

Israel and the Fall of Assad: Rejoice, Repel, Reach Out, Reload

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Brief Analysis

Prompt military action is helping Israel counter the immediate security risks of Syria's sudden upheaval, but additional efforts will be needed to seize the broader opportunities of this new era.

As far as Israel is concerned, the fall of the Assad regime is a severe blow to Iran and its “axis of resistance” in the region, with several potential benefits for Israeli interests. In addition to cutting a vital link in the Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut strategic arc (or “Shia crescent”), it could also cut the logistical route to the shores of the Mediterranean, creating a major setback for Hezbollah’s rearmament aspirations and disconnecting Iran’s industrial-strategic rear from the various battlefronts on Israel’s borders. Meanwhile, Russia is seeking to maintain its bases in Syria while reducing its military presence there, which could expand Israel’s freedom of action in the area.

Yet the new situation also comes with a throng of emerging threats. Jihadist terrorists—whether Islamic State remnants, extremist elements of the rebel groups that toppled Assad, or other actors—could advance near Israeli communities in the Golan Heights area. The regime’s arsenal, including many advanced weapons, could be turned against Israel. Radical Sunni Arab elements—some supported by Turkey—could pose threats to stability in neighboring Jordan, a vital pillar in Israel’s national security architecture. For its part, Iran may seek to maintain or even expand its regional influence to compensate for its losses. Although Iranian forces and proxies have been fleeing Syria, Tehran is in contact with some of the victorious rebel factions and looking for new inroads.

In response, Israel’s main objectives in Syria are clear: protecting its residents and sovereignty; repelling hostile actors from its borders; preventing strategic weapons from falling into extremist hands; strengthening Jordan’s stability; preventing the reestablishment of Iranian and proxy supply lines

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dont-assume-irans-supply-lines-hezbollah-are-cut>) to Hezbollah and other actors; countering any local resurgence by the Islamic State or other Sunni jihadist terrorist organizations; and last but not least, ensuring that Israel maintains sufficient freedom of action to defend itself and remove any threats in the region, from the Levant all the way to Iran—unilaterally if necessary, but preferably in cooperation with others.

Israel has already taken action to advance these objectives. First, it began reinforcing its defenses in the Golan Heights immediately after Assad's fall. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) then launched Operation Bashan Arrow, part of which involved hundreds of strikes that destroyed most of Syria's arsenal, focusing on military bases, air defenses, ballistic missiles, weapons depots, military aircraft, naval assets, and various production and development facilities, including for chemical weapons. Although this disarmament campaign has been mostly bloodless, Syria's nascent government will presumably view it as aggression.

For the ground part of the operation, the IDF seized the Area of Separation (AOS) in Syria, in violation of the 1974 UN disengagement agreement that formally ended the previous year's Arab-Israeli war. It also captured Syria's Mount Hermon outpost, which overlooks Israel's own strategically crucial outposts on the mountain. After warning rebel forces not to approach this buffer zone, the IDF then arranged for local Syrian communities to disarm, which they quietly did.

Official Israeli statements regarding these steps explained them as a temporary effort to improve the country's defensive positions and protect its border communities, not establish a new status quo on this frontier. Yet some of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's remarks on the latter point have raised concerns. In a December 8 appearance, he **noted (<https://www.gov.il/he/pages/event-golan081224>)** that he had instructed the IDF to seize the AOS in order to prevent any hostile force from entrenching on Israel's border after the 1974 disengagement agreement collapsed, later **clarifying (<https://www.gov.il/he/pages/event-us121224>)** that this is just a temporary measure until an effective replacement entity is established to enforce the agreement. Yet he has also reportedly **declared (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/09/israel-seizes-syrian-buffer-zone-amid-airstrikes-on-regime-weapons-depots>)** that the Golan Heights will remain part of Israel "for eternity," and his government has now **approved (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/12/16/israel-golan-heights-syria-mayotte-cyclone-scholz-snap-elections/>)** a plan to double the Israeli population there. Notably, when rebels captured the Syrian Golan from Assad in 2013, the disengagement agreement **remained (<https://www.inss.org.il/publication/a-ship-upon-a-bygone-sea-the-un-force-in-the-golan-heights-at-the-start-of-2016/>)** in effect with support from both Jerusalem and Damascus.

For the time being, the UN and other players have condemned Israel's violation of Syrian sovereignty. Abu Mohammed al-Jolani (aka Ahmed al-Sharaa)—head of the leading rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham—**stated (<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2024/12/16/world/syria-assad-rebels-news/6406f47f-7357-5086-9a35-89078377a53a?smid=url-sharehttps://www.nytimes.com/live/2024/12/16/world/syria-assad-rebels-news/5e0e4e9c-d715-5bdb-a173-a10568ab2dd7?smid=url-share>)** that Syria will abide by the 1974 disengagement agreement and called on the international community to ensure that Israel does so too. He also **called on (<https://www.thetimes.com/world/middle-east/article/abu-mohammed-al-jolani-syria-hts-leader-interview-nmbz0xb0v>)** Israel to stop its strikes in Syria and withdraw from the territory it has occupied since Assad's fall. Notably, he indicated that the war-torn nation's current circumstances do not allow for new confrontations.

Besides its immediate defensive goals, Israel's presence on Syrian soil is probably rooted in a desire to seek operational advantages against possible new threats down the road and gain leverage that can help it negotiate improved security arrangements in the Golan. Yet the longer this presence lasts, the more it will be seen as an illegal

land grab, and the higher the risk of provoking action against it—whether in the form of local forces trying to liberate Syrian land, international players applying more political pressure, or both.

Next Steps

To allay these concerns while still meeting the security imperatives described above, Israel, the United States, and other partners will need to focus on multiple efforts in the near and medium term:

- Clarify that the 1974 disengagement agreement is still valid as a basis for common security in the Golan, despite having been profoundly undermined over the past decade. This means emphasizing that the IDF presence in Syria is just a temporary situation until satisfactory security arrangements are agreed and implemented. With the recent Lebanon ceasefire agreement in mind, the parties should explore amendments and adaptations to the 1974 agreement, including improved implementation mechanisms.
- Establish lines of communication between Israel and Syria's nascent government, emphasizing the advantages of border security for both parties.
- Maintain a strong buffer zone between Israeli border communities and potential threats in Syria—initially through an IDF forward deployment, augmented by understandings with local Syrians and, if possible, with the government in Damascus. As in Lebanon, UN peacekeeping efforts can facilitate communication on this matter, though unilateral Israeli enforcement must be preserved as the ultimate backstop against any threats.
- Ensure Israeli freedom of action in Syria (primarily in the country's airspace) in order to prevent Iran's return, Hezbollah's rearmament, the **Islamic State's resurgence** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-crisis-leaves-islamic-state-prisons-and-detention-camps-vulnerable>), or other threats. This freedom should be maintained despite expected protests from the new authorities in Damascus regarding Syria's sovereignty.
- Maintain the **existing U.S. presence** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/supporting-sdf-post-assad-syria>) on Syria's borders with Jordan and Iraq, which is small (around 900 troops total) but very effective. This would enable continued U.S.-Israel cooperation against the Islamic State, Iran, and other common foes.
- Support U.S. efforts to seize and eliminate Syria's remaining **chemical weapons** (<https://www.axios.com/2024/12/08/syria-chemical-weapons-assad>). A similar campaign is required in Lebanon following reports of such weapons **in the hands of Hezbollah** (<https://www.jns.org/idf-found-chemicals-gas-masks-in-hezbollah-bases/>).
- Proceed with efforts to address any remnants (i.e., materials, designs, plans) connected to the Syrian nuclear reactor that Israel destroyed in 2007.
- Ensure Israeli intelligence visibility on all relevant actors in post-Assad Syria and strengthen ties with the moderate ones, in concert with Arab partner governments in the Gulf states and elsewhere. This outreach could encompass Kurdish, Druze, and Sunni Arab factions in various parts of the country.
- Invigorate relations with local communities across the Golan border. This effort could be modeled on Israel's "Operation Good Neighbor," an initiative that began promisingly in 2012 but came to an end when the Assad regime reestablished local control in mid-2018.
- Work with the United States and Jordan to strengthen the kingdom's stability and border security. This will help address multiple threats, including Islamist terrorist plotting against Amman, renewed refugee flows, and weapons smuggling into the West Bank.
- Condition international recognition, delisting, reconstruction funding, and other aid to the new Syrian government on key security requirements. Specifically, Damascus should be expected to remove any strategic arms that pose a threat to neighboring states, prevent any actors from using its territory to threaten these neighbors, remove any terrorist

elements from the factions that form the next government, and implement security arrangements with Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon.

- Take advantage of the new situation in Syria to bolster security arrangements in Lebanon, especially with regard to securing their shared border and preventing arms transfers to Hezbollah.
- Eliminate Syria and Lebanon's industries for making and **smuggling Captagon** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hamas-and-iran-are-trying-ignite-israels-eastern-fronts>) and other illegal drugs—an important source of funding for Hezbollah, the late Assad regime, and potentially Assad's successors.
- Mend Israeli-Turkish relations, in part because Ankara is poised to become **a major player** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/trump-cant-sit-one-out>) in determining Syria's future.

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