

AFTER ASSAD: THE FUTURE OF SYRIA

HEARING

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SUBCOMMITTEE ON MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH
AFRICA

BEFORE THE

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AFTER ASSAD: THE FUTURE OF SYRIA

Thursday, June 5, 2025

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:10 p.m., in room 2200 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Michael Lawler (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. LAWLER. The Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa will come to order. The purpose of this hearing is to assess U.S. national security interests as relates to Syria and discuss potential policy options to further them. I now recognize myself to give an opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN MICHAEL LAWLER

Syria is at a turning point. The fall of Bashar al-Assad this past December following four decades of authoritarian rule has created conditions for unprecedented change for Syria and for the Middle East. This change comes with significant risk.

The Syrian war dating back to 2011 has left most of the country in ruins, destroyed by years of indiscriminate bombing by Assad and his Russian and Iranian backers. The costs of reconstructing this broken country will be in the tens of billions, even by the most modest assessment, and investors face significant hurdles as they work to navigate the complex sanctions regime that has emerged after four decades of Assad family rule.

While there are rightfully many who seek to break down barriers, advocating for sanctions relief to ensure reconstruction can take place, and put Syria on a path of success, we must not lose sight of core U.S. interests in this rush to embrace Syria's new regime.

There remain significant questions about Syria's new interim authorities led by U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, HTS, a former Al-Qaeda affiliate, Ahmed al-Sharaa. Despite his hardened past, the interim president continues to verbally signal a commitment to reform, though his ability to deliver remains to be seen, which is why we must be explicit with our goals for Syria.

This includes the counter-ISIS mission, which has been a central part of U.S. foreign policy since 2014. We must set clear expectations for the interim authorities on what we expect from them with respect to counterterrorism cooperation to prevent a resurgence

and assume responsibility for detention centers holding thousands of ISIS members and affiliated individuals in the northeast.

And concerns about extremism are not, by any means, limited to ISIS. Iran and its proxies have long used the country as a sanctuary space to plan and carry out attacks, including against Israel, while Russia sees Syria as a strategic launchpad to undermine our interests not just in the Middle East but much further afield, from Africa to Europe.

There must be clear red lines when it comes to Iran and its proxies, as well as Russia's, ability to operate in Syria. Preventing Syria from being used as a sanctuary space is vital not just for the U.S. but also for Syria. This will, no doubt, be one of the metrics used as the international community measures the success of Syria's transition and by extension for the prospects for further economic relief.

For Syria to succeed and reestablish itself on the international world stage, it must take action to prevent extremism from thriving once again, including by signaling a commitment to inclusive governance by establishing a positive working relationship with our Kurdish partners, the Syrian Democratic Forces. They have been at the forefront of the campaign to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS.

On that basis, the Trump administration has rightfully taken steps to waive U.S. sanctions on a limited and temporary basis, giving al-Sharaa sufficient time to demonstrate he is able to turn his words into actions. But this is not, I have to stress, a full embrace of al-Sharaa or those he continues to surround himself with.

We must use this opportunity to press him on key U.S. priorities, notably as relates to counterterrorism, while also retaining limitations on U.S. sanctions relief to ensure Iran and Russia cannot benefit financially.

Al-Sharaa has expressed a concerning willingness to embrace Moscow, despite Putin's complicity in war crimes against the Syrian people. For Russia, their presence in Syria is not just about the Middle East; it is a vital staging ground essential to everything they do in Africa and Eastern Mediterranean.

We underestimate the strategic importance Syria holds for the Russians at our own peril. Make no mistake: what happens in Syria does not stay in Syria. The country has consistently demonstrated its ability to impact and shape affairs far outside its borders, from Europe's migrant crisis to ISIS to the war in Ukraine.

When Secretary Rubio testified before Congress last month, he said, quote, "There is no guarantee that by outreach and working with the transitional authority in Syria, things are going to work out. It may work out; it may not work out. But if we don't reach out and try, it is a guarantee not to work out."

And I echo the Secretary's sentiment and just came back, along with the ranking member, from a trip to the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Jordan. And that was the sentiment shared there as well. We want to give this an opportunity to work but are fully cognizant of the consequences of failure here.

During this hearing, we will further examine Syrian stability and the vital role Syria and the Syrian people play in the Middle East.

I now yield to the ranking member, Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick, for her opening statement.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER SHEILA
CHERFILUS-McCORMICK**

Mrs. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for convening this important hearing on developments in Syria following the fall of the brutal Assad regime.

I welcome our expert panelists for this afternoon, all of whom have robust knowledge of Syria, the broader Middle East, and core U.S. interests at this time of immense transition and opportunity.

As Chairman Lawler noted, we recently returned from a congressional delegation to Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Jordan. In many meetings, developments in Syria were front and center. Excitement was palpable among our regional partners over the opportunities that changes in Syria and Lebanon present.

Across the Middle East, U.S. allies and partners have welcomed change in leadership in Damascus with the hopes to support our robust construction work, investments in critical infrastructure, and increased humanitarian assistance to the millions of Syrians who require urgent aid as of today.

I stand and support the Syrian people, who look to a new future and a government that does not engage in systemic campaigns of violence and repression against its own citizens. I welcome the Trump administration's initial engagement with the new Government of Syria, including the decision to lift certain sanctions through the General License 25 and issuing a 180-day waiver on the Caesar Act sanctions.

However, while the President is correct to say that this is Syria's moment to shine, helping Syrians must meet this moment requires a clear plan. This is noble. However, I do not believe that this can be achieved without providing incentives that would allow the new Syrian Government to create and enable an environment and a strong institution which is needed.

Congress has not received any such details on the administration's plan to implement sanction relief effectively, nor a more coherent strategy that the administration on its priorities for U.S.-Syrian relationships.

I hope the vacuum the executive branch has created brings members from both sides of the aisle together to work on legislation that establishes clear priorities for further U.S. engagement with Syria, including with respect to inclusion and fully representative governance, protection of religious and ethnic minority groups, continued counterterrorism cooperation, and more.

A conditions-based sanction relief policies with clear time lines and matrices is critical for Syria's security, regional security, and the United States' national security. I look forward to working with my colleagues on legislation to address this. Absent such congressional leadership, I fear the U.S. Syria policy would be characterized by a haphazard, ill-conceived, move-fast, break-things approach that has been a characteristic of the Trump administration to date. The stakes for Syrian people are too high and a peaceful Syria is too critical to our own interests to be reckless and unfocused.

Incentives for direct deliverables for Syria are critical. U.S. policy on Syria must continue to prioritize effective and multilateral counterterrorism operations, securing high-value ISIS detainees, restoring critical life-saving humanitarian aid that contributes to deradicalization, elimination of chemical weapons and stores and unexploded ordnances, and capability-building for the interim government's security forces.

It also requires robust engagement with our regional partners, including Jordan. At the exact moment when a change in Syria requires a full set of foreign policy tools to advance U.S. interests, the Trump administration has not only proposed a gutting of the State Department, but numerous United States stabilization and assistance programs active in Syria and within neighboring countries have been cut.

Today, because of the Trump administration's policies, our regional partners in the Middle East are asking whether we keep our word, whether our adversaries are betting that we won't. I welcome the opportunity to speak with our panelists about the policies and strategies we should be working on to ensure this moment of cautious optimism for Syria's people is not wasted and the United States' interests in the region are protected.

I yield back.

Mr. LAWLER. Thank you to the ranking member.

Other members of the committee are reminded that opening statements may be submitted for the record.

We are pleased to have a distinguished panel of witnesses before us today on this important topic: Hon. David Schenker, Taube Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and previously Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs under President Trump's first administration; Dr. Anna Borshchevskaya, Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy; Dr. Jon B. Alterman, Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

This committee recognizes the importance of the issues before us and is grateful to have you here to speak with us today. Your full statements will be made part of the record, and I will ask each of you to keep your spoken remarks to 5 minutes in order to allow time for member questions.

I now recognize Mr. Schenker for his opening statement.

STATEMENT OF DAVID SCHENKER

Mr. SCHENKER. Thank you, Chairman Lawler, Representative—Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick, honorable members. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today.

The future of Syria matters greatly to the United States. Under Assad, Syria was a source of regional instability and a persistent threat to Israel, Lebanon, and Jordan, among others. Assad's fall represents an opportunity for Syria, Washington, and its regional partners.

There has been a lot of perseverating lately about Ahmed al-Sharaa. To be certain, he is no panacea. At a minimum, he's an Islamist and likely a burgeoning authoritarian. Notwithstanding

lingering doubts, though, I believe al-Sharaa is much better than Assad.

He might not succeed in unifying and stabilizing Syria. Five months after the fall of Assad, though, al-Sharaa is the only game in town. The Trump administration should invest diplomatic capital to help him succeed. Time will tell whether suspending crippling U.S. sanctions was the right decision. A gradual process may have had more success at shaping the new government, or perhaps continued U.S. economic pressures would have scuttled al-Sharaa's already unlikely attempt to stabilize a fractious and scarred Syria.

As with many U.S. policy decisions, the initiative to suspend sanctions was not a choice between good and bad, but rather a choice between bad and worse. Washington has no doubt ceded some leverage, but I believe Trump made the less bad decision; that is, to give al-Sharaa and the new Syria a chance.

Meanwhile, al-Sharaa is meeting some expectations on important issues. He is cooperating with the U.S. on counterterrorism and undoubtedly will continue to do so. It is important that U.S. forces remain in Syria until conditions are conducive to withdrawal.

Foreign fighters constitute an even bigger challenge for al-Sharaa. Terrorists, militia men, and foreign Jihadis played a key role in toppling Assad. So these men are not going to be expelled. Now, at al-Sharaa's request, the administration has consented to the integration of some 3,500 of these fighters into a unit of the military. While expedient, it is difficult to imagine that this decision won't have problematic long-term implications for discipline, accountability, and public confidence.

Integration of these Jihadis doesn't solve the problem. It defers it. Post-Assad Syria will not be a democracy. Still, Washington does have an abiding interest in the protection of minorities, a modicum of human rights, and some kind of political representation for Syria's ethnic and religious communities. I am talking about the Kurds, Druze, Christians alike. An inclusive Syria, I believe, will mitigate toward stability.

Going forward, Washington should set and convey expectations to al-Sharaa on terrorism, foreign fighters, and governance and be prepared to reimplement sanctions if Syria's trajectory dictates.

Al-Sharaa's relations with Israel are also another challenge. Since the fall of Assad, Israel has been occupying and bombing Syria, at times justifiably. At the same time, the government is interdicting Iranian weapons shipments destined for Hezbollah.

Over time, direct discussions between Israel and Syria, which are reportedly underway, could help build some trust between the parties, stabilize the border, and lead to more normal relations between these longtime enemies.

Another concern is that a weak Syria will invite foreign meddling. At present, Iran is unwelcome, but the jury is out on Russia. But Turkey and Israel both appear to be working to establish military spheres of influence in Syria. Israel bordering on Turkey, in my opinion, would be a recipe for heightened tensions, and the Trump administration should be pressing Israel and Turkey to establish, at a minimum, a hotline to preempt unintentional escalation.

In sum, Syria faces a lot of challenges. The new government in Damascus will need U.S. political support and robust diplomatic engagement to succeed. The U.S. can help with coordinating reconstruction, keeping ISIS at bay, and implementing banking sector reforms necessary to reopen Syria for business while at the same time encouraging the government to be more inclusive.

It will be difficult for Washington to balance expectations and be patient, but the potential benefits for the United States and its partners of a stable, benign Syria that rejects the so-called axis of resistance are enormous.

Thank you. I have submitted testimony for the record, and I will look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Schenker follows:]

Testimony of David Schenker

Taube Senior Fellow, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

June 5, 2025

House Foreign Affairs Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and
North Africa

After Assad: the Future of Syria

A Moment of Opportunity

The December 2024 fall of Syria's Assad regime represents an enormous opportunity for the region and the United States. Syria under Hafiz al Assad was an inaugural member of the State Department list of State Sponsors of Terrorism. Over the course of the regime's more than 50 years in power, Damascus under Hafiz and Bashar al Assad trucked with Palestinian and Kurdish terrorist organizations, as well as with Russia and North Korea. Worse, Syria counted Iran as a strategic ally, providing assistance and logistical support to Tehran's leading terror proxy, Lebanese Hezbollah.

Equally problematic was the regime's treatment of the Syrian people. For decades, Hafiz al Assad administered a world-class police state replete with horrific human rights abuses. Hafiz' best known atrocity was the 1982 Hama massacre, when his forces killed an estimated 40,000 armed Islamist rebels, at times reportedly employing hydrogen cyanide gas. He was outdone by his son and successor, Bashar, who in an effort to extinguish a popular uprising between 2011 and 2024 killed more than 500,000 mostly civilians and forced some 14 million other Syrians into exile.

On several occasions, during the rebellion, Bashar deployed Sarin and chlorine gas, and other chemical agents to subdue his opponents. Years earlier, aided by North Korea and perhaps Iran, Assad's Syria likewise attempted to develop nuclear weapons, and endeavor ended in 2007 when Israel bombed the regime's secret facility in Kibar.

Along the way, the Assad regime actively sought to destabilize its neighbors as a matter of policy. Syria was a sanctuary for PKK and Palestinian terrorists targeting Turkey, Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon. Syria brutally occupied Lebanon for nearly thirty years. Then, after Syria departed, the regime backed Hezbollah's domination of that state. Assad also flooded Iraq with Al Qaida and other flavors of insurgents in the lead up to the 2003 US invasion, killing American soldiers in addition to thousands of (predominately Shiite) Muslims. More recently, Syria's Assad emerged as a narco-trafficking hub, with disastrous effects for Jordan and much of the region.

The Assad regime was cruel and its list of misdeeds long. For the vast majority of Syrians, as well as for Washington and its partners, the demise of the regime is a welcome development. Russia, which supported Bashar in his efforts to repress the revolution, is poised to lose influence—and perhaps its military bases—with the new administration in Damascus. Iran too, is unwelcome in the new Syria. Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Tehran's Iraqi militias no longer have *carte blanche* in Syria. And Hezbollah in Lebanon, which supported Assad's military operations, can no longer use Syrian territory as a logistical center to stock its arsenal.

Notwithstanding the clear benefits of the regime's departure and the potential strategic watershed moment, the picture is not all rosy. Post-Assad Syria faces enormous challenges, and it is far from certain its nascent president Mohammed Al Sharaa' will succeed in transforming Syria into a functional, stable, and successful state. At the same time, notwithstanding a relatively positive first five months leading Syria, questions persist about what kind of Syria Al Sharaa' envisions.

What is Al Sharaa'?

Ahmed al Sharaa's biography is by now familiar. Previously a Salafi jihadist and member of Al Qaeda in Iraq, Al Sharaa'—then known by his *nom de guerre* Abu Mohammed al Julani—was incarcerated by US forces from 2006 to 2011. Later in Syria, he served as leader of the terrorist organizations Jebhat al Nusra, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and was designated as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in 2013. Along the way, Julani killed Iraqis, Syrians, and perhaps Americans.

Julani broke with Al Qaeda in 2016. In Idlib province where Julani's HTS governed for eight years prior to the fall of Assad, Julani seemed to pursue a more tolerant brand of Islamist rule. Not only did Julani fight both ISIS and Al Qaeda, he pledged not to support foreign terrorist operations. Under Julani, the administration in Idlib ended the implementation of *hudud* punishments associated with Islamic law. Moral policing in Idlib likewise ceased in 2021. To be sure, during this period, there were reports of human rights abuses and little patience for popular dissent, but HTS provided adequate services to the local population through what some scholars have described as a technocratic civilian administration.

Since coming to power, Al Sharaa' has said a lot of the right things. He has discussed the need for an inclusive and transparent government, a popular political process to inform the new constitution, and has spoken about women's rights and human rights. He has also said that *sharia* (Islamic) law restrictions would not be imposed on minorities. So far, there is no forced hijab for women, and alcoholic beverages can still be found in Damascus bars.

Yet concerns about the treatment of minorities, and governance remain. Syria's temporary constitution ratified by Al Sharaa' has been widely panned for its lack of inclusivity, absence of protections for minorities, and for its emphasis on executive powers. Some fear the document will reinforce Al Sharaa's burgeoning authoritarian tendencies. Others, including minorities, moderates, and secular groups, are also troubled by the constitution's designation of Islam as the main source of legislation. Still others point to Al Sharaa's nepotistic inclinations. To wit, in April, he appointed his brother Maher as general secretary of Syria's presidency; in May, he brought his businessman brother Hazem to Saudi Arabia as part of the official Syrian delegation to meet Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman.

While Sharaa' initially sought to assuage the concerns of Syria's Christian, Druze, and Kurdish communities, a series of violent sectarian and communal clashes with the new Government's forces and former regime elements have exacerbated fears among Syria's minorities. After former Assad regime elements targeted government security forces in March, armed militias supporting the new Government reportedly killed over 1600 Alawite civilians and armed opposition elements. Less than two months later, militants from the former regime clashed with the Druze communities in Jaramana and Sahnaya. The violence was sparked by a fabricated recording of a Druze sheikh cursing the Prophet Mohammed. At least 100 people were reportedly killed over two days of fighting.

Government associated militias—reportedly brimming with foreign fighters and unrepentant Salafi jihadists—remain a source of concern for Syrians and the United States. Al Sharaa’s initial incorporation of foreign jihadists—including an ethnic Albanian US-designated terrorist from North Macedonia, a Dagestani, an Egyptian, a Jordanian Palestinian, Tajiks, and Chinese Uyghurs—into key positions in Syria’s new military also raises questions about the future disposition of the military.

Along these lines, Syrian Kurds are also not reassured. The US Kurdish counter-ISIS partner force, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) entered into an agreement with Al Sharaa’ this past March to integrate into the Syrian military. In May, however, Al Sharaa’s government appointed Abu Hatem Shaqra as commander of the 86th division, responsible for much of North East Syria. Shaqra, a militiaman in the US designated terrorist organization Ahrar al Sharqiya, was implicated in the trafficking of Yazidi women and children in Iraq, as well in the execution of Syrian Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf. The appointment of Shaqra, whose militia perpetrated significant atrocities against Syrian Kurds, was not an assuring message of coexistence.

Policy Challenges

The new Government in Damascus faces a host of pressing problems. Social cohesion and communal relations have emerged as a significant challenge. Al Sharaa appears relatively tolerant and extremely pragmatic, yet his government is replete with Islamist ideologues who appear to have little regard for Syria’s ethnic-religious mosaic. The same goes for re-establishing a semblance of security. Large areas of Syrian territory remain outside the control of the central government, and segments of the population are reluctant to disarm and put themselves at the mercy of Islamist militias associated with the new government. It will be difficult for Al Sharaa’ to convince Syrian minorities of his government’s good intentions. It will be even more difficult to compel these communities to disarm by force.

An equally significant challenge for Syria is the economy. Today, over 90 percent of Syrians live below the poverty line, an estimated 30% of housing has been destroyed, and the state can provide only five hours a day of electricity in the capital Damascus. The combination of the 2011-2024 war and crippling sanctions imposed on the Assad regime, plus corruption and isolationism, severely constrained economic life in Syria. Al Sharaa’ faces the daunting prospect of rebuilding a devastated Syria while jumpstarting a lifeless economy.

Finally, ongoing robust Israeli military actions are complicating Al Sharaa’s efforts to re-establish control over the state. No doubt, the Government of Israel is concerned with the Islamist nature of the Al Sharaa’ regime, and has taken proactive measures—including occupying some Syrian territory and carrying out more than 700 airstrikes targeting individuals and installations—to mitigate the perceived threat. Recently reported direct talks between Israel and the Al Sharaa’ administration could start to alleviate mistrust, help avoid kinetic military activity, and mitigate toward a more normal relationship along the border.

The Initial US Approach

The Trump Administration initially viewed Al Sharaa' with great skepticism. In February, Deputy Assistant to the President and Director of Counterterrorism at the National Security Council Sebastian Gorka expressed doubts about Al Sharaa's apparent political transformation. "In my 24 years of studying jihadist movements," he told *Al Hurra*, "I have never seen a successful jihadist leader evolve into a democrat or embrace a representative government." The view, in short, was "once a jihadi, always a jihadi." Concerned that continued imposition of crippling US sanctions with no off-ramp would become a self-fulfilling prophecy, i.e., that abjuring from engagement would ensure the failure and subsequent radicalization of Syria, the Administration pivoted to a more nuanced approach.

In March, State Department Deputy Secretary of State for the Levant Natasha Franceschi delivered a memo to Syrian Foreign Minister Assad al-Shibani outlining US expectations of the new Government in Damascus.¹ For US sanctions to be lifted, Al Sharaa' would have to meet eight demands:

1. The formation of a professional, unified Syrian army with no foreign fighters in key command roles.
2. Full access to all chemical weapons facilities and associated infrastructure.
3. The establishment of a committee to investigate the fate of missing Americans, including Austin tice.
4. The repatriation of ISIS family members currently detained at Al-Hol camp, under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).
5. Sustained cooperation with the US-led international coalition in the fight against ISIS.
6. Authorization for the United States to conduct counterterrorism operations on Syrian territory targeting individuals it deems threats to national security.
7. A public declaration banning all Palestinian militias and political activities in Syria, accompanied by the deportation of their members in a bid to address Israeli security concerns.
8. A commitment to preventing Iranian military entrenchment in Syria and formally designating the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization.

Al Sharaa's government fulfilled some of these requests. Damascus committed to cooperating with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), and OPCW deployed a team to Syria in March. Syria is said to be working with Washington to investigate the whereabouts of Tice, and has helped repatriate other Americans in Syria. Al Sharaa's government is fighting ISIS, and reportedly has an ongoing productive liaison with US counterterrorism officers, exchanging information and interdicting threats. In January, Iranians were banned from travel to Syria. There are currently no direct flights between the capitals, and

¹ "Syria and the Eight American Demands: Diplomacy, Security, and a Shifting Balance," *The Syrian Observer*, April 21, 2025, <https://syrianobserver.com/foreign-actors/syria-and-the-eight-american-demands-diplomacy-security-and-a-shifting-balance.html>.

diplomatic relations have been frozen since Assad was deposed. Moreover, in April, Damascus arrested two senior officials of the US designated Palestinian terrorist organization Islamic Jihad. In May, *AFP* reported that leaders of several other Palestinian terrorist groups departed Syria after they were “harassed” by authorities and effectively banned from operating.

However, still other important US requests remain unsatisfied, chief among them the matter of foreign fighters (and US-designated terrorists) occupying key positions in the Syrian military. Nevertheless, the Administration’s policy of conditioned sanctions relief didn’t last long.

The New US Approach

During his trip to Riyadh, Trump met with Al Sharaa’, and—at the behest of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman—made the surprising announcement that the US would lift sanctions to “give Syria a chance.” The May 13 pronouncement suspended, at least temporarily, a raft of US sanctions, some of which had been in place since 1979.

Trump’s sudden reversal in policy was reminiscent of his December 2018 decision—also after a phone call with Erdogan—to withdraw 1000 US troops busy fighting ISIS from Eastern Syria. Only 200 soldiers eventually redeployed, but the abrupt change in course has resonant similarities. In both cases, senior administration officials reportedly were not informed prior to the announcement.

As Secretary of State Marco Rubio later explained, the change in course was necessary, as Syria was only weeks away from “potential collapse and a full-scale war of epic proportions.” While the secretary’s rationale may have been a bit hyperbolic, he was essentially correct. Absent some sanctions relief, the prospects for a stable successful Syria were bleak.

The Administration is now lifting some sanctions—such as the Cesar Act measures—by issuing waivers and exemptions. Absent congressional action, however, these sanctions are suspended for just 180 days at a time. While the decision will have some positive impact—just days ago, Qatar announced a \$7 billion deal to develop power plants in the energy-starved state—the limited length of the suspension—and the prospect of re-imposition—may disincentivize larger and longer-term private investments in Syria.

At the same time, the Administration has pared down its requests of Al Sharaa’ from 8 to 5 demands. These include 1) joining the Abraham accords with Israel; 2) expelling all foreign terrorists; 3) deporting Palestinian terrorist groups from Syria; 4) assisting the US to prevent the resurgence of ISIS, and; 5) assuming responsibility for managing ISIS detention centers.

These are reasonable expectations of Al Sharaa’, to be sure. With the sanctions lifted, however, Washington will have less leverage going forward to press for the requests’ implementation. And it will be more unpalatable for the Administration to re-impose sanctions should the Al Sharaa’ government fail to comply with US requests.

Policy Recommendations

Time will tell whether suspending the sanctions was the right decision. A gradual process may have had more success at shaping the new Government over time. Or perhaps economic pressures would have scuttled Al Sharaa's already improbable attempt to stabilize a fractious and scarred Syria. No doubt, Al Sharaa' is a mixed bag, yet Syria remains a pivotal state, and its trajectory matters greatly to Washington and its regional partners.

The Administration's new Syria envoy Tom Barrack recently re-tweeted a line from President Trump's May 13 Riyadh address. "Gone are the days when Western interventionists would fly to the Middle East and give lectures on how to live, and how to govern your own affairs," Trump said. Fair enough. But if post-Assad Syria mistreats its minorities and/or empowers Salafi jihadists in the ranks of the military, millions of Syrian refugees won't return home, and there is a risk that Syria could revert to its former self—a source of regional instability, with negative implications for US partners Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. The same is true of Al Sharaa's obligation to fight ISIS. Syria should govern its own affairs, but what happens in Syria doesn't necessarily stay in Syria.

Washington need not "lecture" the new Syrian Government. But it should engage with Damascus more frequently and systematically, encouraging Syria to live up to its commitments. As the Trump Administration contends with Syria in transition, it would be helpful to keep the following points in mind:

Continue to Cooperate on ISIS: ISIS sees Al Sharaa's Islamist government as an "apostate regime." Last week, the group attacked the Syrian military and its affiliated forces twice. Al Sharaa' is cooperating with Washington to confront the ISIS challenge, but he may need additional US assistance to contain the threat. While there is still some skepticism in Washington about Al Sharaa', it will be necessary to invest in Syria's C/T capabilities and nurture a robust bilateral liaison relationship. The Administration must also resist its inclination to withdraw US forces from Syria.

Mistrust and verify: Washington has had sanctions on Syria since 1979 for a reason. The Assad regime was a human rights abusing, terrorist supporting, WMD state. Al Sharaa' and Syria deserve a chance, but the new Syria—like the former Syria—should be held accountable for its actions. Progress on performance vis-à-vis the Administration's requests should be benchmarked and notional timelines set. Should Al Sharaa' persist in staffing its government and military with terrorists, for example, the Administration should be prepared to re-implement sanctions. This is not meddling, it is US law.

Downgrade expectations on governance: Some had high-hopes that post-Assad Syria would emerge as a Jeffersonian democracy. It should by now be clear that this is not going to happen. This shouldn't come as a surprise. Aside from Israel, there isn't a single democratic government in the Middle East. Best-case scenario, Syria will emerge somewhere on the spectrum of authoritarian states that govern the region. Still, Washington has an interest in the protection of

minorities, a modicum of human rights, and some kind of representation of Syria's ethnic and religious communities. The US has learned the hard way that Salafi and/or Wahabi influence on the local education system can result in dangerous spillover.

Focus on foreign fighters: Assad would not likely have been deposed without the participation of terrorist militiamen and foreign fighters. Now they are in the system, and Al Sharaa' has more pressing short term objectives than routing them out. Recent reports indicate the Administration has consented to Al Sharaa's integration of these foreign forces into the military. While expedient, it is difficult to imagine that this decision won't have problematic long-term implications for discipline, accountability, and public confidence. At a minimum, a new Syrian Army stacked with jihadis will be reluctant to consent to Trump's goal of Syria-Israel peace. It will also prevent the kind of national reconciliation required for Syrian society to heal from the war and decades of oppression. Integrating these fighters defers rather than solves Al Sharaa's dilemma.

Ascertain Israel's strategy: In the aftermath of October 7, Israel is a lot more proactive in its self-defense. This is currently playing out in Syria, where Israel is occupying swaths of territory, targeting government forces south of Damascus, and articulating a newfound interest in protecting minority communities—an inclination that Israel lacked during the entire 14 years of the Syrian civil war. Israel's concerns about Al Sharaa's intentions are understandable, but its current actions in Syria appear to be exacerbating instability, undermining what the US and its Gulf partners are working to achieve. Indeed, it is unclear what Israel's strategy is in Syria. The reported Israeli-Syrian talks could be helpful in building trust and scaling back some of Israel's more forward-leaning kinetic activities in Syria. No one should be asking Israel to return to the 2024 borders just yet, but the Administration should be asking some hard questions about what Jerusalem is hoping to accomplish in Syria, where the new government has repeatedly stated that it has "no problem with Israel."

Prevent spheres of military influence: One of the reasons why Israel is so active in Syria is that Turkey is active in Syria. Israel and Turkey are not friends, indeed they are hostiles. The Trump Administration reportedly believes that Israel and Turkey should carve Syria up into spheres of influence. Officials of these states recently met in Azerbaijan to come to some understandings about de-confliction. But Israel bordering on Turkey would seem to be a recipe for misunderstandings and heightened tensions. The Trump Administration should be engaging with Ankara and Jerusalem to minimize foreign intervention in Syria. More immediately, Washington should be pressing Israel and Turkey to establish a hotline to preempt unintentional escalation.

Manage competition: Along these lines, MbS and Erdogan are regional rivals, and rarely seem to agree on issues. Together they convinced Trump to lift sanctions on Syria. That's largely because both Turkey and Saudi want to play a bigger political role in the state. This competition will be healthy if both states contend to rebuild the devastated country. It could prove more problematic if Syria becomes a political battleground with Saudi, Turkey, and perhaps Qatar fighting for political influence over a vulnerable new government. Trump has said he wants "regional solutions," for the region's problems. US disinterest won't benefit long-term stability in Syria.

Keep the Russians out: Moscow helped Assad murder 500,000 civilians, so it wouldn't be surprising if the new Government of Syria is disinclined to strategically re-align with Russia. Already, Al Sharaa' has cancelled Syria's 2019 contract with the Russian firm STG Engineering to develop Tartus Port, and signed an \$800 million deal with Dubai Port World at the facility. This disinclination toward Moscow should be encouraged. The Trump Administration along with Washington's friends in the Gulf should incentivize Damascus to close Russia's naval and air force bases at Tartus and Himamim.

Recognize Shebaa Farms as Syrian territory: Damascus is indebted to the Trump Administration for lifting sanctions. Washington should seize the moment to ask Al Sharaa' to formally file for Syrian recognition of its sovereignty over the Shebaa Farms at the United Nations. Israel currently occupies this territory, which Hezbollah claims is Lebanese. Historic maps seem to tell a different story. If Shebaa is Syrian, it would dramatically simplify the delineation of the Lebanon-Israel border, bringing those two states closer to normal, if not peaceful, relations.

Full time Syria envoy: Tom Barrack may be an extremely capable individual. And he clearly has the President's trust. But Barrack is currently US Ambassador to Turkey—the point man on this critical and complicated bilateral relationship. Ambassador to Turkey is a full time job. So is the position of US envoy on Syria. Just ask former Trump Administration Syria envoy, Ambassador Jim Jeffrey. In the coming months and years, Syria will need a lot of attention. The Administration should consider whether one man can do two full-time jobs well, simultaneously.

Mr. LAWLER. Thank you, Mr. Schenker.
I now recognize Dr. Borshchevskaya for her opening statement.

STATEMENT OF ANNA BORSHCHEVSKAYA

Chairman Lawler, Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick, honorable members, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. With your permission, I am submitting my written testimony, and I am going to summarize it.

We now have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape the balance of power in the Middle East. Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship is over, but the window of opportunity it presents is going to close fast.

Russia seeks to replace our influence and remake the world order with itself at the center. Syria is and has been essential to that strategy. Nothing about the fall of Assad changes Moscow's overall plans and objectives, but it does give us a window of opportunity to foil Vladimir Putin's plans.

As Chairman Lawler said in his opening remarks, what happens in Syria tends to not stay in Syria. This is why we need to ensure Russia does not reestablish a foothold there. Knowing that, my testimony will now focus on several key issues of vital importance to the U.S.

First, the Eastern Mediterranean is crucial to Russia. That is why the goal of control there is consistent in centuries old for the Russian State. Make no mistake about it: this goal will outlast Vladimir Putin. It is part of how Moscow views its strategic positioning vis-a-vis the West.

Second, Assad is gone, and Russia may change tactics but not its strategic objectives. These tactics will focus on staying in Syria, on leveraging economic influence, and positioning Russia as a protector of minorities. Syria has been fundamental to Russia's success in leveraging its influence for the last decade across the Middle East. Russia retains this influence as it seeks to use it to undermine the United States. And if Moscow can navigate the new Syrian regime, the Kremlin can continue to exert influence.

Assuming the United States does not want to see its position weakened in the region—and I would suggest that that would be disastrous—the U.S. must ensure that Russia does not reestablish control in Syria.

To that end, the U.S. could utilize its influence through a carrot-and-stick approach to block Russia's ability to leverage power. The U.S. can achieve it through the following: first, by tapping into the strength of Ukrainians; facilitate greater ties with Syria and further empowering Ukrainians all across the Middle East and North Africa. In Syria, the U.S. can facilitate economic and diplomatic ties between the two countries, for example, by supporting Ukraine's wheat deliveries to Syria. And all across the MENA region, the U.S. can facilitate a push for Ukrainian technology, arms trade, and information.

Over the last 3 years, the Ukrainian military has integrated Western and post-Soviet military systems and made impressive innovations in the arms industry. And we saw an example of that most recently with Ukraine's drone attack on Russia this past weekend. We saw how creative, how powerful, that attack was. The

U.S. now has significant opportunity to partner with Ukraine to help transform and modernize Middle East states that have been traditional Russian client states.

Second, continual engagement with the Syrian Government—this engagement should include demonstration that if this government meets certain guideposts, it will be able to unlock aspects of a normalized relationship, which it desires.

And last, limiting Russia's resources through additional sanctions and tackling Russia's so-called ghost fleet of illicit oil tankers—as the United States and Europe ease or suspend sanctions against Syria, they must balance the need to help Syria recover with the need to block Russia's ability to profit from this recovery and use its economic tools to gain control. This could also include additional sanctions against Russia and entities that work with Russia and working with Turkey to crack down on the ghost fleet's legal violations and ecological threats.

I began my testimony by telling you that this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity. Let me reiterate here that this window is closing quickly. While we deliberate, Russia is strengthening its partnerships with Iran, China, and North Korea. Ensuring Russia does not reestablish a position in Syria is bigger than Syria, but it is also bigger than even Russia alone. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Borshchevskaya follows:]

Anna Borshchevskaya
Harold Grinspoon Senior Fellow
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Testimony submitted to the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa
June 5, 2025
After Assad: the Future of Syria

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

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

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

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

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

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

Longstanding competition for Syria

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Russia retains influence across the Middle East

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

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

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

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

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

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

Economic potential

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

³ "US, allies press UAE over Russia trade, sanctions," The Business Standard, May 1, 2024
<https://www.tbsnews.net/world/us-allies-press-uae-over-russia-trade-sanctions-840851>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Policy Recommendations

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

The US can achieve this through:

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

Here is what each of these recommendations entails.

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

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

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

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

Mr. LAWLER. Thank you, Dr. Borshchevskaya.
I know recognize Dr. Alterman for his opening statement.

STATEMENT OF JON B. ALTERMAN

Dr. ALTERMAN. Thank you, Chairman Lawler, Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick, distinguished members of the committee.

Let me start by expressing my condolences over the passing of Mr. Connolly. He and I met almost forty years ago when he was working for Senator Pell, and I was a very young aide for Senator Moynihan. Then, as now, I was in awe of his energy, his creativity, and his dedication to public service. His loss is a loss to this committee and to the country.

As Chairman Lawler said, Syria stands at a profound inflection point. Syrians celebrate having overthrown a brutal dictatorship, but they don't know whether they will live under another dictatorship, a theocracy, a democracy, or a failed State.

The questions before Congress are clear. How much should we care about Syria's future? How much can we shape it? And how should we proceed? On the first point, make no mistake: Syria is important to U.S. national security. It borders key U.S. allies Israel, Turkey, and Jordan. The country hosts an active Jihadi movement, and elements in the country have a long history of co-operation with Iran.

Syria's new leaders are overwhelmed by their domestic needs. They are navigating the wreckage of 50 years of dictatorship and 15 years of civil war. The economy has operated on bribery, government shakedowns, and Captagon drug sales for years. Infrastructure is crumbling, and there is a critical shortage of capable administrators.

The government also faces severe security dilemmas. Two of the most important are how to handle tens of thousands of Syrians who supported Assad's repression and how to manage Jihadi movements that include thousands of foreign fighters who have been important allies of Syria's new leaders.

Our impact in this context is going to be limited. We will have the most influence shaping Syria's external environment. Multiple countries have keen interests in Syria's future, and that creates some dangerous dynamics. Turkey sees itself as the dominant external actor, and it has worked closely with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Syria's current rulers. Turkey views Syrian reconstruction as both a security imperative and also a business opportunity.

Israel's interests sharply conflict with Turkey's. The Israeli leadership views Syria's new leaders as Jihadist or Jihadi-adjacent. After decades with Hezbollah threatening Israel from Lebanon, Israel is creating a buffer zone along Syria's border while working to weaken Islamist forces in the Syrian Government.

Iran seeks to maintain a foothold in a country where it invested tens of billions of dollars and maintained a strategic pathway to Hezbollah. And as Anna suggested, Russia similarly attempts to preserve its military bases and what's left of decades of influence and investment in Syria. Europe wants a peaceful Syria to stem the refugee flow, and the Gulf States want to keep Iran marginalized.

In this, Syria faces a critical danger beyond Jihadi capture. It could become a battleground for regional proxy wars, much like Lebanon was in the 1970's and 1980's. The growing hostility between Israel and Turkey, exacerbated by the Gaza war, poses particular risks. Countries may adopt unsavory allies to undermine each other in Syria, and the effects could spread regionally.

The Trump administration correctly relaxed sanctions, and it has given Syria's new government an opportunity to demonstrate its intentions and capacity. Still, that policy needs some adjustment.

First, while appointing a Syria envoy was constructive, choosing somebody who is simultaneously Ambassador to Turkey creates a conflict of interest that will make balancing between the regional players much harder. Ambassador Barrack's two jobs will be in conflict much of the time.

Second, we can't exert influence over allies and partners while they pour aid into Syria and we completely abstain. Humanitarian engagement here serves U.S. self-interests and isn't mere charity. Groups we oppose throughout the Middle East build grassroots support through social services, and we can't afford to be absent on the aid front.

We don't have to fully understand Ahmed al-Sharaa's motivations or trust his background, which includes troubling associations with some of the region's most vicious terrorists. Given our justified uncertainty, we should support him modestly, test him continuously, and ensure that our allies remain aligned with our policy.

I see great potential in Syria, as I think many of us do, and we also see Syria's risks. We need a policy that makes the former more likely and heads off the second. A modest conditional U.S. strategy anchored in coordination with allies and partners offers the best opportunity to advance U.S. interests.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Alterman follows:]



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

“After Assad: The Future of Syria”

Testimony by:

Dr. Jon B. Alterman

Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy

June 5, 2025

RHOB 2200

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. LAWLER. Thank you, Dr. Alterman.

I now recognize myself for 5 minutes of questioning.

Ms. Borshchevskaya, what are Russia's main objectives in Syria, and how has Assad's fall shaped its ability to achieve them?

Dr. BORSHCHEVSKAYA. At present, Russia is working very hard to ensure it retains a presence in Syria. At this stage, they are being relatively quiet, but they are watching. They are engaging in discussions with the current Syrian Government. And as I mentioned in my written remarks, Russia is trying to position itself as a protector of minorities.

The most striking example of that is one that I mentioned in my testimony where, according to Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Russia had given several thousand people refuge at Hmeimim during an outbreak of violence on the coast.

So I think, at this stage, Russia is taking a very cautious wait-and-see approach and slowly building ties and retaining influence. But make no mistake: this is toward a larger goal.

Mr. LAWLER. And how could the Kremlin use Syria's transition as an opportunity for financial gain? From that perspective, what guardrails need to be in place to prevent that from happening as we consider how best to lift Syria's complex and multifaceted sanctions regime?

Dr. BORSHCHEVSKAYA. So I think Russia's one big advantage Russia has is its trade relationships with the Gulf States. And as we are now seeing Gulf States looking to engage economically with Syria, given the fact that Russia has these strong relationships with these countries—so many Russian oligarchs have fled to the Gulf after Russia's invasion of Ukraine—Russia could find ways to cement ties through second and third parties, and that would be hard to trace. And that is something that we need to continuously monitor and look to block.

Mr. LAWLER. Mr. Schenker, how might the power vacuum in a post-Assad Syria be exploited by regional actors like Turkey?

Mr. SCHENKER. Thank you, Chairman. I think, as Jon Alterman said a few minutes ago, you do have Turkey that not only has relations with HTS but also with the Syrian National Army, other active militia in the country, and shares, frankly, their ideological, in a way, fellow travelers. They are Islamists, as well, the Government of Turkey. And I think there is opportunities for them to make inroads, influence, with the new government. They are a more trusted partner than many.

At the same time, on the ground, there's a real possibility—we see, right now, Qatar trying to get in. We see Saudi Arabia, as well, that frankly, in my view, is a better influence. But all these groups will be competing, and if they compete to see who can spend more to rebuild Syria, maybe that is a good thing. But if they compete for political influence, this could lead to corruption or further radicalization.

Mr. LAWLER. I think, to that end, Israel has sought to curb the growing Turkish influence in Syria. In recent months, Israel has become increasingly forward-leaning in terms of its willingness to take action within Syria's borders to contain the threat, though there have been efforts to have discussions between Israel and Turkey.

What can the U.S. do to make sure that both sides' interests are protected in this transition?

Mr. SCHENKER. Thank you. Certainly, I think that the United States should be working with Israel and Syria if they need our help, to get together and chat quietly to deconflict, to gain a better understanding of where each party is at, what their own concerns are.

You are not going to have a successful Syria, frankly, if you can't have Syrian Government forces operating south of Damascus. So what can be done to reassure Israel? And what can be done going forward to—on areas that are overlapping, where both al-Sharaa and Israel agree? ISIS has to be fought. Palestinian groups may have to be restrained. And these are things that both Israel and Syria can work on jointly.

Mr. LAWLER. Last, al-Sharaa has pledged to establish inclusive governance in Syria and certainly prevent the country from becoming a staging ground. I think, obviously, he has said a lot of the right things. That was a takeaway, certainly, from my conversations in Saudi Arabia and Israel and Jordan. But obviously, the proof will be in the pudding.

So what is your assessment of his willingness to deliver on these promises thus far, and does he have an effective command and control of the various militia troops on the ground?

Mr. SCHENKER. Those are two good questions but two separate questions. I think in terms of inclusive governance, the answer is this is very much a work in progress. They had committee meetings to talk about the constitution or the temporary constitution. These were widely panned, I think, by minority groups as being performative, that there wasn't a real inclusion—other types of things that have appeared that the nature of the Syrian State is defined as being a Muslim State in the constitution. This, to many in Syria, is viewed as exclusionary.

And the appointment of, certainly—let's—we can go beyond just minorities, so the inclusion of women in government is also, I think, striking how low it is.

As for command and control or control over these militias, the answer is no. I think he controls a very small part of Syria to date and is even working to incorporate in an effective manner the SDF, the Kurdish U.S.-backed counterterrorism partner. This, too, I think, is a challenge, if for no other reason that al-Sharaa himself has appointed Jihadi to be in charge of Hasakah, who has perpetrated atrocities against Kurds before.

Mr. LAWLER. Thank you.

I now recognize Ranking Member Cherrilus-McCormick for 5 minutes.

Mrs. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you so much, and thank you for your testimony. Being actively participating in the recovery and reform of Syria is top line for us to make sure that Syria has a real chance of succeeding. And I think our goal really is to be one of the strongest partners to Syria but also to be the most influential. And right now, we are competing with Russia, and we are aware that Russia now has two bases that it does have control over.

But I wanted to first start with the first half. How can we be successful in being the strongest partner to ensure we have stability? Do you believe that—I know we lifted the sanctions, but what are some of the reforms or strings that you would like to see attached when it comes to incentivizing them to make sure that they are actually moving in a forward movement that we can trust and believe in? Oh, that question is for Dr. Alterman. Well, actually, first—I was actually going to ask it to all you guys, but I will start with you.

Dr. ALTERMAN. Thank you. I think, first, we are all friends from many years ago, and I think we also fundamentally agree on many of the issues in Syria, as many of you do.

Look. I think the way we become a force multiplier is partly we are active on the ground, but I think even more important is we have an ability to rally our partners and allies in a way that no other country does. As you have heard from several of us, there is a real challenge of Israel and Turkey mixing it up, but there are other parties, too.

And to me, there is partly an issue of what our aid should be, but I don't think we should spend a lot of time trying to create the perfect incentive, the perfect conditions, the perfect consequences of bad action. I think it is much more important that we make sure all of our friends and allies are rowing in the same direction. It is not at all clear to me that they will. It is not at all clear to me that they want to.

And to me, this is really—it is partly an aid issue, but I think more fundamentally, it is a diplomacy issue, and it is the administration speaking with one voice about some very complicated issues where I think the administration may not agree internally on all of the issues. But I think we have to speak with one voice, act with one hand, and persuade our allies and partners to join with us rather than undermine each other, which I think will really undermine the chances for recovery in Syria.

Mrs. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Well, you mentioned that we need to use all of our diplomatic tools. And right now, our tool kit has been diminished due to the cuts we have seen with USAID. So I wanted to narrow in. Are there any that you think are imperative for us to actually have some guardrails so we can say these need to be in place so we can help move them along in a positive direction?

Some of the responses we got when we were overseas also—there is an ambivalence about this new administration and government. So how can we put guardrails, if anybody has any suggestions? What needs to be incorporated to help that along? And I will open that up to you.

Mr. SCHENKER. Ranking Member, I think at a minimum we should be working on—you know, now that we have had these—suspension of sanction, you still won't see—what they need is really a huge flow of foreign direct investment, of—to build, actually, a financial life, right? There is no economic life in Syria to speak of.

And with the suspension and with the prospect of—after 180 days of reimposition of sanction, if performance is inadequate for some reason or another, this does not inspire confidence of investors. So this requires that we help the Government of Syria to help

themselves through banking reforms, through cleaning up their counterterrorism and financing, et cetera, so that we can start to—people can start to rely on banks, and they can actually do business. That is at a minimum.

But there are no guardrails, right? We are relying on one person here. This is key personnel. And he—it is remarkable, really, you know, the irony that we are relying on a U.S.-designated erstwhile terrorist to secure all these disparate factions of Syria in this broken society. So I think it is also important to be thinking about executive protection.

Mrs. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Well, my last question, if I can have a moment—I really wanted to get to the two bases which are under Russian control. Do you believe that Russia will be successful at maintaining control and influence over those bases?

Dr. BORSHCHEVSKAYA. Well, I think that remains to be seen, but I think Russia has a real chance in maintaining a nominal degree of control. And that is very important because that is Russia's ability to project power into multiple directions, into NATO's southern flank, into the Middle East, and into Africa.

And beyond that, if I may, to your earlier question about what can we do, I agree with David. The reality is there are no guardrails. But I think we could aim to demonstrate that we are committed to Syria and that we are going to be consistent.

Russia came into Syria 10 years ago at a time when there was a vacuum. And any vacuum that there is, Russia is going to fill. So I think if we can demonstrate a consistency in interest—because one of the biggest problems that many of our partners have with us is that we are inconsistent. We say one thing, and then we change policies. Sometimes we don't know what the policy is.

And if we can demonstrate that we are committed, that this is important for us, and that we are willing to do what it takes, be it, as David described, through helping Syria navigate banking reform but also empowering other actors who are our partners in Syria—essentially, filling in the need that otherwise Russia would fill—I think that would be an important step forward.

Mrs. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you.

Mr. LAWLER. Thank you, Ranking Member.

I now recognize the gentleman from South Carolina, Representative Wilson, for 5 minutes.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much, Chairman Lawler. And I want to say amen to your opening comments—additionally, how important this hearing is. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

All the members are here, which is outstanding. And Ryan Zinke has just joined us all the way from Montana. And then I'm really grateful that we have Congressman Cory Mills here, who actually was in Damascus last month to support the people of Syria.

So we are just so grateful for what we see as a historic decision by President Donald Trump to lift all sanctions on Syria. I believe it was a masterstroke that has the potential to lead to a complete realignment of the Middle East with stability, peace, and prosperity for all the people.

It is particularly important to me because last November, I had the distinction and honor of being identified by the dictator Bashar al-Assad as an enemy of the State. I take that as a great honor.

Three weeks later, he fled to Moscow, where he should be, with war criminal Putin. What a great team they are.

But again, it is so exciting to me, the people of Syria standing up for freedom and democracy. In one move, President Trump has boxed out China from the whole of the Arab world. He has additionally provided for helping expel Russian bases which are logistics for the Russians, for war criminal Putin, maintaining dictatorships in Africa. He has also prevented the Iranian regime from resurgence and taken a major step to put pressure on ISIS.

As Secretary of State Marco Rubio testified to the committee a few weeks ago, it is important to immediately lift the sanctions. And that has truly been done. I also appreciate that the Syrian Government has limited the activities of the Russian bases. And at the same time, though, we need to do more to completely expel the Russians.

The new Syrian authorities should remember war criminal Putin's massive crimes of mass murder in Aleppo. This also led, with the mass murder, to historically unprecedented dislocation of over half the people of Syria from their homes, their mosques, their schools, their businesses, their churches—nearly 12 million people. In modern times, it is inconceivable that so many millions could lose everything they have, and half a million people were murdered.

Turkey and Jordan have been so appreciated for securing millions in refugee camps. And with that in mind, Dr. Borshchevskaya, you have done great with your identification of how to remove the Russian bases. And I would like to know what our other colleagues, Dr. Schenker and Dr. Alterman—how can we help them remove these bases?

Mr. SCHENKER. Well, I'll give a first crack at that. I think the Government of Syria is disinclined toward Russia and Iran for the reasons that you mentioned. Russia and Iran helped the Assad regime kill half a million Syrians in what resembles a genocide and to force 12 million Syrians into exile in something that resembles ethnic cleansing. And so they are disinclined.

And we have seen already that the Government of Syria, the Sharaa government, has canceled contracts with STG Engineering, a Russian engineering firm that was developing Tartus' port, the civilian port in Tartus, and signed an \$800 million with Dubai Port World from the Emirates. This is a positive step, but this is going to require, I think, ongoing diplomatic engagement.

Iran also—there is no direct flights right now. The ties are not great. I think they are wary, and they keep on intercepting and interdicting Hezbollah weapons that Iran is sending into Syria to traverse into Lebanon. So they are doing the work, but I think they need be pushed over the finish line. And they are going to need something eventually to fill that vacuum, to replace Russia.

Dr. ALTERMAN. Thank you, Congressman.

If I may, I think to add to what David said, and to underline it in some ways, this persistent attraction of Russia is if the Government of Syria feels it may need a veto on the Security Council. And the Russians are so unscrupulous that even after contributing to the death of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, I think they are

willing to execute their veto for a partner that does something for them.

And I think the Sharaa government, at this point, may not want to abandon that option. The more secure they feel that things are moving in the right direction, the less they feel they need somebody to veto things for them, I think the less attractive the Russians are because on many levels—commercial, military, and so on—the Russians aren't a very attractive partner.

Mr. WILSON. Well, I hope they say that America, Saudi Arabia, Tokyo, Jordan, Qatar, UAE are much better partners than war criminal Putin.

I yield back.

Mr. LAWLER. Thank you, Representative Wilson.

I now recognize the gentleman from California, Representative Sherman, for 5 minutes.

Mr. SHERMAN. President Trump is a tough negotiator when he is dealing with Americans or Canadians. He has eliminated the vast majority of our sanctions, and we still don't have a pledge that he will be—that the Russian bases will be eliminated.

So you have one country that did not support Assad in any way, that does not have military bases in Syria—the side that was bombing the current government's forces retains those bases. Now, we have acquiesced in 3,500 foreign Jihadis fighters being, quote, “integrated” into the military. This is a force that could be, to the extent they have any ideological control, pulling Sharaa in the wrong direction.

It is argued that abandoning those forces would also be a problem. These 3,500—what portion of the total foreign fighters are the 3,500 that are now being integrated? Is it substantially all, or—

Mr. SCHENKER. Yes, the reports suggest that it is the vast majority of them. Of course, there were earlier reports that al-Sharaa had given key posts to—and senior-level posts within the Ministry of Defense, and the military, about a dozen—

Mr. SHERMAN. Are those reports accurate?

Mr. SCHENKER. Yes. The earlier reports about the dozen, yes.

Mr. SHERMAN. So it is one thing to us to acquiesce and them joining the military because you gotta do something with them, perhaps. But the idea of giving them key posts seems extreme. And I guess the question is, have we surrendered our sanctions regime in return for sufficient controls on the foreign fighters, for sufficient controls on Russia and its bases?

I was here when Obama was incredibly concerned about the use of chemical weapons by Assad. We took the Chemical Warfare Treaty seriously. Has this new regime disposed of any stockpiles of chemical weapons and the ability to create those weapons?

Mr. SCHENKER. Should I go again?

Mr. SHERMAN. Yes. Go ahead.

Mr. SCHENKER. Thanks. As for the foreign fighters, I don't know what the administration has requested. Initially, they had requested that these people be expelled. Obviously—

Mr. SHERMAN. But they have acquiesced officially, more or less, in the integration.

Mr. SCHENKER. Correct.

Mr. SHERMAN. And as a de facto matter, they've acquiesced in these foreign fighters getting important government positions. But if you could talk a little bit about the chemical weapons and the capacity to manufacture——

Mr. SCHENKER. Yes. These were in the initial Trump administration requests of the Government of Syria, and in fact, this is one of the good news stories. The Syrians have provided access to the chemical weapons watchdog, and then just today, the IAEA was in Syria. They went out to Deir ez-Zor to look at Kibar and the remains of that and four other nuclear facilities.

Mr. SHERMAN. So at least we are looking, and I assume that we have at least a commitment to dispose of these weapons of mass destruction.

Dr. ALTERMAN. Congressman, one of the things that is most remarkable about Ahmed al-Sharaa is he has managed to convince all kinds of pretty difficult people that he is fundamentally on their side. Whether it was Zarqawi, whether it is Ayman Zawahiri or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi his secret.

Mr. SHERMAN. And Donald Trump.

Dr. ALTERMAN. Well, but his secret ability seems to be that he can convince people that, fundamentally, he is with them. I think he does it within his government. He does it outside of his government.

Mr. SHERMAN. I want to sneak in one more question. Do we foresee a Syria in which the Kurds, the Druze, and others will have effective control of their area, cooperate with the government but still have autonomy and their own military presence? Or do we see the government in Damascus trying to, in effect, conquer and disarm the Druze and the Kurds?

Dr. ALTERMAN. Well, I think the Kurds are an especially difficult case and this regard. But as I said, this is why I think it is so important that we not have Syria turn into a set of regional proxy wars, because if that happens, that will endanger all of the minority communities and the stability and the territorial integrity of the country.

Mr. SHERMAN. So, certainly, we should have gotten clearer guarantees for the Christian community before we eliminate the sanctions. Of course, we can restore those sanctions at any time. But it appears as if we have given them almost everything they want and gotten an—you know, aside from the chemical weapons, which of course is their obligation anyway, we have gotten very few concessions.

I yield back.

Mr. LAWLER. Thank you, Representative Sherman.

I now recognize Representative Kean for 5 minutes.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you to our distinguished witnesses for being here today. As we evaluate the State of Syria following the fall of the dictator Bashar al-Assad, we must ensure that the U.S. continues to support our allies in the region. This includes promoting peace and cooperation between Syria and Israel.

Dr. Borshchevskaya, recent reports cite direct meetings between Israel and Syria in efforts to ease tensions between the two nations. What actions should the U.S. Government be taking to en-

courage Syria to continue to pursue peace with our important allies in Israel?

Dr. BORSHCHEVSKAYA. I think the United States can continue to stay engaged diplomatically and signal to Israel that a stable Syria is—a stable, whole Syria, a Syria that is not weak and divided—is also in Israel’s interest. I think also, to a certain extent, engagement with Azerbaijan—that has facilitated meetings between Israel and Turkey on the conflict between Turkey and Israel that David had mentioned in his opening remarks.

So I think staying engaged diplomatically would be very important, and it would be, again, demonstrating consistency in our commitment to Syria.

Mr. KEAN. Well, are—Dr. Alterman, you mentioned in your testimony—and this is—I would like to say this for the other two panelists as well—what—how to test the current regime in Syria that—what other steps are necessary—and I may have this for the entire panel—to test that they’re actually going through on the commitments?

Dr. ALTERMAN. Thank you, Congressman. I think we need lots of tests. I think we have to test them continually on how they treat various minority communities, how they treat Jihadis. And the Jihadi issue is difficult because, as we know in Iraq, firing all the members of the Ba’ath Party helped create an insurgency in Iraq. You don’t want to have that. You have a problem with the Jihadis; their countries don’t want them back.

So is there some way where you can separate people who can be reformed from people who can’t be? I think this is something we should be working with allies and partners to continually evaluate. I don’t think there is any test that is going to make me feel comfortable and feel we can start ignoring things in Syria. I think what we have to do is we have to work with Syrians and work with others to come up with a wide array of things, a constant set of report cards, and talk about where this is going. Where do we have to nudge it? And where are things encouraging and we want to encourage them further?

Mr. KEAN. Israel’s safety and security is paramount. So how do we ensure that—you know, Dr.—excuse me, Mr. Schenker, what steps has the U.S. taken to support counterterrorism efforts in the Middle East?

Mr. SCHENKER. Well, there is an ongoing liaison, Congressman, between Israel—sorry, between Syria and the United States. There is exchange of information. And Syria has acted on—against impending terrorist attacks.

We know earlier that al-Sharaa, back when he was Jolani, cooperated with the Turks in Idlib Province. So this type of ongoing intelligence—and this makes not only Syria safer from ISIS but also makes Israel safer.

At the same time, we now see what appears to be the beginnings of communications between the al-Sharaa administration and the Government of Israel. And they, too, can do some liaisons, some counterterrorism cooperation. And Israel can test Syria on this.

This is going to take some time to build trust, but this is a border—Israel already occupies swaths of Syrian territory right now. There have been—and just was, I think, this past week—a few

mortars fired toward Israel from what we believe are Palestinian groups. Israel says they are going to hold the al-Sharaa government responsible.

We will see going forward if they respond to information or if they expel Palestinian terrorist groups from Damascus. This is an open question. They have arrested some. But this is also an ongoing work in progress.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you.

I yield back.

Mr. LAWLER. Thank you, Representative Kean.

I now recognize Representative Mfume for 5 minutes.

Mr. MFUME. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

My thanks to the witnesses also. I don't want to be redundant, but there was something that caught my ear a moment ago.

Mr. Schenker, you described—and I hope I am adequately repeating this—the regime in Syria as being a disparate erstwhile group of U.S.-designated terrorists. You don't have to comment. I am just saying it caught my ear. Am I incorrect?

Mr. SCHENKER. Al-Sharaa. I described al-Sharaa——

Mr. MFUME. Al-Sharaa.

Mr. SCHENKER [continuing]. and the country being a disparate group of ethnic groups and religious groups. But al-Sharaa in particular is a——

Mr. MFUME. Yes.

Mr. MFUME. You know. Yes.

Mr. MFUME. So it is a sad situation. I mean, it is a scary situation, particularly from those of us who look abroad. I think this 180-day pause is a position and point of concern for a lot of people. I just want to be on the record and say I just don't trust Syria. I have not trusted them since they committed all sorts of heinous crimes against innocent people.

This Damascus government I am not convinced is any better than the government that they took down. I could be wrong and would love to be wrong. And I am not paranoid, but I think a little paranoia is good sometimes. In other words, I don't believe that Humpty Dumpty fell. I think he was pushed.

And in this instance, I just don't believe that the Syrian Government in Damascus is everything they say they are until they take some concrete steps so that the outside world and community will understand that they are correct. And I agree with the assumption that somebody made earlier that Russia would easily trade a veto to be able to get another partner. And the partner might want a veto so bad that they find themselves shaking hands.

It is all very, very kind of scary. But let me ask you, do you believe that the administration, our Secretary of State, and others have done enough to ensure that this current regime in Syria has not and will not re-create the same conditions that previously existed, especially in regards to the support of terrorist groups and the tamping down of human rights? I would just like to get your opinions on the record.

Let's start with A, Mr. Alterman. If we are looking for an order here, let's go alphabet.

Dr. ALTERMAN. Okay. I think this is a process and not an event, sir. I think this is going to be ongoing. It is going to take years.

I share all of your discomfort. I spoke to a friend who has been a journalist in the Middle East for decades. He spoke to Ahmed al-Sharaa, and he said, I spoke to him and got a sense that we are going to see not Bashar al-Assad again but Hafez al-Assad ascend again.

Hafez al-Assad—not his son, but certainly not a friend of the United States, certainly not a force for stability in the Middle East. Could we be going there? We could be going there. I don't think there is any policy where we just do the policy and we are done. I think this is going to be a process of years.

He will try to settle in what he—what his government—whether he will be in power and what his government will look like in 2 years', 5 years' time. I don't know. He doesn't know. It is quite possible that he will misjudge how to deal with radicals in his own midst. It is quite possible that he will fall prey to some sort of Israeli-Turkish differences.

I don't know how this is going to go, but I think we have to constantly be watchful for all the reasons you say—

Mr. MFUME. Paranoid.

Dr. ALTERMAN. Paranoid people have enemies, right?

Mr. MFUME. Yes, they do.

Dr. ALTERMAN. And there are a lot of enemies in Syria, and there is a lot of bad stuff that has happened in Syria and will happen in Syria.

Mr. MFUME. Okay. Let me just get a couple more responses in. Thank you very much for that. I appreciate it.

Dr. BORSHCHEVSKAYA. Sure. You know, I also share your concerns. And let me start by answering your question with the following. I was born in the Soviet Union. I remember when it fell apart. I was a child at the time, but I remember it very well. There was a sense of euphoria that Russia was going to transform into a liberal-style democracy. We saw what happened, and Russia went back to its authoritarian past.

So I share your concerns. I think the fact of the matter is—you know, to answer your question, it is very hard to know what there is to be done. Has the administration done enough? There is only so much we can do to look forward. We have to take it one step at a time.

We don't have a lot of leverage. And the fact that sanctions can be snapped back quickly, that there is this 180-degree window, that is an important leverage that we have. But the fact of the matter is there is not a whole lot beyond that.

I think—as I said in my opening remarks, I think that the most important thing we can do is to stay engaged and give consistent benchmarks and to demonstrate that we are going to hold this government responsible to those benchmarks.

Mr. MFUME. Thank you very much.

My time is expired. I think the key here is gradualism. That is how we proceed, not with giant steps, but little bitty steps that we measure daily, weekly, and monthly in this process.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back. Thank you.

Mr. LAWLER. Thank you, Representative.

I now recognize Representative Baumgartner for 5 minutes.

Mr. BAUMGARTNER. Well, thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you for this very important committee hearing.

Syria has a special place in my heart, not just for the immense geopolitical importance of this troubled part of the world, but roughly 30 years ago, my first trip to the Middle East was as a Kurd scholar to Syria and Jordan. And I spent a really meaningful summer in Damascus and Aleppo and saw, at the time, what I had hoped was going to be a world new possibility and opening right before the peace—what would eventually be a peace agreement with Jordan and Israel and so much potential in Syria, and certainly potential that has not been realized. In fact, it has gone much the other way these last 30 years.

I very vividly remember, when I was at the U.S. Embassy in Iraq during the surge, the challenge of foreign fighters coming across the border from Syria. And then, as Iranian influence grew throughout the region as the U.S. stepped back, we saw some of the consequences there.

I also appreciate that all three of you testified to the importance of deliberate, thoughtful, strategic action by the U.S., I think much in contrast to what we saw, particularly under the Obama administration, when we saw an offhand comment by John Kerry open the door for Russia to enter the region. We saw a red line by President Barack Obama then not enforced by the U.S. Government, and then a statement by President Obama that Russia entering Syria was going to be a quagmire for them, that it was all a mistake.

I would just ask, perhaps, you, Anna—and I will just call you Dr. Anna. When you are a Baumgartner, you honor sympathy for challenges on last names. But could you contrast or give some thoughts on U.S. Government policy in the last 15 years, kind of just haphazard—what I would call haphazard, but I would like to hear your comments—versus what we would like to see in a thoughtful strategy.

In the briefing document today, I saw a list of conditions from the State Department that they had put on the Government of Syria to sort of come into the union with the West and the U.S. And as I was looking, I thought it is a good list of conditions, but I also thought wouldn't it be helpful if we had a list of conditions—not the same conditions, but conditions for Syria's neighbors of behavior that we would like to see there?

Perhaps, specifically, what would we like to see from Turkey and Israel in addition to—I think it is a given that they would have a hotline to avoid a proxy war, but what would be one or two things we would like to see from each of Syria's neighbors with respect to Syria? But both—so some commentary on the haphazard nature, perhaps, and then what we would like to see from their neighbors.

Dr. BORSHCHEVSKAYA. Sure. Well, first, you know, the Obama administration saw Russia essentially as part of a solution rather than the problem as the ongoing Syria tragedy developed. And so, to me, what I highlighted over the course of my work is that Russia cannot be part of the solution. Putin had taken advantage of that perception.

These events that you refer to, such as the statement that Syria was going to be a quagmire for Russia, Secretary Kerry opening the door for Russia and so forth—there was this confusion about

what Russia was, what it could do, and therefore—and then the belief that Russia could help disarm Assad. Remember, this was Assad's biggest backer, who frankly created Assad's chemical weapons in the first place. He could not possibly disarm him.

So what I would like to see is more consistency and clarity that we need to compete with Russia. Russia cannot be part of a solution, especially not after helping Assad destroy this country, because our credibility is on the line at this point.

In terms of what we would like to see beyond the hotline, well, I would like to see more diplomatic engagement, more commitment to empowering other actors, like I mentioned, potentially such as Azerbaijan, who has already stepped into this role, but also looking—to take your question a little bit further beyond our partners—looking to create linkages between European and Middle East theaters.

That is why I highlighted the importance of empowering Ukrainians, tackling Russia's ghost fleet, looking at the bigger strategic picture, because that is how Russia is looking at it.

Mr. LAWLER. Thank you, Representative Baumgartner.

I now recognize the gentleman from Illinois, Mr. Schneider, for 5 minutes.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you, Mr. Lawler.

I want to thank the witnesses. I have so many questions. How do we help make sure that al-Sharaa succeeds? How do we protect minorities? How do we orient Syria toward our allies and away from enemies like Iran, but at the same time, how do we make sure allies like Turkey don't move the S-300's to Syria to get out of CAATSA? Things that we need to worry about.

But, Dr. Borshchevskaya, you talked about Russia and the Soviet Union, and I started thinking as I'm sitting here about history. The Soviet Union lasted 69 years. To understand where Russia goes after the Soviet Union, you have to understand where it was before and, you know, look back to the 800's.

Syria history goes back even farther, and you have more ethnic groups than you can count. When the civil war started 12, 13 years ago, I remember using—I guess it was 2011, 14 years ago—using a metaphor of a corkscrew and that there were so many different groups in there. And as countries around and even the U.S. got involved, we essentially tied ourselves to that corkscrew. And every time the corkscrew turned, it pulled us further and further in.

We didn't know what the outcome would be. Ultimately, finally, Assad left. Al-Sharaa rises to power. Those threats seem to have been cut in many ways, but we still are very much—as you all have said, we have interests in Syria, and not just our interests. We have interests and concerns with countries who are trying to stay in Syria: Russia, Iran, and others.

So my question is, given this narrow window of opportunity that you have talked about that we are looking at, the desire of Russia to make sure it maintains its access to the Eastern Mediterranean that is so critical for its view, China trying to make sure it has its play, Iran, et cetera, what do we need to do as the United States, most importantly—and I am just going to go down one, two, three from left to right. What does Congress need to do to make sure that we are protecting our interests, protecting our long-term hopes and

aspirations for a new region? I say this as the chair of the Abraham Accords Caucus. Syria is talking about being part of the Abraham Accords. And I will leave it at that.

So Dr. Alterman?

Dr. ALTERMAN. Thank you very much, Congressman. First, I think you are thinking about this in exactly the right way. If you think about who wants instability in Syria, it is the people we are most concerned about. It is the Iranians and the Russians who seek to exploit instability because they see Syria settling down as helping us and undermining them. I think that is partly why we need to work so closely with our partners and allies.

I was talking to a friend over the weekend and mentioned I was testifying. He said, "So no State Department witnesses?" I mean, I think one of the things Congress can do is you can engage with the administration—

Mr. SCHNEIDER. We would like to.

Dr. ALTERMAN [continuing]. and make sure—no, and make sure that they have worked out both where they are—and to say I am very concerned about Ambassador Barrack trying to play both the Turkey role and the Syria envoy role because it then becomes very hard to reassure the Israelis—

Mr. SCHNEIDER. And I want to give others a chance to respond, but I will say if you do everything half-assed, you do nothing well. And so I agree with you.

Dr. Borshchevskaya?

Dr. BORSHCHEVSKAYA. Sure, and I agree with Jon on what he just said. I mean, to add to that, I think Congress can make it clear that Syria is a priority, that it will highlight these issues on a regular basis; it will engage in conversations and monitor and look for potential points of leverage.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you.

Mr. Schenker?

Mr. SCHENKER. Yes. Thank you, Congressman. I actually agree with what Jon said about Tom Barrack. I have a section in my written testimony about this. I don't think he can do two jobs of one person simultaneously well, in addition to the conflicts of interest.

What I do say one of the things he can do—and I don't know if you have already done this, but you know how you have the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act. People who undermine the stability or countries who undermine the stability of Syria can also be sanctioned or otherwise treated differently. I mean, just an idea.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. I like that idea.

With my last few seconds, I will just make an observation. I mentioned the Soviet Union was 69 years. Assad family took power in 1971, 25 years after Syria was established as a State. We can think of those in long periods.

But just doing some research as I was sitting here, the Ottomans ruled Syria for 400 years. Before that, the Arabs ruled Syria for almost 900 years, the Byzantines for 300 years. The Romans were there. And that is just the modern history of Syria. It goes back ten of thousands of years.

I think if we are going to understand Syria, we need to understand the history of the different ethnic groups in the area. But it is also imperative that we understand the topography of the area, the importance of the Euphrates River running from the north—southeast—or south—yes, southeast, as well as the mountains running vertical from south to north, because to fail to understand that, we will fail and make mistakes with unintended consequences.

I yield back.

Mr. LAWLER. I now recognize Representative Zinke for 5 minutes.

Mr. ZINKE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to turn my attention to the PKK, which is a Marxist terrorist organization. I do think it was a mistake of this government to arm them because the enemy of our enemy is not necessarily our friend. And because of the Kurds, I think we made a mistake to think that all Kurds are the same, just like all Irish the same except the IRA.

Now, having said that, the Kurds, or the Syrian Government as it is, has said that they are disarmed. I would like your opinion on what that disarmament really means, and are they?

And, doctor, if you would go first—Dr. Anna.

Dr. BORSHCHEVSKAYA. Well, I mean, first, let me just say I think the announcement that the PKK was disarmed is historically important. When I think about the key PKK, I think about the fact that it was the Soviet Union that helped empower this organization in the first place. So I think, if it is in fact disbanded, it is a step in the right direction. I—

Mr. ZINKE. Do you think they are really disbanded?

Dr. BORSHCHEVSKAYA. So I don't have accurate information that they really have disbanded, and I think that it behooves us to continue monitoring this issue. But I don't have that information.

Mr. ZINKE. Dr. Alterman, your opinion?

Dr. ALTERMAN. I don't think they have decided what this all means yet. I am not sure the Turkish Government is confident what it all means yet. It is an opening, and it requires watchful waiting.

I agree with you on many of the threats, but I also think we shouldn't close the door on the possibility that this conflict is entering a very different phase than it has been in for many years.

Mr. ZINKE. And sir?

Mr. SCHENKER. I agree with Jon, Congressman. I think that this is a start. I think it is far from clear that the PKK has put down its weapons and all the people that were at one time adherents of the PKK—that they are finished.

Mr. ZINKE. So the ISIS individuals that are imprisoned—there are a number of them. The former PKK is guarding them. What should be our policy, other than sending them to El Salvador?

Mr. SCHENKER. Well, the policy has been, Congressman, the repatriation, ultimately, of these people to go back to the countries that they were from and that they would be responsible for them in those countries.

As you know, no country wants to take back former members of ISIS. It has been a very slow process. Iraq has taken back some. Other countries—Oman has taken back some people, I believe. Our

policy should be for the Government of Syria ultimately to be responsible for these camps.

Mr. ZINKE. Doctor, do you agree?

Dr. ALTERMAN. I once again agree with my old friend, David Schenker.

Mr. ZINKE. So how big of a threat are they if they were released into the population?

Mr. SCHENKER. I think you would see, Congressman, the immediate resurgence of ISIS in the area, absolutely.

Mr. ZINKE. I agree.

And doctor?

Dr. ALTERMAN. There is no question in my mind that some people can be reformed. There is also no question in my mind some people cannot be reformed, and you would see increased ISIS—there already is, of course, ISIS activity, and you would see more of it.

Mr. ZINKE. In the interest of time and letting my colleagues also give questions, I yield back.

Mr. LAWLER. Thank you, Representative Zinke.

I now recognize Representative Mills, the chairman of the Oversight Subcommittee, for 5 minutes.

Mr. MILLS. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Schenker, I wanted to go back to one of the things you talked about. You said that they want to show inclusivity, but nothing has been done yet. But my understanding is that you have the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, Hind Kabawat, who is Christian. You have Amjad Badr, who is the Minister of Agriculture, who is Druze. So would you like to kind of reState what you meant by that statement, just to be clear?

Mr. SCHENKER. Yes. Thank you, Congressman. I was talking about if you look at overall composition of the government between, for example, men and women, and also if you look at what these communities said after the constitutional meetings and the consultations about whether their inputs were appreciated, taken into consideration, incorporated into the draft documents, I think that there was a lot of complaints from the communities.

Mr. MILLS. Speaking on the documents, I mean, in 2025, under al-Sharaa, he signed an agreement with the Druze representatives from Sweida Province, which integrated the Druze into the entire State institutions. So this is obviously a very pivotal step, something that not even Assad or any of the others were willing to do.

And in talking about inclusivity, as you know, even some of our own allies are just now starting to incorporate women into ministries, Ambassadorial positions, et cetera, based on cultural understandings and nuances.

You also mentioned the IAEA, which is a very important part. But OPCW, who is actually the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, has been in there on multiple occasions inspecting every single one of the actual sites, and to include 22 sites just in the last week and a half and how they would actually look at safely—this is the key thing; people think that you can just go ahead and pick up these chemicals and just toss them out in the trash, and we are going to be good—but safely be able to dispose of this so they can't be utilized in the future.

We also talked about—and I agree with this. This is going to be one of those relationships that we have to not only be cautious of based on backgrounds and past experiences, but it is going to be a “trust but verify” relationship. And we know that very well in any conflict, post-conflict, areas.

But if we took the broad-brush approach that someone’s past therefore defines their future, we wouldn’t have alliances with Japan and Germany to this day. And so I think that we need to keep this in mind because what I have seen so far is the current administration there has not only partnered with Iraq CTS and the U.S. to help counter ISIS operations, they have not only continued to stop the illicit weapons transfers of Hashd al-Sha’bi and the Iranian regime-backed militia groups through Syria into Lebanon to be utilized to attack, but just today, 15 antitank guided missiles and 30 crates of heavy caliber ammunitions that was concealed by smugglers in a truck headed to Hezbollah was blocked and prevented from being able to be utilized against Israel.

So I say this to explain that not actually looking at a way to try and work with the Syrian people to get an inclusive, democratically elected, free Syrian Government only opens the door for our adversaries like Russia, who, when I spoke with President al-Sharaa, said that he already had a proposal on the table by Russia that they were demanding that be signed. And he refused because he said, “I would rather partner with the West and start developing our Nation.”

When he talked about Iran, he said that we have not only pushed Iran out, but we will never allow Syria to be a proxy State of Iran. They can have a diplomatic opening of their consulate or their embassy, but we will even limit the number of visas for Iranians to come here because we know their influence, operations, and their capabilities. This is a man who fought in combat on both the good side and the bad side. So he understands how these operations work.

So what would be a greater risk: not looking to work with Syria and make them an ally and help the regional stability and protect the great State of Israel, or to allow them to fall into the hands of the predatory manners of Russia and Iran and China?

Mr. SCHENKER. Congressman, I agree with you wholeheartedly. As I said earlier, the chemical weapons—the WMD, the IAEA, the counterterrorism cooperation—these are high points. I think there is some criticism on the inclusivity part, but I am all for working with this government. This is the only game in town, and it is our opportunity to lose. So we should be on the ground floor.

Mr. MILLS. And I think that not even allowing China into the palace, which is something that he has done, shows even a further desire to work with the West. I think that helping to establish good neighbors, as Robert Frost—the “Good fences make good neighbors” relationship with Israel—will protect our allies there.

I think that people understand that if you study the geopolitics of the Middle East, making sure Syria is stable will ensure that we can have a stable Middle East, which is President Trump’s America-first agenda and promise.

Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. With that, I yield back.

Mr. LAWLER. Thank you, Representative Mills. I echo your sentiments.

I want to thank the witnesses for their valuable testimony and the members for their questions. The members of the subcommittee may have some additional questions for the witnesses, and we will ask you to respond to these in writing. Pursuant to committee rules, all members may have 5 days to submit statements, questions, and extraneous materials for the record, subject to the length limitations.

Without objection, the committee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:32 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE HEARING RECORD



Chairman Brian Mast

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128**

**Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa
Michael Lawler (R-NY), Chairman**

June 3, 2025

Revised

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs to be held by the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa at 2:00 p.m. in Room 2200 of the Rayburn House Office Building. The hearing is available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>.

DATE: Thursday, June 5, 2025

TIME: 2:00 p.m.

LOCATION: 2200 RHOB

SUBJECT: After Assad: The Future of Syria

WITNESSES: The Honorable David Schenker
Taube Senior Fellow
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Dr. Anna Borshchevskaya
Harold Grinspoon Senior Fellow
Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Mr. Jon B. Alterman
Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy
Center for Strategic and International Studies

*NOTE: Witnesses may be added.

By Direction of the Chair

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202-226-8467 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
MINUTES OF MENA SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING

Day Thursday Date June 5, 2025 Room 2200 RHOB

Starting Time 14:10 Ending Time 15:32

Recesses ☐ (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____)

Presiding Member(s)

Chairman Lawler

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☒

Executive (closed) Session ☐

Televised ☒

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☒

Stenographic Record ☒

TITLE OF HEARING:

After Assad: The Future of Syria

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Attached

NON-COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Attached

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: *(List any statements submitted for the record.)*

Rep. French Hill

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

or

TIME ADJOURNED 15:32

Meg Wagner
Full Committee Hearing Coordinator

Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa
119th Congress

ATTENDANCE

Meeting on: After Assad: The Future of Syria

Date: June 5, 2025

[illegible]

FRENCH HILL
2ND DISTRICT, ARKANSAS
COMMITTEE ON FINANCIAL SERVICES
CHAIRMAN
HOUSE PERMANENT SELECT COMMITTEE
ON INTELLIGENCE



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The Honorable French Hill
Statement for the Record
House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa
U.S. House of Representatives
June 12, 2025

Chairman Lawler, Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit a Statement for the Record. I appreciate the chance to offer my insights on the topic of “After Assad: The Future of Syria.”

As the Co-Chair of the Friends of a Free, Stable, and Democratic Syria Caucus in the House of Representatives, I am an outspoken advocate for the Syrian people. Now that Bashar al-Assad and his regime have fallen, it is crucial to support the Syrian people as they decide their future—free of repression and sectarian violence.

As Syria works to establish a new government, I understand that many are skeptical. We have seen a relatively positive first several months under the interim government. However, nothing is guaranteed. Syria is currently working to build its future, which the interim government envisions as free of repression and sectarian conflict. Despite the progress made, Syria remains in a state of flux, with evolving geopolitical and security dynamics.

I recognize the fluid and changing landscape within Syria, particularly as Russia continues to undermine United States interests in the region. The United States has a strategic national security interest in strengthening diplomatic relations with the Syrian interim government. The United States also has a vital interest in supporting humanitarian efforts that will allow Syria to rebuild and stabilize itself in a way that aligns with the United States and our allies, rather than with our adversaries.

I applaud President Donald J. Trump for his historic decisions regarding United States policy on Syria, including the lifting of sanctions and the waiver of certain measures under the Caesar Act. It goes without saying that the actions of the Syrian interim government must be closely reviewed and monitored. The threat of renewed sanctions should always be available should conditions in Syria change. President Trump’s bold steps represent a significant shift in American engagement with Syria and open the path for renewed diplomacy, regional stability, and accountability. The United States has an opportunity to help Syria limit the influence of China, Russia, and Iran. We must also support Syria in preventing the resurgence of ISIS and other threats to both Syrian and American national security.

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 The Honorable Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick
 June 12, 2025
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I respectfully offer the following recommendations as the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa continues to examine Syrian stability and Syria's vital role in the region:

1. Promote Religious Freedom and Cultural Dialogue

The U.S. should support the Syrian interim government's efforts to enhance broader regional acceptance of religious diversity while countering the presence of radical groups backed by Iran and ISIS and ensuring that Syria belongs to all of its people. I welcome the re-engagement of Syrian Jews—some of whom have made multiple visits to Syria and met with interim government officials—which presents a unique opportunity to support religious freedom and cultural reconciliation. Their presence highlights the potential for religious minorities to play a role in rebuilding civil society and fostering pluralism in a post-conflict Syria.

2. Oppose Russian Influence in Syria

The Russian Federation has consistently acted to undermine United States interests in the region, often enabling the Assad regime's most egregious actions. It is essential that the United States prevents Moscow from cementing a permanent foothold in Syria. The presence of Russian bases in Syria undermines the stability of Syria itself. A Syria free from Russian interference aligns with both United States strategic and humanitarian goals.

3. Ensure Justice Through Accountability

Congress has been pivotal in supporting accountability and justice efforts in Syria. From FY2014 to FY2018, Congress authorized the use of funds appropriated in the annual State and Foreign Operations appropriations acts for programs that sought to “document, investigate, and prosecute human rights violations in Syria, including through transitional justice programs and support for nongovernmental organizations.” In addition, from FY2019 until FY2024, Congress authorized the use of funds appropriated in the annual State and Foreign Operations appropriations acts for “chemical weapons use investigations.”

As we move forward, preserving evidence of war crimes, including documentation of mass graves and eyewitness testimony, must remain a priority. Accountability is critical for long-term peace and healing. I urge the Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa to support ongoing efforts to safeguard these records and enable international justice mechanisms to prosecute crimes committed since 2011.

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4. **Support Efforts to Locate the Missing—Especially American Citizens**

Thousands remain missing in Syria, including American citizens. The United States must ensure that the Syrian interim government continues to assist American families looking for their loved ones, as well as the National Commission for Missing Persons continues to work with civil society to identify the thousands of missing persons and support existing direct engagement between Americans and the Head of the National Commission for Missing Persons.

5. **The Illicit Trafficking of Captagon**

Although Captagon remains a problem, I applaud the dismantling of the Assad regime's Captagon network. I urge the Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa and Congress to partner with the Trump Administration on strategies to prevent the production and distribution of the transnational drug Captagon. The interagency strategy dedicated to countering the Captagon trade, as established by the Captagon Act of 2022, should be fully utilized as a mechanism to help obtain success against this amphetamine. The United States should work with Syria to fully document the Assad regime's support, production and distribution of Captagon. Continuing to prevent the trade of Captagon will help keep Syria safe and stable.

Thank you for your consideration. I stand at the ready to work with the Subcommittee on matters related to Syria.