

US removes Syria from its “state sponsors of terrorism” list

Jean Shaoul
9 September 2026

The US has formally announced Syria’s removal from Washington’s State Sponsors of Terrorism list. This designation had defined US–Syria relations for nearly half a century, leading to sanctions and Syria’s diplomatic and economic isolation.

Removal from the terrorism list signals the incorporation of the new Syrian regime into a US- and Gulf-backed regional order. For the Syrian population, the opening to foreign capital is taking place alongside the consolidation of an authoritarian Islamist state and an economic programme that shifts the costs of reconstruction onto workers, farmers and the wider population.

Ending sanctions on the Turkish-backed Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), lifting the \$10 million bounty on President Ahmed al Sharaa, the HTS leader previously known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, and the repeal of the Caesar Act open the way for Syria’s reintegration into the global financial system.

A long period of economic isolation was compounded by the fourteen-year civil war in which the US, Gulf states and Türkiye backed different opposition forces, including Islamist and jihadist-linked militias, while Russia, Iran and Hezbollah intervened to preserve the Assad regime.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio stated that the delisting was “in recognition of the positive actions taken and further commitments by the Syrian government under President Ahmed al Sharaa to fully distance Syria from acts of international terrorism.” These “positive actions” include renouncing links to jihadist networks, joining Washington’s coalition against ISIS and Iran-aligned groups, and cooperating with US counterterrorism agencies.

The reasons for rehabilitating the former jihadist were geostrategic in character: stabilising the weak post-Assad and pro-US state in the face of growing unrest over social conditions, eliminating Russia’s influence by integrating Syria into its regional axis, weakening Iran, enabling Gulf investment in Syria and using Syria as an alternative, land-based energy corridor from the Gulf to the Mediterranean.

With the major US and European sanctions substantially lifted, US and European banks can resume operations with Syrian banks and Syria’s Central Bank can seek a sovereign credit rating, enabling access to global capital markets.

From regional “adversary” to US partner

Following the 1979 Iranian Revolution that overthrew one of Washington’s key regional allies, the Carter administration began to reorganise the Middle East, strengthening Israel’s role in the region. One element of this was the designation of Syria as a State Sponsor of Terrorism for its support of the Rejectionist Front, Palestinian militant organisations, and later Hezbollah, in their struggle against Israel during

the civil war in Lebanon—in which some right-wing Christian parties were allied with Israel.

Syria was a linchpin in the Obama administration’s broader struggle to assert US hegemony over the resource-rich Middle East and Central Asia. Its close ties to Iran and Hezbollah made it particularly important to the US efforts to weaken what Washington viewed as the main obstacle to its domination of the region. This significantly increased Syria’s dependence on the Soviet Union and, following its collapse, Iran.

After seizing power in the immediate aftermath of Israel’s war on Hezbollah in Lebanon, al-Sharaa, the former jihadist leader, made clear his orientation towards the US, Türkiye, the European Union and the Gulf. This ensured his—and Syria’s—rapid integration into Washington’s orbit, with President Donald Trump declaring him to be a “young, attractive guy. Tough guy. Strong past. Very strong past. Fighter.” Trump invited him to the White House in November 2025 and met him again last July, when al-Sharaa was a guest of the NATO summit in Ankara.

This was proof that the \$10 million bounty was never more than a public-relations cover while the CIA collaborated with jihadists, with a reported annual budget of nearly \$1 billion, to topple the Assad regime. Al-Sharaa was now welcome in the US, Türkiye and Gulf-backed regional order, having joined the international coalition fighting ISIS, and Syria could be opened for business.

The unintended consequences of Syria’s new geopolitical realignment within a US-aligned regional order have been the expansion of Türkiye’s influence, which conflicts with Israel’s security requirements and brings with it increasing tensions between Ankara and Tel Aviv.

In June, Trump called for al-Sharaa to take over Israel’s role in dismantling Hezbollah as a military organisation, a task he declined as beyond his army’s capabilities.

Israel, however, is determined to keep the new Syrian state weak and fragmented and prevent it from developing military capabilities that could constrain its own freedom of action. It views the Kurds, who had established an autonomous region in the northeast, as its “natural allies”. The Turkish state for its part is attempting, through its negotiations with Abdullah Öcalan, the long-imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, to turn its 40-year-old enemy into an ally, thereby undermining Israel’s policy toward the Kurds.

Israel has seized territory in southern Syria close to the border, allied with some of the Druze leaders in Suwayda, and built permanent military infrastructure inside the country, both as a counterweight to al-Sharaa and as a bulwark against Turkish influence. It has repeatedly bombed Syrian airbases, most recently Abu al-Duhur in northern Syria in August, to warn Türkiye against using the base to expand its military influence.

Washington ditches its alliance with the Kurds in favour of al-Sharaa and Türkiye

The fate of the Kurdish national militias—the Syrian Democratic forces (SDF) and the People’s Protection Units (YPG) that controlled the Kurdish region in the northeast of Syria with US support—illustrates both Washington’s broader geopolitical realignment and the class character of the nationalist forces fighting for regime change. In August, the SDF formally announced its dissolution under an agreement with the al-Sharaa government, ending Kurdish autonomy and placing Kurdish regions under HTS and Islamist units.

Throughout the war for regime change, the SDF/YPG had served as Washington’s principal proxy force, alongside the Sunni Islamist militias of HTS, in return for its backing for an autonomous Kurdish entity.

The *World Socialist Web Site* rejected the pseudo-left’s glorification of these forces as fighters of a “democratic revolution,” insisting that “What is unfolding in Syria is not a revolution but a reactionary, imperialist-led carve-up of the country.”

The SDF/YPG capitulation was dictated by Washington, not chosen by the Kurds. As SDF commander Mazloum Abdi has acknowledged, it was done in support of its ally, Ankara—opposed to any Kurdish autonomy.

The March 2025 agreement—signed after months of clashes between the SDF and Damascus, amid the massacre of nearly 1,000 Alawites—provided for the integration of SDF forces and the autonomous administration into the Damascus regime. In August 2025, Syria signed an agreement with Türkiye to train and equip its armed forces, signalling a move against the SDF.

The December 2025 agreement for three SDF divisions to remain affiliated with the Kurds within the military structure of the Syrian Army followed immediately on the US Congress vote to lift sanctions on Syria. After Washington “green-lighted” the HTS military offensive, with support from Ankara, against the Kurds that cost the SDF up to 80 percent of its territory, it was forced to sign the January 2026 agreement returning the region to Damascus’ control. US envoy Tom Barrack stated that “the original purpose of the SDF as the primary anti-ISIS force... has largely expired”. The US alliance with the Kurds was over once it no longer served Washington’s drive against Iran.

The SDF leadership never broke from imperialism. Its strategy of manoeuvring between Washington, Ankara and even Israel, which it had accepted as a “natural ally”, left it isolated and defenceless. SDF leader Abdi was still backing Trump’s plan to “make Syria great again” and offering to work with the US against Iran as late as December 2025.

The SDF’s actions expose the political bankruptcy of the pseudo-left’s interpretation of the Kurdish national movement as a revolutionary alternative to imperialism. They spent a decade glorifying the YPG/SDF and the “Rojava Revolution” as a beacon of “democratic confederalism”, “women’s liberation” and anti-ISIS heroism, which was nothing short of support for an imperialist proxy war.

When the SDF capitulated, these forces had no coherent explanation, because their entire framework—that the Kurds were fighting a “revolution” aided by US airstrikes and arms—collapsed. While bemoaning Washington’s “betrayal”, they evaded the central question: that the Kurdish forces had been allied with US imperialism from the start, and that they had cheered this on.

This was part and parcel of their overall role in the Syrian war: from glorifying the “moderate rebels” to the celebration of Assad’s overthrow in December 2024. Their “revolution” rhetoric served to provide a left cover for Washington’s regime-change operation—as the Kurds’ capitulation, and their own inability to explain it, confirms.

Al-Sharaa establishes an Islamist dictatorship

Shortly after toppling the Assad regime, al-Sharaa consolidated his political position by imposing a new constitutional framework that instituted a political dictatorship. It gives the president the sole power to declare a state of emergency and appoint one third of the “people’s assembly” that would draft legislation but have no power to impeach the president.

The new constitution entrenches Sunni Islamist dominance, making Islamic law the primary legislative source and empowering an all-Sunni Fatwa Council with no minority representation to vet legislation. It codifies discrimination against Alawites, Christians, Druze, and Ismailis who together constituted nearly 20 percent of Syria’s population in 2025.

The new regime dismantled civil and land registries, undermining legal identity rights and disproportionately harming minorities. UN reports have documented ongoing arbitrary detentions, kidnappings, torture, and sexual violence against minorities.

Al-Sharaa has used the military as well as the new constitutional arrangements, to consolidate his grip on power. While formally dissolving the HTS, he has rewarded his followers and restructured the Syrian army around HTS fighters, with thousands of veteran jihadis incorporated into the new security forces.

His new military apparatus has carried out a wave of sectarian violence against minorities. A months-long Reuters investigation established that 1,479 Alawites were killed between March 7 and 9, 2025 in more than 40 settlements along Syria’s Mediterranean coast. The chain of command ran up to leading figures of the new regime in Damascus. UN reports have documented abductions, rape, arbitrary detention, and sectarian slurs against Alawite women and girls by armed personnel, including foreign fighters integrated into state forces.

Al-Sharaa’s forces carried out a brutal campaign against the Druze in southern Syria in July 2025, killing more than 1,000 in Suwayda province. Sectarian violence continued into 2026, with Druze communities facing intimidation and displacement. Nevertheless, Suwayda remains outside Damascus’ full control and has become a key mechanism for Israeli intervention in Syria.

The restructuring of Syria’s post-war economy

The World Bank has estimated the cost of reconstructing Syria’s infrastructure, residential, and non-residential buildings as about \$216 billion, more than three times Syria’s pre-war GDP and nearly 10 times the size of Syria’s 2024 economy. This poses the issue of how Syria will be rebuilt and, most significantly, who will benefit from the enormous flows of capital it will generate.

The new regime is using the opening created by sanctions removal to restructure the economy via foreign investment, privatisation and trade liberalisation—all based on nepotism and patronage—while consolidating its control over the institutions that will distribute the resulting wealth.

Government contracts typically go to companies headed by family members and HTS loyalists, while leading positions in the new government, economic and security institutions go to family members and people close to al-Sharaa and HTS. While some Assad-era businessmen have been able to agree opaque deals with the new regime, others have had their assets sequestered.

Al-Sharaa has announced \$28 billion in Gulf and foreign investments in key sectors such as aviation, telecommunications, and water infrastructure—a key element in the US–Saudi agreement to stabilise the Levant.

The government has pursued the trade liberalisation policies promoted by the World Bank and IMF in manufacturing and agriculture. These have

served to widen the trade deficit with its neighbours, Türkiye and Jordan.

It has introduced a new tax system, with the new top rate of corporation tax set at 15 percent, regardless of size, with big tax and duty concessions to investors. It has announced plans to cut the public sector workforce by one third and privatise state-owned enterprises and public services such as health and education.

Social costs fall on workers, farmers and their families

Once a middle-income country, GDP per capita already fell from \$1,550 in 2011 to \$670 in 2022, a more than 50 percent decline. Unemployment stands at a massive 60 percent, according to the Economy Minister's estimate.

The new regime has pursued policies that have further impoverished the Syrian people. It has reduced the subsidies on bread, suspended fuel and oil subsidies, and hiked electricity prices. With fuel now denominated in US dollars—the dollar is now worth 122 Syrian pounds—farmers and small businesses face soaring prices that could force many to close. While some electricity supply has been restored, this has not benefited the peripheral and rural areas.

Syria is facing a massive food crisis, amid UN warnings of a collapse in the agricultural sector, which has been ravaged by 14 years of conflict, recurring drought, and a collapsing economy. The Food and Agriculture Organization reported that 14.5 million Syrians are suffering from acute food insecurity.

Syria faces a severe water shortage as a result of the destruction caused by the war that has damaged more than 60 percent of water infrastructure and low winter rainfall 60 percent below the annual average.

More than 90 percent of the population live below the poverty line. Many are reliant on remittances from family members living abroad, believed to total \$4 billion in 2025, equal to 15 to 20 percent of GDP. But this too is in jeopardy as refugees are being forced by their host countries to return home. The return of one million refugees and 2.5 million IDPs has strained housing, water, electricity, and municipal services and led to new conflicts over property ownership as others have taken over their abandoned homes and land.

Growing social resistance

There has been a growing wave of protests and strikes this year by workers, professionals, students, traders, farmers and residents of devastated areas, with 41 demonstrations in the first half of June alone. They demanded relief from deteriorating economic conditions, labour and professional rights and the release of detainees and the disappeared. There have been protests over land rights and the displacement of residents for investment in luxury projects and property rights in Homs and Damascus.

In May, protests broke out in wheat growing areas in the east of the country before spreading nationwide following the government's setting the price it would buy wheat from farmers well below the cost of production, a situation aggravated by the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz driving up oil and fertilizer prices. While al-Sharaa issued a decree raising the price, this was still below what farmers were demanding.

These protests and strikes demonstrate that the Syrian masses were not "liberated" in December 2024 but handed from one repressive regime to another. The social catastrophe produced by 14 years of imperialist proxy war is now being felt by the population under its new beneficiaries.

Events in Syria confirms Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution: in regions of belated capitalist development like the Middle East, the national bourgeoisie cannot establish even formal democratic rights for minorities or pursue an anti-imperialist policy, because of its ties to imperialism and fear of the working class. Those tasks fall to the working class in the struggle for socialism.

Workers must build sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Syria, Türkiye and across the region, capable of unifying workers of all nationalities and religions—Arab, Kurdish, Turkish, Persian, Sunni, Shia, Alawite, Christian and Jewish—around a socialist program for the reorganisation of society based upon social need not private profit. This must be fought for against all the imperialist powers and their proxies and based on the establishment of a United Socialist States of the Middle East.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact