

Syria: Regime Change, Transition, and U.S. Policy

December 9, 2024

Rapid [offensives](#) by Syrian armed groups opposed to the government of Bashar Al Asad (alt. Assad) forced Asad's resignation and [exile](#) to Russia on December 8, 2024. This inflection point in Syria's post-2011 [civil war](#) marked the end of decades of Asad-family rule.

Advances since late November by anti-Asad groups left much of western Syria (including Damascus and most other major cities, **Figure 1**) in the hands of different forces: a coalition led by the U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) [Hay'at Tahrir al Sham \(HTS\)](#), the Turkey-backed [Syrian National Army \(SNA\)](#) coalition, and southern Syria-based armed groups. Groups (including Alawite minorities) with historical ties to the Asad regime maintain a presence in some western coastal areas where Russian air and naval bases are located. Eastern Syria remains largely under the control of the U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led [Syrian Democratic Forces \(SDF\)](#) and the U.S.-backed [Syrian Free Army](#), both U.S. counterterrorism partners against remnants of the Islamic State (IS/ISIS) that once dominated parts of Syria and Iraq.

Many Syrians are welcoming the end of Asad's rule and opportunities to reunite families and release long-held prisoners. At the same time, Syrians and outside observers note that considerable political, economic, and security challenges lie ahead.

President Joseph Biden [called](#) Asad's ouster "a fundamental act of justice" and "a moment of historic opportunity." On December 9, a senior Biden Administration official [asserted](#) that U.S. policy helped bring about the weakness of the Asad regime and the "entire Iranian-backed artifice in the region," and has "completely changed the equation in the Middle East." President Biden also said the U.S. government would protect U.S. citizens and personnel in Syria along with U.S. regional partners, and would remain vigilant against a possible IS resurgence. Approximately 900 U.S. military personnel are [present](#) in eastern and southern Syria, conducting [counterterrorism missions](#) against IS remnants and supporting the SDF's detention of more than 9,000 IS prisoners and administration of camps for more than 40,000 individuals from formerly IS-held areas. U.S. Central Command conducted [dozens](#) of airstrikes against IS targets in central Syria as Asad's forces withdrew. The United States [suspended](#) operations at the U.S. Embassy in Damascus in 2012; the Czech Republic serves as the U.S. protecting power in Syria. President-elect Donald Trump made [statements](#) as Asad's government collapsed, calling for the United States to refrain from involvement in Syria's conflict.

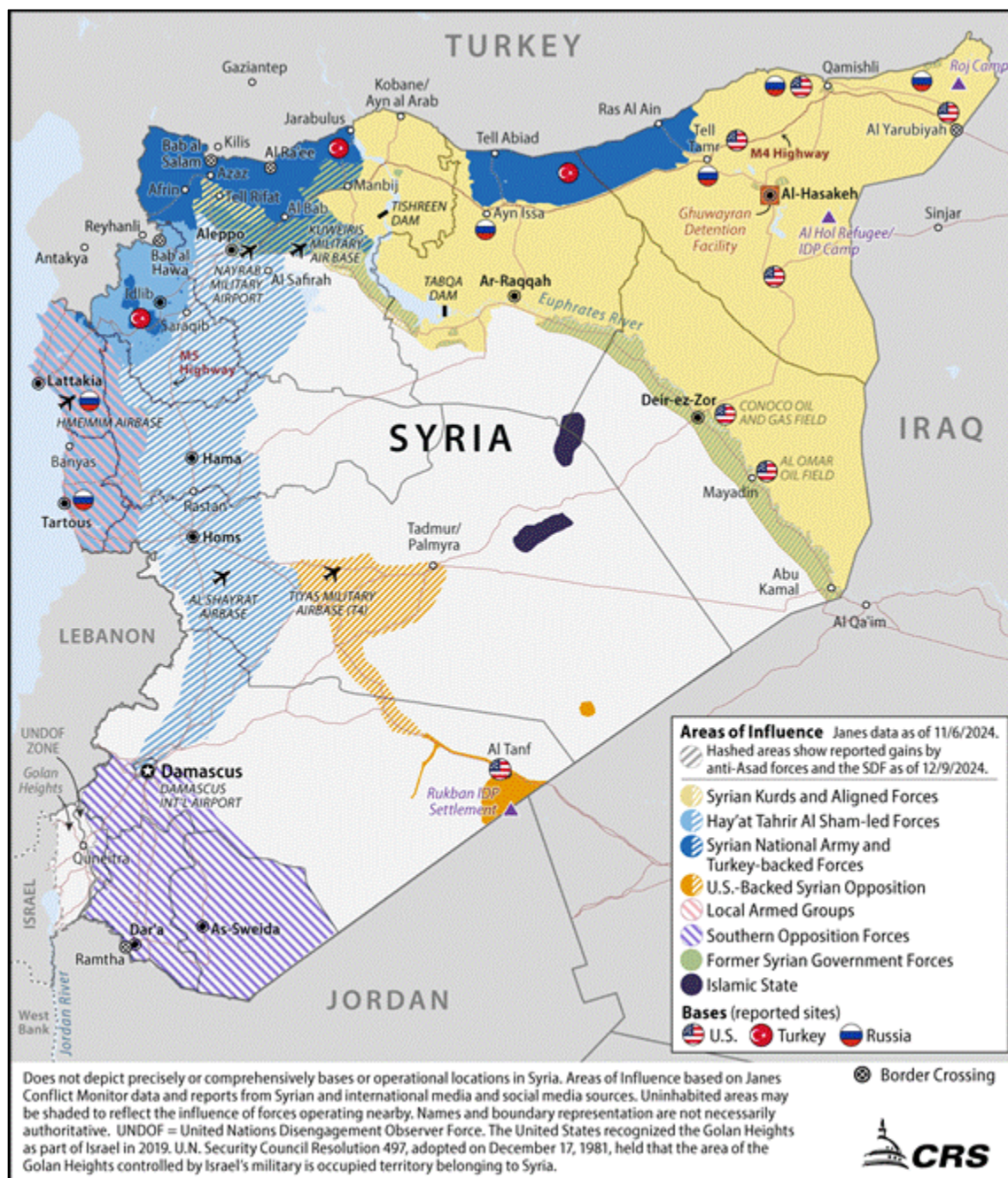
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Figure I. Syria: Areas of Influence

As of December 9, 2024



Source: CRS using Janes Conflict Monitor data, Lead Inspector General reporting, and selected media reports.

Notes: All areas approximate and subject to change.

Situation in Syria

As of December 8, some Asad government officials appeared to remain in place and anti-Asad forces appeared to be coordinating with them to attempt to preserve order. Debate among Syrians over

governance may reflect the diverse interests of Syrian political, ideological, ethnic, and religious groups. While armed Sunni Islamist groups led the final military campaign that ousted Asad, non-Islamist locally organized armed groups, particularly in southern Syria, participated and may control some strategic areas and resources. Syrians' demands for accountability and personal grievances may affect security as the transition unfolds.

Outside actors, including Syria's neighbors, may act to influence Syria's transitional arrangements and the post-Asad security environment in ways that serve their discrete interests. Turkey supports armed groups in northern Syria that have [seized](#) areas near Aleppo from the U.S.-backed SDF since early December. The Turkish government seeks to counter the SDF because of [links](#) Kurdish SDF elements have with the [Kurdistan Workers' Party](#) (PKK, another FTO). On December 8, Israel [took control](#) of some formerly Syrian military-held areas of the [Golan Heights](#) and [said](#) it would continue to strike "heavy strategic weapons throughout Syria." Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [characterized](#) Israel's military as taking a "temporary defensive position," and expressed his hope that Israel and Syria could have peaceful relations in the future. To date, some Russian military forces have repositioned but reportedly [remain](#) in Syria. Iran reportedly [evacuated](#) some personnel from Syria.

Asad's departure may enable additional international humanitarian assistance to Syria. In June 2024, a UN official [warned](#) that Syria was "facing its highest levels of humanitarian need since the start of this 13-year crisis," with 7.2 million people internally displaced and 13 million people (of a population of nearly 24 million) facing "high levels of acute food insecurity." Nearly 5 million Syrians are [registered](#) as refugees in regional countries. Any return home of displaced Syrians may ease pressures on host communities, but could increase humanitarian and service demands on transitional authorities and create new operational and diplomatic questions for donors.

Issues for Congress

Immediate questions for Congress include consideration of Syria-related provisions of the proposed House-Senate compromise [version](#) of a National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for FY2025. As proposed, the bill would extend through 2029 the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 ([22 U.S.C. §8791 note](#)), which provides, among other things, for sanctions on officials of the government of Syria and their family members determined to be responsible for human rights abuses. The bill also would extend through 2025 authorities for U.S. train and equip programs in Syria. The bill would not include a Senate-reported provision that would have required the Secretary of Defense to certify the independent capabilities of U.S.-backed Syrian forces before reducing the number of U.S. troops in northeast Syria below 400. The proposed [Joint Explanatory Statement](#) for the bill includes directives to the executive branch to provide Congress with reports and briefings on a number of Syria-related security topics.

Congress may assess the transition in Syria, regional security, and post-Asad reconstruction needs when considering appropriations requests for FY2025 and beyond. Asad's departure may obviate congressional concerns about U.S. aid programs benefiting Asad's regime, though Members may monitor post-Asad governing arrangements and weigh the roles, if any, played by former regime officials or members of U.S.-designated armed groups.

In addition to conducting oversight of U.S. military operations and any U.S. recognition of transitional government entities in Syria, Congress may discuss with the executive branch the array of U.S. sanctions on Syria in place pursuant to executive branch determinations, Syria-specific legislation, and other provisions of U.S. law. These sanctions, put in place over decades in response to Syrian government policies and conflict in Syria, may have different implications for U.S. interests in post-Asad Syria. The U.S. government could reconsider Syria's designation as a [state sponsor of terrorism](#) and could revisit terrorism-related designations of Syrian groups and leaders, including [HTS](#) and its [leader](#) Ahmed Al Shar'a (aka [Abu Mohammed Al Jolani](#)). In remarks on December 8, President Biden [acknowledged](#) that

“some of the rebel groups that took down Assad have their own grim record of terrorism and human rights abuses,” and said “we will assess not just their words, but their actions.”

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