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Crossroads Central Asia

CENTRAL ASIA'S CALCULATED SILENCE ON SYRIA

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The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024 and the rapid consolidation of power by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) marked one of the most consequential political shifts in the Middle East in over a decade. While regional and global actors, most prominently Turkey, Gulf states, the United States, Russia, and Ukraine, moved quickly to position themselves vis-à-vis the new authorities in Damascus, one group of states stood out for their restraint: the countries of Central Asia.

More than a year after Assad's departure, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have largely avoided formal statements, bilateral initiatives, or clear diplomatic signalling toward the new Syrian government. This silence is striking not only because of Syria's renewed geopolitical relevance, but also because developments in the Middle East often intersect indirectly with Central Asia's own security and foreign-policy considerations.

This article argues that Central Asia's muted response is not the result of indecision or neglect, but a deliberate and calculated strategy. At its core lies the uncomfortable positioning of post-Assad Syria within the broader Russia–Ukraine confrontation. As Moscow and Kyiv compete, both directly and symbolically, for influence in Damascus, any overt engagement with the new Syrian authorities risks being interpreted as a geopolitical alignment. For Central Asian states that remain economically and politically entangled with Russia, strategic silence – much like their approach to the Russia-Ukraine war [itself](#) - has emerged as the least costly option.

By examining how Russian and Ukrainian involvement in Syria has shaped Central Asian calculations, this article discusses the logic behind this restraint, the differences in approach among Central Asian states, and the conditions under which silence may eventually give way to cautious engagement.

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This report is part of Crossroads Central Asia's series highlighting analytical work by emerging scholars working on the region.

PATTERNS OF CAUTION IN CENTRAL ASIAN RESPONSES

Public engagement between Central Asian governments and the new Syrian authorities has so far been minimal, confined to large international conferences. However, Central Asian ministers sharing a room with new Syrian officials has not always resulted in public interaction. The search “Syria” on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan’s website is blank. Tajikistan’s last formal interaction was on September 26, 2024 during the 79th session of the UN General Assembly. In Kyrgyzstan’s case, the most recent [entry](#) on its MFA’s website mentioning Syria, published on December 10, 2024, focuses on the 22nd Doha International Forum held on December 7-8, 2024. Despite the regime change unfolding on December 8, 2024, during the conference, the summary lists Syria only midway in a series of conflicts, an avoidant formulation that chooses to ignore Assad’s flight to Moscow on that very day.

In contrast to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have made limited public references to Syria since December 2024. The 51st Session of the OIC Ministerial Council was the vehicle used by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for discussions with Syria outside of official bilateral diplomatic meetings, which would require a formal acknowledgement of regime change. Baxtiyor Saidov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs for Uzbekistan, held [talks](#) on the side of the session with Foreign Minister of Syria Asaad Hassan Al-Shaibani, during which “prospects for close cooperation were discussed”. Kazakhstan’s then Foreign Minister Murat Nurtleu similarly participated in the session and mentioned the necessary “stabilization of the situation in Syria” and “taking into account the interests of the Syrian people”.

Taken together, the limited signals from Central Asian governments suggest a spectrum of cautious positioning toward the new Syrian authorities. Notably, Kazakhstan’s statements at the 51st OIC Ministerial Council closely mirrored Russia’s own messaging on Syria. Both countries [focus](#) on “the importance of addressing all domestic issues by the Syrians themselves” and “sustainable stabilization”. The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the Republic of Kazakhstan has [republished](#) Russian Foreign Ministry statements on Syria, such as that condemning the July sectarian violence in Suwayda. From this, Astana is closely aligned with Moscow on Syrian foreign policy. By contrast, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan’s silence makes the two neutral, their reticence even more noticeable due to their participation in the 51st OIC Ministerial Council without interaction with Syria. Uzbekistan’s advertisement of positive bilateral talks with Syria at the OIC session sets the country up to be the most likely among Central Asian states to develop relations with Syria.

THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR’S IMPACT ON SYRIA

One of the major factors shaping Central Asian responses to Syria is Russia’s position. For more than a decade, Moscow treated the Assad government as a critical Middle Eastern partner and became its principal external protector during the civil war. In this context, the

abrupt collapse of Assad's rule in December 2024 placed Russia in an uncomfortable and reactive position. At the same time, Ukraine worked hard to capitalise on post-Assad anti-Russian sentiment in Syria, a factor that has further complicated matters for Central Asian states. The result is Central Asia's silence: governments in the region worry that engaging too openly with the new Syrian leadership could be interpreted in Moscow as a shift in alignment - an impression they are keen to avoid.

The Syrian regime change cannot be viewed in isolation from the Ukraine–Russia war. Russia itself drew this parallel. Six days after the Syrian Opposition Offensive launched and four days after HTS captured Aleppo, the Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia [addressed](#) the Security Council at a special briefing on Syria on December 3, 2024. Nebenzia was unflinching in his condemnation of HTS, characterising the future government as “terrorists” who were “clearly coordinated from abroad”. “Russian Aerospace Forces” were actively involved in supporting Assad (“legitimate Syrian authorities”) against HTS. Military intervention in Syria is not new or surprising. Russia's direct conflict with HTS placed Moscow in perhaps the least favourable position for productive relations with the new government. However, the key significance of Nebenzia's speech is the mention of Ukraine. He claimed that “the Main Directorate of Intelligence of Ukraine (GUR)” was “present in Idlib to train HTS fighters for combat operations”, had mounted “attacks against the Russian and Syrian troops in Syria”, and “that Ukrainian specialists accompanied by HTS terrorists were spotted at a scientific center in Aleppo province”. The message was clear: Russia backs Assad, Ukraine backs HTS.

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The above framing meant that any early support for the new Syrian authorities risked being perceived as an alignment with one side of the Ukraine–Russia conflict. For Central Asian states, caught between pro-Assad Russia and pro-HTS Turkey, maintaining silence became the least politically costly option.

UKRAINE'S ATTEMPT TO EXPAND INFLUENCE IN SYRIA

Russia and Ukraine's struggle for influence in Syria did not stop with al-Sharaa's assumption of power. Ukraine was perfectly positioned to take advantage of post-Assad anti-Russian sentiment in Syria, capitalising on positive relations developed through military support. In January, Damascus' Russian-language tourist signs had been graffitied over, and “Ukrainian”

was seen as a more [acceptable](#) alternative to “Russian” when Damascenes enquired about westerners’ origins.

Kiev capitalised on this opening. On December 30, 2024, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha and Minister for Agrarian Policy and Food Vitaliy Koval met al-Sharaa, recognising both Syria’s readiness for new diplomatic relationships and its need for humanitarian support. The meeting concluded with the opening of an informal honorary Ukrainian consulate in Damascus, which President Volodymyr Zelensky followed up with the intention of re-establishing formal diplomatic ties on January 2, 2025. This was the first sign of productive diplomatic relations since ties had been cut in June 2022 after Syria’s recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions’ independence. Ukraine included Syria in the “[Grain from Ukraine](#)” humanitarian aid program, providing “resources for around 167,000 Syrians for a month” in a relationship that “should be sustainable and not a one-off, but rather long-lasting and predictable”.

Russian intervention in both Ukraine and Syria was quickly weaponised into diplomatic rhetoric. The Ukrainian ambassador to Jordan, Myroslava Shcherbatiuk [stated](#) that “the war in Syria... [was] fuelled by external forces including Russia”, which is a “destabilizing actor”. Grain humanitarian aid for Ukraine holds both practical and symbolic importance in context of the “‘Holodomor,’ a genocide by starvation perpetrated by Stalin and the Soviet Union 90 years ago”. “Ukraine will not allow Russia to repeat this crime [famine] either to itself or to other countries”, Kiev told Damascus.

RUSSIA’S SUCCESS AT REHABILITATING RELATIONS WITH SYRIA

While alignment between Ukraine and Syria was always likely, it proved to be short-lived. This simplifies the dichotomy for Central Asian countries, as Russia moves down the long but plausible process of reconciliation with al-Sharaa’s government. Cold relations between Russia and Syria are not in Moscow’s interest, particularly considering Russia’s military bases at Hmeimim and Tartus. Tartus is Russia’s only permanent naval base in the Mediterranean outside the former Soviet Union. Tartus is under Russian jurisdiction until 2066, with a clause allowing Russia the ability to store nuclear weapons on their ships. These bases’ status is unclear. Russian ships [retreated](#) from the base in January 2025 and officially the lease was [terminated](#) by the new Syrian government. However, these decisions are reversible. Russian presence remains at Hmeimim air base, which became particularly significant in March. During the March 2025 massacres of [1,500 Alawites](#) in Latakia, about [9,000 Alawites](#) sought shelter at Khmeimim. This protection helped jumpstart Russian-Syrian conversations, as Ahmed Abdel Rahman, a government security official, [talked](#) of “coordination with our Russian friends” and thankfulness for their involvement.

Russia's attempts to warm relations have been persistent. Russia's first official visit to Syria was on January 28, 2025, when an official Russian inter-agency delegation including the Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov visited Damascus. President Vladimir Putin talked with al-Sharaa during a telephone call in March, and Turkey mediated talks between Russia and Syria in Antalya in April. Russia's efforts culminated with the visit of Syrian Foreign Minister Assad al-Shaibani to Moscow on 31 July, 2025. Meeting his Syrian counterpart, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stressed that "Syria ... remains a good friend" and its relationship with Russia "remains unaffected by shifting political dynamics or transitions in government". The meeting confirmed assurances regarding "the security of Russian facilities in the Syrian Arab Republic", the establishment of a "bilateral Intergovernmental Commission for Trade and Economic Cooperation", and the commitment "that the Kurds remain fully integrated within the Syrian society as part of a single state". The Syrian Foreign Ministry's short [44-word](#) website summary was perhaps less enthusiastic than the Russian Foreign Ministry's [215 words](#). Despite the imbalance, the Moscow meeting's productivity is testament to impressive improvement in relations, considering the direct Russian aerospace forces conflict with HTS only six months prior.

THE FUTURE OF CENTRAL ASIAN – SYRIA RELATIONS

Russia's evolving rhetoric makes future Syrian relations with Central Asia slightly easier. In a bid to look past Putin-era Assad relations, Lavrov drew from the Soviet Union's "defining role in laying the foundations of Syria's modern economy" and education programmes in Soviet universities, alongside a shared frustration with western sanctions and the religious "sisterly relationship" between Syrian Christians and the Russian Orthodox Church. In this context, Central Asia's role in Soviet-Syrian relations provides an additional, if indirect, bridge to the new government in Damascus, alongside religious affinities that Russia cannot fully claim.

That said, Syria's political trajectory remains fluid, making long-term alignment difficult to assess with confidence. Based on the current [Syrian Foreign Ministry website](#), however, the results of Russia and Ukraine's efforts for influence are clear. As of September 6, 2025, Russia is on the list of diplomatic relations; Ukraine is not. Russian-Syrian relations were further consolidated in October 2025, when Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa travelled to Moscow to participate in the Russia–League of Arab States Summit on October 15. On the margins of the summit, al-Sharaa held direct talks with President Vladimir Putin and senior Russian officials, marking the highest-level Russian-Syrian engagement since the collapse of the Assad regime. The meeting confirmed Russia's intent to maintain a long-term political and security role in post-Assad Syria and underscored Damascus's willingness to reintegrate Russia as a central external partner, despite Moscow's earlier military support for the former regime.

At the same time, Syria and Ukraine formally restored diplomatic relations on September 24, 2025, when President Ahmad al-Sharaa and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed an agreement on the sidelines of the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly. This agreement reaffirmed a commitment to cooperation across politics, trade, and humanitarian affairs after relations had been severed in 2022.

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are not yet mentioned on the Syrian Foreign Ministry website's "Asia" section. How long the Central Asian states will remain absent is unclear, but there is little immediate pressure for the region to declare a position. It is least risky for the region to wait for the dust to settle on international relations before making advances. What is certain is the unlikelihood of regional uniformity on Syrian relations, given Uzbekistan's relative openness, Kazakhstan's Russia-aligned caution, and the determined neutrality of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. However, as Russia's relations with Syria strengthen and Ukraine's diplomatic footprint remains limited, one significant constraint on Central Asian engagement is gradually diminishing, making the prospect of productive bilateral relations increasingly plausible.