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AMERICA'S ROAD TO—AND OUT OF—DAMASCUS

A NEW CHAPTER FOR U.S.-SYRIA RELATIONS

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TOPLINE POINTS

- ★ To build upon current efforts to eliminate the immediate threats from the Iranian regime and to meet the president's objective of withdrawing U.S. troops from Syria, the United States could follow through on the administration's lifting of sanctions in Syria with further coordination with regional powers invested in the country.
- ★ Engagements with the interim Syrian government should continue to focus on the themes raised between President Trump and Ahmad al-Sharaa: normalization of ties with Israel and elimination of threats from al-Qaeda and ISIS.
- ★ In the meantime, the United States could facilitate coordination between the interim Syrian government and U.S. regional partners in three distinct parts of the country:
 - In the south:** collaborate with Israel and Lebanon to eradicate Hezbollah political and military elements, bringing stability to the southeast corridor.
 - On the eastern border:** work with Jordan and the United Arab Emirates to interdict foreign fighters, weapons, and narcotics smuggling.
 - In the north:** coordinate with Turkey on shared regional counterterrorism priorities.

A NEW CHAPTER IN SYRIA

On May 14, 2025, President Donald J. Trump made history by meeting with Ahmad al-Sharaa, the new interim leader of Syria, and announcing the lifting of sanctions on Syria. The meeting with Sharaa, which took place in Saudi Arabia as part of the president's first planned official overseas visit of his second term, came at the request of the Crown Prince and the President of Turkey. It followed a marathon of meetings that Sharaa (who, just in late 2024, was best known as the leader of an al-Qaeda offshoot) held between various international delegations, including members of the Biden Administration, in December of 2024. In April 2025, the America First Policy Institute (AFPI) counseled that “[A]ny engagement—without clear conditions—with Sharaa puts us into our old, failed pattern of backing the wrong horse and realizing too late that we are working at cross-purposes with our own security” ([Olidort, 2025a](#)). During the same month, AFPI explained that while there were clear interests



the United States had in Syria, including finding and bringing U.S. citizen Austin Tice home, the main challenges in engaging with Sharaa had to do with “the lack of clarity about him” and therefore the lack of clarity about “whether he is in a position to deliver on U.S. priorities” ([Olidort & Tan, 2025](#)).

It was reported that at their meeting, President Trump requested that Sharaa join the Abraham Accords, take responsibility for the detention facilities housing Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters, and cooperate with the United States on combating terrorism ([Miller et al., 2025](#)). Although Syria’s government did not officially confirm these details, Sharaa has expressed “openness” to normalizing ties with Israel, according to members of Congress who met with him ([King, 2025](#)). He has also moved quickly to demonstrate his commitment to meeting U.S. demands, including sending a delegation to meet with Israeli officials in Azerbaijan ([The Times of Israel, 2025a](#)) and agreeing to locate missing Americans in the country ([CBS News, 2025](#)), according to the Special Envoy for Syria and U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Thomas Barrack.

These are welcome developments, and they point to the effectiveness of President Trump’s leadership regarding the Middle East—leadership that during his first term produced the most significant peace agreement in the region in a quarter century, the Abraham Accords. For evidence of where the Syrian people stand on these developments, one can look to the celebrations in the streets of Damascus and the broadcast of President Trump’s meeting with Sharaa on large screens across the city. These developments also point to the critical role of our regional partners—and those nations’ understanding of the potential for a historical moment and their trust in the Trump Administration to make it happen.

The Trump Administration’s efforts in Syria also create favorable conditions for Israel’s historic operation to eliminate the existential threats to it posed by Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Shortly after Israel began its operation, Sharaa announced that Syria’s skies are open to Israeli jets. If Syria’s future is to be as bright as these recent developments suggest, Syria’s next chapter—guided by American leadership—requires cooperation within and without Syria’s borders. At a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing just days after the president’s meeting with Sharaa, Secretary of State Marco Rubio observed that Sharaa’s government, “given the challenges they’re facing, are maybe weeks—not many months—away from potential collapse and a full-scale civil war of epic proportions, basically the country splitting up,” and that such a civil war would take on “epic proportions” absent outside support to Sharaa’s government ([Tandon, 2025](#)).

As the United States restores stability and prosperity to the Syrian people, the United States can determine how and where to reduce its footprint in the country relative to conditions on the ground.

The president has stated as his objective bringing all U.S. troops home from Syria. As Biden’s Afghanistan debacle demonstrates and as President Trump’s orderly plan for the Afghanistan withdrawal called ([Kellogg et al., 2021](#)), a conditions-based approach ensures that our interests are protected and our regional partners are both committed and capable of shouldering the burden of maintaining stability.



AN AMERICA FIRST SYRIA FRAMEWORK: REGIONAL COOPERATION TO SECURE BORDER AREAS

In April 2025, before the Trump Administration embarked on its new approach to Syria, AFPI recommended working with “regional partners to ensure the ungoverned areas to the south and east of the country do not become havens for terrorists or for Iran” ([Olidort, 2025a](#)). Today, there exists a critical opportunity to continue this effort while working cautiously with the government in Damascus in following through on the commitments reportedly made during the Trump-Sharaa meeting. This approach—which could be presented with regional partners to Sharaa as a mechanism to help reinforce his efforts to centralize power in Damascus—ensures that the United States inspires regional partners to take a deeper and consistent collaborative approach to the country’s future in a manner that preserves U.S. and partner interests. With both Iran’s footprint and its capacity for escalating militarily in the aftermath of U.S. and Israeli strikes in June 2025 significantly diminished, there is today a moment to definitively cut off Iran’s influence and infrastructure in critical parts of the region that it has used in the past to export its destructive agenda. Relying on regional partnerships to fill the void left by Iran will open the path not only for regional peace and stability but also for a better future for the Syrian people.

This framework requires a focus on three key geographic regions. To the southwest, the future of Lebanon; to the southeast, cutting off the flow of weapons, fighters, and narcotics to and from Jordan and Iraq (and from there into the region and around the world); and to the north, stopping the travel of terrorists across the Turkish border. These can be the priority areas for the United States to build on with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and with other regional and global partners, depending on the area and the issues.

THE SOUTHERN BORDER: LEBANON AND THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

In the aftermath of Israel’s extraordinary decapitation of Hezbollah in the summer of 2024, today’s Lebanese government appears eager to build on these efforts by completely pushing out the terrorist group and beginning a new chapter of peace for the Lebanese people. Sharaa is faced with a rare opportunity to encourage this positive change, and in partnership with Israel, to bring security and stability across Syria’s southern border by definitively ending the military presence of Iran and Hezbollah there.

Part of this effort will require that Israel and the Syrian government come to an agreement about protecting the security of the Druze community of Suwayda. Israel’s commitment to protect its Druze citizens and their family members is noble and is fully within its right to do. Its actions in mid-July across the border in response to attacks on the Druze community, including possibly by forces with ties to the Syrian government, may be evidence of Sharaa’s limited reach and control on the country’s periphery and the need for a security arrangement in this area that ensures the safety of its residents as well as of Israeli citizens across the border. This urgent security vacuum requires the cooperation of Jerusalem and Damascus, and the vital mediating role of the United States.

Security of this area will also require Sharaa to embrace the Trump Administration’s decision in 2019 to recognize Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights—a decision that has proven



prescient given the threats Israel faced after the October 7 attack and the current lack of governance on the Syrian side of the area. On June 30, 2025, Sharaa took a step in this direction by abandoning Syria's longstanding position that Israel give up the Golan Heights. The subject will remain a focus of Syria-Israel talks, especially amid reports that Sharaa insists that Israeli forces withdraw from the strategically important Mt. Hermon area, but the fact that Sharaa made such a concession demonstrates a welcome tone of pragmatism ([Yohanan, 2025](#)).

Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights should be part of a revamped border security arrangement between Israel, Lebanon, and Syria. This is particularly the case given the ceasefire on the Lebanese border and the absence of a trusted institution on the Lebanese side to preserve it and keep Hezbollah and other Iran-backed forces out. Israel, with the only capable military presence in the area, could play a role in providing stability and support in the area during Lebanon's continued transition away from Hezbollah.

The current transformational political moment in Lebanon presents an opportunity to augment this regional cooperation with institution-building within the country. Following a recent bipartisan visit to the country, Senator James Lankford (R-OK) noted he is "optimistic" about Lebanon ([Rod, 2025](#)). The Co-Chair of the Senate Abraham Accords Caucus observed that Lebanon is "working to demilitarize Hezbollah and to make sure that [the Lebanese Armed Forces] are the one army...I think there's real progress and opportunity" ([Rod, 2025](#)). The Trump Administration has already seized this opportunity, exempting the LAF from the freeze on foreign assistance and awarding the LAF \$95 million in foreign military financing in March of 2025 ([Helou, 2025](#)).

Deepening the partnership between the Israeli Defense Forces and a revamped LAF—whose continued assistance could be conditional on metrics of progress in eliminating Hezbollah—is the logical and necessary next step towards not only keeping the current ceasefire in place, but for peace between the two countries.

The key to deepening this military cooperation between Israel and Lebanon depends on the recognition that Israel's military is the only force currently capable of addressing threats from Iran-backed elements in the region. It can form both the backbone of this new cooperation and, in time, the guidance needed to help build the LAF into a capable and Hezbollah-free institution. That partnership can serve as the foundation and inspiration for momentum to continue within Lebanon to marginalize Hezbollah's military and political influence.

THE EASTERN BORDER

Long removed from the reach of Damascus, the eastern part of the country has been the site of not only Iranian military activity but also the key strongholds of ISIS, including the location of its former capital of Raqqa. Consequently, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (who are backed by the United States) have been largely active there in the D-ISIS mission. The area has also served as the first transit point in the country for Iran's "land bridge" (a corridor between Iran and stretching through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon) through which the regime would traffic foreign fighters and weapons systems into the country ([Frantzman, 2019](#)).



With the drawdown of Iranian military infrastructure and presence across the country, including the east, due to Israel's military campaign ([The Times of Israel, 2024](#)), there are new fears of ISIS reconstituting in the area ([Lister, 2025](#)). Although the SDF entered into a pact with Sharaa's government in March 2025, Sharaa's still-fragile position and the SDF's likely war-weariness may prove too limited a force to address the potential escalation from ISIS, as well as Iran's potential return ([Frantzman, 2025](#)).

To wind down its troop presence in the country, the United States will need to rely upon regional partners to patrol and secure this loosely governed area. It has a ready partner in Jordan. For several years now, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has been doing a great service not only to its people but to the whole region by targeting the smuggling of the Captagon opioid by Iran-backed militias from Syria into the broader region. The narcotic, which has hit the Gulf monarchies particularly acutely, has been a multi-billion-dollar revenue stream for the sanctioned Assad government ([Calabrese, 2024](#)), and some have observed that the Captagon trade appears to persist despite the change in government and actions from Sharaa to address it ([Ecanow & Tran, 2025](#)).

The persistence of the threat of the Captagon trade also represents a new opportunity for coordination against the range of threats posed by both Iran-backed forces and jihadist terrorists in the eastern part of the country. The momentum and precedent for such military cooperation have been established over the last two years, particularly air defense efforts to interdict Iran's direct attacks on Israel. Some cases—for example, in Jordan, where Iran is actively seeking to overthrow the monarchy through pro-Hamas elements in the country ([Olidort, 2025b](#))—translate into broader public awareness of the shared threats posed by Iran to local governments.

Although the Iranian regime is on notice by both the United States and Israel after their historic strikes in June 2025, the possibility of a future Iranian escalation against regional partners should not be ruled out. To both prepare for such a scenario and to eliminate what is currently its most strategically significant geographic stronghold in and around Syria, regional partners can cooperate militarily on securing Syria's eastern border area, especially focusing on fighters and weapons Iran tries to import to the region from Central Asia. This action will also have the immediate effect of containing ISIS and its transit routes eastward while blocking any encroachment by Iran-backed militias into Syria, all of which helps Sharaa secure his hold on power and support his efforts to integrate the eastern part of the country with Damascus.

COUNTERTERRORISM COOPERATION WITH TURKEY

Although Turkey is a critical partner to the United States and is one of the foremost military powers within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, its actions under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan have not been without challenges to the United States, not least his proximity to Russia, his vocal enmity toward Israel, and his support for terrorist groups. Turkey's enabling of Islamist and jihadi terrorist groups was the very factor that turned it into one of the foremost backers of Sharaa. Today, many have rightly observed that there is a real opportunity to build a new partnership with Turkey, given



President Trump's strong record with Erdogan, as well as the important appointment of Tom Barrack as U.S. Ambassador to Turkey and Special Envoy for Syria ([Cagaptay, 2025](#)).

Building this new partnership could begin along the Syria-Turkey border, and specifically on the terms under which Turkey maintains its security. The Turkish government regards the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as the country's foremost terrorist threat. It is in the name of this threat that the Turkish government has launched military operations across the border against the SDF, where Kurdish People's Defense Units fighters populate a large portion of their force. Although Turkish operations have quieted since the SDF partnership with the Syrian government, the border area remains relatively permeable, with Islamist and other groups transiting across and into Europe.

The United States can demand that Turkey close the Turkey-Syria border in exchange for assistance regarding the PKK threat within its borders. With the eastern border secured by regional partner cooperation, the PKK loses a transit path across Syria and into Iraq, giving Turkey further assurance that the PKK threat is contained. These conditions can then set the groundwork for greater trust-building with other partners, including Israel—which would both deepen its ties with Sharaa and increase security along its southern border with Syria—leading to greater cooperation around the common responsibility that Turkey and other partners have for Syria's stability and regional peace.

THE WAY FORWARD

What will happen in Syria will determine the course of the Middle East, particularly whether the gains made by the United States and Israel vis-à-vis the Iranian regime can be secured and whether lasting peace can be sustained. The Trump Administration continues correctly to push the Syrian government to be a constructive partner to the United States in the region, and our partners have a rare opportunity to build on this effort towards a broader peace in their region. Indeed, amid the historic operation against Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs, the Trump Administration announced that it is holding "preliminary discussions" towards an agreement between Syria and Israel, and that a deal is possible by the end of the year ([Ravid, 2025](#)). Towards that end, on June 30, 2025, the Trump Administration lifted most of the remaining sanctions on Syria that had been imposed on the country since the 1970s, with an eye towards encouraging this process further.

It is incumbent upon Congress to support these efforts, not only for identifying those sanctions whose alleviation would help Syrian society rebuild, but also to better understand the steps being taken by Sharaa and his government to work towards strengthening ties with Israel and being a partner for peace in the region. This could include delegation visits to the country and facilitating opportunities to engage with the government here and abroad. At the same time, the Trump Administration could continue its approach of building this partner-led and regionally integrated policy toward Syria in a manner that facilitates opportunities with our partners while protecting our interests. Ultimately, Syria's ability to escape its dark, recent history will depend not only on the opportunities created for Sharaa and his government but also on Sharaa's decisions to build a new future for Syria and for its relationship with U.S. partners. Sharaa's permission to Israel to fly over Syria during Israel's operation against Iran and his reported receptivity to Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights are important steps that



signify a willingness to break with decades of enmity towards the Jewish State while also recognizing the measures Israel needs to take to ensure its own self-defense.

Although there is still more to do in establishing the conditions for peace, Sharaa's appetite for pragmatism is noteworthy and needed. Given Iran's uniquely weakened state, and the important consequences of Syria's future for regional peace, the United States has a historic opportunity to deepen the partnership and cooperation between Sharaa's government, Israel, and all our partners for a future of lasting peace both for the Syrian people and their neighbors.



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