

Avoiding an Israel-Syria Showdown (Part 1): The Risks of “Occupation”

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Linda and Tony Rubin Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Brief Analysis

Israel’s cross-border incursion is understandable but may have gone too far, raising the need for U.S. intercession on merging Syria’s disparate forces, easing sanctions, deconflicting with Turkey, and other urgent stabilization tasks.

In early November, a billboard appeared in Tel Aviv congratulating President-elect Trump and asking him to help “make Israel great again.” Lately, and in unexpected places, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu seems determined to make Israel “greater” again, as implied when its forces seized large swaths of Syrian territory after the fall of Bashar al-Assad. Although security imperatives may justify certain aspects of this incursion, the scope of Israel’s foray is provocative at minimum, and could wind up destabilizing the frontier for the long term.

Rationales for Israel’s Incursion

In 2013, two years into Syria’s civil war, the Israel Defense Forces began targeting Iranian assets and personnel on Syrian soil, in large part to close the “land bridge” for major weapons transfers to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Over the next decade, the IDF routinely hit Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps formations, Iranian missile bases, Hezbollah operatives, and other Iran-backed militia units inside Syria. Yet these operations were mostly limited to airstrikes.

In September 2024—two months before rebel forces led by Ahmed al-Sharaa launched their shock offensive to oust Assad—Israeli forces carried out a joint air-ground operation at the Scientific Studies and Research Center, the regime’s underground production facility for precision-guided missiles, subsequently destroying the base. In October, concerns about the increasingly brittle regime led the IDF to begin moving ground forces into the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) zone, the 150 square mile demilitarized buffer area originally drawn in 1974 to separate the Israeli and Syrian militaries in the Golan Heights. IDF units also constructed new roads and

fortified positions along the fence line. Subsequently, Israel deployed two ground brigades and various armored assets into the zone.

The fall of Damascus signaled a dramatic new phase for Israeli operations elsewhere in Syria. As Assad's forces dissolved and concerns grew about hostile actors potentially seizing the regime's weapons, the IDF launched an air campaign to destroy most of the military's strategic assets ([see Part 2 of this analysis \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/avoiding-israel-syria-showdown-part-2-opening-new-negotiations\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/avoiding-israel-syria-showdown-part-2-opening-new-negotiations)). It also took over abandoned positions that provide commanding views of both Sharaa's forces in Damascus and Hezbollah's strongholds in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley. Ultimately, the IDF established nine military outposts in the UNDOF zone and expanded its presence beyond the buffer area in several ways: launching raids in the vicinity of Damascus (including al-Kiswah and Maaraba) and Deraa city along the Jordanian border; conducting routine operations to disarm border villages and seize heavy weapons as far as ten miles into Syria; and establishing a continuous presence north of the zone along the Lebanese border.

These deployments were partly motivated by Israeli fears of another October 7-style attack, this time across the northern border. Jerusalem views Sharaa (a former member of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State) and the Islamist militias that helped him topple Assad as a burgeoning threat. It is similarly concerned about the ongoing chaos in Syria as authorities struggle to gain control post-Assad. And from a legal perspective, Israel considers the disengagement agreement it signed with Assad's father in 1974 as inoperative once Bashar fell, at least until order is reestablished.

In short, Israel seems intent on creating its own buffer zone inside Syrian territory. On February 23, Netanyahu [warned \(https://apnews.com/article/israel-syria-buffer-zone-military-netanyahu-6a107f835d4262b56551ad940a5144d7\)](https://apnews.com/article/israel-syria-buffer-zone-military-netanyahu-6a107f835d4262b56551ad940a5144d7) that Israel would not allow militias or Syrian government forces to operate south of Damascus, enforcing this prohibition with repeated [airstrikes \(https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20250317-israel-southern-syria\)](https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20250317-israel-southern-syria) on military equipment and personnel. Meanwhile, his government has sought to build relationships with Syrian Druze communities in the UNDOF zone ([see Part 2 \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/avoiding-israel-syria-showdown-part-2-opening-new-negotiations\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/avoiding-israel-syria-showdown-part-2-opening-new-negotiations)). It has also reached out—with little success—to Druze leaders further north, most notably in Jaramana near Damascus, where Netanyahu [suggested \(https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-844244\)](https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-844244) on March 1 that he might take military action to protect the minority from Islamist government forces. And last week, Defense Minister Israel Katz publicly lamented the [recent massacres \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrias-transitional-honeymoon-over-after-massacres-and-disinformation\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrias-transitional-honeymoon-over-after-massacres-and-disinformation) against another minority, the Alawites, leading some to speculate that they might be offered IDF protection as well. Of course, empathizing with the [plight of minority communities \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-new-syria-first-three-months\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-new-syria-first-three-months) under the nascent Islamist administration in Damascus does not necessarily mean Israel will act on these sentiments—after all, it opted not to intervene on behalf of the Druze throughout the entire civil war despite well-documented regime persecution. For Sharaa's part, after arriving in Damascus, he put aside the nom de guerre he had used for years (Abu Muhammad al-Jolani) and traded in his fatigues for a suit and tie. For weeks afterward, he and his circle of transitional authorities issued numerous statements professing a lack of interest in conflict with Israel. On December 16, for example, he [stated \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/syrian-islamist-leader-says-rebel-groups-to-be-disbanded-minority-rights-protected/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/syrian-islamist-leader-says-rebel-groups-to-be-disbanded-minority-rights-protected/) that he “had no intention of confronting Israel” and pledged not to “let Syria be used as a launchpad for attacks” against neighboring states.

Assurances aside, the jury is still out [on Sharaa's long-term intentions \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-breakdown-episode-four-revolutionary-](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-breakdown-episode-four-revolutionary-)

rebuilding-and-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-hts). Although he distanced himself from al-Qaeda and the Islamic State long ago, his new government includes a number of known terrorists and jihadist foreign fighters hostile to Israel. And even if his stated desire for more amicable relations with Jerusalem is sincere, he controls only a portion of Syria's territory and militias.

Given the current instability and the new government's uncertain future posture, Israel's inclination to take proactive defensive steps and establish an area of influence in south Syria is understandable. The question is whether the threat justifies such a robust and potentially counterproductive cross-border deployment beyond the UNDOF zone. And regardless of the answer to that question, Washington and other actors must account for another key factor driving Israel's Syria deployment: its concerns over **Turkey's increasing influence** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-age-turkish-relations-syria>) in Damascus.

Policy Recommendations

When asked about post-Assad engagement in January, President Trump stated, "Syria is in its own mess...They don't need us involved." His administration is also **reportedly making plans**

(https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/dod-drafting-plans-withdraw-us-troops-syria-recent-trump-comments-rcna190726) to withdraw the small U.S. troop contingent in east Syria that has helped Kurdish partners keep a lid on the Islamic State for years and **secure detention facilities**

(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-crisis-leaves-islamic-state-prisons-and-detention-camps-vulnerable) holding thousands of the group's operatives, adherents, and family members. Yet Washington still has a pressing interest in fostering stability and ensuring that Syria's new government can exert sovereignty, defend the borders, fight terrorism, and repudiate the country's long track record of menacing neighbors—otherwise, many of the administration's other objectives in the Middle East will be jeopardized.

To achieve this goal, U.S. officials will have to work with partners to help improve economic conditions, mainly by finding **the right balance of urgent (if temporary) sanctions relief** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/navigating-syria-sanctions-conundrum>). They should also help curb fragmentation and warlordism by continuing to encourage armed elements to merge with the new Syrian army—an approach that bore fruit last week when the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) reached an initial integration agreement with Sharaa.

Perhaps more important, the Trump administration needs to talk with Israel to better understand its long-term strategy in Syria. For example, while Jerusalem should be encouraged to enhance its security by continuing to establish partnerships across the border, any efforts to form a new proxy force there would be ill advised, as seen when Israel fostered the creation of the South Lebanon Army decades ago. Israel should be able to defend itself sufficiently from its positions in the UNDOF zone and Mount Hermon, and through periodic airstrikes further into Syrian territory when necessary. If it keeps troops stationed beyond that zone, it might encourage more radicalism and terrorist threats over time, undermining both Israeli security and Syrian stability. Despite Sharaa's previous statements about avoiding friction with Israel, his embattled government is now **complaining** (https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/syrias-new-leader-calls-for-pressure-on-israel-to-withdraw-troops/) about IDF deployments, while new Iran-backed "resistance" groups **are reportedly being formed** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/uli-al-baas-part-1-new-islamic-resistance-front-syria>) to fight the Israeli "occupation."

In the longer term, Jerusalem and Damascus may need to take the admittedly challenging but likely indispensable step of negotiating a new border security regime to modify or replace the 1974 Agreement on Disengagement. With mediation by Washington, the new agreement should take into account the unique security challenges of post-Assad Syria and the **general fecklessness** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/big-small-and-needless-rebalancing-three-un-peacekeeping-missions>) of UN peacekeepers in Arab-Israeli conflict zones.

Finally, Washington should engage Turkey about its intervention in north Syria and its ties to Islamist militias there. If Syria devolves into a weak state with permanent Turkish and Israel spheres of influence, the situation would be replete with friction points and potential conflict between two key U.S. allies. Israel is **reportedly** [\(https://www.reuters.com/world/israel-lobbies-us-keep-russian-bases-weak-syria-sources-say-2025-02-28/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/israel-lobbies-us-keep-russian-bases-weak-syria-sources-say-2025-02-28/) so concerned about Turkey's growing influence that it is lobbying Washington to facilitate the Russian military's return to Syria—even though Moscow's withdrawal was one of America's major policy wins from the fall of Assad. Trump is right, Syria is a mess. But absent U.S. diplomatic involvement, the mess would likely get much messier, with wide ripple effects for the president's other policy priorities in the Middle East.

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute, director of its Rubin Program on Arab Politics, and former assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs in the first Trump administration. ❖

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