existed on a sliding scale of greater or lesser degrees of benign despotism.

That kind of broad indifference to authoritarianism, and even appreciation for strongman leaders, was of course a particularly distinctive feature in Trump’s own brand of foreign policy realism and hyper-transactionalism. It also bears mentioning that on the issue of Sharaa and Syria’s future, by Trump’s own admission, the regional leaders that had the greatest impact on his emerging policy were Erdogan’s Turkey and MBS in Saudi Arabia, for whom questions of decentralization, federalism, and power sharing, especially with ethnic and religious minorities, were irrelevant, if not downright anathema.

## B. The U.S. Blind Spot: Syria’s Internal Governance

In retrospect, it is increasingly clear that the blind spot in U.S. strategy toward Sharaa was its failure to pay adequate attention or attach sufficient priority to issues of internal governance in the wake of Assad’s collapse. It is one thing to disregard such internal matters when facing a status quo with a friendly authoritarian firmly in control of their country, or even a revolutionary situation where a clearly dominant faction with overwhelming power and resources is able to impose relative stability by quickly and efficiently imposing its authority and control over the rest of the country, whether by force, inducement, persuasion or some combination of all three.

That is patently not the case in post-Assad Syria. Though Sharaa’s approval ratings are reportedly high—estimated at about 70%, the approximate size of Syria’s Sunni majority—his capability to successfully impose his centralizing and authoritarian vision on the rest of the country without triggering large-scale disorder and instability is in serious doubt. In the wake of the civil war, too many arms are in the hands of battle-hardened and determined minority communities outside Damascus who are more than ready to resist—the Druze clearly, but especially the Kurds. Both have enjoyed significant backing from major foreign powers and, as has already been demonstrated in the case of Suwayda, it is today a near certainty that Israel would intervene militarily to protect and support the Druze in any fight with the interim government and, if necessary, on a scale that could put Sharaa’s entire post-Assad project at risk.

Indeed, it has become increasingly apparent that Sharaa’s inability or unwillingness to set aside his centralizing mission, with all major powers vested in him and his narrow band of HTS followers, has itself become a primary threat to Syria’s future. His insistence on a narrow and rigid definition of national unity that deems all calls for decentralization, power sharing, and greater guarantees for religious and cultural rights as outside the bounds of acceptable discourse and an acute threat to the country’s integrity are themselves fueling greater societal division and decreasing the chances that post-Assad Syria will be able to hold together. The refusal to take seriously and engage with the legitimate fears, concerns, and aspirations of Syria’s minorities, especially in the aftermath of not just one but two major massacres that elements of his own forces actively participated in, is pushing the goal of a stable and unified Syria further and further out of reach.

In hindsight, it is difficult not to conclude that the Trump administration's eagerness to throw its weight so fully behind Sharaa may have, inadvertently, encouraged him to believe that, in addition to the full backing of Erdogan and MBS, he also had the blessing of the United States for re-establishing order and stability in post-Assad Syria via a state-building project that concentrated all power in Damascus in the hands of a strong and charismatic leader like himself.

The relative paucity of sustained public U.S. attention to issues regarding Syria's internal governance, particularly concerning the treatment and rights of sectarian and ethnic minorities, could not have escaped the notice of Sharaa and his inner circle. The absence of a well-defined list of U.S. concerns for Syria's domestic affairs to match the extensive and well-publicized lists of requirements regarding Syria's security policies quite plausibly left the impression that Sharaa's latitude to assert his authoritarian vision internally was substantial. Certainly, it was reinforced by the fact that Trump's decision to not only meet with Sharaa but announce his intent to lift all sanctions came just two months after the horrific massacre of Alawites along the central coast—an event for which there is no evidence Trump raised with Sharaa as an area of significant U.S. concern, if only to put him on notice that it should never be repeated.

At the time of the March massacre, Secretary of State Rubio issued what appeared to be the lone high-level U.S. response. It was an appropriately tough statement via a social media posting on March 9 saying that "The United States condemns the radical Islamic terrorists, including foreign jihadis, that murdered people in western Syria in recent days." Rubio pledged that "The United States stands with Syria's religious and ethnic minorities, including its Christian, Druze, Alawites, and Kurdish communities," and warned that "Syria's interim authorities must hold the perpetrators of these massacres against Syria's minority communities accountable."<sup>262</sup> However, any signs of sustained U.S. diplomatic follow through on the issues of minority rights and inclusion in post-Assad Syria were scant.

On the contrary, with Trump's subsequent decision to gamble big on supporting Sharaa and giving Syria "a chance at greatness," a far different tone came to dominate America's emerging Syria strategy. It was embodied in the frequent pronouncements and activities of Barrack, the administration's new Syria envoy. As a longtime friend and business partner of the President, Barrack's appointment in the immediate aftermath of the Trump-Sharaa meeting in Riyadh was a powerful signal that—despite Trump's historical reticence dating from his first term about U.S. involvement in Syria—the administration intended to significantly elevate the country's importance in U.S. Middle East strategy and the diplomatic resources it was prepared to invest to help Syria succeed. In that context, however, Barrack's relatively unequivocal and frequent expressions of backing for Sharaa reinforced the growing perception, fairly or not, that Trump himself had come down foursquare in support of Sharaa's strong centralizing vision for post-Assad Syria.

### C. The Barrack Factor

In his first visit to Damascus in late May, Barrack went out of his way to suggest that the United States' intent was to be very hands off when it came to Syria's internal ordering and in large part defer to Sharaa's lead. "America's intent and the president's vision," he said, "is that we have to give this young government a chance by not interfering, not demanding, by not giving conditions, by not imposing our culture on your culture."<sup>263</sup>

In a June interview, Barrack said that by lifting all sanctions on Syria unconditionally, Trump had decided to just “rip the band aid off” and that his job as envoy was to prevent “bureaucratic babysitting” in Washington from delaying the implementation of Trump’s strategy. While Trump had raised certain “expectations” with Sharaa on Syria’s efforts to combat ISIS, Palestinian militants, and build relations with Israel, with regard to Syria’s internal affairs, Barrack again stressed, “We are not dictating. We are not giving conditions. We are not nation-building.” Obliquely referencing Iraq, he noted, “We’ve done that. It’s never worked.”<sup>264</sup>

In the same interview, however, Barrack seemed to offer a not-so-subtle U.S. endorsement of Sharaa’s late-era governing style in Idlib—with its authoritarian and Sunni supremacist features, but where minorities were tolerated—as a suitable and desirable model for Syria’s post-Assad future: “I’m certain that our interests and his interests are exactly the same today, which is to make a success like he did in Idlib of building an inclusive, functioning society that will be soft Islam, not hard Islam.”<sup>265</sup>

The timing and context of what were probably Barrack’s most problematic statements about Syria’s future governance were unfortunate. They came in early July, immediately after he had brokered a round of talks between Sharaa and Mazloum Abdi, the SDF commander, to continue their negotiations on the March 10 agreement to integrate the SDF into the new Syrian state. The comments also occurred on the immediate eve of the eruption of the crisis in Suwayda which just days later would result in the mass killing of Druze at the hands of pro-Sharaa forces. Whatever Barrack’s intent, the exasperation he voiced concerning Kurdish proposals on Syria’s future carried a very high risk of misinterpretation by Sharaa—a U.S. green light, in essence, for a more assertive and aggressive posture in order to impose the central government’s authority and control over minority groups proving recalcitrant and even obstreperous in bending the knee to Damascus.

In an interview in Damascus just after concluding the Sharaa-Abdi talks, Barrack said, “I think the SDF has been slow in negotiating and accepting that [Syria’s future as a centralized system], and my advice to them is to speed that.” He pointedly warned the Kurds that they have no choice but to accept that “There is only one road and that road is to Damascus.” With regard to the Kurds’ specific proposal for a federal state structure, Barrack categorically appeared to rule it out on behalf of the United States as a complete non-starter. “The difficulty in all these countries, what we’ve learned is federalism doesn’t work,” he said. “You can’t have independent non-nation states within a nation.” While acknowledging that the Kurds and other aggrieved Syrian minority groups would need time to accommodate themselves to that reality, Barrack again stressed that they needed to expedite their decision making because “we are running out of time.”<sup>266</sup>

Two days later in New York, Barrack continued his drumbeat of criticism of the SDF’s negotiating position, suggesting that they should be under no illusion that their common struggle for a decade alongside U.S. troops against ISIS would translate into U.S. support for greater Kurdish autonomy. “There’s a big sentiment,” he noted, “that because they were our partners, we owe them.” However, he added, “The question is what do we owe them? We don’t owe them the ability to have their own independent government within a government.”<sup>267</sup>

As for the future of the SDF as a military force, Barrack made clear that he completely ruled out the idea of ethnic and sectarian minorities being able to maintain their own security forces to protect their local communities. “You can’t have a separate Druze force dressed like Druze, a separate Alawite force dressed like Alawites, a separate Kurd force dressed like Kurds, and on and on,” Barrack insisted. “There’s going to be one entity.”<sup>268</sup>

As a final shot across the bow of the Kurds, Barrack warned again that they should move fast to make an arrangement with Sharaa because the U.S. military presence in Syria was winding down, at which point, he hinted, the Kurds would be left to deal with a potentially hostile Syrian government (and Turkey) on their own. “We’ll bring you together, we’ll arbitrate, we’ll mediate, we’ll help,” Barrack said, “but we’re not going to stick around forever.” He ended on an ominous note that “If you don’t agree, fine—but we won’t be your babysitter.”<sup>269</sup>

In the immediate wake of the massacre in Suwayda, a heavily sourced story in Reuters explicitly connected the dots between Barrack’s hardening convictions about the need for a centralized Syria and Sharaa’s disastrous decision to send his forces to intervene. According to the story, Barrack’s persistent message that Syria should be run as “one state” without autonomy for its minority groups had caused Sharaa to miscalculate how Israel would respond to his deployment of troops to Suwayda. Despite Israel’s repeated warnings that the security of the Druze was a red line, Sharaa allegedly thought that he had received “a green light” for the operation from both Barrack as well as from Syria’s burgeoning dialogue with Israel—including the direct discussions that had occurred just a day or two prior on the sidelines of Sharaa’s July 12 visit to Azerbaijan.<sup>270</sup>

A Syrian military source said that U.S. officials failed to respond after being informed of Sharaa’s pending plan to send troops into Suwayda, leading the Syrian leadership to believe that there was tacit approval and that “Israel wouldn’t intervene.”<sup>271</sup> Giving strong credence to the theory that Sharaa may have badly misread the signals being sent by the United States, on July 16, shortly after Israeli jets had bombed Damascus to force the retreat of Sharaa’s forces, Secretary Rubio said at the White House that local rivalries between Bedouin and Druze in Suwayda “had led to an unfortunate situation and a misunderstanding, it looks like, between the Israeli side and the Syria side.”<sup>272</sup>

After the tragedy of Suwayda, Barrack’s tone regarding Syria’s future started to evolve, albeit not immediately and not with any clear relation to an actual change in official U.S. policy. Shortly after he brokered the final ceasefire to end the bloodletting, Barrack’s first reaction was to criticize Israel’s intervention for creating “another very confusing chapter” and coming “at a very bad time.” He also questioned Israel’s motives for taking action, suggesting that it wanted to see Syria fragmented and divided rather than a strong central state in control of the country. “Strong nation-states are a threat—especially Arab states are viewed as a threat to Israel,” he opined in an interview. Barrack, presumably speaking for the United States, made clear that his own view of Syria’s future had not changed and remained largely in line with Sharaa’s vision for the country. “I think all of the minority communities are smart enough to say, ‘We’re better off together, centralized.’”<sup>273</sup>

Remarkably, however, just a day later in a different interview and without further explanation for the change, Barrack’s tune for the first time shifted significantly in terms of raising serious doubts about the viability of Sharaa’s centralizing vision. Barrack said that, after Suwayda, he was now counseling Sharaa that changes in his approach were urgently needed, including in the type of army he was building and scaling back Islamic indoctrination.

According to Barrack, “Sharaa should say: I’m going to adapt quickly, because if I don’t adapt quickly, I’m going to lose the energy of the universe that was behind me.” He said Sharaa needed to “grow up as president and say ‘the right thing for me to do is not to follow my theme, which isn’t working so well.’” Barrack explained that the interim government needed to consider being “more inclusive quicker” with respect to integrating minority groups.<sup>274</sup>

After warning that there was no “Plan B” if Sharaa’s government collapsed, and that Syria could easily go the way of failed states like Libya and Afghanistan, Barrack reverted to claiming that the United States was not dictating what the internal political structure of Syria should be, other than stability, unity, fairness, and inclusion. Then, in a complete contradiction of virtually everything he had said up to that point about the infeasibility of decentralization in Syria, Barrack concluded that “If they end up with a federalist government, that’s their determination. And the answer to the question is, everybody may now need to adapt.”<sup>275</sup>

In another statement from July, while still very much suggesting that the situation after Suwayda had made consideration of alternatives to a centralized state essential, Barrack was quoted as still expressing skepticism about true federalism, indicating that he preferred something slightly less formal. “Not a federation,” he explained, “but something short of that, in which you allow everybody to keep their own integrity, their own culture, their own language, and no threat of Islamism.”<sup>276</sup>

## VI. Recommendations

### A. Keep Building Cooperation on U.S. Security Priorities

As detailed above, in the security realm, the Trump administration's engagement with Sharaa has shown limited, but real promise. Sharaa has taken a number of steps on a series of issues that mark a major positive change from the Assad regime and, if sustained over time, would be profoundly supportive of U.S. regional interests. With limited capacity and resources, Sharaa's regime has pragmatically cooperated with and supported U.S. military and intelligence operations against ISIS. It has combatted and sought to eliminate the malign influence of Iran and its proxies, including the land bridge to Hezbollah. Perhaps most remarkably, the former al-Jolani, still surrounded by no small number of dyed-in-the-wool jihadists, has openly entered direct negotiations with Israel under U.S. auspices with the aim of reaching a mutually beneficial long-term security arrangement.

Of course, Sharaa is acting in his own interests. ISIS is a deadly rival. Iran was Assad's biggest supporter. He needs Israeli strikes and military interventions to stop. Most of all, he desperately needs U.S. relief from sanctions to inject new life into Syria's moribund economy in order to consolidate and maintain his new-found power. That urgent requirement and the need to maintain U.S. favor for the eventual complete elimination of sanctions has provided the Trump administration real leverage that has, without question, helped encourage Sharaa's slow but steady responsiveness to the clear list of security-related priorities that the United States conveyed to him starting in the spring of 2025.

U.S. engagement with Sharaa on Washington's key security requirements should of course continue and be expanded, wherever possible. The Trump administration should keep pressing the interim government to make additional progress against ISIS, Iran, Hezbollah, and other terrorists, including Palestinian militants still in Syria. As it does, the United States not only should be prepared to periodically extend the 6-month waivers of Caesar Act secondary sanctions, but it should consider ways to help increase Syria's capacity to cooperate against these common adversaries, including through increased intelligence sharing.

Trump should also use his leverage to expedite the conclusion of a new Israel-Syria security agreement that moves beyond the 1974 disengagement agreement. Recent reporting suggests great progress has been made through three rounds of direct talks at the Dermer-Shaibani level and that a deal may be close to being finalized.<sup>277</sup> Such a deal would obviously be a great achievement for U.S. diplomacy.

An Israel-Syria agreement would need to ensure a strict security regime to protect Israel's border, including relatively expansive zones south of Damascus imposing severe limits on the amounts and types of heavy weaponry that Syria could deploy. As in the 1974 disengagement agreement, UN forces might have a role to play by physically patrolling the extended demilitarized zones on the Syrian side of the border, but thought should also be given to the establishment of a trilateral U.S.-Israel-Syria mechanism that would be in charge of monitoring and enforcement of the deal. Also important would be some sort of side understanding between Jerusalem and Washington that, should Syria not immediately act to repair a clear violation, Israel would have the right to take unilateral action to protect its interests.

A deal would also need to establish a clear modus vivendi to avoid any further clashes between the interim government, Israel, and the Druze of Suwayda—one that would guarantee that the

current political and security status quo (with the Druze in charge of Suwayda) could not be changed through force or unilateral declarations, but only through good-faith negotiations between the Syrian government and the Syrian Druze. In addition, arrangements would need to be made to ensure the free flow of international humanitarian assistance to Suwayda and the cessation of any de facto siege or blockade of the province.

Finally, Israel would need U.S.-backed security assurances from Syria that no antagonistic foreign power hostile to Israel (meaning Turkey) would be permitted to establish new military bases in Syria or play a dominant role shaping Syrian military policy or capabilities in ways that could threaten Israel.

In return, Syria would be spared repeated military incursions, and Israel would withdraw its forces from areas inside Syria occupied after the fall of Assad. If possible, and as another step in stabilizing relations and building confidence short of a peace treaty, serious thought should be given to expanding over time any Israel-Syria security deal to include possible economic components as well, particularly in sectors where Syria is in desperate need of assistance—including extreme water shortages, heavy demand for natural gas, and access to technology—and Israel is well positioned to help. Similarly, at a cultural level, an agreement could allow for Druze from both sides of the border to conduct family visits, make pilgrimages to religious sites, and even engage in intra-communal cross-border commerce.

## B. Recognize the Threat Posed by Sharaa's Centralizing Approach

The most pressing matter now for U.S. strategy in Syria is to consciously begin wielding the same leverage that has been effectively deployed to help shape Sharaa's decision making on U.S. security priorities, to modify his hardline centralizing approach toward critical questions of internal governance. That approach and the horrific incidents of violence surrounding it have triggered a non-virtuous cycle of intensifying suspicion and fear among key Syrian minorities that, if not stemmed, only increases the risk of Syria's eventual violent unraveling.

After a decade of civil war, both the Kurdish-led SDF and the Druze have well-armed militias that will not submit to the authoritarian commands of a Sunni Islamist regime in Damascus without a major fight, including the prospect of conflicting large-scale foreign interventions—by Israel, in defense of the Druze, and Turkey, against the Kurds. Such an outcome, of course, would dash the Trump administration's hopes that Sharaa will emerge as the stable partner Washington is seeking to help build a more secure and peaceful post-Assad Syria. In short, continued U.S. neglect of or passive acquiescence in Sharaa's current state-building project of enforced "unity" is a self-defeating strategy that will more likely end up undermining rather than advancing America's core security objectives.

Already, after Suwayda, the Kurds and Druze are seriously discussing the possibility of taking radical unilateral steps to declare their separation, autonomy, or semi-independent status from Damascus. In rejecting a recent U.S.-Syria-Jordan roadmap for ending the crisis in post-July Suwayda, organizations affiliated with Druze spiritual leader al-Hijri openly demanded Suwayda's right to self-determination, including holding a referendum on whether the province should opt for independence, self-rule, or some form of decentralized administration inside Syria.<sup>278</sup> Well-attended public rallies in August actually called for Suwayda to be annexed by Israel.<sup>279</sup>

In the northeast, escalating clashes between the SDF, government forces, and pro-Sharaa Sunni Arab tribal fighters in northeast Syria could easily explode and accelerate the drive toward ethno-

sectarian partition. Speaking of the SDF, Sharaa has promised to defend “every inch” of Syrian soil and could not remain passive in the face of a separatist push by the Kurds or Syria’s other minorities.<sup>280</sup>

It is already a near certainty that another attack on the Druze heartland would spur Israeli intervention against the government, while any unilateral action by the SDF in the direction of formalizing some version of Kurdish autonomy would invite Turkey to enter the fight on the government’s side to crush it. The prospect of miscalculation leading to a direct Turkish-Israeli military clash inside Syria would be perilously high. U.S. forces deployed alongside the SDF in northeast Syria could be caught in the crossfire or suffer the moral stain of standing by while their longstanding Kurdish partners in the fight against ISIS are slaughtered. In the resulting chaos and violence, the likes of ISIS, Iran, Hezbollah, and other bad actors would thrive.

Whether or not such a disastrous outcome is the most likely scenario, its prospects are high enough to warrant real concern and attention from the Trump administration. It would border on negligence to simply depend on cooler heads prevailing in the current combustible environment, or to count on Syrians to keep muddling through in spite of the occasional act of mass sectarian violence.

### C. Develop a Strategy to Stem Syria’s Fracturing

The better part of wisdom would be for the United States to act judiciously but far more purposefully to apply its significant leverage to matters of Syrian internal governance in an effort to short-circuit the dangerous dynamic set off by events of the past nine months. Sharaa should be put on notice that, while Washington shares his opposition to Syria’s dissolution or unraveling, it sees his authoritarian model of Sunni supremacism and concentration of power as the primary engine driving the country toward such a potentially disastrous outcome. Such an approach simply will not work if Syria is to stand any chance of being reassembled on the ashes of Assad’s horror show as a coherent and unified state capable of serving as a force for regional and international stability. As such, absent a shift in course by Sharaa that exhibits far greater patience, openness, tolerance, and commitment to reaching an acceptable accommodation with Syria’s minorities, he should be under no illusion that the full and permanent relief from U.S. sanctions that he still needs will be a realistic prospect.

Of course, in return, Sharaa should know that the United States would similarly use its leverage and influence with Syria’s minority communities to warn them off any unilateral actions and provocations guaranteed to enflame and destabilize an already precarious situation. Claims for a more just, inclusive, and pluralist Syria, where the legitimate political, cultural, and religious rights of minority groups are protected and their communities are secure, will garner concerted U.S. backing. Unilateral efforts to force secession or partition that are likely to instigate violence, chaos, and a resumption of civil war will be strongly opposed.

#### *i. Establish an Ad Hoc Diplomatic Coalition on Syria*

To strengthen its diplomatic leverage in advancing all aspects of the U.S. agenda in Syria, the Trump administration would do well to assemble its allies in a more formal grouping that seeks as much as possible to advance a common strategy in support of Syria’s stability and success. The United States is the strongest partner of many, if not most of the countries in the Middle East and Europe whose political, economic, and security clout and cooperation are most crucial to Sharaa’s

success, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, Turkey, Israel, France, Great Britain, and Germany. To the extent that Washington could gain agreement from the most powerful and influential stakeholders in Syria's future on a broad set of objectives that they seek to advance together, both with respect to Syria's security policies as well as its internal governance, it would serve as a major force multiplier that would be difficult, if not impossible, for Sharaa to easily ignore or defy.

The Trump administration should seek to forge such an ad hoc coalition by bringing together willing partners in a Syria Contact Group or 'Friends of Syria' group. The U.S.-led coalition's explicit purpose would be to support the emergence of a stable and secure Syria, at peace with itself and the world, and fully reintegrated into the global economy. In the security realm, broad agreement almost certainly exists around common interests like keeping Iran and its proxies out of Syria, fighting ISIS and other terrorist groups, negotiating an Israel-Syria security agreement, and ending Syria's role as the epicenter of the region's illicit narcotics trade, especially in Captagon.

Gaining consensus on a set of principles for Syria's internal governance will no doubt be harder given the instinctive biases the Sunni Arab monarchies and Erdogan's Turkey have for Sharaa's brand of imposed Sunni authoritarianism. Nevertheless, the United States should work to impress upon its partners the huge risks to Syria's stability and unity that Sharaa's centralizing project is now fueling and the consequent danger it poses for their interests and the wider region, should it continue apace. A broad insistence from such a group to Sharaa and Syria's minorities alike on the need for patience, tolerance, and a commitment to compromise through peaceful negotiations that enhance and protect Syria's unity by fairly accommodating the legitimate concerns and interests of all its diverse components as they seek to recover from more than a decade of civil war and 50 years of Assadism would be a powerful statement.

*ii. Re-Open and Fully Staff the U.S. Embassy in Damascus*

To assist in its own efforts to accurately monitor and track the Sharaa regime's progress in addressing America's core list of priorities, both on security matters and especially on issues of internal governance, the Trump administration should seek to resume operations at its embassy in Syria as soon as possible and staff it with a full country team of experienced diplomats and Syria experts with appropriate language skills. The sooner the United States can get on the ground to engage on a daily basis with Sharaa's government and all Syria's diverse communities, develop relationships, build trust and understanding, and produce its own independent reporting and assessments of what is actually happening, rather than relying on second-hand accounts by agenda-driven partisans, the better. In an environment as complex and dynamic as post-Assad Syria, a fully functioning American embassy could be of enormous value to senior policymakers in Washington as well as the members of an international Syria Contact Group, should it be formed.

*iii. Press Sharaa on Steps to Signal a Change in Approach to Governance*

Any effort by the United States and its allies to prescribe the ultimate political bargain struck between Damascus and Syria's minorities would be folly. Between the extremes of centralized Sunni supremacism and outright secession or partition is a wide spectrum of options for greater or lesser degrees of decentralization, inclusion, pluralism, and power sharing. That is a matter for Syrians to decide. What Washington and others of good will can insist upon is a fair and peaceful process of dialogue and negotiations to determine such issues, where all voices can be heard and

concerns raised in the spirit of building a more stable, secure, and peaceful Syria, free from threats, ultimatums, and imposed solutions from any side.

The Trump administration should urge Sharaa to take a number of steps on an urgent basis to clearly signal a step back from his own more rigid vision of Syria's future, and his good faith desire to arrest the spiraling deterioration of relations between his regime and Syria's minority communities, including:

- **Reconvene a national dialogue conference that is more inclusive, open, and sustained.** Far too many saw Sharaa's initial one-day effort in February as a rushed sham, with Sharaa and HTS choosing the invitees, dictating the agenda, restricting discussion, and determining outcomes. Launching a new iteration of the dialogue following a process of real consultations with Syria's other key stakeholders that creates a more representative, serious, and genuine process would mark an important acknowledgment by Sharaa of the need for continued discussion, debate, and compromise. Sharaa should also be encouraged to invite observers and expert facilitators from international agencies and friendly foreign embassies to monitor the dialogue and provide technical support to improve its chances for success.
- **Reopen the interim constitutional declaration for amendments based on consultations among a more diverse and representative group of drafters.** The declaration signed by Sharaa in March was drafted by a small group of like-minded Sharaa appointees in a non-transparent process that involved no real input from or consultations with Syria's minority communities. It was unsurprisingly received as an effort largely directed at consecrating and imposing on the rest of Syria Sharaa's own very narrow conception of a highly centralized Islamist state with an all-powerful president wielding dictatorial powers. In an immediate post-Assad environment fraught with fear that desperately needed dialogue and persuasion, Syria's minorities instead got a constitutional fait accompli dictated from above by a group of former jihadists. Sharaa's willingness to consider amendments that might expand the relevant sources of legal authority, strengthen certain guarantees and protections for minorities, more formally acknowledge Syria's ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, and provide for greater political inclusion, pluralism, and power sharing would be a meaningful signal of his willingness to go the extra mile in seeking to bring all Syrians together.
- **Call off the demand for the rapid demobilization and integration of the SDF and Druze militias into a unified Syrian national army and recommit instead to resolving the issue through a patient process of peaceful negotiations that seek to build trust and confidence over time while rejecting imposed solutions.** After more than a decade of brutal civil war, the rise to power of a radical group of one-time enthusiasts for ISIS and al-Qaeda, and nine months of creeping Islamist authoritarianism punctuated by two vicious sectarian massacres, the SDF and Druze are not about to lay down their arms, disband their forces, and spread their fighters to the four winds to serve in disparate units of an army that Sharaa and his ex-jihadists dominate and command. Any effort to compel them to do so will be a recipe for intensified violence. Sharaa would do well to recognize this reality and resolve to allow the SDF and Druze to remain in charge of security within their communities pending peaceful negotiations on their final disposition. As Sharaa has done with former militias from the Turkish-backed SNA as well as the terrorist fighters from the Uyghur-led Turkistan Islamic Party, he should be open to the possibility of

integrating the SDF and Druze as fully formed units of the new Syrian army, perhaps in the guise of a territorial national guard, rather than demanding their complete dismantlement.

- **Make a sustained commitment to recruit local community members to serve in Syrian security units responsible for policing vulnerable minority neighborhoods, villages, and towns.** This was an important recommendation of the UN Commission that investigated the atrocities committed against Alawites in March along the central coast and could help increase trust, improve communication, and alleviate fears between minorities and the new Syrian authorities.
- **Commit to establishing immediately a comprehensive program to professionalize the new Syrian defense and interior ministry forces, including Western training, technical advice, and oversight.** The hodgepodge of revolutionary Sunni jihadists, extremists, and terrorists that Sharaa hastily assembled, called a national army, and threw into duty to impose law and order on a fractured and fearful population was a disaster waiting to happen. It was only a matter of where and when the inevitable thirst for retribution and radical Islamic justice would slip its bounds and be unleashed. The tragic events along the central coast targeting the Alawites and the Druze in Suwayda were the answer. A rapid commitment to professionalize the force, drawing on Western support and standards of discipline and accountability, would demonstrate Sharaa's determination to make every effort to ensure such incidents are never repeated. Recent agreements with Turkey to train and provide support to Syrian forces should hardly be seen as sufficient—especially in light of Turkey's patronage of the SNA, whose units had a notorious record for extreme violence and human rights abuses during the civil war.<sup>281</sup>
- **Remove foreign jihadist commanders from the new security forces and disband foreign units found to have participated in atrocities against Alawite and Druze civilians.** Having to build a new army on the foundation of a cadre of one-time Syrian extremists and terrorists is a high enough hurdle for Sharaa to overcome if he hopes to eventually win the trust and confidence of Syria's minorities to join in his state-building project. Demanding that they also reconcile themselves to a bunch of heavily armed foreign jihadists patrolling their communities, who have longtime allegiance to the black banner of ISIS and al-Qaeda, should be a bridge too far. Whether Sharaa gives them a medal, pays them for their past service, and allows them to take up residence and a civilian career in Syria is a separate matter. Sharaa should be pressed to recognize that whatever the advantages of rewarding controversial foreign jihadists with prominent positions in Syria's security forces, they are far outweighed by the loss in trust and security his regime is incurring among the country's already frightened and suspicious minority communities.
- **Ensure that the main highway between Damascus and Suwayda remains open to international aid deliveries to the embattled Druze and move swiftly to re-open it to the safe and secure flow of commercial and civilian traffic.** After the events of July, Syrian forces closed the main highway, and only minor amounts of assistance were able to enter Suwayda through more difficult routes. The highway's re-opening in late August to allow larger UN convoys to flow into the province was an important step and needs to be sustained.<sup>282</sup> Sharaa also needs to prioritize the resumption of commercial and civilian traffic to help the citizens of the province fully recover. The partial siege and embargo imposed on the territory by government forces after their humiliating forced retreat from

Suwayda city in July at Israeli hands has only further fueled the Druze's mounting sense of victimization and alienation from the new authorities in Damascus. It is a dangerous dynamic that needs to be stemmed. A trilateral U.S.-Syria-Jordan roadmap for ending the Suwayda crisis—though containing political elements rejected by prominent Druze—did contain practical elements for improving the dire humanitarian and economic situation in the province that should be acted upon regardless.<sup>283</sup> Sharaa has said repeatedly that he considers the Druze an integral component of Syrian society. Rising above the lingering resentments and going the extra mile by rapidly addressing the bleeding wound of post-July Suwayda would show that he means it.

*iv. Preserve U.S. Economic and Military Leverage*

Convincing Sharaa to respond in good faith to an agenda that would require a significant scaling back of his own domestic ambitions and Sunni Islamist vision would be a tall order under any circumstance. It will likely be impossible should the United States unnecessarily squander the significant leverage it retains over Sharaa.

*a) Modify, Don't Repeal, the Caesar Act*

In the first instance, that means maintaining the leverage incident to the comprehensive sanctions architecture built up on Syria over the past several decades. The most powerful sanctions were imposed under the 2019 Caesar Act and its regime of secondary sanctions that stifled nearly all international commerce with Syria. President Trump has already gone far in fulfilling the commitment he made to Sharaa in May to remove sanctions, including by exercising his authority to waive the Caesar Act's penalties in six-month increments. Several countries, especially in Europe and the Gulf, are already providing significant support. International banking transactions are gradually restarting. Major investment commitments have been made to rebuild Syrian infrastructure, including significant interest by U.S. companies in rejuvenating the country's energy sector.

Nevertheless, there is no question that a permanent repeal of the Caesar Act and the removal of any risk that its far-reaching sanctions could be reinstated in the future remains a huge priority for Sharaa—the key to fully unlocking unhindered global commercial activity with Syria. Indeed, an historic visit by Syrian Foreign Minister to Washington on September 18 had as its sole purpose lobbying Congress for the Act's quick repeal.<sup>284</sup> As such, it still provides Sharaa with a major incentive to be responsive to U.S. priorities, as he has already been on a series of security issues, and as he could be if the same leverage were now purposefully applied to a similar list of U.S. priorities with respect to governance—along the lines identified above. Absent the leverage provided by the looming threat that secondary sanctions could return, however, the chance that Sharaa acts on his own to modify his present course by taking meaningful steps to ease the escalating antagonisms with Syria's minorities is highly unlikely.

Accordingly, the Trump administration should put a hold on current efforts in Congress to repeal the Caesar Act immediately. Instead, it should opt to continue breathing life into Syria's economy through the renewal of regular 180-day sanctions waivers while holding off on full repeal pending a sustained pattern of progress by Sharaa's regime not just on existing U.S. security requirements, but on taking meaningful steps to address the legitimate fears and concerns of Syria's minority communities and establishing a more inclusive and pluralist style of internal governance.

An interesting compromise is being offered by Congressman Mike Lawler (R-NY).<sup>285</sup> In the wake of the massacre in Suwayda, he put forward a bill that—rather than rushing recklessly to reward the atrocities with an immediate repeal of the Act—would instead grant repeal only after Syria acts for two consecutive years to meet a set of U.S. requirements, including on matters of minority rights. In theory, that would permit all Caesar Act sanctions to disappear by 2027, a full two years ahead of their scheduled 2029 automatic sunset. Whether Lawler’s exact set of metrics are the right ones can be debated, but the principle of requiring a sustained period of good-faith effort to accommodate Syria’s minorities before permanently surrendering Washington’s most powerful remaining source of leverage is a sensible one.

b) Maintain a Small U.S. Presence in Eastern Syria

The other key piece of leverage that the United States possesses to positively influence Sharaa’s actions, including with respect to his approach on internal governance and Syria’s minorities, is the continued U.S. military presence in northeastern Syria alongside the SDF. Having to factor in the presence of U.S. troops and their long history of successful collaboration with the SDF against ISIS gives Sharaa (and Turkey) an important incentive to act with an added degree of restraint, moderation, and reasonableness in his efforts to reintegrate the SDF and the Kurdish-led autonomous administration into the Syrian state.

The Trump administration has already begun withdrawing troops from several bases in Syria and is planning to concentrate the hundreds that remain within a single base.<sup>286</sup> The administration should be extremely cautious about leaving Syria entirely. Not only would it squander America’s leverage to shape an acceptable compromise and accommodation between the SDF and Sharaa that would buttress Syria’s long-term stability and chances for success, but it would also risk abandoning the Kurds to the mercies of Sharaa’s security forces and Turkey, ensuring that the SDF’s focus on fighting and containing ISIS comes to an end. In short, it would be a recipe for increased violence, chaos, and the renewed growth of transnational terrorism.

## Conclusion

No one should have any illusions. Given the amount of bloodshed that has already flowed since the Assad regime's collapse, the odds that a more focused U.S. effort to help Syria emerge as a unified and pluralist state that can serve as a reliable long-term American security partner will succeed are not particularly high. What makes it important to try, however, is the unpalatability of the most likely alternatives, neither of which would serve U.S. interests well. The first is the nightmare scenario of a return to sectarian civil war, foreign interventions, refugee flows, and a gaping security vacuum in the heart of the Middle East. The second is the less threatening, but equally tragic, scenario of a relentless campaign of Sunni Islamist supremacism that slowly but surely grinds Syria's minorities into despair, leaving them in a perpetual state of insecurity and second-class citizenship, with few prospects for a better future. Over time, everyone who can flee would, draining the country of most of its remaining ethnic and religious diversity and no small part of the essential human capital it will need to rebuild and thrive.

When presented with a clearly articulated set of U.S. security priorities, Sharaa has proven himself to be a ruthless pragmatist ready to veer sharply from his jihadist past in order to secure U.S. political and economic support that he deems crucial to his effort to consolidate power and ensure his regime's success. On issues of internal governance, however, where no such corresponding list of U.S. concerns has yet been identified and the exercise of U.S. leverage has been largely absent, Sharaa has proceeded full steam ahead on a centralizing mission that is now in danger of pushing the U.S. goal of a stable and secure post-Assad Syria out of reach. With no good alternatives, the Trump administration should act with dispatch to apply its significant leverage to Syria's internal governance as well, by pressing Sharaa to modify his current authoritarian approach to state building, most importantly through steps that demonstrate a sustained and meaningful outreach to Syria's minorities. Sharaa again needs to be forced to adopt the mantle of the ruthless pragmatist who is ready to trim his ideological sails and make the difficult compromises necessary to secure the U.S. support that is essential to his ultimate success.

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