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POLICY COMPASS
Geopolitical Dynamics Surrounding
Washington's Opening to Post-
Assad Syria

By
Gulf State Analytics



6 June 2025

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For information about Rosa&Roubini Associates, please send an email to info@rosa-roubini-associates.com or call +44 (0)20 7101 0718.

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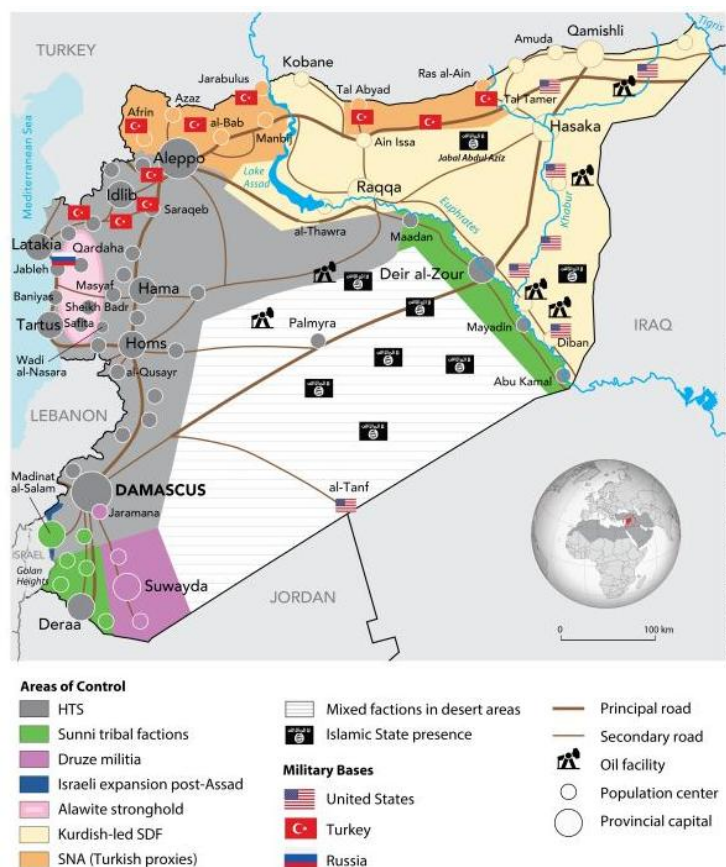
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Executive Summary

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- ✧ President Donald J. Trump has recently made bold changes in Washington's Syria foreign policy, opening the war-torn country up to the US.
- ✧ The White House's policy shifts vis-à-vis post-regime change Syria bring the US into closer alignment with Gulf Arab monarchies and Turkey.
- ✧ Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman played a central role in influencing Trump to change course in Syria.
- ✧ US-Syria relations appear to have started a new chapter, but Trump's unpredictability makes it difficult to confidently predict how bilateral ties will evolve in upcoming years.
- ✧ An unknown variable is whether the Trump administration will pressure Israel into halting its military operations against post-Ba'ath Syria.
- ✧ With Syria's geopolitical position moving closer to the Gulf Arab monarchies, Turkey, and the West, it is safe to assume that Damascus will be cautious before making bold overtures to Tehran.
- ✧ With Syria becoming more West-aligned, the Kremlin has good reason to be nervous about Russia's future role in post-regime change Syria.
- ✧ The recent lifting of many US sanctions offers Syria's population reason to be hopeful about their country's future.

Key Picture: Post-Assad Syria Territorial Control



Source: [Washington Institute 2025](#)

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1. Shifting Foreign Policy Towards Syria

The Trump administration's foreign policy toward post-Ba'ath Syria has experienced drastic shifts with the White House opening up to the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)-dominated government in Damascus. With Washington now making bold moves to further legitimise the Islamist rebels-turned-rulers who overthrew Bashar al-Assad. In late 2024, the US along with France appear to be drawing Damascus into the West's sphere of influence—an evolving dynamic that could carry far-reaching geopolitical implications for both Syria and the broader Middle East.

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In mid-May, Trump was in Riyadh on the first leg of his recent Gulf tour. While in the Kingdom, the 45th and 47th US president announced the cessation of Washington's sanctions on Syria.¹ The following day Trump met Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa face-to-face in the Saudi capital while in the company of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan joining by phone.² Soon after, the Treasury Department swept aside long-standing restrictions, opening the door for US citizens and businesses to make many financial transactions with Syrian counterparts, which were previously illegal under Washington's sanctions regime.³ Then by the end of the month, the American flag was raised outside the long-shuttered US ambassador's residence in Damascus, symbolising the strengthening relationship between Washington and Syria's relatively new government.⁴

2. Significance of US-Syria Changing Relations

In historical context, the recent transformations in US–Syria relations are nothing short of astonishing. Trump's meeting with Sharaa in Riyadh marked the first meeting between American and Syrian presidents since President Bill Clinton met with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad in Switzerland in 2000. That Sharaa, once the head of Syria's al-Qaeda division, now carries the implicit endorsement of the White House is a major development that many analysts did not anticipate, particularly given the Trump administration's composition, which includes prominent anti-Islamist figures such as Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard. In early 2025, Gabbard characterized Sharaa's government as little more than a jihadist regime in Damascus.⁵

For ordinary Syrians, the easing of US sanctions and the normalisation of American-Syrian diplomatic ties could have profound and potentially transformative effects on daily life and the country's broader trajectory. This shift in Washington's Syria foreign policy paves the way for the unfreezing of Syria's international assets, renewed foreign investment in its war-ravaged economy, the revival of external trade, and the long-awaited restoration of access to global financial systems. In essence, Washington's economic and diplomatic reengagement with Syria holds the promise of ushering in a new and more hopeful chapter for a population that has endured years of hardship and isolation. One important caveat, however, is that this policy course must be sustained—something far from guaranteed under the unpredictability of Trump's leadership.

3. Regional Dynamics

Trump's abrupt reversal on Syria policy underscores the significant influence exerted by key regional powers—namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey—on the administration's strategic calculations. The leaders in Riyadh, Doha, and Ankara have each articulated their views that regional peace and stability are best served by affirming and upholding Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and by lifting the stringent US sanctions which have for years left Syria's economy strangled and isolated.

A particular point of concern for the Gulf Arab monarchies and Turkey has been Israel's ongoing military activity in Syria, which these actors have sought to address by urging the Trump administration to restrain Tel Aviv's belligerency. Although it remains uncertain to what extent the White House is willing, or able, to exert meaningful pressure on Israel to alter its approach, what is increasingly evident is Syria's gradual reorientation toward the West, Turkey, and the Gulf Cooperation Council member-states. This emerging geopolitical realignment occurs at the expense of Iranian influence, which drastically declined as a consequence of Assad's sudden fall at the hands of the HTS-led rebel offensive that swept through the country in November and December 2024.⁶

The Sharaa government will undoubtedly seek to advance the cause of improved relations with Washington and key European capitals, exercising deliberate caution to avoid actions, such as bold overtures toward Tehran, that could provoke concern among Western policymakers and potentially jeopardise this emerging diplomatic momentum. Within this context, it will also be necessary to monitor how the US and Europe's opening to post-Assad Syria impacts the relatively new Damascus government's relations with China and Russia against the backdrop of great power competition heating up in the day and age of Trump 2.0.

4. Implications for Moscow

From the Kremlin's perspective, the ongoing normalisation of US-Syria relations presents a potentially unwelcome development with far-reaching implications. For Moscow, the continuation of severe US sanctions on Syria in the aftermath of regime change had created a unique geopolitical opening, allowing Russia to maintain its influence in Damascus and access to the post-Assad Syrian state with major strategic and economic benefits for Moscow. This evolving chapter in US-Syria relations, however, threatens to recalibrate the regional balance in ways that may dilute Russia's longstanding advantages in Syria and, by extension, the rest of the Levant. Should the West's rapprochement with Syria go further, Russia's position in Syria could weaken significantly.

Moreover, the US-Syria normalisation process risks complicating Moscow's efforts to shape the country's reconstruction agenda and to anchor its presence in the broader Eastern Mediterranean region, which could have major ramifications not only for Russia's military posture in the Middle East but also Africa. In this context, the Kremlin is likely to view Washington's reengagement with caution, if not apprehension, as Moscow assesses how best to protect and adapt its strategic posture in Syria amid rapidly shifting geopolitical dynamics.

NOTES

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-says-will-remove-us-sanctions-syria-2025-05-13/>

² <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/05/meeting-al-sharaa-and-trump-has-shifted-balance-power-middle-east>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/24/us/politics/syria-sanctions-trump.html>

⁴ <https://apnews.com/article/syria-us-ambassador-residence-ties-f0e22df744565ad6a6503c9c7d90972c>

⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/30/key-takeaways-from-tulsi-gabbards-us-senate-confirmation-hearing>

⁶ <https://www.rferl.org/a/farda-briefing-iran-syria-trump-sharaa/33415089.html>