

## **A New Era in Syria: Winners, Losers, and Implications for Israel**

**Carmit Valensi** | January 12, 2025

### **Main Points**

The developments in Syria present Israel with both new challenges and potential opportunities. The uncertainty surrounding the policy of the new regime under Ahmed al-Sharaa and the evolving situation on the ground necessitate that Israel maintain a high level of military readiness to cope with emerging threats, the unclear intentions of key actors—including Turkey—and the potential re-establishment of the Iran–Hezbollah axis within Syria. At the same time, al-Sharaa’s restrained statements regarding Israel, the presence of moderate elements, and the weakness of the Iranian-led “axis of resistance,” as well as of Russia in Syria, could create opportunities for diplomatic engagement. Israel should prepare for both scenarios: a stabilized Syria led by a moderate and effective regime or a Syria that serves as a breeding ground for extremist actors that could threaten Israel’s security. To address both possibilities, Israel should adopt a policy that encourages positive developments. This approach should combine military determination with measured diplomatic and humanitarian efforts that would enable Israel to protect its borders, participate in efforts to stabilize the region, emphasize its assets, and significantly improve its standing in both the regional and international arenas.

### **The Overview**

Within just 13 days, the rebel group Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) seized control of Damascus, bringing an end to the 13-year-long Syrian civil war. This marked a shift in Syria’s political and military landscape. HTS’s takeover of Damascus was the result of a combination of circumstances that resulted in a “perfect storm.” The ongoing war with Israel left Iran and especially its proxies—Hezbollah and Hamas—in an unprecedented position of weakness, significantly undermining their presence in Syria and enabling the rebels’ swift advance. Russia, preoccupied with its war in Ukraine, scaled back its presence and involvement in Syria. Witnessing the Syrian army’s collapse, Moscow concluded that salvaging Assad’s regime was futile. Despite HTS’s jihadist roots, significant segments of the Syrian population seemed to support its struggle out of frustration with Assad’s rule and deteriorating living conditions. Meanwhile, cracks within the political and military elite’s confidence in the regime prepared the ground for Assad’s rapid fall.

## New Government, Old Challenges

HTS was established in January 2017, a year after its leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, also known as Abu Mohammad al-Julani, severed ties with al-Qaeda's Syrian branch (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) to form a local Syrian organization. As a result of ideological disagreements with ISIS and al-Qaeda, al-Sharaa adopted an independent path with the primary goal of overthrowing Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Since 2018, HTS ruled a population of about 3.4 million residents in the Idlib Governorate in northwestern Syria. Despite the humanitarian crisis there, including over one million displaced persons, the group managed to establish a relatively stable model of governance, and, with Turkish support, it succeeded in bringing some economic stabilization to the region. Despite its jihadist roots, HTS has generally adopted a pragmatic approach, refraining from violently imposing Islamic law and allowing a certain degree of freedom. However, it is still too early to draw conclusions from the experience in Idlib about the ability to govern a country with 23 million residents facing severe political and security challenges, as well as severe economic and energy crises.

Although HTS has undergone a process of relative moderation in recent years, there are concerns that an extreme religious ideology will take over, or, at the very least, that authoritarian patterns of governance will be adopted. Moreover, even if al-Sharaa has genuinely embraced moderation, he is still surrounded by extremists in both the political and military leadership, which could hinder his efforts in charting a new course and stabilizing Syria's complex political landscape.

However, so far, the transition under al-Sharaa has been marked by relative calm, aside from isolated protests and sporadic acts of violence. The new regime is rapidly implementing stabilization measures, including the appointment of foreign, defense, and other government ministers, and expediting the restoration of Syria's foreign relations. In less than a month, al-Sharaa has hosted a series of regional and international leaders, many of whom have already announced the renewal of diplomatic relations with Syria. When it comes to Syria's political future, he has promised to draft a constitution and hold elections, but only after stabilization—a process that could take about four years—with the ultimate goal of reuniting Syria. On the military front, al-Sharaa is working to unify the armed militias into a new military and security establishment that operates under the authority of the central political leadership. He is also addressing the status of former Syrian army personnel and overseeing the transfer of weapons from various rebel factions to the central government. While these military measures are proceeding with relative consensus, significant challenges remain, and the process is far from complete.

To address the economic crisis and repair the damage caused by the civil war—estimated at between \$250 billion and \$400 billion—the new regime will need

immediate international assistance, mainly humanitarian aid and the supply of oil, which was piped in from Iran during Assad's rule. Some countries in the region, such as Qatar, have already begun providing aid. However, the critical factor lies with the United States and its decision on whether to continue to implement the sanctions under the Caesar Act, which was passed by the US government in 2019 and imposes sanctions on entities providing economic support to the Assad regime.

#### Key Actors—Achievements and Losses

**Turkey**—Turkey supported the rebels against the Assad regime throughout the civil war and is now reaping the benefits of its involvement. It is expected to have a central role in shaping Syria's future—potentially even more significant than the roles Iran and Russia have played in the country. Over the years, Ankara's policy in Syria has been motivated by two main interests: reducing the Kurdish autonomous region and pushing its perceived threat away from Turkish territory, as well as facilitating the return of some of the 3.5 million Syrian refugees currently in Turkey, who pose an economic and political burden for the regime. In addition, having dealt with terrorist attacks perpetrated by al-Qaeda and ISIS within its borders, Turkey aimed to prevent Syria from becoming a renewed center for jihadist terrorism.

Furthermore, the current situation in Syria suits Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's nationalist aspirations of positioning Turkey as a regional power with various levers of influence. In the short term, Turkey is expected to seize the opportunity to weaken the Kurds through its armed proxy groups, such as the Syrian National Army (SNA). It will likely strengthen its influence in Syria by supporting political processes, building the army, and contributing to the country's anticipated economic rehabilitation. Ankara may also become a major supplier of diverse Turkish-produced military equipment to Syria. In addition, it could push for the establishment of a military and strategic alliance with the new Syrian regime—one that would secure its influence over Syria's military and political decisions and perhaps even allow Turkey to maintain troops within Syria and retain control of the territories it has captured. Al-Sharaa has even stated that "Turkey, which offered refuge to millions of Syrians during the civil war, will have priority over other countries in rebuilding Syria."

**Qatar**—Like Turkey, Qatar supported the Syrian rebels for years. However, unlike Ankara, which in recent years had been seeking a dialogue with Assad, and in contrast with the other Arab Gulf countries that tried to pull Assad back into their circle of influence, Qatar maintained a firm stance, refusing any diplomatic recognition of Assad and his return to the Arab world. Although this uncompromising stance positioned Qatar as a key player in Syria, it now plays a secondary role to Turkey in terms of influence. Qatar's stance also sets it apart from its neighbors, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, which are still navigating their approach to the new regime in Syria.

Within a week of the events that led to the fall of Assad's regime, Doha opened its embassy in Damascus and began providing humanitarian aid. It is already collaborating with Turkey on economic projects to rebuild Syria. Qatar and Turkey may also renew their plans to construct a natural gas pipeline to Europe via Syria.

**The Kurds**—The situation of the Kurdish minority in Syria, numbering about 2.5 million residents, has significantly worsened since the country's upheaval. The main military conflict in Syria today is being waged against the Kurdish autonomous region in the northeast. Ankara has threatened to expand its military operations in Syria to remove Kurdish forces from the areas east of the Euphrates River, after successfully expelling them from key points to the west. Mazloum Abdi, the leader of the Kurdish forces, proposed establishing "weapon-free zones" along parts of the Syrian–Turkish border and expressed a willingness to integrate the Kurdish forces into a future Syrian army. However, Turkey has rejected such compromise proposals and continues to push for the removal of Kurdish forces from strategic areas in northern Syria. The Kurds remain in a precarious position, heavily dependent on American and international support.

**Iran**—The fall of the Assad regime represents a serious setback for Iran, which was forced to withdraw its forces and assets from Syria, including Hezbollah. As a result, Iran has lost a critical strategic foothold in the region. Iran's decision to refrain from actively supporting Assad against the rebels has sparked harsh criticism within the Revolutionary Guard and increased fears about the potential repercussions on Iran's domestic stability. The Iranian regime also faces the reality that Turkey was behind the recent developments and will become the dominant actor in the future of Syria. At this stage, Iran has adopted a wait-and-see approach, relying on scenarios of instability in Syria that could provide opportunities to align with local factions opposed to the new regime.

**Russia**—Having been forced to remove most of its forces from Syria, Russia is now focused on maintaining its two military bases, the Khmeimim Air Base and the Tartus Naval Base in western Syria, by seeking agreements with Turkey and the new regime. Russia still retains leverage over the new government in Syria, particularly through the supply of grain (much of Syria's wheat imports come from Russia). Although the HTS considers Russia an enemy whose air force attacked the Idlib Governorate and the rebel organizations for years, as well as now granting political asylum to Assad, HTS's pragmatic approach thus far leaves room for potential cooperation between the two sides.

**The United States**—The developments in Syria have played into Washington's hands, particularly regarding its stance on Iran and Russia. After years without diplomatic relations with the Assad regime, the United States quickly sent a delegation led by the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Barbara A. Leaf, to Damascus to meet with al-Sharaa. The meeting ended with the announcement that the bounty on al-Sharaa had been removed. In time, the US administration may also consider easing

or lifting sanctions imposed on Syria under the Caesar Act, along with removing HTS from its list of terrorist organizations, to strengthen alliances with the new Syria, especially in efforts against ISIS and Iran. However, the return of Donald Trump to the White House raises uncertainties about the level of US interest in Syria. During his first term, Trump sought to remove the American forces from Syria but reversed course due to pressure from his advisors. A quick withdrawal of American forces, as he has proposed in the past, could lead to the collapse of the Kurdish autonomous region, encourage the activity of extremist groups such as ISIS, and undermine efforts to stabilize Syria.

From a regional perspective, it appears that many in the region—Jordanians, Egyptians, Syrians, and Emiratis—are concerned about the future intentions of al-Sharaa and his inner circle, viewing him as a “wolf in sheep’s clothing.” Many believe it is only a matter of time before his policy is translated into subversive activities, including the establishment of a Hamas-like branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Golan Heights against Israel; serving as an inspiration for Islamist groups that seek to destabilize the regimes in the region, especially Jordan and Egypt; and fostering the emergence of a network of Muslim Brotherhood-aligned states—including Turkey, Qatar, and the new Syria—that could compete with the network of pragmatic Sunni countries, such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.

### **Implications for Israel**

Al-Sharaa’s attempt to project a pragmatic and moderate image is also evident in his statements about Israel. In several media interviews in December, al-Sharaa spoke about Israel in a cautious, restrained, and even somewhat positive manner. For example, he pledged to uphold the 1974 Agreement on Disengagement between Israel and Syria and asserted that Syria is not interested in conflict with Israel but rather in rebuilding the country. Al-Sharaa also conveyed that he would not allow Syria to be used as a base for attacks against Israel or any other country. At the same time, he called on Israel to stop its attacks in Syria and withdraw from the buffer zone it captured, an area of about 235 square kilometers under the management of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) on the Syrian side of the border. According to al-Sharaa, Israel’s justification for its operations in Syria—the presence of Hezbollah and Iranian militias—is no longer valid. While uncertainty remains regarding al-Sharaa’s intentions and the future of Syria, the emerging reality could create both challenges and opportunities for Israel.



The course of events presents Israel with three main options: (1) Taking over the Syrian Golan Heights and directly influencing its demilitarization, including advancing as far as the Syrian frontline (a succession of dormant volcanoes on both sides of the border); (2) Taking control of the buffer zone and Mount Hermon and counter-influence efforts to create a demilitarized zone enforced through live fire; (3) A conditional military withdrawal based on establishing a stable framework of understandings with the new regime, under US sponsorship and in coordination with Turkey. As of this writing, Israel has chosen the second option. However, an analysis of the implications indicates that the third option better aligns with Israel's long-term military and strategic objectives.

### Positive Aspects

From Israel's perspective, a positive scenario in shaping Syria's future includes several key elements: the absence of the Iranian "axis of resistance" and its influence; a stable new regime that is not hostile to Israel and is even willing to hold diplomatic talks; and a functioning Syrian army capable of addressing threats from extremist groups such as ISIS.

The damage to the "axis of resistance" is significant at this stage, and Syria's detachment from the axis will further undermine efforts to rehabilitate it. Currently, most rebel groups near the border with Israel do not belong to (or identify with) HTS. They include remnants of the Free Syrian Army and Druze forces, which have expressed a positive attitude toward Israel and have previously cooperated with it. While concerns remain about Syria's lack of an effective central authority and the rise of extremist jihadist groups near Israel's border, the military capabilities of the rebel groups are inferior to those of Iran and its proxies. Furthermore, their main enemy is the Assad–Iran–Hezbollah axis, as well as other groups inside Syria. As a result, fighting against Israel is unlikely to be a top priority for them in the near term, even in response to Israeli military actions in Syria.

In the long term, the post-Assad era could create opportunities to renew diplomatic talks between Syria and Israel, depending on the emergence of a stable and moderate central government in Syria. Until then, Israel has an opportunity to improve its standing and influence in the region, bolstered by its relationships with the United States, Jordan, and the countries of the Abraham Accords as described below.

### Negative Potential

A negative scenario for Israel involves the development of a jihadist Islamist regime hostile to Israel, the consolidation of a broader Islamist camp in the region, and the spread of instability, chaos, and violence along Israel's border. Such conditions could serve as fertile ground for Iran and its proxies to renew their presence in the Syrian arena.

After over a year of war on several fronts, Israel has expressed concern that the instability in Syria could spill over into its territory. In response, Israel has taken immediate preventive measures, including a series of extensive air and naval strikes aimed at significantly reducing the military capabilities of the Syrian army, particularly its strategic weapons, and preventing these weapons from falling into the hands of hostile groups. In addition, Israel took control of the demilitarized buffer zone established under the 1974 ceasefire agreement. Israel has emphasized that this is a temporary measure intended to secure its borders, maintain stability, and preserve the integrity of the buffer zone. From a Syrian, regional, and international perspective, however, Israel's capture of territory and unilateral actions are viewed as aggressive and hostile toward Syria.

Although HTS and other extremist groups in Syria have primarily focused on internal challenges, recently their attention has turned to Israel, as evident in the public and media discourse. This shift comes despite al-Sharaa's statements that the organization intends to respect the disengagement agreement and avoid conflict with Israel. Moreover, Israel's actions could undermine the legitimacy of Syria's new government, which is unable to assert control or exercise its sovereignty given Israel's activity, and could inadvertently strengthen extremist elements. Currently, the discourse in Syria mainly focuses on Israeli actions and the resulting physical damage, including civilian casualties, the destruction of houses and agricultural land in southern Syria, as well as demonstrations by local populations demanding the withdrawal of the IDF from the buffer zone. If the IDF's presence continues, it is likely that such incidents and opposition from the local population will increase.

Meanwhile, international criticism of Israel's actions in Syria is increasing, with Israel being accused of violating Syrian sovereignty and playing into the hands of extremist groups. In response, Israel can expect that Turkey and others will soon initiate international efforts and potentially military ones to remove the IDF's forces from the newly controlled territories in the Golan Heights.

Moreover, Turkey's military presence in Syria may expand over time (even if defined as "advisors"), which would restrict Israel's ability to operate there and could lead to friction with IDF forces. If Iran's "axis of resistance" resumes the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah without being stopped by the new Syrian regime or Turkey, the likelihood of conflict will increase. Ultimately, any occupation of Syrian territory that leads to friction with the local population will pose significant risks and could even reignite calls for the return of the Golan Heights to Syrian sovereignty.

## Recommendations for Action

Of the three options proposed, the third—creating a stable set of understandings with the new regime under American sponsorship and cooperation with Turkey—is recommended. This approach emphasizes not only Israel’s military capabilities (controlling the buffer zone, military strikes, and the potential to increase them) but also its diplomatic, civilian, and humanitarian efforts to reduce the negative effects of the military action and establish long-term security without requiring a military presence. Within this framework, the following steps are recommended:

1. The uncertainty of Syria’s future—particularly regarding the actions of its government and other jihadist groups in relation to Israel—**necessitates the development of a new border defense strategy**. This plan should address the question of the buffer zone and the role of UNDOF, accompanied by a clear diplomatic statement that Israel’s presence in the area is temporary and contingent on resolving key issues to safeguard its interests, mainly the emergence of a responsible and moderate force capable of securing the Syrian side of the border. This development could allow Israel to unilaterally withdraw from the buffer zone in the short term while maintaining control over the Syrian Hermon until lasting stability is achieved.
2. The process Israel has begun of destroying Syria’s strategic weapons is critical. This effort should ensure both militarily and through internationally guaranteed diplomatic arrangements that no biological or chemical weapons remain in Syria.
3. Israel should consider **initial channels of communication with the new regime in Syria**, provided that its diplomatic and security interests in the Golan Heights and the rest of the country are maintained. Such engagement should be contingent on the regime refraining from spreading terrorism or cooperating with terrorist groups that threaten Israel. Positive actions by the new regime could be met with recognition and carefully measured reciprocal gestures by Israel in the future.
4. Israel should provide **strategic clarity** to local (Druze and moderate Sunnis), regional (Turkey), and international actors regarding its timeline for remaining in the territory and define the conditions necessary for its withdrawal. Until then, Israel should reduce its visibility and exposure of its military activities to avoid attracting both attention and fire toward Israel.
5. Israel should expedite talks **and establish relations with positive forces in the territory**. This effort should include providing focused but symbolic humanitarian aid to help alleviate the anti-Israel sentiment. Such actions should be coordinated with the central regime as a confidence-building measure, ensuring that they are not perceived as an attempt to undermine its



authority. Israel should also avoid direct involvement in the military conflicts in Syria and maintain coordination with its allies, chiefly the United States.

6. Israel has a strategic interest to avoid positioning Turkey as an adversary. Turkey is a member of NATO and a former ally of Israel. Despite Ankara's hawkish policies, including its position on the war in Gaza, it is in Israel's long-term interests to reduce tensions rather than exacerbate them. Consequently, Israel should pursue **mutual understandings with Turkey** focused on stabilizing the border region through moderate groups agreed upon by both sides and clarifying Turkey's intentions in Syria.
7. Israel should also seek to **strengthen its dialogue with Jordan and the Gulf states** to shape Syria's future and prevent hostile parties such as Iran and Russia from renewing their influence in the region.
8. Israel should support advancing an international initiative led by the United States to establish a four-member committee comprising Turkey, Russia, and Israel. The committee's primary goal will be to stabilize the new government while ensuring the protection of minority groups. Under this framework, the United States would be responsible for the Kurds, Israel for the Druze, Russia for the Alawites, and Turkey for the Sunni groups under its influence.
9. Syria's severe economic crisis and shortage of essential goods—fuel, wheat, and water—will likely cause regional and international competition for influence in the country. This reality presents Israel with a **strategic opportunity to stand out as a constructive actor** by leveraging its technological advantages (including in agriculture). Such efforts could contribute to rebuilding Syria and also strengthen Israel's regional influence over competing interests.
10. **In any case, any Israeli, regional, and international recognition of the new regime** and aid provided to it **should be conditioned on guarantees and the fulfillment of demands. These conditions should include** securing the borders and preventing threats from extremist groups, halting the re-establishment of the "axis of resistance" and the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon, refraining from acts of vengeance against ethnic and religious groups, and implementing a process of transition and rebuilding under international guidance to stabilize Syria.