

Israel's Red Line in Syria—and the Price of Confrontation with Turkey

Carmit Valensi and Amal Hayek | No. 2189 | August 27, 2026

On the night between August 17 and 18, 2026, the Israeli Air Force conducted an unusual strike deep inside Syrian territory, a mere 60 km from the Turkish border. Eight missiles struck the runways at the Abu al-Duhur military airfield in Idlib Governorate. The Prime Minister's Office de facto confirmed the strike, clarifying that the deployment of Turkish forces on Syrian soil constitutes a red line for Israel. According to the Prime Minister's Office statement, a security status quo had formed between the countries, which Damascus was on the verge of violating by allowing Turkish forces to deploy at the base despite repeated warnings. About a week later, it was reported that Mossad Director Roman Gofman met with Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani in an effort to defuse tensions and find a diplomatic solution to the crisis. This article examines the positions of the respective parties and the gaps between them, addressing whether, given Israel's complex calculus in Syria, military action was warranted despite the risk of escalation with Turkey. It is worth noting that Turkey has maintained a presence in northern Syria since 2018. Israel is now concerned, however, that Turkey may introduce advanced weapons and air defense systems into Syrian territory that could constrain Israel's freedom of action. The article considers what criteria should be established for recognizing the continued Turkish presence in Syria while ensuring that it does not jeopardize Israel's strategic interests.

The Israeli Concern

A few days prior to the recent strike deep inside Syria, Israeli defense officials told the United States that Turkey was preparing to deploy radar at the Abu al-Duhur base, followed by air defense systems and Turkish forces to operate them, a move that Israel claimed would alter the regional balance of power. In fact, Israel suspects that Turkey is seeking to establish a presence at Syrian airfields and strategic sites using radar and command-and-control systems manufactured by ASELSAN, Turkey's largest defense electronics company. Although no precise target date had been set for the arrival of these systems, Israel identified the base as a possible target.

Israel regards the preservation of its aerial freedom of action in Syria as a critical objective on which it is unwilling to compromise. This was the guiding approach during Bashar al-Assad's rule to thwart Iranian entrenchment, and it remains so now, in the al-Sharaa era. Jerusalem considers Israel's freedom of action essential for four main reasons: Israeli suspicion and mistrust regarding the nature and intentions of the regime, given its jihadist roots; the presence of hostile actors and rogue armed militias, ranging from Hamas and Hezbollah to global jihadist organizations; and Turkey's assertiveness and intention to expand its influence in the country, given its close ties with the Syrian leadership on the one hand, and the hostility Ankara has displayed toward Israel since the war in Gaza on the other.

Furthermore, against the backdrop of the war with Iran, Israel wishes to preserve a situation in which Syrian airspace remains open to Israeli Air Force operations, as it did in the two previous rounds of fighting with Iran, and fears that Turkish air defense systems could impede such operations. Therefore, as occurred in April of last year at the T4 base in Homs, Israel once again chose to send a message through a limited warning strike, while emphasizing that it has no interest in escalation with either Syria or Turkey. This came after Israel reportedly urged the Syrian foreign minister not to allow Turkey to take such action, but the Syrians “failed to internalize the message.”

The Syrian Position

As a country undergoing a fragile recovery process from a protracted civil war, Damascus views the restoration of its military capabilities as both a fundamental sovereign right and an existential security imperative. Although Turkey is currently its dominant and almost exclusive partner in the military force-building process, this does not mean that Damascus is prepared to lock itself into a long-term strategic dependence on Ankara. The Syrian leadership is systematically working to diversify its sources of funding, training, equipment, and operational support by developing parallel ties with Arab states, the United States, Europe, Pakistan, and Russia.

Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani made clear that Damascus does not want its territory to become an arena for confrontation between Israel and Turkey, stressing that there had been no intention to establish a Turkish base at Abu al-Duhur, create a permanent Turkish presence there, or deploy foreign forces. According to him, the facility had been largely deserted, and its restoration had not yet been completed. This position was formally and explicitly conveyed at the Syrian-Israeli meeting between al-Shaibani and Mossad Director Roman Gofman, held in Jordan on August 23 under U.S. mediation. The Syrian delegation emphasized that Syria is a sovereign state with full right to rebuild and develop its national military and determine its alliances in accordance with its interests, and rejected any mechanism that would restrict these fundamental rights.

At the same time, Syrian officials criticized Israel, arguing that it has repeatedly backed away from emerging security understandings brokered by the United States. Nevertheless, alongside the official condemnations, al-Shaibani assessed that negotiations to establish security arrangements are expected to resume under pressure from Washington. According to him, Syria recognizes the need to take Israel's security concerns into account, but expects in return that Jerusalem will respect Damascus's security needs, its sovereignty, and its right to restore state institutions.

From the Syrian leadership's perspective, this approach is grounded in a tangible security reality: Syria must simultaneously contend with ISIS cells, cross-border smuggling and terrorist networks, remnants of the former regime, armed militias, and the threat of Iranian attempts to destabilize the country through its proxies. Accordingly, building a functioning military, rehabilitating military bases, and restoring control over the country's borders and airspace are presented in Damascus not as an attempt to challenge Israel, but as essential conditions for stabilizing the country, consolidating governance, and preventing Syria from once again becoming a breached arena for foreign forces and non-state actors.

Turkish Intentions

After years of supporting rebel organizations in Syria, foremost among them Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Turkey enjoys a unique position and considerable political, security, and economic influence in the

country under al-Sharaa's rule. Turkish interests range from stabilizing the new Syrian regime and containing the Kurds (PKK/SDF) to facilitating the return of refugees and expanding Turkey's regional influence.

Nevertheless, despite the close relations between the countries, Syria does not function as a Turkish proxy. As noted above, al-Sharaa has sought to avoid complete dependence on Ankara, choosing instead to hedge by maintaining relationships with a variety of regional and international actors in an effort to pursue a balanced policy that strengthens Syrian sovereignty while preserving as much independent room for maneuver as possible. Furthermore, Damascus is well aware that full and unconditional cooperation with Turkey is a highly sensitive issue for regional actors, foremost among them Israel. The relationship between Ankara and Damascus is therefore more complex than is sometimes perceived in Israel and is not free of tension. Evidence of this can be found in a series of structural changes recently implemented by Damascus in the ranks of the Syrian army, indicating an intention to reduce the autonomy of these forces and the extent of Turkish influence over them.

As of August 2026, the Turkish military presence in Syria is undergoing a process of reorganization. Ankara is gradually downsizing some of the smaller outposts and facilities it established during the years of war – particularly in areas where the security situation has changed – and transferring authority and responsibility to Syrian state institutions. In Afrin, for example, the evacuation of individual sites continues, and on August 9, Turkish forces vacated the base in the village of Jalbara after more than eight years of presence there.

This should not, however, be interpreted as a Turkish withdrawal from northern Syria. The overall picture points to a transition from a broad, decentralized deployment across dozens of outposts to a more focused and consolidated model of military presence, alongside deeper security cooperation with Damascus. Turkey's ambassador to Syria, Nuh Yilmaz, likewise emphasized that the principal threats along the border have declined significantly, while pointing to continued military coordination and joint counterterrorism efforts.

At the same time, Ankara's military influence currently extends beyond merely maintaining direct outposts, and includes training, advising, infrastructure rehabilitation, and assistance in shaping the Syrian military's force-building processes.

Just days before the Israeli strike, a Turkish military delegation visited the base to assist in its rehabilitation after it had remained inoperative for roughly a decade due to fighting in the area. The Turkish Ministry of National Defense denied that its military personnel were present at the base at the time of the strike, rejected claims that Turkey intended to establish a military presence there, and accused Israel of acting for domestic political reasons and exploiting the incident to destabilize Syria.

The American Position

The United States has demonstrated unprecedented support for the Syrian leadership and has taken diplomatic and economic measures aimed at contributing to the country's stability, including the lifting of sanctions. Most recently, Washington made the historic decision to remove Syria from the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism. While President Trump adopted a restrained stance toward the Israeli strike, U.S. Special Envoy for Syria Tom Barrack took a more critical position. He described the strike as an

unnecessary escalation that undermined regional stability and emphasized that the al-Sharaa government has repeatedly expressed a clear preference for de-escalating tensions with Israel.

Barrack added that approximately six days before the strike, Israel passed intelligence to Washington indicating that Turkey might be preparing to transfer military personnel or assets to the Abu al-Duhur base. According to Barrack, after U.S. officials checked the claim with their own intelligence agencies, they were told that no such move was taking place. He assessed that the Israeli information may have been based on discussions about the possible expansion of a Turkish training program at the site rather than an actual military deployment. At the same time, Barrack stated that neither the United States nor Turkey had received advance warning of the strike and suggested that the decision may have resulted from a failure of coordination or information-sharing among the IDF, Mossad, and the Prime Minister's Office.

Barrack further warned that the strike nearly led to a direct military confrontation between Israel and Turkey. He raised the possibility that Israel had sought to provoke a Turkish response and that electoral and domestic political considerations may have played a role in the decision. Defense Minister Israel Katz rejected Barrack's remarks, claiming that they contained numerous inaccuracies. He stressed that the intelligence had been conveyed to the relevant U.S. officials and that Damascus had been warned before the decision to carry out the strike was made.

Implications

Threat Assessment: Between Rhetoric and Reality on the Ground

The unusual Israeli strike raises fundamental questions that warrant serious examination: To what extent does Turkish activity in northern Syria pose a direct threat to Israel, and was it justified to risk regional stability in order to thwart it? Northern Syria, where Ankara has been operating for nearly a decade, represents a vital national security interest for Turkey, first and foremost in the Kurdish context, to a degree that far exceeds its strategic importance for Israel.

At the same time, the comparison frequently drawn in Israeli discourse between Turkey and Iran misrepresents the strategic reality. Despite Ankara's hawkish rhetoric, Turkey—unlike Iran—is a member of NATO, a key U.S. ally, and maintains diplomatic relations and active coordination channels with Israel.

The strike in northern Syria was intended to preserve the IDF's freedom of action, but its actual consequences could prove to be a double-edged sword. The diplomatic contacts aimed at preventing further escalation have now raised the prospect of establishing a formal, institutionalized, and potentially restrictive deconfliction mechanism. Although such a mechanism could help resolve the immediate crisis, it could also tie Israel's hands, limit its aerial flexibility, and generate precisely the operational restrictions that Israel initially sought to avoid.

Moreover, excessive reliance on drawing "red lines" carries an inherent risk: the proliferation of red lines creates an expectation of an automatic military response whenever one is crossed, thereby narrowing the scope for diplomatic maneuver and accelerating a dynamic of uncontrolled escalation.

Guiding Principles for Assessing the Turkish Presence in Syria

Looking ahead, Israel's set of considerations must be based on precise operational distinctions:

- **Restoration of Syrian infrastructure and the establishment of a Turkish presence:** A distinction should be made between technical assistance, training, and the rehabilitation of facilities for the Syrian state, on the one hand, and the establishment of independent Turkish command-and-control infrastructure, on the other.
- **Deployment of systems in northern Syria:** From an operational standpoint, there is little practical difference between the deployment of Turkish radar, electronic warfare, or air defense systems in northern Syria and their deployment in southern Turkey or northern Cyprus. Their coverage ranges are similar, and the presence of such systems in northern Syria therefore does not in itself constitute a red line warranting the use of Israeli force. The same applies to the maritime domain: The Turkish navy enjoys an inherent advantage in the eastern Mediterranean, and a limited presence along the Syrian coast would not fundamentally alter the balance of power.
- **Geographic delineation**—central and southern Syria as critical areas: While Turkey justifies its presence in northern Syria as necessary to prevent threats to its territory, the establishment of Turkish bases farther inside the country—in central Syria, and even more so in the south—is not dictated by such security needs. It would also bring potential friction closer to the Israeli front and constitute a problematic shift in the regional balance.
- **Entrenchment of terror proxies in southern Syria:** Israel should focus on thwarting terrorist elements—particularly Hamas—and preventing them from enjoying freedom of action or safe haven under Turkish or Syrian auspices in the southern region adjacent to Israel’s border.

In conclusion, Turkey’s presence and influence in Syria are an established reality that is unlikely to disappear through the use of military force alone. Israel’s challenge is not to eliminate Turkish involvement altogether, but rather to contain and balance it. Relying exclusively on military force and striking targets of marginal operational value, without a parallel diplomatic track with Damascus, jeopardizes Israel’s security interests and could drag the parties into a direct confrontation that neither side desires. Israeli decision-makers must therefore combine focused military deterrence with direct and indirect dialogue, utilize deconfliction mechanisms, and clearly define the areas in which Israel is prepared to allow Syria to rebuild its capabilities—before the situation deteriorates into dangerous regional escalation.

In this context, blanket Israeli opposition to any process of Syrian military rehabilitation could prove counterproductive, pushing Damascus toward greater dependence on Ankara. Moreover, the broader regional and diplomatic context should be taken into account: Damascus is currently drawing closer to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and gaining growing legitimacy from the United States and European countries. Israel’s actions are increasingly perceived as seeking to destabilize Syria, and in this context Israel is at times even compared to Iran. In this framework, greater attention may be directed toward the issue of the Golan Heights, as recently raised by Barrack, while regional—and particularly international—pressure could intensify for Israel to withdraw to the lines established under the 1974 Separation of Forces Agreement, possibly even without significant political concessions in return.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurz, Rinat Harash, Eldad Shavit and Keri Rosenbluh