



By: TA | AP Insight

# Tough guy in Washington—What does the first-ever Syrian leader's visit to the White House bring?

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Two decades ago, **Ahmad al-Sharaa** was held in a U.S.-run detention center in Iraq after joining al-Qaida militants fighting against American forces there.

Few would have predicted that he would go on to become the first Syrian president to visit Washington since the country's independence in 1946.

Since rebel forces he led ousted former Syrian President Bashar Assad last December, al-Sharaa — who cut ties with al-Qaida years earlier — has gone on a largely successful **charm offensive** to establish new ties with countries that had shunned Assad's government after its brutal crackdown on protesters in 2011 spiraled into a 14-year civil war.

Al-Sharaa met with U.S. President Donald Trump in Saudi Arabia in May, where Trump announced that he would lift decades of sanctions.

The two men will meet again on Monday in Washington, where Syria is widely expected to officially join the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State group.

Al-Sharaa arrived in the U.S. on Saturday ahead of the meeting, according to Syrian state media.

Apart from that agreement, al-Sharaa will use the visit to push for a full removal of the remaining sanctions imposed on his country.

Al-Sharaa's media adviser, Ahmad Zeidan, told the Saudi-owned Al Arabiya TV that the "foremost" issue on the president's agenda in Washington is to call for a repeal of the Caesar Act, which imposed sweeping sanctions over human rights abuses by Assad's government and security forces.

The Caesar sanctions are currently waived by presidential order, but a permanent repeal will require a congressional vote.

## A push to lift the last sanctions

Days ahead of al-Sharaa's visit, Trump told reporters that he had moved to lift sanctions from Syria "to give them a fighting shot, and I think (al-Sharaa's) doing a very good job so far."

"It's a tough neighborhood and he's a tough guy, but I got along with him very well, and a lot of progress has been made with Syria," he said.

On Thursday, the **U.N. Security Council** voted to lift sanctions from al-Sharaa and his interior minister, and the U.S. then removed them from its "specially designated global terrorist" list.

Meanwhile, senators have advanced a repeal of the Caesar Act through an annual defense authorization bill, but the final legislation is being negotiated with the House, where some top Republicans want to put conditions on it.

Rep. Brian Mast, the Republican chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, has expressed reservations about a full repeal.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, a South Carolina Republican who is close to Trump, has also pushed for conditions on the repeal, including security and representation for **religious and ethnic minorities**, "maintaining peaceful relations with other states in the region, including the State of Israel," and removing foreign fighters from government and security institutions.

Skeptics of al-Sharaa point to eruptions of sectarian violence over the past year during which pro-government Sunni gunmen killed hundreds of civilians from the Alawite and Druze religious minorities. Al-Sharaa has promised to hold perpetrators accountable, but minority communities remain wary.

The advocacy group Save the Persecuted Christians sent a letter signed by 100 U.S. religious leaders calling on Trump to address the "massacre" of minorities in Syria and to push al-Sharaa to open a humanitarian corridor from the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights to the Druze enclave of Sweida in

southern Syria.

Since Assad's fall, Israel has seized a formerly U.N.-patrolled buffer zone in southern Syria and pushed for a demilitarized zone south of Damascus. The two countries, which do not have diplomatic relations, have been negotiating a potential security agreement.



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Meanwhile, the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, has led the effort for a full Caesar repeal. Shaheen said that “we have a real opportunity in the Middle East right now that we haven't had in my lifetime.”

Advocates say it is unfair to keep sanctions that were specifically imposed on Assad's government as leverage over the new authorities and that the threat of a Caesar snapback would prevent international companies from investing in rebuilding the war-battered country.

Mouaz Moustafa, executive director of the Syrian Emergency Task Force, which lobbied for the imposition of the Caesar sanctions but is now trying to get them removed, said the U.S. government can impose new targeted sanctions if warranted.

“But to use Caesar for that is like using a sledgehammer instead of a scalpel — you're going to kill the person you're operating on,” Moustafa said.

## A strengthened military alliance

U.S. envoy Tom Barrack said last week that Syria will “hopefully” soon join the **coalition** of some 80 countries working to prevent a resurgence of IS.

A Trump administration official said Al-Sharaa is expected to sign an agreement to join the coalition during his visit.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt declined to comment when asked about the possibility.

Another U.S. official with knowledge of the situation said that while Syrian forces had already been fighting IS, their formal entry into the coalition will be a “milestone” and will enable U.S. forces to work more closely with the Syrians.

Both officials were not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.



*Syria will “hopefully” soon join the coalition of some 80 countries working to prevent a resurgence of IS - Tom Barrack*

Syrian officials declined to comment on the discussions about joining the coalition.

While the Islamic State lost hold of all of the territory it once held in Syria and Iraq years ago, cells of the extremist group have continued to carry out attacks in both countries and abroad.

Lt. Cmdr. Emily Pumphrey, a spokesperson for

U.S. Central Command, said there have been 311 IS attacks in Syria and 64 in Iraq so far this year, down from 878 in Syria and 160 in Iraq in 2024.

Before Assad's fall, al-Sharaa – then known by the nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Golani – led Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, an Islamic insurgent group controlling much of northwestern Syria.

It was formerly an offshoot of al-Qaida but later split from it. HTS and IS were rivals, and al-Sharaa cracked down on Islamic State cells in the area he controlled.

The main U.S. partner in the fight against IS at the time was the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in the country's northeast.

Since al-Sharaa took power, the U.S. military has expanded its cooperation with Damascus and Washington has pushed for a deal to merge the SDF and the new Syrian army.

While Damascus and the SDF have agreed in principle to do so, implementation has stalled amid tensions that have sometimes escalated into clashes between the two sides.