

Beyond the Brink: Israel's Strategic Opportunity in Syria

Nir Boms, Carmit Valensi, Mzahem Alsaloum¹ | No. 1979 | May 8, 2025

On December 8, 2024, Syria experienced a historic turning point with the fall of Bashar al-Assad. This dramatic development has ushered in a new phase of uncertainty and transition, offering both risks and opportunities. While it is still too early to determine Syria's long-term trajectory, the new leadership under President Ahmed al-Sharaa has made cautious moves to stabilize the country. However, Israel's initial reaction—shaped by security anxieties and the trauma of the October 7 attack—has resulted in a militarized and unilateral approach that risks overlooking emerging diplomatic openings and reinforcing old patterns of confrontation. This article examines the unfolding dynamics in Syria, the risks of an overly reactive Israeli policy, and the strategic opportunities that could emerge if Israel shifts from a posture of fear to one of cautious engagement. A recalibrated approach might not only improve Israeli security but also reshape the broader regional landscape.

On December 8, 2024, Syria experienced a historic turning point with the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime and his exile to Moscow. Recent dramatic shifts in Syria have altered the balance of power that has defined the country over the past decade, and these changes are still ongoing. On the spectrum between moderation and inclusive governance on one end, and instability fueled by radicalization on the other, it remains unclear which direction the new regime will take. Although some positive steps have been taken, doubts persist about the true intentions of the new Syrian president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, given his jihadi background.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore that the new Syrian government has quickly established itself as a formal authority and is taking steps toward stabilization. Within four months, it formed a transitional government and is working to restore Syria's foreign relations. The new administration has begun sending reassuring messages to the world and its neighbors, particularly Israel, emphasizing that it has no intention of pursuing military conflicts. It has introduced its agenda, emphasizing pragmatic goals: power-sharing, minority rights, and economic development—all critical for a war-stricken country.

Despite these positive moves, the regime faces significant challenges, particularly in asserting control over all armed forces operating on its behalf. This was clearly illustrated during the bloody clashes between the Alawite community and regime forces in Latakia in late March

¹ **Mzahem Alsaloum** is a Syrian analyst from Deir-al-Zor. He participated in the Syrian war and served as a spokesperson for the Free Syrian Army.

Dr. Carmit Valensi is a senior researcher at the INSS

Dr. Nir Boms is a research fellow at the Dayan Center, Tel Aviv University, where he manages the Syria Research Forum.

2025. Although this event tarnished the regime’s image, al-Sharaa sought to mitigate the damage by condemning the violence and establishing a state commission of inquiry to investigate the events and prosecute those responsible for harming civilians.

Overall, the policy al-Sharaa has pursued seems to offer an opportunity to reshape regional relations. However, Israel’s approach to Syria since the fall of Assad has been shaped by security concerns, influenced by the trauma of October 7. Israel’s response—seizing control of a demilitarized buffer zone established under the 1974 ceasefire agreement, including areas on the Syrian side of Mount Hermon; launching an intense series of airstrikes on Syrian military sites; and conducting raids in Damascus has set a confrontational tone. Israeli officials have stated that the new government is led by “[a jihadist terrorist of the al-Qaeda school](#)”—a message echoed by Iran as well, raising questions about Israel’s willingness to consider a shift in its relations with Syria.

Parallel to military operations, Israel has announced a “minority engagement” policy with the [Kurds and Druze](#), who share similar concerns about the rise of Islamist forces in the region and [fear for their security](#). Israel has pledged to support the Kurds and protect the Druze by military means, if necessary—a policy that places Israel as a partisan actor in the middle of Syria’s internal conflicts and at odds with the Sunni majority-led government. Israel’s policy has therefore been driven by a desire to prevent another security vacuum while maintaining its freedom of action to neutralize emerging threats.

However, the new rulers of Damascus are not Hamas, and they do not have the same policy. The new Syrian government has refrained from engaging with Hamas leaders, has expelled some Palestinian factions—such as the PFLP and Hamas—by [asking them to move](#) their operations outside of Syria, and even made a rare move of arresting two senior members of the [Palestinian](#) armed faction Islamic Jihad. In addition, it has invested significant efforts to counter Hezbollah’s attempts to smuggle weapons, including bombing Hezbollah forces along the Syrian–Lebanese border.

How Current Israeli Policy May Lead to the Very Threats It Seeks to Prevent

Although the new Syrian government has primarily focused on internal challenges and maintained a cautious, restrained approach toward Israel, Israel’s intense—and at times deadly—military actions within Syria have dramatically shifted public and media attention toward Israel. This shift occurred even though President al-Sharaa publicly reaffirmed his commitment to uphold the disengagement agreement and avoid conflict with Israel.

[Israel’s deadly raid](#) in southern Syria on April 3, which killed nine individuals, [sparked widespread outrage among segments of the Syrian public](#). The attack was followed by mass demonstrations and calls for local communities to arm themselves and resist the Israeli presence in Syria. In other words, while Israel aimed to eliminate potential threats through these military operations, its actions may have instead fueled growing resistance and increased the likelihood of future clashes—ironically, the very scenario it aimed to prevent by intervening in the first place.

Moreover, Israel's operations have begun to erode the legitimacy of Syria's new government, which is increasingly seen as incapable of asserting control or exercising sovereignty in the face of Israeli actions. Although Israel expresses little trust in the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)-affiliated government due to its Islamist background, this perception of weakness could inadvertently strengthen the extremist elements that Israel seeks to contain. Meanwhile, [international criticism of Israel's actions in Syria is increasing](#), with Israel being accused of violating Syrian sovereignty without clear justification.

While Israel's minority policy—supporting the Kurds and Druze—may seem like a prudent strategy in the short term, it could prove counterproductive in the long term if treated as the primary framework for engagement with Syria. By encouraging the de facto fragmentation of Syria into ethnic and sectarian enclaves, Israel risks undermining efforts to stabilize the region. This policy, although seemingly aligned with Israel's security interests, could inadvertently foster a cycle of sectarianism that would ultimately benefit Israel's rivals—including Iran.

Iran's Expansion in Syria

Since Assad's fall and the evacuation of Iranian forces, Iran has sought new ways to maintain and expand its influence in Syria. Even after being forced out of certain areas, [Iran continues to empower proxy forces](#), including some Alawite Shiite loyalists, Hezbollah, Iraqi Shiite militias, local warlords, and even some Kurds from the PKK. These groups are integral to Iran's strategy of exerting regional influence in Syria and the broader region through malign proxies. While Iran often uses manipulation, propaganda, and the fostering of instability through local Syrian groups, its overarching goal remains the consolidation of its power bases in Syria. Ironically, Israeli policy actions may unintentionally support that very narrative: Israel was quick to blame the HTS-affiliated Islamists for the massacre against Alawites and Christians in March 2025. Yet the reality on the ground was more nuanced and complex, with few "innocent souls" involved. It became clear that [Iranian-influenced forces had much to do with triggering the violence](#), attempting to expand Iran's influence in Syria even among Israel's allies—the Kurds and villages in southern Syria.

Moreover, the continued IDF activity in southern Syria has provided Iran with a convenient pretext to call for the revival of its "resistance" against Israel from Syrian territory. At the end of December 2024, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, [declared that there is no doubt that "brave Syrian youth" will expel the "Zionists" from Syria](#). Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Hossein Salami stated that [the situation in which "Zionists" can look into the homes of Damascus with the naked eye is intolerable](#), and warned that Israel would pay a heavy price and be buried in Syrian soil. Ali Akbar Ahmadian, the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, said during a meeting with Oman's Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi that with Israel's occupation of Syrian land, [a new "resistance"](#) has been born—one that will manifest itself in the coming years.

Potential Israeli-Turkish Escalation

Perhaps the most pressing and crucial factor in the equation is Turkey, a NATO member with a complex relationship with Israel. Tensions between Turkey and Israel have escalated since

Commented [CV1]: לתרגום בעברית- מנהיג איראן, עלי ח'אמנהאי, הצהיר בסוף דצמבר 2024, כי אין ספק שהצעירים הסורים האמיצים יוציאו את "הציונים" מסוריה (אתר מנהיג איראן, 22 בדצמבר 2024). מפקד משמרות המהפכה סלאמי אמר כי המצב שבו "הציונים" יכולים להשקיף לתוך הבתים של דמשק בעין בלתי מזוינת הוא בלתי נסבל וכי הם ישלמו מחיר כבד וייקברו באדמת סוריה (תסנים 15, בדצמבר 2024). מזכיר "המועצה העליונה לביטחון לאומי" אחמדיאן אמר בפגישה עם שר החוץ העומאני, בדר אלבו סעידי, שעם כיבוש אדמות סוריה בידי ישראל, נולדה "התנגדות" חדשה, שתבוא לידי ביטוי בשנים הקרובות) איסנא 30, בדצמבר 2024.

the start of Israel's war in Gaza in 2023, marking the end of a brief period of reconciliation between the two countries.

The collapse of Assad's regime has enabled Ankara to expand its influence in Syria by leveraging its military capabilities to fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal of Russian and Iranian forces. Since December 2024, Ankara and Damascus have been negotiating a defense pact under which Turkey would provide air cover and military protection to Syria's new government. As part of these efforts, Turkey has moved toward taking control of Syria's Tiyas Air Base (T4) and is preparing to deploy air defense systems there.

Israel views Turkey's growing military presence as a potential threat to its freedom of operation in Syria. Since December, the IDF has intensified its airstrikes on Syrian military infrastructure, recently focusing on the T4 and Palmyra Air Bases—targeting runways and strategic assets. These strikes are meant to signal that Israel will not tolerate Turkish actions that could undermine its aerial operational freedom. However, it remains unclear whether these strikes will deter Turkey; at most, they may cause tactical delays.

The current trajectory heightens the risk of further deterioration in Israeli–Turkish relations and has already brought the [two countries to meet in Azerbaijan](#) to discuss a deconfliction mechanism. Moreover, although al-Sharaa has been [hesitant to fully align with Turkey](#) in order to avoid turning Syria into a Turkish proxy, he has maintained contact with competing actors such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Nevertheless, Israel's recent moves may be pushing him closer to Erdoğan.

While Turkey's policies have historically been hostile toward Israel, it plays a different strategic role than Iran. Despite its opposition to Israeli policies in some areas, Turkey is unlikely to become a full-fledged enemy of Israel due to its opportunistic approach, its membership in NATO, its relationship with the United States, and its strategic interests in the region.

From Fragmentation to Engagement and Cooperation with Damascus

Israel's continued emphasis on military presence, airstrikes, and protecting minorities in Syria might contribute to further fragmenting the country and weakening the central government in Damascus. Ironically, this trend could align with Iran's interests, as Iran benefits from Syria's lack of central authority. Having lost much of its influence in Syria, Iran seeks to maintain new channels of influence in the country, relying on former loyalists as well as on the remnants of its proxy networks, competing with Israel for influence over the same communities. Besides Iran's malign activity, a fractured Syria would provide fertile ground for other radical elements to flourish, such as ISIS, al-Qaeda, or Hamas—all of which the new Syrian regime is currently suppressing.

One could also argue that Israel's current policy contradicts a core principle shared by both Israel and the United States: the need to strengthen central governments in fragile Arab states so they can better confront non-state actors, which Iran could exploit to expand its influence, primarily in Lebanon (via Hezbollah) and Iraq (via pro-Iranian Shiite militias). As a result, a paradox emerges: While Israel advocates for bolstering Lebanon's central government to weaken Hezbollah, and while the United States works to integrate Shiite militias into Iraq's

official security forces to reduce their autonomy and curb Iran's influence, in Syria, it is Israel itself that is actively working to undermine the central authority. While Israel might enjoy greater freedom of action in a fragmented state lacking a strong government, it would also face a proliferation of threats—requiring even greater investment of resources and attention—and could entangle itself in yet another arena.

However, there is an alternative path—one that could better serve Israel's long-term interests. Rather than focusing on fragmentation, Israel could capitalize on its recent military successes against Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas and pursue a more constructive strategy. With its military strength recently on display, Israel has an opportunity to shift its approach and engage in a different dialogue with the new Syrian government.

Although Syria's future remains uncertain, Israel should take proactive steps to reduce the risk of escalation by pursuing a series of understandings and agreements with the Syrian administration, starting with border security arrangements and potentially expanding to broader areas of cooperation. As for Turkey, interestingly, Damascus—long seen as a key axis of conflict—could become a potential venue for Israeli–Turkish cooperation. Given that both countries face shared security concerns regarding Iran's influence, if the two countries can overcome their current dispute and establish a joint framework of understanding, it could evolve beyond a simple deconfliction mechanism. For instance, it might include limitations on the deployment of Turkish air defense systems in Syria, which could pose a threat to Israel. This could open the door for dialogue and joint efforts aimed at stabilizing the country and combating radical elements, an interest of both Israel and Syria.

A stable framework of understanding, supported by the United States and coordinated with Turkey, could integrate military deterrence with diplomatic and humanitarian measures. This approach would enable a cautious and secure Israeli withdrawal, contingent upon the emergence of a responsible and capable force on the Syrian side, which [could further align with Israel](#). Positive steps by the new regime could, in turn, be met with recognition and carefully calibrated reciprocal gestures from Israel.

Israel's ability to navigate this delicate balance—together with support from regional actors—could be key to shaping the future of Syria in a way that benefits the broader Middle East. Israel, together with Jordan, Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, shares common interests in stabilizing Syria, reducing the risk of further Islamist extremism, countering Iranian entrenchment, and limiting Turkish influence.

One promising avenue for cooperation is Syria's reconstruction. Israel, in coordination with the Gulf states, could promote joint infrastructure projects, such as water and agriculture initiatives, whether via aid funding or utilizing Israeli technology and expertise. Such collaboration would not only support Syria's recovery but also enhance Israel's role as a constructive regional player.

In the long term, Israel's security interests may be best served by creating constructive interdependencies—balancing security policies with economic opportunities and engaging regional partners to stabilize Syria. A cohesive Syria, based on a functioning power-sharing model—less dependent on Iran and allied with the moderate Arab countries—would

strengthen regional stability and reduce the threat to Israel's northern border. Notably, during the first visit by American lawmakers to Syria since the fall of Assad, President [al-Sharaa told Congressman Cory Mills](#) that Syria would be willing to join the Abraham Accords "under the right conditions."

Both Israel's and the international community's engagement with the Syrian regime should proceed cautiously, ensuring that any recognition and aid are gradual and conditional upon clear commitments. Beyond addressing border security issues, this approach should aim to block the renewed entrenchment of Iran and Hezbollah, remove foreign fighters, dismantle chemical capabilities, and promote genuine political reforms, including broader political representation and respect for minority rights.

Once sufficient trust has been established, Israel should seize the opportunity to advance a normalization process with Syria, beginning with security and cooperation agreements. Such normalization would help reduce the risk of Islamist resurgence, weaken Iran's foothold in the region, and foster greater regional stability.

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Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg