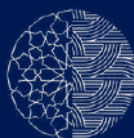




**BETWEEN HAWKS AND
ISOLATION: CRAFTING A
U.S. ROLE IN SYRIA'S
REBUILDING**

ZOE SILVERMAN

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BETWEEN HAWKS AND ISOLATION: CRAFTING A U.S. ROLE IN SYRIA'S REBUILDING

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Abstract

This report examines the critical juncture Syria faces following the collapse of Assad's regime and the rise of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) as a dominant actor. It evaluates the challenges and opportunities for U.S. foreign policy in shaping Syria's reconstruction, balancing the risks of full disengagement against the pitfalls of overreach. Drawing on lessons from past U.S. interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran, the report advocates for a measured, strategic approach emphasizing Syrian-led governance, economic recovery, and multilateral partnerships. Recommendations include fostering inclusive political transitions, prioritizing localized empowerment, addressing humanitarian needs, and leveraging U.S. influence to counter regional instability. By committing to long-term, pragmatic engagement, the U.S. can support Syria's recovery, strengthen its position in the Middle East, and demonstrate the value of diplomacy in resolving complex global challenges.

I. Introduction

The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime and the rise of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) as a dominant power broker have placed Syria at a critical juncture, one with immense challenges but also unique opportunities. After over a decade of brutal civil war, the country faces the daunting task of rebuilding its governance structures, economy, and social cohesion. This moment demands a decisive response from the United States, one that avoids both the pitfalls of complete disengagement and the errors of past interventions. The election of a president running on an "America first" agenda is evidence of pressing domestic challenges limiting foreign policy interventions. However, absolute isolationist measures would create long-term challenges for the U.S., as regional instability can quickly spiral into global consequences. By collaborating with Syria and its allies, the U.S. has an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to Syria's reconstruction without resorting to full-scale intervention.

As Thomas L. Friedman of *The New York Times* argues, U.S. action in Syria represents a relatively low-cost opportunity for transformative impact compared to the trillion-dollar investment in Iraq, provided it is handled wisely (Friedman, NYT). Friedman highlights a key distinction: unlike Iraq, where U.S. forces imposed top-down regime change, the transition in Syria has occurred from the ground up, with Syrians themselves driving the change. This critical difference means that Syrians have a sense of ownership, a factor that, if supported correctly, can foster long-term stability. There are dire consequences of a U.S. withdrawal: a power vacuum that could devolve into chaos, with Turkey, Israel, and Russia intervening according to their interests, creating a failed state at the heart of the Middle East. Such a scenario would not only destabilize U.S. allies like Jordan and the European Union but also embolden adversaries like Iran and Russia. By rolling up its sleeves and committing to smart, strategic engagement, the U.S. has a chance to tilt Syria's trajectory toward stability and inclusivity.

This report takes the stance that the United States must adopt a balanced and sustained strategy in Syria. Full disengagement risks plunging the region into a free-for-all, while overreach could repeat the failures of Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead, the U.S. should prioritize Syrian-led governance, support economic reconstruction, and leverage its influence to foster an inclusive political transition. As Friedman asserts, the stakes are high, but the potential payoff is immense: rebuilding a resilient Syria, establishing a key ally in the Levant, and restoring U.S. credibility as a leader in international diplomacy.

A thoughtful, long-term U.S. strategy is not only a moral obligation but also a pragmatic step to counteract the influence of Russia, Iran, and China. By promoting stability and empowering local actors, the U.S. can avoid the moral and strategic costs of inaction while strengthening its position as a credible actor in the region. This report argues that, with a relatively modest investment, the U.S. can help create a stable, inclusive Syria and demonstrate the power of diplomacy and strategic engagement in addressing complex global challenges.

II. Recent Developments in Syria with HTS

• 1. What is HTS?

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, Organization for the Liberation of the Levant), an organization originally formed as an offshoot of Al-Qaeda, has become a dominant force in northern Syria in the wake of the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Its leader, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, was sent by the leader of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) to lead his group's entry into Syria and create the Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) in 2011.

HTS is one of the dominant rebel groups confined to Idlib until the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime on December 8, 2024. This is the same Jolani who adopted the name Ahmed al-Sharaa as the leader of the HTS today. HTS has been present in the north of Syria since 2011 and it is still considered as a terrorist organization by the United States, the United Nations, the European Union, and the United Kingdom.

HTS's efforts to rebrand itself from a purely terrorist entity to a political and military leader in Syria has created a complex situation for both local governance and international engagement. HTS officially broke ties with al-Qaeda in 2016 (Bowen, BBC). Initially recognized as a U.S. designated terrorist organization, HTS has attempted to distance itself from its extremist roots by softening its public rhetoric and embracing a more politically-oriented stance. In his interview with the BBC, Jolani states that "in the last 14 years, we [HTS] haven't targeted any civilians or civilian areas or civilian targets" and thus that HTS should be delisted from the terrorist list (Bowen, BBC).

Despite their repressive tendencies, they have managed to establish local roots, gain legitimacy on the ground, and mobilize both human and material resources in Idlib, in northern Syria. For instance, HTS prioritized providing public services over imposing Islamic law (sharia), did not require women to wear hijab, and provided an education for men and women with more than 60% of women in universities in Idlib. HTS has even taken the step of arresting individuals with links to al-Qaeda within its controlled territories to demonstrate the absence of any allegiance (HTS | CSIS). Its leaders have sought to portray HTS as a viable alternative to Assad's regime, positioning themselves as key actors in Syria's future,

particularly in the Idlib province. Despite its shift in tactics, HTS's control over critical territories and its military capabilities in northern Syria make it an influential power broker.

• 2. Recent Developments of the Organization

One of the most significant developments has been HTS's involvement in the capture of key cities, including Aleppo and Damascus in December 2024. While Assad's regime has weakened due to both domestic and international pressures with the loss of its allies such as Russia, Iran, and Lebanon's Hezbollah, HTS has capitalized on the power vacuum, consolidating control over much of Syria's north. The day after a ceasefire was declared between Hezbollah and Israel in November, HTS initiated an offensive moving east and southward from Idlib. Within days, it seized control of Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city and commercial hub. The following week, it captured Hama to the south, and by December 7th, the takeover of Daraa and Homs effectively cut off Damascus, enabling the rebels to enter the capital just hours later on December 8, 2024, the fall of Assad's regime.

HTS's growing influence in Aleppo and Damascus presents a dilemma for international actors who are trying to promote a Syrian-led transition. The group's substantial military footprint in these areas, combined with its ability to undermine rival groups and local governance, gives it substantial leverage in shaping the direction of Syria's post-Assad future. Indeed, the Idlib of 2015 presents significant similarities to Syria today and HTS has played a central role in reconstructing this region with damaged infrastructure, a diversity of governing actors, and fragmented territorial control (Middle East Institute).

• 3. Challenges of Cooperation

However, HTS's extremist ties present ongoing challenges. Although the group has made efforts to distance itself from Al-Qaeda and present itself as a legitimate political entity, it continues to face skepticism from both international and local actors. Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) in 2012 was highly affiliated with Al-Qaeda and has claimed nearly 600 attacks in Syria in its first year of operations (The Washington Institute). JN is the precursor organization of HTS, established in 2017 through the merger of several rebel factions. HTS's leadership is closely aligned with hardline elements that maintain strong ideological links to global jihadist networks. This poses a fundamental issue for Western governments, particularly the U.S., which is committed to counterterrorism efforts in the region. The group's continued affiliation with these networks complicates the potential for meaningful international cooperation, especially when it comes to promoting a democratic and inclusive governance structure in Syria.

Furthermore, HTS's treatment of local populations and its use of harsh tactics to consolidate power raise concerns about its commitment to human rights and long-term stability. Between February and September 2024, mass protests broke out in the Idlib region, calling for the ousting of the HTS leader and condemning issues such as corruption, the taxation system, and the imprisonment of political dissidents (Middle East Institute). This past raises questions about the capacity of HTS to consolidate its governance for the future of Syria.

Ahmed al-Sharaa has asked in his BBC interview to lift the sanctions on Syria that were targeted at the old

regime and the removal of the HTS terrorism designation to ensure a democratic and inclusive political transition. "HTS also consider themselves to be victims of the crimes of the Assad regime" as Jolani declares (Bowen, BBC). However, to ensure a Syrian-led transition, this is not enough. Foreign assistance should focus on strengthening local actors throughout the country, enabling them to provide localized services that align with and support the central government rather than competing with it. The situation also presents a delicate balance for the U.S. and other international actors. On one hand, engaging HTS could help stabilize northern Syria by fostering a ceasefire and focusing on reconstruction efforts as the brutal dictatorship of ten years disintegrated the country. On the other, aligning with a group that still adheres to radical principles could undermine the broader objective of fostering a pluralistic, Syrian-led transition. The United States and its allies face a difficult choice: should they engage with HTS to contain instability and prevent further fragmentation of Syria, or should they continue to oppose the group due to its extremist ideology, even if it risks deepening the crisis?

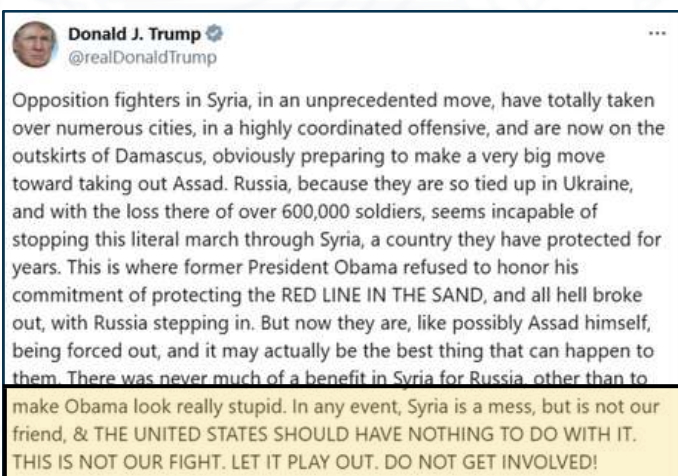
III. Trump's Isolationist Plans and Selective Hawkishness

Donald Trump's remarks after the fall of Al-Assad on X highlight his "America First" political agenda, which emphasizes focusing on domestic priorities over foreign entanglements (Stepansky, Al Jazeera). If this statement aligns with his campaign commitments to reduce U.S. involvement in international conflicts and his frequent reassurances to voters that he would prevent global wars; it also comes in contradiction with his past "selective hawkishness" when it comes to peace in the Middle East.

- **1. Isolationist Plans**

Trump's approach to Syria reflects a pattern of isolationist decision-making. In 2019, he ordered the withdrawal of U.S. troops from northern Syria, a move that allowed Turkey to launch a military operation against Kurdish forces (Barnes and Schmitt, NYT). These Kurdish groups had been critical allies in the battle against ISIS but were left vulnerable after the withdrawal.

Many critics, including prominent Republicans, condemned the decision, arguing it damaged U.S. credibility and abandoned a key partner. Trump, however, justified the move as fulfilling his promise to end "endless wars" and bring troops back to the U.S (Landler, New York Times). Despite his rhetoric about non-involvement, Trump's policy towards Syria reveals a more complex reality. The country's strategic importance lies primarily in its connection to two key issues: oil and its role as a battleground for Iranian influence in the Middle East. Syria's significance to Trump stems largely from how it impacts U.S. goals in the region, especially in countering Iran and its alliances.



• 2. Contradicting Actions through US Involvement

Throughout his first term, Trump prioritized isolating Iran, labeling it as a major sponsor of terrorism. His administration withdrew from the 2015 nuclear agreement and reinstated comprehensive sanctions on Tehran. In 2020, he escalated tensions further by ordering the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, the leader of Iran's elite Quds Force, who was instrumental in coordinating Iranian efforts in Syria and beyond (CFR "Donald Trump's Foreign Policy Positions," 2019). Syria's alliance with Iran made it a critical piece in Trump's broader strategy to limit Iranian influence, especially its support for Hezbollah and other proxy groups operating in the region.

The political evolution of Syria also holds broader implications for regional stability. A shift toward democracy could potentially inspire similar changes in Iraq, encouraging the rise of nonsectarian political movements. However, a destabilized Syrian regime might pose an even greater risk, especially given the large number of ISIS detainees held in Kurdish-run camps (around 40,000) (Friedman, NYT)

Although the U.S. maintains only about 900 troops in Syria, their presence east of the Euphrates River serves significant strategic purposes. These forces play a key role in monitoring ISIS activity and curbing Iran's influence. Prior to the Syrian civil war, the country was a major hub for Iranian operations, facilitating the transfer of arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon. (Katulis & Masthoff, Middle East Institute) This has made Syria a frequent target of Israeli airstrikes, particularly after October 7th.

Trump also placed notable importance on Syrian oil fields. In late 2019, he openly declared, "We're keeping the oil," signaling that U.S. forces would remain in the region to secure these resources and prevent them from falling into the hands of ISIS or other adversaries. (ABC News) This approach diverged from his broader isolationist rhetoric, highlighting a pragmatic side of his foreign policy, where economic interests justified continued military involvement.

• 3. Selective Hawkishness To Come

As Trump potentially prepares for a return to the presidency, his administration may face challenges in reconciling these conflicting priorities. While Trump has consistently voiced his desire to avoid entanglement in Syria, key figures among his appointees, such as National Security Adviser Mike Waltz and Secretary of State nominee Marco Rubio, have underscored the strategic necessity of maintaining a U.S. presence in the region. (Feffer, Foreign Policy In Focus) These differing perspectives suggest that his policy towards Syria may ultimately be more multifaceted than his public statements imply.

In conclusion, Trump's approach to Syria encapsulates the tension between his isolationist tendencies and the strategic demands of U.S. foreign policy. While his rhetoric advocates disengagement, the geopolitical realities of the Middle East—particularly concerning Iran, Israel, and control over key resources—indicate that some level of U.S. involvement may be unavoidable. Therefore, as Trump seeks to shape his foreign policy legacy, his administration must reconcile the conflict between the rhetoric and reality of intervention in the Middle East.

IV. Learning from Past Mistakes

The United States' interventions in the Middle East have consistently prioritized short-term ideological or strategic goals over the well-being of local populations, resulting in enduring economic devastation, social fragmentation, political instability, and the rise of extremist organizations. While the focus is often placed on the emergence of terrorist groups or authoritarian regimes, it is crucial to examine the broader societal impacts, including widespread poverty, displacement, and the erosion of state institutions.

This section evaluates the U.S.'s involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran to show how these actions destabilized nations and harmed their populations under the guise of promoting democracy or combating communism. Finally, given the U.S.'s poor track record in the Middle East and its consistent failure to prioritize the well-being of local populations in its intervention decisions, we will examine the implications for U.S. involvement in Syria.

- **1. Iraq: A Cycle of Instability, Terrorism, and Displacement**

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, aimed at toppling Saddam Hussein's regime, demonstrates the dangers of imposing political change without adequate planning for its aftermath. The policy of de-Ba'athification and the disbanding of Iraq's military stripped the country of its administrative and security framework, leaving a vacuum that extremist groups rapidly exploited.

Iraq, once one of the most developed countries in the region, saw its economy collapse under the combined pressure of pre-war sanctions and

post-invasion mismanagement. The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) oversaw widespread corruption (Chandrasekaran), with billions of reconstruction funds disappearing while basic services like water and electricity remained scarce. Iraqis experienced high unemployment and crumbling infrastructure, fueling resentment toward the U.S. occupation. According to journalist Rajiv Chandrasekaran, the CPA's failure to restore essential services led to deep disillusionment, fostering support for insurgencies. The dismantling of Iraq's military left thousands of unemployed, disaffected Sunni men vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups. (Zinn, Cornell International Affairs Review) By 2006, Al-Qaeda in Iraq had become a dominant force, with former Ba'athist officers contributing their military expertise. The 2006 bombing of the Al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, a symbolic attack against Shia Muslims, triggered sectarian violence and deepened the civil war. This cycle of violence laid the groundwork for the emergence of ISIS. Historian Truls Hallberg Tønnessen notes that "former Iraqi officers removed from their positions when the Iraqi army was disbanded in 2003" played pivotal roles in ISIS's rise, demonstrating how U.S. policies directly contributed to the group's creation. Sectarian divides, exacerbated by de-Ba'athification, transformed Iraq into a battlefield of ethnic and religious conflict. Sunni communities, marginalized both politically and economically, retaliated through insurgencies, while Shiite militias conducted retaliatory violence. This instability displaced over 4.7 million Iraqis (UNCHR), creating one of the largest refugee crises in modern history. The resulting power vacuum destabilized Iraq and spilled into neighboring Syria, where ISIS gained a foothold.

The U.S.'s failure to anticipate these cascading consequences revealed a disregard for Iraq's population, prioritizing regime change over sustainable governance. The resulting devastation continues to affect millions of Iraqis, with the country struggling to rebuild its fractured state.

- **2. Afghanistan: The Petri Dish of Extremism**

Afghanistan exemplifies the unintended consequences of U.S. intervention, from Cold War geopolitics to the post-9/11 War on Terror. U.S. support for the Mujahideen during the Soviet invasion (1979–1989) militarized Afghan society and seeded global extremism. To counter the Soviet invasion, the U.S., along with allies like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, armed and funded the Mujahideen, a coalition of tribal, nationalist, and Islamist groups. Billions of dollars in advanced weaponry flowed into Afghanistan, transforming it into a Cold War battleground. This militarization devastated rural infrastructure, turning farmlands into minefields and displacing millions. As Brzezinski, National Security Advisor under President Carter, admitted, the U.S. aimed to turn Afghanistan into "the USSR's Vietnam". (Le Nouvel Observateur) The U.S.'s support for Islamist groups unintentionally created a breeding ground for extremism. Osama bin Laden, a Saudi volunteer in the Mujahideen, leveraged the networks and resources established during the war to form Al-Qaeda. These U.S.-backed militants later directed their ire toward the West, culminating in the 9/11 attacks. Brzezinski's dismissive remark in 1998, "What is more important? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire?" illustrates the short-sightedness of U.S. strategy, which prioritized Cold War victories over long-term stability. Decades of conflict reduced

Afghanistan to one of the poorest countries in the world. By 2001, over half the population lived below the poverty line, with limited access to healthcare, education, or employment. Millions of Afghans remain displaced, with many living in precarious conditions in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran. Women, in particular, suffered severe setbacks, as gains in education and rights were repeatedly reversed by instability and the Taliban's resurgence.

The U.S.'s disengagement following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 left Afghanistan in a state of anarchy. This vacuum allowed the Taliban to rise and later provided a safe haven for Al-Qaeda. Afghanistan's enduring instability is a stark reminder of the long-term consequences of U.S. intervention without sustained support for governance and development.

- **3. Iran: Economic Exploitation and Entrenched Resentment**

The 1953 CIA-led coup in Iran, orchestrated to secure U.S. economic and strategic interests during the Cold War, not only undermined Iran's democratic aspirations but also entrenched political repression and inequality.

The Shah's regime, reinstated by the U.S., became a vehicle for Western economic interests, funneling oil revenues into military expansion and lavish royal projects while neglecting rural development. By the 1970s, despite Iran's oil wealth, over 40% of its population lived in poverty. This economic inequality fueled resentment among marginalized groups, particularly workers and rural communities. The Shah's reliance on SAVAK, a U.S.-backed secret police force, suppressed dissent through torture and intimidation, further delegitimizing his rule. The 1979

Islamic Revolution, which replaced the Shah with a theocratic regime, was both a rejection of foreign interference and a response to decades of authoritarian rule. As historian Ervand Abrahamian observed, the 1953 coup “destroyed liberal and nationalist movements, creating the conditions for a theocratic regime to rise in their place.”

The U.S.'s actions in Iran illustrate the long-term consequences of undermining democracy for strategic gain. The coup not only destabilized Iran but also fostered decades of anti-American sentiment, shaping the region's geopolitics for generations.

- **4. Lessons Learned and Implications for Syria**

The U.S.'s history of intervention in the Middle East underscores the dangers of prioritizing ideological or strategic goals over sustainable development and stability. In Syria, where reconstruction is critical, these lessons must guide a restrained and thoughtful approach.

- 1. Avoiding Power Vacuums:** The U.S. must prioritize rebuilding Syria's governance structures, ensuring local ownership and inclusive participation. Failure to address governance risks repeating the mistakes of Iraq and Afghanistan, where power vacuums enabled extremist groups to thrive.
- 2. Promoting Local Ownership:** Syrians must lead their own reconstruction efforts, supported rather than directed by external powers. Imposing foreign models of governance risks alienating local communities and undermining legitimacy.
- 3. Balancing Engagement with Restraint:** The U.S. must avoid using Syria as a geopolitical battleground. Its role should focus narrowly on humanitarian support and fostering stability.

4. Economic Reconstruction: Reconstruction efforts must focus on rebuilding infrastructure, creating jobs, and addressing the needs of displaced populations. Lessons from Afghanistan show that poorly managed aid can exacerbate inequality and corruption, undermining long-term recovery.

5. Monitoring and Accountability: Any involvement must include rigorous oversight to prevent corruption and ensure that resources benefit the Syrian people. Transparency is essential to build trust and avoid repeating the CPA's failures in Iraq.

The U.S.'s interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran serve as cautionary tales. In Syria, the priority must be addressing the needs of its population and fostering long-term stability, rather than pursuing short-term geopolitical gains. Failure to learn from past mistakes risks perpetuating the Middle East's cycles of conflict and suffering.

V. Different Scenarios

On account of being a global powerhouse, it goes without saying that when it comes to world politics, nothing seems to go on without the approval or otherwise tacit attentiveness of the United States. Choices made at the White House in a near future will affect the ability of Syria's new governing entity to ensure it administers and rebuilds a battered and bridled state. The fall of the Assad regime and its brutal underpinnings should rekindle hope for opportunity alongside the genuine safeguard of the Syrian people. The U.S. must be called upon to play a constructive role in the region and enable a path towards peace and prosperity. The situation on the ground prompts immediate action. Plenty of challenges lie ahead. 13 years of civil

war and dictatorial rule have resulted in a fully isolated country struggling to keep afloat while grasping for economic opportunities despite a decimated private sector activity, stifled services, and absence of any interface to global markets. Syria's outcast status has precluded it from aspects which are vital for its economic recovery (Hall & Hiltermann). The cost of reconstruction stands at some staggering 400\$ billion and there is reason to believe the estimates are rather indulging (Steven & Landis). Access to loans from regional players and possible partners such as the EU and the Gulf's Monarchies has remained a dead end. Likewise, sanctions, which originally targeted the Assad regime and its cronies, have now transferred to the country's new leadership, paralyzing any significant economic improvement (Karam & Fève).

Unlocking aid from the IMF and World Bank is a pressing prerequisite without which Syria has no chance of recovery. A few key data points account for the extent of the damage. Syria's GDP has contracted by over 80 % since 2011. 90% of its population is living under the poverty line and unemployment rates are just as alarming (World Bank). Moreover, speculation over a possible influx of returnees with a yet inestimable share of the 6.2 million displaced Syrians, because of the Civil War, contemplating returning home, threatens to destabilize the country's brittle social fabric. (Global Focus) Basic services are lacking, and it will take time for health care, education and sanitation to be fully, or even partially, operational.

The energy sector is in a similar state of shambles. Once a net energy exporter, Syria now "struggles to meet basic domestic energy needs". Its distribution networks are mostly destroyed, and the U.S. backed SDF controls most of the country's oil and gas resources. Access to electricity is severely limited.

The many hurdles Syria now faces will be compounded, or else alleviated, by U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis the country's new leadership. Prospects of economic recovery, international sanction alleviation and coercive measure reversion, are many of the several aspects which will be shaped by U.S. policy in the region. Securing an enduring peace will be contentious on the country's ability to meet the terms of UNSC Resolution 2254, while setting in motion the unification of Syria's fragmented economic framework and governing entities. Only then will the country be able to credibly signal to the international community its willingness to become a benign regional player. A flare that would upshot sanctions relief and carve a way forward to achieve economic recovery. Should the new Syrian leadership fail to take serious domestic reforms and achieve international support, the country's recovery will be in jeopardy. Unlocking unconditional sanctions relief on several key economic sectors will be the first step that the country's new leadership will seek to attain. Without this, and foreign investment aid, the vision of a new Syria risks being nothing more than a stillborn endeavour. Whether the U.S chooses to commit to an active involvement, disengage or otherwise champion a narrower strategic engagement in Syria, will alter the pace at which the country will recover. It will likewise dictate if it will become a reliable partner for the West and the extent to which change will be made for Syrians and by Syrians.

The U.S. has met the objectives it previously set in Syria. Assad's rule is no more, Iranians and Russian troops have moved out and the Ayatollah can no longer rely on Syria to shuttle arms to its proxies in Lebanon or Gaza. A three-folded evidence that foretells a deadly blow to the "axis of resistance".

Unfolding events now prompt the State, the Pentagon and the White House to redefine the country's strategic imperatives in the region. The U.S.'s troubling interventionist record and its foregrounding of short-term economic gains concealed under the moral high ground of liberal democracy have stroked its credibility and intent to champion long-term stability in the region. To avoid past mistakes, Washington must adopt a sustained strategic approach and opt for one of three scenarios.

- **Scenario 1: Active U.S. involvement**

Should the U.S. decide to become actively involved in Syria it would be playing a risky hand that may only prove fruitful if it displays an undivided commitment to success. Impartial involvement and half-measures would likely increase the risk of strategic imbroglios and worsen a fragile stalemate. If the U.S. does not seek to take the future of Syria in its own hands it must be cautious and aware of the risks of balancing partial strategic commitments on the ground with expectations over the threats and costs of acting on foreign soil.

Inducing intervention, where one's essential national interests are not at stake, is an oftentimes risky gamble that may result in strategic quagmires, ill-defined goals and domestic backlashes. Caution would warn proponents of intervention to circumvent unnecessary entanglements wherever and whenever possible. U.S. presence in Syria accounts for approximately 2000 forces, a fraction of its 614,000 active-duty and reserve military personnel (Steven & Landis). Throughout the civil war these forces were tasked with a number of missions amongst, which to impede Iranian interference in the region, to defeat ISIS and its proxies, to deter attacks on U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) by Turkey and to

cut off Assad's access to Syria's oil fields, most of which are located in rebel strongholds (Sam, "How to Hold Syria Together."). Their mission, as it previously stood, can now be deemed complete. Only remains the important exception to the uncertain fate of Syrian Kurds, whose safeguard seems to remain contingent on American presence. The U.S. cooperation with the SDF to curb and defeat ISIS served as a useful baseline that enabled the establishment of Rojava and Deir ez-Zor governorate.

Two nearly autonomous territories in Northeastern Syria that house most of the country's oil and gas wells, controlled by U.S. forces, and where nearly 20,000 ISIS fighters are jailed (Steven & Landis). Active U.S. involvement will have to provide an answer to the fate of Syrian Kurds in the country to insure ISIS fighters remain behind bars and oil and gas wells start yielding much needed funds to a New Syria. While Shara assured the Kurds that they would not face persecution, HTS's ties to Ankara have fed credible fears that the new leadership would turn a blind eye to a Turkish attempt at removing the SDF. If the U.S. abandons the Kurds it will have to wrestle with the legacy of a permanent moral stain. A strategic mistake that could have a ripple effect and make Washington incur reputational costs that would strain its alliances and impair its ability to make credible commitments to other players. An active U.S. involvement must follow a detailed strategy whose first priority must be to convince the SDF that it is in Syrian Kurds' interest to integrate Syria's new leadership. Securing a unified Syria is the cornerstone upon which ambitious plans for economic recovery, peace and long-term stability may be achieved. For this Washington will have to persuade Ankara to bring to a permanent halt any attempts to o threaten Syrian

Kurds security and tie sanction relief, foreign aid, alongside access to oil-rich areas, to credible assurances of Shara's intent to pursue governance reforms. Avoiding diplomatic knots will require an active and demanding strategic effort.

A further complicated process should the U.S. not take advantage of the opportunity of striving for a large coalition building with NATO and other regional partners. To seize the opportunity provided by a low-cost engagement – one that would not entail increasing military presence in Syria – the U.S. will have to implement the teachings of its past mistakes in Iraq and Afghanistan dodging overreach and dependency while relying on dialogue and concerted diplomatic efforts to enable a stable future for Syrians.

Policymakers must not overlook their goal of creating the conditions for an orderly U.S. withdrawal from Syria once they have met their renewed strategic imperatives. While active U.S. involvement in Syria equates to important challenges, a full disengagement may come at far greater costs. Withdrawing and overlooking the unfolding events in Syria will likely ignite a slow-burning candle wick at the tip of a dynamite stick.

• **Scenario 2: Full U.S. Disengagement**

The fate of the Syrian Kurds alone should rule out any full U.S. disengagement in Syria. Removal of U.S. forces might have dangerous repercussions while Kurds' fate remains unresolved.

Likewise, ruling out involvement in Syria and opting for a hasten retreat would amount to forfeiting substantial leverage to influence the country's future. A costly agenda if the U.S. wants the new Syria to have any chance of being capable of easing the current

humanitarian crisis, unify the country and kickstart the process of reconstruction. Total disengagement will be counterproductive in the greater pursuit of long-term stability in the region. Although it is urgent for the U.S. to redefine the mandate and rules of engagement of its forces in Syria, it must rule out withdrawal if it wishes to constrain power vacuum risks. Shifting the character of the deployed garrison to an observer role by preferably converting it into a multilateral peacekeeping force, may allow the U.S. to avoid power vacuum risks while leveraging its presence and control over the country's resources to strike a deal for Kurds' safeguard, reconstruction, ISIS curtailing, and its departure. If it fails to act accordingly, and leaves without proper notice, the U.S. will embolden risks over the resurgence of ISIS and Iranian proxies. ISIS upturn is a worrying current trend. Full disengagement in Syria would occasion ISIS to flourish rather than fester. The terrorist organization's recent resurgence stems from four main reasons. First, "the breakdown in governance in the Sahel has led to turmoil and insecurity that's created space for bad actors, including ISIS and Al-Qaeda." (Schmitt & Maclean) Power vacuums in the Sahel Region have been filled by Islamist groups' who now serve as a rear base for metastasized terrorist cells in the MENA region. Second, U.S. departure from Afghanistan has released pressure on ISIS-K, an ISIS chapter in the country which has been expanding beyond its borders. Third, ISIS has reasserted itself in some parts of Iraq and Syria. A tendency that might accentuate as the terrorist group takes advantage of instability caused by the crackdown on Assad's regime and the establishment of a new leadership, to move its pons (Lister).

Lastly, Israel's war in Gaza has fostered copycat terrorism and caused terrorist ranks to swell. ISIS remains a credible threat and requires sustained countermeasures to remain disempowered. An incompatible outcome should the U.S. opt for disengagement in the region. Additionally, reducing the U.S. footprint in Syria, may result in further challenges stemming from a prolonged situation of a failed state. Were things to worsen in Syria and ethnic tension to be revived under the country's new leadership, refugee flows would increase, exerting pressure on Jordan, Israel and ultimately the U.S's NATO partners. A situation that could strain the U.S's relations with some of its partners, as they would embrace buck passing and deem the situation to have issued from a mishandled withdrawal of its forces. In time, the consequences of disengagement would preclude any benefits to Washington's deep-rooted goals in the Middle East. A failed Syrian state would amplify regional instability (Steven & Landis) and undermine U.S influence, while emboldening threats for other players.

- **Scenario 3: Limited and Strategic Engagement**

With disengagement ruled out under the impetus of its substantial shortcomings, limited engagement appears to allow the U.S. to safeguard its interests in Syria while enabling Damascus to hope for prosperity. By seeking to act as a mediator supporting Syrian-led rebuilding efforts, the U.S. has an opportunity to facilitate the coming about of a unitary country able to deliver on its commitments to regional partners, uphold human rights, and take a shot at lasting regional stability. The alternative would be a fragmented and contentious Syria that would eventually compel a costly U.S. military presence in

the Middle East, threaten peace in Iraq, foster waves of emigration and be an overarching synonym of destabilization.

Avoiding this scenario will entail giving Syria's new leadership a chance. Shara's should at least be given the benefit of the doubt. Syria's need for foreign aid, sanction relief, investment, and immediate economic rewards derived from a permitted access to its oil fields, remains contingent on economic and governance reforms. Its new leadership is aware of this and will therefore be encouraged to pursue reform for the sake of recovery. Besides, Shara has on several occasions steered away from an Islamist agenda and instead embraced a Syrian nationalist one. He has also "disavowed previous jihadist ambitions to win the military and financial support of Turkey and Qatar, which enabled HTS's eventual march to Damascus", sought to ensure religious plurality showcasing his commitment to safeguard Christian and Druze communities in Syria, and embraced women's education, signalling to Western states an open door to humanitarian assistance (Hall & Hiltermann). Only time will tell whether Shara is serious about upholding his commitments or not. In the meantime, the U.S should leverage its ability to act as a powerful spokesperson, that can speed the process towards recovery in Syria by unlocking a number of benefits sought after by its new leadership, to avoid a regional conflagration over competing spheres of influence.

Coalition building, diplomatic efforts and avoiding at all costs surging American military presence on site, will be paramount elements of a successful strategy in Syria. Only then will the U.S. be able to sustain pressure on an agenda that seeks to incentivize reform and foster confidence in peace-building. A path towards

guaranteeing that each Syrian holds its country's fate in the palm of its hands. One that now requires the work of all diplomacy, nothing but diplomacy.

VI. Recommendations

The fall of Assad's regime marks a pivotal moment in the Middle East, offering both challenges and opportunities for U.S. foreign policy. While the risks of engagement are significant, the costs of inaction are far greater. By adopting a measured approach that combines limited involvement with robust multilateral efforts, the U.S. can avoid the pitfalls of past interventions and contribute to a more stable and inclusive regional order. As Friedman (2024) cautioned, "Whatever happens in Syria will not stay in Syria." The stakes are high, and the U.S. must act with both caution and resolve to ensure that its actions align with long-term goals for peace and stability. There are several ways the U.S. can engage with Syria – here are some of our recommendations:

1. Support Syrian-Led Governance and Local Empowerment

- **Encourage decentralized governance:** The U.S. should work with Syrian leaders to establish decentralized governance models that empower local administrations in regions controlled by various factions, including HTS. These models should prioritize inclusivity by integrating representatives from diverse ethnic, religious, and political backgrounds to prevent sectarian divides. Careful oversight is essential to ensure that extremist groups do not dominate governance structures, while maintaining a Syrian-led process to foster legitimacy and stability.

- **Lift targeted sanctions strategically:** Engage in diplomatic negotiations to lift sanctions that hinder Syria's reconstruction efforts, particularly in critical sectors like healthcare, education, and energy. These measures would encourage international investment and economic recovery while simultaneously maintaining pressure on individuals and entities that undermine stability. This approach must be paired with monitoring mechanisms to ensure resources are directed toward rebuilding efforts and not misappropriated by extremist groups or corrupt actors.
- **Foster international coalitions:** Collaborate with NATO, the EU, and GCC nations to strengthen Syrian institutions and ensure shared responsibility for reconstruction and stability. These coalitions should focus on building the capacity of local governance, providing technical assistance, and coordinating international efforts to minimize duplication and inefficiencies.

2. Promote Economic Recovery and Infrastructure Development

- **Unlock international financial aid:** Advocate for the involvement of the IMF and World Bank in funding large-scale infrastructure projects to rebuild Syria's transportation networks, energy systems, and public services. This financial assistance should be conditional on transparency and accountability measures to prevent misuse of funds, with a focus on creating sustainable economic growth and addressing immediate humanitarian needs.

- **Encourage private investment:** Develop incentives for private-sector firms to invest in key industries such as renewable energy, agriculture, and manufacturing. These investments should be supported by guarantees, tax benefits, or public-private partnerships to mitigate risks for investors. This strategy not only fosters job creation but also reduces Syria's dependence on external aid and promotes long-term economic resilience.
- **Coordinate resource management:** Facilitate agreements between Syrian authorities and neighboring countries on the efficient management of critical resources, such as oil, water, and agricultural land. A well-coordinated approach can ensure equitable distribution of resources, reduce tensions between factions, and foster collaboration among regional stakeholders, including Kurdish groups and Arab-majority areas.

3. Strengthen Partnerships and Alliances

- **Engage Turkey as a critical partner:** Develop a mutually acceptable framework with Turkey to address its security concerns while supporting the integration of Kurdish groups into Syria's governance structures. This could include security guarantees for Turkey's border regions and assurances that Kurdish-led territories will not serve as a base for hostile activities. Facilitating this dialogue is crucial for regional stability and preventing further conflict between Turkey and Kurdish factions.
- **Deepen regional alliances:** Strengthen partnerships with key regional players such as Jordan and Israel to address shared security threats, including the resurgence of ISIS and

Iranian proxy networks. These alliances can provide critical intelligence-sharing opportunities and coordinated strategies to maintain stability in the region. Additionally, the U.S. should work with Gulf states to secure funding and logistical support for reconstruction efforts, ensuring these align with shared strategic interests.

- **Leverage NATO and EU support:** Build a coalition of NATO and EU countries to share the financial and logistical burden of reconstruction. This collaboration should focus on rebuilding critical infrastructure, strengthening healthcare and education systems, and creating robust public health initiatives. A coordinated approach will enhance the effectiveness of rebuilding efforts and reinforce the U.S.'s commitment to multilateralism.

4. Measured Diplomatic Involvement

- **Indirectly influence HTS:** While direct engagement with HTS remains untenable due to its designation as a terrorist organization, the U.S. can work through intermediaries to pressure the group into adopting international norms. This could include encouraging HTS to demonstrate tangible reforms, such as commitments to human rights and democratic governance, as a condition for future reconsideration of its status. This indirect approach allows the U.S. to influence outcomes without legitimizing extremist factions.
- **Facilitate regional dialogue:** Use diplomatic channels to mediate negotiations between Syria's new leadership, Kurdish factions, and neighboring countries like Turkey. These discussions should focus on resolving territorial disputes, protecting minority rights, and reducing

ethnic tensions. By fostering agreements that prioritize territorial sovereignty and inclusivity, the U.S. can help lay the groundwork for a stable post-conflict Syria.

- **Enforce accountability mechanisms:** Advocate for the establishment of independent monitoring bodies to oversee human rights compliance and anti-corruption efforts in reconstruction projects. These bodies could be supported by international organizations and equipped with the authority to investigate and address abuses, ensuring that aid is used responsibly and effectively.

5. Prioritize Security and Counterterrorism Measures

- **Maintain a strategic military presence:** Retain a limited U.S. military presence in Syria to deter ISIS resurgence, protect Kurdish allies, and secure key infrastructure such as oil fields. This force should focus on intelligence-gathering, counterterrorism operations, and supporting local security forces. Transition these efforts into multilateral peacekeeping operations led by regional and international partners to ensure long-term stability.
- **Enhance intelligence cooperation:** Strengthen partnerships with regional actors, including Turkey, Jordan, and Israel, to monitor extremist activities and disrupt terrorist networks. This cooperation should involve sharing intelligence, conducting joint operations, and coordinating border security measures to prevent the exploitation of power vacuums by extremist groups.
- **Address refugee reintegration:** Partner with humanitarian organizations to develop

comprehensive programs for the safe return and integration of displaced Syrians. These programs should prioritize access to housing, education, and employment opportunities to stabilize communities and reduce the strain on neighboring countries hosting large refugee populations.

6. Adopt a Balanced Strategic Narrative

- **Avoid interventionist overreach:** Clearly define the limits of U.S. involvement in Syria to prevent repeating the mistakes of Iraq and Afghanistan. The focus should be on enabling Syrians to take the lead in their recovery while providing targeted support in areas such as governance, security, and humanitarian aid.
- **Rebuild U.S. credibility:** Use Syria as an opportunity to demonstrate the U.S.'s commitment to multilateralism and long-term stability. Transparent and cooperative efforts will help rebuild international trust in U.S. foreign policy and showcase a pragmatic approach to complex global challenges.
- **Counter adversarial influence:** Develop strategies to mitigate the influence of adversaries like Russia and Iran in Syria by offering viable alternatives through U.S.-led initiatives. These efforts should focus on promoting stability, fostering economic development, and creating a regional order that aligns with U.S. interests.

7. Long-Term Commitment to Syrian-Led Rebuilding

- **Foster local governance initiatives:** Support the development of inclusive governance structures that encourage accountability and representation at the local level. This approach should emphasize

the organic growth of governance systems that reflect the needs and aspirations of Syrian communities.

- **Ensure effective aid distribution:** Direct international aid toward communities in greatest need, ensuring that resources are not diverted by extremist factions or corrupt officials. This includes implementing stringent monitoring systems and working with trusted local partners to deliver aid effectively.
- **Promote pluralistic development:** Facilitate dialogue among diverse factions to create a sustainable, inclusive political system. By prioritizing reconciliation and collaboration, the U.S. can help Syrians build a society that values diversity and respects human rights.

VII. Conclusion

The collapse of Assad's regime and the rise of HTS present Syria at a crossroads, demanding a decisive U.S. strategy. This report emphasizes the need for a balanced approach—avoiding isolation while refraining from overreach. By promoting Syrian-led governance, economic recovery, and strategic engagement, the U.S. can transform instability into an opportunity for lasting peace. The stakes are clear: a unified, stable Syria aligns with global security interests and demonstrates the power of thoughtful diplomacy. As we move forward, the U.S. must lead with resolve, leveraging lessons from the past to craft a future defined by resilience and cooperation.

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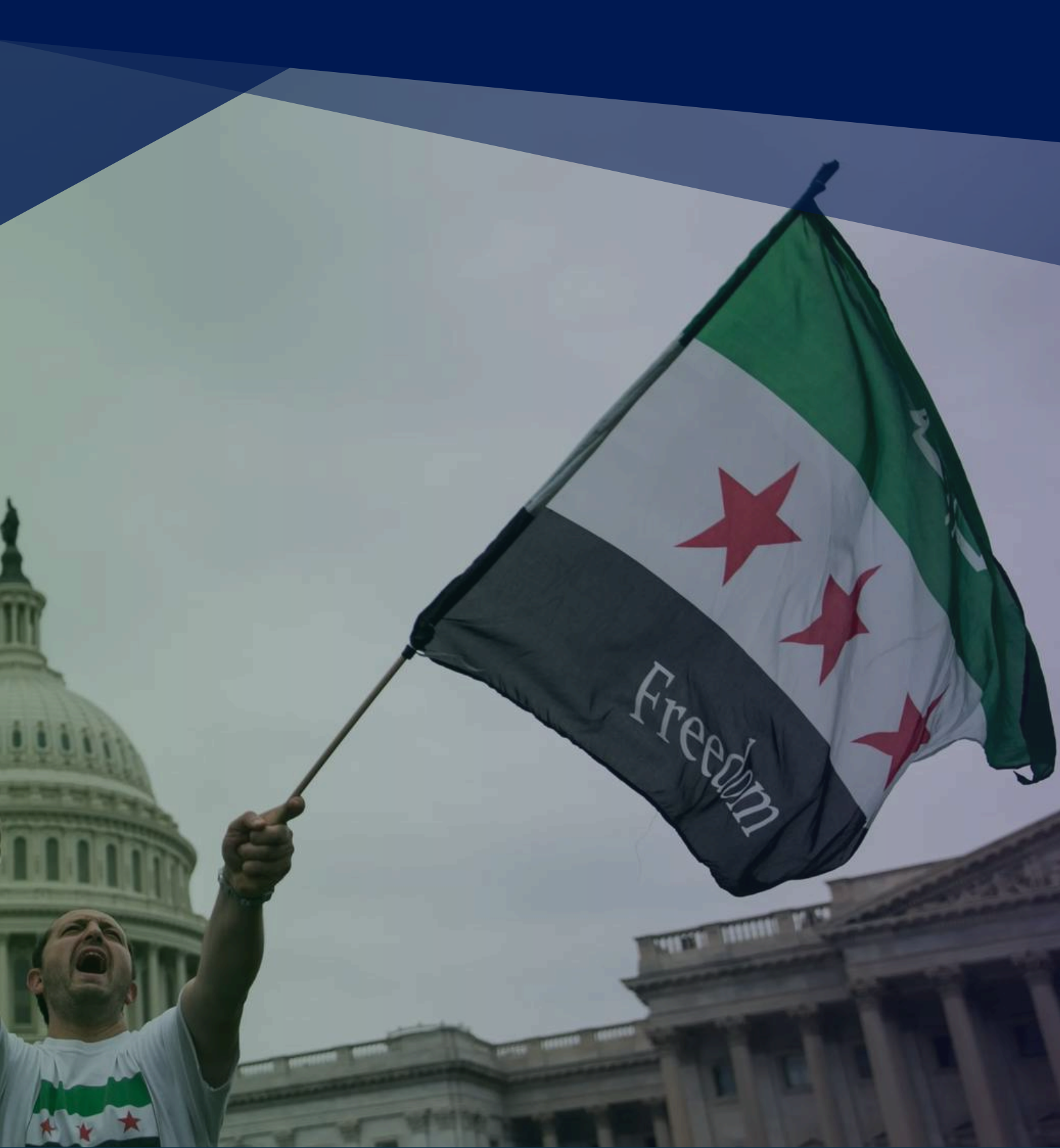


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