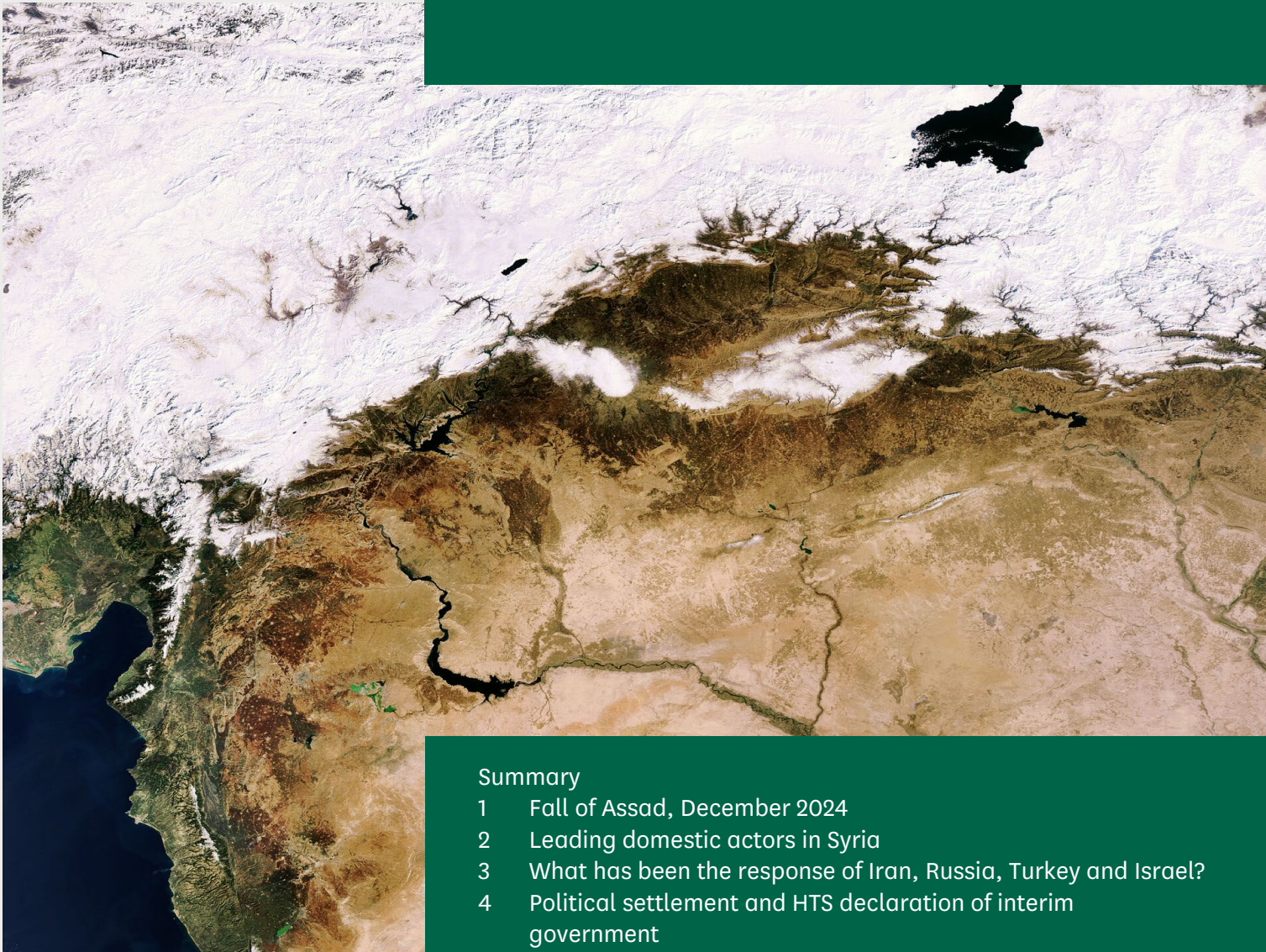


Research Briefing

13 March 2025

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Syria after Assad: Consequences and interim authorities 2025



Summary

- 1 Fall of Assad, December 2024
- 2 Leading domestic actors in Syria
- 3 What has been the response of Iran, Russia, Turkey and Israel?
- 4 Political settlement and HTS declaration of interim government
- 5 How have the UK, UN, US and EU responded to the interim government?
- 6 Islamic State/Daesh

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Summary

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

The announcement follows the [rapid collapse of the Assad government's military forces](#) in Syria in the wake of an offensive from [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#) and [other opposition groups](#), including the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA). The HTS-led offensive was launched in November 2024 and culminated in the capture of Damascus in early December.

In December [HTS announced a transitional government](#) and set out plans for a [national dialogue on Syria's](#) future. HTS remains [proscribed as a terrorist organisation](#) by the [UN](#), US, EU, [UK](#) and others. Opposition groups continue to vie for territorial control in Syria, with HTS and SNA taking areas controlled by the US-backed Kurdish led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Other violence, involving some [pro-Assad forces](#) and in [Alawite minority areas](#), has occurred.

In 2024-25 Israel also conducted [military actions targeting Syrian military assets](#) and chemical weapons facilities previously held by the Assad government. Israeli forces entered the [Syria-Israel buffer zone](#) and in 2025 said [its presence in some parts will be "indefinite"](#) in order to protect Israel.

This research briefing describes the key local and international actors in Syria and continuing violence and human rights concerns; the status of Syria's chemical weapons; the significance of Assad's fall to his allies Iran and Hezbollah and the attempts of Russia to retain its Syrian bases; Israeli actions in the Golan Heights; HTS plans for the interim government and constitutional talks; and the strength of Islamic State/Daesh. It also sets out UK, US and EU actions and statements, including the UK and EU lifting some sanctions in 2025 to support economic recovery.

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

What is the situation in Syria?

Bashar al-Assad has left Syria, and, according to the Russian Foreign Minister, [he has resigned the presidency](#). Several armed groups now wield control in different areas of Syria, with HTS dominant. Assad, HTS, SNA and SDF have all been accused of [human rights violations](#) during the conflict.

Humanitarian need in Syria remains high, with [an estimated 16.5 million people in need](#) in 2025. Ongoing violence between the SDF and SNA in north east Syria has led to the [displacement of around 1.1 million people](#) and [civilian and combatant casualties](#). In March, [extensive violence reportedly killed many](#) in fighting and acts of violence in minority Alawite areas. [Executions by HTS](#) of some pro-Assad forces and civilians was alleged. There has also been over a decade of [extensive damage to Syrian infrastructure](#), including schools and hospitals. Syria's neighbours have been seeking the [return of refugees](#).

In December 2024 HTS, which controls the largest part of Syria and the capital, declared the [establishment of a transitional government](#) and in January the [appointment of its leader as interim president](#). The transitional government is dominated by HTS and was [planned to be in place until 1 March](#). The interim government has begun a national dialogue which will [make recommendations on a new Syrian constitution](#).

HTS says all armed groups should dissolve and become part of a single armed force. While [some have agreed to this](#), Syria [remains a patchwork of armed groups](#). The SDF has not yet dissolved though [signed an agreement in principle to do so in 2025 in March](#). The SDF has been [calling for a ceasefire in the north east](#) as a prelude to a national dialogue.

What are international attitudes towards HTS?

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

The [UN Security Council](#), [UK](#), [US](#), [EU](#), and others consider it a terrorist group. All have said they will [judge HTS by its actions](#), not words and [they want it to protect civilians](#), minority groups and implement a peaceful transition. In December 2024 Prime Minister Keir Starmer said [it was "too early" to reconsider the proscription of HTS](#) as a terrorist organisation in the UK.

In 2025 the [United Kingdom](#) and [European Union](#) said they will amend their sanctions regimes to support economic reconstruction, if the transition makes sufficient progress. The UK [removed some designations in March 2025](#) (PDF), [following the EU in February](#). UK and EU changes focused on finance, energy and infrastructure. Sanctions include exemptions for humanitarian aid.

The [UK](#), as well as the [EU](#) and [US](#), have also sent officials to meet HTS leaders to discuss an inclusive political transition that protects human rights. Following the violence of March 2025, the UK Government said [HTS "must ensure the protection of all Syrians"](#) and "urgently establish a clear process and timeline for the next phase of the [political] transition".

What role do Turkey and Israel have?

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

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

Israel said its actions in 2024 were a [temporary move to pre-empt possible attacks](#) and reflected the withdrawal of Assad government forces from the zone. In 2025, [Israel said it would remain “indefinitely” at Mount Hermon](#) to ensure security for Israel and the Golan and wants the [demilitarisation of parts of southern Syria](#) with no HTS presence. The IDF also [carried out many strikes against chemical weapons and military facilities](#) in Syria in 2024 and 2025. Israel has previously [attacked Iranian and Hezbollah forces in Syria since 2013](#). It has also [announced an expansion of settlements](#) in the occupied Golan Heights.

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

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

What does Assad’s fall mean for the region?

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

To Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, the fall of Assad marks [a strategic defeat for Iran’s “axis of resistance”](#). This is a [network of armed and terrorist groups](#) Iran has developed, including Iraqi militias, Assad in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza and the Houthis in Yemen, to threaten Israel and

others. The loss of Assad cuts a significant land route from Iran to Lebanon and follows the weakening of Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran as military forces in their [conflicts with Israel in 2023-25](#).

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

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

How strong is Islamic State/Daesh?

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

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

What is the status of the political transition?

Since December, the HTS-declared interim government has issued an [amnesty for those conscripted](#) into Assad government forces, [dissolved the Syrian parliament](#) (dominated by Assad’s Baathist party), said it wants to [disarm and dissolve all non-state armed groups](#), and that it would [protect religious and other minorities](#). The SDF has called for an end to military operations to [facilitate national talks on Syria’s future](#).

The [US, UK, European Union](#) and UN have called for political negotiations under [UN Security Council Resolution \(UNSCR\) 2254 \(2015\)](#) (PDF). This calls for a new Syrian constitution to be negotiated and free and fair elections held.

The UK has also [issued a statement](#) alongside European partners, the US, Turkey, and the Arab Contact group on Syria (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt and the Arab League Secretary General). It said transitional authorities must respect human rights, provide basic services, destroy chemical weapons and ensure accountability for human rights violations.

1 Fall of Assad, December 2024

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

1.1 Background: The Syrian civil war, from 2011²

Timeline and statistics on the conflict

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

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

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

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

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

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

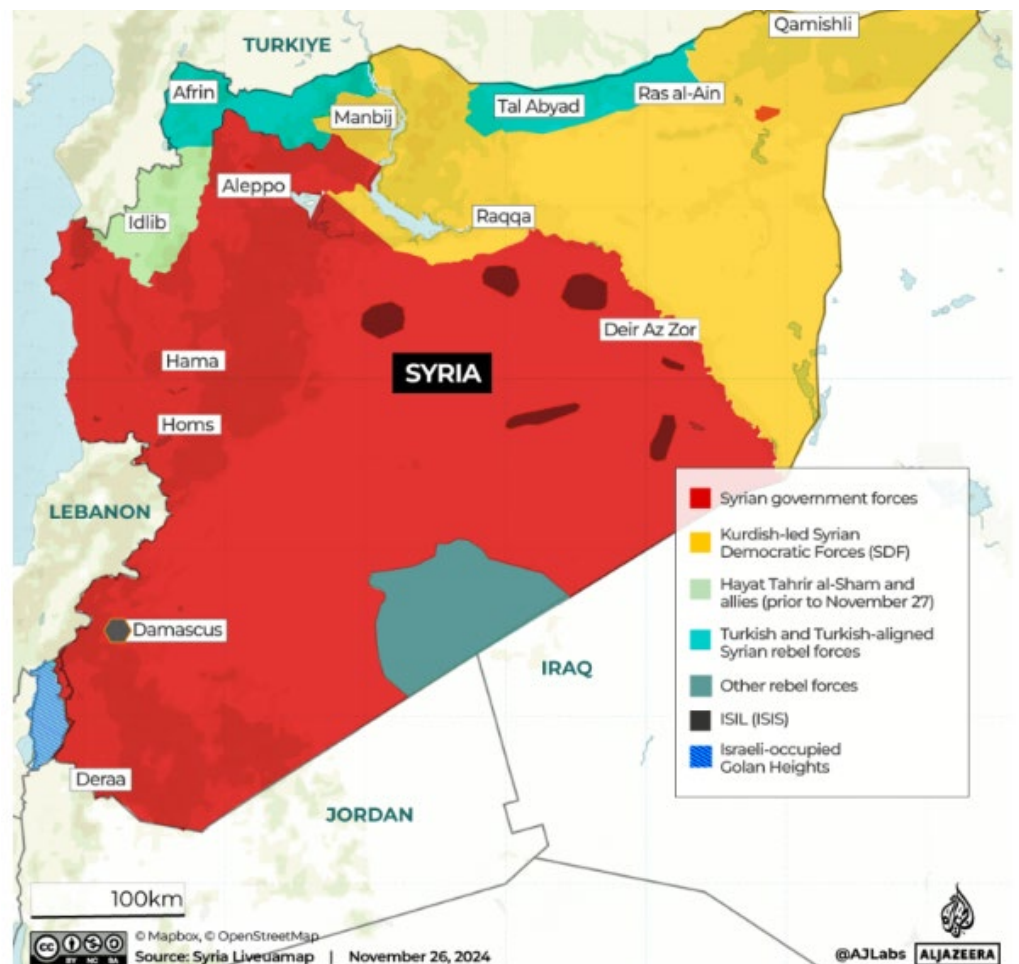
² This section sourced from Commons Library research briefing, [Syrian civil war: timeline, UK aid and statistics](#). See also [Syria back in the Arab League](#), for information on the six foreign actors.

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

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

Zones of control in Syria, November 2024

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



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

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

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

1.2

Fall of Assad, November/December 2024

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

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

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

There had also been recurrent protests in southern Syria since 2023.⁷

Timeline of opposition offensive

On 27 November 2024 Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, see section 2.2), one of the largest armed opposition groups in Syria (proscribed as a terrorist group by the UK Government), began an offensive from Idlib, in north-western Syria.⁸ A range of foreign fighters also claimed to participate alongside HTS.⁹

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

The Syrian National Army (SNA, see section 2.3), backed by Turkey and centred in northern Syria, also launched attacks. Some its attacks were focused on the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, see section 2.4), a Kurdish-led coalition group, elements of which the Turkish Government considers to be linked to terrorist groups active in Turkey.¹⁰

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁰ [Rebel groups attack Kurdish-held areas](#), FT, 2 December 2024; [Kurds' dream of self-rule under threat as Turkish-backed forces sweep across Syria](#), France 24, 12 December 2024

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

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

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

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

Further reading on Assad's collapse

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

1.3

What is the status of Syria's chemical weapons?

The government of Assad confirmed it had chemical weapons in 2012. There were reported and alleged chemical weapons attacks by Assad forces against the opposition in each year between 2013 and 2019. Some attacks were also perpetrated by non-Assad forces. The [Organisation for the](#)

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

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

[Prohibition of Chemical Weapons](#) (OPCW), which is the international body responsible for overseeing global efforts to eliminate chemical weapons, has confirmed the use of chemical weapons in several reports.¹³

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

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

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

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

In March, the Syrian interim Foreign Minister addressed the OPCW, stating that the interim authorities are committed to "destroy[ing] any remains of the chemical weapons programme developed under the Assad regime".²¹ The OPCW Director General also met the interim president in Damascus in February.²²

An OPCW delegation is expected to be deployed to Syria to inspect sites. Izumi Nakamitsu, UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, said in March

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

that while Syria had “started to take steps” on chemical weapons, the situation left by the Assad government remains “extremely worrying”.²³

The UK has announced £120,000 funding for OPCW’s work in Syria,²⁴ and reiterated that HTS must ensure all Syria’s chemical weapons are destroyed.²⁵

1.4

What is the humanitarian situation?

Minority ethnic and religious groups in Syria

There are many minority ethnic and religious groups in Syria:

Demographics

- Minority ethnic groups: Kurds constitute around 10% to 15% of the population (2 million). They are mostly concentrated in the north and northeast.
- Religious demographics: Sunni Muslims constitute 75% of the population, with Alawite Muslims (of which Assad was an adherent) 12%, other Muslims 2%, Christian denominations around 10% and Druze 3% to 4%.²⁶

Since Assad fled, monitors have raised concerns for Alawites, Christians and Shia Muslims and reported the establishment of armed groups seeking to target them. HTS says it will arrest those that incite sectarianism.²⁷

The UK Government has said it expects the interim Syrian authorities to uphold human rights and the rights of minority groups. It has raised the issue directly with the interim foreign minister and via the [UK Special Envoy for Syria](#).²⁸ Section 4.3 provides more on human rights and minority groups.

Human rights reports

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

- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), [The 2022 human rights and democracy report](#), July 2023

²³ UN, [Post-Assad Syria faces critical test over eliminating chemical weapons](#), 7 March 2025

²⁴ FCDO, [UK announces £50 million new support](#), 15 December 2024

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

²⁶ Minority Rights Group, [Syria](#), updated June 2019

²⁷ Washington Institute, [Alawites under threat in Syria?](#), 31 December 2024; [What future awaits Syria’s Alawite community?](#), Al Monitor, 11 January 2025; [New militant group in Syria targets Alawites, Assad loyalists](#), BBC Monitoring, 13 February 2025

²⁸ PQ 28019 [[Syria: human rights](#)], 12 February 2025; HL Deb, [10 February 2025](#), cc993-5

- US State Department, [Reports on human rights practices: Syria](#), 2024
- Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, [Human rights violations](#)
- Amnesty International, [Syria](#)
- Human Rights Watch, [Syria](#)

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

For 2025, the UN estimates there are 16.5 million people in need, out of a total population of 23.7 million. Most of those to be targeted for assistance are in areas previously held by opposition groups in Idlib and Aleppo provinces. An estimated 14.5 million people are food insecure and 14.4 million need water, sanitation and hygiene services.²⁹

Damage due to the conflict is extensive—between US\$8.7 billion and US\$11.4 billion for 14 assessed cities in 2022, according to the World Bank. Syria’s gross domestic product is estimated to have shrunk by between 54% and 85% since 2010. The cost of living for a family of five is also estimated to have risen up to seven-fold from 2022 to 2025. Inflation, food and fuel shortages, unemployment, and sanctions are among the challenges facing Syria.³⁰

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

1.5

What is the status of Syrian refugees?

In November 2024, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) recorded 4.8 million Syrian refugees and asylum seekers registered in the region, with the largest numbers in Turkey (2.9 million) and Lebanon (768,000).³¹ The governments of both Turkey and Lebanon have sought the return of Syria refugees, citing economic and other pressures. They reiterated these positions in 2024 and 2025.³² Many Syrian refugees in past surveys have expressed a desire to return, once conditions change.³³

²⁹ UNOCHA, [Syria: humanitarian response priorities](#), January 2025,

³⁰ [What are the economic challenges facing Syria?](#), BBC Monitoring, January 2025; [Syria’s economy: the devastation impact of war and sanctions](#), Reuters, 6 January 2025

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

³² [Turkey to work for return of Syrian migrants to return home safely \[...\]](#), Reuters, 9 December 2024; [Syria refugees don’t want to return, officials in Lebanon and Syria see exodus as opportunity](#), AP News, 9 November 2024; [Lebanese, Syrian leader discuss return of refugees](#), AA, 11 January 2025

³³ Center for Strategic and International Studies , [Don’t rush Syrian refugees return](#), 11 December 2024

There are also many Syrian refugees in Europe. Germany hosts the most, at around 1 million, followed by Austria, at 95,000. Since the fall of Assad, many European countries, including Germany, Austria, France, Greece, and the UK have said they will pause processing asylum applications while they assess the situation. There are around 30,000 Syrian refugees in the UK.³⁴

As of March 2025, UNHCR estimate that 571,000 Syrians have returned from abroad since January 2024, including 260,000 since November 2024. Around six million remain outside Syria.³⁵

Within Syria, seven million people are displaced. This includes 3.4 million in the northwest, which has seen fighting between the SDF and SNA. UNHCR estimate that 600,000 may seek to return home between March and September 2025, where they will need “housing, jobs, schools, hospitals, electricity and clean water”.³⁶

In December 2024 the head of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) said that “this is not the moment to talk about large-scale returns” as local communities in Syria “are just not ready to absorb the people who are displaced” and returns could “risk more disruptive impact”.³⁷

On 11 December, the Home Secretary Yvette Cooper told the Commons that:

many claims for asylum relate to the Assad regime, which is clearly not in place now. It would therefore not be appropriate to grant asylum decisions on those cases in the current circumstances. We need to monitor the evolving situation so that we can get new country guidance in place and take those decisions, but we will do that in a sensible and serious way, which is about getting the asylum and immigration systems back under control.³⁸

In January 2025 the UK Government confirmed that decisions on Syrian asylum claims remained paused as Home Office guidance is reviewed but people from Syria remain eligible to apply.³⁹

UNHCR has said “the suspension of processing of asylum applications from Syrians is acceptable” in the context of conditions of December 2024, “as long as people can apply for asylum” and lodge asylum applications. The agency said Syrian refugees must be allowed to make voluntary decisions on whether to return.⁴⁰

³⁴ [Syrian asylum seekers in limbo \[...\]](#), BBC News, 9 December 2024

³⁵ UNHCR, [Returning Syrians filled with hope despite challenges ahead](#), 3 February 2025; UN, [Up to one million people plan to return home in desperation](#), 7 March 2025

³⁶ UN, [Up to one million people plan to return home in desperation](#), 7 March 2025

³⁷ [2 journalists working for Kurdish media killed \[...\]](#), The Independent, 20 December 2024

³⁸ HC Deb, [11 December 2024](#), c903

³⁹ HL Deb, [29 January 2025](#), cc254-5

⁴⁰ UNHCR, [Comment on asylum processing suspension and returns](#), 10 December 2024

Further reading on Syrian refugees

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

2

Leading domestic actors in Syria

This section looks at the key domestic actors in Syria, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Sections 4 and 5 discuss the interim government declared by HTS and the response of the UK, EU and US to it. This includes discussion on potential sanctions relief and expectations HTS protects human rights.

Further reading on domestic actors in Syria

- Washington Institute, [How HTS landed on the US terrorist lists](#), 17 December 2024
- New York Times, [Why America's Kurdish allies are under threat](#), 16 December 2024
- International Crisis Group, [Priorities after Assad's fall](#), 12 December 2024
- Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, [Domestic and regional impact of the political earthquake in Syria](#), 9 December 2024
- Royal United Services Institute, [Fall of Bashar al-Assad and Syria's unfinished business](#), 9 December 2024
- Italian Institute for International and Political Studies, [The end of Assad: a new chapter in Syrian history](#), 8 December 2024

2.1

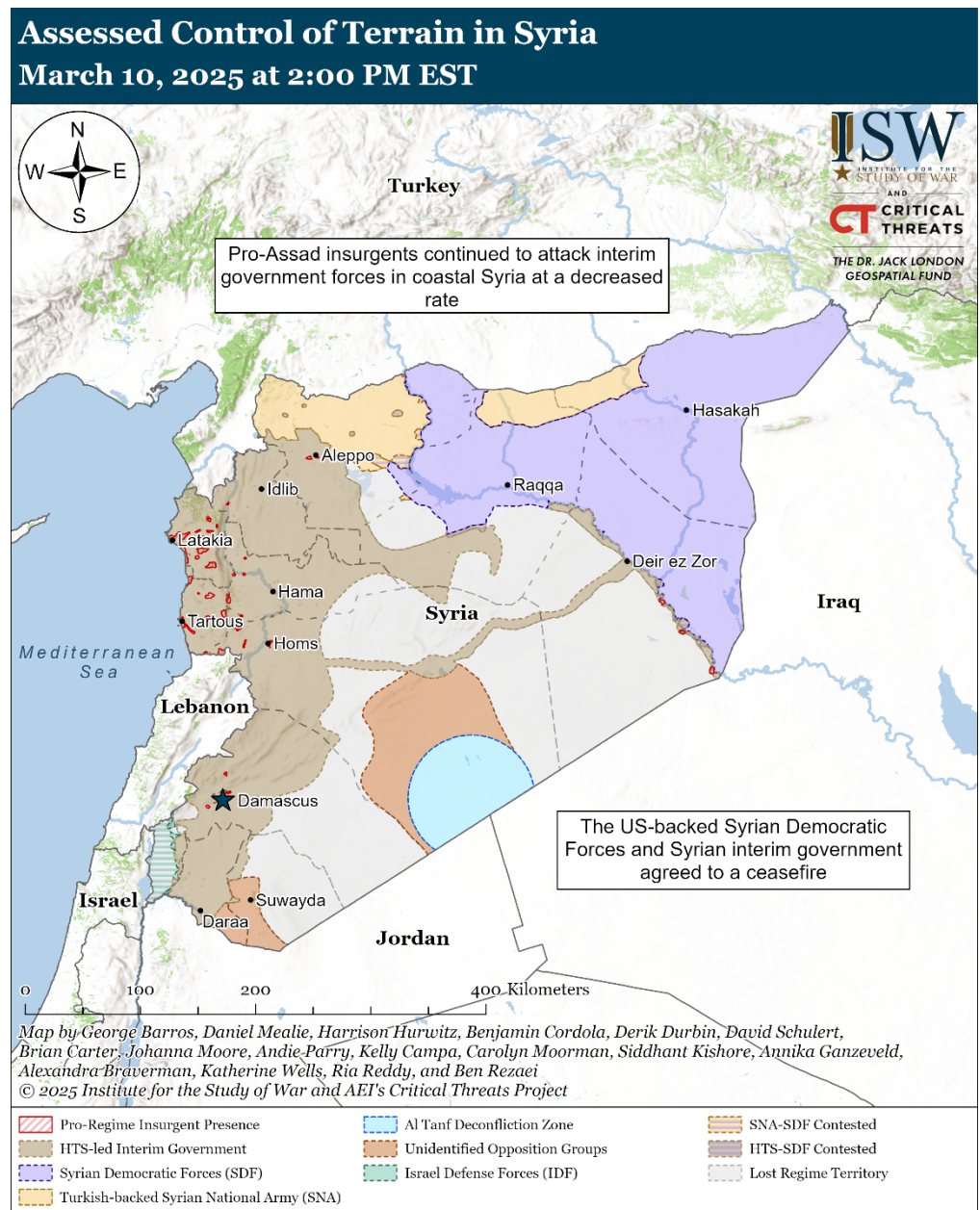
Areas of control and ongoing conflict

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

- Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which led the November/December offensive. They now appear to control the largest area of territory. Since Assad's fall, they have taken control of some areas previously held by Kurdish groups.
- The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), focused in the north-east, where US troops also have a presence.

- The Syrian National Army (SNA), not the army of Assad but rather a coalition of Turkish-backed groups in the north of Syria. After Assad's fall, they continue to be in a state of conflict with the SDF.
- Unidentified opposition groups in areas south of Damascus.
- Israel Defence Forces in the south, centred on the occupied Golan Heights (see section 3.4 for Israeli action).
- Small areas of Russian presence, near to its naval and air bases (see section 3.3 for Russian action)

The below map shows areas of control, as of 10 March 2025.



Source: Institute for the Study of War, [Iran update](#), 10 March 2025. © Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project. See updated maps on the [Institute's website](#).

The period since Assad fled has also seen the continuation or establishment of some armed groups loyal to Assad and hostile to HTS control. These include in areas with minority groups such as Alawites (see below box).⁴¹ There has also been some conflict on the Syria-Lebanon border, with HTS saying it was combatting drug and weapons smuggling. In February the Lebanese army deployed to the area and local tribal groups withdrew, bringing an end to the conflict.⁴² The most extensive armed fighting, however, has been between the SDA and SDF. Islamic State/Daesh remains active but holds no territory (see section 6).

March 2025 violence in Alawite areas

Alawites [are one of a number of minority religious groups within Syria](#). Bashar al-Assad is an Alawite, and while some Alawites opposed his rule, the group has been targeted due to its association, both during and after the civil war.⁴³

In March 2025 the most extensive single act of violence in Syria for several years was reported by the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) and Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). Organisations have not been able to independently verify the numbers killed and the SOHR and SNHR report more than 1,000 people were killed.⁴⁴ Assad loyalists and interim government forces were reportedly killed in Alawite villages in the Tartus, Hamas and Latakia governorates. Monitors estimates the majority of those killed were civilians. There were reports of multiple “revenge attacks” against non-interim government forces and civilians. Interim president Sharaa said he would hold to account those responsible for the violence.⁴⁵

The violence also resulted in attacks on some Syrians in Iraq by one new Shia militia group. Both the interim Syrian government and the Iraqi government condemned the violence.⁴⁶

The UK, EU, US and Arab states condemned the Syria violence.⁴⁷ The UK Government said that the interim authorities “must ensure the protection of all civilians and set out a clear path to transitional justice”. The Middle East Minister, Hamish Falconer, said the UK was “constantly emphas[ing]” the

⁴¹ [Syria imposes curfews in Homs, Latakia, Tartus amid unrest](#), BBC Monitoring, 25 December 2024; [Nearly 300 arrested in crackdown on Assad loyalists](#), Asharq al-Awsat, 30 December 2024; [Assad militias clash with Syria security in Latakia](#), Al-Monitor, 14 January 2025

⁴² [Islamists cheer Syrian security ‘purification’ of Lebanese border](#), BBC Monitoring, 10 February 2025

⁴³ Minority Rights Group, [Alawis in Syria](#)

⁴⁴ [Why do reported death tolls from recent violence in Syria vary?](#), BBC Monitoring, 12 March 2025

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

⁴⁶ [Iraq orders arrest of Shia militia members for attacking Syrians](#), BBC Monitoring, 12 March 2025; [Fallout from mass killings in Syria’s coastal areas seeps into Iraq](#), New Arab, 11 March 2025

⁴⁷ European Council, [Syria: statement by the High representative](#), 11 March 2025; [Arab states condemn violence in Syria](#), BBC Monitoring, 8 March 2025; US State Department, [The escalation of fighting and civilian deaths in Syria](#), 9 March 2025

need to protect human rights in its engagement with the interim Syrian authorities.⁴⁸

The military operation reflects the development of armed opposition groups to the HTS-dominated Syrian interim authorities. Conflict monitor, the US-based Institute for the Study of War, reports that pro-Assad groups have been developing in western Syria since early 2025 and warn that the March violence may drive further opposition and organisation in Alawite areas. Some Iran-backed opposition groups have also announced their establishment in 2025.⁴⁹

For further analysis, see:

- Crisis Group, [Finding a path through a perilous moment for post-Assad Syria](#), 10 March 2025
- Washington Institute, [Syria's transitional honeymoon is over](#), 10 March 2025
- US Institute for Peace, [Sectarian violence threatens Syria's shaky transition](#), 10 March 2025

2.2

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

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

Who are Hayat Tahrir al-Sham?

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, or the “Organization for the Liberation of the Levant”), has been the major opposition group in Idlib province, in north-western Syria, since the late 2010s. HTS has its origins in Al-Qaeda, being founded as Jabhat al-Nusra in 2011, before becoming Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in 2016 and merging with other groups in 2017 to form HTS.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ HC Deb, [10 March 2025](#), c663

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

⁵⁰ Italian Institute for International Political Studies, [Syria's broken status quo](#), 5 December 2024; Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), [Terrorism backgrounder: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#), 2018 and ACLED, [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#), 25 July 2023 and European Council on Foreign Relations, [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham \(Syria\)](#), 10 November 2020; [Who's in control of Idlib?](#), BBC News, 18 February 2020

HTS has some contact with Turkey, though not as much as the Syrian National Army (see below), and the group is a designated terrorist organisation in Turkey.⁵¹

The leader of HTS is Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. Since the fall of Assad, official communiques refer to him by his real name, Ahmed al-Sharaa. He was a member of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, where he was imprisoned for participating in the insurgency against UK and US forces.⁵²

How did HTS govern Idlib?

HTS and other opposition groups formed the “Syrian Salvation Government” in Idlib in 2017. The administration took responsibility for health, education, and other social services. There was some local armed opposition and there were protests against its rule up to and including October 2024.⁵³

In March 2024, it was reported that Ahmed al-Sharaa had offered to resign as leader of the government due to the ongoing protests against HTS. The group instead pledged reforms to its security forces and prison system, which have been accused of committing human rights violations.⁵⁴

Analysts note that the group has sought to present a more moderate stance to appeal to other opposition groups within Syria. Many analysts consider it a [jihadist group](#) that is currently focused on power within Syria, rather than seeking to act internationally, though also note not all its members will share the leadership’s rhetoric or stated direction and are uncertain on its long-term objectives.⁵⁵

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

The group publicized its tolerance of the first Christian liturgy celebrated in Idlib in over a decade and pledged to redistribute property it had confiscated from Christians and Druze. However, HTS continued to impose its interpretation of Sunni Islam on both Muslim and non-Muslim residents of Idlib. In August, the SSG [Syrian Salvation government] invoked its interpretation of Shari’a in new rules for Idlib’s schools, and HTS security forces continued their

⁵¹ Council on Foreign Relations, [What role is Turkey playing in Syria’s civil war?](#), 6 December 2024

⁵² [From Syrian jihadist leader to rebel politician](#), BBC News, 9 December 2024

⁵³ [HTS accused of violent response to women’s protest in Syria’s Idlib](#), BBC Monitoring, 21 October 2024; [Anti-HTS protests break out in north west Syria](#), BBC Monitoring, 14 September 2024; [Protests grow against powerful Jihadist group in Syria enclave](#), VoA, 7 March 2024; [Syrian protesters rise up against Islamists in Idlib](#), DW, 25 May 2024; [HTS makes rival jihadis in Syria’s Idlib \[...\] give up weapons](#), Al Monitor, 20 November 2021; [Who’s behind the “Salvation government” running northern Syria?](#), BBC Monitoring, 13 December 2019

⁵⁴ [HTS leaders offers to quit](#), BBC Monitoring, 13 March 2024; [HTS linked authority details progress on reforms](#), BBC Monitoring, 2 April 2024

⁵⁵ European Council on Foreign Relations, [Guns and governance: HTS](#), 2020; [Syria: HTS Islamists pledge to show tolerance for minorities](#), DW, 4 December 2024

arbitrary and unlawful detention of human rights advocates and private individuals critical of HTS’s “rule or religious doctrine”.⁵⁶

In its April 2024 report covering human rights in Syria, the US State Department also noted allegations that HTS in Idlib had held detainees in what it termed “security prisons” without the right to appeal. HTS also arrested groups seeking to protest against its rule and detained political opponents, journalists, activists and civilians perceived as critical of their rule of religious doctrine. Allegations of have torture have also been made.⁵⁷

What did HTS say on Syria’s future after Assad?

On 8 December 2024 the leader of HTS, Ahmed al-Sharaa, said that the group would “continue to work with determination to achieve the goals of our revolution [...] to complete the path we started in 2011”.⁵⁸

In one media clip, on 8 December he said that Syria had been “abandoned as a playground for Iranian ambitions” under Assad and criticised the “corruption”, “sectarianism” and [trade of the captagon drug](#).⁵⁹

Ahmed al-Sharaa has also criticised Israeli military actions (see below, section 3.4) as “threaten[ing] an unjustified escalation in the region”. He has also been quoted as saying “the Turkish people are our closest friends”.⁶⁰

In a December 2024 interview with CNN, he said the opposition would transition “into a state of governance, institutions and so on” after the fall of Assad. He said “HTS is merely one part of [building Syria] [...] and it may dissolve at any time”.⁶¹

He also suggested that “there will no longer be a need for any foreign forces to remain in Syria” after the fall of Assad.⁶²

Section 4 details steps taken by the interim government declared by HTS.

2.3

UN designation of HTS as terrorist group

For information on UK, US and EU sanctions and their policies towards the interim Syrian government declared by HTS, see below, section 5.

⁵⁶ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, [Annual report 2024](#), 2024, p68

⁵⁷ US Department of State, [2023 country reports on human rights practices: Syria](#), April 2024

⁵⁸ [“New history written” says HTS leader](#), Al Jazeera, 8 December 2024

⁵⁹ [HTS leader says all Syria “can breathe freely”](#), BBC Monitoring, 8 December 2024

⁶⁰ [HTS chief addresses Israel, Iran, Russia](#), BBC Monitoring, 15 December 2024

⁶¹ [Syrian rebel leader says goal is to “overthrow” Assad regime](#), CNN, 6 December 2024

⁶² [Syrian rebel leader says goal is to “overthrow” Assad regime](#), CNN, 6 December 2024

UN Security Council

HTS is designated as a terrorist group by the UN Security Council.⁶³ Following the fall of Assad, the UN Envoy for Syria, Geir Pederson, said on 10 December 2024 that the designation was a “complicating factor” but said decisions should await HTS actions:

what we need now to see is, of course, that the good statements and what we are seeing on the ground at the beginning, that this is now followed up in practice in the days and the weeks ahead of us. And the most important test, the most important test will be how the transitional arrangements in Damascus is organized and implemented.⁶⁴

It is for the UN Security Council members to determine whether a group removed from the designation list. The effect of the terrorist designation is to impose an asset freeze, travel ban and arms embargo by all UN member states against the group.⁶⁵

The UN Security Council adopted a resolution maintaining the exemption for humanitarian providers from the asset freeze measures against some listed terrorist organisations in Syria before Assad’s fall, on 6 December 2024.⁶⁶

UN agencies have worked with HTS directly in Idlib for several years to deliver humanitarian assistance. The UN Humanitarian Coordination for Syria, Adam Abdelmoula, has been in contact with HTS since Assad’s fall.⁶⁷

United States

The United States has listed HTS as a foreign terrorist organisation. Its leader was subject to a US bounty, until this was removed in December 2024.⁶⁸

On 2 December 2024, then US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said that the group is “a terrorist organization designated by the United States. So, we have real concerns about the designs and objectives of that organization”.⁶⁹ Following the fall of Assad, the US administration said that the HTS “had elements affiliated with groups that have American blood on their hands”.⁷⁰ Some US State Department officials met with HTS leaders in Damascus in December.⁷¹

⁶³ For background, UN Security Council, [Consolidated list: Qe.De.137](#), as of 5 December 2024

⁶⁴ UN Special Envoy Syria, [Statement, 10 December 2024](#)

⁶⁵ UN, [The de facto authority in Syria is a designated terrorist group](#), 12 December 2024

⁶⁶ UN, [Unanimously adopting Resolution 2761 \(2024\) \[...\]](#), 6 December 2024

⁶⁷ UN, [Syria: top official stresses need for unity \[...\]](#), 13 December 2024

⁶⁸ US State Department, [Foreign terrorist organisations](#), accessed 9 December 2024; [US scraps \\$10 million bounty for arrest of Syria’s new leader Sharaa](#), BBC News, 20 December 2024

⁶⁹ [US left facing difficult situation in Syria](#), CNN, 2 December 2024

⁷⁰ White House, [Remarks by APNSA Jake Sullivan](#), 8 December 2024

⁷¹ [US delegation arrives in Syrian capital for first meetings \[...\]](#), NBC News, 20 December 2024

United Kingdom

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

We do not talk to HTS, which is a proscribed terrorist organisation—it is proscribed for a reason and remains proscribed, and we are concerned by many of the public statements it has made.⁷²

The UK has subsequently had contact with the group. In December 2024 a delegation of UK officials met with HTS leaders in Syria, and in January the Foreign Secretary David Lammy met the HTS-appointed interim foreign minister in Saudi Arabia as part of regional talks on the country (the US, Germany, France and other states also sent representatives).⁷³

On 9 December, Foreign Secretary David Lammy had told the House of Commons the UK would judge the group “by its actions, monitoring closely how they and other parties to this conflict treat all civilians in areas they control”.⁷⁴ In a separate statement, Prime Minister Keir Starmer said the same day that it was “far too early” for a change in policy.⁷⁵

2.4

The Syrian National Army and Turkey

What is the Syrian National Army?

The Syrian National Army (SNA) is a Turkish-backed coalition centred in northern Syrian on the Turkish border. It is not an official Syrian state body and was opposed to the rule of President Assad. As a collection of groupings, it has a range of approaches towards HTS and the future governance of Syria.⁷⁶

The SNA was established in 2017. It focused on countering Islamic State/Daesh and the People’s Defence Units (YPG), which form part of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, see section 2.5). Turkey judges that elements of the SDF are tied to the [Kurdistan Workers Party \(PKK\)](#), a proscribed terrorist group in Turkey.⁷⁷ See below, section 3.3, for Turkish action.

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

⁷² HC Deb, [2 December 2024](#), c64

⁷³ [UK diplomats meet rebel leader in Damascus](#), BBC News, 17 December 2024; FCDO, [UK joins key meetings in Saudi Arabia to help build a stable Syrian future](#), 12 January 2025

⁷⁴ HC Deb, [9 December 2024](#), c693

⁷⁵ [Too early to remove Syrian rebels from terror list—Starmer](#), BBC News, 9 December 2024

⁷⁶ [Rivalries and alliances in the Turkey-backed SNA](#), BBC Monitoring, 27 January 2025

⁷⁷ [The Syria National Army, a rebel group loyal to Turkey](#), Le Monde, 6 December 2024; Atlantic Council, [Efforts to tame the Syrian National Army](#), 18 June 2024

What actions has it taken in 2024 and 2025?

The Syrian National Army joined the HTS attack on Aleppo in November 2024, attacking Assad government forces and those of the SDF. The offensive against the SDF continued until 10 December, when the SDF and SNA reached a temporary ceasefire agreement in the northern city of Manbij as a result of US mediation. The SDF were to withdraw from the city.⁷⁸ The ceasefire was later extended to 22 December 2024.⁷⁹

In January, it was reported that most of the SNA was willing to dissolve and become part of a single Syrian armed force. Turkey has backed the move.⁸⁰

However, fighting in 2025 has continued amid calls for all armed groups to disarm and disband (see sections 2.5 and 4.2). In January the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) said that clashes had been ongoing for a month “without any change in the map of the country”.⁸¹ As of 18 February 2025, it reports 625 deaths since December. This includes 56 civilians.⁸² In March, these attacks continued.⁸³

2.5

Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces

Who are the Syrian Democratic Forces?

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

The SDF consists of several groups, including the People’s Protection Units (YPG). The YPG was created in 2012 and Turkey judges it to have ties to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a designated terrorist group in Turkey and elsewhere.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ [Syrian democratic forces, rebels reach US-brokered ceasefire \[...\]](#), Reuters, 10 December 2024; [Syrian national army besieges Tel Rifiit \[...\]](#), AA, 1 December 2024; [Syrian opposition group clears Manbij of US backed PKK/YPG terrorist group](#), Daily Sabah, 9 December 2024

⁷⁹ [Despite ceasefire, fighting continues in Manbij](#), VoA, 11 December 2024; [Truce ends between Syria Kurdish forces and pro-Turkey group](#), BBC Monitoring, 17 December 2024; US State Department, [Press briefing](#), 17 December 2024

⁸⁰ [EM says Turkey seeks “stability” in Syria, asked groups to disarm](#), BBC Monitoring, 27 January 2025; [Rivalries and alliances in the Turkey-backed SNA](#), BBC Monitoring, 27 January 2025

⁸¹ [Deadly clashes continue between SDF, SNA in northern Syria](#), 15 January 2025

⁸² SOHR, [SDF attack. Four Turkish-backed militiamen killed \[...\]](#), 18 February 2025

⁸³ Turkey’s operations against Kurdish militants in northern Syria [...], Al Arabiya, 12 March 2025

⁸⁴ European Council on Foreign Relations, [Guns and governance: SDF](#), 2020

The Syrian Democratic Council is the political wing of the SDF and the AANES.⁸⁵

What role has it played in the conflict?

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

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

During the Syrian civil war, the SDF controlled the majority of Syria's functioning oil production.⁸⁶ In 2024, it joined the November offensive and said it captured the eastern city of Deir Al-Zour and Syria's major crossing points with Iraq from Assad.⁸⁷ It lost territory to both the SNA and HTS in December 2024, including Deir Al-Zour to HTS.⁸⁸

What has it said on Syria's future?

On 16 December the SDF called to an end to military operations in Syria "in order to begin a constructive, comprehensive national dialogue".⁸⁹

The SDF have also asked the US to ensure that no Turkish-led offensive is launched against the group.⁹⁰ It has also suggested French as well as US troops deploy to the region to maintain security in Turkey-Syria border areas. Turkey has rejected the suggestion of French troops.⁹¹

The Commander of the SDF, Mazloum Abdi, said in February 2025 that the group was seeking dialogue with HTS and wants a united Syria with a central government in Damascus, "based on democracy that preserves the rights of all its [Syrian] components". He said the SDF's aim is not a separate government or parliament for Kurdish areas of Syria (as is the [case in Iraq](#)).⁹²

As of March 2025, the SDF is not participating in the planned national talks initiated by HTS on the future of Syria. Organisers said all groups must disarm before they are allowed to participate, and that the SDF does not represent

⁸⁵ [Syrian Democratic Council](#), BBC Monitoring and Syrian Democratic Council, [Who we are](#)

⁸⁶ [Syria war: who benefits from its oil production?](#), 21 November 2024

⁸⁷ [Kurdish-led SDF capture eastern Syria \[...\]](#), New Arab, 6 December 2024

⁸⁸ [Syrian rebels claim control of oil-rich Deir ez-Zor from SDF](#), Rudaw, 11 December 2024

⁸⁹ [Syria's Kurds call for end to all military operations](#), Al-Arabiya, 16 December 2024

⁹⁰ [US fears military build up by Turkey \[...\]](#), Wall Street Journal, 17 December 2024

⁹¹ [Rojava urges US, France to deploy peacekeeping troops \[...\]](#), Rudaw, 9 January 2025; [Turkey sidelines France in favour of US partnership \[...\]](#), France 24, 10 January 2025

⁹² [US backed commander says his Kurdish-led group wants \[...\]](#), AP, 3 February 2025; [Kurdish-led SDF fights for place in post-Assad future](#), Guardian, 21 February 2025

Syrian Kurds.⁹³ One SDF official said it would be bound by the decisions of the national dialogue if it does not participate.⁹⁴

Some progress with HTS-led interim government has been achieved, with an agreement to supply it with oil from February 2025.⁹⁵

Will the SDF become part of the interim armed forces?

In February 2025 a senior SDF commander, Abu Omar al-Idlibi, said that the SDF had agreed to integrate into the structure of the Syrian army established by the HTS interim authorities and for foreign fighters to leave the SDF and Syria (a likely reference to PKK members).⁹⁶

However, the wider SDF leadership did not confirm the agreement or how it would be implemented. Issues to be discussed include the security of detention facilities for Islamic State fighters, oil fields, and providing civilian infrastructure and services. There are reports that not all SDF leaders support the move but there is pressure from its Arab members to merge.⁹⁷

The SDF commander Mazloum Abdi has previously said foreign fighters will leave the group and Syria if a ceasefire is agreed for northeastern Syria.⁹⁸

In March 2025, the SDF and HTS-dominated interim authorities agreed, in principle, for the two to merge and for a nationwide ceasefire. The agreement recognises the Kurds as an “integral part” of the Syrian state and says the responsibility for airports, oil and gas fields, and other civil and military institutions in northeastern Syria, will be transferred to the interim authority.⁹⁹

The agreement is intended to be implemented by the end of 2025.¹⁰⁰ The EU and US welcomed the agreement.¹⁰¹ Turkey, which continues to support the SNA’s attacks on the SDF, welcomed the agreement as supporting the “territorial integrity of Syria” and Syria’s “unitary structure”.¹⁰²

What have Turkey, the SNA and HTS said after Assad?

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

Turkish statements on the SDF and PKK

On 15 December the Turkish Defence Minister said that his “primary issue in Syria” was “dismantling the PKK/YPG terrorist organisation” and expected the US to “reassess” their position on the issue. He said HTS shared the view.¹⁰³

Peace negotiations between Turkey and the PKK

In March 2025 the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan, called on members of the group to lay down their arms.¹⁰⁴ Operations against the PKK in Iraq and

the SDF in Syria continue,¹⁰⁵ and the SDF says the Turkey-PKK agreement does not apply to them.¹⁰⁶ For more on the negotiations, see:

- Fikra Forum, [Ankara’s subtle shifts towards reconciliation with Kurdish elements in Turkey](#), November 2024
- Amwaj Media, [How Turkey-PKK peace may usher change in Iraqi Kurdistan](#), January 2025
- European Institute for Studies on the Middle East and North Africa, [The impact of a potential Turkish-PKK peace agreement on the Kurdistan region of Iraq](#), January 2025
- Foreign Affairs, [The end of the PKK?](#), February 2025
- Washington Institute, [Inside the latest PKK talks](#), February 2025
- DW, [What the end of the PKK would mean for Kurds](#), March 2025

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham statement on the SDF in 2024

On 14 December the HTS-appointed Defence Minister said Syria would “not enjoy security until we put an end to the separatist schemes of the PKK and liberate our people”.¹⁰⁷ HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa also talked of SDF-controlled regions “gain[ing] freedom and com[ing] under the hands of their people”. He has reportedly differentiated between Kurdish groups and the PKK in interviews, however.¹⁰⁸

⁹³ [The talks shaping Syria’s new constitution will exclude Kurdish forces \[...\]](#), AP, 14 February 2025; [US-allied Kurds excluded from Syria ‘national dialogue’](#), BBC Monitoring, 15 February 2025; [Syrian groups must disarm to take part in national dialogue \[...\]](#), Reuters, 13 February 2025

⁹⁴ [SDF says will ‘not be bound’ by Syria national dialogue \[...\]](#), BBC Monitoring, 14 February 2025

⁹⁵ [Syrian Kurdish-led SDF supplies oil to Damascus](#), BBC Monitoring, 23 February 2025

⁹⁶ [SDF ‘agrees’ to integrate into Syrian army](#), BBC Monitoring, 18 February 2025

⁹⁷ Institute for the Study of War, [Iran update](#), 18 February 2025; [Kurdish leaderships reveal details of plan to merge with Syrian army](#), Asharq Al-Awsat, 19 February 2025

⁹⁸ [Syrian Kurdish commander: non-Syrian Kurdish fighters to leave \[...\]](#), Reuters, 19 December 2024

⁹⁹ [Agreement signed to integrate SDF into institutions of \[...\] Syria](#), SANA, 10 March 2025

¹⁰⁰ As above

¹⁰¹ US State Department, [Agreement between the Syrian interim authorities and the SDF](#), 11 March 2025; European Council, [Syria: statement by the high representative](#), 11 March 2025; HC Deb, [10 March 2025](#), c672

¹⁰² [Turkey’s Erdogan welcomes Syrian deal with Kurdish forces](#), Reuters, 11 March 2025

¹⁰³ [Turkey wants dismantling of PKK/YPG \[...\]](#), AA, 15 December 2024; [Turkey-backed Syrians end US-mediated ceasefire](#), Al Monitor, 18 December 2024

¹⁰⁴ [What to know about the latest effort \[...\]](#), AP News, 13 January 2025

¹⁰⁵ [Turkey’s operation against Kurdish militants in northern Syria continuing](#), Reuters, 12 March 2025

¹⁰⁶ [SDF says Ocalan’s call for disarmament, dissolution does not apply](#), Rudaw, 27 February 2025,

¹⁰⁷ [New Syrian government warns Kurdish ‘separatists’](#), BBC Monitoring, 14 December 2024

¹⁰⁸ [HTS chief addresses Israel, Iran, Russia](#), BBC Monitoring, 15 December 2024; [HTS chief says new government seeks “freedom” for northeast Syria](#), BBC Monitoring, 17 December 2024

The HTS military commander, Abu Hassan al-Hamawi, also said in December 2024 that “the Kurdish people are one of the components of the Syrian people...Syria will not be divided and there will be no federal entities”. This suggests a unified Syrian state is intended by HTS, without the AANES.¹⁰⁹

What have the US and UK said on the SDF?

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

We have to work with all groups in an inclusive manner, but I will be really clear that in the UK, we remain concerned about Daesh, and about extremism in camps that we know exist in the north-east. We are vigilant about those issues, and we are happy to—we have to—work with Kurdish minority groups, who will assist us in that enterprise.¹¹⁰

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

we have said publicly in the past that some of these operations elsewhere along that border [between Syria and Turkey], conducted by Turkish military forces, are problematic because it does have that risk of pulling the SDF away from the counter-ISIS mission, which we don’t want to see happen. And those are conversations that we’re having with the Turks as well.¹¹¹

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

Ultimately, I can say that what we want to see [...] is the establishment of a Syrian national government that encompasses all of the various ethnic groups inside Syria, and that at the end of that you don’t have any subnational militias, any subnational groups who are carrying arms under their own banner. And as part of that we certainly think it’s appropriate to discuss the expulsion of foreign fighters.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ [Syria ex-rebel chief says to dissolve armed wing](#), France 24, 17 December 2024

¹¹⁰ HC Deb, [9 December 2024](#), c702

¹¹¹ White House, [On the record press gaggle with National Security Advisor](#), 10 December 2024

¹¹² US Department of State, [Press briefing](#), 17 December 2024

3

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

Further reading on Assad’s fall for the region and world

Section 5 has further reading on the UK, EU and US role in Syria.

- RAND, [The fall of Assad could be a turning point for the axis of US adversaries](#), January 2025
- Carnegie Endowment, [The \[Arab\] Gulf shifts polices in response to the “new” Syria](#), January 2025
- Royal United Services Institute, [The coming fight for Syria](#), January 2025
- Wilson Center, [Syria in transition and implications for Jordan](#), January 2025
- US Institute for Peace, [How Assad’s fall could impact Iraq](#), December 2024
- Italian Institute for International Political Studies, [Syria, the path forward: regional perspectives](#), December 2024
- Atlantic Council, [What the fall of the Assad regime really means for China](#), December 2024
- Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, [Assad’s fall prompts initial Gulf unity but differences and concerns are emerging](#), December 2024
- Crisis Group, [Regional perspectives on Assad’s fall](#), December 2024
- Foreign Affairs, [The Middle East’s dangerous new normal](#), December 2024
- Foreign Policy, [Assad’s fall in the Middle East’s 1989](#), December 2024
- Washington Institute, [Don’t assume Iran’s supply lines to Hezbollah are cut](#), December 2024
- Foreign Policy, [What’s next for Syria and the Middle East?](#), December 2024
- Chatham House, [Fall of Bashar al-Assad is a blow to Iran and Russia—and a boost for Turkey](#), December 2024
- Atlantic Council, [Rebels have toppled the Assad regime. What’s next for Syria, the Middle East and the world?](#), December 2024

3.1

Iran and Hezbollah

Syria as a strategic link for Iran

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

Syria, under Bashar al-Assad and his father, Hafez, has been one of the longest-standing allies of post-1979 Iran (when the Shah was overthrown and the Islamic Republic was created). Syria formed part of what Iran has called the “axis of resistance”, constituted of Iran, Iran-backed Shia militias in Iraq and Syria, the Assad government, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza and the Houthis in Yemen. Syria has been a key land route for Iran to supply Hezbollah and Hamas and threaten Israel.¹¹³

Syria’s role in Lebanon

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

While the ability of Syria to project its influence fell with its withdrawal in 2005, it continued under Bashar al-Assad. The politics of the two countries remained interlinked through Hezbollah, Syrians displaced to Lebanon, and [historical divisions in Lebanese politics between pro- and anti- Syrians](#).¹¹⁴

Iranian and Hezbollah investment in Assad

Iran is estimated to have spent more than US\$30 billion in support of Assad during the civil war, as well as providing his government with subsidised oil and other resources.¹¹⁵ Iranian militias deployed in Syria were estimated to have numbered between 20,000 and 30,000 personnel, while Hezbollah was estimated to have had 7,000 to 10,000 fighters in Syria (out of a total of 40,000 to 50,000).¹¹⁶ Certain numbers are unknown.

Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran have each been weakened militarily through their conflicts with Israel in 2023/24. In October 2024 then Israeli Defence Minister, Yoav Gallant, described both Hamas and Hezbollah as no longer

¹¹³ See Commons Library, [Iran’s influence in the Middle East](#), updated July 2024

¹¹⁴ Royal United Services Institute, [Lebanon in Limbo: No escaping the Syrian gales](#), October 2012 and [Lebanon: the return of Pax Syriana?](#), November 2017

¹¹⁵ Carnegie Endowment, [Why did Iran allow the downfall of Assad?](#), 9 December 2024

¹¹⁶ As above and Atlantic Council, [Iranian influence in Syria](#), November 2020; CSIS, [The escalating conflict with Hezbollah in Syria](#), June 2018

effective proxies for Iran.¹¹⁷ Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said Assad fell because of Israeli military action in 2024 against his allies.¹¹⁸

Iran and Syria

- Commons Library, [Iran in 2025: how strong does it remain the Middle East?](#), 29 January 2025
- US Institute for Peace, [Iran is the biggest regional loser of Assad's fall](#), 12 December 2024
- [With Assad's fall, Iran's "axis of resistance" unravels](#), New York Times, 8 December 2024
- Council on Foreign Relations, [Will Iran become more dangerous after Assad's ouster in Syria?](#), 8 December 2024

Iran, Hezbollah and Syria after Assad

The Financial Times in December 2024 cited unnamed Iranian officials as saying that Iran was increasingly “frustrated” with Assad, that he had been unable to halt Israeli air strikes in Syria in 2024 (see below) and that he was moving away from Iran in his rapprochement with Arab Gulf States from 2023.¹¹⁹

Iran has denied having any military presence in Syria since Islamic State lost its Syrian territory (in 2019).¹²⁰ In December, Iran flew a reported 4,000 Iranians out of Syria. It is unclear whether these were civilians or government or military personnel.¹²¹

Following the fall of Assad, the Iranian foreign ministry said that it would seek to maintain ties with Syria. Statements made by the Iranian ambassador to Syria no longer described HTS as a terrorist group, which it did when Assad was in power, signalling a desire to advance ties.¹²²

HTS leader Sharaa said in December 2024 that “Syria cannot continue without relations with an important regional country like Iran”.¹²³

¹¹⁷ See Commons Library, [Middle East instability in 2023-25](#) and briefings on Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah; [Hamas, Hezbollah no longer effective proxies for Iran](#), Reuters, 27 October 2024

¹¹⁸ YouTube, [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's statement from the Golan Heights](#), 9 December 2024

¹¹⁹ [Iran “lost faith” in Assad before his ousting](#), Financial Times, 8 December 2024

¹²⁰ [Iran says Assad government ignored advice for ‘political solution’](#), BBC Monitoring, 8 December 2024

¹²¹ [Ayatollah Khamenei defiant \[...\]](#), FT, 11 December 2024

¹²² [Iran on Syria: people will decide the future](#), Tehran Times, 8 December 2024; [Iran's Syria ambassador strikes positive note on post-Assad era](#), BBC Monitoring, 8 December 2024

¹²³ [Syria's de-facto leader wants to maintain ‘respectful’ ties with Iran, Russia](#), RFE, 29 December 2024

Analysts view Iran as likely to seek influence and presence in Syria's minority groups.¹²⁴ In December 2024 Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, said that "a strong, honourable group will [...] emerge in Syria" from "today's youth".¹²⁵ Some critical voices have been raised in public within Iran over whether its strategy of supporting groups overseas is an effective one.¹²⁶

Hezbollah has signalled it will now focus on its position in Lebanon.¹²⁷ It has also criticised Israeli military action in southern Syria.¹²⁸

3.2

Russia

Russian backing for Assad

Russia militarily supported the Assad regime since 2015 when it [intervened in support of Syrian government action against Islamic State](#). Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, said at the time that it was doing so "at the invitation of the legitimate Syrian government".¹²⁹ Observers questioned Russia's motives, however, and accused the Russian Government of intervening with the primary objective of sustaining President Assad in power.¹³⁰

Russian military presence in Syria and region

By supporting President Assad, over the last decade Russia has been able to expand its existing military presence in the region, securing a permanent naval presence at the Syrian base of Tartus on the Mediterranean coast and at Hmeimim air base in Latakia.¹³¹ According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies' Military Balance 2024, 4,000 Russian military personnel were based in the country, although there have been reports that many of those personnel may have been re-deployed to Ukraine.¹³²

Having a strategic military presence in Syria has allowed Russia to project power into Africa, in particular in support of its operations in Libya and the

¹²⁴ [Despite Assad's departure, Iran sees opportunity \[...\]](#), Al Monitor, 13 December 2024

¹²⁵ Khamenei,IR, [Courageous Syrian youth will expel Zionists from Syria](#), 22 December 2024

¹²⁶ [The Syrian upheaval has Iran's leaders reeling too](#), New York Times, 13 December 2024

¹²⁷ [Hezbollah outlines focus of movement over next stage](#), BBC Monitoring, 15 December 2024

¹²⁸ [Hezbollah issues first statement since toppling of Assad](#), BBC Monitoring, 11 December 2024

¹²⁹ ["Russian Foreign Minister Defends Airstrikes in Syria"](#), New York Times, 1 October 2015

¹³⁰ "Russia's war plan in Syria", RUSI Analysis, 2 October 2015

¹³¹ Russia has had a presence at Tartus since the early 1970s. It was only in 2017 that a long-term lease agreement was signed, and Russia's military presence was significantly expanded at Tartus and a base established at Hmeimim (see [How Assad's fall threatens Russia's military influence in Syria and across the region](#), Radio Free Europe, 9 December 2024); [Importance of Russia's military bases in Syria and how it could keep them](#), BBC Monitoring, 12 December 2024

¹³² International Institute for Strategic Studies, Military Balance 2024; [Rebel gains in Syria put Russia on the back foot](#), Carnegie, 6 December 2024; [Assad's downfall](#), Politico, 9 December 2024

Sahel, and to secure access to the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, thereby pressuring NATO's southern borders.¹³³

What does Assad's fall mean for Russia?

The fall of Assad is widely considered, among Western observers at least, as “a strategic political defeat” for Russia.¹³⁴ It raises questions over Russia's ability to exert and maintain influence in areas of strategic importance and Russia's reputation as a credible ally and protector.¹³⁵

Russia's military bases

On 8 December 2024, Russian State news agency TASS reported that the government had secured an agreement with armed opposition leaders in Syria for the security of Russian military bases and personnel in the country.¹³⁶ Opposition forces are in full control of Latakia province where both bases are located.¹³⁷

However, there have also been widespread reports that plans for the evacuation of Russian military assets in the country are in place. Russia's naval fleet has been moved offshore and preparatory work is reportedly underway at Hmeimim air base and other sites.¹³⁸ In February, the UK Royal Navy reported that some ammunition had been withdrawn from Syria.¹³⁹

The loss of Russia's military bases in Syria would have significant implications for [Russian military operations in Africa](#), having been used as a logistical staging post, and for its presence in the Mediterranean. The latter has already been undermined by Russia's inability to use its Black Sea fleet in the Mediterranean after Turkey closed the Turkish Straits linking the Black Sea and the Mediterranean at the beginning of the Ukraine conflict.¹⁴⁰ However, in

¹³³ Russian bases in Syria have been used as a staging post for its Africa operations and as a repair and replenishment base for its naval assets. Institute for the Study of War, [Africa File Special Edition: Syria's potential impact on Russia's Africa and Mediterranean ambitions](#), 4 December 2024

¹³⁴ Institute for the Study of War, [Russian offensive campaign assessment](#), 8 December 2024

¹³⁵ As above. Questions over the reliability of Russia as an effective security partner have already been raised within the context of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 after Russian peacekeepers failed to prevent Azerbaijan's military takeover of the disputed region (see Commons Library research briefing, [What is happening in Nagorno-Karabakh?](#))

¹³⁶ [Assad in Moscow, security of Russian bases](#) TASS Russian state news agency, 8 December 2024

¹³⁷ [“Functioning of Russian bases \[...\]”](#), TASS Russian state news agency, 9 December 2024

¹³⁸ Institute for the Study of War, [Russian offensive campaign assessment](#), 10 December 2024; [Russian ships move from Syria base](#), BBC Verify/News, 11 December 2024 and [Russia moving equipment at Syrian bases satellite images show](#), BBC News, 18 December 2024

¹³⁹ [UK tracks Russian ships carrying ammunition from Syria](#), Reuters, 15 February 2025

¹⁴⁰ Under the terms of the Montreux Convention, Turkey has sovereignty over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits (the Turkish Straits) connecting the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. In February 2022 Turkey closed the straits to all warships (except those returning to their bases in the Black Sea), in an effort to preserve the naval balance of power in the region. In early January 2024, the Turkish government confirmed that it would not allow passage of the vessels through the Straits for as long as the war continues, (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, [Statement regarding disinformation about UK mine hunting ships](#), 2 January 2024). An explanation of the Convention can be found in The Conversation, [What the Montreux Convention is \[...\]](#), March 2022

February 2025 Russia reached an agreement for a new base in Sudan on the Red Sea.¹⁴¹

In December HTS leader Ahmad al-Sharaa said that “we do not want Russia to leave Syria in the way that some wish”, citing the importance of Russian-supplied arms and management of power plants. However, he said he expected Russian forces to withdraw.¹⁴²

Reports in February and March 2025 suggest that Russia may be able to retain some of its bases in Syria following negotiations with the HTS authorities. The HTS interim defence minister said that Russia’s attitude towards it had “improved significantly” since December and “if we get benefits” from Russia retaining a presence, it would be allowed.¹⁴³

Reuters news-agency reports from unnamed officials that Israel has been lobbying the US to ensure Syria remains decentralised, including through keeping Russia nbases. This reflects Israeli mistrust of HTS and Turkey. The US and Israel have not commented.¹⁴⁴

Neither Russia nor HTS have confirmed any agreements.¹⁴⁵

Other Russia-HTS engagement

Foreign Affairs analysts note that a desire of HTS to diversify its allies beyond Turkey and a lack of US engagement (it has not removed any sanctions, for example), has created an opening for Russia to engage with the interim authorities and potentially keep its bases.¹⁴⁶

In January 2025, HTS raised possibly requesting compensation from Russia. The HTS interim foreign minister, Asaad al-Shibani, said Syria owes Russia around US\$8 billion.¹⁴⁷

In February the interim foreign minister said that the “Syrian people have wounds and pain that they suffered at the hands of” Russia and Iran and Syria “must feel comfortable with this relationship”.¹⁴⁸

In February President Putin spoke to the HTS leader and HTS-appointed interim president, Ahmed al-Sharaa.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴¹ [Following Syria losses, Russia seeks to double down on Africa](#), Al Monitor, 22 February 2025

¹⁴² [Syria’s de-facto leader wants to maintain ‘respectful’ ties with Iran, Russia](#), RFE, 29 December 2024

¹⁴³ [Syria could allow Russia to keep its bases, new defence minister says](#), Washington Post, 6 February 2025

¹⁴⁴ [Israel lobbies US to keep Russian bases in “weak” Syria, sources say](#), Reuters, 28 February 2025

¹⁴⁵ [Russia set to keep reduced military presence in Syria](#), Bloomberg, 17 February 2025

¹⁴⁶ [Russia is chasing a deal to keep its military bases in Syria](#), Wall Street Journal, 6 March 2025

¹⁴⁷ [Syria asks Russia for reparations](#), Financial Times, 29 January 2025

¹⁴⁸ [Syria’s interim foreign minister says Russia-Iran ties to Assad \[...\]](#), AP News, 12 February 2025

¹⁴⁹ [Russia’s Putin and Syria’s Sharaa hold first call since Assad fall](#), Al Monitor, 12 February 2025

In both February and March Russia has also delivered Syrian banknotes to Damascus, assisting Syria's liquidity crisis.¹⁵⁰

Russia and Syria

- Italian Institute for International Political Studies, [Russia's evolving footprint in the Middle East and North Africa](#), February 2025
- Chatham House, [Russia has lost prestige after the fall of Assad. It has also been freed from a difficult partner](#), December 2024
- [What Assad's fall means for Russia](#), BBC Monitoring, December 2024
- Wilson Center, [With Syria's collapse Russian's regional play disintegrates](#), December 2024

3.3

Turkey

What are Turkey's aims in Syria?

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

Turkey has been focused on four objectives:

- defeating Islamic State/Daesh
- combatting Kurdish groups it says are tied to terrorist activity by the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in Turkey (see above, section 2.5)
- creating the conditions to allow for the return of Syrian refugees (Syria hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees, at 2.9 million)
- implementing UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015) for a political settlement to the conflict.¹⁵¹

In October 2023, the Turkish parliament voted to extend Turkey's military operations in Syria and Iraq for a further two years.¹⁵²

In 2023 and 2024, Turkey was in talks on potentially re-establishing diplomatic relations with the Assad government. These failed. Turkey asked President Assad to take steps to contain the Kurdish-led groups that it views

¹⁵⁰ [Syria receives local currency printed in Russia](#), Reuters, 14 February 2025; [Syria gets new cash shipments from Russia amid warming ties](#), Reuters, 6 March 2025

¹⁵¹ [Erdogan has interests in Syria's reignited war](#), DW, 4 December 2024; Atlantic Council, [What does Turkey gain from the rebel offensive in Syria?](#), 5 December 2024

¹⁵² [Turkey extends Syria, Iraq operations by another two years](#), France 24, 17 October 2023

as linked to the PKK in Turkey and to allow for the return of Syrian refugees. President Assad asked Turkey to withdraw its forces from Syria and end its support for armed groups in Syria.¹⁵³

The failure of these talks is reportedly one reason why Turkey backed the HTS offensive in November 2024.¹⁵⁴ The Turkish Government has publicly rejected the claim.¹⁵⁵

Turkey and Syria

- Crisis Group, [Turkey's tightrope in post-Assad Syria](#), February 2025
- Foreign Policy, [Turkey hasn't won anything yet in Syria](#), January 2025
- Royal United Services Institute, [Can Turkey stabilise Syria?](#), January 2025
- BBC Monitoring, [What Assad's fall means for Turkey](#), December 2024
- Wilson Center, [What Syria's opposition resurgence means for Ankara](#), December 2024
- Stimson, [What Turkey hopes to gain from the HTS offensive in Syria](#), December 2024

What is the Kurdistan Workers' Party?

The [Kurdistan Workers' Party](#) (PKK), has waged an insurgency since 1984 against the Turkish state, seeking greater cultural and political rights and an autonomous or independent Kurdish state. The conflict has resulted in nearly 40,000 deaths. The PKK is proscribed as a terrorist organisation by the UK, United States and the European Union.¹⁵⁶

Although some ceasefires were in place in the 2000s, there have been substantial hostilities since 2015 and increased Turkish military activity against Kurdish groups in northern Syria and Iraq, which Turkey argues are linked to terrorist activity in the country.¹⁵⁷

As set out above, in section 2.5, the PKK and Turkey have been in talks about the group disarming in 2024/25. The SDF says talks will not affect them.

Turkey considers the PKK to have links to Kurdish groups in north-east Syria, including the [People's Defense Units](#) (YPG). The YPG forms part of the wider

¹⁵³ [What hurdles face Syria normalisation?](#), BBC Monitoring, 16 July 2024

¹⁵⁴ [Turkey could benefit from rebel offensive in Syria: experts](#), France 24, 12 December 2024

¹⁵⁵ [Where Turkey stands as Syrian government falls to opposition insurgents](#), AP, 8 December 2024

¹⁵⁶ Commons Library, [Turkey under Erdoğan: recent developments and the 2023 elections](#), section 1.4

¹⁵⁷ Washington Institute, [Turkey's war in northern Iraq: By the numbers](#), 28 July 2022

Syrian Democratic Forces coalition (see section 2.5), though the US, UK and EU consider the PKK a terrorist group.¹⁵⁸

In November 2024 the UK Government said it recognises Turkey’s “legitimate security interests in Syria” and says it must “protect civilian lives and infrastructure, and to avoid destabilising activity”.¹⁵⁹

Statements after Assad’s fall in 2024

In response to a question on whether Turkey would provide military support or training to Syria, in December the Turkish Defence minister said that the country is “ready to provide the necessary support if the new administration requests”. The minister also reiterated Turkey would act against the PKK.¹⁶⁰

In December 2024 Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said that Syria “will be cleared of the PKK and Daesh [Islamic State] and that the “elements within the YPG/PKK that are not Syrian and have the status of international terrorists [...] must leave” Syria.¹⁶¹

In February 2025 Turkey said it would be willing to work with Jordan, Syria and Iraq to counter Islamic State. Its Foreign Minister said this would allow the United States to cut its ties with the SDF.¹⁶² Jordan and Iraq have not publicly commented on the proposal.¹⁶³ For US-SDF ties, see section 6.

In December 2024 Turkey reopened its embassy in Syria.¹⁶⁴ In February HTS appointed interim Syrian president, Al-Sharaa, visited Turkey for talks with President Erdogan.¹⁶⁵

3.4

Israel and the occupied Golan Heights

History of Israel-Syria relations

Israel and Syria have technically been in a state of war since 1948. There were direct military engagements in the Arab Israeli wars of 1948, 1967, and 1973. They were both also participants in the Lebanese Civil War (1975 to 1990). Syria has not recognised the state of Israel. There was no direct conflict during the Syrian civil war between Assad forces and Israel, however.

¹⁵⁸ SWP, [Turkey’s military operations in Syria and Iraq](#), 30 May 2022. Home Office, [Proscribed terrorist groups or organisations](#), 26 November 2021.

¹⁵⁹ PQ 15621 [[Syria: Turkey](#)] , 28 November 2024

¹⁶⁰ [Turkey ready to offer military training to Syria \[...\]](#), Reuters, 15 December 2024

¹⁶¹ [What are Turkey’s plans for northeast Syria?](#), BBC Monitoring, 24 December 2024

¹⁶² [Turkey says it will join with neighbours to fight the Islamic State group](#), ABC News, 2 February 2025

¹⁶³ [Turkey escalates push to replace Kurds \[...\]](#), Al Monitor, 12 February 2025

¹⁶⁴ [Turkish embassy in Damascus resumes operations after 12 years](#), AA, 14 December 2024

¹⁶⁵ [Syria’s al-Sharaa, Turkey’s Erdogan talk Kurdish fighters \[...\]](#), Al Jazeera, 4 February 2025

During the Syrian civil war Israel conducted air strikes on Lebanese [Hezbollah](#) and the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC, an Iranian force that works overseas to support armed and terrorist groups).¹⁶⁶

Status of the Golan Heights and Israeli settlements

In 1967 Israel captured the [Golan Heights](#), in south-western Syria, in the Third Arab Israeli War. The Golan Heights are strategically important, being a site of high ground and adding depth to Israeli or Syrian defences.¹⁶⁷

The Israeli Knesset (parliament) passed a law annexing them in 1980. Around 20,000 Israeli settlers and 20,000 Syrians live in the Golan. Syria, under Assad, said it would not agree to a peace agreement with Israel until Israel withdraws.¹⁶⁸

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

Strengthening the Golan is strengthening the State of Israel, and it is especially important at this time. We will continue to hold onto it, cause it to blossom, and settle in it.¹⁶⁹

UN Security Council Resolution 497 (1981) says the Israeli legislation of 1980 is “null and void and without international legal effect” and “demands” that Israel rescind the legislation.¹⁷⁰

In 2019 the US recognised the Golan Heights as Israeli territory. The UK Government does not recognise their annexation by Israel.¹⁷¹

Israel and the separation zone, from December 2024

In early December 2024, Israel Defence Forces (IDF) reinforced their positions on the Golan Heights and occupied some posts in the [demilitarised buffer zone](#) between Israel and Syria. The zone was established in 1974, after the Fourth Arab Israeli War.¹⁷²

The 1974 agreement, endorsed by the UN Security Council, establishes a line of separation in southern Syria, with Israeli forces allowed to remain west of

¹⁶⁶ See Commons Library, [Syria's civil war in 2023: Assad back in the Arab League](#), section 2.5

¹⁶⁷ [Golan Heights profile](#), BBC News, 29 August 2023

¹⁶⁸ As above

¹⁶⁹ [Netanyahu says he spoke to Trump about need for “victory” \[...\]](#), CNN, 15 December 2024

¹⁷⁰ [UN Security Council Resolution 497 \(1981\)](#)

¹⁷¹ Trump White House, [Remarks by President Trump at signing of presidential proclamation \[...\]](#), 26 March 2019; FCDO, [UK position on the Golan Heights has not changed](#), 27 March 2019: PQ 18888 [[Golan Heights: Syria](#)], 17 December 2024

¹⁷² [IDF deploys in Golan buffer zone](#), Times of Israel, 8 December 2024

what is termed “line A-1” and Syrian forces to the east of “line A”. The UN Disengagement Observer Force is stationed in the separation area.¹⁷³

Media reports suggest Israel had been strengthening its positions in the frontier area earlier in 2024.¹⁷⁴

In December 2024 Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that Assad government forces had withdrawn from the border, and this marked a collapse of the agreement.¹⁷⁵ In a separate letter to the UN Security Council, the Israeli representative to the UN said the country “remains committed to the framework of the 1974 Disengagement Agreement”.¹⁷⁶

The Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz said some armed groups from Syria had “infiltrated areas near the border” in violation of the agreement. He said the IDF had taken “limited and temporary control”.¹⁷⁷

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

- On 9 December Israel said the IDF had temporarily deployed “in a few points and in a limited capacity east of Line A, focusing on specific locations where defensive measures are necessary”.¹⁷⁸
- On 11 December the Israeli Defence Minister, Israel Katz, said that he has ordered a “sterile defensive zone” to be created in southern Syria, without a permanent Israeli presence, to limit any potential threats to Israel.¹⁷⁹
- On 13 December, Mr Katz told Israeli troops to be “prepare[d] to remain” throughout the winter.¹⁸⁰
- On 28 January, Mr Katz said that the IDF will remain on the “summit of the Hermon and the security zone indefinitely to ensure the security of the communities of the Golan Heights and the north”. He said “we will not allow hostile forces to establish themselves in the security zone in southern Syria” or be reliant on others for Israeli security.¹⁸¹
- On 11 March, Mr Katz said that “the IDF is prepared to stay in Syria for an unlimited amount of time. We will hold the security area in Hermon and

¹⁷³ [UNSC 338 \(1973\)](#), [UNSC Resolution 350 \(1974\)](#) and [S/11032/Add.1, May 1974](#)

¹⁷⁴ [UN force says Israeli work on Syrian frontier saw “severe violations” \[...\]](#), AP, 12 November 2024

¹⁷⁵ YouTube, [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s statement \[...\]](#), 9 December 2024, at 00:40

¹⁷⁶ UN Security Council, [S/2024/887, Letter from \[...\] Israel \[...\]](#) (PDF), 9 December 2024

¹⁷⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [FM Sa’ar briefs foreign journalists](#), 9 December 2024

¹⁷⁸ UN Security Council, [S/2024/887, Letter from \[...\] Israel \[...\]](#) (PDF), 9 December 2024

¹⁷⁹ [PM: Israel wants “correct” ties with new Syrian regime](#), Times of Israel, 11 December 2024

¹⁸⁰ [Israeli troops to remain in Syria over winter](#), Telegraph, 13 December 2024

¹⁸¹ [Defense minister, in Syria buffer zone, says IDF to stay indefinitely](#), Times of Israel, 28 January 2025

make sure that all the security zone in southern Syria is demilitarized and clear of weapons and threats”¹⁸².

In February, it was reported for the first time that IDF came under fire when in the buffer zone. Armed groups linked to Assad claimed responsibility.¹⁸³

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

We demand the complete demilitarization of southern Syria in the provinces of Quneitra, Daraa and Suwayda from the forces of the new regime. Likewise, we will not tolerate any threat to the Druze community in southern Syria.¹⁸⁴

In March, Israel reiterated that it would act to protect the Syrian Druze community, including in Jaramana, a suburb of the capital Damascus.¹⁸⁵

The February statement led to protests in Syria and criticism by some Islamist groups against HTS for allowing continued Israeli strikes. HTS has criticised Israeli actions (see below).¹⁸⁶

Israeli attacks in Syria from December 2024

In December 2024 the IDF confirmed it conducted aerial attacks on “strategic capabilities left by the Syrian military so it will not fall into the hands of the jihadists”. Prime Minister Netanyahu said that the new Syrian authorities must not allow Iran to re-establish itself in Syria or allow the transfer of Iranian arms.¹⁸⁷

In December Foreign Minister Gideon Saar said Israel had struck suspected chemical weapon and long-range missile sites.¹⁸⁸ On 10 December the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said it had conducted 350 air strikes and destroyed between 70% and 80% of former Assad government military capabilities. This included airbases, air defences, weapons, and production sites.¹⁸⁹

These were not the first confirmed attacks by Israel in 2024: in September it launched a raid against an Iranian missile manufacturing plant in Syria.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸² [Atop Mt Hermon, Katz says Syrian leader will see indefinite IDF \[...\]](#), Times of Israel, 11 March 2025

¹⁸³ [IDF troops operating in Syria buffer zone come under fire \[...\]](#), Times of Israel, 1 February 2025

¹⁸⁴ [Netanyahu says Israel won't allow Syrian forces 'south of Damascus'](#), VOA, 23 February 2025

¹⁸⁵ [Netanyahu and Katz direct IDF to “prepare to defend” Syrian Druze suburb \[...\]](#), Times of Israel, 1 March 2025; [After violence in Syria, Israel says it is prepared to defend Syria's Druze](#), Reuters, 10 March 2025; [Israel says it will let Syrian Druze workers cross \[...\]](#), Reuters, 9 March 2025

¹⁸⁶ [Protests held in southern Syria against Israel PM's comment on Druze](#), BBC Monitoring, 25 February 2025; [Islamists warn of possible Israeli invasion \[...\]](#), BBC Monitoring, 26 February 2025

¹⁸⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [PM Netanyahu at the Kirya in Tel Aviv](#), 10 December 2024

¹⁸⁸ [\[...\] Israel temporarily took over Syrian areas \[...\]](#), Israel National News, 9 December 2024

¹⁸⁹ [In historic campaign across Syria \[...\]](#), Times of Israel, 10 December 2024

¹⁹⁰ [Israeli army confirms elite unit raided Syrian missile production facility](#), Haaretz, 1 January 2025

The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) monitors military activity. From 8 to 16 December, it documented 498 Israeli air strikes across Syria.¹⁹¹ The Armed Conflict and Location Event Data (ACLED) Project records around 100 Israeli air strikes in the first half of December 2024, around a third of the total across the whole of 2024.¹⁹²

In February 2025 the IDF said it conducted an airstrike on an arms depot it linked to Hamas near Damascus and at other sites in southern Syria.¹⁹³ Defence Minister Israel Katz said Israel was “now attacking strongly in southern Syria as part of the new policy we have defined of pacifying southern Syria”.¹⁹⁴ ACLED reports “at least” 27 Israeli operations in January and February 2025, targeting military and civilian facilities.¹⁹⁵

UN statements that the 1974 agreement remains in force

On 10 December the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, said the Israeli action represented a “very troubling development” and “needs to stop”.¹⁹⁶

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

The Secretary-General stresses that the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement remains in force, condemns all actions that would be inconsistent with the Agreement, and calls on the parties to the Agreement to uphold their obligations under this instrument, including by ending all unauthorized presence in the area of separation and refraining from any action that would undermine the ceasefire and stability in Golan.¹⁹⁷

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

UNDOF has informed its Israeli counterparts that these actions constitute a violation of the 1974 Disengagement Agreement. UNDOF urges all parties to respect their obligations under the Agreement, cease all military activities in the area of separation, and uphold the terms of the 1974 agreement to preserve stability in the Golan.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹¹ SOHR, [Nearly 500 airstrikes destroy the remaining \[...\]](#), 18 December 2024

¹⁹² ACLED, [Syria: Israeli airstrikes reach an all-time high](#), 19 December 2024

¹⁹³ [IDF says it carried out airstrike on Hamas arms depot \[...\]](#), Times of Israel, 8 February 2025

¹⁹⁴ [Israel says it is conducting strikes in southern Syria](#), ABC News, 25 February 2025

¹⁹⁵ ACLED, [Regional overview March 2025](#), 7 March 2025

¹⁹⁶ UN Office of the Special Envoy for Syria, [UN Special envoy for Syria \[...\]](#), 10 December 2024

¹⁹⁷ UN, [Note to correspondents: Syria](#), 12 December 2024

¹⁹⁸ UN Peacekeeping, [UNDOF press statement](#), 13 December 2024

Syrian and international response

On 15 December HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa said Israeli forces “have clearly crossed the disengagement line in Syria, which threatens a new unjustified escalation”.¹⁹⁹ He has said he is committed to the 1974 agreement.²⁰⁰

In January, he said he would welcome a UN force to monitor the zone and that the removal of Iran and Hezbollah from Syria means Israel no longer has a reason to remain.²⁰¹

On 10 December 2024 UK Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, said he had spoken to Foreign Minister Saar on 9 December in respect of IDF operations and said there “are legitimate security concerns for Israel, particularly in the context of a country that has housed [Islamic State], Daesh and al-Qaeda”.²⁰²

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

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

The UK's position on the Golan Heights remains clear: they are occupied territory, and we do not recognise Israel's annexation.²⁰³

France has called for Israel to withdraw from the buffer zone.²⁰⁴ In December 2024 the US State Department says it wants the 1974 agreement upheld.²⁰⁵

Arab states, as well as Iran and Turkey, have been critical of Israeli military action as a violation of Syrian territory and international law.²⁰⁶

Israeli call for attacks on Kurdish-led forces to stop

The Israeli Foreign Minister said that attacks on Kurdish forces in the north east of Syria must stop and the “international community must protect those who fought bravely against ISIS” as well as other minority groups.²⁰⁷ Israel has said there was “no justification for the continuation of Turkish aggression”.²⁰⁸

¹⁹⁹ [Israel intensifies Syria attacks, but HTS leader says \[...\]](#), Al Jazeera, 15 December 2024

²⁰⁰ [Jolani: Syria won't be used as a launchpad for attacks on Israel](#), Times, 16 December 2024

²⁰¹ [Syria's de facto lead says country ready to welcome UN forces \[...\]](#), Reuters, 16 January 2025

²⁰² HC Deb, [9 December 2024](#), c700

²⁰³ HL 4180 [[Syria: Israel](#)], 28 January 2025

²⁰⁴ [France tells Israel to withdraw its forces \[...\]](#), Le Monde, 11 December 2024

²⁰⁵ US Department of State, [Department press briefing](#), 10 December 2024

²⁰⁶ [Arab countries condemn Israel's seizure of buffer zone in Syria's Golan Heights](#), AA, 10 December 2024; Iran Foreign Ministry, [Iran slams repeated Israeli raids on Syrian infrastructure](#), 10 December 2024; [Qatar, Turkey, Egypt condemn Israel's activity \[...\]](#), Times of Israel, 10 December 2024

²⁰⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [FM Sa'ar briefs foreign journalists](#), 9 December 2024

²⁰⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Israel rejects Turkish statements \[...\]](#), 17 December 2024

4 Political settlement and HTS declaration of interim government

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has appointed a transitional government for Syria and its leader as interim president. International actors have called for inclusive negotiations on Syria's political future under UN frameworks. However, the risk of violence and a power vacuum continues. As set out above, the Syrian opposition is not united, and some violence has occurred.

4.1 UN Security Council Resolution 2254

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

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

Expresses its support, in this regard, for a Syrian-led political process that is facilitated by the United Nations and, within a target of six months, establishes credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance and sets a schedule and process for drafting a new constitution, and further expresses its support for free and fair elections, pursuant to the new constitution, to be held within 18 months and administered under supervision of the United Nations, to the satisfaction of the governance and to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability, with all Syrians, including members of the diaspora, eligible to participate.²⁰⁹

Successive rounds of UN-led talks failed to make substantial progress on a peace settlement or the development of a new Syrian constitution. The last talks in Geneva on a new constitution took place in 2022.²¹⁰

The continued failure of UN-led peace and constitutional talks allowed other diplomatic paths pursued by Russia, Turkey and Iran. Since 2017, Russia, Iran and Turkey have participated in talks in Astana (formerly NurSultan, the

²⁰⁹ [UN Security Council Resolution 2254 \(2015\)](#) (PDF), paras 2 and 4

²¹⁰ [UN envoy urges Syria to rejoin Geneva constitution talks](#), Al Monitor, 17 March 2024

capital of Kazakhstan). While the US participated as an observer, it criticised them as undermining the Geneva process. The process has had some success in de-escalating the conflict militarily but has not found a political solution.²¹¹

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

What has the UK said on the resolution?

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

We are closely monitoring developments in Syria and urge de-escalation by all parties and the protection of civilians and infrastructure to prevent further displacement and disruption of humanitarian access. The current escalation only underscores the urgent need for a Syrian-led political solution to the conflict, in line with UNSCR 2254.²¹²

The UK representative to the UN Security Council, James Kariuki, reiterated this position to the council on 3 December 2024.²¹³

Astana members and Arab states on the resolution

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

The Ministers stressed the need to stop military operations in preparation for launching a comprehensive political process, based on Security Council Resolution 2254, to put an end to the military escalation that leads to the shedding of more innocent and defenseless blood and prolonging the crisis, and to preserve the unity, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria and to protect it from slipping into chaos and terrorism and ensure the voluntary return of refugees and the displaced.²¹⁴

What have others said on the resolution?

- European Union: High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Kaja Kallas, has called for all stakeholders to engage with UNSCR 2254 (2015) and ensure an “orderly, peaceful and inclusive transition”.²¹⁵

²¹¹ Sada, [The Astana process six years on](#), 1 August 2023

²¹² FCDO, [Joint statements on developments in Syria](#), 2 December 2024

²¹³ FCDO, [Only a Syrian-led political solution will resolve this conflict](#), 3 December 2024

²¹⁴ [Joint statement by foreign ministers of Arab countries and the Astana process](#), Qatar News Agency, 8 December 2024

²¹⁵ European Council, [Syria: statement by the high representative](#), 9 December 2024

- Russia: says it maintains contacts with all Syrian opposition groups and “strongly supports” efforts to establish a political process under the UN resolution.²¹⁶
- China: backs a “Syrian-owned” process under UNSC 2254 (2015).²¹⁷
- Arab states: Arab League states had begun to re-engage with Assad from 2023. Since his fall, Arab states with embassies have kept these open (these include Saudi Arabia and the UAE) while others have now reopened them (such as Qatar).²¹⁸ Eight Arab countries have issued a joint statement calling for a transition in line with UNSC 2254 (2015).²¹⁹
- Iran: says it backs the resolution and that the “fate of Syria and its future must be determined [...] without foreign interference or imposition”.²²⁰

4.2

Transitional government declared, December 2024

Assad Prime Minister initially continues in office

Following the resignation of Assad, his Prime Minister, Mohammad Jalali, said he would manage any transition to opposition forces. He had been appointed in September 2024 by Assad following elections to the Syrian parliament, which were [dominated by the ruling Baath party of Assad](#).²²¹ He remained in office until 10 December 2024, when a new government was appointed.²²²

The Baath party also announced it would suspend its work and activity until further notice, and that properties and finance would be handed over to the Syrian interior ministry.²²³

Some Assad government members have also reportedly left Syria for Lebanon.²²⁴

²¹⁶ Russian Foreign Ministry, [Foreign ministry statement](#), 8 December 2024

²¹⁷ [China backs “Syrian-led, “Syrian owned” \[...\]](#), AA, 13 December 2024

²¹⁸ [Bahrain “ready to cooperate with new Syria govt”](#), New Arab, 13 December 2024

²¹⁹ [Eight Arab countries vow to support \[...\]](#), Al- Jazeera, 14 December 2024

²²⁰ [Iran on Syria: people will decide the future](#), Tehran Times, 8 December 2024

²²¹ [Syria’s Assad tasks EU-sanctions former minister to form government](#), BBC Monitoring, 14 September 2024; [Syria announces parliamentary election results](#), BBC Monitoring, 18 July 2024

²²² [Syria’s PM al-Jalali says ready to cooperate \[...\]](#), Al Arabiya, 8 December 2024

²²³ [Syria’s Baath party suspends work](#), Abram, 11 December 2024

²²⁴ [Did Syrian officials flee to Beirut?](#), L’Orient, 11 December 2024

Declaration of transitional government and president

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

The transitional government will be led by Mohammed al-Bashir, who led the HTS administration, which was called the “Salvation Government”.²²⁵

Two women were appointed to leadership positions: Aisha al-Dibs to the Women’s Affairs Office (a ministry), and Maysaa Sabrine as acting head of the Syrian Central Bank. Aisha al-Dibs faced criticism for comments following her appointment that women should “not [...] go beyond the priorities of their God-given nature”. In response, the interim foreign minister said “we will work to stand by women’s issues and support their full rights”.²²⁶

In February, it was confirmed a new government will be in place from 1 March, which the interim foreign minister says will “represent the Syrian people as much as possible and take its diversity into account”.²²⁷

In January 2025 the HTS leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, was named interim president of Syria. He will form an interim legislative council to govern Syria until a new constitution is approved.²²⁸

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

4.3

What has the interim government done and said?

Constitution and politics

- No elections: Ahmad al-Sharaa says elections could take up to four or five years, citing the need to draft a constitution and to take an accurate census of the population (many Syrians are displaced abroad).²²⁹
- It has annulled the 2012 Syrian constitution and parliament (dominated by the Baathist party of former President Assad).²³⁰

²²⁵ [Syria’s new transitional PM calls for stability and calm](#), BBC News, 10 December 2024; [Who’s who in Syria’s first interim government](#), Al Monitor, 11 December 2024; [HTS appointees dominate Syria top civilian and military leadership](#), BBC Monitoring, 15 January 2025

²²⁶ [Who is Maysaa Sabrine, first woman to lead Central Bank of Syria?](#), Al Monitor, 30 December 2024

²²⁷ [Syria to have new government on March 1](#), Al Monitor, 12 February 2025

²²⁸ [Ahmed al-Sharaa named Syria’s transitional president](#), BBC News, 29 January 2025

²²⁹ [New elections could take up to four years, Syrian rebel leader says](#), BBC News, 29 December 2024

²³⁰ [Leader of rebels who toppled Syria president Bashar Assad \[...\]](#), AP News, 29 January 2025

- National dialogue: a national dialogue has been announced, to include all members of Syrian society. This will contribute to the development of a new constitution. Reports suggest there will be between 1,000 and 1,500 members and dialogue is open to Kurdish and other groups.²³¹

Many of those on the preparatory committee for the dialogue are linked to Sharaa or HTS. It contains no Kurdish members, Shias or Alawites, but does include one Christian. The SDF say they may not recognise the committee if they are excluded.²³² Assad figures are also excluded.²³³

The preparatory committee held meetings in late February, in which it agreed to form a committee to draft a new constitution, the formation of a temporary legislative council, and for the respect of human rights, including those of women, children, people with disabilities and young people. The conclusions are not binding.²³⁴

Armed forces

- There will be an amnesty to those conscripted to fight in Assad forces.²³⁵ However, not all opposition groups have endorsed the amnesty, and some have called for “revenge attacks” against Assad government officials.²³⁶ Rights group report some have taken place.²³⁷
- It has dissolved the armed forces of the Assad government and will secure any chemical weapons depots.²³⁸
- All armed groups in Syria will be disbanded (including HTS) and only the armed forces of the new Syrian state will be allowed to bear arms.²³⁹

However, Syria remains a patchwork of armed factions.²⁴⁰ The SDF remains a separate armed group though has agreed in principle to merge with other forces in 2025.²⁴¹ Talks with Druze groups remain ongoing.²⁴²

²³¹ [Preparations begin for Syrian national dialogue](#), BBC Monitoring, 31 December 2024

²³² [Who is on Syria's national dialogue committee?](#), BBC Monitoring, 18 February 2025

²³³ [The talks shaping Syria's new constitution will exclude Kurdish forces \[...\]](#), AP, 14 February 2025

²³⁴ [Syria dialogue conference condemns Israeli occupation in south](#), BBC Monitoring, 25 February 2025; [With 18 points...national dialogue concludes its work](#), Enab Baladi, 26 February 2025

²³⁵ [HTS-led coalition announces general amnesty for Assad soldiers](#), New Arab, 9 December 2024

²³⁶ [Islamists call for retribution against Assad 'henchmen' \[...\]](#), BBC Monitoring, 12 December 2024

²³⁷ [Revenge attacks, "sectarian strife", reported](#), BBC Monitoring, 12 December 2024; [Syria's new leaders struggle to contain revenge killings \[...\]](#), Washington Post, 18 December 2024

²³⁸ [Syrian rebel leader says he will dissolve toppled regime forces \[...\]](#), Reuters, 12 December 2024;

[Syrian leadership announces dissolving 'all' factions \[...\]](#), BBC Monitoring, 29 January 2025

²³⁹ [HTS chief discusses Israel, Iran, Russia](#), BBC Monitoring, 15 December 2024

²⁴⁰ [Can Syria's new rulers sustain its fragile peace?](#), FT, 24 February 2025

²⁴¹ [Syria's interim president signs deal with Kurdish-led SDF \[...\]](#), Reuters, 11 March 2025

²⁴² [Druze factions announce intention to join Syrian army](#), BBC Monitoring, 7 January 2025; [Syria's Druze set out basis for security coordination with Damascus](#), BBC Monitoring, 12 March 2025

- Foreign states have reportedly warned the HTS on its appointment of some foreign fighters to senior military positions.²⁴³

Society

- Women: officials have been told not to interfere with women's dress or appearance.²⁴⁴ Al-Sharaa has faced criticism from some within HTS and other Islamist and Jihadist groups for allowing his wife to visit Turkey when he visited and for not wearing the niqab (full face cover).²⁴⁵
- Education: in December the interim education minister said the right to schooling for boys and girls would remain.²⁴⁶ In January the interim education ministry announced a new curriculum, pending further reviews. The interim minister said "inaccuracies" in the Islamic education curriculum had been corrected. Reported planned changes include removal of material on pre-Islamic religions in Syria.²⁴⁷
- Refugees: Prime Minister Bashir has called for the return of refugees.²⁴⁸
- Religion and belief: the "political affairs bureau", affiliated with the Idlib government backed by HTS, has announced it would protect Christians, Shia and Alawite Muslims, and other minorities in Syria.²⁴⁹

Al-Sharaa has met with minority groups including Christians.²⁵⁰ A two-day public holiday was also announced to coincide with Christmas. This drew criticism from some Islamist and Jihadist groups.²⁵¹

- Human rights abuses: the interim authorities have said they will seek accountability for those who committed human rights abuses, including those who have fled abroad.²⁵²

Economy and sanctions

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

²⁴³ [Western powers warn Syria over foreign jihadists in army \[...\]](#), Reuters, 10 January 2025

²⁴⁴ [Syrian government services to a "complete halt" \[...\]](#), ABC News, 9 December 2024

²⁴⁵ [Islamists criticise public appearance of Syrian leader's wife](#), BBC Monitoring, 14 February 2025

²⁴⁶ [Syrian girls right to schooling unrestricted \[...\]](#), Reuters, 19 December 2024

²⁴⁷ [New Syrian government's school curriculum changes spark concern](#), BBC News, 2 January 2025;

[After outrages, Syria's education minister clarifies curriculum changes](#), Al Monitor, 2 January 2025

²⁴⁸ [We want to bring all Syrian refugees home \[...\]](#), AA, 11 December 2024; [Interim Syrian PM vows to rebuild country \[...\]](#), Arab Weekly, 11 December 2024

²⁴⁹ [HTS linked body vows to protect Christians \[...\]](#), BBC Monitoring, 10 December 2024; [HTS linked body reaches out to minority communities \[...\]](#), BBC Monitoring, 5 December 2024; [HTS linked authority reaches out to Shias \[...\]](#), BBC Monitoring, 30 November 2024

²⁵⁰ [Syria's de facto leader Sharaa meets Christian clerics](#), BBC Monitoring, 1 January 2025

²⁵¹ [Syrian Islamists condemn New Year outreach to Christians](#), BBC Monitoring, 1 January 2025

²⁵² [HTS leader pledges to punish ex-government figures \[...\]](#), BBC Monitoring, 10 December 2024; [Syria's Sharaa gives first address to nation as president](#), BBC Monitoring, 31 January 2025

The interim authorities have said they plan to increase public sector salaries, reduce customs fees for external trade, and build ties with neighbouring states to address sanctions, raise funds and promote development.²⁵³

The interim foreign minister says the lifting of sanctions against Syria is “key” to establishing stability and that the “reason for these sanctions [Assad] is now in Moscow”. He said the country would be open for foreign investment.²⁵⁴

Interim President Sharaa also criticised the “socialist” economic system of Assad as producing corruption. The interim authorities have said they wish to privatise state-owned companies.²⁵⁵ The number of public sector workers is expected to half.²⁵⁶ Currently, 25% of the population is unemployed and 90% live below the poverty line.²⁵⁷

4.4

What human rights concerns have been raised?

Violence in Alawite areas in March 2025

See above, section 2.1, for the violence against Alawites and other civilians.

Monitors have raised concerns for some violations since December:

- HTS monopolisation of power: in February 2025 several opposition groups to HTS met in Switzerland to discuss the “monopolisation” of power by HTS and argued it is establishing a “new totalitarian regime” with a lack of non-HTS voices. The group, known as the Syrian national meeting, say they will continue to monitor developments.²⁵⁸
- Sectarian attacks: the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reports sectarian attacks and incidents across parts of Syria, including against Alawites. Local security forces have reportedly

²⁵³ [How is Syria's government addressing its economic challenges?](#), BBC Monitoring, 31 January 2025

²⁵⁴ [We need Syria to be a place of peace and development \[...\]](#), Arab News, 22 January 2025

²⁵⁵ [Sharaa discusses elections, transition first Syrian media interview](#), BBC Monitoring, 4 February 2025; [Syria to dismantle Assad-era socialism, says foreign minister](#), FT, 22 January 2025

²⁵⁶ [Syria's new Islamist rulers to roll back state \[...\]](#), Reuters, 31 January 2025

²⁵⁷ UN Development Programme, [The impact of the conflict in Syria](#), February 2025, p9

²⁵⁸ [Opponents of Syria's new government meet in Geneva, criticise Sharaa](#), Al Monitor, 19 February 2025

intervened to contain the attacks.²⁵⁹ Reported attacks include on an Alawite shrine and burning of a Christmas tree.²⁶⁰

- Protests for a secular state and women’s participation: in December SOHR reported that “thousands” of people gathered in Damascus to protest for a “secular state and women’s participation in politics”. The protests were not suppressed by security forces.²⁶¹
- “Revenge attacks”: SOHR reports 425 people have been killed in “revenge attacks” since the fall of Assad on 8 December 2024 to 11 February 2025.²⁶² See above section 2.1, for violence in early March 2025.

Further reading the interim authorities and challenges

- Chatham House, [Syria needs security—can Al-Sharqa build a united army to provide it?](#), March 2025
- Washington Institute, [Al-Sharqa is better than Assad](#), March 2025
- [Syria’s new rulers set ambitious economic goals. Are they achievable?](#), Al-Monitor, February 2025
- Crisis Group, [Key decisions loom as Syria enters new era](#), January 2025
- Foreign Affairs, [Syria’s post authoritarian trap](#), January 2025
- The Economist, [Syria has exchanged a vile dictator for an uncertain future](#), 12 December 2024
- Chatham House, [Syria’s challenges are even greater than those Libya faced in 2011](#), December 2024
- Foreign Policy, [Assad must face justice for his government’ atrocities](#), 8 December 2024
- New Humanitarian, [Syria faces huge humanitarian challenges as it begins post-Assad era](#), 9 December 2024
- Engelsberg Ideas, [Syria’s rebels won the war—can they win the peace?](#), 9 December 2024
- New York Times, [Assad’s rule was brutal. Will what comes next be better?](#), 9 December 2024
- Atlantic Council, [A blueprint for bringing about a new Syria](#), 10 December 2024

²⁵⁹ SOHR, [Attempts to stir up sectarian strife](#), 13 February 2025; [General security cordons sectarian protests \[...\]](#), 14 January 2025

²⁶⁰ SOHR, [Video footage showing attack on shrine in Aleppo](#), 25 December 2024; [Protests in Syria over Christmas tree burning](#), BBC News, 24 December 2024

²⁶¹ [Thousands protest \[...\] for a “civil democratic state”](#). BBC Monitoring, 20 December 2024

²⁶² SOHR, [SOHR documents death of 425 people in revengeful attacks](#), 11 February 2025

- Arab Center DC, [A new Syria is born: hopes and challenges](#), 11 December 2024
- Chatham House, [While international support is crucial, Syrians must lead their country's political transition](#), 11 December 2024
- Just Security, [Syria's pursuit of freedom and self-governance](#), 12 December 2024
- Human Rights Watch, [Post-Assad transition should center human rights](#), 12 December 2024

5

How have the UK, UN, US and EU responded to the interim government?

Sanctions on Syria

Other than UN sanctions against specific terrorist groups (including Islamic State/Daesh and HTS), there were no UN sanctions against Assad due to [vetoes by China and Russia at the UN Security Council](#). However, the United States, EU and UK apply a wide range of sanctions. These also include exemptions to allow for the delivery and distribution of humanitarian aid.²⁶³ These sanctions are set out below. The UK plans to bring forward legislation in 2025 to amend its sanctions regime to aid Syria's economic recovery. The EU is also planning amendments to its regime, likely focused on energy and infrastructure.

As set out above, in section 2.2, the US, EU and the UK designate HTS as a terrorist organisation. All three say it is too soon to make a judgement on removing the terrorist designation. All three said in December, however, that they are in direct contact with HTS to encourage an inclusive transition.²⁶⁴

5.1

G7 and international statements

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

credible, inclusive, and non-sectarian governance that ensures respect for the rule of law, universal human rights, including women's rights, the protection of all Syrians, including religious and ethnic minorities, transparency and accountability.²⁶⁵

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

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

²⁶³ Commons Library research briefing, [Syria's civil war in 2023](#), section 4.2

²⁶⁴ EU External Action, [Press remarks by High Representative](#), 16 December 2024; [EU to engage with Syrian leaders](#), Reuters, 17 December 2024 See below for UK/US.

²⁶⁵ FCDO, [G7 leaders' statement on Syria](#), 12 December 2024

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

Affirmed the full support for Syria's unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty. Stressed on the respect for human rights, including for women and minorities; preserve state institutions that serve the interests of, and provide critical services to, the Syrian people; exist in harmony with its neighbours; provide unfettered access for humanitarian aid and freedom of movement for IDPs and returnees; protect all foreign diplomatic facilities and personnel; secure and safely destroy chemical weapons stockpiles; and facilitate access to regime prisons and facilities for accountability and to determine the fate of missing Syrians and foreign nationals.²⁶⁶

Members of the UN Security Council (including China, France, Russia, the US and UK) have issued a statement in support of UNSCR 2254 (2015), the UNDOF, and for action against non-conventional weapons and Islamic State/Daesh in Syria.²⁶⁷

French and EU conference, February and March 2025

In February 2025 France hosted an international conference on Syria, attended by a range of Arab and European states, and all members of the G7 save for Italy and the United States. This followed ministerial meetings in Jordan and Saudi Arabia in December and January.

An EU conference will be held in March to mobilise international efforts to support a transition and ensure “a free, inclusive, united, sovereign, stable and peaceful Syria that is fully integrated in its regional and global environment”. Issues to be discussed include lifting economic sanctions and increasing the delivery of aid and technical assistance.²⁶⁸

5.2

United Kingdom

UK position on recognising governments

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

²⁶⁶ FCDO, [Joint statement on Syria](#), 14 December 2024

²⁶⁷ UN, [Security Council press statement on Syria](#), 17 December 2024

²⁶⁸ French Embassy in the UK, [Paris conference calls for successful post Assad transition](#), 13 February 2025

On 29 January, Ahmed Al-Sharaa was announced as Syrian President for a transitional period. We welcome Al Sharaa's announcement that he will form an inclusive transitional Government, leading to free and fair elections. This is a critical moment for Syria's transition and we will continue to judge Al Sharaa on his actions.²⁶⁹

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

Statements on HTS-appointed interim government

In December 2024 Prime Minister Keir Starmer said “we must not make the mistake of thinking that what comes next [in Syria] is necessarily going to be different and better”. He said the UK was talking to regional states to ensure Syria “complies with international law and protects the rights of civilians and minorities”.²⁷⁰

In the same month, David Lammy also said that the UK will take a “cautious” approach to HTS:

Thus far, HTS have offered reassurances to minorities in Aleppo, Hama and Damascus. They have also committed to co-operating with the international community over monitoring chemical weapons. We will judge HTS by their actions, monitoring closely how they and other parties to this conflict treat all civilians in areas they control.²⁷¹

In January 2025 the UK’s representative to the UN Security Council, Dame Barbara Woodward, said that the UK was “encouraged” by the transitional government and their:

timelines for drafting a new constitution and holding elections and national dialogue. We are [also] encouraged by early engagement with the international community and call for continued cooperation with the UN throughout the transitional period.²⁷²

In February FCDO Minister Lord Collins also said that the government was “concerned by reports of attacks on minorities, including Christians, and attempts to stoke sectarian tensions”.²⁷³

²⁶⁹ PQ 28023 [[Syria: politics and government](#)], 17 February 2025

²⁷⁰ Liaison Committee, [Oral evidence: evidence from the Prime Minister](#), 19 December 2024, Qs 62-3,

²⁷¹ HC Deb, [9 December 2024](#), c693

²⁷² FCDO, [The new authorities must build a democratic state](#), 8 January 2025

²⁷³ HL Deb, [10 February 2025](#), c993

Formal engagement with HTS and interim authorities

On 15 December 2024 Foreign Secretary David Lammy said the UK has had “diplomatic contact” with HTS. He said the UK had engaged in order to encourage a democratic and inclusive transition, to secure chemical weapons stockpiles, and ensure an end to violence.²⁷⁴

The UK Special Envoy, Ann Snow, has visited Syria for talks with the interim authorities, including the head of the women’s affairs department. The government said it raised the “importance of including key groups, including women and ethnic and religious minorities” in a peaceful transition.²⁷⁵

The UK Foreign Secretary has also raised the treatment of minorities with the interim authorities.²⁷⁶ The Foreign Secretary met with his regional counterparts, including the interim Syrian minister, in Saudi Arabia in January.²⁷⁷

Speaking in December, the Foreign Secretary said it would be “hasty” to make announcements in reopening the UK embassy in Damascus.²⁷⁸ The UK closed its embassy in 2013. European states with embassies in Syria include Italy, the Czech Republic and Greece.²⁷⁹

UK sanctions

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

- asset and travel freeze against individuals and organisations linked to Assad, the use of chemical weapons, the movement of restricted technologies and goods and their financing, and human rights violations.
- restrictions on UK financial institutions opening bank accounts in Syria or for a company based in Syria
- trade restrictions on military goods and exports, crude oil and petroleum products from Syria, Syrian bank notes and coinage, luxury goods, and services relating to electricity production in Syria
- a ban on Syrian aircraft landing in the UK.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁴ [UK diplomats meet rebel leaders in Damascus](#), BBC News, 17 December 2024

²⁷⁵ HL Deb, [6 February 2025](#), c804; [UK diplomats meet rebel\[s\] \[...\]](#), BBC News, 17 December 2024

²⁷⁶ HC Deb, [14 January 2025](#), c154

²⁷⁷ FCDO, [UK joins key meetings in Saudi Arabia to help build a stable Syrian future](#), 12 January 2024

²⁷⁸ HC Deb, [9 December 2024](#), c699

²⁷⁹ Commons Library research briefing, [Syria in 2023: Assad back in the Arab League](#), p30 and [Italy returns to Damascus](#), Le Monde, 31 July 2024

²⁸⁰ FCDO and others, [Syria sanctions: guidance](#), as of 5 December 2024; [UK’s Syrian \(Sanctions\) \(EU Exit\) Regulations 2019](#), Part 7, as amended.

The UK sanctions include exemptions for humanitarian aid delivered by the UN and related organisations participating in UN plans or with UK funding. This includes for fuel and petroleum products.²⁸¹

In February 2025 FCDO Minister Stephen Doughty announced that the UK Government would bring forward legislation to [amend the UK's sanctions regime against Syria](#). The Commons will debate the measures.²⁸²

The Minister said the changes would be made to support economic recovery in Syria:

We are making these changes to support the Syrian people in re-building their country and promote security and stability. They will include the relaxation of restrictions that apply to the energy, transport and finance sectors, and provisions to further support humanitarian delivery.²⁸³

UK sanctions on Assad and those linked to him will remain in place.

Lifting of some sanctions

On 6 March 2025 the UK Government removed 24 entries of those listed under the existing Syrian sanctions regime. This included the Central Bank of Syria, other banks and petroleum companies, and Syrian Arab Airlines. Under the UK sanctions regime, they were subject to the freezing of funds and economic resources.²⁸⁴

Speaking in the Commons on 10 March, the Middle East Minister Hamish Falconer said that the sanctions relief would support economic recovery and was “very much focused on allowing normal Syrians and humanitarian actors to get on with their lives”. All sanctions remain under review.²⁸⁵

The interim authorities welcomed the UK decision and said they “look forward to further positive steps towards the lifting of sanctions”.²⁸⁶

Frozen Syrian assets in the UK

Media reports suggest around £161 million of frozen Syrian assets are in the UK.²⁸⁷ The UK Government says these remain frozen.²⁸⁸

²⁸¹ Office of Financial Sanctions implementation, [General license INT/2025/5810196](#), 12 February 2025; [Syria \(sanctions\) \(EU exit\) \(amendment\) \(No 2\) Regulations 2024](#), debated in the Commons: HC Deb, [9 September 2024](#), cc623-32

²⁸² HCWS451 [[Syria sanctions](#)], 13 February 2025

²⁸³ As above

²⁸⁴ Office of Financial Services Implementation, [HM Treasury notice](#), 6 March 2025

²⁸⁵ HC Deb, [10 March 2025](#), c666

²⁸⁶ [Syrian government welcomes UK decision to lift numerous sanctions](#), BBC Monitoring, 8 March 2025

²⁸⁷ Just Security, [The UK is failing to recoup ill-gotten gains \[...\]](#), 1 April 2024

²⁸⁸ PQ 24272 [[Bashar al-Assad](#)], 21 January 2025

5.3

United Nations

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

He “welcome[d] the many clear commitments and messages” from the HTS-led interim authorities.²⁸⁹

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

Envoy Pedersen has stressed the need to lift sanctions to advance efforts towards rebuilding Syria. On 15 December he said he “hope[d] to see a quick end to sanctions” to support Syrian reconstruction.²⁹⁰

The UN Independent Commission of Inquiry into Syria, established in 2011 to investigate all reported violations of human rights since then, remains in place. Its staff have visited Syria since the fall of Assad.²⁹¹

5.4

United States

Statements: Biden administration

The US confirmed in December that it was in direct contact with HTS and other parties in Syria.²⁹² The then US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, also said the transition process and new government in Syria must protect human rights and address terrorism:

[it must] fully respect the rights of minorities, facilitate the flow of humanitarian assistance to all in need, prevent Syria from being used as a base for terrorism or posing a threat to its neighbours, and ensure that any chemical or biological weapons stockpiles are secured and safely destroyed.²⁹³

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

All nations should pledge to support an inclusive and transparent process and refrain from external interference. The United States will recognize and fully support a future Syria government that results from this process. We stand prepared to lend all appropriate support to all of Syria’s diverse communities and constituencies.²⁹⁴

²⁸⁹ UN, [In Syria, top UN envoy highlights international backing \[...\]](#), 22 January 2025

²⁹⁰ UN, [UN envoy calls for increased aid for Syria in Damascus visit](#), 15 December 2024

²⁹¹ UN Human Rights Council, [Independent commission of inquiry into Syria](#)

²⁹² US State Department, [Secretary Antony Blinken at a press availability](#), 14 December 2024

²⁹³ US State Department, [The Syrian people will decide the future of Syria](#), 10 December 2024

²⁹⁴ US State Department, [The Syrian people will decide the future of Syria](#), 10 December 2024

Statements: Trump administration

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

That said, it is in the national interest of the United States, if possible, to have a Syria that's no longer a playground for ISIS, that respects religious minorities ranging from [Alawites] all the way to Christians, that protects the Kurds and at the same time is not a vehicle through which Iran can spread its terrorism to Hezbollah and destabilize Lebanon, not to mention what's happened in other parts.²⁹⁵

US sanctions

The US has an [extensive sanctions regime against Syria](#) and has listed the country as a state supporter of terrorism since 1979. Being listed as a supporter of terrorism bans US defence exports, imposes controls over the export of dual use items (goods that could have both civilian and military purposes), financial restrictions and limits certain US aid.²⁹⁶

US measures include the [Caesar Sanctions](#), which were introduced in 2019. These were due to expire in December 2024. The 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) amended the expiration date to December 2029.²⁹⁷

Other sanctions target Syria's oil and gas industry, the Central Bank, and individuals who have committed human rights abuses.²⁹⁸ Since 2004, the export of US goods other than food or medicine to Syria has also been prohibited.²⁹⁹

On 6 January 2025 the Biden administration issued a licence to expand for six months existing exemptions from US sanctions to enable humanitarian assistance relating to essential services, energy, water and sanitation.³⁰⁰

In January 2025, Mr Rubio said he would “explore” removing sanctions:

I would argue that the Caesar sanctions directly contributed to the downfall of the Assad regime in many ways. We find ourselves in this interesting situation now where because I think it was reauthorized as part of NDAA, we now have these sanctions in place against the government that no longer exists.

²⁹⁵ Senate Foreign Relations Committee, [Nomination hearings](#), 15 January 2025, at 2 hours 58

²⁹⁶ US State Department, [State sponsors of terrorism](#)

²⁹⁷ [National Defence Authorization Act 2024](#), HR5009 section 5123

²⁹⁸ US Office of Foreign Assets Control, [Syria](#); Lawfare, [Our man in Damascus?](#), 13 December 2024

²⁹⁹ US State Department, [Sanctions on Syria: message to Congress](#), May 2004

³⁰⁰ US Treasury Department, [US Treasury issues additional sanctions relief for Syrian people](#), 6 January 2025

But nonetheless, it's an opportunity for us to explore how we could use that tool, the removal of it and others if in fact the territory is fertile for these outcomes.³⁰¹

5.5 European Union

Statements and engagement

German, Italian and French foreign ministers are among those who have visited HTS interim authorities in Syria. The EU has also said it will reopen its diplomatic offices in the country.³⁰²

In December, the EU's High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, Kaja Kallas, said that there was consensus on the future of Syria in the EU:

These are the principles of territorial integrity; sovereignty; accountability. Also, inclusiveness of government – taking into account especially the minorities and women's rights in this case. [...]

Extremism, Russia and Iran should have no place in Syria's future. [...]

we all said that we want to see no extremism, no radicalisation, and it going to the right direction. Right now, they are saying the right things, but [not] everybody is convinced that they do the right things [...]³⁰³

Germany's Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock, said “a political reset between Europe and Syria, between Germany and Syria, is possible” but Syria must have an inclusive transition, including one without “excessively long waits for elections”:

give everyone in Syria, women and men, regardless of the ethnic or religious group they belong to, a place in the political process, if it guarantees them rights and offers them protection. If precisely these rights are safeguarded in the transition process that now lies ahead, rather than potentially undermined by excessively long waits for elections or by steps to Islamise the justice or education system. If the past is reckoned with, justice is done and reprisals against entire groups are refrained from. If extremism and radical groups have no place. That must be our common goal. And it is also very much in our own interest – security in Europe and in Germany is closely intertwined with this goal.³⁰⁴

³⁰¹ Senate Foreign Relations Committee, [Nomination hearings](#), 15 January 2025, at 2 hours 59

³⁰² Kaja Kallas on Twitter/X, [We can't leave a vacuum in Syria](#), 17 December 2024

³⁰³ EU External Action Service, [Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks](#), 16 December 2024

³⁰⁴ Federal Foreign Office, [Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock prior to her departure \[...\]](#), 3 January 2025

The French Foreign Minister, Jean-Noël Barrot, said the ministers “reaffirmed the desire for a peaceful, rigorous transition that represents Syria’s diverse society”.³⁰⁵ In February, France also invited Syria’s interim president to visit.³⁰⁶

The Italian Foreign Minister, Antonio Tajani, said that Sharaa was “ready to block illegal immigration and fight against drugs traffickers”.³⁰⁷

The EU’s Syria sanctions

The EU applies a range of restrictions on trade in goods, services and technology for Syria and against certain individuals and organisations linked to Assad. The EU regime includes:

- restrictions on weapons and technology used for internal repression or monitoring of communications
- prohibitions on Syrian financial institutions, including engagement with EU banks
- an import ban on oil and petroleum products and a ban on EU investment in the Syrian oil industry or electricity power plants.³⁰⁸

On 27 January 2025, EU leaders reached a political agreement for a “roadmap” to ease Syrian sanctions. Kaja Kallas said the EU would lift sanctions that “are most hindering the early buildup of the country and to move from there” in a “step by step approach”.³⁰⁹

EU leaders suspended several elements in February. These included:

- suspending measures on the energy and transport sectors
- removing five entities (Industrial Bank, Popular Credit Bank, Saving Bank, Agricultural Cooperative Bank, and Syrian Arab Airlines) and the Central Bank, from the organisations subject to a freeze on their funds
- introducing exemptions on some aspects of banking relationships between Syrian financial institutions and those of EU member states
- indefinitely extending the existing humanitarian exemption
- allowing the export of luxury goods to Syria for personal use.

³⁰⁵ France Diplomacy, [Syria-Jean-Noël Barrot \[...\]](#), 3 January 2025

³⁰⁶ [Macron invites Syria’s Sharaa to France for first EU visit](#), New Arab, 6 February 2025

³⁰⁷ [Italy FM says new Syria leader pledged to stop “illegal immigration”](#), France 24, 10 January 2025

³⁰⁸ EUR-LEX, [EU restrictive measures in view of the situation in Syria](#), 13 September 2024

³⁰⁹ [EU cautiously agrees roadmap to ease sanctions \[...\]](#), AP, 27 January 2025; EU External Action, [Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks](#), 27 January 2025; [EU agrees on “step by step” roadmap to start easing sanctions on Syria](#), Euro News, 27 January 2025

The EU said it would keep these and potential measures under review.³¹⁰

Further reading on UK, EU and US policy on Syria

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- Human Rights Watch, [US, EU, UK: lifting Syria sanctions hindering recovery](#), February 2025
- Washington Institute, [The Paris conference on Syria: coordination and a roadmap are needed](#), February 2025
- European Council on Foreign Relations, [How Europeans and Gulf Arab states can promote Syria's political transition](#), February 2025
- Carnegie Endowment, [The Europeans return to Syria](#), February 2025
- European Parliament Think Tank, [Time to lift the international sanctions on Syria?](#), February 2025
- Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, [Oral evidence: the situation in Syria](#), 28 January 2025
- Centre for European Policy Studies, [Europe is taking a pragmatic approach to Syria. Its origins lie in Kabul](#), January 2025
- Foreign Policy, [Why Trump can't ignore Syria](#), February 2025
- Foreign Affairs, [The best way for America to help the new Syria](#), January 2025
- Foreign Policy, [It's now or never for US engagement in Syria](#), January 2025

³¹⁰ [EU set to suspend Syria energy, transport sanctions, draft declaration shows](#), Reuters, 19 February 2025; EU Council, [EU suspends restrictive measures on key economic sectors](#), 24 February 2025

6 Islamic State/Daesh

[Islamic State/Daesh](#) has its origins in Al-Qaeda groups in Iraq in the 2000s. Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) was founded in 2013. It a designated terrorist group by the UN Security Council, UK, and many others. In the 2010s it launched an extensive campaign across Syria and Iraq. In 2023 the UK Government acknowledged the atrocities committed against the Yazidi people by Islamic State in Iraq in 2014 as [an act of genocide](#).

6.1 How strong is Islamic State?

Since 2019 Islamic State/Daesh no longer holds territory in Syria or Iraq. However, it remains active and in June 2024 the US military said it considered the group is “attempting to reconstitute”.³¹¹ HTS is not allied to Islamic State.

The US and the [Global Coalition to Defeat Islamic State](#) is continuing to target the estimated 2,500 fighters that remain in Iraq and Syria.

US Central Command said that from January to June 2024 Islamic State claimed to have conducted 153 attacks in Syria and Iraq. This was around double the number of claimed attacks in 2023. Around half of attacks in 2024 have been focused on fuel convoys and mostly in the east of Syria.³¹²

6.2 How many fighters and families are detained?

Around 9,000 fighters remain in 20 detention facilities, managed by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). There are also around 44,000 people linked to Islamic State, mostly women and children, [in Al Hol and Roj camps](#).³¹³

Those in detention include British nationals. In 2024 the rights charity, Reprieve, estimated there were around 70 Britons in north-east Syria, including 40 children. In 2023 the Home Office had estimated 200 of the 800 Britons who went to Syria remained unaccounted for.³¹⁴

³¹¹ Centcom, [Defeat for ISIS mission in Iraq and Syria for January-June 2024](#), 16 July 2024

³¹² [Can IS capitalise on Syria's instability?](#), BBC Monitoring, 10 December 2024

³¹³ Centcom, [Defeat for ISIS mission in Iraq and Syria for January-June 2024](#), 16 July 2024

³¹⁴ [What does the fall of Assad mean for Jihadi brides? \[...\]](#), The Times, 9 December 2024

The US has sought the repatriation of foreign nationals held in SDF camps, citing the risk of radicalisation by Islamic State or their release due to attacks by Islamic State fighters.³¹⁵

The UK has repatriated some individuals from Syria.³¹⁶ In 2020 the government said it believed that those who fought or supported Islamic State, “should face justice and accountability through prosecution in the most appropriate jurisdiction: often in the region where the crimes took place”.³¹⁷ It has supported the repatriation of some children as “innocent victims of war”.³¹⁸

In January 2025, President Trump’s incoming senior director for counterterrorism said that the UK should repatriate further Islamic State members from Syria. The UK’s independent reviewer of terrorism, Jonathan Hall, had also said in December that:

the numbers are not so great that — at least in the case of women, and children, for whom special considerations ought to apply on humanitarian grounds — the UK’s well-regarded counter-terrorism system could not absorb the risk.

The burden of monitoring could be tempered, in high-risk cases, by phased return. At the very least there should be a presumption of return.³¹⁹

In response to the US comments, Foreign Secretary David Lammy said that the government would “always put British security interests first and the safeguarding of our population”. The Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, said nationals would be dealt with on a “case by case basis”.³²⁰

The US Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve (the US Mission against Islamic State) notes that Islamic State “followers continu[e] to indoctrinate and intimidate residents in the al-Hol and Roj displaced persons camps”.³²¹ The report also cites the assessment of General Kurilla, the US Central Command Commander, who visited Al-Hol and Roj camps during the review period, who stated:

The training [of the SDF] is key to keeping the residents safe, enabling access for aid organizations, and preventing the spread of extremism. Nonetheless, the longer that displaced persons remain in camps like Al Hol and Al Ro [Roj], the more susceptible they are to ISIS [Islamic State] ideology, making their reintegration into society more difficult. Alongside our partners, we continue to identify and detain ISIS facilitators operating in the camps.³²²

³¹⁵ US State Department, [Secretary Antony Blinken at opening of D-ISIS ministerial](#), 30 September 2024, and below

³¹⁶ Rights and Security International, [Global repatriation tracker](#)

³¹⁷ PQ HL9648 [[British nationals abroad: Syria](#)] 9 November 2020

³¹⁸ PQ 2385 [[Syria: British nationals abroad](#)], 17 May 2021

³¹⁹ [UK should take back ISIS members in Syria, says Trump’s terror chief](#), The Times, 8 January 2025

³²⁰ [Shamina Begum ‘not coming back to UK’ says Lammy \[...\]](#), The Independent, 9 January 2025

³²¹ Office of the Inspector General, [\[...\] Quarterly report to the US Congress](#), May 2024, p9

³²² Centcom, [Statement of General Michael Kurilla](#), 7 March 2024

Islamic State has also launched attacks on detention facilities holding its fighters. Its most recent, largest, attack was in January 2022 against a prison in Haskah, which lasted several days and in which several hundred guards, prisoners and Islamic State fighters were killed.³²³

6.3 What is the position of US forces?

The US has around 2,000 troops in Syria. Around 1,100 of these are on “temporary rotation”, meaning they remain in the theatre for 30 to 90 days. The remainder are considered “core assets” who deploy for 9 to 12 months. They are primarily based in northeastern Syria, alongside the Kurdish-led SDF.³²⁴ US troops have continued to conduct attacks against the group in November and December 2024.³²⁵

The Biden administration said it would retain these troops in Syria “and will take measures necessary to prevent a resurgence of the Islamic State”.³²⁶ It planned to continue to work with the Syrian Democratic Forces.³²⁷

In February 2025 NBC News reported that Trump administration is drafting plans to withdraw US forces from Syria. No confirmation by the Department of Defence has been published. Options for withdrawal reportedly being considered include over a 30-, 60- or 90-day period.³²⁸

In response to a question on whether the US had informed Israel on plans to withdraw troops from Syria on 30 January, President Trump said:

I don't know who said that. I mean, I don't know who said that, but we'll make a determination on that. We're not getting, we're not involved in Syria [...] Syria is its own mess. They got enough messes over there. They don't need us involved in everyone.³²⁹

During his confirmation hearing before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in January 2025, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said that there would be “implications to abandoning partners” and it was “in the national interest” to ensure Islamic State does not recover in Syria.³³⁰

The Trump administration has also paused most US foreign aid and assistance for 90 days from January 2025, pending reviews. Some exemptions have been introduced. Analysts have raised concerns that the pause may

³²³ International Crisis Group, [Containing a resilient ISIS](#), July 2022

³²⁴ DoD, [DoD announces 2,000 troops in Syria \[...\]](#), 1 December 2024

³²⁵ US Department of Defence, [Press Secretary holds an on-camera \[...\] press briefing](#), 2 December 2024; US Centcom, [Central Command conducts dozens of airstrikes to eliminate IS camps](#), 8 December 2024

³²⁶ [US will remain in eastern Syria and seek to prevent IS resurgence](#), Reuters, 8 December 2024

³²⁷ White House, [Remarks by APNSA Jake Sullivan](#), 8 December 2024

³²⁸ [Defense department drafting plans to withdraw troops from Syria \[...\]](#), NBC News, 5 February 2025

³²⁹ As above

³³⁰ [Incoming Secretary of State Rubio hints at US role \[...\]](#), New Arab, 16 January 2025

weaken the ability of the SDF to contain Islamic State and maintain detention facilities.³³¹

In January 2025 the Commander in Chief of the SDF, General Mazloum Abdi, said that the “key factor of stabilisation” in the region is the “US presence on the ground” and there would be a “resurgence” of “many factions, including Islamic State”, if they were to leave.³³²

6.4

What is happening to the coalition to combat Islamic State?

In September 2024 the United States and Iraq reached an agreement on plans to withdraw US-led “Global Coalition Against Daesh” forces from Iraq. Coalition forces are to leave the majority of Iraq by September 2025, and transition to a bilateral security partnership, which “supports Iraqi forces and maintains pressure” on Islamic State. Coalition forces presence will remain in Iraq to support the US and coalition action in Syria until September 2026.³³³

The UK Government supported the agreement and said it would advance a new bilateral relationship with Iraq.³³⁴

In March 2024 US General Michael Kurilla had told the US Congress that there were risks to a “premature” departure from Syria and Iraq:

We must also prevent a premature Coalition departure from Iraq and Syria. If Iran and Russia were to succeed in their goal of pushing us out before our partner forces can operate independently, it is my assessment that ISIS would reconstitute the ability to seize territory within two years. The Global Coalition’s sustained presence not only helps our partners in their fight against ISIS, it also prevents the reemergence of territorial control and ensures the group does not have a safe haven in Iraq or Syria to plan global attacks. The eventual transition to a traditional security cooperation framework must be predicated on Partner Force Development and Security Sector Reform in Iraq, and continued repatriations, secure detention facilities, and a political pathway for the SDF in Syria.³³⁵

³³¹ [Despite waivers, US funding freeze sows doubt \[...\]](#), New York Times, 6 February 2025; Human Rights Watch, [Northeast Syria: camp detainees face uncertain future](#), 7 February 2025; [How the collapse of USAID could unleash “an ISIS army in waiting”](#), Devex, 7 February 2025

³³² [Kurdish general urges Trump to leave US troops in northeast Syria](#), Guardian, 9 January 2025

³³³ US Department of State, [Joint statement announcing the timeline for the end of military mission](#), 27 September 2024

³³⁴ Ministry of Defence, [UK response to the conclusion of the Global Coalition’s military mission in Iraq](#), 28 September 2024

³³⁵ Centcom, [Statement of General Michael Kurilla on the posture \[...\]](#), 7 March 2024

Further reading on Islamic State/Daesh in Syria

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- Hudson Institute, [The Islamic State's operations in Iraq and Syria](#), 5 December 2024
- Middle East Institute, [Don't leave Syria. The mission is far from over](#), 22 November 2024
- Counter Extremis, [ISIS Redux: the central Syrian resurgence in September 2024](#), 15 October 2024
- Tahrir Institute, [Challenges in repatriation from Al Hol camp in Syria](#), 6 August 2024
- UN Security Council, [Letter from the Chair of the Security Council \[...\] concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, Al Qaida and association individuals, groups \[...\]](#), (PDF), 22 July 2024
- Washington Institute, [One year of the Islamic State worldwide activity map](#), 20 May 2024
- Washington Institute, [Five years after the caliphate, too much remains the same in northeast Syria](#), 19 March 2024
- UK Independent Reviewer on Terrorism Legislation, [Returning from Islamic State: risk and response](#) (PDF), February 2023

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