

Egypt's Attitude Toward the “New” Syria

Amira Oron | No. 2005 | July 3, 2025

Syria is currently undergoing an accelerated process of reintegration into the international community, which appears increasingly inclined to legitimize its new regime under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa. As an Arab Muslim country that shares a border with Israel, it is important to examine how Egypt—Israel’s most important neighbor and a major Arab state—is receiving Syria. While Egyptian–Syrian relations have fluctuated over the past decades, a fundamental ideological gap is now emerging for the first time. Nevertheless, Egypt is taking a pragmatic approach toward Syria, emphasizing its support for the Syrian people, the preservation of Syria’s sovereignty, and its reintegration into the Arab system.

Examining Egyptian–Syrian relations can help Israel in formulating a policy toward Syria and its role within the Arab and regional system. This is particularly important in light of the establishment of the new regime in Damascus and the consolidation of al-Sharaa’s leadership—given his background in ISIS and support for Salafist ideology, which contradicts the concept of the civil state, a principle championed by Egypt. In addition, the early stages of relations between the regime in “New Syria” and Egypt may offer insight into future developments and contribute to forming a precise Israeli policy toward its northern neighbor, while considering the broader Arab framework.

The historical shift that took place in Syria with the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime on December 8, 2024, necessitated the formulation of a new Israeli policy toward its northern neighbor. Israel’s first move—taken in the early hours following the regime’s collapse—was an offensive military operation, which escalated in order to prevent the capabilities and military infrastructure of the collapsing Syrian army from falling into the hands of the new regime. In this context, Israel expanded its hold on Syrian territory beyond the buffer zone in the Golan Heights.

Syria’s new president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, for his part, chose to take impressive diplomatic steps, including conciliatory statements and declarations—even toward Israel—to help secure his acceptance by the international community. Among other actions, al-Sharaa visited Riyadh on May 14, 2025, and, with the mediation of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Turkish President Erdoğan, even met with President Donald Trump, who was visiting Saudi Arabia at the time. President Trump then announced the lifting of sanctions that had been imposed on the Assad regime. The main significance of these meetings, even before Trump’s Gulf visit, was the recognition of al-Sharaa as a legitimate leader by Arab leaders, including King Abdullah of Jordan, who hosted him in Amman in February 2025. In contrast, al-Sharaa did not attend the Arab League summit convened in Baghdad on May 17, due to reservations expressed by Iraqi political actors associated with Iran.

Among the Arab countries' policies toward al-Sharaa, Egypt's stance is particularly significant for three reasons:

- Egypt's senior status and influence in the Arab and broader regional arenas;
- Egypt's position to al-Sharaa best reflects the broader debate within the Sunni world over the relationship between Islam and the state—namely, political Islam, as embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood, versus the civil state model championed by Egypt;
- Given al-Sharaa's background—having emerged from a non-state jihadist organization that overthrew the Syrian state—the question of his commitment to the idea of the Arab state model and its practical implementation becomes more acute, particularly regarding the state's ability to control its military forces and territory.

Egyptian–Syrian Relations—Background

Egyptian–Syrian relations have fluctuated over the decades. From 1958 to 1961, the two countries briefly united under the banner of the “United Arab Republic.” Later, during the Yom Kippur War, they launched a coordinated attack on Israel. After the war, their paths diverged, particularly following Egypt's peace treaty with Israel in 1979, which Syria strongly opposed.

Relations between Presidents Hosni Mubarak and Hafez al-Assad were correct and marked by mutual respect, rooted their shared past as fighter pilots in the Yom Kippur War. These ties developed further when Egypt rejoined the Arab League in 1989, following a prolonged boycott by most Arab states—including Syria. When Bashar al-Assad came to power in July 2000, President Mubarak warmly received him. However, tensions soon emerged, for example, after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005, which was attributed to the Assad regime, and due to Egypt's criticism of Syria's involvement in Lebanon. In 2011, toward the end of his term, President Mubarak called on his Syrian counterpart to step down to prevent the destruction of Syria and avoid further bloodshed. These two crises illustrated Egypt's consistent policy of supporting the idea of the Arab state and preserving its territorial integrity.

The presidency of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, which began in June 2014 after the overthrowing of the Muslim Brotherhood's regime in Egypt, marked a positive turning point in relations between the two countries following the brief presidency of Mohamed Morsi. In June 2013, two weeks before his removal from office, Morsi announced during a rally in support of the Syrian rebels that Egypt was severing diplomatic ties with Syria and closing the Syrian embassy in Cairo. He accused the Assad regime of committing crimes against humanity. This dramatic and hasty decision illustrated the limited capacity of the Muslim Brotherhood's rule in Egypt and the failed foreign policy led by Morsi. The concept long promoted by the Brotherhood across the Arab world holds that Islam is not only a religion and faith but also a political and state framework capable of governing citizens in Arab states according to Sharia law. Thus, on July 3, 2013, Assad was among the first to welcome the fall of Morsi's regime—what he called “so-called political Islam.” The first step taken by Egypt's interim government regarding Syria was to close its borders to Syrian nationals without travel visas while Syrians residing in Egypt were

asked to leave. In doing so, Egypt sought to halt the influx of Syrian Islamists, which had occurred freely during the Muslim Brotherhood's rule.

In the years that followed, Egypt's rapprochement toward Syria was cautious and measured. Diplomatic relations were renewed. Egypt did not support the Syrian rebels; instead, it emphasized the need to preserve Syria's territorial unity and state sovereignty. This position—which remains in effect to this day—reflects Egypt's principled view upholding the civil state and its sovereignty while rejecting the opposing concept of political Islam. President el-Sisi publicly expressed support for President Assad in an interview broadcast on November 22, 2016. He voiced his backing for the Arab national armies in countries experiencing governance crises, such as Libya, Iraq, and Syria. He added that Egypt's position respected the will of the Syrian people and the need for a political resolution to the Syrian crisis, while stressing the need for a ceasefire and humanitarian aid, along with combating Islamist groups. These remarks reflected the solidarity of the Egyptian regime and the public with the suffering of the Syrian people—and of any Arab people experiencing war or crisis, including the Palestinians.

Normalization between Egypt and Syria included coordination and dialogue between the two countries' security agencies. In May 2023, Egypt approved Syria's return to the Arab League after 11 years of absence, believing the conditions had been met—primarily, a commitment to end the internal Syrian conflict through peaceful means.

Egypt and the New Regime in Syria

Egypt's attitude toward al-Sharaa's regime and toward Syria will be reviewed below in light of statements by senior Egyptian officials and commentary by analysts beginning in the early days following the collapse of Assad's regime and the takeover by al-Sharaa and his supporters.

On December 4, 2024, the Syrian foreign minister under the Assad regime, Bassam al-Sabbagh, called Egypt's Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty to update him on developments in Syria. Abdelatty emphasized Egypt's consistent support for the Syrian state—its sovereignty, territorial unity, and integrity—while highlighting the paramount importance of protecting civilians. However, Egypt's Foreign Ministry later officially denied reports that Egypt had offered Assad a proposal to resign and leave Syria. Moreover, according to a report in *The Economist*, Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE rejected Assad's request for political asylum. Egypt's official stance was marked by caution, and it refrained from issuing an immediate response to the unfolding events in Syria, and merely urged Egyptian citizens residing in Syria to exercise caution.

On December 8, the Egyptian Foreign Ministry issued a statement, affirming that Egypt “supports the Syrian people, supports Syria's sovereignty, the unity and integrity of its territory, and calls on all parties to preserve the state's capabilities and national institutions [i.e., primarily the army], to prioritize the country's supreme interest, and to launch a comprehensive political process to establish a new phase of internal peace.” Additionally, Egypt highlighted its coordination with international actors to provide aid to the Syrian people and support the country's reconstruction and the return of Syrian refugees. This statement

articulated Egypt's position toward the emerging regime in Syria with careful wording: it was addressed to the Syrian people and made no reference to the new regime. From this, it could be inferred that Egypt did not accept the new regime and did not recognize it at this stage.

Although the Egyptian regime, as a rule, avoids voicing criticism against fellow Arab regimes, Egypt's reservations regarding al-Sharaa were widely and clearly expressed in the Egyptian media. Journalists and commentators—led by senior journalist and intellectual Ibrahim Eissa—heavily criticized al-Sharaa and his associates, describing them as jihadists, much like members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other organizations linked to its ideology. It is important to note that all Salafi-jihadist movements originate from the Muslim Brotherhood, representing a radical, violent evolution of its ideas. Ayman al-Zawahiri, who succeeded Osama bin Laden as the leader of al-Qaeda, joined the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt at age 14 and was influenced by the writings of its ideologue, Sayyid Qutb.

Prominent journalist Ahmed Moussa, a frequent critic of Brotherhood media outlets, wrote on March 8 that “a terrorist remains a terrorist even if he bathes in the waters of the Zamzam well [the sacred well in Mecca's Grand Mosque].” Egyptian journalists also rejected false reports in Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated media in the dramatic days following al-Sharaa's rise to power. These reports claimed that Egypt was the next target and hinted at domestic unrest and citizen protests against the Egyptian regime, echoing the events in Syria. These reports reflected a campaign launched by the reformist wing of the Muslim Brotherhood to destabilize Egypt and reignite a revolutionary momentum. Egyptian media and social discourse acknowledged that there was widespread pressure directed at Egypt, with the goal of dismantling the state—similar to what had occurred in Syria. Consequently, calls were made for the Egyptian people and state to remain vigilant and prepared.

At the time of the collapse of the Assad regime, Egyptian media coverage expressed shock at the rapid fall of Syria, especially the speed at which its army collapsed. Sympathy was expressed for the fate of the Syrian people, who were left without protection. One Egyptian commentator compared the collapse of the Syrian army to the walking stick of the Prophet Solomon, as described in the Qur'an (sura Saba, verse 14). According to traditional interpretations of the verse, Solomon died while leaning on his staff, and the Jinn did not realize he was dead until he fell, as a woodworm had gnawed through it. The implication was clear: The Syrian army had long been rotten and decayed before al-Sharaa's forces defeated it, explaining its swift collapse.

Another perspective on the Syrian army was offered by veteran political commentator Dr. Mustafa al-Fiqi, who argued that the Syrian regime fell because its army did not defend it. The army abandoned its responsibility and loyalty to President Assad, no longer viewing him as a leader or commander-in-chief, thereby sealing his fate. Senior military analyst Maj. Gen. (res.) Samir Farag told Syrians that “after the joy over Assad's fall, you will cry—for the state has been lost with the collapse of its army.” His forecast included the understanding that the new Syrian army would be made up of jihadist elements, with no commitment to the state or understanding of the army's proper role—to defend the homeland. From this standpoint, prominent intellectual and journalist Dr. 'Abd al-Mun'im Said noted that the destruction of

the Syrian army's capabilities served al-Sharaa in building his new army by recruiting his own loyalists.

The prevailing conclusion among the commentators—and the dominant narrative promoted by the Egyptian media, especially in light of Israel's role in dismantling the Syrian army's capabilities—was that Egypt needs a strong, capable, well-equipped, and modern army loyal to the state and its leadership, to protect the homeland from threats and deter enemies both domestic and foreign.

Egypt's Domestic and Foreign Moves

In light of Egypt's position toward the al-Sharaa regime, its response measures can be understood as follows:

Domestically, on December 15, 2024, President el-Sisi convened a meeting with several senior newspaper editors and commentators, many of whom also host Egypt's most-watched talk shows. He outlined three threats facing Egypt: the risk of forced migration from Gaza to the Sinai Peninsula, dormant terrorist cells, and pressure within Egypt instigated by the Muslim Brotherhood. The president emphasized that the public is aware of these threats and added that he was not concerned because "his hands are clean"—he had not embezzled public funds or shed blood—implying a contrast with President Assad.

Additionally, el-Sisi held a series of meetings with the senior command of the army and security agencies. While such meetings are routine, the media coverage emphasized the unwavering commitment of these institutions to defend the homeland and its citizens, and their steadfast loyalty to the president—unlike the conduct of the Syrian army. Once again, the post-Mubarak revolution slogan was highlighted: "The army and the people are one hand." These messages were designed to raise public awareness and reinforce internal solidarity between the leadership and the Egyptian public.

Externally, Egypt expressed reservations toward the new Syrian regime, yet adopted a policy similar to other Arab states in accepting Syria's return to the Arab League. President al-Sharaa was invited to the emergency summit on the Palestinian issue held on March 4, 2025, in Cairo. President el-Sisi received al-Sharaa, like the other Arab leaders, at the entrance to the conference hall in Egypt's new administrative capital. Still, el-Sisi's reception appeared noticeably unenthusiastic. In other words, Syria would not receive a warm embrace from Egypt, but it would no longer be boycotted or excluded from the Arab system, as had been the case under President Bashar al-Assad. This cautious acceptance reflects the shared aim of Egypt and other Arab states to secure influence over the new Syrian regime—which seeks to position itself as a natural part of the Arab world—and to curb the influence of non-Arab actors over Syria's future.

Moreover, Egypt has kept its embassy in Damascus operational. One of the main reasons is the need to provide consular services to the Egyptian community in Syria. Meanwhile, over the past few years—and as the Syrian civil war dragged on—a large Syrian migrant community has taken root in Egypt, numbering approximately 700,000 to 1 million people. These migrants, called "guests" by President el-Sisi, have earned public appreciation in Egypt,

integrated into society, and established successful businesses, especially in hospitality and food services. These migrants celebrated the fall of the Assad regime and expressed hopes of possibly returning to their homeland. Egyptians congratulated Syrians on social media, and the latter thanked Egypt for hosting them. However, the government restricted the celebrations to prevent any expression of support or sympathy within Egypt for the al-Sharaa regime. The return of Syrian refugees to their homeland also requires continued diplomatic ties between the two countries. Beyond that, it ensures Egypt's place in international discussions about Syria's future and its reconstruction efforts.

In the regional context, Egypt's position on Israeli activity in Syria is also worth noting. Immediately after the collapse of the Assad regime, Egypt condemned Israel's seizure of the buffer zone and its occupation of Syrian territory in violation of the 1974 disengagement agreement. According to a statement from Egypt's Foreign Ministry, Israel's actions violate international law and Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty. The Arab League also issued a similar condemnation, led by Egypt, calling for a peaceful transition toward establishing a new political system that fulfills the aspirations of the Syrian people, through UN-supervised elections. Furthermore, Israel's actions sharpened the prevailing understanding in Egyptian discourse that powerful non-Arab regional actors—Iran, Turkey, and Israel—are exploiting the Arab world's weakness to pursue aggressive moves aligned with their own interests. This understanding forms part of the intellectual discourse in Egypt from a historical perspective on the Arab world, lamenting its condition in recent decades. The fall of Syria—whose capital was once the seat of the Umayyad Empire and the cradle of Arab nationalism—into the hands of an Islamist force aided by a non-Arab country, Turkey, echoes how Syria under Assad had become beholden to Iran.

Israel, Egypt, and the Al-Sharaa Regime

While the war in Gaza has created and emphasized rifts and disagreements between Israel and Egypt, there are clear points of similarity in their approaches to Syria under al-Sharaa's leadership—although important gaps remain.

Israel and Egypt view President al-Sharaa with great suspicion, due to his background in terrorism and the jihadist ideology rooted in al-Qaeda. Although the Egyptian regime avoids direct criticism of al-Sharaa, its reservations and disregard for him are evident—favoring direct appeals to the Syrian people. Nonetheless, Egypt has adopted a pragmatic approach in its engagement with al-Sharaa and his regime, evaluating his actions—which may indicate his policy—rather than relying on rhetoric. It seems Israel has begun to adopt a similar approach, conducting indirect dialogue with the al-Sharaa regime on security arrangements needed along their mutual border.

However, a significant difference has emerged between Egypt and Israel regarding Syria's unity and sovereignty and the need to preserve a centralized government. Israel has pursued a policy of protecting the Druze community in Syria, and this may extend to other minority groups that feel vulnerable or endangered. Yet, Israel's extensive public discourse on the need to intervene to protect the Druze may be perceived by Syria and other Arab states as an Israeli strategy to advance its own security and strategic objectives within Syria. This approach, which

might be termed “minority diplomacy,” contradicts the principle championed by Egypt and other Arab states because it may accelerate or amplify separatist tendencies among various minorities in Syria—potentially leading to the state’s fragmentation. The actions Israel has taken thus far reinforce the existence of ethnically and sectarian-defined enclaves, in contrast to the central regime’s efforts to unify Syria. As past experience has shown, fragmentation and the absence or weakness of centralized governance invite interference from foreign, state and non-state actors. A fragmented Syria would provide fertile ground for terrorist activity or involvement by Iran and Turkey—contrary to the interests of both Egypt and Israel.

The shared interest for Israel and Egypt is to ensure that the new Syria distances itself from the Muslim Brotherhood camp. The assumption is that Syria will not turn in that direction so long as an alternative exists in the form of the pragmatic Sunni Arab camp—led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia—which seeks stability, reconciliation, and positive ties with the West.

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