

Engaging With a New Syria

As Syria embarks on a new chapter following the end of the Assad regime, Canada reaffirms its commitment to peace, stability, inclusive governance, and reducing the global refugee crisis. This report will outline how Canada should engage with the new interim government led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The situation in Syria has many implications for Canada's foreign and security policy including, but not limited to, the potential for the resurgence of violent extremist groups, the resettlement of refugees, and preventing any further human rights infringements.

Canada faces a complex decision in navigating the evolving situation in Syria, balancing its values of human rights and global mediation with its own security and interests. While the fall of Assad aligns with Canada's goals, the rise of HTS to leadership poses its own challenges due to its historical affiliation with Al-Qaeda and ISIS. A multilateral, strategic approach, alongside allied support and donor commitments, offers the best path to ensure a peaceful Syrian-led transition without conflict.

Considering the current situation and Canada's strategic interests, I recommend that the Government of Canada increase its intelligence collaboration in the region and develop clear policies for repatriation and rehabilitation of Canadian foreign fighters in the region. Canada's strategies rely on its cooperation with its global and regional allies. Later in the report, I build on the European Union's (EU) and United Kingdom's strategies at the Annual Syria Pledge conference in March 2025. I also dive deeper into Canada's cooperation strategies with its allies in the region, primarily Jordan and Lebanon. Finally, I consider NATO's approach and Canada's role in Syria. I further suggest the importance of supporting human rights efforts in the region. Finally, I advise the government to commit to diplomatic engagement with the interim government for a peaceful transition. These recommendations aim to foster stability, support democratic governance, and promote human rights in the region.

Canada's Interests in the Region

As a specialist in Middle Eastern affairs, Professor [Thomas Juneau](#) claimed that Canada had not done enough ten years ago in Syria. Those words are still true today. At the centre of the policy at the time was that no belligerent party winning would be in the interest of Canada's security and prosperity. Instead, Canada's containment policy centred around the need to [“build the capacities of vulnerable regional partners; to support international counter-proliferation initiatives; and contribute to humanitarian efforts.”](#)

[Canada's current strategy for Syria](#) is part of its whole-of-government strategy for the Middle East. Having invested over \$4 billion between 2016-2022 to respond to the ongoing crisis in Iraq and Syria, Ottawa has pursued four main strategic objectives. One has been to provide gender-responsive, needs-based humanitarian assistance to crisis-affected populations. Canada has cooperated with UN agencies, non-governmental organizations, and the

International Red Cross/Crescent Movement to help vulnerable individuals. The second has been to help communities build up their resilience in the face of protracted conflict. In Syria, Canada has contributed to livelihoods programming and ensuring the self-reliance and autonomy of female-headed households, built the capacity of women's organizations, and raised awareness of affected communities. The third has involved supporting efforts on accountability related to war crimes, genocide, crimes against humanity and allegations of chemical weapons use. Ottawa's commitment to transitional justice initiatives seeks to hold all parties of the conflict accountable for building civil society and peacebuilding initiatives while supporting the political participation of women. Fourth, and finally, Canada has supported those diplomatic initiatives that contribute to a sustainable political resolution of the conflict. Canada's commitment to a negotiated solution by working with allies, like-minded countries, and the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria. Ottawa has reaffirmed its commitment to improved humanitarian access to civilians, a ceasefire, and respect for human rights law and international humanitarian laws.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its consolidation of power

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is a coalition of Sunni Islamist insurgents based in northern Syria. It evolved from Jabhat al-Nusra, which was al-Qaeda's former branch in Syria. [HTS was formed in 2017 when the Nusrah Front](#) merged with other anti-regime groups in northwestern Syria. The group primarily focused on attacks against the Assad regime and sought to replace it. However, the group's focus has shifted to preserve the status quo by [ending the conflict, solidifying its governance of its controlled areas, and gaining international recognition](#). The group has lost support from various Salafi-jihadists due to their prioritization of [governance and perceived abandonment of "jihad"](#).

HTS is the largest fighting group of [Operation Deterrence of Aggression in Syria](#), the umbrella group formed to coordinate military operations in opposition to the Assad regime. They were formerly known as the Jabhat al-Nusra. At the start of the Arab Spring in 2011, it was formed by ISIS, which it split from to declare allegiance to al-Qaeda. The group had an estimated [10,000 to 30,000 fighters](#) before it severed ties with in 2017. The group subsequently changed its name to HTS and [set up a new organization with several other similar groups](#).

HTS is made up of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (the largest faction in the group), Liwa al-Haqq, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, and Jaysh al-Sunna. [Military analyst](#) Michael Clarke notes that at best, "we can hope for from HTS would be some kind of 'benevolent dictatorship' with a tolerance of Syria's patchwork of different peoples." Doubts linger as to whether HTS had completely renounced al-Qaeda. However, al-Sharaa's comments to ["defend the oppressed" and promises of punishment and accountability "even among those close to us"](#) seem to give some hope.

[HTS also operates and is allied with various groups under Operation Deterrence of Aggression](#). First is the Tavhid va Jihod (KTJ), whose previous leader was removed by HTS for supporting al-Qaeda in the region. The group is made up of 400-500 fighters specialising in

sniping operations, direct assaults, and operations behind enemy lines. The second group is Xhemeti Alban (Albanian Tactical), which is composed of 50-100 Albanian fighters from Kosovo, Macedonia, Albania, and southern Serbia. Mujahdin Ghuroba Division joined HTS in 2017 and was integrated as the Omar bin al-Khattab brigade of 200-400 Uzbek, Tajik, and Uyghur fighters. The Islamic Party of Turkestan (TIP) established a faction called “TIP in the Sham” composed of 1000 and 2000 Uyghur fighters. The Yurtugh Tactical joined HTS in 2024 to fight a regime supported by a Chinese oppressor and to support Turkestani groups. Jaysh al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (LMA) comprises 400-500 Chechens, Tajiks, Dagestani, Azerbaijanis, Kazakh, and Ukrainian fighters and joined HTS in January 2017. LMA offer military operational support as well as media and propaganda arms. Ajnad al-Kavkaz is an exclusively Chechen group that operates in northern Syria. This group is somewhat independent of HTS and has been involved in the [Ukrainian defence against Russia](#).

On December 8th, 2024, the rebel army, led by HTS, [took over Damascus](#) and [Ahmed al-Sharaa](#), previously known as Abu Mohammad al-Julani, became interim president of the Syrian Arab Republic. Al-Sharaa’s foreign policy has taken a shift from Assad’s anti-American, pro-Russia stance; the interim government has announced that it aims to restore ties with the United States and believes [‘that President Trump seeks peace in the area’](#). Al-Sharaa visited the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman [‘to support the security and stability of sisterly Syria’](#) and [‘to strengthen bilateral relations.’](#) He followed this meeting with another [trip to Türkiye](#) to resolve the Kurdish conflict peacefully. With the assignment of [Mohammed Terko](#), a Syrian Kurd, as the minister of education, the [ceasefire between the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces \(SDF\) and HTS](#), and the [public celebrations of Newroz](#), we are seeing signs of Syria’s new political horizon. These events represent a shift to the suppression Syrian Kurds previously experienced [under Bashar al-Assad’s regime](#).

Syria is in a period of political and social transition, and HTS faces various security threats within Syria’s borders that must be overcome before the country can achieve stability. In his first address as president, al-Sharaa vowed to [“form a broad transitional government, representative of Syria’s diversity.”](#) Putting into consideration the example of the Taliban’s authoritarian governance after the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, caution is warranted. Ezzedine al-Rayeq, a Damascus-based lawyer, stated that although he wished a more democratic approach had been used to appoint the interim president, this was the only [‘realistic and pragmatic’](#) way forward. Professor Ziad Majed, an expert on the Middle East at the American University of Paris, warns about the importance of avoiding any acts of revenge against the [Alawite community and other supporters of the Assad regime](#).

In an attempt to encourage patience and to signal his commitment to democracy, al-Sharaa announced his plans for elections in Syria in five years. Superficially, those plans indicate a positive and democratic turn for Syria. Alas, many internal and external threats must be confronted for a peaceful transition. One worries, however, that the rhetoric coming from

Damascus only serves to appease Western governments and to continue taking up an anti-Assad stance to deflect attention away from any authoritarian processes within.

Old Wounds: Syria's Historical Divisions and Threats

The various threats within and beyond Syria's borders are ubiquitous. Internally, al-Sharaa must deal with trying to resolve conflicts that have existed long before the Arab Spring in 2011 that continue to threaten the safety and security of the region. The [risk of religious violence between Sunnis and Alawites](#) persists in Syria and if the interim government does not resolve these issues peacefully the potential for conflict increases. When a [car bomb killed 19-20 people](#) on the 3rd of February, 2025, it posed another security threat for al-Sharaa to address. The trauma and wounds cut during the civil war remain deep when a [Syrian security patrol was attacked by al-Assad loyalists](#) on 6th of March, 2025, leading to a clash estimated to have [killed more than 1,000 people in two days](#). The removal of Assad was only the first step on a long road to a safe and secure Syria.

[External threats to Syria's security and the potential for spillover into the rest of the Middle East and North Africa](#) remain a concern for all parties involved. The clashes between Kurdish troops and Turkish militant groups continue to be a cause of concern for as [Ankara wants to closely monitor any agreements between the HTS and the Kurdish armed groups](#). Despite Türkiye extending its role to maintaining the diplomatic channels between Syria and NATO members, Türkiye [has its own interests in maintaining a relationship with Russia and Iran](#).

Al-Sharaa's government must also deal with calls for [Shia intervention](#) by former Prime Minister of Iraq, Nouri al-Maliki. With the HTS's members and supporters being Sunni, the discourse emerging from Shia neighbours could trigger conflict and civil unrest. The tension between Sunni groups and the other military factions continue to grow as al-Sharaa [denounced Iran](#) and labelled them a regional threat. Furthermore, as [Israeli outposts are being built in Syria](#) the growing threats of conflict in the Golan heights and fears of an [Israeli land grab continue](#). Israel's assertive stance despite [al-Assad's presidency marked relative border stability](#), his removal has resulted in airstrikes in Syria due to Israel's concerns over a political void in Syria.

What meaning for Canada and what could be done

The conflict in Syria has potential global security implications and Canada is no exception to this. Canada has over [44,000 Syrian refugees](#) currently settled across its provinces. If the conflict continues, there is increased potential of a further refugee crisis, with consequences on Canada's economy and on the refugees themselves who have expressed how [hard it has been for them to adapt](#). Additionally, as the interim president is part of HTS, which Canada still labels a [terrorist entity](#), has begun attempts to gain legitimacy and international recognition of his authority with international visits and shifts in alliances, the Government of Canada needs to focus on cooperation and mediation to prevent further conflicts.

The shift in Syria's alliances towards [Saudi Arabia](#), while maintaining a relationship with [Türkiye](#) is crucial to understanding the shifting regional dynamics. If peace is to persist, there must be attempts at ensuring these regional ties with Syria and its neighbours continue to develop. Canada needs to decide on the level of diplomatic recognition and engagement with the interim Syrian government to ensure its own foreign interests and security.

The power vacuum and transitional instability may provide opportunities for rival groups to regroup and to pose potential global security threats similar to what had occurred in 2013 with ISIS. These violent extremist groups were not limited by borders and their movements were seen globally. The Government of Canada also has a commitment to ensuring the safety of its population for returning ISIS fighters. Indeed, as a signatory of the Convention for the Punishment and Prevention of the Crime of Genocide, it has [a legal obligation to prosecute returning foreign fighters](#). The new Syrian government's stance on foreign nationals should concern Canadian policy makers. Foreign fighters associated with opposition groups will impact policies on repatriation and monitoring of Canadian citizens involved in the conflicts, especially if the HTS seeks to prosecute them in Syria.

From a humanitarian perspective, the transition could lead to new waves of refugees, especially those concerned about the current governments policies and any prosecution of non-Sunni Muslims. The Government of Canada should be monitoring the new government's commitment to human rights, with specific focus on religious and ethnic minorities. The humanitarian aid being provided must be adjusted to satisfy these goals. Furthermore, the sanctions policy must be evaluated and instead be replaced with providing humanitarian aid and reconstruction.

Perhaps the most important commitment Canada should consider is its strategic diplomatic engagement with regional allies to have a cohesive approach towards the new Syrian government, which balances support of the democratic process against the caution necessary given HTS's own human rights and illiberal record. The opening of an embassy or, for that matter, a consulate in Damascus remains premature, but an official delegation to Syria and some conditional intelligence sharing could improve ties. Meaningful concessions become symbolic of the relationship and make groups less likely to return to violence; [providing unconditional humanitarian aid and symbolic gestures](#) reduces the likelihood of Syria returning to a civil war under another belligerent dictator. Canada's announcement to [reduce sanctions on Syria](#) – which were tools against the Assad regime – is a positive first step in order to allow the rebuilding of Syria; the interim government in Damascus has sought international support and Canada's commitment to funding humanitarian assistance reflects the global sentiment of commitment to assisting the Syrian people.

A Multilateral Approach

Canada's strategy in Syria largely relies on its cooperation with its international and regional allies. On February 14th, 2025, in a [joint statement on Syria](#) in preparation for the March

conference, participants expressed to cooperate on ensuring the success of the post-Assad transition framework that “must be Syrian-led and Syrian-owned”. The group supported al-Shara’s commitment to representing all Syrian society as well as members of the Syrian diaspora. The joint statement further echoed its commitment to acknowledge the Syrian transitional government, provide it with support to ensure terrorist groups cannot re-establish haven in Syrian territory, cease all hostilities in Syria in support of unification, and mobilize the international community to increase humanitarian assistance and aid to Syria and its people. In March, the European Union reaffirmed its commitment to aiding Syria pledging [6 billion euros](#) in aid to ensure a peaceful political transition of power, following the ousting of former President Bashar Assad in December.

The British government has also increased their commitment to a stable Syria to ensure [“security at home and abroad.”](#) London’s Plan for Change emphasizes the United Kingdom’s commitment to playing a leading role in Syria’s post-Assad recovery. Hamish Falconer, Minister of the Middle East, pledged 160 million British pounds – to be delivered by UN and NGO partners – to provide Syrians with essential aid such as water, food, healthcare, and education. [Syria’s interim leaders were present at the Annual Syria Pledge conference in Brussels](#), which for the first time since 2017 has included members of the Syrian government. EU have echoed the need to commitment to a fresh start, “despite the deadly violence this month that pitted the new, Islamist rulers against Assad loyalists.” The conference, despite the [UN’s designation of HTS as a terrorist group](#), seeks to engage with the new rulers as long as they commit to inclusive and peaceful transition.

NATO has also emphasized the importance of the cautious approach to the uncertainty in Syria. NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte has described the situation as a [“moment of joy but also uncertainty”](#), which he called for a Syrian-led transition so long as the Syrian rebels uphold the rule of law, protection of civilians, and respecting religious minorities. However, NATO’s response has been far from a united one. Türkiye has been [criticized by U.S. President Donald Trump](#) for controlling the rebels and how President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is orchestrating an “unfriendly takeover”. Despite these criticisms Ankara has doubled down on its position and [celebrated its cooperation with Syria and the HTS](#). Ibrahim Kalin, Türkiye intelligence chief, was [praying in the Umayyad mosque with al-Sharaa](#) and [Defense Minister Yasar Guler](#) emphasized the new opportunity to provide military training and resources to support the de facto leaders to stabilize Syria. NATO’s stance on Syria remains complex and plagued with uncertainty. Between Washington’s cooperation with Tel Aviv and Ankara’s strategic interests and agreements with Moscow, there has been no unified approach on how to deal with the HTS. The conflicting interests have left [NATO without a unified strategy](#), despite the understanding that there needs to be a peaceful resolution. [NATO’s “hands-off approach”](#) has had negative consequences without as long as it remains representing different interests that limit NATO’s overall impact.

Cooperating with regional allies could be Ottawa's most important containment toolkit. Canada's strategies for [Jordan](#) and [Lebanon](#) are not limited to aid, it places emphasis on strengthening border security on the Syrian border and building capacity for their security forces to prevent and counter violent extremism and reducing the flow of foreign fighters in and out of Syria. Canada's cooperation and coordination with Jordan and Lebanon largely revolve on the security threats emerging from the Syrian civil war. [Syria and Lebanon's agreement to a ceasefire](#) presents an opportunity for Canada to use Beirut to ensure a degree of security in the region so that Ottawa can succeed in Syria mission. Canada's ambassador to Lebanon – Stefanie McCollum – will play a dual role as Syria's ambassador as well to further Canada's commitment to increasing diplomatic ties with the interim government. Canada's special envoy to [Syria's – Omar Alghabra – visit to Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon](#) was tasked with reiterating their commitment to contributing to peaceful and inclusive transition in Syria. Alghabra went a step beyond the traditional containment approach and instead shifted the discourse to increasing [Canada's humanitarian commitment](#) to ensuring food security, healthcare, water and sanitation, and protection services through cooperation with their regional allies – Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. Alghabra's mission focused on enhancing cooperation with regional consultants to strengthen diplomatic ties and coordinate humanitarian response strategies.

Ottawa thus can leverage international recognition and rhetorical commitments to human rights on the part of HTS to recover its role as a mediator and to build more trust with its regional allies.

A Tiger Changing its Stripes?

One of the main concerns for all parties involved is the potential for HTS to take the route of the Taliban when the dust settles. Similar to Syria, Afghanistan continues to face its own internal struggles after years of conflict and despite the wishful optimism of the international community, there was a significant return to their authoritarian rule. The [United Nations has referred to the regime](#) as a 'de facto authority' that lacks international legitimacy, with increased restrictions on women and reduced toleration of religious practices. There have been arguments however, that this [lack of recognition and cooperation](#) does nothing on the ground other than give Western politicians a moral high ground and symbolic champions of Afghan women.

That is not to say that al-Sharaa is guaranteed to take the Taliban's route and go back on all his promises since taking control of Damascus. It is important that a key component of [al-Sharaa's policies](#) have been to expel the radicals within HTS and their separation from al-Qaeda for their goals of governance beyond the latter's mission of a global Jihad. During 2018 HTS [clashed with al-Qaeda groups](#) to survive over their shift from Jihad to politics. HTS is also responsible for dismantling the al-Qaeda affiliated group [Hurras al-Din](#) and have [shared intelligence with NATO](#) through Turkey to expose ISIS and al-Qaeda high-value targets.

In creating the Salvation Government, al-Sharaa did not impose minority status on religious minorities and has continued to emphasize his commitment to ideological and

behavioural transformation. That being said, al-Sharaa has [coup-proofed his rule](#) by monitoring disputes within his inner circle and ensuring internal opposition cannot gain any traction in his ranks. HTS may not take a path of the Taliban, but that is not to imply that they would be a champion of democracy.

Despite the growing pessimism and skepticism, not all groups designated as terrorist groups should remain. Though very different from HTS, not least in the use of violent tactics and human rights violations, the African National Congress, which originated as South Africa's liberation movement, was once labelled a terrorist group and later became the group that positioned itself as a key player to end Apartheid peacefully and champion democracy. Similarly, it was Sinn Fein's [communication strategies](#) and [dissociation](#) from the IRA that mirrors HTS' approach. Ottawa cannot assume that HTS will return to its radical origins. Nor should it expect its immediate reform. Al-Sharaa's policies have shifted how the group has operated over the past decade and despite the persistence of hardline elements, the leadership has strived for rule through a more inclusive and national direction rather than an ideological one. His pragmatism is itself a double-edged sword; he appears willing to moderate and combat al-Qaeda and ISIS, but he may do whatever it takes to remain in power.

Conclusion

The recent developments in Syria present various challenges and opportunities for Canada. It is a chance for Canada to reprise its role as a global mediator and advocate for human rights. A proactive approach is essential to navigate the complexities of the evolving situation, uphold Canadian values, and protect its own interests and security.

Canada's allies in the region and beyond have all signalled their commitment to ensuring a peaceful Syrian-led transition under the de facto government. Although how the HTS will operate remains uncertain, much of what has been done should give some form of optimism of change. This is not wishful optimism of believing Syrian democracy will unfold over night, but a response to lessons learned from the hands-off approaches in the past and an absence of consensus in NATO and the UN.

Ottawa is left with a dilemma on how to proceed about Syria. The toppling of Assad was the desired outcome but having HTS take his place – with its own history of violent radicalism – poses many problems. In assessing HTS's trajectory considering Canada's interest and allies in the region, a multilateral strategic approach represents the best step forward to ensure a peaceful transition of Syria and to prevent another civil war. The commitments made at the Syria International Donor pledge aims to encourage the leaders down a path of peace and Canada's role in this should not be understated.