

AFTER ASSAD: NAVIGATING SYRIA POLICY

HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

FEBRUARY 13, 2025

Printed for the use of the Committee on Foreign Relations



Available via <http://www.govinfo.gov>

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

59-893 PDF

WASHINGTON : 2025

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

JAMES E. RISCH, Idaho, *Chairman*

| | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| PETE RICKETTS, Nebraska | JEANNE SHAHEEN, New Hampshire |
| DAVID MCCORMICK, Pennsylvania | CHRISTOPHER A. COONS, Delaware |
| STEVE DAINES, Montana | CHRISTOPHER MURPHY, Connecticut |
| BILL HAGERTY, Tennessee | TIM KAINE, Virginia |
| JOHN BARRASSO, Wyoming | JEFF MERKLEY, Oregon |
| RAND PAUL, Kentucky | CORY A. BOOKER, New Jersey |
| TED CRUZ, Texas | BRIAN SCHATZ, Hawaii |
| MIKE LEE, Utah | CHRIS VAN HOLLEN, Maryland |
| RICK SCOTT, Florida | TAMMY DUCKWORTH, Illinois |
| JOHN R. CURTIS, Utah | JACKY ROSEN, Nevada |
| JOHN CORNYN, Texas | |

CHRISTOPHER M. SOCHA, *Staff Director*

NAZ DURAKOĞLU, *Democratic Staff Director*

JOHN DUTTON, *Chief Clerk*

(II)

C O N T E N T S

| | Page |
|---|------|
| STATEMENTS | |
| Risch, Hon. James E., Chairman, U.S. Senator From Idaho | 1 |
| Shaheen, Hon. Jeanne, Ranking Member, U.S. Senator From New Hampshire | 3 |
| WITNESSES | |
| Singh, Michael, Managing Director and Lane-Swig Senior Fellow, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, DC | 6 |
| Prepared statement | 8 |
| Stroul, Dana, Director of Research and Shelly and Michael Kassen Senior Fellow, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, DC | 13 |
| Prepared statement | 15 |
| ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD | |
| Letter to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee from Gen. Mazloum Abdi, Command-in-Chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces, February 13, 2025, submitted by Senator Jeanne Shaheen | 40 |
| Statement for the Record from Citizens for a Safe and Secure America et al., February 13, 2025, submitted by Senator Jeanne Shaheen | 42 |
| Letter to Senator Shaheen from the Access Centre For Human Rights (ACHR) et al., February 10, 2025, submitted by Senator Jeanne Shaheen | 52 |
| Fact Sheet: U.S. Assistance in Syria, submitted by Senator Jeanne Shaheen .. | 60 |
| The White House's wildly inaccurate claims about USAID spending, the <i>Washington Post</i> , February 7, 2025, submitted by Senator Chris Van Hollen | 62 |

AFTER ASSAD: NAVIGATING SYRIA POLICY

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2025

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:46 a.m., in room SD-419, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. James E. Risch, chairman of the committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Risch [presiding], Ricketts, McCormick, Shaheen, Coons, Kaine, Van Hollen, Duckworth, and Rosen.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES E. RISCH, CHAIRMAN, U.S. SENATOR FROM IDAHO

Senator RISCH. Today we are going to talk about Syria. I would call it opportunities that we want to look at—this is an important hearing.

For those of you in the audience, we are glad to have you. This is a public hearing, and we appreciate you attending and watching what we do, but participation is not allowed.

So as I have said over and over again, if you interrupt the proceedings, if you try to get attention, if you try to distract the committee or witnesses in any way, you will immediately be removed by our friends here who are working security and be charged, and also you will be banned from the committee for a year.

So with that, on a zero tolerance policy, I have got a few remarks I would like to make to open. Then I am going to yield to the distinguished ranking member for remarks.

Then we have two excellent witnesses here, one alumni of the staff of this committee, and so, obviously, well trained, and we are anxious to hear their thoughts.

The ranking member and I have been discussing this issue for some time, and I think there are opportunities here.

Since the Hamas October 7 terror attack in Israel, long held policy assumptions governing the Middle East have been turned on their head. Iran's ring of fire, which had encircled Israel with terror proxies and instability for decades, is now in ruins.

Thanks to our ally, Israel, Hamas is on its deathbed. The crown jewel of Tehran's terror groups, Hezbollah, is in tatters. Iran's weapons superhighway through Syria has been severed, and perhaps, most shockingly, the Assad regime, a fixture of brutality, collapsed in what seems like an instant.

The fall of the Assad regime presents policymakers with a dilemma. How should the United States engage with Syria? Should

we engage with Syria and at the same time safeguard U.S. national security interests now that the Assad regime is gone?

There is a very real tradeoff between opportunity and risk. Too much engagement too soon could create more security dilemmas but no or little engagement

Too little engagement could give Russia and Iran the ability to wield substantial influence again and also signal that the U.S. has no interest, which would be an incorrect assumption.

Make no mistake, there are very real dangers to lifting sanctions too quickly. After all, Syria's interim leader al-Sharaa has rebranded himself as a moderate, but he has supported some of the most violent terror groups in the Middle East. He fought under al-Qaeda in Iraq, worked under the Islamic State, and pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda all in the past.

In addition, Syria is rightly subject to a vast array of sanctions to include sanctions placed on the Caesar Act, which I drew and all of us supported to get in place.

Before the United States expands its engagement, several vital security interests need to be addressed, and I am going to list four of those in just a minute.

Going back to al-Sharaa—and we should be fair that he has been saying the right things, and much of the bad behavior that he committed, admittedly, is quite a ways in the past.

So let us talk about the things that need to be addressed if we are going to engage with Syria.

Number one, following the tragic attacks in New Orleans, which was inspired by the Islamic State, and troubling reports of ISIS infiltration across the southern border during the Biden administration, we need evidence that the interim government will not allow Syria to be a launching pad for terror attacks against the United States or our partners.

This includes full accountability and elimination of the Assad regime's chemical weapons stockpiles.

Second, Russia and Iran must be permanently ejected from Syria. Moscow must not have use of its port on the Mediterranean to threaten the United States or our allies. I am particularly troubled by Damascus recently hosting a Russian delegation to explore basing agreements.

Third, the Assad regime tragically turned Syria into a narco state, flooding the region with illegal drugs and fueling corruption and instability in the region. Additionally, this trade of methamphetamine and Captagon served as a source of revenue for the Assad regime, undermining the impact of U.S. and international sanctions and wreaking havoc on Syria's neighbors.

Assad's methamphetamine empire, and with its sprawling infrastructure and literal mountains of inventory, has to be destroyed.

Fourth, the interim government must account for American citizens detained by the Assad regime, including Austin Tice. This is a top priority for the United States and should be a top priority for Syrian leaders if they truly wish to work toward change in our bilateral relationship.

Finally, al-Sharaa dissolved the Syrian constitution and appointed himself president for 4 years. Syrians deserve a realistic political roadmap that returns power to the Syrian people and does

not fall back into a brutal dictatorship that threatens them or American security.

On all of these fronts the United States requires more than promises. If the new Syrian regime wants to have a friend in the United States, which the new interim government says that they do, we need to see action on the items I have laid out. If they do that they will find a willing partner in the United States.

In short, we must help and do enough to show the new interim government we are sincere in our desire to build an alliance, and at the same time we must, with clear eyes, maintain the ability to disengage if they prove to be nothing more than just another authoritarian government with no respect for human rights or religious diversity.

So I know the National Security Council at the White House is working on a Syrian policy. I am happy they are doing that.

We are giving them our input, and what I would propose that they seriously consider what we are going to say here today, and I am not talking about United States taxpayer dollars.

What I am talking about is a gradual lifting of the Caesar sanctions that we have put in place. Let them come into place. Let us see how we are doing.

Let us see how the new interim government acts, and if that happens we will continue in a stream of lifting those sanctions, and I am urging, because time is of the essence here, that the National Security Council take this up as soon as possible. Until that happens this is the policy of the United States I believe we should follow that I will be pursuing.

With that, I know the ranking member and I share some common thoughts in this regard. We have spoken about it a lot, and like myself she has spoken with a lot of the Syrian people and other people who have interests in the region.

So with that, let me yield to Senator Shaheen.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JEANNE SHAHEEN,
RANKING MEMBER, U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW HAMPSHIRE**

Senator SHAHEEN. Well, thank you very much, Chairman Risch, and welcome to our witnesses.

Thank you both for joining us today.

Let me also recognize—I understand we have some representatives from the White Helmets who are in the audience today.

Let me thank you for your service to the people of Syria.

I would like to begin by asking for consent to enter three statements into the record, Mr. Chairman.

The first is from General Mazloum who is the commanding general of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the second is from the Syrian American diaspora, and the third is from NGOs who have been working on Syria assistance.

Senator RISCH. Without objection.

[EDITOR'S NOTE.—The information referred to above can be found in the "Additional Material Submitted for the Record" section at the end of this document.]

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you.

Senator Risch and I, as he indicated, have spent a number of years working toward a better Syria. We are both relieved that after 50 years the Assad regime has finally fallen.

This was a regime that tortured and killed hundreds of thousands of Syrians. They forced millions to flee their homes. They gave an opening for terror groups like ISIS. They extended Vladimir Putin's reach and power into the Middle East.

Assad's fall was a defeat for Putin. We want to make sure that it continues to be a defeat for Putin. He not only lost a deepwater port that allowed him to threaten NATO's southern flank, but he lost a reliable defense partner who gave Russia a decade to practice the military tactics in Syria that they are using today in Ukraine.

So Assad's fall, as Chairman Risch has pointed out, creates an opportunity. It is a chance for us to rebuild from the rubble, a chance for the economy to recover, a chance for refugees to come home, and a chance to deny Putin, as well as Iran's Revolutionary Guard, a strategic foothold in the region.

Tehran wants the Syrian land bridge to the Mediterranean and to its proxies. They want their UAV development and missile sites back. They want to return to training security forces in Syria.

Stopping them, I believe, is critical to U.S. interests and to our partners in the region like Lebanon and Israel.

U.S. efforts in Syria are also key to preventing ISIS from taking advantage of the vacuum. ISIS has terrorized people across Syria and the region, and ISIS has radicalized and inspired lone wolf terrorists who have struck inside the American homeland—San Bernardino, California; Orlando, Florida; Garland, Texas; Ohio State University; New York; New Orleans.

It is a very long list, and we should be doing everything we can to prevent this terrorist group from reconstituting itself.

And it is not enough to leave the mission up to Turkey. We need to stand with our Kurdish allies and the entire global coalition to defeat ISIS. We cannot cut and run at this critical moment.

That is why the foreign aid freeze and recent attempts to shut down the United States Agency for International Development are so disturbing.

Mr. Chairman, I would ask for consent to enter a summary on assistance blocked in Syria for the record as well.

Senator RISCH. Without objection.

[EDITOR'S NOTE.—The information referred to above can be found in the "Additional Material Submitted for the Record" section at the end of this document.]

Senator SHAHEEN. Not only have these efforts meant cutting off programs to educate women and girls and help the very basic needs like delivering babies, they have directly undermined efforts to combat ISIS, to preserve evidence, to hold Assad and his regime accountable for their crimes.

We have heard that security guards have been at risk at Al-Hol, which is a huge detention camp in Syria where ISIS is looking to reconstitute itself. We cannot allow that to happen.

Evidence that could help bring Austin Tice and recover Americans who have been murdered in Syria needs to be addressed. That is why I have asked Secretary Rubio to immediately issue waivers

for aid to Syria including to support the security of ISIS detention facilities.

At the same time, we need to move quickly toward targeted sanctions relief, and we are not talking about throwing open the doors to the U.S. banking system.

These sanctions were put in place on the Assad regime. That regime is gone. If we do not reevaluate those sanctions we punish all Syrians for the sentence of Assad.

Syria's transitional government needs to understand the expectations of the United States and the international community, and that means we need clear, measurable benchmarks for an inclusive government that respects the rule of law and protects the Syrian people.

Sanctions relief will also help bring in the investments from regional partners and the international community that Syria needs to rebuild.

This is a once in a generation opportunity, but it will not last forever.

So I hope our witnesses will speak to the challenges there and the opportunities and help us think about how we can move swiftly to take advantage of the situation.

How can we incentivize inclusive governance, transparency, and the rule of law? How can we support stability in Syria and prevent our adversaries like Russia and Iran from regaining a foothold?

And what steps can we take in this short window of opportunity to keep Americans safe from the threat of terrorist groups like ISIS?

So I look forward to hearing your testimony today and to our conversation. Thank you.

Senator RISCH. Thank you, Senator Shaheen.

And the matters of expenditures of U.S. taxpayer dollars on a lot of these matters, as you know, were fluid and being reviewed. I have no doubt that this will get resolved appropriately in the not too distant future.

So with that, we are going to turn to our distinguished panel.

First of all, we are going to start with Mr. Michael Singh. He is the managing director and Lane-Swig senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

He was senior director of the Middle East affairs at the White House from 2007 to 2008 and a director on the National Security Council staff from 2005 to 2007. Mr. Singh co-chaired the bipartisan congressionally appointed Syria Study Group with Ms. Stroul, who also joins us here today.

The group released its final report on U.S. policy toward the conflict in Syria in September 2019. Much has changed since then, which is why we are here today, and I suspect both of you are surprised, as a lot of us were, at the breathtaking speed and pace at which Syria changed.

So with that, Mr. Singh, the floor is yours.

**STATEMENT OF MICHAEL SINGH, MANAGING DIRECTOR AND
LANE-SWIG SENIOR FELLOW, THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE
FOR NEAR EAST POLICY, WASHINGTON, DC**

Mr. SINGH. Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Shaheen, members of the committee. It is great to be back with you to discuss this subject at a time that I agree is fraught with risk but is also full of hope. The question before us, really, is how do we seize this opportunity that both of you, I think, have eloquently and accurately described while getting around the many obstacles that there are to actually realizing some of these positive benefits. I, frankly, find a lot to agree with in both of your statements, and I will try to avoid repeating it.

First, the opportunity. You both described it. Syria has been for years a Star Wars bar for U.S. adversaries in the region, whether that is ISIS and al-Qaeda, Iran, Russia.

It has been the platform for power projection for those adversaries, where their actions have not just been confined to Syria, but they have used Syria to try to attack Israel, to destabilize Lebanon, and so on and so forth.

And the conflict in Syria over the past 14 years has not remained confined to Syria. It has drawn in numerous foreign forces, including ours. It has sparked massive refugee flows to Europe and to Syria's neighbors.

It has led to, as you mentioned, to Syria's rise as a major narco trafficking state, something which we had not seen before, and even saw the first use of chemical weapons in war for decades since, I think, World War I.

And when you go through that list, it is absolutely clear that the emergence of a new and better government in Syria would represent probably the starker and most positive change of the many changes that the Middle East has seen since the heinous attacks of October 7, 2023.

But we are a long way from realizing that opportunity. We can see it, but it is not yet within our grasp. What are the obstacles?

First, both of you mentioned Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the group that has taken Damascus, and its leader Ahmed al-Sharaa and his background.

It does seem as though Sharaa and HTS have sincerely, as far as we can tell, broken ties with ISIS and with al-Qaeda, and even cracked down on those groups within the territory they previously controlled in Idlib.

But HTS continues, as far as we can tell, to adhere to a rigid and intolerant Islamist ideology, and it is reflected in the way that they governed Idlib, which was repressive toward minorities and toward women, toward dissent, and it was also authoritarian. Sharaa's rule was unchallenged in Idlib.

HTS for the past several years, since at least 2018, has tried to reassure us that we are not their enemy and that they want to work with the West.

But there, I would say, are unmistakable parallels between the rise of HTS and the rerise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, which made a lot of the same promises that we are seeing now from HTS and has not, obviously, followed through on those promises.

The second obstacle, as both of you mentioned, ISIS is not defeated, and in fact, we have seen a resurgence in ISIS attacks, according to CENTCOM, over the past year, and I think there is a lot of reason to worry just from initial reports that ISIS is trying to use this time—this time of instability and transition, to mount a comeback, and there is a lot of reason to worry that they could try to free those fighters and those family members that both of you mentioned who are in northeastern Syria hoping that, you know, we will take our eye off the ball or otherwise the situation will break down.

Third, I think there is a real risk that a new chapter of conflict could open in Syria, whether that is between Syrian factions, as HTS tries to consolidate its power, or as Turkey tries to seize territory and target Kurdish fighters, including those making up the SDF with which, as you know, we work.

And then, fourth and finally, my view is our adversaries are going to try to regain their footing in Syria.

As you mentioned, Mr. Chairman, Russia wants to salvage a role for itself. China's role was modest under the Assad regime, but they may see strategic and economic opportunities here. And even Iran, which the—I do not think the new government of Syria is going to like, will try to take advantage as it often does, of this poorly governed space and to try to work through proxies.

So what do we do? How can we seize the opportunity and get around these obstacles?

Briefly, let me recommend the following. First, we need to continue to prioritize our counterterrorism operations and partnerships. We cannot ease up the pressure on ISIS.

Second, I do think we should engage pragmatically with HTS and test its willingness to cooperate on areas of shared concern like countering Iran and ISIS, counter narcotics, border security and so forth, and we need to watch and see if HTS is truly committed to more inclusive governance, which is, I think, the key to long term peace and stability and the key to our interests as well.

Third, we should take a phased and performance based approach to the relief of sanctions, which is something absolutely Syrians will need as they go forward.

And then, finally, as we look at the bigger regional picture, I lay out a full agenda in my written testimony, but several things are key.

First and foremost, we have to work assiduously to ensure that Syria never again falls into the orbit of Iran, and we cannot cede the ground of Syria to Russia and China.

Second, we need to work in lockstep with our Arab partners. We did not do this in Iraq after 2003. And what happened was those partners shunned Baghdad, and we and they left it exposed to Iranian domination. We do not want to see that happen here.

Third, we need to reach an understanding with Turkey that it should respect Syrian sovereignty and refrain from actions that are going to undermine stability or our interests there.

And then, finally, we need to take this opportunity to try to cement Israeli-Syrian nonaggression understandings, which could eventually lead to actual peace between Israel and Syria, which is something we have sought for a long time.

It is a full agenda but I agree it is a historic opportunity, and seizing it, I think, is going to take patience, pragmatism, but most of all American leadership.

Thanks very much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Singh follows:]

Prepared Statement of Mr. Michael Singh

Since Hamas' heinous attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East has shifted dramatically. Yet many of these changes are tentative or incomplete—Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon will seek to rebuild with Iran's help, and Iran itself will look to Russia and China as it aims to rearm. In each place, whether the changes wrought by a year-and-a-half of war are lasting or fleeting depends heavily on the actions and determination of local and external actors.

In Syria, on the other hand, change is not only certain, it is unfolding swiftly. More than fifty years of Assad family rule has come to an abrupt end. It is cause for satisfaction in Washington—the Assad regime sponsored terrorism against the United States and Israel, served as a base of operations for Iran and Russia, brutally repressed the Syrian people, employed chemical weapons and clandestinely sought nuclear weapons, and in recent years became a leading trafficker of illegal narcotics. Whatever Syria's next chapter may hold, it will be a sharp break from the past five decades.

Yet there is good reason for unease regarding what Syria's future holds and its implications for American interests. The new government in Damascus is dominated by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a US-designated terrorist group whose roots lie in the global jihadist movement spearheaded by Al-Qaida and whose leader—now appointed as Syria's president—spent time in prison for fighting against US forces in Iraq. Even if the group's intentions are good, the task facing it is enormous—Syrian history between its independence in 1946 the rise of Hafez al-Assad in 1970 was marked by numerous coups and communal violence, and since 2011 the country has been effectively divided into statelets and occupied by foreign forces. The divisions which Syrians will need to surmount if they are to come together and rebuild their society and economy are deep indeed, and extend beyond the country's own borders.

While putting Syria on a better path may be a daunting challenge, it is also an opportunity—not just for Syrians themselves, but for the Middle East, the West, and the United States. The Assad regime was implicated in many of the most serious national security threats emanating from the region and contributed to threats globally. The United States should, through pragmatic but cautious engagement, explore whether the Assad regime's collapse could represent a meaningful reduction in these threats.

THREATS TO US INTERESTS

In a world full of conflicts, the war in Syria has long stood out for the threats it posed to US interests. As detailed in the September 2019 report of the congressionally mandated Syria Study Group¹, numerous threats have long originated in the country. ISIS, Al-Qaida, and other terrorist groups—including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which has historical links to both—have long operated out of Syria. Though ISIS is diminished, it continues to mount attacks. Syria has also been a forward operating base for Iran, which used the country both to coordinate with regional terrorist proxies and for the transshipment of arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon and groups in the West Bank; and for Russia, whose 2015 intervention in Syria aimed to thwart US objectives there and reestablish Moscow as a regional player. The conflict saw the open use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime and raised questions about the disposition of any residual elements of Syria's nuclear program, which was largely destroyed by Israel in 2007.

Nor were the Syrian conflict's effects confined within the country's own borders—Syrian refugees flooded and imposed a significant economic burden on the region and Europe. The conflict drew in Turkey, Israel, and of course the United States, among others, and placed US partners like the Syrian Democratic Forces into direct conflict with Turkish and Russian-backed forces, the latter of which also used Syria to project power into the Mediterranean and Africa. More recently, Syria has also become a major global narco-trafficking hub, producing eighty percent of the world's

¹The Syria Study Group report can be found here: <https://www.usip.org/syria-study-group-final-report>

captagon supply and generating illicit revenues worth three times those earned by Mexican drug cartels, according to the British government.²

These threats have evolved but not disappeared with the collapse of the Assad regime. Several risks stand out in the current situation:

- *The Rise of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.* The Assad regime's overthrow came at the hands of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which had for several years ruled over the city and province of Idlib in northern Syria. HTS presents a complex case for US counter-terrorism policy, and in many respects a novel one, though its rise has parallels to the Taliban in Afghanistan. HTS' leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, at one point fought with Al-Qaida in Iraq (which later became ISIS) against US forces, subsequently spending 7 years in an American-run prison. From there, he traveled a circuitous path, breaking from ISIS and affiliating with Al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, with whom he also subsequently broke ties pursuant to his decision to focus on fighting the Assad regime rather than engaging in international terrorism.

While HTS and Sharaa eschewed attacks abroad, their record governing Idlib gives cause for concern. Though the group acted against jihadists in its territory who sought to mount overseas attacks, HTS fighters also clashed as recently as 2022 with US forces pursuing ISIS leaders. In addition, Sharaa and HTS have praised the use of terrorism elsewhere, such as Hamas' attacks against Israel. In addition, Sharaa in the past characterized HTS as defending not just Syria, but defending Sunni Muslims globally, and the HTS government in Idlib persecuted non-Sunni minorities, executed dissenting Sunni scholars, repressed women, and even imprisoned and tortured Western journalists. Furthermore, the HTS government of Idlib was essentially authoritarian, with Sharaa as its unchallenged leader.

In recent years however—even before taking control of Damascus in December 2024—Sharaa and HTS have sought to project moderation. The group reportedly provided assurances to US envoys in 2018 that it did not consider the United States an enemy, softened its policies toward the Christian and Druze residents of Idlib, denied plans to enforce a harsh Islamist agenda, and since assuming control of the Syrian government placed women in a handful of senior positions and welcomed envoys from the West and elsewhere. Yet there is reason to worry that HTS' shifts may simply represent new means for accomplishing longstanding ends. HTS ideologues have compared the group to the Taliban, with Washington Institute scholar Aaron Zelin noting, “The Taliban’s successful negotiation of the United States’ exit from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the prior talks that occurred in Doha, Qatar, provide a potential example of new strategies that jihadist groups might employ to further their ultimate goals.”³

- *A Possible Resurgence of ISIS.* While ISIS no longer controls significant territories in Syria, the group is not defeated. Indeed, as of June 2024, ISIS was on track to double the number of attacks it conducted in 2023, according to Centcom.⁴ There is good reason to worry that ISIS may seize upon current events to mount a broader comeback. In the days following the fall of the Assad regime, ISIS reportedly seized significant numbers of weapons in formerly regime-held areas. Among other purposes, those weapons could be used in any effort to free the thousands of ISIS fighters imprisoned in northeastern Syria, of the tens of thousands of ISIS family members—spouses but especially children—from the Al-Hol and Roj camps. These prisons and camps are guarded by the US-partnered Syrian Democratic Forces, who have already come under new pressures since the regime's collapse.

There is also a risk that Syria could become a safe haven for other terrorist groups. In its campaign to oust Assad and focus on Syria first and foremost, HTS did not just break from but clashed with AQ, ISIS, and other externally focused groups in recent years. Now that it has accomplished its proximate goal of overthrowing Assad, however, its will and ability to persist in this approach will be tested. Western policymakers will doubtless be mindful of the fact that the Afghan Taliban also pledged not to permit territory they controlled to be used in overseas terror plots, but has not honored that promise. Nor is it clear that HTS, now that it is in control of Damascus, will adopt the same disapproving attitude toward Palestinian terrorist groups active there as they have done toward jihadist groups targeting the West, especially given Sharaa's past praise for Hamas attacks on Israel.

- *Renewed Intra-Syrian Conflict.* In abolishing Syria's constitution and declaring himself president, Ahmed al-Sharaa also called for the dissolution of the country's

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/tackling-the-illicit-drug-trade-fuelling-assads-war-machine>

³ <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/sites/default/files/pdf/PolicyFocus175Zelinv2.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3840981/defeat-isis-mission-in-iraq-and-syria-for-january-june-2024/>

numerous armed groups. While this putatively included his own group, HTS, it also implied that groups such as the Turkish-supported Syrian National Army (SNA) and US-partnered Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) should cease to exist as independent entities and somehow be integrated into a national military. While talks are reportedly ongoing between the new government and the SDF, it is not clear whether an agreement will be reached; Syria's Kurdish minority not only faces possible attack by Turkish-backed forces and ISIS remnants, but has a history of persecution at the hands of Damascus which will likely diminish its willingness to disband its forces.

Other flashpoints in post-Assad Syria include the Syria-Turkey border, where Turkey and its local partners have sought to expand the territory they control; the Golan Heights, where Israel has moved into territories previously controlled by forces allied with the Syrian regime; and the Iraq-Syria border, which remains closed by the Iraqi government and patrolled by Iranian-backed Iraqi militias.

Role of Iran, Russia, and China. The fall of the Assad regime was a blow to Russia, for whom Syria was a traditional locus of Soviet influence in the Middle East and then a last bastion of post-Soviet Russian influence. Syria was also touted by Moscow as an example of Russia's steadfastness as an ally, something US partners in the region were quick to echo when seeking commitments from Washington. Syria also served more pragmatic ends for Russia—it provided both an air base and a warm-water port, a showcase for Russian arms sales, and a proving ground for Russian commanders, many of whom subsequently fought in Ukraine. Despite Assad's fall, however, the new Syrian government and the Russian government have already held multiple high-level contacts, and Sharraa has expressed a certain pragmatism in approaching Moscow, noting the Syrian military equipment and energy facilities are Russian in origin. If Syria cannot obtain what it needs in the defense, energy, industrial, and other sectors from the West—or cannot do so at a competitive price—it may turn to Russia despite Moscow's past support for Assad.

For Iran, Syria even more important than it was for Russia. Damascus was the closest thing that Tehran had to a state ally in the region, its other key partners all being nonstate actors. Syria provided strategic depth to Iranian efforts in Lebanon and the West Bank: a transshipment point, operations room, and source of revenue all in one. When the Syrian revolution erupted in 2011, Iran provided the Assad regime with the shock troops it needed to survive, in the form of Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon, militants and conscripts from Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, and even officers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps itself. The loss of the Assad regime is grievous for Iran's so-called "forward defense" model, interrupting the land and air bridge from Iran through Iraq and Syria into Lebanon and the West Bank. Without a compliant government in Damascus, Iran will be hard pressed to rebuild Hezbollah or liaise as it did before with Palestinian terrorist groups.

It seems unlikely that any new Syrian government will want to replicate Assad's cozy relationship with Tehran. While Sharraa has called for normal relations with Tehran, this is in itself something of a rebuke, as it carries the implicit accusation that the prior arrangement disrespected Syrian sovereignty. More significantly, the Iranian embassy was ransacked during the storming of Damascus, and the new Syrian authorities have reportedly seized Iranian weapons bound for Hezbollah on more than one occasion. More likely than a close Syrian-Iranian security relationship under HTS rule would be Iran seeking to capitalize on security and governance vacuums in Syria by working with non-state actors in poorly governed regions or in the Lebanese and Iraqi border regions where Iranian proxies are influential, or even seeking to use them to weaken or destabilize a fledgling Syrian government.

While China has not been nearly as involved in Syria as either Russia or Iran, it may perceive economic and strategic opportunities in Syria—as it has in Iraq and Afghanistan—if the country seems to be stabilizing to the point where Chinese officials and businessmen could operate safely. China frequently used its Security Council veto to protect the Assad regime and reportedly engaged in intelligence cooperation with Syrian counterparts, but is likely not nearly as associated with the former government as are Russia or China in the minds of Syrians. While Beijing may be discomfited by HTS' past associations with Uyghur foreign fighters, it will not consider HTS' ideology an insurmountable obstacle to good relations, especially if it can crowd out Western influence in cultivating them.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR US POLICY

The fall of the Syrian regime is a vindication of a sustained, bipartisan US policy opposing Assad's continued rule and supporting his opponents. US sanctions undoubtedly helped to weaken Assad, as did American pressure on his key sup-

porters—Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia. At the same time, American support for and partnership with Syrian opposition groups not only isolated the regime, but helped to suppress ISIS and other terrorist groups. Nevertheless, US policy must now inevitably shift in response to events and in order to ensure the advancement of American interests.

- *Engagement with HTS.* It is not the case, unfortunately, that simply because the Assad regime was an enemy of the United States that the new Syrian government will be a friend. Even if HTS maintains its opposition to international terrorism having accomplished its proximate goal of overthrowing Assad, it remains an Islamist movement with a record of intolerance, repression, and authoritarianism. How—and if—it will work with other groups and factions in Syria and US partners in the region remains to be seen.

In approaching HTS, the US should be patient, pragmatic, and interests-focused. This was the approach of the Trump administration in its first term toward HTS in Idlib, when then-Special Envoy Ambassador Jim Jeffrey held back-channel talks with Ahmed al-Sharaa. This pragmatism also characterized the initial approach the Biden administration took toward HTS and Sharaa, lifting the bounty on the latter but otherwise insisting that US policy would be based on HTS' actions, not its words.

In our dealings with Sharaa and his government, the US should look for areas of common interest where HTS' intentions can be tested and trust can be built. These include sharing intelligence on border security, drug trafficking, terrorism, and the Iranian threat network, against which the new Syrian authorities have already reportedly been acting. When it comes to issues of Syrian governance, Washington should be patient and take our lead from Syrians themselves. While a Syria that is governed in an authoritarian or sectarian manner is unlikely to be stable, prosperous, or friendly to the West, the US should avoid seeking to impose our views regarding precisely what form of government Syria must have or how it should arrive at it. Likewise, it should be up to Syrians to decide how to balance backward-looking accountability for the many heinous crimes committed during a decade-plus of war against the need to move forward as a unified society.

- *Sanctions.* The highest-priority request of the new Syrian government has been for the US and the West to lift sanctions, and understandably so—Syria's economy and infrastructure have been devastated by war, causing the previously middle-income country to descend into wrack and ruin. The Biden administration provided modest initial sanctions relief, largely to support humanitarian relief and the provision of essential services in Syria. Yet extensive sanctions remain targeting both the Syrian government and HTS itself.

Washington should adopt a phased and performance-based approach to relieving sanctions—as HTS and Syrian authorities demonstrate that the original grounds for the sanctions no longer apply, Congress and the Trump administration should consider waiving or lifting them. Sanctions that were intended primarily to isolate the Assad regime might be the first to be eased, whereas those prohibiting sensitive defense and related exports might remain in place for some time, for example.

Just as importantly, however, the US approach to sanctions relief should be tied clearly to US interests rather than to any well-intentioned efforts at political engineering. While Washington would be wise to use sanctions to incentivize the Syrian government to break from extremism, shun Iran, and govern inclusively, placing too many conditions on sanctions relief, especially those not clearly connected to US national security interests, risks alienating the new Syrian government and pushing them toward US rivals. Conversely “Not Assad” is an insufficient condition for sanctions relief, and moving too quickly would risk setting a precedent that extremist groups elsewhere might hope to emulate.

- *Counter-terrorism.* Sharaa has called the US presence in Syria “illegal” and has called for the US-partnered Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to dissolve, disarm, and integrate into the new Syrian military. At least superficially, Sharaa’s apparent goal of a unified Syria under a single authority could well align with US interests; in the long run, the best way to prevent an ISIS resurgence or the establishment of terrorist safe havens is for Syria to be well and capably governed, to cultivate professional and effective security forces, and to eschew the use of terrorism as a policy tool. The US should support Syria’s movement in this direction, for example by encouraging the SDF to reach appropriate understandings with any new government in Damascus whose legitimacy is internationally recognized. But in the meantime the US should continue to prioritize counter-terrorism operations in order to prevent a resurgence of ISIS or related groups.

- *Geopolitical Concerns.* While the Assad regime’s collapse has been followed by popular expectations that Syria’s diplomatic alignment would shift, the reality is

likely to be more complex. While the new Syrian government may, as noted above, have pragmatic reasons for good relations with Moscow and Beijing, it is important to US interests that Syria durably leave the orbit of Iran and its proxies.

While Sharaa and HTS have reached out to Arab neighbors—many of whom were in the process of normalizing with Assad before he fled to Russia—their strongest regional relationship is with Turkey, whose influence in Syria is resented by Arab Gulf states in particular and which may yet harbor designs on portions of Syrian territory occupied by Turkish forces or proxies. The Arab states themselves, which regard political Islamism as nearly great a threat as they do Iran, are likely to be wary in their own engagement with Damascus. This has been demonstrated by the divergent approaches that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have adopted toward Sharaa thus far, with the former offering aid and the latter holding back. For its part, Israel acted swiftly after Assad's fall to defend its interests, but Sharaa and other Syrian officials have suggested an openness toward better relations with Jerusalem.

It is up to HTS to satisfy their neighbors that they pose no threat, but the US has an undeniable stake in the outcome. Assuming Damascus can assuage their concerns, Washington should encourage its Arab allies to partner closely with Syria in order to avoid a repeat of post-2003 Iraq, which was shunned by fellow Arab states and became easy pickings for Iran and other malign actors. For Washington, several priorities stand out:

- 1) Ensuring that Syria never again becomes a conduit for Iranian power projection in the region, working as necessary with the Syrian government to this end;
- 2) Limiting the security and defense relationship between Damascus, Moscow, and Beijing, while recognizing that, as elsewhere in the region, these relationships are likely to be cordial ones;
- 3) Coordinating with Arab partners to present Damascus with common benchmarks for sanctions relief and economic and security partnership and Syria's eventual integration into regional security frameworks;
- 4) Ensuring that Turkey respects Syrian sovereignty and does not seek to capitalize on this transitional period in ways that undermine the country's future stability or US interests;
- 5) Brokering Israel-Syria non-aggression understandings that could lead to eventual peace and normalization, as well as working to improve Israel-Turkey relations to prevent the two US allies from increased friction; and
- 6) Working closely with US partners in Europe—particularly France—and elsewhere to ensure a common Western approach to the Syrian transition.

CONCLUSION

The fall of the Assad regime in Syria is a watershed moment for the Middle East and could be a boon for US interests and those of our regional partners. In recent years the US has been torn between excessive intervention and exasperated neglect in our approach to the Middle East. The current situation in Syria calls for neither, but instead requires policymakers to recognize that vital American interests are implicated there, and advancing them will require patience, pragmatism, and US leadership.

Senator RISCH. Thank you very much.

Now we will turn to Ms. Stroul. She is the director of research and Shelly and Michael Kassen senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

As mentioned, she co-chaired the Syria Study Group with Mr. Singh in 2019 before leaving the institute from 2021 through 2023 to serve as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East, the Pentagon's top civilian official with responsibility for the region.

Prior to joining the institute in 2018 she served for 5 years as a senior professional staff member of this distinguished committee where she covered the Middle East, North Africa, and Turkey.

Undoubtedly, you have some thoughts on this, and we would love to hear you, and welcome back.

**STATEMENT OF DANA STROUL, DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH AND
SHELLY AND MICHAEL KASSEN SENIOR FELLOW, THE WASH-
INGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY, WASHINGTON,
DC**

Ms. STROUL. Thank you so much, Senator.

Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Shaheen, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Five years ago, serving as a co-chair of the Syria Study Group alongside Mr. Singh, what we testified then was that Syria and a robust U.S. engagement in Syria is in the American national security interest, and we also said at the time that the drivers of conflict in Syria remained even though there was an assumption that the Assad regime had won, the drivers of conflict would leave Syria perpetually unstable, and I think those recommendations have borne out.

The Assad regime had not won. We failed to understand how hollowed out his tenuous hold over Syria was. But the main point that I want to make here is that those drivers of conflict remain today, and if there is not a concise, coordinated effort to address those drivers of conflict, the risk is that Syria falls back into conflict, which is what happens in most post-conflict societies that have experienced this kind of deadly conflict for as long as the Syrian people have.

The risks are too high and I think it is worth noting, again, both of you mentioned these in your opening statements, what the risks are because of how Syria under Assad served as a base from which terrorism and instability radiated across the region, affecting our national security as well as that of Europe and the Middle East.

Under Assad, Syria had a nuclear weapons and a chemical weapons program. He emptied his prisons of violent Sunni extremists during the U.S. war in Iraq, which led to al-Qaeda in Iraq and an insurgency against U.S. forces.

He used chemical weapons, which remain in the country today. Torture, barrel bombs, starvation, and other brutal measures against the Syrian people, sending millions of refugees fleeing for safety, which still affect the stability of our partners today.

He granted Russia a naval base on the eastern Mediterranean, remained Iran's one strategic ally in the region, and allowed Hezbollah and various Iran backed groups to attack U.S. forces and Israel from within Syria.

His regime produced and smuggled the narcotic Captagon on across the Middle East, and finally, his brutality and unwillingness to address the drivers of conflict in Syria made the seizure of Syrian territory by ISIS and al-Qaeda a reality.

With Assad out and a new transitional government in, we have an opportunity to shape outcomes in Syria that protect American interests, specifically with respect to counterterrorism and counter Iran objectives.

But events on the ground and international engagement with Ahmed al-Sharaa are outpacing U.S. policy. We must urgently update our approach to the post-Assad Syria.

No surprise I am going to agree with a lot of what Mr. Singh said. I think a U.S. policy review must answer the following three questions.

Engagement—what commitments does Washington seek from Damascus's new leaders?

Sanctions—what actions are required in order to begin the process of providing expanded sanctions relief and lifting state level sanctions on Syria?

And three is the U.S. military presence. What are the necessary conditions in order for the U.S. military to transfer its counterterrorism mission in northeast Syria without risking the reemergence of ISIS?

We should engage the new government in Damascus and set out a series of benchmarks to assess whether Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria's unelected president who grew out of al-Qaeda, is willing and able to govern in a manner that does not further destabilize Syria and the region or threaten American interests.

Examples of benchmarks—appropriate counterterrorism action against ISIS, al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and Iran associated groups; limiting acts of violence outside the rule of law and enabling transitional justice and accountability; holding him accountable for the transition timeline he set out himself, including drafting a new constitution, ensuring equitable representation in governance and resource distribution, and recommitting to the 1974 disengagement agreement with Israel.

Now, building on what Mr. Singh said about counterterrorism, there is no alternative to the U.S. military and its local partner, the SDF, for the defeat ISIS mission.

The U.S. should reaffirm our commitment to maintaining U.S. forces in Syria lest all the gains against ISIS be squandered. We should also begin consultations and planning for the conditions under which we could transfer the military mission without breathing new life into ISIS.

Though the Administration announced important exemptions to the assistance freeze for lifesaving humanitarian aid, nonhumanitarian aid is just as important.

This committee has played a critical role for more than a decade in oversight of assistance to groups like the White Helmets, NGOs working at ISIS detention camps, stabilization programs in communities liberated from ISIS, and the documentation of war crimes.

Cutting off programs that help communities recover after surviving the brutalities of either Assad's rule or ISIS without plans to transition funding or services to non-U.S. actors will exacerbate the drivers of conflict that will keep Syria unsafe.

Moreover, the dismantling of USAID and anticipated reduction in State Department career personnel, the U.S. Government risks losing critical technical expertise in implementing U.S. programs and the delicate work of engaging post-conflict countries.

The United States is safer if Syria is stable and can address threats rising from within its territory without outside intervention.

In turn, a more resilient Syria promotes greater security across the Middle East, leading to more stable countries and prospects for widened economic and security cooperation with the United States.

Finally, a Syria that is not destabilizing, attacking, or antagonizing its neighbors—Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey—is also in the U.S. national security interest.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify today.
 [The prepared statement of Ms. Stroul follows:]

Prepared Statement of Ms. Dana Stroul

Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Shaheen, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the future of U.S. policy toward Syria. Five years ago, while serving as a co-chair of the Syria Study Group, I testified before this committee on the enduring importance of Syria for U.S. national security. Today, not only do developments in Syria remain critical for protecting Americans at home, but they also present real opportunities for the Syrian people, for the Middle East, and for the United States.

In order to grasp the stakes for Middle East stability, and the safety of Americans, it is important to recall how Syria—under the rule of Bashar al-Assad—was long a base from which terrorism and instability radiated across the region and U.S. adversaries thrived.

Under Assad's rule:

- Syria developed a covert nuclear weapons program, which was eliminated by Israel in 2007.
- Syria developed a chemical weapons program, which to date has not been entirely dismantled.
- Syria emptied its prisons of violent Sunni extremists during the second Gulf war, which began in 2003, and facilitated their movement to Iraq, leading to the establishment of al-Qaeda in Iraq and an insurgency against U.S. forces that killed and wounded thousands.
- The Assad regime used chemical weapons, torture, barrel bombs, starvation, and other brutal measures to suppress peaceful protests by Syrian citizens, sending millions of refugees fleeing for safety across the Middle East and into Europe.
- The Assad regime welcomed Russian and Iranian support, allowing both to gain access to the Mediterranean and use land routes to arm Lebanese Hezbollah and disperse increasingly sophisticated weapons across the region.
- Assad, as Iran's one strategic ally in the Middle East, allowed the use of Syrian territory by Hezbollah and various Iran-backed militia groups to attack U.S. forces and Israel.
- The drivers of conflict related to the Assad regime's brutal rule facilitated the seizure of Syrian territory by the Islamic State (ISIS) and al-Qaeda affiliates. For years, ISIS has flourished most in Assad-regime-held areas.
- Assad-regime forces produced and smuggled the narcotic Captagon across the Middle East, utilizing criminal and terrorist networks.

With Bashar al-Assad out and a new transitional government in Damascus, the United States has an opportunity to work with its allies and partners to shape outcomes in Syria that promote regional security and protect American interests, specifically with respect to counterterrorism and counter-Iran objectives. U.S. engagement toward the new Syrian leadership is fraught: its leaders grew out of al-Qaeda and many are designated as terrorists, while others espouse extremist views. But events on the ground and international engagement with the new leadership in Syria are outpacing U.S. policy. America must urgently update its approach to post-Assad Syria, and test the new Syrian leadership to determine the opportunities and risks associated with engagement. The United States retains significant levers of influence: military pressure against ISIS through its continued presence in northeast Syria; the U.S.-led sanctions architecture, the unlocking of which could facilitate meaningful economic recovery and reconstruction; U.S. diplomatic leadership and its unmatched ability to convene like-minded partners; and U.S. foreign and technical assistance.

A U.S. policy review must address the following issues:

- *Engagement.* What actions and commitments does Washington seek from Damascus's new leaders in order to acknowledge the new government as the internationally recognized representative of Syria?
- *Sanctions.* What actions and commitments are required in order to begin the process of providing expanded sanctions relief and lifting state-level sanctions on Syria?
- *U.S. military presence.* What are the necessary conditions in order for the U.S. military to transfer its counterterrorism mission in northeast Syria without risking the reemergence of ISIS?

Engagement. The self-appointed transitional president of Syria, Ahmed al-Sharaa, also known by his nom de guerre—Muhammad al-Jolani—is moving quickly to signal his commitment to governing in an inclusive manner, disarming and integrating all armed groups, stabilizing Syria’s economy, and reintegrating Syria into the international community. Al-Sharaa emphasizes his commitment to not imposing strict Islamic law on Syria’s religiously and ethnically diverse society, and to preventing both terrorist activity at home and Syria serving as a base for terrorist operations abroad. The challenge for the United States is determining if his nascent government is appropriately separated from its al-Qaeda/ISIS roots and both willing and able to counter terrorism, resist malign Iranian influence, and govern Syria in a manner that does not lead to further cycles of violence.

While the United States has not yet determined if the new Damascus leaders’ early moves meet benchmarks for support, an emerging coalition of U.S. allies and partners across the Middle East, Europe, and Turkey is moving quickly to engage him. These governments, however, are not coordinating messaging or expectations with each other or with America; the risk is that Damascus hears mixed messages and does not feel compelled to commit to any program of action that can prevent future instability and violence. It is noteworthy that while the United States has engaged Sharaa only at the assistant secretary level in December 2024, the Qatari emir recently visited him in Damascus, and Sharaa’s first trip abroad was to meet with the crown prince of Saudi Arabia followed by the president of Turkey. Al-Sharaa now has invitations to Paris and Berlin, and may attend the Egypt-hosted emergency summit on the Palestinians in late February.

The United States should engage the new government in Damascus at the political level, and set out a series of benchmarks to assess whether Sharaa and his government are willing and able to govern Syria in a manner that does not further destabilize Syria or the region, or threaten American interests. Benchmarks include:

- Holding the government accountable for its own transition timeline of three to 5 years, including the national dialogue and drafting of a new constitution.
- Taking appropriate counterterrorism actions against ISIS/al-Qaeda/affiliates and Iran-associated non-state groups. (Here, the new government’s actions to counter Hezbollah-associated networks’ operations on the Lebanon-Syria border is an encouraging early indicator.)
- Consolidating security control over formerly regime-held areas of Syria and demobilizing armed groups.
- Working to limit acts of retributive violence outside the rule of law, and enable transitional justice and accountability for all Syrians who suffered under the Assad regime.
- Ensuring equitable representation at the national and local levels in Syria’s governance, and fair distribution of resources.
- Upholding commitments that ensure the security of U.S. allies, including recommitment to the 1974 disengagement agreement with Israel.

Sanctions. Before Assad’s ouster, U.S.-led sanctions only permitted humanitarian aid delivery to regime-held areas, otherwise blocking all economic engagement or reconstruction. In early January of this year, the United States issued General License 24 for a 6-month period to allow certain transactions with the Syrian government and personal remittances through the Syrian Central Bank. It also provided a waiver to the Foreign Assistance Act in order for America’s partners to provide aid to Syria without the risk of violating U.S. sanctions. But the U.S. designation of Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism, and other state-level sanctions like the congressional Caesar sanctions, will reduce appetites for the kind of economic engagement necessary to effect real change in Syria. The United States should urgently initiate a thorough and deliberative process regarding the state-level terrorism designations on Syria and sanctions tied to the behavior of the Assad regime.

In the short term, the United States can do more to ease Syria’s economic recovery by getting out of the way: partners in Europe and the Middle East can fill in gaps and provide assistance even if America will not, as long as they are assured of not violating U.S. sanctions. U.N. technical experts, as well as international financial institutions, can also play a role in stabilizing Syria’s economy and setting it on a path to recovery. This will require targeted sanctions relief and waivers, and a clearly communicated strategy. A process should be initiated soon to expand the waivers granted in General License 24.

In the medium-to-long term, more expansive sanctions relief should be tied to the performance of the new government and its commitment to following through on its promising reform and stabilization agenda.

U.S. military presence. About two thousand U.S. military personnel remain in northeast Syria under the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. These forces are sustaining pressure on ISIS through unilateral and partnered military strikes, and supporting the Kurdish-majority Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who maintain custody of nearly nine thousand ISIS detainees and forty thousand ISIS-affiliated families in displaced persons camps. The U.S. partnership with the SDF is the main irritant with NATO ally Turkey, which considers the SDF part of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)—an entity designated as a terrorist group by the United States, Turkey, and others. Ankara in turn opposes SDF ambitions to establish a semiautonomous region within Syria, on Turkey's border. The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) is currently engaged in a military offensive against the SDF in northeast Syria.

The new leadership in Damascus has stated its commitment to preventing Syria from being exploited for transnational terrorism, a willingness to take over security at the ISIS detention facilities and displaced persons camps, and an openness to absorbing the SDF into the new national Syrian security forces. But this is a significant undertaking that will require training, equipment, intelligence support, and time. In the near term, there is no viable, combat-credible alternative to the United States and the SDF to take over the defeat-ISIS mission. Therefore, the U.S. should urgently initiate a political and military dialogue with key stakeholders on the timeline and conditions under which it could transfer the military mission, and underscore its commitment to maintaining U.S. forces in Syria for the short-to-medium term lest all the battlefield gains against ISIS be squandered.

- With the SDF, the United States needs to back its local partner while facilitating dialogue with the new government in Damascus. The SDF leadership has already acknowledged its commitment to a future within a unified Syria; the U.S. should support the SDF's leaders in seeking reasonable assurances to integrate into the new Syrian national forces and secure commitments for Syrian Kurdish representation in the central government along with a local-level role. The SDF should immediately take steps to separate its forces from non-Syrian fighters like those from the PKK.

- With the Damascus government, the United States is already testing its commitment to countering terrorism by providing operational intelligence against ISIS threats. If the new government demonstrates will and capability for targeting ISIS and al-Qaeda threats within Syria, the United States should begin a multiyear process to transfer the on-the-ground mission and determine how it can still support counterterrorism activities without such a presence. This supporting role could include intelligence sharing, training, and the provision of limited kinds of equipment.

- With Turkey, the United States should initiate a political and military dialogue that takes stock of the Islamic State's ability to reconstitute in Syria, and formulates the conditions and timeline under which America could safely redeploy out of Syria. As part of this dialogue, the U.S. should seek commitments from Turkey to stop targeting the SDF and direct the SNA to cease attacking the SDF and terrorizing communities in the northeast: these actions are threatening hard-fought gains against ISIS.

- With Damascus and with Ankara, the U.S. must have credible assurances that ISIS detainees, as well as families in displaced persons camps, will be treated securely and humanely in accordance with international humanitarian law and the law of armed conflict. The U.S. should also reenergize efforts to repatriate Iraqi and third-country nationals from these facilities, so that the population is more manageable.

U.S. foreign assistance freeze. Though the Trump administration announced exemptions to the assistance freeze for lifesaving humanitarian aid, the impact of this policy is harming U.S. interests in Syria and further destabilizing a fragile situation. Consider that before Assad's ouster 16.7 million Syrians required humanitarian assistance, the highest level inside the country since the civil war started in 2011. Before the freeze, the United States was the largest bilateral donor for Syria's humanitarian needs, providing \$1.2 billion in 2014 and more than \$18 billion since 2011.

Non-humanitarian U.S. aid goes to Syrian civil society groups like the White Helmets, whose members conduct search-and-rescue missions and clear unexploded ordnance. At displaced persons camps in northeast Syria, American assistance supports water and sanitation services, and administrative management and security. The United States provides stabilization funds, separate from humanitarian aid, to communities liberated from ISIS in northeast Syria. This kind of support is critical to mitigate conditions that make communities vulnerable to violent extremist propaganda and actions. Another area of U.S. support currently frozen is funding for doc-

umentation of war crimes and crimes against humanity. For years, the United States has provided funding and training to preserve evidence of the Assad regime's crimes, which sent an important signal to Syrians suffering from Assad-regime brutality.

This committee can encourage the State Department to prioritize Syria in the ninety-day review of all U.S. programs, and quickly make determinations as to which programs make America stronger, safer, and more prosperous based on the criteria articulated by Secretary of State Rubio. Put simply, cutting off programs that help communities recover after surviving the brutalities of either Assad's rule or the Islamic State—without plans to transition funding or continuity in services to non-U.S. actors—risks exacerbating drivers of conflict that could undermine stability in Syria and in the Middle East. The United States is safer if Syria is stable and can address threats rising from within its territory; a more resilient Syria promotes greater security across the Middle East, leading to more stable countries and prospects for widened economic and security cooperation with the United States. A Syria that is not destabilizing, attacking, or antagonizing its neighbors—Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey—is also in the U.S. national security interest.

Beyond funding, the U.S. Government possesses deep technical expertise and knowledge in post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction. The first Trump administration produced a Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR) in 2018 calling for the selective use of taxpayer dollars and the expectation of burden sharing by partners. It also correctly identified stabilization as an inherently political endeavor, the goal of which is to “create conditions where legitimate authorities and systems can manage conflict and prevent violence.” The SAR identified the State Department as the lead agency for stabilization efforts—it has an entire bureau focused on conflict and stabilization policy—and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) as the lead implementing agency. With the dismantling of USAID and the removal of most of its civil servants, the U.S. Government risks losing critical technical expertise in implementing U.S. programs and overseeing the distribution of U.S. funds to local groups.

Blocking adversaries/working with partners. From 2015 until recently, a widely held assumption was that Russian and Iranian backing for the Assad regime was more decisive than any support offered to the opposition by the United States, Europe, or Arab governments. The U.S. has an opportunity to further undermine Russian and Iranian positions in the Middle East, building upon their failure to back Assad, which dealt a strategic blow, and the widespread resentment across Syria of their support for his brutal campaign against his own people.

While the assumption of an unbreakable Damascus-Tehran-Moscow axis has been disproven, the networks that sustained this alliance remain intact, from commercial relationships, smuggling routes, and agricultural ties to remaining Soviet influence in Syria's armed forces and Iran's work to project soft power influence. Tehran and Moscow will look to these networks of influence as they seek to protect their own interests in post-Assad Syria, from retaining Russia's naval base on the Mediterranean to securing commercial contracts to Iran's land route for rearming Hezbollah. Russia and Iran are well positioned to play spoiler to Syria's recovery and reintegration into the international fold. Therefore, it will be critical for the United States to coordinate an approach to post-Assad Syria that can keep Europe, Arab governments, and Turkey aligned sufficiently to deny adversaries opportunities to play this spoiler role.

Aligning with like-minded partners on Syria is imperative. Turkey, a NATO ally, maintains the closest ties to the new Damascus leadership and is positioned to shape the policies of Syria's leaders, but Washington should seek clarification from Ankara on its objectives in Syria considering its well-known support for Islamist and Muslim Brotherhood groups and movements across the Middle East. Even as Turkey maintains significant influence, it lacks the resources given its own fragile economy to fund Syria's recovery. Here, U.S. strategic partners in the Gulf are critical because of their strong economies and assistance pledges. Gulf leaders are already engaging the Sharaa government though without agreement on or articulation of a strategy or vision for Syria and its future role in the Middle East. The United States should be working to convene, organize, and align its partners in the region and outside—particularly in Europe—on metrics and indicators that Syria's post-Assad recovery is on a stable path, while also consistently raising problematic actions that can undermine progress.

Conclusion. Five years ago, members of the bipartisan Syria Study Group argued that the threats posed by the conflict in Syria were sufficiently serious to merit a determined response from the United States. The report presciently argued that the Assad regime had not won the war, and the drivers of conflict in Syria remained. The final report argued that American engagement in Syria can lead to better out-

comes for America, for Syria, for the Middle East, and for like-minded allies and partners. The challenge then remains relevant and urgent today: development of a realistic strategy and application of an appropriate mix of U.S. tools, along with prioritization of Syria by high-level U.S. officials with their counterparts. Today's hearing is a critical step forward toward addressing these urgent goals.

Senator RISCH. Well, thank you to both of you.

It is obvious we have the right people here to talk about this, and I think it is also obvious this is not a partisan issue, and I think we ought to all work together to get to a place on foreign policy as it relates to Syria and move forward with it and move forward with it quickly.

As you have indicated, the door is ajar, but it is going to close on us if we do not take advantage of where we are.

I have got a couple of questions I would like to get to. I do want to say one thing.

Mr. Singh, you had referenced the fact that the interim government and its leader had not done very well in Idlib, and I have heard the same thing.

But interestingly enough, I met and I think maybe the ranking member also met with maybe even the same group, but probably 25 or 30 people from Syria who all were interested in doing the right thing and building Syria back up again.

And at the table there were Sunnis. There were Shi'a. There were Christians. There were Druze. There were Alawites. It was across the board.

They were not at all interested in talking about their religious persuasion, and I asked them that question, and they pointed out, hey, in Syria we have been living together for centuries. You guys are new to this, OK. We have been living together for centuries, and we can go back to living again together if things are done right.

So, again, the experience you referred to in Idlib is troubling. Nonetheless, I think the new leadership understands that we are looking for something different than that.

If you do not have religious tolerance in this region, the country has got a big problem, and we all know that from the other things that happened.

Well, let me tell you one of the things I am concerned about, and that is—you know, when you look at the map of Syria, I mean, it looks like a flat Rubik's cube because of the way that the country is divided up, and what we are talking about is mainly the governance of the western part of the country.

And certainly that is important, and without that you are not going to have anything else. But I would like to hear your thoughts on how we thread the needle because we do have these other parts of the country that we are going to have to deal with.

I guess my idea is we need to focus on this western part and continue to look at the others. But the first objective is if you do not get a handle on this you are not going to get a handle on the rest of the country.

Mr. Singh, your thoughts?

Mr. SINGH. Well, thanks, Mr. Chairman.

I think that is right. Look, obviously, in Syria, as you mentioned, the bulk of the population is in the west, and so that has been the

focus of many things and is the focus right now of the new government.

They came down from Idlib to the south and have, largely, taken over that sort of western strip of the country. And in the northeast, of course, you have Kurdish forces, you have some other forces, but you also have some pretty vast areas which are lightly inhabited, and ISIS actually has been able to use those areas to sort of regroup and conduct its activities.

I would say that the question in my mind is, you know, HTS, which has maybe tens of thousands of fighters, has swept down from Idlib, maybe had more success than even they anticipated.

It does not seem to me that they could actually right now assert their authority over the entire country. So they will need to reach understandings with groups in the other parts of Syria, and of course, the one that is of greatest interest to us are the Kurds and others in northeastern Syria with whom we work.

I think that we can focus on what is happening in western Syria, deal with the government there, while also trying to encourage and maybe facilitate this process of coming together among these groups.

You know, the new self-appointed president of Syria, Ahmed al-Sharaa, has asked these other groups to dissolve. The reality is, though, if they did not exist, I am not sure that HTS could come in and fill in for them.

And so you have to have this kind of internal negotiation process. Ultimately, we want, in the long run, one authority in Syria, one authority in Damascus, that can exercise its control over the entire state.

That is an ideal outcome from us, but it is going to happen in stages, and it is going to happen through these negotiations.

Senator RISCH. Well said.

Ms. Stroul, your thoughts?

Ms. STROUL. He has set out—Mr. al-Sharaa, the self-appointed president of Syria—a series of benchmarks for himself in terms of reasserting control over Syria, and he is making some progress in these early days of this transitional government.

He is working to disarm and integrate the non-HTS aligned armed groups. He is working on border security. In the past couple days many of us have been closely following the clashes on the Lebanon-Syria border.

This is actually forces aligned with President al-Sharaa working on stopping residual Hezbollah trafficking networks from using that border area to rearm Hezbollah.

So actually he is doing things that are in our interest, which is cutting down that weapons proliferation. I think we should watch very carefully what he is doing to reassert security control over the parts of Syria and set out our expectations for not seeing revenge violence, and that there should be local participation in governance as he reasserts control.

And then the longer pole in the tent I agree with Mr. Singh is the SDF, and we obviously, because of our military presence and our commitments to them, because they have bled and died for what we share is an objective of making sure ISIS is enduringly defeated, we need to work to facilitate dialogue between the SDF

and the Sharaa government in Damascus about how they eventually reintegrate into the fabric of the Syrian government.

Senator RISCH. Well said.

You mentioned it, and the next round of questions I am going to ask a little bit about Lebanon because, again, it is a similar situation than what we have.

There is opportunity there, we need to engage, and the relationship between these two countries is incredibly important. So we will talk about that next.

But in the meantime, Senator Coons.

Senator COONS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you both for your testimony today and for your service.

As the Chairman and Ranking Member have both laid out, and as you have painted more detail, for more than a decade Syria has been a hotbed of extremism, a source of massive regional destabilization through migration, a base from which both Iran and Russia projected malign power, and today we have a narrow window of opportunity.

It is critical that we get it right. No one should mourn the fall of the Assad regime of decades, but there is a lot of reconstruction and reconciliation to do. There are, roughly, 2 million children out of the school system.

Ninety percent of Syrians living in poverty. The medical system is in tatters. There are no real jobs or electricity or support.

The agricultural fields are littered with unexploded ordnance and land mines, and entire towns lay almost completely in rubble.

In these circumstances a small amount of support can go a long way to rebuilding homes, trust, and engagement, to work on demining, to provide food and water, and this outcome really is zero sum.

If the al-Sharaa government continues to move in a direction that meets the strategic objectives the chairman laid out we should be willing to engage with them, both indirectly through U.N. and international NGOs and maybe ultimately directly by the United States, because if they do not get assistance from us and our Western partners, they will get it from Iran, from Russia, and from China, and ISIS will reemerge as a very real threat.

But at the moment, because of the freeze in all U.S. foreign assistance, we are withholding exactly what the Syrian people need to see the American people engaging with them—food, medicine, education.

We have even pulled away in the first days of what I view as a disastrous foreign aid freeze, security from guarding ISIS prisoners at the Al-Hol prison, although that funding mercifully has been turned back on.

So, Ms. Stroul, you know the stakes here better than anyone, certainly better than I do. What assistance should we be considering to provide in the interest of stability and security with this new Syrian state, and what are the risks if we do not provide some leadership in this area?

Ms. STROUL. Thank you, Senator, for that question.

First of all, I think this committee has played and should continue to play an incredibly important oversight role into all of the

assistance, both the humanitarian and the nonhumanitarian assistance going into Syria.

As a former staffer I can tell you we put USAID and the State Department through its paces, and I know you all are continuing to do that.

My recommendation is that we encourage Secretary Rubio and the State Department to accelerate that 90 day review. All U.S. assistance should be subject to oversight and whether or not it is in line with U.S. priorities.

But the nonhumanitarian aid going to Syria is as important for arresting those drivers of instability that could sink Syria back into conflict and again make it a proliferator of terrorism instability across the region.

So in a post-conflict environment the most important thing is local security and law enforcement, then clearing out the unexploded ordnance, then getting communities back, lights on, services, kids in school.

All of this requires nonhumanitarian aid, and it also requires coordination with others. What we know—

Senator COONS. To be clear, if I could, Ms. Stroul, while there are waivers for humanitarian assistance, there is no funding flowing. In the last 48 hours I have spoken with the leaders of each of the major NGOs that implements humanitarian work around the world.

Almost none of them—and 98 percent of the programs that we discussed under things like PEPFAR working to fight malaria or TB, to contain Ebola, demonstrably humanitarian, the money is not flowing yet because the aid freeze has not yet translated, largely, because the key people who need to turn the financial system back on and approve the reversal of the stop work orders are not there.

So not just longer term development aid after some aid review, but the humanitarian relief is not flowing.

Ms. STROUL. Thank you, Senator, for that clarification. I could not agree with you more. The loss of the career civil servants inside USAID, the threats of a reduction in the State Department staff—what we know about post-conflict societies is that reconstruction and stabilization are inherently political tasks.

It is not something the U.S. military could do, which is why we need to get this funding turned back on.

Senator COONS. Could I ask one more question, Mr. Chairman?

I am alarmed by speculation that the Administration is considering a hasty withdrawal of our troops from Syria. I am concerned about the stability and the future of the SDF and of northeastern Syria.

If both of you could briefly answer what are the risks of a hasty departure of the U.S. presence in northeastern Syria, particularly vis-à-vis our hard fought gains against ISIS, and who would fill that vacuum?

Ms. Stroul. Mr. Singh.

Ms. STROUL. The about 2,000 U.S. military forces are both supporting the SDF and keeping pressure on ISIS. They are still doing their own unilateral strikes, our U.S. military against ISIS. They are also supporting the SDF who maintain custody of nearly 9,000 ISIS fighters in detention facilities.

ISIS is looking at them to replenish its ranks, and it is looking at the young children and families in the Al-Hol detention camp as ISIS 2.0.

If we are not there to provide intelligence and support to the SDF and the SDF are being attacked both by the Syrian National Army—the SNA—and our NATO ally Turkey, they will prioritize focusing on their own communities, and they will take pressure off ISIS.

ISIS will then have an opportunity to retake territory and not only terrorize people in Syria, but direct transnational terrorism abroad including against the United States.

Senator RISCH. Thank you, Senator Coons.

And Ms. Stroul, I do not think you could have said it more clearly. I think most everyone who deals with this has a clear understanding of that. I do not share the immediate concerns you do about them pulling out of there. I think that there is an understanding of what would happen.

Look, we have minimal troops there at 2,000—1,900, whatever it is—and their keeping 9,000 ISIS people in the prison is critical.

So with that—

Senator COONS. Glad to hear that, Mr. Chairman.

Senator RISCH. Thank you.

Senator Ricketts, you are up.

Senator RICKETTS. Great. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

As we see what is unfolding in Syria we know that the ramifications are from Putin's war in Russia. His miscalculation there is rippling through the system.

We see it in Nagorno-Karabakh. We see it here in Syria, how he was not able to support the Assad regime. But we know in years past that Russia was critical to keeping Assad afloat and basically responsible for killing Syrians.

And so with HTS victory, Russia has been set back on its heels, and we discussed or you mentioned, Mr. Singh, the Russian naval base Tartus. You have got the Latakia air base just outside of there.

So Russia has got some key assets. I think they moved some equipment out of the Latakia area, but obviously, that was how they were doing their power projection, and they have had to really flee with their tails between their legs here.

And the question is what will happen going forward here with regard to how will Russia engage. I mean, al-Sharaa has got to stabilize his country. He is seeking legitimacy both internationally and with his own people.

How is this all going to play together with regard to the role of Russia? Will Russia be completely kicked out? Obviously, things like oil, grain, even military weapons is something that Syria is going to need.

They have been getting that historically from Russia. But recently we have been reading reports that the Europeans have been in conversations with al-Sharaa about, again, lifting some of the sanctions, and one of the conditions being kicking the Russians, basically, out of their naval base and the air base.

So what do you see as the role for us in this? Should we be making that a condition of lifting our sanctions as we look at this, that the Russians have to withdraw and what is the practicality of that?

Can you just kind of give us an assessment of what you think we should be thinking about with regard to our sanctions and Russia's presence and the military presence in these naval bases?

Mr. SINGH. Sure. Thanks a lot, Senator.

And look, you are right. I mean, Russia has had, even going back to Soviet times, a long standing relationship with Syria and with the Assad regime ever since Hafez al-Assad took over in 1970.

Assad was Moscow's guy. He was also Tehran's guy. But you see where he ended up. He ended up in Moscow. That is how close that relationship was.

At the same time, my sense of the Russians has always been that they kind of view Syria as their last bastion, as it were, of their influence in this region, and they are going to be loath to give that up. And we already see, as several of you have mentioned, a pretty sort of high tempo of engagement between Russia and this new transitional Syrian government.

I worry, frankly, that it is a higher tempo than ours or the Europeans' or even the region's. The Russians are really going to Damascus, and the Syrians are coming to them. And part of that, I think, is due to the fact that you have this integration of sort of Russian stuff, as it were, into Syria. You have defense equipment, you have energy facilities, and so forth.

And so, you know, if you have got this military equipment you have captured from the Assad regime, and it is Russian, well, you are going to have to turn to the Russians, perhaps, to service it, to update it, and so forth.

We have to somehow kind of put a wedge into that, and so I think part of that is going to be carrot, and part of that is going to be stick. The carrot part is, obviously, we are going to through this kind of patient, pragmatic engagement and setting of benchmarks, which Ms. Stroul also talked about, hold out the prospect of Western cooperation.

I do think it should be conditional, and I do think one of those conditions has to be, look—

Senator RICKETTS. If I could just interrupt you for a second.

Mr. SINGH. Yes.

Senator RICKETTS. When you say Western help you are also saying Western military aid—

Mr. SINGH. So we have—

Senator RICKETTS [continuing]. Like weapons and equipment? That sort of thing?

Mr. SINGH. We have sanctions preventing that now, and I think it is very—those will probably be some of the last we would want to consider lifting.

But I think you have to hold out the prospect that there could be, under the right conditions, a much more robust relationship across the board, a security relationship including—security broadly defined.

But if that is ever going to happen, they cannot also be hosting Russian forces. But I think that there is a stick side of it as well, which is where the sanctions come in, and you know, my own view

is we need a phased and gradual withdrawal of those sanctions, and we need to see performance on this issue in addition to others.

I would just say do not leave out of this conversation the Chinese because, you know, they supported Assad in other ways through the use of their veto, for example. They tend to be cautious about going into places that are in conflict.

But if they perceive the situation as having changed, they will also see both the economic and strategic opportunity here. And I think that has to be on the list of conditions.

Senator RICKETTS. So I am running out of time here. But just briefly, what is the risk for al-Sharaa if he cuts a deal with the Russians?

I mean, Russia was complicit with what Assad did—you know, the killing of their own people. Does he have a risk internally with his own people if he cuts a deal even if, say, he gets Assad extracted back to Syria? Does he have a risk there?

Mr. SINGH. I think there certainly is a risk. How he perceives that risk, how big a risk he perceives it compared to, say, the risk of dealing with Iran is hard to say.

But certainly there are a lot of sore feelings about the way Russia conducted itself, bombing hospitals and schools and things like that in Syria.

Senator RICKETTS. Great. Thank you, Mr. Singh.

Senator RISCH. FYI for the committee, we heard the same thing from the Syrians, that the populace is not happy with either Iran or Russia, who conducted themselves very poorly in colluding with the Assad regime.

So that is a good thing for us, for the people that are getting that understanding.

So with that, Senator Duckworth.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am going to start off with just a little bit of an opening statement.

In the immediate aftermath of the Assad regime's fall, Syria faces a pivotal and fragile moment in its history that will not only determine the fate of its people for decades to come but will also hold immense consequence for the trajectory of its role on the global stage.

This is a moment of cautious hope for Syrians and democracies around the world alike, a moment of opportunity for a democratic transition of power and of hope for the millions of displaced Syrians who wish to finally return home to safety.

But instead of recognizing this opportunity for the U.S. to flex its muscle and showcase its strength, the U.S. is notably absent amid a dire need for a stabilizing force.

Our adversaries, as we have already discussed today, Russia and Iran are closely watching, and they are eager to step in to fill the vacuum left behind by the United States.

This is a dangerous consequence of President Trump's attack on U.S. foreign assistance and a clear reflection of his blatant disregard for the importance of U.S. global leadership and participation as a national security imperative.

His attack on USAID will jeopardize the safety and well being of innocent people in Syria who rely on USAID for critical humani-

tarian assistance and leaves an already vulnerable state at a greater risk of malign influence.

So no, we are not talking dollars wasted. There are direct investments in U.S. national security and a projection of U.S. strength through USAID's work.

As the largest global donor in humanitarian aid and development, the U.S. plays a critical role in supporting the development of infrastructure that provides space for a democratic transition of power, which is only possible if Syria has the proper resources to strengthen its internal policies to build that future for themselves.

An unstable Syria not only means more suffering for its people, it becomes a potential breeding ground for terrorism in the Middle East.

Now more than ever the United States cannot abandon our commitment to the Syrian people, and I hope that all of my colleagues will agree that a stable Syria is clearly in our own national security interests.

Every U.S. dollar spent on stabilization, importantly on humanitarian aid, is an investment that requires less funding down the line for security and fewer U.S. troops who have to be deployed in a way that puts their lives at risk, and we know that a dollar goes a very long way in Syria.

We are hearing that Syrian hospitals are struggling and even closing during a time when the need and demand for medical resources is high due to the sudden cut in funding as lifesaving grants programs under USAID are now paused.

One such hospital that relies on USAID funding is the Al-Shifa hospital located in the majority Kurdish city of Afrin, Syria. This hospital serves as a critical area, given the native Kurdish population as well as internally displaced persons.

Your 2019 report talked about energizing efforts to address the humanitarian crisis in Syria. Right now the money is not flowing. How do you assess the current freeze will impact our Kurdish partners in Syria and specifically regarding access to humanitarian assistance and medical care?

I think, Mr. Singh, if you could talk about that, I would appreciate it.

Mr. SINGH. Well, thanks, Senator.

So look, I think that my own view is we need to distinguish between sort of the dollars that are going in the programs themselves. We are not talking about huge chunks of money here.

Senator DUCKWORTH. No.

Mr. SINGH. And where the money comes from, whether it is from the United States or from, say, a regional partner, look, for the amount of money that we have spent yearly in Syria on USAID programs, for example, you could get one LIV golfer, I think.

And so Saudi Arabia and other regional states could step forward and provide revenues. I think when you think about the U.S. contribution sanctions relief, for example, is going to be much more powerful for the Syrian economy than any infusion of U.S. taxpayer dollars.

The mechanisms that we create that others can pay into, and some of the technical expertise we offer, I think, is, in a way much more powerful than the actual money.

So I think there is a conversation you could have about where is this money going to come from. Is it going to come from the Saudis, Emiratis, who I think do need to bear some of the burden of stability in their own region, and they have been too reluctant to do that in the past.

And then the question, for example, of sanctions relief, which could open up free markets to come in and help Syria.

But again, I think that that has to happen under certain conditions, and I think that is the most powerful tool that we have.

Senator DUCKWORTH. I could not agree with you more on sanctions. I had a very long conversation with the Syrian American community leaders from Illinois this week on this very issue.

Since you already addressed this, for both of you how do you perceive the current sanctions impede Syria's ability to obtain relief needed to rebuild and heal, and what would you recommend to members of this committee in revisiting those sanctions?

Ms. STROUL. Thank you, Senator, for that question.

There is no doubt that the state level sanctions on Syria, both Syria's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism and then legislation like the Caesar Act, are preventing both others from coming in to further stabilize and reconstruct Syria, are difficult for Syrians abroad to send remittances home, and are creating nervousness within the NGO community on how much they can engage.

I think the General License 24 issued in early January was an important first step. Six months is not a lot of time to build confidence in the networks to expand that humanitarian aid.

So number one, the sanctions, I think, are incredibly significant, and they are preventing the kind of money, funding, and contracting that will be necessary to stabilize Syria.

I will agree with Mr. Singh. I do not think we should rush in and lift all the sanctions now. I think how we provide that relief should be performance based, and that is one of the main sources the United States has in terms of influencing the development of a more stable Syria and a more responsible governance.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you.

Senator RISCH. Thank you.

Well said, Ms. Stroul.

The important thing here, I think, today or something that is noteworthy is how unanimous we are in thinking about what should be done and how we ought to go about it.

Obviously, the devil is always in the details, but there is really unanimity here as far as how to proceed, and that is good. I think that as we go forward that the unanimity will be helpful.

So with that, speaking of helpful, Senator Shaheen.

Senator SHAHEEN. Well, thank you.

And again, thank you both, and I think everyone has done a good job of pointing out the opportunities this presents to prevent Russia and Iran from coming back in and regaining a foothold in Syria.

So I want to talk a little bit about the role of Turkey, because Turkey asserts that they could lead counter ISIS efforts in northeast Syria, that we do not need to back the Syrian Democratic Forces that are led by the Kurds.

So how real is that, and how concerned should we be about Syria increasing their presence in a way that would actually result in conflict with the Kurds?

Whoever.

Ms. STROUL. Thank you, Senator, for that question.

When ISIS first took over large swaths of Iraq and Syria, the U.S. military did look to Turkey, thinking through how we could dislodge ISIS from Syria, and there was no presentation of an immediate combat credible viable force of Turkish military that could be sent in.

And if you look at what Turkey is doing right now, it is working through nonstate groups like the Syrian National Army—the SNA—who is terrorizing local communities and committing terrible atrocities and human rights violations against the communities there. And because our local partner, the SDF, is now having to defend its forces and its communities from the SNA, there is less focus on ISIS, which gives ISIS more of an opportunity to reconstitute.

Turkey is a NATO ally, and I do think we should be engaging very soon in a political and military dialogue with Turkey about what I think is a shared interest. Nobody wants to see ISIS reconstitute, and we should be looking at what the conditions are under which the U.S. military could at some point transition that mission.

But there is no near term alternative or viable combat credible alternative to the U.S. military and the SDF right now, and part of that also is that Turkey does not have the forces to maintain custody of those 9,000 ISIS fighters in detention facilities.

Senator SHAHEEN. And so what leverage have we got with Turkey in trying to engage them?

Ms. STROUL. The U.S.-SDF relationship has been the main irritant in our relationship with Turkey, but they do have some legitimate concerns.

Their concerns are that the SDF has absorbed non-Syrian Kurdish groups like the Turkish Kurdish PKK, which seeks to create a state or an autonomous area on Turkey's border and threaten Turkey. I think that is a legitimate concern.

The PKK is designated as a terrorist organization by the United States. So we should have a conversation with Turkey about its security needs and requirements, and ultimately, the future of the SDF is within a unified Syria, and because of our relationship with the SDF and the leverage and influence we have because of our sanctions and what our proactive engagement could bring to the table with Damascus, which Damascus wants, we are positioned to play a key facilitator and mediation role.

Turkey can also be a huge spoiler and undermine the hard fought gains against ISIS. So I think this will require hardnosed, tough diplomacy but acknowledgement of their legitimate security concerns.

Senator SHAHEEN. And assuming the United States withdraws our military from Syria, how long will it take for ISIS to reconstitute itself in ways that threaten the United States?

Ms. STROUL. Well, we have seen this before. We saw it in Afghanistan. When the United States withdrew hastily and without

a plan, the local—the Afghan Security Forces that we worked to train collapsed, and the Taliban has reimposed brutal rule over Afghanistan.

And we know that when ISIS has territory in Iraq and Syria it used it to inspire, direct, plan, and launch attacks from that territory, and ISIS has its army in waiting already in Syria.

It is those 9,000 fighters in detention facilities, and it has the next generation of ISIS. It is the 40,000 ISIS affiliated families in a detention camp, and there is no plan right now to rapidly reduce either of those populations in a way that would not jeopardize our security.

Senator SHAHEEN. Well, so let us talk about that a little bit, because one of the things—my understanding is that we have turned back on the foreign assistance that supports security at Al-Hol, but that we have not continued to support the other assistance that engages families that helps with the radicalization that is going on.

And so how much of a concern is that? And I would say yesterday we had a chance to talk to General Kurilla, who is the head of Central Command, who indicated that there is a plan to reduce the number of people in the camps and how important is it going to be to ensure that the foreign assistance programs that are available for those camps are there if we are going to reduce the numbers?

Ms. STROUL. Thank you for those questions.

So we also know how this works because of our post-conflict experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, among many others even from Europe in the 1990s.

So after deadly conflict, if communities do not understand what the plan is for them to remain safe, to be protected from the underlying drivers of conflict, to know that their kids will not step on unexploded ordnance, to know that they will have assistance in their homes and communities being rebuilt, that they will be able to purchase food, that they will have jobs, that their kids can go back to school, those communities remain perpetually vulnerable and weak, and that is exactly what ISIS wants, which is why the nonhumanitarian assistance should be turned back on, or/and we should be working with allies and partners who also share an interest in ISIS not reconstituting.

I would agree with General Kurilla. One of the ways in which—what families want to know when they are leaving these camps is that wherever they go they are going to have those assurances.

They want what we want, which is safety and a better future for their families and their kids. That requires funding, it requires leadership, and it requires assistance coordination with our partners and allies, and that is what I hope comes out of the Syria policy review that this Administration is conducting.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you.

Senator RISCH. Thank you, Senator Shaheen.

Your reference—and I will get back to this in the next round of questions. But the relationship between the Turks and the Kurds cause us no end of grief there. Turkey is allegedly an ally of ours, sometimes—at best a recalcitrant ally, particularly when it comes to that relationship. We will explore that a little bit more.

But right now I would like to recognize Senator Kaine.

Senator KAIN. Thank you.

And I will be brief because I am going to ask you about something I bet you have covered a whole lot while I was toggling between two other hearings and this one, but that is with respect to the sanctions, it sounds like there is a pretty good consensus here that we should not miss this opportunity to engage with the new Syrian government.

If we are too slow in engaging, or too miserly in engaging, we run the risk of creating a vacuum that others will fill who are adversaries, and one of the keys to this is the sanctions—Caesar sanctions that are currently in place.

I should know the answer to this question, but I do not. To what extent can sanctions be—I think we all agree that they should be lifted in a phased way based on performance criteria, but to what extent can they be lifted by the Administration versus would there need to be congressional action to lift sanctions?

Senator RISCH. I can answer that. That will not take congressional action. When we passed the bill it was—as anything you passed the President will not sign it unless he has full authority to put them on and take them off. We are good there.

Senator KAIN. My understanding, and correct me on this if I am wrong, is that that is the case for most of the sanctions but there may have been sanctions directed against individuals that the Administration could not waive and that would need congressional action. Is that right or not?

Ms. STROUL. Thank you, Senator, for that question.

If I could offer what I think the different layers of decisions are.

First of all, what the executive branch can do now is think through more waivers or an expanded waiver beyond what it has done with General License 24, not necessarily to permanently lift sanctions but basically to get out of the way so that allies or partners that we would like to see engaging in Syria responsibly can do that.

Number two, it is the state level sanctions that are preventing economic recovery and stabilization in Syria. One of the big ones is that under Assad, Syria was designated as a state sponsor of terrorism. That would require executive action.

The Caesar Act has several criteria in it for the executive branch to determine if the government of Syria, then the Assad government, has met certain benchmarks in order to receive sanctions relief, and here I think there is clearly an active role for Members of Congress who were the initiators of this very important piece of legislation to engage about what their intent is for measured sanctions relief.

Senator KAIN. Well, I hope that we might do something together as a committee to express an opinion to the Administration. It does seem like there is a lot of meeting of the minds on this side.

Senator RISCH. And I agree with that, Senator Kaine. I think that—the Administration has wide, wide authority here. Having said that, because of the Caesar legislation we passed and others, they are going to be looking for us, and I am going to be anxious to give them my—I already have given part of my input on this.

So I think your inquiry is absolutely valid, but I do not think that is a problem. I really do not, but thank you for that.

Senator Kaine. Yield back.

Senator Risch. Thank you.

Let us see. Senator McCormick.

Senator McCormick. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to our speakers today.

Michael, good to see you again after many years.

This hearing comes at such a critical time for the Syrian people and to thousands of Syrian Americans living in Pennsylvania in the Lehigh Valley. I share your joy at the fall of the butcher of Syria.

But even with Assad gone significant challenges, to state the obvious, remain and it was discussed today the new interim president in Damascus and many of his advisers are U.S. designated terrorists with longstanding links to al-Qaeda.

We do not yet know whether this transition process underway will lead to a government that will protect all Syrians, and this process will matter a great deal, of course, to Israel's security and to America's security.

So, Mr. Singh, I would like to start with you on the topic of counter terrorism. From the truck attack in New Orleans to the 2016 shooting of a Philadelphia police officer, Jesse Arnett, our nation has seen firsthand how terrorist groups like ISIS can use Syria as a safe haven and inspire acts of violence in the United States.

How concerned are you about the enduring presence of ISIS in Syria, and what would take, and we have talked about some of this already, but what would take, if you were going to do the couple key points, from Syria reemerging as a sanctuary for global terrorist groups?

Mr. Singh. Well, thanks a lot, Senator McCormick. It is great to see you up there.

Look, I think one thing we can take away from not just the Syria situation but the past 18 months of war in the Middle East is as much as we may want to move on to other issues and other challenges, terrorism remains a top threat to U.S. national security and to the security of our allies, and we have to take it seriously.

We cannot afford to sort of ease up on the pressure on groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, which remain active and determined to attack us around the world.

I mean, one of the—we have talked in this hearing about the break between HTS and some of these groups, and one of the reasons they broke apart was over this question of attacks globally against the West, where ISIS and al-Qaeda are determined to keep doing that.

And those groups are active every day in Syria, and it is through the joint efforts of a lot of different actors who we have mentioned here today, the United States for sure.

Also our local partners like the SDF. Also other forces in northern and southern Syria that prevent those actors from mounting terrorist attacks.

I would say that it would not take a lot. If you have the opportunity because you have the absence of legitimate governing or security forces, if you have a thriving radical ideology and a system that is kind of nurturing that because—you know, Senator you

have served in war zones. You know that ideological piece is, in a way, just as important if not more so than the actual weapons and plots.

If you have those pieces you could absolutely have a resurgence of ISIS, and they could absolutely direct attacks against the United States. We have to be vigilant against that.

Senator MCCORMICK. Thank you.

Ms. Stroul, two quick questions that I hope you can respond to. The first is we talked a little bit—Michael, you talked about this a bit—of this phasing out of sanctions based on the performance of the new government.

And if you were going to think about the sequencing of that what would be sort of the first milestone, and what would be the first set of sanctions that you would consider withdrawing?

The second topic is repatriation of refugees. My wife and I and my kids had the chance a couple years ago to work in the camps in Jordan, where there is millions—as you know, millions of Syrian refugees that have been there for years and also have put a huge burden on the Jordanian government and economy.

Is there any talk of repatriation? Has any of that started to happen? What has been the posture of the new government on that topic?

Ms. STROUL. Thank you, Senator, for those questions.

With respect to sanctions, the most significant sanctions are these state level sanctions, the state sponsor of terrorism designation on the Syrian central government, and then the Caesar sanctions. Those are—when you lift the state sponsor of terrorism it is a onetime shot.

So my recommendation would be to work on successive expansions of the waivers and exemptions to facilitate stabilization and to facilitate allies, partners, and financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank, who will not want to run afoul of U.S. law and sanctions first.

But because this is about terrorism, we need to test them on the criteria of these designations, and we are doing some of that now.

There was a *Washington Post* article about some operational counterterrorism intelligence that the U.S. military has provided to the al-Sharaa government to go after ISIS cells. We should continue to test that premise.

Senator MCCORMICK. And the Hezbollah transition too you talked about, which is important. Yes.

Ms. STROUL. I think they are doing the right thing, and we should test when operationally relevant what information we can provide to them to go after threats that threaten Syria, threaten our neighbors and partners in the region, and threaten our national security.

And with respect to refugees, President al-Sharaa has made very clear that he would like Syrians to be able to return to their home, and we know that a lot of these refugees in Jordan and Lebanon and Iraq and Turkey would want to come home, and a lot of them are already testing the premise.

So they are coming in for short periods of time to see what is happening in their home. Some of them are flying home from Europe.

But they are going to need to be assured that if they are really going to go repatriate, that there is going to be services, the rubble is going to be cleared, Syrian currency is not going to crash. There will be jobs. There will be food.

And this, again, comes back to the kinds of engagement that we can facilitate in order to address those underlying drivers of conflict.

Senator MCCORMICK. Very good. Thank you.

Senator SHAHEEN [presiding]. Senator Van Hollen.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you, Senator Shaheen, and thank both of you for your testimony and sharing your expertise on these issues, and I am glad we are having this hearing on Syria, given the perilous moment we are in. Also a moment of opportunity.

I really think this committee also has to have an emergency hearing on what is happening at the State Department with respect to foreign assistance and specifically the dismantlement of AID.

I am really shocked we have not had a hearing yet. I am thankful to Senator Shaheen who organized an alternative hearing yesterday. We had four great witnesses. Unfortunately, none of our Republican colleagues were there to hear them.

But we are facing a mountain of disinformation about AID from Elon Musk and others, and I would like, Senator Shaheen, to ask unanimous consent to put in the record a *Washington Post* fact checked article on claims being made about AID. It is entitled, “The White House’s wildly inaccurate claims about USAID spending.”

Senator SHAHEEN. I am sure that is without objection.

[EDITOR’S NOTE.—The information referred to above can be found in the “Additional Material Submitted for the Record” section at the end of this document.]

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you.

So this does not even include the big lie that we heard from the White House podium about the \$50 million worth of condoms to Gaza, which was just absolutely untrue. I think my colleagues should understand that Elon Musk called AID a, quote, “criminal enterprise.”

That makes at least the members who have served on this committee for a long time and those who have served in the Senate longer co-conspirators in a criminal enterprise because we authorize and appropriate funds for AID.

And we all know that is not the case, but we really need as a committee on a bipartisan basis to stand up to Elon Musk. And it is outrageous that we have not done that yet, because he is doing great damage around the world.

I think most agree that AID is an important part of our overall national and foreign policy, and I would just like to ask you, Ms. Stroul, with respect to Syria.

Syria has had its assistance frozen. It appears we might get an exemption for some of the UNHCR refugee issues, which are obviously critical at this point in time.

I think Senator Shaheen mentioned al-Hol prison camp that detains a lot of ISIS fighters. If they all get out Americans are in peril.

So could you just speak briefly to how at this critical moment in Syria, which is also a moment of opportunity but also peril, this freeze on U.S. assistance is emboldening our adversaries and preventing the United States from really trying to seize this opportunity?

Ms. STROUL. Thank you, Senator, for that question.

First of all, so there are different layers to the, in my view, negative impact of the targeting of USAID.

First of all, it is the dismantlement of the staff. So the staff in the headquarters possess tremendous technical expertise in how to distribute, conduct oversight, conduct audits, and how to do assistance in a unique, fragile, post-conflict environment.

Number two is that stop work order. So what is happening is USAID and longtime U.S. partners—as a former staffer of this committee we conducted rigorous oversight over how USAID partners on the ground, and there were many instances even when I was on the committee where here were concerns about a specific partner or a specific program, and we stopped those programs but we found ways to safely continue programs that we thought were in the interest of American security and good stewards of U.S. taxpayer dollars.

But the stop work order and the firing of our implementing partners on the ground will dismantle the ecosystem around this very important work. Then there is the funding, which is not flowing.

The humanitarian work is, obviously, critical immediately but over the long term we need to be helping societies and communities recover. They want more than a handout from humanitarian aid.

And finally, it is the oversight. None of our partners possess the kind of technical expertise that we do in monitoring dollars and monitoring performance benchmarks for these programs, and we have seen in plenty of other scenarios when the funds of our partners have led to poor outcomes.

So all of these different ways in which I think the freeze in USAID and the funding and the stop work order are very detrimental to our interests.

And finally, there is the question of U.S. leadership. So when a community or an individual or a mother who needs formula for her child or a diaper or medicine is in need, and they see a U.S. flag or a stamp on that box, they think of the United States and know that we had a role in saving their lives, and then that feeds into positive views of the United States, and when we want to partner with that government or a community in the future, the door is more open. So we are closing doors that could impact our security and our interest for generations to come.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you.

Thank you all.

Senator SHAHEEN. Senator Rosen.

Senator ROSEN. OK. Well, thank you.

Thank you, Senator McCormick.

Thank you. I want to thank Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Shaheen, of course, for holding this hearing.

Thank you for our witnesses for your work, for testifying today.

I also want to thank Senator Shaheen for highlighting the positive impact that USAID has around the world, the difference that we know we are making on the ground for so many—keeping children alive, feeding hungry people, preventing disease. So I want to just thank Senator Shaheen for that.

And I want to move on and talk a little bit about empowering women in Syria because the U.S. does have an opportunity to play a critical role in supporting Syria's political transition following the fall of Assad's regime.

So I believe we should be ready to use all the tools in our toolbox to push that transitional government to be inclusive, democratic, nonsectarian, and I am particularly interested in the role women can play in supporting the new Syria, and how the U.S. could and should help to facilitate this.

So, Ms. Stroul, can you talk about the current role of women in Syria's new leadership and how the Administration could work with the transitional government to ensure that women are empowered to play a critical role in governance, peace building, reconstruction?

Ms. STROUL. Thank you, Senator, for that question.

And, of course, Ranking Member Shaheen must be acknowledged for her leadership and important work on women, peace, and security in this element.

If only 50 percent of Syrian society is engaged in a conversation about the future of Syria, meaning the other 50 percent, women, are not included, then you are not listening to half of your society and that will not lead to a stable outcome.

Generally speaking, across most all post-conflict societies when transitional justice, reconstruction, and stabilization are critical, women have unique peace building roles, unique perspectives, tend to think more about the needs of their communities.

If their voices and recommendations are not taken into account, which means that less than 50 percent of Syrian society would be involved in the decisionmaking and dialogue about the future of Syria, it will not be stable and inclusive over the long term.

President al-Sharaa yesterday announced the committee that will be responsible for organizing and making recommendations for the national dialogue for Syria, that he announced in his transition timeline of 3 to 5 years, there are two women on a committee of seven.

Good start. We should see more, and we should expect more. The main areas of leverage, of course, are that U.S. leadership can help facilitate Syria's entry back into the international community.

We should demand that more women have a seat at that table, and of course, through either sanctions, waivers relief, and eventually lifting.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you.

I want to move on and talk a little bit about Iran and the resurgence of Iran possibly with the fall of Assad's brutal dictatorship. It is going to have profound implications for Iran, which has supported Assad's regime since about 2011.

So coupled with Hamas' defeat in Gaza, the decapitation of Hezbollah, the leadership there in Lebanon, Assad's collapse has

left Tehran weaker, more isolated than it has been in decades, and I believe we cannot squander this opportunity.

Iran must be kept out of Syria, denied the opportunity to terrorize our partners, allies in the region, and we also at the same time cannot allow our adversaries like China and Russia to swoop in and fill those gaps. We know they are waiting.

Dr. Singh, in Syria, President Trump's aid freeze only serves to further Iran's malicious intent, right? And so the aid freeze stops the programs that directly address the instability, and which we know IRGC they thrive on instability, right?

So, again, we know Iran wants to exploit the aid freeze for its own gain. So in your opinion how do you think it might do that, and what proactive steps should we be looking at to stop Iran from potentially doing that?

Mr. SINGH. Well, thanks a lot, Senator.

I think you are right that where Iran sees a poorly governed or ungoverned space in the Middle East, it tries to fill that space, and it fills that space with its proxies, proxies sometimes that it creates out of whole cloth.

You know, we have seen Iran, for example, in Syria import fighters from places like Afghanistan and Pakistan and so forth, and we do not want to see that happen again.

And so I would say, look, as we think about how we are going to relate to this new government with all the tools of our power—diplomatically, intelligence sharing across the board, military—we need to set out areas of shared concern where we can try to engage pragmatically with this new government that is dominated by HTS, and this is certainly one of them.

So I think—you know, Ms. Stroul mentioned before intelligence sharing, for example. I think this is an area where we can test them. Are they willing to work collaboratively with us on this area of shared concern?

And if the answer is yes, we have just gained another new, powerful tool in our toolkit to counter Iran in the region.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you.

I yield back.

Senator RISCH [presiding]. Thank you very much.

Senator Shaheen, you had a follow up.

Senator SHAHEEN. I do.

I actually have a brief comment and then a follow up question, and I want to just point out, thank you for your comments, Ms. Stroul, relative to the importance of women being at the table, and to Senator Rosen for her question.

And I think it is important to point out that the reason that makes a difference is because it does make a difference.

It makes a difference in conflict resolution. We know that when women are at the table the negotiations are likely to last a third more—for 15 years or longer than if they are not at the table.

So there is good data to show that this makes a difference, and I would argue that one of the reasons that we saw the fall happen so fast in Afghanistan is because women were excluded from that negotiating process. But that is another issue.

I did want to get back—I know this is about Syria, but yesterday we heard some testimony about the impact in Lebanon, that like

Syria, this is also an opportunity for us in Lebanon because there is a new government that is not affiliated with Hezbollah, and they have been resistant despite the pressure, and that the halt to many of our foreign assistance programs are having real implications in Lebanon for the ability of that new government to be able to maintain power.

The failure to continue to support the Lebanese Armed Forces, which have been the one stable institution in the country, have real ramifications.

So I do not know if either of you could speak to that and to the importance of addressing the issues in Lebanon as well.

Mr. SINGH. Look, so I think we have talked about the opportunity in Syria. There is an opportunity in Lebanon for sure because with Hezbollah decimated, you know, thanks to Israel, that kind of loosens their grip on that government, and taking advantage of that opportunity should be something that we want to do, and it is going to require tremendous investment of—you know, we are talking a lot about resources, but it is going to take time. It is going to take attention as well at a moment where we have lots of priorities around the world.

So I was very happy to see Morgan Ortagus, the deputy special envoy for the Middle East, go there and spend some time there with the government, and she got, I think, quite positive reviews for the time that she spent there.

That is a good first step, and I think what we really need to see is that kind of engagement, and it needs to be done in partnership with key allies, and that includes allies like France but also allies in the region.

And when it comes down to it we are going to need to support these institutions—security institutions but also the other institutions of the state, and I would say we can do that collaboratively with our allies, and we are going to have to do that collaboratively with our allies going forward, otherwise we are going to lose that opportunity.

Senator SHAHEEN. Well, I would agree, and I would also argue that it is going to cost us a lot less to do this now and when we have this opening than it would to fail and to see Hezbollah and our other adversaries come back not only in Syria but in Lebanon.

Ms. STROUL. If I could add to what Mr. Singh said.

The past several years of assistance we have actually approached it quite cautiously by the executive branch in consultation with Congress, which is that U.S. assistance has gone around the central government in Beirut only for humanitarian because Beirut port blast, collapsed economy—all of the reasons why we did not have confidence in the central government in Beirut.

So our assistance actually adapted around that, and then we provided security assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces.

So the challenge now is, one, is the security aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces is halted at the exact moment when by the terms of the ceasefire with Israel they need to be deploying south and disarming Hezbollah.

So we are asking them to take on a significant undertaking and putting nothing in it and telling them they need to do it anyway.

Number two, humanitarian—that needs to flow, obviously, because the Lebanese people are suffering and have suffered for a very long time.

And then, three, because we have not yet provided assistance through the government in Beirut, we have an opportunity to incentivize the kind of behavior we would like to see with this new leadership.

We can also encourage the World Bank and the IMF, who have held off because of the lack of meaningful economic reform measures.

So this is actually an example where we have used assistance effectively to say we are not going to support this bad behavior, and now we can use it as an incentive.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you both.

Mr. SINGH. Senator, with your forbearance I just want to vehemently agree with the idea that a society that oppresses its women is not going to be a successful society.

Senator SHAHEEN. I appreciate that. Thank you.

Senator RISCH. Thank you.

Thank you to the witnesses.

And you know, I raised the Lebanon issue when we started, and that is something we maybe ought to have a hearing on too, because it is just as important as this.

I think it is a little less complicated but not very much less complicated. So that is the important thing.

There has been—as far as your raising the issue of women being involved you, like I, have met with the diaspora here. There are some very competent and ready to engage women who are ready to do that.

When we were in Munich this weekend, if we meet with these people you may want to raise that with them, and I think that would be important.

A couple of things that were raised here during the hearing was USAID freeze. In fact, they even drug Elon Musk, I guess, through the ringer while I was not here.

Look, everybody needs to stay calm. We are going to get through this, and one thing that we never talk about and should is we are going in debt a trillion dollars every hundred days, and it has got to stop.

And yes, there is going to be some angst getting there but we will get there, and the things that are necessary for best interest of the United States will continue. I am convinced of that.

But there are things—and I am not going to go through the list now so we do not start a fight—but there is money been spent that should not have been spent.

So in any event, with that thank you to the witnesses. I think this was a very good hearing and very helpful to us. We do a lot of these, and very seldom do we see the kind of progress, I think, and unanimity that we have seen today.

So with that, thanks to the witnesses for attending today, providing us with the benefit of your testimony. For the information of members, the record will remain open until the close of business tomorrow.

We ask the witnesses to respond as promptly as possible with your responses. That will be very helpful to us. So thank you for that.

And with that, the hearing is adjourned.
[Whereupon, at 12:15 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Submitted by Senator Jeanne Shaheen

**Syrian Democratic Forces
General Command**



**قوات سوريا الديمقراطية
القيادة العامة**

U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Hearing on Syrian Politics

Thursday, February 13, 2025

Chairman Jim Risch, Senior Member Jeanne Shaheen and Distinguished Committee Members,

Thank you for inviting me to participate in today's session and thank you for your continued interest in the Syrian situation. Today, I want to share with you our vision on the current situation in Syria, and the challenges we face in our pursuit for stability and peace for our people.

Syria has gone through a bitter experience of conflict, displacement and destruction, and these challenges continue to greatly affect our lives. In these circumstances, the SDF has always been at the forefront of the fight against terrorism, especially ISIS, which represents a threat not only to Syria, but to the entire world. Through our partnership with the US-led Global Coalition, we have been able to make significant progress in eliminating the ISIS threat.

Today, after the fall of the Baath regime led by Assad on December 8, 2024. My country, Syria, has entered a new phase and the most important turning point in its modern history. Today, we are at a crossroads; either we achieve a new state that addresses what the Syrians rose up for: Democracy and Freedom, or Syria will slide into another civil war, leading to continued instability in the region and the world.

Syria today is in a transitional phase, which is the stage of building a new state. For our part, we affirm our commitment to Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and we believe that a safe political transition process is the only way to end the conflict. We are ready to cooperate with the new Syrian Government and with all parties concerned to reach a comprehensive political settlement based on respect for the rights of all Syrian components.

Nevertheless, we have valid concerns at the time. The characteristics of this phase are as ambiguous to me as my fellow Syrians. There is no clear timetable for the transition phase. We believe that it should not take more than two years. But what we hear from the new authority in Damascus indicates that this phase could take 4-5 years, which is worrying indeed. Moreover, all the nice words about inclusive and representative government do not match the reality on the ground. We see continuous attempts to monopolize power once again by Damascus, and this is a main concern.

We believe that Syria cannot return to the same totalitarian regime and centralized administration that brought us the failures of the two Assads for more than 50 years. We believe that Syria's struggles and suffering deserve to be real reforms in terms of governance, through the adoption of decentralized governance that guarantees the distribution of power between the center and local areas and guarantees the rights and freedoms of all individuals and components.

Today's transition would not have been a reality without the continued support of the American people for the Syrian people. For the past 14 years, U.S. assistance has been the primary source of our people's resiliency. This assistance has had a significant impact on the lives of Syrians and has been a key factor in our successes. With the removal of the Assad regime, our country continues to suffer from a destructive heritage, and we are confident that continued U.S. support will play a critical role in ensuring the success of Syria's transition. That said, we highly appreciate the issuance of a Syria-specific exemption that would allow the resumption of humanitarian assistance during the transitional period, which will enable us to rebuild Syria on new modern foundations.

As for the U.S. presence in Syria, ladies and gentlemen – our partnership with U.S. forces has rescued the region from the threat of Daesh, not only has achieved victories on the ground, but has proven successful in preserving our shared values embodied in multi-ethnic forces and women's participation, which have been a tangible success in Syria. This military partnership plays a vital role in promoting stability, which is essential at this crucial juncture.

However, talk of any withdrawal at this stage could lead to chaos in the country and undermine the stability that has been achieved. This will give Iran-backed militias and malign forces an opportunity to re-enter the country. It will also increase Turkey's appetite for invading Kurdish-majority Syrian areas, which would be a gift to ISIS, which shows signs of its increased activity since the removal of Assad and there are indications and factors that prove that they are working to exploit the situation in Syria to their advantage.

That is why we need the continued support of the international community, especially the United States, to accelerate the process of political dialogue between all Syrian parties and ensure the stability of the region in the interests of the entire Syrian people. We aspire to a democratic and unified Syria where all components share power and enjoy rights and freedoms. We seek a decentralized governance model that allows all regions to make their decisions faster and more efficiently within the framework of a unitary state of Syria.

In conclusion, I call on the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee to support our efforts to establish the new Syria and to preserve all the gains we have made together against ISIS. We believe that cooperation between us and the United States at this point will be key to achieving common political victory, just as we have achieved military victory together in the past decade.

Gen.Mazloum Abdi



Command-in-Chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces

Submitted by Senator Jeanne Shaheen

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

Navigating U.S.- Syria Policy After Assad

Submitted by: 31 American, Syrian, and International Organizations

Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Thursday, February 13, 2025

Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Shaheen, and Esteemed Members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

We, the undersigned 31 American, Syrian, and international organizations and groups, represent a diverse coalition urging for a strategic overhaul of U.S. policy toward Syria in light of the fall of the Assad regime. This historic moment offers the United States a rare and strategic opportunity to support Syria's stabilization, recovery, and long-term security while advancing U.S. interests and strengthening U.S. leadership in the region.

Below are our key recommendations for U.S. policy in post-Assad Syria, emphasizing the following priorities:

1. **Removing the Ban on U.S. Investments and Services** to enable Syrian-Americans and U.S. businesses to play a proactive role in Syria's reconstruction and recovery.
2. **Updating and Relaxing Other Sanctions** made outdated by the collapse to the Assad regime to facilitate economic recovery, humanitarian assistance, and reconstruction efforts.
3. **Restoring Diplomatic Relations with Syria** including re-opening the U.S. embassy in Damascus and the Syrian embassy in Washington, D.C., to facilitate diplomatic engagement, consular services, cultural exchange, and economic collaboration.
4. **Ensuring Continuity of Humanitarian, Stabilization, and Development Aid** to maintain stability and U.S. soft power, counteract extremism and the influence of adversarial actors, and ensure the continuation of critical, often life-saving, work.
5. **Engaging Syrian Voices in U.S. Policy Discussions** to provide critical contextual insights into the realities facing Syria's evolving political and reconstruction landscape, to ensure informed and effective decision-making.

1. SANCTIONS RELIEF AND PERMITTING U.S. INVESTMENTS AND SERVICES

The Syrian people have endured unimaginable suffering, including chemical weapons attacks, widespread torture, enforced disappearances, mass forced displacement, and the systematic targeting of civilians and destruction of civilian infrastructure and properties. The collapse of the Assad regime and its allies marks a historic and pivotal moment in Syria's history. **Syria now desperately needs an urgent economic recovery—which will require sanctions to be eased or lifted.**

Bashar al-Assad left behind a failed economy, destroyed infrastructure, impoverished people, shattered state institutions, one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, and the legacy of multiple sanction regimes. While the six-month General License (GL) 24 is a step in the right direction, it falls short of the comprehensive relief Syrians need. Intensive sanctions continue to choke Syria's economy and complicate the provision of aid to the country. Accordingly, **we respectfully request the Administration immediately take the following interim measures to provide much-needed sanctions relief:**

- **REMOVE THE BAN ON U.S. INVESTMENTS AND SERVICES:** The President should issue a new Executive Order that amends E.O. 13582 by striking sections 2(a), (b), (d), and (e), in order to permit new investments in Syria and the exportation, sale, or supply of services to Syria by U.S. persons. With U.S. aid for Syria currently frozen, this would enable Syrian-Americans and U.S. businesses to play a proactive role in Syria's recovery.
- **EXPAND GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE OF GL 22:** Now that the Assad regime is gone, the Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) should expand General License 22, which authorizes investments and commercial transactions in several economic sectors in parts of Northwest and Northeast Syria, to cover all areas of Syria.
- **EXPAND NGO LICENSE TO ALLOW MORE ACTIVITIES:** OFAC should amend the general license referenced in 31 CFR § 542.516 to authorize NGO transactions related to or in support of economic development projects that directly benefit the Syrian civilian population and the removal of landmines and unexploded ordinances. This would allow NGOs to carry out the activities in section (g) without the need for specific licenses.
- **EXTEND AND EXPAND GL 24:** OFAC should expand the recently-issued GL 24 to (a) run indefinitely or at least for two years, giving it more meaningful effect, (b) authorize all transactions with the Central Bank of Syria, and (c) authorize new investments by U.S. persons in Syria. OFAC should also clarify what types of transactions with Syrian governing institutions are allowed under GL 24, and particularly authorize the provision of professional, engineering, construction, and internet/telecom services. This would align GL 24 to broader licenses the U.S. has issued for [Afghanistan](#), [Iraq](#), and [Sudan](#), after a change of government.

- **RESOLVE COMPLIANCE CONTRADICTIONS:** The State Department should clarify the distinction between Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Syrian government. To counteract the chilling effect of material support laws, which are not excused by OFAC licenses, the Justice Department should provide comfort that it will not prosecute any dealings allowed by OFAC with Syrian governing institutions as "material support for terrorism" or a violation of 18 U.S.C. § 2332d.
- **ISSUE A BROAD EXPORT LICENSE EXCEPTION FOR SYRIA:** U.S. export controls prohibit the export of most items except for food and medicine to Syria, challenging the work of humanitarian organizations. The Commerce Department (DOC) should issue a broad license exception that mirrors OFAC's authorizations and allows more U.S. exports to Syria without requiring individual export licenses. The exception should include equipment needed for electric grids, construction, clearing landmines, education, and internet. DOC should commit to expedite specific license processing as it did after the 2023 earthquake.
- **TEMPORARILY SUSPEND CAESAR ACT SANCTIONS:** The Caesar Act was untimely extended for five years shortly after the fall of the Assad regime, hindering much-needed foreign investors from contributing to Syria's reconstruction. The President should find the conditions for suspension in Section 7431 of the Caesar Act met and temporarily suspend the imposition of all Caesar sanctions for 180 days.

These measures address emergency needs and facilitate Syria's stabilization and recovery, while allowing for lengthier discussions on its future and a roadmap for lifting other sanctions, including Syria's designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism. These measures are also reversible and allow for U.S. oversight. Sanctions can always be reimposed if conditions change. By taking these pragmatic steps however, the United States can set U.S. engagement with the new Syria on the right track, preventing backsliding, fostering stability, and developing a constructive partnership with the Syrian people.

Maintaining sanctions on a free Syria would disproportionately punish an entire population for a regime no longer in power and impede Syrians' ability to rebuild their country at this fragile moment. Sanctions on Syria currently have the following consequences:

- **Humanitarian Impact:** Syria sanctions and export controls hamper the ability of Syrians to access essential goods, services, and agricultural supplies, exacerbating hardship for millions and worsening an already dire crisis. Humanitarian needs are critical and widespread across all of Syria, with shelter, access to food, and electricity as the top three needs.
- **Limiting Shelter:** Syria sanctions and export controls hinder the reconstruction of

destroyed houses. In 37% of communities assessed in a recent [study](#), the majority of people were living in either a damaged residential building, unfinished or abandoned house, non-residential structure, or in tents.

- **Economic Impact:** Sectoral sanctions cut off Syria from the global financial system, restricting commercial transactions, paralyzing the economy, hindering business activities for small and medium-sized enterprises, and discouraging foreign investors—stunting opportunities to generate jobs and drive economic recovery, a precursor for political stability.
- **Digital Impact:** Syria sanctions obstruct access to the internet, software and digital services, including by Big Tech companies, which hinders the development of Syria's inadequate digital infrastructure. This negatively impacts Syrian society's ability to innovate, access information, communicate with the outside world, work virtually, participate in business, cultural, and educational activities, and exercise their fundamental human rights.
- **Disabling the Diaspora:** Syrian-Americans are eager to help rebuild Syria and tackle its humanitarian and socioeconomic crises by volunteering their medical, psychological, legal, and technical expertise, but sanctions prohibiting investments and services hold them back.
- **Preventing Refugee Returns:** Syria sanctions and export controls restrict access to equipment and financing needed to repair infrastructure, restore basic services and utilities, rebuild schools, and clear explosives, in addition to impeding the generation of jobs. The country's electricity crisis has cascading effects on other essential needs and services, including water pumping, heating, and internet. **These issues pose severe challenges to Syrians and disincentivize millions of refugees and IDPs from returning home.** System strain and infrastructure damage were one of the two main reasons why IDPs who initially went back to their place of origin eventually returned to camps.

Syria's humanitarian and economic crisis demands an urgent response, and sanctions relief would accelerate stabilization and early recovery. Accordingly, **sanctions originally imposed on Assad's regime should not be continued or repurposed for unrelated goals. Without major sanctions reform—not just carving out partial exemptions or temporary suspensions—Syria has no realistic path toward humanitarian recovery and economic renewal.**

The U.S. Government should coordinate and harmonize efforts to rescind sanctions on Syria with key allies and international bodies, several of whom already have roadmaps or are calling for lifting sanctions. For example, the E.U. recently decided to ease sectoral sanctions on the banking, energy, and transport sectors in Syria, as well as its import/export ban, however

without corresponding U.S. action, particularly to relax sanctions on Syria's Central Bank, the E.U. measures will have little meaningful effect. U.S. sanctions relief is thus both necessary to not hinder E.U. measures, and an opportunity to demonstrate greater leadership on this issue. Syrians deserve the chance to rebuild their country and livelihoods free from the burden of sanctions.

Sanctions Relief for Syria Advances U.S. Interests

Moreover, sanctions relief for Syria aligns with America's values, commitment to democracy, and leadership in the Middle East. It also serves U.S. strategic interests, particularly at this sensitive juncture with Syria facing destabilizing factors and competing influences and agendas.

Early recovery and economic stability in Syria are an essential precursor for the stable, inclusive political transition we all hope to achieve. This is why measures to ease sanctions on Syria are critically needed now—precisely because the country's political future is taking shape, not in spite of it. Sanctions relief makes America safer and stronger for the following reasons:

- **Countering Radicalization and ISIS Resurgence:** With over 90% of Syria's war-weary population living in poverty and the security situation in Syria still unstable, the conditions that drive radicalization persist and are ripe for exploitation by bad actors and ISIS terrorists. Sanctions relief can prevent Syria from falling back into chaos and suffering.
- **Facilitating Checks and Balances:** Sanctions relief would revitalize the private sector and civil society. Facilitating private investments would help restore Syria's shrinking middle class. These factors foster checks and balances on the government—benefiting both U.S. and Syrian long-term interests.
- **Fostering Resilience and Regional Stability:** U.S. engagement in Syria's recovery can help transform local institutions into resilient mechanisms that effectively serve the people, protect human rights, and ensure security and stability in Syria and the region.
- **Reducing Future Financial Burdens:** Lifting Syria sanctions could reduce long-term reliance on U.S. and international aid by allowing Syrians, international companies, and the private sector to rebuild infrastructure, industries, and institutions.

Further, the United States is able to employ less harmful tools, alongside diplomatic engagement, to ensure its national security interests and encourage good behavior. Thus far, the transitional authorities in Damascus have demonstrated themselves to be good-faith, rational actors who can be engaged through negotiations and diplomatic channels. This

approach reduces the need for maintaining coercive measures such as sanctions, **which would only risk undermining the global standing of the U.S. dollar**, making America weaker.

2. RESTORING DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

As Syria emerges from years of conflict under a new government, restoring diplomatic relations between the United States and Syria is urgent and necessary. Diplomatic engagement is needed to bring Syria into the envelope of the West, cementing Russia and Iran's exit from the country. This presents a critical opportunity to encourage Syria's realignment on the global stage. Reopening the U.S. embassy in Damascus as well as the Syrian embassy in Washington, D.C., will bolster Syria's exit from the "axis of resistance" and shift towards the U.S. and its allies. Failure to act swiftly in reestablishing diplomatic channels risks squandering this opportunity, diminishing U.S. leverage, and limiting the U.S.' ability to shape Syria's post-conflict trajectory.

Diplomatic engagement with Syria provides a platform for advancing regional stability, countering extremism, and fostering economic recovery. It also creates opportunities for American businesses and investors to contribute to Syria's reconstruction. Continued U.S. disengagement would cede influence to adversarial actors, allowing them to shape Syria's future in ways that may not align with American interests and values, while also depriving U.S. companies of meaningful economic opportunities.

Rekindling diplomatic relations is also essential for addressing the longstanding needs of the Syrian American community, which has suffered due to the absence of convenient, formal consular services between both countries. For over a decade, Syrians living in America have struggled to carry out basic civil affairs, such as registering births, deaths, and marriages, as well as obtaining and renewing passports and other essential documents. Without a functioning consulate, many have faced insurmountable bureaucratic obstacles, limiting their ability to travel, maintain legal status, and manage personal and business affairs tied to Syria. Restoring diplomatic ties would directly alleviate these hardships and ensure that Syrians in the United States have access to the critical services they require.

3. ENSURING CONTINUITY OF HUMANITARIAN AND STABILIZATION AID IN SYRIA

The recent decision to freeze aid to Syria comes at a time when humanitarian and stabilization assistance is more critical than ever. The country remains deeply scarred and is still grappling with the profound devastation left by more than a decade of war. Millions of Syrians remain in dire need of basic services, medical care, and infrastructure rehabilitation. Organizations such as the White Helmets have played an indispensable role in providing emergency relief, medical

assistance, and life-saving rescue operations in conflict-affected areas. Halting aid at this juncture will exacerbate the challenges currently facing the country, hinder critical stabilization efforts, and unravel years of progress that has been made.

The withdrawal of aid also undermines the United States' ability to maintain influence in Syria's reconstruction efforts. As global powers like Russia and China seek to reestablish or expand their presence in Syria and the region, reduced U.S. engagement will further diminish American credibility and strategic leverage. Continued humanitarian and development assistance is a strategic necessity that advances U.S. foreign policy objectives by fostering stability, reducing the likelihood of renewed conflict, and countering the influence of malign actors.

However, during his confirmation hearing last month, Secretary of State Marco Rubio stated:

"It is in the national interest of the United States... to have a Syria that's no longer a playground for ISIS, that respects religious minorities, protects the Kurds, and at the same time is not a vehicle through which Iran can spread its terrorism."

For this vision to be realized, U.S. assistance waivers must go beyond immediate humanitarian relief to also include justice, accountability, and stabilization programs that prevent ISIS resurgence and foster long-term peace and security.

To that end, we urge this committee to reach out to the White House, State Department, and Department of Defense to:

- **EXTEND CRITICAL AID PROGRAMS FOR AT LEAST 30 DAYS**
 - **Al-Hol Action Plan Programs** (camp security, repatriations, and returns) to prevent ISIL resurgence and smuggling operations.
 - **Programs Securing and Destroying Chemical Weapons** to prevent proliferation.
 - **Programs Securing Documents from Regime Prisons** that contain information about missing persons, including U.S. citizens.
 - **Programs Ensuring Humanitarian Aid and Health** that protect lives and advance U.S. soft power in Syria.
- **ISSUE A SYRIA-SPECIFIC FOREIGN AID WAIVER:** The current waiver system is ineffective. For example, of the 170+ organizations in InterAction, only two have successfully received waivers. Aid disruptions pose direct national security risks, and a country-wide waiver for Syria would simplify the process.
- **EXPEDITE REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF REMAINING SYRIA AID PROGRAMS:** Many essential programs remain in limbo, causing layoffs and operational shutdowns. Immediate review and approval will ensure uninterrupted assistance.

- **REQUEST A REMEDIATION PLAN:** If aid extensions and expedited approvals cannot be secured, Congress must demand that agencies outline steps to mitigate the harm caused by these disruptions.

The Extended Review Period is Forcing Layoffs and Program Closures

The USAID aid freezes have forced organizations to lay off hundreds of workers and suspend critical programs in Syria. The funding freeze has impacted a leading Syrian-American medical organization, which provides hundreds of thousands of medical services in Syria but may now be forced to close two hospitals (100-bed and 70-bed facilities), six primary care centers, and maternity wards with incubators. The stop-work order for this organization impacts 70,000+ medical procedures monthly, putting lives at risk. Moreover, with 90% of USAID staff furloughed, communication on waivers is effectively impossible. Contracts near approval remain unsigned, costing organizations their ability to operate.

Programs Beyond Humanitarian Aid and Key to Stabilization Are Also in Jeopardy

- **Justice & Accountability Programs:** Programs to secure and destroy chemical weapons, war crimes investigations, mass graves documentation, and securing evidence (including U.S. citizens' fate) are not explicitly covered under existing humanitarian waivers.
- **Emergency Response and Search & Rescue Operations:** Technical funding classifications exclude them from humanitarian aid streams, further exacerbating the crisis.
- **Vetting of Former Regime Officials:** A U.S.-funded Syrian-American organization responsible for vetting former regime officials to determine who could remain in a new interim government for continuity—helping prevent issues like Iraq's de-Baathification—had to cease operations.
- **Intelligence Document Recovery & War Crimes Investigation:** Another U.S.-funded organization securing 400,000 intelligence documents from regime buildings was forced to lay off its entire document recovery team. They also had to stop interviewing war crimes witnesses and cut their trial monitoring and litigation team in Europe, which was largely funded by State Department's Global Criminal Justice, Democracy, Rights, and Labor (DRL) programs.

Russia's Readiness to Fill the Gap

[Russia's UN Representative Vasily Nebenzia announced](#) that **Moscow is prepared to assist Syria in its reconstruction efforts** and engage with all political factions. Russia is leveraging aid freezes to expand its influence, promoting a narrative of "stability and partnership" in Syria. The

continuation of U.S. assistance programs is necessary to maintain U.S. soft power in Syria and the wider region.

Syria's Fragile Transition and Broader Risks Demands Unfreezing Aid

Syria is undergoing a fragile transition, and the freezing of aid **risks severe humanitarian and stabilization consequences**. Without continued aid, the consequences will not only contribute to loss of life from medical service shutdowns and halted demining operations, but also a breakdown of Syria's social fabric and diminishing U.S. soft power in the region due to a lack of transitional justice programs, economic strain from sanctions, and an inability to support post-war governance. **If left unaddressed, Syria could unravel like Libya or Sudan, creating a power vacuum to be exploited by nefarious actors.**

At this critical juncture, the United States must reassess its approach to aid in Syria and recognize the far-reaching consequences of disengagement. The cost of inaction is too high—not only in human terms but also in terms of U.S. national security and geopolitical influence. Resuming and maintaining aid efforts will help safeguard Syria's recovery, strengthen diplomatic channels, and ensure that the United States plays a constructive role in shaping the country's future.

4. CENTERING SYRIAN VOICES IN U.S. POLICY DISCUSSIONS ON SYRIA

While this hearing aims to explore U.S. policy options in a post-Assad Syria, we note the lack of Syrian expert voices on the panel. There is a diverse group of Syrian experts who have tracked Syria before and throughout the conflict, and several Syrian Americans have also recently returned from extended visits and fact-finding missions to Syria. These voices can offer firsthand insights into the realities on the ground. Their experiences and perspectives would significantly enrich the committee's perspectives and understanding of the evolving situation in the country. The absence of Syrian voices in this discussion is a missed opportunity to engage with those most directly affected by U.S. policy on Syria.

We believe the abovementioned steps will contribute to a more stable and prosperous Syria, which is integral to regional peace and global security. We look forward to working with the Committee to realize these objectives.

Thank you for your attention and we look forward to your leadership in addressing these urgent matters

Sincerely,

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| Citizens for a Safe and Secure America | American Coalition for Syria | Syrian American Council |
| We are with you charity team | Hope smile | Kesh Malek |
| Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) | Dar Justice | Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA) |
| The Empower Peace Initiatives and Strategic of Action Organization, EPISA | Stabilization Support Unit | Task Force of Survivors of Chemical Attacks in Syria |
| Together For Aljarnya | Engineering Creative Team | Syria Relief/Action For Humanity |
| Together For Aljarnya | Violet Organization | Tayif Humanitarian Organization |
| Tayif Humanitarian Organization | International humanitarian relief | The Syrian Legal Development Programme |
| Administrative Development Center | International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) | Syrian Forum USA |
| Karam Foundation | Union of Revolutionary Bureaus | Mozaic |
| Immigrants Act Now | Syria Film Festival | Civilian council for American Security |
| Syrian American Development & Investment Quorum (SADIQ) | Sanabel Al-Furat | |

Submitted by Senator Jeanne Shaheen

February 10, 2025

The Honorable Jeanne Shaheen
Ranking Member, Senate Foreign Relations Committee
506 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Shaheen:

We, the undersigned 162 American, Syrian, and international organizations and groups, write to urge your immediate attention to the issue of U.S. sanctions on Syria. The Syrian people have endured unimaginable suffering, including chemical weapons attacks, widespread torture, enforced disappearances, mass forced displacement, and the systematic targeting of civilians and destruction of civilian infrastructure and properties. However, after 54 years of authoritarian rule and 14 years of war, their patience and persistence has paid off. **The collapse of the Assad regime and its allies marks a historic and pivotal moment in Syria's history. Syria now desperately needs an urgent economic recovery—which will require sanctions to be eased or lifted.**

Bashar al-Assad left behind a failed economy, destroyed infrastructure, impoverished people, shattered state institutions, one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, and the legacy of multiple sanction regimes. While the six-month General License (GL) 24 is a step in the right direction, it falls short of the comprehensive relief Syrians need. Intensive sanctions continue to choke Syria's economy and complicate the provision of aid to the country. Accordingly, **we respectfully request the Administration immediately take the following interim measures:**

1. **EXPAND GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE OF GL 22:** Now that the Assad regime is gone, the Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) should expand General License 22, which authorizes investments and commercial transactions in several economic sectors in parts of Northwest and Northeast Syria, to cover all areas of Syria.
2. **EXPAND NGO LICENSE TO ALLOW MORE ACTIVITIES:** OFAC should amend the general license referenced in 31 CFR § 542.516 to authorize NGO transactions related to or in support of economic development projects that directly benefit the Syrian civilian population and the removal of landmines and unexploded ordinances. This would allow NGOs to carry out the activities in section (g) without the need for specific licenses.
3. **EXTEND AND EXPAND GL 24:** OFAC should expand the recently-issued GL 24 to (a) run indefinitely or at least for two years, giving it more meaningful effect, (b) authorize all transactions with the Central Bank of Syria, and (c) authorize new investments by U.S. persons in Syria. OFAC should also clarify that all types of non-military transactions with Syrian governing institutions are allowed under GL 24, and particularly the provision of non-military services otherwise prohibited under 31 CFR § 542.207 and the Caesar Act. This would align GL 24 to broader licenses the U.S. has issued for Afghanistan, Iraq, and Sudan, after a change of government.

4. **RESOLVE COMPLIANCE CONTRADICTIONS:** The State Department should clarify the distinction between Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Syrian government and consider removing HTS' FTO designation. To counteract the chilling effect of material support laws, which are not excused by OFAC licenses, the Justice Department should provide comfort that it will not prosecute any dealings allowed by OFAC with HTS or Syrian governing institutions as "material support for terrorism" or a violation of 18 U.S.C. § 2332d.
5. **REMOVE THE BAN ON U.S. INVESTMENTS AND SERVICES:** The President should issue a new Executive Order that amends E.O. 13582 by striking sections 2(a), (b), (d), and (e), in order to permit new investments in Syria and the exportation, sale, or supply of services to Syria by U.S. persons. With U.S. aid for Syria currently frozen, this would enable Syrian-Americans and U.S. businesses to play a proactive role in Syria's recovery.
6. **ISSUE A BROAD EXPORT LICENSE EXCEPTION FOR SYRIA:** U.S. export controls prohibit the export of most items except for food and medicine to Syria, challenging the work of humanitarian organizations. The Commerce Department (DOC) should issue a broad license exception that mirrors OFAC's authorizations and allows more U.S. exports to Syria without requiring individual export licenses. The exception should include equipment needed for electric grids, construction, clearing landmines, education, and internet. DOC should commit to expedite specific license processing as it did after the 2023 earthquake.
7. **TEMPORARILY SUSPEND CAESAR ACT SANCTIONS:** The Caesar Act was untimely extended for five years shortly after the fall of the Assad regime, hindering much-needed foreign assistance to Syria as well as FDI that could accelerate Syria's recovery. The President should find the conditions for suspension in Section 7431 of the Caesar Act met and temporarily suspend the imposition of all Caesar sanctions for 180 days.

These measures address emergency needs and facilitate Syria's stabilization and recovery, while allowing for lengthier discussions on its future and a roadmap for lifting other sanctions, including Syria's designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism. These measures are also reversible and allow for U.S. oversight. Sanctions can always be reimposed if conditions change. By taking these pragmatic steps however, the United States can set U.S. engagement with the new Syria on the right track, preventing backsliding, fostering stability, and developing a constructive partnership with the Syrian people.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF SYRIA SANCTIONS

Sanctions on Syria were imposed to hold the Assad regime accountable for its destabilizing behavior and deprive it of access to the global financial system. These sanctions have fulfilled their purpose and are now outdated and no longer justified. **Maintaining sanctions on a free Syria would disproportionately punish an entire population for a regime no longer in power and impede Syrians' ability to rebuild their country at this fragile moment.**

- **Humanitarian Impact:** Syria sanctions and export controls hamper the ability of Syrians to access essential goods, services, and agricultural supplies, exacerbating hardship for millions and worsening an already dire crisis. Humanitarian needs are critical and widespread across all of Syria, with shelter, access to food, and electricity as the top three needs.
- **Limiting Shelter:** Syria sanctions and export controls hinder the reconstruction of destroyed houses. In 37% of communities assessed in a recent [study](#), the majority of people were living in either a damaged residential building, unfinished or abandoned house, non-residential structure, or in tents.
- **Economic Impact:** Sectoral sanctions cut off Syria from the global financial system, restricting commercial transactions, paralyzing the economy, hindering business activities for small and medium-sized enterprises, and discouraging foreign investors—stunting opportunities to generate jobs and drive economic recovery, a precursor for political stability.
- **Digital Impact:** Syria sanctions obstruct access to the internet, software and digital services, including by Big Tech companies, which hinders the development of Syria's inadequate digital infrastructure. This negatively impacts Syrian society's ability to innovate, access information, communicate with the outside world, work virtually, participate in business, cultural, and educational activities, and exercise their fundamental human rights.
- **Disabling the Diaspora:** Syrian-Americans are eager to help rebuild Syria and tackle its humanitarian and socioeconomic crises by volunteering their medical, psychological, legal, and technical expertise, but sanctions prohibiting investments and services hold them back.
- **Preventing Refugee Returns:** Syria sanctions and export controls restrict access to equipment and financing needed to repair infrastructure, restore basic services and utilities, rebuild schools, and clear explosives, in addition to impeding the generation of jobs. The country's electricity crisis has cascading effects on other essential needs and services, including water pumping, heating, and internet. **These issues pose severe challenges to Syrians and disincentivize millions of refugees and IDPs from returning home.** System strain and infrastructure damage were one of the two main reasons why IDPs who initially went back to their place of origin eventually returned to camps.

Syria's humanitarian and economic crisis demands an urgent response, and sanctions relief would accelerate stabilization and early recovery. Accordingly, **sanctions originally imposed on Assad's regime should not be continued or repurposed for unrelated goals. Without major sanctions reform—not just carving out partial exemptions or temporary suspensions—Syria has no realistic path toward humanitarian recovery and economic renewal.** The U.S. Government should coordinate and harmonize efforts to rescind sanctions on Syria with key allies and international bodies, several of whom already have roadmaps or are calling for lifting sanctions. Syrians deserve the chance to rebuild their country and livelihoods free from the burden of sanctions.

SANCTIONS RELIEF FOR SYRIA ADVANCES U.S. INTERESTS

Sanctions relief for Syria aligns with America's values, commitment to democracy, and leadership in the Middle East. It also serves U.S. strategic interests, particularly at this sensitive juncture with Syria facing destabilizing factors and competing influences and agendas.

Early recovery and economic stability in Syria are an essential precursor for the stable, inclusive political transition we all hope to achieve. This is why measures to ease sanctions on Syria are critically needed now—precisely because the country's political future is taking shape, not in spite of it. **Sanctions relief makes America safer and stronger for the following reasons:**

- **Countering Radicalization and ISIS Resurgence:** With over 90% of Syria's war-weary population living in poverty and the security situation in Syria still unstable, the conditions that drive radicalization persist and are ripe for exploitation by bad actors and ISIS terrorists. Sanctions relief can prevent Syria from falling back into chaos and suffering.
- **Facilitating Checks and Balances:** Sanctions relief would revitalize the private sector and civil society. Facilitating private investments would help restore Syria's shrinking middle class. These factors foster checks and balances on the government—benefiting both U.S. and Syrian long-term interests.
- **Fostering Resilience and Regional Stability:** U.S. engagement in Syria's recovery can help transform local institutions into resilient mechanisms that effectively serve the people, protect human rights, and ensure security and stability in Syria and the region.
- **Reducing Future Financial Burdens:** Lifting Syria sanctions could reduce long-term reliance on U.S. and international aid by allowing Syrians, international companies, and the private sector to rebuild infrastructure, industries, and institutions.

Further, the United States is able to employ less harmful tools, alongside diplomatic engagement, to ensure its national security interests and encourage good behavior. Thus far, the transitional authorities in Damascus have demonstrated themselves to be good-faith, rational actors who can be engaged through negotiations and diplomatic channels. This approach reduces the need for maintaining coercive measures such as sanctions, **which would only risk undermining the global standing of the U.S. dollar**, making America weaker.

Thank you for your attention and we look forward to your leadership in addressing this urgent matter.

Sincerely,

| | |
|--|---|
| Access Centre For Human Rights (ACHR) | Big Heart Foundation |
| Access Now | BINAA Organization for Development |
| Action For Humanity | Brücken der Hoffnung (Jusoor Al-Amal) Organisation |
| Adalaty Organisation | Caesar Families Association |
| Administrative Development Center | Change Makers Organization |
| Al Sham Humanitarian Foundation | Charity & Security Network |
| Al-Baghous Hope for Development | Chemical Violations Documentation Center and Research (CVDCR) |
| AlKafaat Team (Congregation of Competencies) | Child Guardians (Syrian Child Protection Organisation) |
| Amal Organization for Relief & Development | Christian Aid |
| American Coalition for Syria (ACS) | Citizens for a Secure and Safe America (C4SSA) |
| American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) | CIVICUS |
| Americans For A Free Syria | Civilian Council for American Security |
| Arab American Association of New York | Council on American-Islamic Relations |
| Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) | Damma Organization |
| Association Sans Menottes | Deirna Organization |
| Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO) | Doctors of the World-USA |
| Assyrian Human Rights Network | Duderî e.V. |
| Ataa Development Organization | Emgage Action |
| Awda Organization for Development | Engineering Creative Team |
| Bader for Development | Enma Al Jazeera Development |
| Balloon Organization | Enmaa Development Organization |
| Basmet Amal for Humanitarian Relief | Ensaf for Development |
| Baytna pour le soutien de la société civile | Fajjet Khuraq Atelier Project |
| Bedaya Organization | Families For Freedom |
| Beit Alkoll (All House Team) | |

| | |
|---|--|
| Future Makers Team | Kattee Family Foundation |
| Ghiras Al-Nahda | Kesh Malek |
| Global Justice | Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights (LDHR) |
| Halab Today TV | Leading Women Organization |
| Hand in Hand for Aid and Development (HIHFAD) | Lelun Victims Association |
| Hope Organization | Let's Build (LBD) Team |
| Hope Revival Organisation | Life for Relief and Development |
| Horan Foundation | Local Development & Small-Projects Support (LDSPS) |
| Humanists Volunteer Team | Mahabad Organization for Human Rights (MOHR) |
| Ihsan Relief and Development | Masarat Initiative |
| Immigrants Act Now | Massar Families Association |
| Inaash Organization For Development | MedGlobal |
| Innovative and Powerful Vision (IPV) | Mehad |
| International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) | Mercy Without Limits (MWL) |
| International Humanitarian Relief (IHR) | Mizan Organisation for Legal Research and Human Rights |
| Ishtar Development Organization | Molham Team |
| Jaber Othurat Al-Kiraam Team | Mozaic |
| Judy Organization for Relief and Development (JORD) | Multifaith Alliance |
| Jusoor | Musawa Women's Studies Center |
| Jusoor Al-Amal (Bridges of Hope) Organization | Musawat (Equality) Organization |
| Justice Paths | Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) |
| Kara Family Foundation | Nihna Qudha Group |
| Karam Foundation | Nisan Cultural Forum |
| Karam Shaar Advisory Limited | |

| | |
|---|---|
| Observatory of Political and Economic Networks | Syrian American Council (SAC) |
| Omran Center for Strategic Studies | Syrian American Development & Investment Quorum (SADIQ) |
| Orange Organization | Syrian American Engineers Association (SAEA) |
| Physicians Across Continents Turkey | Syrian American Lawyers' Network |
| Presbyterian Church (USA), Office of Public Witness | Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) |
| Pro-Justice | Syrian British Consortium (SBC) |
| Rahma Worldwide Aid and Development | SBC Investigations Team |
| Rajeen Initiative | Syrian Canadian Foundation |
| Roya Organization for Training and Development | Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) |
| Sada Aljanub | Syrian Christians USA |
| Sadad Humanitarian Organization | Syrian Computer Society |
| Sanabel Al-Furat Organization | Syrian Economists' Syndicate |
| Shafak Organization | Syrian Expatriates Medical Association |
| SKT Organization | Syrian Forum USA |
| Sobh Cultural Team | Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) |
| Social Development International (SDI) | Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA) |
| Souriyat Across Borders (SAB) | Syrian Orphans Organization |
| Stabilization Support Unit | Syrian Society for Scientific Research (SySSR) |
| SYCAC | Syrian Youth Empowerment (SYE) Initiative |
| Syria Faith Initiative | SYRIAWISE |
| Syria Film Festival | Takaful Al Sham (TAS) |
| Syria Relief & Development (SRD) | Task Force of Survivors of Chemical Attacks in Syria |
| Syria Solidarity Campaign | Tayif Humanitarian Organization |
| Syria Students Union (SSU) | |

| | |
|---|---|
| The Day After (TDA) | Union of Revolutionary Bureaus |
| The Empower Peace Initiatives and Strategies of Action Organization (EPISA) | Violet Organization |
| The MENTOR Initiative | Warsheh Team |
| The Syria Campaign | We Are With You Charity Team |
| The Syrian Legal Development Programme (SLDP) | Woman Support Association |
| The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP) | Women Support Unit |
| The White Helmets (Syria Civil Defense) | Women's Support and Empowerment Center in Idlib |
| Together For AlJarniyah | Zat Initiative |
| Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations (UOSSM) | Zenobia Association for Syrian Women |
| | Zorna Development Organization |

Submitted by Senator Jeanne Shaheen

Fact Sheet: U.S. Assistance in Syria

Impact of Executive Order Freezing U.S. foreign assistance on Policy Priorities in Syria

FROZEN PROGRAMS – STATE DEPARTMENT

Including \$35,150,000 in fiscal year (FY) 2024 Economic Support Funds (ESF) and International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INCLE) and prior fiscal years, which included \$44,525,000 in FY2023 ESF; and \$37,084,000 in FY2022 ESF and INCLE

- Supporting Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Syria
 - Supports Syrian civil society to serve, represent, and advocate for all Syrians, with a focus on capacity-strengthening of CSO partners; supporting CSOs to address social cohesion and acute livelihood and service gaps; and enabling community members to hold local authorities accountable.
- Supporting Local Governance Entities in Syria
 - Supports local--and governorate-level councils with training, equipment and financial support to promote accountability and transparency. This work enables these local governance entities to provide essential services in their communities, to build community resilience, to serve as viable alternatives to violent extremists, including ISIS, and to counterinfluence from malign actors.
- Strengthening the Syrian Political Process
 - Aids Syrian political process stakeholders to advance a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned transitional political process to produce an inclusive, non-sectarian and representative government formed through a transparent process based on the principles of United Nations Security Resolution (UNSCR) 2254. This project emphasizes approaches that incorporate participation of religious and ethnic minorities, youth, women and other marginalized groups.
- Supporting Access to Education in Syria
 - Supports initiatives to improve equitable access to vital education for children and youth, reducing their susceptibility to violent extremist ideology, contributing to community resilience and stability, and discouraging further displacement. In so doing, this project helps cement the enduring defeat of ISIS.
- Support for Independent Media in Syria
 - Works to improve Syrians' access to unbiased, accurate and locally-relevant information to promote accountability of local governance entities and counter violent extremist narratives and disinformation to lessen the influence of ISIS and other malign groups. These funds will enable media platforms to counter violent extremism and disinformation perpetuated by Iran and its proxies, Russia, ISIS and other malign actors.
- Support for Accountability and Justice efforts
 - Expands efforts to document, preserve and analyze evidence of human rights abuses, such as torture, chemical weapons attacks and forced displacements; addressing housing, land and property rights, and civil documentation; securing and analyzing mass graves and DNA samples; strengthening advocacy efforts for a survivor-centric transitional justice process; and promoting local reconciliation and social cohesion initiatives.

FROZEN PROGRAMS – USAID

Including \$5,000,000 in FY2025 Complex Crises Fund (CCF); \$33,525,000 in FY2023 ESF; and \$16,500,000 in FY2022 ESF

- Support for women entrepreneurs in northern Syria
 - Strengthens collaboration across key sectors such as agriculture, livestock and veterinary services, and retail, which are essential for community recovery and women's economic participation.
- Conflict Mitigation and Stabilization
 - Provides lifesaving services -- including through the White Helmets -- to address urgent stabilization, humanitarian and other basic human needs caused by the resumption of conflict and regime collapse. In Syria, USAID's support for lifesaving emergency services is critical to alleviating humanitarian suffering and promoting stabilization in newly liberated areas.
 - Advances U.S. policy objectives to prevent the resurgence of terrorist groups in Syria, such as ISIS, by fostering resilience and stability in conflict affected communities.
- Political Competition and Consensus Building
 - Works with local CSOs and communities to promote broad-based participation in determining reforms, rules and institutional frameworks in northeast Syria.
- Promotion of Human Rights
 - Supports lifesaving work and facilitate partnerships with civil society organizations to promote institutional capacity building and locally led service delivery to the most vulnerable communities in northwest Syria.
- Agriculture
 - Supports agricultural revitalization in northeast Syria, including areas with vulnerable populations.

UNFROZEN PROGRAMS – STATE DEPARTMENT

Including \$6,000,000 in FY2024 INCLE

- Supporting Community Security in Syria
 - Supports civilian security providers and the local and regional governance entities that oversee them to deliver effective and equitable security to create the enabling security context needed to continue vital stabilization and humanitarian assistance. It also denies ISIS the space to exploit local grievances to advance its recruitment efforts. Funding includes support for civilian security efforts inside al-Hol camp and efforts to address the flow and abuse of narcotics in Syria, including captagon.

UNFROZEN PROGRAMS – USAID

- NONE

Submitted by Senator Chris Van Hollen

Democracy Dies in Darkness

The White House's wildly inaccurate claims about USAID spending

Eleven out of 12 claims about the agency's work are misleading, wrong or lack context.

February 7, 2025

⌚ 12 min ⏸ 1949



Analysis by [Glenn Kessler](#)

As the Trump administration this week dismantled the U.S. Agency for International Development, the primary vehicle for U.S. foreign aid, the White House issued a statement justifying its actions. Titled “At USAID, Waste and Abuse Runs Deep,” the [news release](#) claimed USAID “has been unaccountable to taxpayers as it funnels massive sums of money to the ridiculous — and, in many cases, malicious — pet projects of entrenched bureaucrats, with next-to-no oversight.”

The news release then listed 12 examples, plucked from the websites of right-wing media. But the numbers cited — as low as \$32,000 — hardly justify the claim that these are “massive sums” of money. In fact, they are so low that some of the funds appear to have been awarded at the ambassador level, without Washington involvement. At least one dated from the first Trump administration, and some were actually State Department grants, not USAID.

Whether they are “ridiculous” might be in the eye of the beholder. White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt held up the sheet before reporters on Monday and declared, “I don’t know about you, but as an American taxpayer I don’t want my dollars going toward this crap.”

In fiscal year 2023, USAID was appropriated about \$25 billion by Congress, according to [ForeignAssistance.gov](#). (The website in recent days has been changed to combine USAID spending with foreign aid distributed by the State Department, so the combined total is nearly \$39 billion.) The White House identified only about \$12 million in grants — one of which was \$6 million — though one allegation vaguely claimed “hundreds of millions of dollars.” Upon inspection, that turned out to be from 2005 to 2008.

As a reader service, we examined these line items, as they have spread across social media. By eliminating USAID's website, the administration made harder to ascertain the details of some of these programs. But we determined that, as framed by the White House, only one claim — out of 12 — was accurate. After we highlighted key errors in the statement to the White House, we received a statement from spokeswoman Anna Kelly: "This waste of taxpayer dollars underscores why the president paused foreign aid on day one to ensure it aligns with American interests."

The Facts

According to surveys, many Americans have a misguided view of how much money the United States devotes to foreign aid. Polls consistently reveal that Americans believe that it is about 25 percent of the federal budget — and that a majority believe it should be more like 10 percent. In reality, foreign aid is less than 1 percent of the budget.

On top of that, other countries are more generous with foreign aid. By raw dollars, the United States gives more foreign aid than any other country. But when measured as a percentage of a country's economy, the United States is far behind nations such as Britain, Norway, Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands. The United Nations has set a target of contributing 0.7 percent of gross national income in development aid; the United States clocks in with less than 0.2 percent, near the bottom of the list of major democracies, according to a 2020 report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Much of the time, this aid does not actually leave U.S. shores. Then, if it does, it generally goes to nongovernmental organizations, not host governments. The exception might be direct cash transfers as a reward for counterterrorism operations to countries that support the United States, such as Turkey and Jordan, or Egypt and Israel for signing the Camp David Accords, according to the Congressional Research Service (CRS). Very little since the 1970s has been spent on direct construction of roads, irrigation systems, electric power facilities or similar projects, CRS said.

About two-thirds of U.S. foreign assistance funds in fiscal year 2018 were obligated to U.S.-based entities, CRS said. For instance, food aid must be purchased in the United States and by law must be shipped on U.S. carriers. With the exception of some aid given to Israel, all military aid must be used to purchase U.S. military equipment and training — meaning foreign military aid in reality is a jobs program in the United States.

Here's a line-by-line examination of the White House list, in the order presented.

“\$1.5 million to ‘advance diversity equity and inclusion in Serbia’s workplaces and business communities’”

This is mostly accurate. USAID provided \$1.5 million to a group called Grupa Izadji, which focuses on creating opportunities for young LGBTQ people. Aleksa Savić, executive director of Grupa Izadji, said in an email that the goal “was to raise the perception among employers and the broader Serbian public that the economic engagement of all individuals, including LGBTQI+ persons, yields positive effects for the economy and creates better conditions for economic growth and development.” Under the terms of the three-year grant, USAID delivers money after certain milestones have been met. The organization has received \$1.14 million and on Jan. 24 “submitted additional milestones valued at \$755,000, for which we are awaiting payment from USAID,” he said. For many years, USAID has tried to improve civil society in Serbia as interest groups could advocate with the government on reforms. LGBTQ people faced discrimination, so one area of focus was ensuring acceptance of Belgrade Pride, an annual parade that previously was canceled after threats of violence. The 2024 parade was peaceful, and the government is discussing legislation on same-sex partnerships.

“\$70,000 for production of a ‘DEI musical’ in Ireland”

This is wrong. This was a State Department grant, not USAID. In 2022, the U.S. ambassador hosted an event featuring Grammy-winning folk duo Francesco Turrisi and Rhiannon Giddens, along with other Irish and American musicians.

“\$2.5 million for electric vehicles for Vietnam”

This is wrong. This was for more than electric vehicles. USAID launched a \$2.5 million fund that provided awards up to \$100,000 to organizations with promising new products, business models, or financing models in Danang or Ho Chi Minh cities. The fund was part of a larger effort to bring green energy to a country that is one of the world’s fastest-growing per capita greenhouse gas emitters. China has a head start on green energy, but the United States has sought to keep Vietnam out of China’s orbit, so the program was intended to boost the U.S. brand in green energy.

“\$47,000 for a ‘transgender opera’ in Colombia”

This is wrong. USAID did not fund this. The White House appears to be referring to a \$25,000 State Department grant to Universidad De Los Andes in Bogotá to stage an opera, “As One,” composed by Laura Kaminsky, an American. The rest of the money came from other sources, according to Juana Monsalve, the lead actress in the Colombian performances. “This is a well-known opera in the U.S., highly acclaimed by audiences,” Monsalve told a radio show in Spanish. “The last thing I expected was to hear those statements from the White House.”

“\$32,000 for a ‘transgender comic book’ in Peru”

This is wrong. USAID did not fund this, and it was not specifically transgender. Instead, the grant says the State Department provided \$32,000, under the guise of public diplomacy, to Peru’s Education Department “to cover expenses to produce a tailored-made comic, featured an LGBTQ+ hero to address social and mental health issues.”

“\$2 million for sex changes and ‘LGBT activism’ in Guatemala”

This is misleading. as it suggests USAID arranged for sex changes. The three-year grant to [Asociación Lambda](#), a Guatemala LGBTIQ+ organization, was to “strengthen trans-led organizations to deliver gender-affirming health care, advocate for improved quality and access to services, and provide economic empowerment opportunities.” The World Health Organization [defines](#) gender-affirming health care as “any single or combination of a number of social, psychological, behavioral or medical (including hormonal treatment or surgery) interventions designed to support and affirm an individual’s gender identity.” About \$350,000 of the grant has been delivered. Officials at Asociación Lambda could not be reached, but a former senior USAID official who worked on LGBTIQ+ programs for the agency said, “I regularly went to the Hill and communicated on the record to note that for USAID, gender-affirming care does not include surgeries, hormone replacement therapies or any other medical interventions.”

“\$6 million to fund tourism in Egypt”

This is wrong. This initiative was launched in the first Trump administration to “increase educational opportunities and strengthen the livelihoods of the people of North Sinai,” [according to the citation provided by the White House](#). The money would “provide access to transportation for rural communities and economic livelihood programming for families.” There is no mention of funding tourism.

“Hundreds of thousands of dollars for a nonprofit linked to designated terrorist organizations — even AFTER an inspector general launched an investigation”

This is dubious. Allegations of links to Pakistani terror groups have never been proved and have been denied as “baseless and defamatory” by the organization, known as Helping Hand for Relief and Development. Some GOP members of Congress for years have claimed the group has terrorism links, and the Washington Examiner [reported](#) last year that the USAID inspector general began an investigation. The State Department, in a [brochure](#) on American Muslims published during the first Trump administration, said Helping Hand was “lauded for its ability to deliver effective aid.”

“Millions to EcoHealth Alliance — which was involved in research at the Wuhan lab”

This lacks context. Before the pandemic, up until 2019, USAID provided \$1.1 million to [EcoHealth Alliance](#), an environmental health nonprofit, via a subagreement on virus research. USAID initially awarded a grant to the University of California at Davis to improve monitoring of zoonotic viruses with pandemic potential in African and Asian countries. UC-Davis then hired EcoHealth, which in turn contracted with Wuhan University and the Wuhan Institute of Virology, to collect biological samples from roughly 1,500 individuals in the Yunnan province with exposure to bats, other wildlife and domestic animals, [according to the Government Accountability Office](#). The origin of the covid virus has still not been determined. In 2022, USAID awarded EcoHealth \$4.7 million for a conservation project to improve farming practices in southwest Liberia — completely unrelated to virus research.

“Hundreds of thousands of meals that went to al-Qaeda-affiliated fighters in Syria”

This is highly misleading. As [the article](#) cited by the White House makes clear, investigators, including the USAID inspector general, discovered that the head of a nongovernmental organization diverted \$9 million intended for Syrian civilians to combatant groups. He was charged in a 12-count indictment unsealed in November. “USAID OIG works tirelessly to ensure that U.S.-funded humanitarian assistance does not fall into the hands of terrorist organizations,” said Jason Donnelly, special agent for the inspector general, in [a news release](#). “We will continue to work with the Department of Justice and law enforcement partners to hold accountable those who compromise USAID programs for vulnerable populations around the world.” Yet the White House is now blaming the agency for fraud that it exposed.

“Funding to print ‘personalized’ contraceptives birth control devices in developing countries”

This is misleading. USAID gave [a grant](#) to the University of Texas at Austin to develop personalized 3D-printed nonhormonal intrauterine devices (IUDs). The grant was part of a program managed by Eastern Virginia Medical School at Old Dominion University and USAID to improve reproductive health by researching low-cost, safe and noninvasive HIV prevention methods as well as contraceptives.

“Hundreds of millions of dollars to fund ‘irrigation canals, farming equipment, and even fertilizer used to support the unprecedented poppy cultivation and heroin production in Afghanistan,’ benefiting the Taliban”

This is false. USAID never intended to support opium poppy cultivation or the Taliban, and in fact the United States sought to stem it. The White House cites a right-wing news site’s account of [a 2018 report](#) by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) — whom President [Donald Trump](#) recently fired — that found that USAID efforts to fund alternative development projects during the George W. Bush administration (2005 to 2008) had failed. The Taliban before 2001 had successfully banned poppy cultivation, but the U.S. invasion led to a power vacuum that was exploited by poppy growers. USAID was the lead U.S. agency for implementing alternative development projects, modeled after a more successful effort in Colombia, but the report documented how conflicts among agencies and with allies hampered the effort. It’s a stretch to now, years later, accuse USAID of helping the Taliban.

[\(About our rating scale\)](#)

Send us facts to check by filling out [this form](#)

Sign up for The Fact Checker [weekly newsletter](#)

The Fact Checker is a verified [signatory to the International Fact-Checking Network code of principles](#)

