

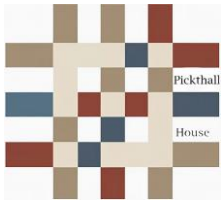
On UK's Strategic Engagement with post-Assad Syria and Türkiye

Executive Summary

The [collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024](#) marked a critical turning point in the Middle East's political landscape. In response, the United Kingdom has significantly recalibrated its foreign policy towards Syria, shifting from a primarily sanctions-based approach to one focused on economic recovery and political stabilisation. This white paper outlines the UK's evolving strategy, analysing key policy shifts, economic support initiatives, and security concerns, particularly concerning the transitional government's links to former militant groups.

This paper advocates for a pragmatic, interests-driven approach to Syria, one that acknowledges the geopolitical realities of the region while advancing British strategic, economic, and humanitarian objectives. As Syria enters a new political phase after more than a decade of conflict, the UK must reassess its stance. The key questions addressed by Pickthall House here are:

1. To what extent should the United Kingdom support Syria's transitional government?
2. What forms of economic engagement, including Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), will best contribute to Syria's recovery and regional stability, while furthering the United Kingdom's interests?

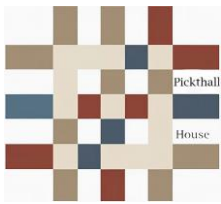


3. How can the United Kingdom leverage its diplomatic position to influence the policies of the United States and the European Union on sanctions and regional stability in the interest of national security?

Current UK Actions and Statements

The UK has an opportunity to exercise greater sovereignty in this increasingly competitive and multipolar world, by moving dynamically and decisively to form and implement an independent foreign policy. The UK's approach to Syria so far has been cautious, and mostly reactive, balancing humanitarian concerns with broader strategic priorities. Key recent developments include:

- [December 9, 2024 \(House of Commons\)](#): Foreign Secretary David Lammy outlined the UK's priorities: protection of civilians, support for minorities, counterterrorism efforts, and a negotiated political settlement. Lammy reaffirmed the UK's commitment to humanitarian aid, with £4bn allocated since the onset of the conflict.
- [January 8, 2025 \(UN Security Council\)](#): UK Ambassador to the UN Barbara Woodward called for Syrian democracy to be rebuilt and the Syrian population to be supported.
- [January 12, 2025](#): Lammy's participation in an Arab-led summit in Saudi Arabia emphasised the UK's role in supporting reconstruction and holding the Assad regime accountable for war crimes.
- [January 15, 2025](#): The UK reviewed its sanctions policy, reflecting the growing consensus that US secondary sanctions are hindering Syria's recovery and regional stabilisation.
- [January 17, 2025](#): UK Ambassador to the UN Barbara Woodward discusses the Lebanon-Israel Blue Line, but also reiterates Syria's sovereignty and seeks timelines on withdrawal from Israel.
- [March 25, 2025](#): UK Ambassador to the UN Barbara Woodward reinforces the importance of a strong Syria for the wider region and states that diplomacy and dialogue are the best ways to achieve this.
- [April 10, 2025](#): UK Ambassador to the UN Barbara Woodward welcomes the formation of the new Syrian government, and notes concerns over Israeli airstrikes destabilising Syria and the wider region.



The UK has also coordinated closely with the US, EU, and regional partners:

- **Early January 2025:** UK representatives met with France, Germany, Italy, the US, and the EU in Rome to discuss Syria.
- **Regional Dynamics:** [Spain](#) has reopened its embassy in Syria; [Germany](#) has increased healthcare aid; [Qatar](#) has provided diplomatic assistance on sanctions relief; [Japan](#) has sent high-profile delegations; the [European Commission](#) has allocated reconstruction funds, bringing the total allocation for Syria in 2025 to €182.5 million.

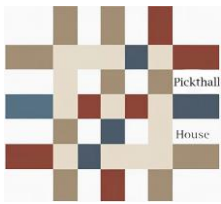
These actions indicate a strategic recalibration. Beyond these measures, however, Pickthall House believes that the UK must make a decisive break from the inertia of the past by pursuing an independent foreign policy that supports Syrian sovereignty, recovery, and stability. This is especially important considering the online spread of [serious disinformation](#) on Syria, largely led by Assad-allied Iran and Russia. By exploiting pre-existing divisions, this disinformation could contribute dangerously to destabilising Syria in the coming months.

Sanctions and Their Impact

[UK sanctions](#) remain a pivotal issue in Syria's recovery. While food and medicine are exempt, broader financial restrictions have severely hindered economic stabilisation and trade.

In February 2025, Minister for International Development and Africa, Stephen Doughty, announced a [revision of the UK's Syria sanctions](#) framework. The policy shift aims to enable humanitarian and economic recovery while maintaining targeted restrictions on individuals and groups involved in human rights abuses.

By March 2025, the UK government took concrete steps toward easing sanctions on Syria by lifting asset freezes on [24 Syrian entities](#). Among these were the Central Bank of Syria, a move aimed at facilitating financial transactions essential for rebuilding the Syrian economy, and Syrian Airlines, which was reinstated to enhance connectivity and support humanitarian supply chains. Additionally, key energy companies were included in the sanction relief, reflecting a broader effort to stabilise the country's infrastructure and economic recovery.



While these measures signal a willingness to engage with the new Syrian government, they stop short of full economic normalisation, reflecting the UK's cautious optimism regarding Syria's post-Assad trajectory.

Policy Recommendations

1. Recognise and Support the Transitional Government

The UK should move decisively to officially recognise and support Syria's transitional government as a legitimate governing authority. The transitional administration has demonstrated:

- Competency and [governance capacity](#) through state-building efforts.
- A [pluralistic and consensus-driven approach](#), moving away from ideological extremism.
- Effective counterterrorism measures, such as the handling of [ISIS elements](#), although they continue to pose a threat.

While engagement with non-state actors is inevitable, the UK must ensure that support is only directed toward groups aligned with these principles.

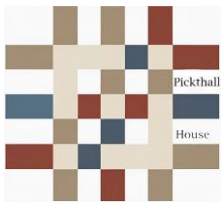
Organisations that previously supported Assad, are linked to the SDF (PKK-affiliated), or are [undermining governance efforts](#), should not receive UK backing. The UK should be particularly cautious of Kurdish groups that have violently suppressed protests in [SDF-controlled areas](#).

2. Pursue an independent Diplomatic and Economic Strategy

The UK should push for a coordinated international effort to remove economic sanctions, particularly those imposed by the [US that hinder third-party engagement](#). As a post-Brexit power, the UK has the flexibility to act independently without waiting for the EU's slow decision-making process. Lifting these sanctions would facilitate economic recovery and foster greater international cooperation in Syria's reconstruction.

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) should be directed toward industries that support local economic growth rather than exploitative sectors. Key areas for investment include:

- **Infrastructure and utilities:** Syria's rebuilding efforts require extensive investment in roads, electricity, and sanitation.



- **Renewable energy:** The UK could play a role in solar and wind energy projects to reduce Syria's dependency on Iranian and Russian fuel supplies.
- **Agriculture and food security:** Investment in sustainable farming and water management would enhance Syria's self-sufficiency.

Given the active roles of [Saudi Arabia, Turkiye, and Qatar in Syria](#), the UK should prioritise cooperation with these nations rather than relying solely on the US and EU. Strengthening regional partnerships would not only enhance diplomatic influence but also serve as a counterweight to [Iranian and Russian dominance](#), ensuring Syria does not fall back into economic and military dependency.

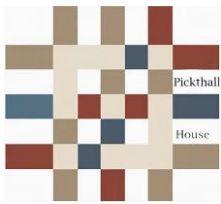
3. Maintain Syria's Territorial Sovereignty

The UK must take a firmer stance against Israeli actions in Syria, particularly [illegal land grabs and military interventions](#). These actions contradict the [UK's stated commitment to a rules-based international order](#) and risk further regional destabilisation. A consistent and principled approach is necessary to uphold Syria's sovereignty and prevent further conflict.

The US's erstwhile strategy involved supporting [SDF-affiliated Kurdish forces](#) to carve out a semi-autonomous region as a bargaining chip in future negotiations (which now appears to have taken a backseat under Trump, whose priority is to disentangle the US from Syria). This strategy threatens Syria's territorial integrity and risks long-term instability. Consequently, the UK should advocate for a diplomatic resolution that ensures national unity.

The UK should engage with Turkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar in counterterrorism and stabilisation efforts, ensuring security cooperation aligns with long-term regional stability. Strong UK-Syria relations naturally bolster ties with Turkiye, given its [strategic role in managing security threats from Syria](#), including extremism and migration. Coordinating with Turkiye on stabilisation efforts would enhance intelligence sharing and regional security.

At the same time, preventing Syria from becoming a base for [Iranian military expansion](#) is crucial, as Iran's growing influence threatens regional stability and Turkish security interests. A UK-Turkiye partnership to counter Iran's footprint, through diplomatic pressure and support for local governance, would



strengthen bilateral trust while reinforcing a broader strategy for stability and counterterrorism.

4. Manage Refugee Returns

The UK should facilitate [gradual, voluntary return mechanisms for Syrian refugees](#) who wish to participate in reconstruction, without forcing an immediate and overwhelming influx. A phased reintegration approach could include:

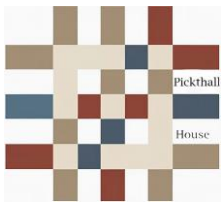
- Permitting non-naturalized Syrian refugees in the UK to travel back and forth without losing residency status. Currently, the UK has not confirmed that [refugees returning to Syria would be allowed to re-enter the UK](#).
- Partnering with [Qatar's initiative to fund public sector salaries](#) in Syria, ensuring that returning refugees can integrate into the economy without overwhelming state resources.

Anticipating Objections

Concerns about Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Extremism

Currently, [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS) remains [proscribed as a terrorist organisation](#) by the [UN](#), US, EU, [UK](#) and others. Yet, HTS has undergone a [transformation from its early ideological roots](#), demonstrating a growing commitment to governance. Its leadership has distanced itself from radicalism, learning from past revolutionary failures and adapting its approach to maintain stability. However, critics have raised concerns over [HTS' slow ideological refocusing and over the treatment of minorities](#), such as women. Historical precedents, such as the evolution of Gulf regimes, show that radical groups can transition into pragmatic state-builders, suggesting that HTS may follow a similar trajectory. However, the UK should monitor HTS with caution, especially for signs of extremism.

Encouragingly, Syria has appointed a female, Christian Minister for Social Affairs in Hind Kabawat. More saliently, many senior members of the new government are British educated, including the new governor of the Central Bank (who studied in Durham).



The Role of the US and EU

The [US is leveraging sanctions to influence Syria's post-war order](#) rather than actively facilitating its recovery. Meanwhile, the [risk of 'balkanisation'](#) remains high, particularly if Kurdish autonomy is imposed against the will of the Syrian majority, further deepening regional instability. The EU has taken a more cautious approach, [reducing some harsh restrictions while delivering humanitarian aid](#). However, its fragmented decision-making process and reluctance to engage directly in Syria's reconstruction limit its effectiveness in shaping a stable post-war settlement.

In contrast, the British Embassy in Syria under Ann Snow has been doing lots of good work, building goodwill with local authorities, in notable contrast with France.

Supporting Syrian Self-Determination

British foreign policy prioritises national self-determination. After years of conflict, [Syrians are increasingly accepting the current governance](#), as shown by support from diverse religious leaders. [HTS has distanced itself from Salafi-jihadism](#), rejecting takfir and incorporating non-jihadist figures. [Leaders like Abu Mohammed al-Jolani and Shara emphasize pragmatism](#), signaling a shift toward stable governance.

A final point to note: given Syria and Türkiye's close relationship, Cyprus (and with it, UK military bases, personnel, and equipment) remains in a precarious position, and the UK has additional incentive to step in and protect its assets in the region.

Conclusion

A pragmatic, independent policy will allow the UK to strengthen its strategic position in Syria while advancing stability and security in the Middle East. It is critical that the UK act swiftly and decisively, ensuring that its engagement benefits both Syria's long-term recovery and British national security, and geopolitical interests.

The UK has a natural advantage with respect to goodwill and diplomacy, and it would be remiss not to capitalise on it effectively.