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The shocking, sudden fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime at the hands of the Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has prompted jubilation among Syrians who suffered 13 years of civil war and decades more of oppressive rule. But as a new government takes shape in Damascus, Syrians and foreign observers alike worry about how inclusive, representative, and Islamist it may be. The country's de facto leader, Ahmed al-Shara, is a former al Qaeda militant, although he claims to have renounced terrorism. HTS itself is designated a terrorist organization by the United States. And there are fears that unresolved tensions between Syria's ethnic and religious groups could impede Shara's efforts to unify the country and consolidate his rule.

Choices that the United States makes in the near term will affect the ability of the new regime to extend its writ throughout Syria and rebuild.

As Washington considers how to respond to the change in government, there are reasons to give Syria's new leaders the benefit of the doubt. One is the dire state of the war-torn country: more than 70 percent of Syrians are living below the poverty line, Syria's GDP has fallen from $60 billion to $10 billion since 2011, and the cost of reconstruction is projected at $400 billion. Shara has also demonstrated his ability to adapt to new circumstances. After capturing Syria's Idlib Province in 2017, he proceeded to build a proto-state from scratch, expelling many foreign fighters from HTS to embrace a Syrian nationalist agenda. He disavowed previous jihadist ambitions to win the military and financial support of Turkey and Qatar, which enabled HTS's eventual march to Damascus. Shara also reached out to the province's small Christian and Druze communities and embraced women's education, opening the door for humanitarian assistance from Western states and nongovernmental organizations.

Perhaps most pertinent for Washington, the United States' objectives in Syria have largely been met. Assad's rule is finished. The Iranian and Russian troops that supported the regime have withdrawn from the country. For Iran, in particular, the loss of a friendly government in Syria is a significant blow: Tehran has lost its main route for shuttling arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and thus its path to rebuild its severely weakened "axis of resistance." U.S. forces and the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish militant group based in northern Syria, have also badly damaged the Islamic State, known as ISIS. Washington no longer has a pressing need to maintain its military presence or the crushing sanctions that were initially designed to incapacitate the Assad regime.

The best outcome for Syria and its neighbors is a unitary, cohesive state that can negotiate and deliver on diplomatic agreements that foster long-run regional stability. The alternative is a weak, divided, and conflict-prone Syria—an outcome that would require a longer-term and increasingly costly U.S. military presence in the region, create problems for Turkey (a U.S. ally), jeopardize a delicate rebuilding process in Iraq, and generate another wave of Syrian emigration. To avoid that scenario, the United

States should give the new Syrian government a chance. It should withdraw its troops from the country, allowing Damascus to regain control of the agricultural and oil-rich provinces in Syria's northeast. First, however, Washington needs assurances that Shara and HTS have the capacity and the will to keep ISIS in check and that the new government will guarantee the safety and inclusion of Syria's Kurds, if necessary distancing itself from Ankara to do so. Using the leverage at its disposal—including a commitment to lift sanctions, which will permit foreign investment in Syria and give the government access to the international banking system—Washington can convince Shara's government that cooperating to facilitate a U.S. military departure is in its best interest.

BRING THEM HOME

The United States should plan to remove the approximately 2,000 forces currently deployed in Syria. U.S. troops served several purposes while the country was mired in civil war: they interdicted Iran's access to Syrian territory to resupply Hezbollah in Lebanon, cut off the Assad regime's access to oil fields in rebel-held territory, deterred attacks on the SDF by Turkey or its proxies, and worked with the SDF to defeat ISIS, a mission that the Pentagon reaffirmed in December 2024. These efforts also helped establish Rojava, a quasi-independent state in the Kurdish region in Syria's northeast. This region, along with the Deir ez-Zor governorate, holds most of Syria's oil and gas wells, which U.S. forces have controlled since 2019. It is also where some 20,000 ISIS fighters remain jailed inside detention centers, along with 60,000 women and children. Most U.S. objectives in Syria have been accomplished: Iran's access to Lebanon through Syria has been stanched, Assad is out, and the ISIS caliphate has been crushed. Only the fate of Syrian Kurds remains unresolved.

Withdrawing American forces from Syria would do little to change Washington's overall military posture, as the current deployment to Syria represents an infinitesimal fraction of the United States' 614,000 active-duty and reserve soldiers and marines. If Washington prefers to see Syria weak and divided, a garrison of 2,000 troops is arguably an economical approach to keeping it that way. But if it wants the new Syrian

government to be capable of alleviating the current humanitarian crisis, controlling the country's borders, and beginning the process of reconstruction, maintaining a U.S. troop presence in defiance of the wishes of that government will be counterproductive. Maintaining the status quo could be far more dangerous than withdrawal. If the new government were to challenge the continued U.S. presence, American troops would be killed, and Washington could be forced to commit to a larger deployment. Cornered Syrian authorities might seek the help of Turkey or even Russia, and escalation would follow. But if Washington instead makes a deal that includes the departure of U.S. troops, it could win concessions from the new Syrian government that advance U.S. military objectives, including the security of Syrian Kurds.

U.S. withdrawal could help Syria's economic recovery, as well. This process would entail handing control of oil fields to the new Syrian government, which could ramp up output and reap immediate economic rewards. The United States could enlist Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the effort to increase oil production, a step that would both redound to Washington's benefit in future negotiations and transform the Syrian economy by providing steady employment in the oil sector and other industries that depend on it, which could entice refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey to return to their homeland.

A DIPLOMATIC KNOT

The fate of the Syrian Kurds is a potential sticking point in a negotiated departure of U.S. forces. After the Assad regime fell, the Kurdish administration in northeastern Syria swiftly raised the opposition flag, and Shara assured the Kurds that they were an essential part of the country and would not face persecution. Yet given HTS's ties to Ankara and the persistent animosity between Syrian Arabs and Kurds, there are credible fears that the new Syrian leadership might permit a concerted Turkish attempt to suppress the SDF and ravage Kurdish areas. Defenders of the SDF have argued that U.S. abandonment of the Kurds in Syria would be not only an indelible moral stain on Washington's reputation but also a strategic mistake that would weaken allies' belief in U.S. reliability,

encourage Turkey's regional ambitions, and embolden the remnants of ISIS.

The United States must convince the SDF that the best bet for Syrian Kurds is to integrate with the new government, as Shara has urged. U.S. policymakers will also need to persuade Ankara to accept this outcome. Turkey considers the SDF a terrorist organization aligned with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, a militant group that has been fighting Turkey for decades and that both Turkey and the United States have declared a terrorist organization. Ankara maintains that militants affiliated with both groups in northern Syria pose a threat to its security, and those concerns cannot be disregarded: Turkey is a NATO ally and therefore has a claim on U.S. support.

For years, U.S. leaders have struggled to keep the peace between the Syrian Kurds, who have been critical allies in the fight against ISIS, and Turkey. In his first term, President Donald Trump initially promised Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan a free hand to subjugate the Kurdish region of northern Syria before reversing his decision and reaffirming the U.S. commitment to Kurdish autonomy. In 2020, Trump sought to remove U.S. troops from Syria but failed in the face of pushback from the Pentagon and members of Congress. In December 2024, after the HTS push into Aleppo, the president-elect wrote on Truth Social: "The United States should have nothing to do with [Syria.] This is not our fight." With the civil war now concluded, Trump would presumably favor drawing down U.S. forces in the country.

Any U.S. troop withdrawal must include a plan to leverage Syrian Kurds' territorial gains and U.S. control over oil fields in exchange for the new regime's promise to protect the country's Kurds from Turkey's aggression. A deal might stipulate, for example, that the SDF would retreat to Kurdish population centers and cooperate with the yet-to-be-constituted Syrian national army in Kurdish areas, an important signal of good faith. And the United States could condition the return of Syria's oil fields to the government in Damascus on Shara's demonstration of his willingness to protect Syrian Kurds from Turkish attacks and his ability to

defend the fields from ISIS attacks. Ankara, too, would have to be assured that the new Syrian government, potentially with the assistance of a multilateral monitoring and verification effort, could prevent militants in its territory from threatening Turkey.

WORTH THE RISK

Creating the conditions for a smooth U.S. withdrawal from Syria is no small task. Not only would Shara and HTS need to take over the military campaign against ISIS and reach a resolution with the Syrian Kurds, but the new government might also need to eschew the overtures of powerful neighbors, as well as the demands of extremist factions within Syria, to meet Washington's requirements. To facilitate a workable arrangement, the United States will need to provide Damascus with relief from the sanctions on the Assad dynasty that have been in place since 1979. Economic measures meant to squeeze the dictator have punished ordinary Syrians, who lack access to electricity and clean water, a transportation network, health care, education, a functioning agricultural sector, and timely humanitarian aid. As long as sanctions remain in place, economic development and employment will remain stunted, decreasing the chances of success for Syria's new government and increasing the likelihood of violent disorder, foreign intervention, and additional emigration.

Sanctions against the Assad regime are separate from those targeting HTS and Shara, which are based on the group's terrorist designation. Washington should ignore the inevitable drumbeat from advocates of economic pressure to keep these sanctions in place or to levy new ones, and waive the current restrictions instead. In the meantime, to guard against possible human and civil rights abuses by the new government, the United States should work with other countries in the region that may hold sway with Syria's leaders to ensure that the regime understands the crucial importance of quelling retributive violence and respecting the rights of secular and minority Syrians. Recognizing that some level of turmoil is inevitable while the government consolidates its rule, the United States, in the absence of egregious atrocities, should grant a six-

month grace period in which it refrains from reinstituting old sanctions or imposing new ones.

The United States has considerable leverage over the main actors in the new Syria. Shara understands how useful U.S. support would be to legitimize his rule, to secure the resources necessary for stabilization and reconstruction, and to help Damascus rebuff other countries that may try to pursue their own interests in Syria. With the United States working against Syria's government, the country would be vulnerable to military pressure from Turkey and Israel, lack access to domestically produced oil, struggle to arm and feed a professional military, and face a separatist Kurdish region. Turkey, for its part, understands that if U.S. forces stay in Syria, Ankara's relationship with Washington will remain strained, and de facto Syrian Kurdish autonomy will continue to frustrate Turkish security goals. As for the Syrian Kurds, the ball is in the United States' court, but Washington must make clear that its goal is to leave the Kurdish region under the authority of a central government in Damascus that respects the rights and safety of its residents.

Even if Washington is able to win the cooperation of Syria's new leaders, protect Syrian Kurds without drawing the ire of Ankara, and keep ISIS disempowered, all while reducing the U.S. footprint in Syria, it still may not be enough to avert a regional conflagration. Israel and Turkey both hope to carve out spheres of influence in Syria. In the chaos of the past few weeks, the Israeli military has already seized a swath of territory on the Syrian side of a 1973 cease-fire line. Turkey, meanwhile, has taken control of a long buffer zone on the Syrian side of the countries' shared border. The context for these moves is troubling: in September, Erdogan urged the UN General Assembly to authorize the use of force against Israel because of its conduct in Gaza. Should the new Syrian authorities give Turkey access to military bases in the country—especially those between Damascus and the Golan Heights, a move Israel would regard as threatening because of the area's proximity to Israeli forces and territory—a clash between Israel and Turkey would be a serious possibility.

But by negotiating the terms that would enable a U.S. military withdrawal from Syria, Washington can avoid another calamitous outcome: a continued U.S. troop presence combined with a lack of measures to help stabilize the new Syrian government could lead to an increasingly costly U.S. mission in a country that is not at the center of Washington's global strategic concerns. Withdrawal could relieve the United States of a secondary security responsibility; empower the new Syrian government to stave off intervention by Iran, Turkey, or even Russia on its own; and keep in place the formal and informal arrangements that have maintained peace between Israel and Syria for decades. Handing the reins of oil production over to Damascus could also help the new government manage an economy that can absorb a substantial number of returning refugees. Trusting a regime with a limited track record is a gamble. But should Washington's bet not pay off, the result—a Syria in which the United States has few contacts and little influence—would be a return to the status quo ante, with the United States hardly worse off than it is now. And after more than a decade of disorder—and untold levels of suffering by Syrian civilians—the upside is worth the risk.