



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 12 January 2025

Biden's Approach to Post-Assad Syria

Unit for Political Studies

Biden's Approach to Post-Assad Syria

Series: [Situation Assessment](#)

12 January 2025

Unit for Political Studies

The Unit for Political Studies is the Center's department dedicated to the study of the region's most pressing current affairs. An integral and vital part of the ACRPS' activities, it offers academically rigorous analysis on issues that are relevant and useful to the public, academics and policy-makers of the Arab region and beyond. The Unit for Political Studies draws on the collaborative efforts of a number of scholars based within and outside the ACRPS. It produces three of the Center's publication series: Assessment Report, Policy Analysis, and Case Analysis reports. .

Copyright © 2025 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

Table of Contents

Biden’s Approach to Change in Syria	1
Managing the Transition and Its Outcomes	3
Trump Policies	4
Conclusion	5



US President Joe Biden's administration welcomed the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria on 8 December as a "historic opportunity for the long-suffering people of Syria to build a better future for their proud country". At the same time, it noted that Syria was in a "moment of risk and uncertainty".¹ Washington faces a dilemma in dealing with the new reality in Syria, as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), classified by the US, Europe, and the United Nations as a "terrorist entity" since 2018, is leading the transitional phase in the country after the deposal of Assad. At the same time, Washington does not want to make space for any hostile regional and international powers, such as Iran and Russia, to fill the vacuum there, nor for Syria to become a source of chaos, threat, and instability for its neighbours.²

Biden's Approach to Change in Syria

According to Biden, the approach taken by his administration "has shifted the balance of power in the Middle East", weakening the Assad regime and contributing to its downfall by:³

1. Tightening sanctions on the Assad regime to force it to engage in a political process, although "Assad refused, so we carried out a comprehensive sanction program against him and all those responsible for atrocities against the Syrian people." These sanctions helped chip away at state institutions, including the army and security, disrupting incentives to defend the regime.
2. Maintaining a military presence in Syria as part of the campaign against ISIS, and "ensuring that ISIS can never establish a safe haven there again".
3. Supporting Israel's freedom of action to act against Iranian networks in Syria and against Iranian-aligned actors there and using military force against Iranian allies to protect US forces.

In addition to taking credit for toppling the Assad regime, he also stressed his administration's desire to intervene in shaping the new Syria. The Biden administration is relying on several tools to pressure the new transitional government in Damascus, the most important of which are:

1. HTS and its leader Ahmed al-Sharaa (formerly known by his nom de guerre, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani) are still on the US and international terrorist lists. Although the US cancelled the \$10 million reward for anyone who helps in capturing him after a high-level delegation from the US State Department met with him in Damascus on 20 December, he has remained on the US terrorist lists since 2013.⁴
2. Syria is still groaning under the weight of US and international economic sanctions, which, although designed to target and tighten the noose around the Assad regime, have not been

¹ "Remarks by President Biden on the Latest Developments in Syria," The White House, 8/12/2024, accessed on 9/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQRy>

² Omar Abdel-Baqi, Bertrand Benoit & Laurence Norman, "The West Auditions Syria's New Leaders," The Wall Street Journal, 21/12/2024, accessed on 9/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zReK>

³ "Remarks by President Biden on the Latest Developments in Syria."

⁴ Ibid.



lifted. Syria needs urgent relief and economic aid, and it also needs to pump huge amounts of money into reconstruction and the resettlement of millions of refugee and internally displaced Syrians after more than 13 years of war.

3. The presence of US military forces in eastern Syria not under Damascus authority, but under the control of Kurdish militias US support. US military sources recently revealed that the size of its military force in eastern Syria is 2,000 soldiers, not the 900 previously reported.⁵

Biden announced that the United States will work with its partners and allies to seize opportunities and manage risks in Syria by:

1. Supporting Syria's neighbours, "including Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Israel — should any threat arise from Syria during this period of transition."⁶ In this context, the Biden administration is seeking to justify Israel's aggressive and illegal incursion into Syrian territory and its occupation of more territory in the occupied Golan Heights and the Yarmouk Basin, as well as its military aircraft launching hundreds of airstrikes on Syrian military sites after the collapse of the Assad regime, destroying about 85%. The Biden administration labelled the Israel's blatant aggression as self-defence.⁷
2. Helping to "ensure the stability of eastern Syria" and protect US forces against any threats. Biden also announced the continuation of the US mission against ISIS and efforts to maintain the security of detention centres where about 8,000 ISIS fighters and their families are being held under the supervision of Kurdish militias. On the day the Assad regime was declared to have fallen, the US launched more than 75 airstrikes on what it said were ISIS targets in Syria.⁸ On 19 December, the day before a high-level US delegation was due to meet with al-Sharaa in Damascus, US Central Command announced that it had carried out an airstrike that killed the leader of ISIS in Syria along with his aide. A US Central Command statement said the strike was carried out "in an area formerly controlled by the Syrian regime and Russians".⁹
3. Engaging "with all Syrian groups, including within the process led by the United Nations, to establish a transition away from the Assad regime toward independent, sovereign [...] Syria with a new constitution, a new government that serves all Syrians. And this process will be determined by the Syrian people themselves."¹⁰

⁵ Ellen Mitchell, "Pentagon Doubled the Number of US Troops in Syria 'Months' Ahead of Assad's Fall," The Hill, 19/12/2024, accessed on 9/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQAD>

⁶ "Remarks by President Biden on the Latest Developments in Syria."

⁷ "Department Press Briefing," The State Department, 19/12/2024, accessed on 9/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQR8>

⁸ Barak Ravid, "U.S. Diplomats Meet Syrian Opposition Leader in Damascus," AXIOS, 20/12/2024, accessed on 9/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQzD>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Remarks by President Biden on the Latest Developments in Syria."



Managing the Transition and Its Outcomes

Three days after the Assad regime collapsed, the Biden administration dispatched Secretary of State Antony Blinken to the region to coordinate the positions of Washington's allies on the situation in Syria in an attempt to mould the outcomes of the transition. Blinken visited Türkiye (12 December), where he met with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan seeking assurances that there would be no military escalation with Kurdish militias in northeastern Syria under the pretext of preventing ISIS from regrouping.¹¹ He then visited Iraq (13 December), where he met with Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al Sudani and discussed ways to prevent ISIS from posing a new threat to Syria and Iraq.¹² Finally, he visited Jordan, where he participated in the Aqaba summit (14 December), attended by regional and international parties to discuss Syria and its future. The Aqaba Summit called for the necessity of a comprehensive political process led by the Syrians themselves, "in accordance with Security Council Resolution 2254 and the aspirations of the Syrian people, one that ensures the rebuilding of state institutions, and preserves the sovereignty of Syria, its unity, and territorial integrity."¹³

Blinken identified seven conditions (which he referred to as principles)¹⁴ agreed upon by the parties participating in the Aqaba meeting to support the transition process in Syria:

the rights of all Syrians—including minorities and women—should be respected; humanitarian aid should be able reach people who need it; state institutions should deliver essential services to the Syrian people; Syria should not be used as base for terrorist groups or others who threaten Syria's people, its neighbors, or the world; chemical weapons stockpiles should be secured and safely destroyed; Syria should have peaceful relations with its neighbors; relevant organizations should have access to facilities that can help determine the fate of missing Syrians and foreign nationals – and eventually hold abusers accountable.¹⁵

In the context of US efforts to dictate the transitional phase in Syria, the US delegation visited Damascus, headed by Assistant Secretary of State Barbara Leaf, including Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs Roger Carstens and diplomat Daniel Rubinstein. The delegation met with HTS leader al-Sharaa and other representatives, as well as civil society activists, humanitarian workers, and others to discuss their vision for the future of Syria and how the US can support them. According to a State Department statement, Leaf stressed "the United States' full support for an inclusive, Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition and a process that leads to credible, inclusive, representative, and non-sectarian governance that meets international standards of transparency

¹¹ "Secretary Blinken's Meeting with Turkish President Erdoğan," The State Department, 12/12/2024, accessed on 9/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zR0t>

¹² Jennifer Hansler, "Blinken Makes Unannounced Trip to Iraq as International Community Grapples with Syrian Regime Collapse," CNN, 13/12/2024, accessed on 9/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRcT>

¹³ "The Aqaba Summit and the Transition Process in Syria," Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 17/12/2024, accessed on 9/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQuI>

¹⁴ "Secretary Antony J. Blinken in a Conversation at the Council on Foreign Relations," The State Department, 18/12/2024, accessed on 9/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQxG>

¹⁵ "Secretary Blinken Holds a Press Availability in Aqaba, Jordan," U.S. Embassy in Jordan, 14/12/2024, accessed on 9/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRfB>



and accountability in the spirit of United Nations Security Council resolution 2254."¹⁶ Leaf said that the discussions with al-Sharaa were "quite good, very productive, detailed," and described al-Sharaa as "pragmatic," but added that Washington will judge "in actions, not just words."¹⁷

The US announcement that it was cancelling bounty on al-Sharaa's head, "in the interest of beginning a discussion with HTS" is a telling sign.¹⁸ HTS had helped the United States secure the release of US citizen Travis Timmerman from Syria, who disappeared in Assad's prisons seven months ago.¹⁹ HTS and other Syrian factions are working with the Biden administration to find US journalist Austin Tice, who disappeared more than a decade ago in Syria. According to US officials, Washington is now considering removing HTS from its terrorist lists.

Trump Policies

In the coming period, attention will be focused on the policies of Donald Trump's incoming administration. Trump wrote, during the rebel offensive that resulted in the overthrow of the Assad regime, that "Syria is a mess, but is not our friend, & THE UNITED STATES SHOULD HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH IT. THIS IS NOT OUR FIGHT",²⁰ and hinted at accepting a Turkish role in Syria. Since Trump does not have a clear vision for US foreign policy, which is based on the principle of "America First". Some Americans fear that his second administration will pave the way for the spread of chaos in Syria and the return of ISIS.

Trump took an erratic approach to Syria in his first term. He pursued military action against the Assad regime in 2017 and 2018 after it used chemical weapons against its own people and then announced in late 2018 that he would withdraw US forces from Syria on the grounds that Washington had succeeded in destroying ISIS, but his advisers dissuaded him from doing so, stressing the importance of the US presence there. Others, including current officials and Trump advisers, believe the President elect unlikely to abandon the US military presence in Syria as he wanted to do during his first administration, given the threat of the potential return of ISIS. Joel Rayburn, who works on Trump's national security team, believes that "Jolani is 'delusional' if he thinks 'the world and Syria's neighbors will support his HTS-dominated 'salvation government' as it imposes a transitional government on all of Syria'".²¹ A third group argues that the fall of Assad gives the US a significant opportunity to reshape the Middle East in its favour. But Trump doubts Washington's ability to change

¹⁶ "Assistant Secretary Leaf, Special Presidential Envoy Carstens, and Senior Advisor Rubinstein's Travel to Syria," The State Department, 20/12/2024, accessed on 9/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRkt>

¹⁷ "Special Online Briefing with Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara A. Leaf and Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs Roger D. Carstens", The State Department, 20/12/2024, accessed on 9/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQC3>

¹⁸ Ravid.

¹⁹ Matthew Lee, "Here's What to Know about the US Push for Stability in Post-Assad Syria," *Associated Press*, 14/12/2024, accessed on 9/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQmo>

²⁰ Joseph Krauss, "America's Closest Ally in Syria is Losing Ground as a New Order Takes Shape," *Associated Press*, 12/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQx8>

²¹ Loveday Morris, Abbie Cheeseman & Suzan Haidamous, "After Toppling Assad, Can Syria's Rebels Rebuild a Shattered State?" *The Washington Post*, 11/12/2024, accessed on 9/1/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQv8>



things in Syria, especially given his country's failed record of promoting democracy around the world. The possibility that Trump's White House will abandon the Biden administration's demands for an inclusive and representative Syrian government should not be underestimated. Moreover, it will probably recognize Israel's occupation of new Syrian territory, just as his first administration recognized in 2019 that the occupied Syrian Golan Heights are part of the State of Israel.

Conclusion

The Syrian transitional government faces many challenges, including the need to lift sanctions to stimulate the economy, the security challenge, and the unification of Syrian territory. The US has a central role in all of these challenges. The relationship with it must be managed wisely and thoughtfully, without surrendering any of Syria's rights, including in the occupied Golan. Managing this crisis also requires Syrian unity so the transitional government must focus on unifying Syrian forces to face these challenges by respecting the equality of citizenship, encouraging participation in the management of the state and its institutions, and presenting a pluralistic democratic model that can integrate the Syrian people in the east, north, and south, as well as areas of Syria outside state control. It must also work to deprive foreign powers, including the US, of any justification to maintain sanctions, a military presence on Syrian territory, or tamper with its territorial integrity.