



Middle  
East  
Institute

December 2025

# A New Day in Syria: Opportunities for Reconstruction and Renewal

Middle East Institute Delegation Visit to Syria

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## TRIP LED BY

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Photo above: Courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.

Front cover photo: MEI Delegation meeting with Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs Asaad Hassan al-Shaibani. [Source: Syrian Arab News Agency.](#)

## Trip Participants

1. **Gen. Joseph L. Votel, USA (Ret.)**, 13th Commander, US Central Command; Distinguished Military Fellow and Member of the Board of Governors, Middle East Institute
2. **Amb. (Ret.) Stuart Jones**, Former US Ambassador to Jordan and Iraq; President, Middle East Institute
3. **Raphael Benaroya**, Managing Director, Biltmore Capital Management
4. **Mary Boies**, Counsel, Boies, Schiller & Flexner LLP; Member of the Board of Governors, Middle East Institute
5. **Charles Lister**, Senior Fellow, Middle East Institute
6. **Courtney Lobel**, Chief Development Officer, Middle East Institute
7. **Kerry Propper**, Managing Partner, ATW Partners; Member of the Board of Governors, Middle East Institute
8. **George Salem**, Attorney, DLA Piper; Member of the Board of Governors, Middle East Institute
9. **John Serafini**, Chief Executive Officer, Hawkeye 360; Member of the Board of Governors, Middle East Institute
10. **Michele Votel**
11. **Paul Weir**, Chief Executive Officer, Genel Energy

## Syrian Government Officials

1. **Asaad al-Shaibani**, Foreign Minister
2. **Anas Khattab**, Minister of Interior
3. **Ahmed Zaidan**, Special Advisor to the President
4. **Hamza al-Mustafa**, Minister of Information
5. **Raed al-Saleh**, Minister of Emergency and Disaster Response
6. **Abdulsalam Haykal**, Minister of Communications and Information Technology
7. **Abdulkader Husriyeh**, Governor, Central Bank
8. **Qutaiba Idlbi**, Assistant Foreign Minister for American Affairs
9. **Mohammed Taha al-Ahmed**, Assistant Foreign Minister for Arab Affairs
10. **Talal Kanaan**, Assistant Foreign Minister for International Cooperation
11. **Mustafa Bakkour**, Governor of Suwayda
12. **Najib Ghabban**, Director, Strategic Studies Center, Foreign Ministry
13. **Yasser al-Jundi**, Director, Diplomatic Institute, Foreign Ministry
14. **Hassan al-Dugheim**, Supreme Committee for the People's Assembly Elections
15. **Nawar Najmeh**, Supreme Committee for the People's Assembly Elections
16. **Mohammed al-Yassin**, Supreme Committee for the People's Assembly Elections

## US and Other Government Officials

1. **Brig. Gen. Mason Dula**, Commander, Combined Special Operations Joint Task Force - Central
2. **James Holtsnider**, US Ambassador to Jordan
3. **Sufyan al-Qudah**, Jordanian Ambassador to Syria
4. **Burhan Köroğlu**, Turkish Ambassador to Syria
5. **Michael Ohnmacht**, EU Ambassador to Syria

## Summary

The sudden collapse of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024 left Syria jubilant but also broken, fractured, and exhausted. After nearly 14 years of brutal civil conflict and more than half a century of ruthless and corrupt dictatorial rule, it is hard to understate the extraordinary scale of the challenge ahead.

A year on, Syria's new government is straining to rebuild the country. It has expressed a commitment to national unity and to protect its numerous minorities. It has also tangibly demonstrated a determination to combat ISIS and to prevent Iran from re-establishing its presence in Syria — both in coordination with US forces.

After meeting Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa in Saudi Arabia in May, US President Donald Trump unilaterally lifted most of the US executive branch sanctions on Syria and suspended implementation of Caesar sanctions on a temporary basis. But investors will need greater assurances before making the kind of large, long-term commitments that are needed to truly rebuild the country.

Syria's strategic importance in the region is enormous. It is at the crossroads of an unprecedented, once-in-a-generation opportunity. Positioned at the heart of the Middle East, a stable and prosperous Syria has the potential to transform the wider region into a place of interconnected, transnational exchange that would benefit not just its neighborhood but the world at large. Continued engagement from the United States and its regional partners will be essential to helping Syria capitalize on this historic opportunity to promote growth and stability.



Photo above: MEI Delegation meeting with Assistant Foreign Minister for American Affairs Qutaiba Idlbi.

# Introduction

A delegation from the Middle East Institute visited Damascus, November 1-6, 2025, to meet with senior interim government officials and observe conditions in post-Assad Syria.

Syrian officials expressed a strong sense of mission, a consensus on how to move their country forward, and a commitment to national unification and stability through a focus on attracting private sector investment and stimulating economic growth. They also described a broadly held view among the Syrian people that there can be no return to the chaos and violence of the past 15 years; this must be avoided at all costs.

At the onset of the MEI visit, the White House announced Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa's meeting with President Donald Trump on November 10 in the Oval Office. This became a point of pride and anticipation for government ministers.

In all meetings MEI took part in, three key national priorities were consistently expressed by Syrian officials:

1. An end to US Caesar Act sanctions,
2. Peaceful co-existence with Israel, and
3. Assimilation of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Druze-majority governorate of al-Suwayda into the state.

## Challenges

Regarding the Caesar Act, Syria's government stressed that economic development cannot proceed without the removal of such comprehensive statutory sanctions. The US Senate has voted in favor of repealing the sanctions, but the House of Representatives has not yet taken action. House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Brian Mast emerged as the focal point for opposition to moving legislation forward in his committee. Although the administration has enacted a six-month suspension of Caesar Act sanctions, this has had a negligible impact upon the acute bank de-risking concerns that pose an obstacle to advancing meaningful economic activity. Syrian officials observed that major investors will not enter the market until they perceive a clear and sustainable horizon. The current sanctions regime is onerous and blocks all banking and dollar transactions.

As Gen. Joe Votel, USA (Ret.) and MEI Syria scholar Charles Lister wrote in their recent Op-Ed:

Syrian leaders know that the days of pledging conferences and massive international aid are over. They intend to rebuild their nation through private investment and public-private partnerships. ... The top priority for the newly elected Syrian parliament, now being formed, is a new investment law that will make these things possible. Despite these promising efforts, progress remains on hold until US lawmakers lift the Caesar sanctions, which continue to thoroughly block new investment and economic activity.

### *Relations with Israel*

Regarding Israel, Syrian officials expressed frustration and bewilderment. Syria, they said, comes under almost daily and unprovoked ground incursions and artillery strikes from Israel. They also noted Israel is providing cover, arms, and funds to support Druze leader Hikmat al-Hijri in his efforts to sustain a separatist region in the southern, Druze-majority governorate of al-Suwayda. Officials insisted that Syria is not a threat to Israel and professed a wish for peaceful co-



Photo above: MEI Delegation meets with Minister of Interior Anas Khattab.

existence but lamented that the Israeli government will not communicate directly or constructively. Minister of Interior Anas Khattab said that when he seeks to communicate with his counterpart in Israel, he only receives confirmations of strikes — though he manages teams in southwestern Syria that maintain more operational communication with their Israeli counterparts, when needed.

Syrian leaders expressed a desire for a direct channel to Israel at the political level. They charged that the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is carrying out policies aimed at undermining Syria's national unity and stability, contrary to US national security interests. The current government in Damascus, they insisted, is Israel's best hedge against the resurgence of Iran and Hizballah in the Levant. Iran is continuing to try to ship weapons to Hizballah via Syria, and the Syrian government is interdicting these shipments and continuing to destroy the militia's weapons caches. This was confirmed by senior US Central Command (CENTCOM) officials. The government of Syria has also adopted a proposal to return to 1974 lines in the Golan Heights. While officials recognize that Israel is not yet prepared to negotiate on the Golan, they point to the proposal as evidence of Syrian goodwill and pragmatism in the relationship.

Within the context of the challenging dynamic vis-à-vis Israel, Syrian officials repeatedly highlighted the troubling stand-off with the governorate of Suwayda. Since July, a US- and Jordanian-mediated cease-fire has remained in place, ensuring that the intensive violence seen earlier is not repeated. While substantial humanitarian assistance has entered the region, Suwayda is now also open to commercial traffic. However, the political roadmap set out by the US, Jordan, and Syria has not advanced due to the decision by Hijri to block any dialogue with Damascus, while he calls publicly for secession. Meanwhile, tensions are developing and at times boiling over between rival Druze actors, threatening additional sources of potential instability. With Israel's assistance to the Druze leader continuing, there appears to be no incentive for the stalemate to ease.



Photo above: MEI Delegation meeting with Turkish Ambassador to Syria Burhan Köroğlu.

## *Status of the Syrian Democratic Forces*

Syrian officials also insisted that they are seeking peaceful co-existence under a framework of national sovereignty with the SDF. The two sides are now negotiating an agreement to assimilate Kurdish fighting forces into the Syrian Armed Forces. The Syrian side complained that the talks were moving slowly. They praised the pragmatism of SDF leader Mazloum Abdi but complained that other interests within the SDF movement were blocking a resolution. Other sources indicated that the negotiations have produced some compromises to allow the Kurdish military units to remain intact, including the SDF's female brigade. Syria's Ministry of Interior is now publicly recruiting women into the security forces, in what is a clear signal of openness to integrating the SDF's female fighters. The Syrians acknowledged that only the US — either directly via pressure from CENTCOM or from the Trump White House in Washington — has the necessary leverage to drive a final agreement with the SDF.

## *Unexploded Ordnance and ISIS*

As Syria integrates approximately one million refugees who have returned since the fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, the challenge of unexploded ordnance (UXO) has emerged as a huge burden. Syria's UXO threat is now the biggest in the world by a substantial margin, causing more than 650 deaths in 2025 alone. While Syria's fledgling Ministry of Defense has dedicated resources to demining efforts, they pale in comparison to the challenge faced. Syria's Ministry of Emergency and Disaster Relief has formed a national coordinating body to manage the strategic UXO response, amid calls for help from demining non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like MAG International and the HALO Trust. The US has a clear interest in assisting Syria in tackling its UXO threat — to save lives, facilitate further refugee returns, and to help improve and build upon the new US-Syria relationship.

CENTCOM officials have praised the government of Syria for its robust posture against the Islamic State (ISIS) and Iran's regional agenda. President Sharaa was invited to the White House to announce Syria's decision to join the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. This decision carries considerable risk for Sharaa, from both security and internal political perspectives, and appears to reflect a commitment to collaborate and prioritize ties with US and Western institutions in pursuing shared security objectives.

## Foreign Policy

Syrian foreign policy can be characterized as a sophisticated balancing act aimed at accommodating numerous competing international and regional interests without surrendering sovereignty or agency. Syrian officials expressed warm gratitude for the political and economic support they are currently receiving from the likes of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which are now covering the costs of public sector salaries. They have also welcomed Turkish construction firms and business activity. Some observers have expressed concern that Turkey or Saudi Arabia will seek to dominate the political and security landscape, but Syrian officials dismissed these concerns and insist they do not feel undue pressure from Ankara or Riyadh. Since Syria needs everything, they suggested that all support and especially private investment will be welcome.

Meanwhile, the new regime has negotiated with Moscow to allow the continued presence of Russian forces in bases in Latakia and Tartus. Substantial Russian political and military delegations have visited Syria in recent months, and President Sharaa, Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani, Defense Minister Murhaf Abu Qasra, and General Intelligence chief Hussein al-Salamah have all now visited Moscow. While the Chinese have not yet established a significant presence, Foreign Minister Shaibani did visit Beijing on November 17. Syrian officials made sure to emphasize that while they preferred to look to the US and the West for foreign direct investment, Chinese economic cooperation would present an alternative if sanctions were not lifted.

Although US Special Envoy Thomas Barrack makes frequent and productive visits to Damascus, the lack of sustained on-the-ground American diplomatic presence in Damascus is conspicuous. The European Union, Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and many other governments have all opened diplomatic missions. The daily operational engagement with counterparts and Syria's leadership makes for deeply embedded personal and professional relationships that can be sustained over time, amid strain and success. The US lacks this dynamic, and as Syria's recovery continues to consolidate, there is a risk that others will take the US's natural position of advantage.

## Domestic Security

Domestic security remains a significant challenge for the fledgling government. In addition to the unrest in Suwayda and the as yet unresolved issue of integrating the SDF into the state, the Syrian government continues to contend with former regime elements, Hizballah, and ISIS. The Syrian Army is comprised largely of the remnants of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other more mainstream opposition forces and has therefore been held largely within bases for training in recent months. In its place has stepped the Ministry of Interior, whose Internal Security Forces — with their distinct and locally rooted “directorates” present in each of Syria's governorates — have emerged as the primary security force responsible for tackling internal challenges and threats, as well as general law and order. Also, within Syria's interior ministry are local and provincial police forces, as well as specialist units dedicated to countering



Photo above: MEI Delegation meeting with Governor of Suwayda Mustafa Bakkour

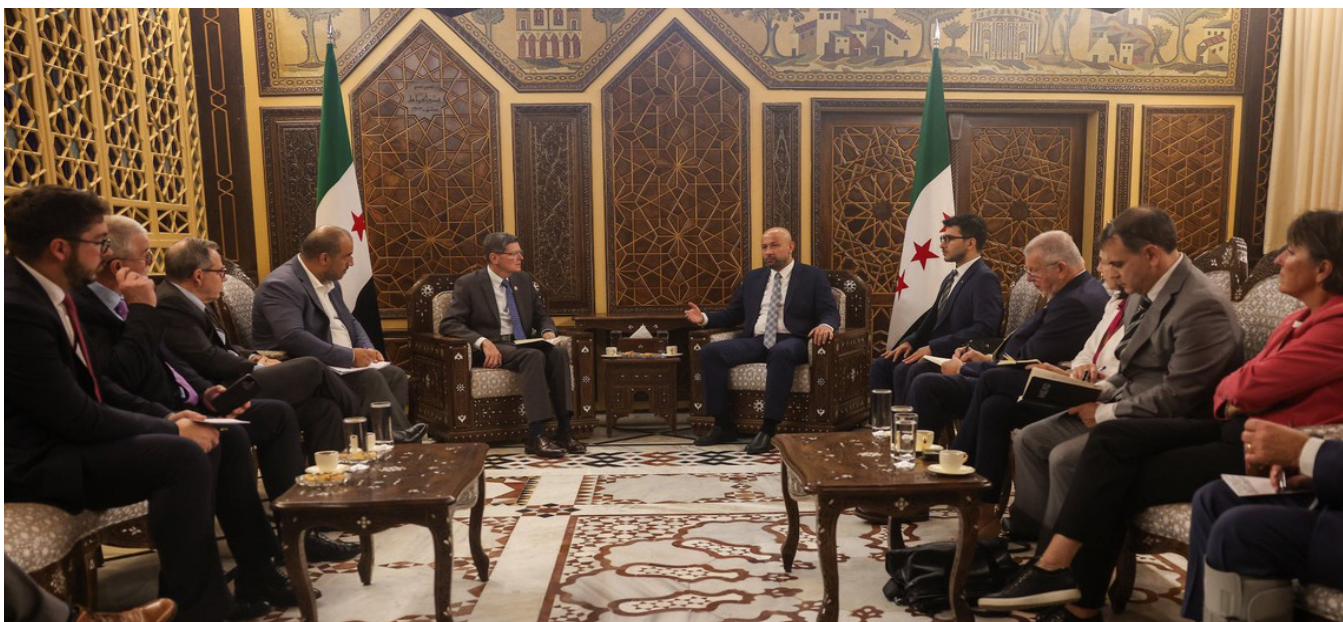


Photo above: MEI Delegation meeting with Minister of Emergency and Disaster Response Raed al-Saleh.

terrorism, organized crime, and narcotics trafficking. Syria's Ministry of Interior has received significant quiet support from several Gulf states in 2025.

With its forces largely restricted to bases, the Ministry of Defense is undergoing significant restructuring and internal reforms. Equal numbers of officers have been dispatched to Saudi Arabia and Turkey for training, while a notable number (at least in the dozens) of soldiers have been quietly arrested in recent months for complicity in atrocities committed during outbreaks of violence on Syria's coast in March and in Suwayda in July. The continued presence of foreign fighters within the ranks of the Syrian Army has been a cause for international concern. For now, between 2,000 and 3,000 non-Syrian fighters have been integrated into a dedicated defense ministry unit, the 84th Division — with a tacit US green light.

While Syrian officials offered little concrete insight into how they will enforce more effective discipline within domestic forces, they adopted a conciliatory tone toward minority groups, including hostile forces defined by their minority status. For example, the governor of Suwayda, Mustafa Bakkour, made a convincing case that he and Syrian forces were bending over backwards to avoid conflict with Hijri's militias inside Suwayda. US defense and communications technologies, if properly deployed and monitored, could provide the Syrian government with a higher level of command and control over its own forces and tools to reduce risks associated with kinetic activity.

The Syrian government has also been asked recently to dedicate resources to locating and freeing Yazidi women and children victimized in previous years by ISIS and still thought to be located on Syrian territory. Since that request, senior officials from Syria's foreign and interior ministries have been directed to work on the case files of several Yazidi victims in order to help secure their freedom and return them to their families in neighboring Iraq. These concerted efforts have already been noted and praised privately by Western governments.

## Economic Strategy and Reconstruction

The government of Syria has developed detailed strategies for jumpstarting the economy once sanctions are lifted. In a recent presentation at MEI, Minister of Economy Mohammed Nidal al-Shaar, a former Fannie Mae and Johnson & Higgins economist, unveiled a seven-point plan for recovery that included, inter alia, attracting foreign investment with a focus on the

Syrian diaspora communities in the US, Europe, and the Arab world; rebooting the agricultural economy; restoring the power sector; and extending banking services to the broader population. Central Bank President Abdulkader Husrieh, a former Ernst & Young partner based in Dubai, reported that the Central Bank has a plan to register and authorize 14 banks. Most of these are regional and therefore fully capitalized and able to extend banking services as soon as sanctions are lifted.

Minister of Communications and Technology Abdul Salam Haykal has developed a compelling proposal to use Syria as an alternate route for internet fiber optic connectivity to transit the Middle East from Europe to Asia. His scheme would provide redundancy to the primary existing route through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea, which is now at risk due to attacks on ships by Yemen's Houthi movement. He contends that the Syrian route, which would also cross and connect in Saudi Arabia, would reduce data transmission time from Europe to East Asia by a significant 0.34 seconds. Haykal, who was a successful entrepreneur and CEO in Dubai prior to returning to Syria to assume his current position, acknowledges the country will have to convince tech investors that it can be a safe and stable place for their cables.

Minister of Information Hamza al-Mustafa, a British-educated academic who had previously been director-general of *Syria TV*, briefed MEI extensively on the extraordinary challenge associated with disinformation. Recent investigations inside and outside Syria have identified nodes of disinformation linked to Iran and its regional proxies (primarily in Arabic), as well as to Israel (predominantly in English), all of which seek to encourage or exacerbate sectarian tensions and conflict in Syria. Increasingly, according to Mustafa, the disinformation takes the form of falsely impersonating pro-government voices in sharing violent sectarian content. However, due to US sanctions, Syria's Ministry of Information has been unable to meaningfully coordinate with US-based tech companies and social media platforms — including Meta, X, and Google — to identify and remove organized disinformation efforts.

Minister of Emergency and Disaster Relief and founder of the White Helmets Raed al-Saleh briefed MEI's delegation on the extraordinary scale of destruction across Syria, following more than a decade of the Assad regime's ruthless bombing of populated areas. Minister Saleh added aptly that while that military battle was now over, the new "battle" was one of rebuilding, recovery, and development. He added that dealing with the world's biggest UXO challenge was putting a severe strain on resources, with his ministry managing a newly established National Mine Action Center to coordinate domestically and with international organizations. As with so many other issues in Syria, however, US sanctions were impeding the



Photo above: MEI Delegation meeting with Special Advisor to the President Ahmed Zaidan.

government's ability to acquire the technology, hardware, materials, and training to scale up its UXO response. Without that, UXO will continue to kill civilians nationwide, impede the recovery of Syria's agricultural sector, and deter refugees from returning to rural areas still riddled with landmines and other unexploded munitions.

Each of these technocrats, none of whom had a prior connection to HTS or Ahmed al-Sharaa, conveyed confidence in and support from the interim president to execute their plans. They each separately explained that prior to returning to Syria they had established a relationship with Sharaa through secure communications apps. They shared his vision for a united and independent nation, and this is what convinced them to return — all at considerable personal and financial sacrifice.

The five technocratic ministers and the HTS-linked foreign and interior ministers also displayed impressive message discipline, attesting to close coordination and cooperation among ministries.

## Conclusions and Strategic Recommendations

Based on these discussions with Syrian officials, the MEI delegation developed the following policy recommendations:

- Open a temporary US diplomatic presence in Damascus as soon as possible. While senior-level engagement has successfully brought Syria to this point, next steps will require painstaking execution and the creation of relationships of trust between Syrian and US officials.
- Ensure that US technology firms are aware of the opportunities emerging in Syria, particularly with the Trans-Syria Fiber Project, as well as the rehabilitation, reconstruction, and expansion of Syria's oil, gas, and electricity sector. The presence of US capital and technology in the rebuilding effort will establish a strong platform for binational cooperation and collaboration.
- Clarify the US relationship with the SDF and redouble efforts to achieve the SDF's assimilation into the Syrian state. As long as the Kurdish forces remain outside of Syrian national institutions, there will be a risk of Syrian government distrust in US intentions. This could prove to be especially true now that the Syrian government has pledged to fight ISIS under the auspices of the international coalition.



Photo above: MEI Delegation enjoys a meal in Amman, Jordan, with the US Embassy team.



Photo above: MEI Delegation meeting with Minister of Information Hamza al-Mustafa.

- Identify and act upon tactical opportunities to assist Syria in dealing with the many challenges associated with its post-war transition — such as resolving the UXO threat across the country. After decades of Assad family rule, the Syrian population does not look favorably upon the US government, but that is slowly beginning to change. By helping with efforts like demining the country — thereby supporting the safe return of refugees and the revitalization of rural agriculture — the US can make an immediate and meaningful impact on improving popular perceptions, building bilateral ties, saving lives, and supporting economic recovery.

## ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE

The Middle East Institute is a center of knowledge dedicated to narrowing divides between the peoples of the Middle East and the United States. With over 70 years' experience, MEI has established itself as a credible, non-partisan source of insight and policy analysis on all matters concerning the Middle East. MEI is distinguished by its holistic approach to the region and its deep understanding of the Middle East's political, economic and cultural contexts. Through the collaborative work of its three centers — Policy & Research, Arts & Culture, and Education — MEI provides current and future leaders with the resources necessary to build a future of mutual understanding.

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