

*Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024*

**Remarks on the Situation in Syria and an Exchange With Reporters**  
*December 8, 2024*

*The President.* Good afternoon. A lot happening in the Middle East.

After 13 years of civil war in Syria and more than half a century of brutal authoritarian rule by Bashar Asad and his father before him, rebel forces have forced Asad to resign his office and flee the country. We're not sure where he is, but the—there's word that he's in Moscow.

At long last, the Asad regime has fallen. This regime brutalized and tortured and killed literally hundreds of thousands of innocent Syrians.

The fall of the regime is a fundamental act of justice. It's a moment of historic opportunity for the long-suffering people of Syria to build a better future for their proud country.

It's also a moment of risk and uncertainty. As we all turn to the question of what comes next, the United States will work with our partners and the stakeholders in Syria to help them seize an opportunity to manage the risks.

You know, for years, the main backers of Asad have been Iran, Hizballah, and Russia. But over the last week, their support collapsed—all three of them—because all three of them are far weaker today than they were when I took office. And let's remember why.

After Hamas attacked Israel on October the 7th, 2023, when much of the world responded with horror, Iran and its proxies chose to launch a multifront war against Israel. That was a historic mistake on Iran's part. Today, Iran's main territorial proxy, Hizballah, is also on its back.

Only 12 days ago, I spoke from the Rose Garden about the cease-fire deal in Lebanon, a deal that was only possible because Hizballah has been badly degraded. Meanwhile, Hamas has been badly degraded as well.

Iran's own military capabilities have been weakened. Iran tried two times to attack Israel, and the United States and—built a coalition of countries to directly defend Israel and help defeat those attacks.

All this made possible for Iran and Hizballah to continue to prop up—impossible, I should say, for them to prop up the Asad regime.

Additionally, Russia's support for Asad also failed. And that's because Ukraine, backed by our American allies, has put up a wall of resistance against the invading Russian forces, inflicting massive damage on the Russian forces. And that has left Russia unable to protect its main ally in the Middle East.

*[At this point, the President coughed.]*

Excuse my cold.

The upshot for all this is, for the first time ever, neither Russia nor Iran nor Hizballah could defend this abhorrent regime in Syria. And this is a direct result of the blows that Ukraine, Israel have delivered upon their own self-defense with unflagging support of the United States.

You know, over the past 4 years, my administration pursued a clear, principled policy towards Syria.

First, we made clear from the start sanctions on Iran—Asad would remain in place unless he engaged seriously in a political process to end the civil war, as outlined by the U.N. Security

Council resolution passed in 2015. But Asad refused, so we carried out a comprehensive sanction program against him and all those responsible for atrocities against the Syrian people.

Second, we maintained our military presence in Syria. Our counter-ISIS—to counter the support of local partners as well on the ground—their partners—never ceding an inch of territory, taking out leaders of ISIS, ensuring that ISIS can never establish a safe haven there again.

Third, we've supported Israel's freedom of action against Iranian networks in Syria and against actors aligned with Iran who transported lethal aid to Lebanon and, when necessary, ordered the use of military force against Iranian networks to protect U.S. forces.

Our approach has shifted the balance of power in the Middle East. Through this combination of support for our partners, sanctions, and diplomacy and targeted military force when necessary, we now see new opportunities opening up for the people of Syria and for the entire region.

Looking ahead, the United States will do the following: First, we'll support Syria's neighbors—including Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Israel—should any threat arise from Syria during this period of transition. I will speak with leaders of the region in the coming days. I had long discussions with all of our people earlier this morning. And I'll send senior officials from my administration to the region as well.

Second, we will help stability—ensure stability in eastern Syria, protecting any personnel—our personnel against any threats. And it will remain—our mission against ISIS will be maintained, including the security of detention facilities where ISIS fighters are being held as prisoners. We're clear eyed about the fact that ISIS will try to take advantage of any vacuum to reestablish its capability and to create a safe haven. We will not let that happen.

In fact, just today U.S. forces conducted a dozen of precision strikes—air strikes within Syria targeting ISIS camps and ISIS operatives.

Third, we will engage with all Syrian groups, including within the process led by the United Nations, to establish a transition away from the Asad regime toward independent, sovereign—an independent—independent—I want to say it again—sovereign Syria with a new constitution, a new government that serves all Syrians. And this process will be determined by the Syrian people themselves.

And the United States will do whatever we can to support them, including through humanitarian relief, to help restore Syria after more than a decade of war and generations of brutality by the Asad family.

And finally, we will remain vigilant. Make no mistake, some of the rebel groups that took down Asad have their own grim record of terrorism and humanity—human right abuses. We've taken note of statements by the leaders of these rebel groups in recent days. And we're—they're saying the right things now, but as they take on greater responsibility, we will assess not just their words, but their actions.

And as—we are mindful—we are mindful that there are Americans in Syria, including those who reside there, as well as Austin Tice, who was taken captive more than 12 years ago. We remain committed to returning him to his family.

As I've said, this is a moment of considerable risk and uncertainty, but I also believe this is the best opportunity in generations for Syrians to forge their own future free of opposition.

It's also an opportunity, though far from certain—though it's far from certain, for a more secure and prosperous Middle East, where our friends are safe, where our enemies are contained. And it would be a waste of this historic opportunity if one tyrant were toppled and only a—only to see a new one rise up in its place. So it's now incumbent upon all the opposition groups who

seek a role in governing Syria to demonstrate their commitment to the rights of all Syrians, the rule of law, and the protection of religious and ethnic minorities.

These past few days have been historic, and you know, it's in the days ahead that will determine the future of a—this country, and we intend to approach them with strength, wisdom, and resolve.

So thank you very much. God bless America, and God protect our troops.

Thank you.

*Q.* What should happen to Asad now, Mr. President?

*Q.* What does the U.S. know——

*Q.* Mr. President, are you concerned about all-out war in the Middle East?

*United States Citizen Austin B. Tice/Former President Bashar al-Asad of Syria*

*Q.* What does the U.S. know about where Austin Tice might be and if he's safe?

*The President.* We believe he's alive. We think we can get him back, but we have no direct evidence of that yet.

And Asad should be held accountable.

*United States Citizen Austin B. Tice*

*Q.* Have you directed an operation to go get him, Mr. President?

*Q.* Mr. President, is Asad in Moscow?

*The President.* Get who?

*Q.* Austin Tice.

*The President.* We have to—we want to get him out. We——

*Q.* Yes, sir.

*The President.* ——we have to identify where he is.

Thank you.

*Q.* Thank you, sir.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:39 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist organization. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on December 9.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : Syria situation; Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters, White House.

*Locations:* Washington, DC.

*Names:* Asad, Bashar al-; Tice, Austin B.

*Subjects:* Gaza, conflict with Israel; Hamas political-paramilitary organization; Iran, regional involvement; Iran, relations with Syria; Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist organization; Israel, attacks by Hamas of October 7, 2023; Israel, military operations in Gaza; Israel, military operations in Lebanon; Israel, U.S. assistance; Lebanon, Hizballah political-paramilitary organization; Lebanon, Israeli military operations; Middle East, regional integration and security; Russia, conflict in Ukraine; Russia, relations with Syria; Syria, civil war and

sectarian conflict; Syria, political transition following President Bashar al-Asad's ouster; Syria, political unrest and violence; Syria, U.S. and coalition airstrikes; Syria, U.S. sanctions; Syrian, human rights issues; Ukraine, Russian invasion and airstrikes; Ukraine, U.S. assistance.

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