

# Avoiding an Israel-Syria Showdown (Part 2): An Opening for New Negotiations

by [Ehud Yaari \(/experts/ehud-yaari\)](/experts/ehud-yaari)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ehud Yaari \(/experts/ehud-yaari\)](/experts/ehud-yaari)

Ehud Yaari is the Lafer International Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

**Direct Israeli dialogue with Syria’s transitional government could produce a new framework for bilateral relations—one that includes effectively ending the perpetual state of belligerency, accepting Israel’s special relationship with the Druze, agreeing on spheres of coordination throughout the south, and cooperating against Iran and Hezbollah’s comeback attempts in Syria and Lebanon.**

**T**he fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime has dramatically transformed Israel-Syria relations. New realities are emerging on the ground along with new public discourse between the two governments. Although the situation is still fraught with dangers, it has opened a promising—yet thus far unexplored—opportunity to hold direct talks and reach substantial understandings between Damascus and Jerusalem, particularly in south Syria.

## New Realities on the Ground

**A**s described [in Part 1 \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/avoiding-israel-syria-showdown-part-1-risks-occupation\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/avoiding-israel-syria-showdown-part-1-risks-occupation), Israel’s military activities in Syria during the Assad era were mostly confined to airstrikes and occasional commando raids against Iranian arms transfers, Iranian military facilities, and incipient Hezbollah bases along the border. Yet this policy was quickly and completely modified once Ahmed al-Sharaa’s forces strolled into the capital unopposed.

First, the Israeli Air Force launched a major campaign that continues intermittently today, destroying most of the former regime’s arms depots, air defense batteries, radars, tanks, armored carriers, artillery batteries, chemical weapon sites, missile stocks, and other assets spread all over the country. Today, there is no Syrian Army to speak of.

Other major changes have occurred in the three provinces south of Damascus—Deraa, Quneitra, and Suwayda—

which comprise roughly 16,500 square kilometers and around 2 million inhabitants. Once Assad fell, the Israel Defense Forces 210th Division captured the buffer zone established by the 1974 separation of forces agreement, whose width ranges between a few hundred meters and ten kilometers. Traditionally, the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) has patrolled the zone and enforced the agreement's restrictions on the size of military deployments. In Jerusalem's view, however, this arrangement ceased to exist once the local Syrian forces responsible for manning the line (Assad's 61st and 90th Army Brigades) deserted their positions amid the regime's fall, raising the risk of terrorists exploiting the security vacuum to mount cross-border attacks.

Accordingly, Israeli forces moved beyond the narrow separation zone and established a de facto security zone of their own, pushing another 15 kilometers deep into Syria and reaching the line of strategic basalt hilltops that previously served as the Syrian Army's main border outposts. Altogether, the IDF now controls 460 square kilometers beyond the line of separation. As noted in Part 1, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has also vowed to enforce the demilitarization of a vast area stretching all the way to the Damascus-Suwayda highway, sixty-five kilometers away from the IDF's current deployment.

On top of that, Israel has publicly promised to protect the local Syrian Druze community, embarking on a new aid program for the 50,000 Druze residents in a string of villages straddling the slopes of Mount Hermon, as well as the half-million residing in the Jabal al-Druze region of Suwayda province. Druze workers from Syria are even being permitted to seek employment in Israel, similar to the Jordanians who work in the resort city of Eilat and the southern Lebanese workers who found jobs in Israel in past decades.

So far, the new government in Damascus has reacted quite mildly to the changes in Israeli policy. Sharaa and his ministers generally refrain from alluding to the Israeli measures in public, even staying mute when new defense minister Israel Katz resorted to public bluster by denouncing Sharaa as a dangerous Islamist jihadist. Notably, Katz reminded the new leader that the IDF can now see through the windows of his presidential palace on the outskirts of Damascus just twenty-three kilometers away from Israel's new positions atop Mount Hermon—as if Sharaa were not already aware of this. Still, the president has made sure to keep his protests few in number and very diplomatically worded, each time reassuring Israel that he has no intention of seeking confrontation.

## **Druze Secession or Annexation Are Nonstarters**

**A**s the new situation on the frontier develops, some Israeli figures have advocated encouraging Druze secession from Syria. This idea was much discussed under the Labor Party governments of the 1950s and '60s and has recently been taken up by certain right-wing politicians, who envision a corridor linking Suwayda to the Kurdish autonomous region in northeast Syria.

Yet reviving the Druze statelet that existed during much of the French Mandate over Syria (1921-36) is not a valid option today. One reason is that the Kurds, with U.S. encouragement, have already struck a tentative deal with Sharaa to integrate their forces with the new Syrian military. More important, conversations with local officials and daily monitoring of developments in the south indicate that many Druze prefer to remain part of Syria—albeit while striving to shape a different relationship with the government based on decentralizing authority and constraining the presence of state military forces, security agencies, and administrators.

As for the idea of being annexed by Israel, only a small minority of Druze—mostly in villages adjacent to the frontier—have expressed interest in that option. The majority aspire to pursue closer, more open relations with Israel and, simultaneously, a new arrangement with Sharaa, thereby strengthening the semiautonomous status they carved out in Suwayda during the civil war.

Yet the precise balance between these two relationships is now being fiercely debated between Druze spiritual leaders, and between the different militia factions that emerged during years of anti-Assad unrest. The sect's top

spiritual leader, Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajri, and the newly created Druze “Military Council” led by several ex-generals all harbor deep suspicion toward the new authorities in Damascus. As such, they rule out any substantial concessions to Sharaa and favor tightening cooperation with Israel. In contrast, other factions—including the lower-ranking spiritual leaders Hamoud al-Hinawi and Yusuf Jarbou, backed by local militias such as “The Men of Dignity” and “Men of the Mountain”—are trying to advance a compromise with Damascus. Both camps have held frequent demonstrations and organized social media campaigns to boost their argument, and a violent eruption cannot be ruled out, especially if Sharaa’s government decides to weigh in on the debate.

## Recommendations

In view of this complex situation, Israeli officials and Sharaa’s transitional government need to urgently open dialogue aimed at reaching understandings on key issues—some longstanding, some new. They already have at least two good options for a neutral meeting place: UNDOF’s Camp Faouar and Camp Ziouani. Sharaa clearly aspires to avoid direct confrontation with Israel for at least the next few years, if not permanently. Likewise, Israel has an obvious interest in stabilizing the Golan frontier. To meet these mutual interests, officials should focus on the following steps:

- **Exchange commitments on the Druze issue.** Specifically, Israel would agree not to push the Druze or other southern groups to break with Damascus, while Sharaa’s government would accept the Druze community’s “special relationship” with Israel, effectively amounting to normalization. Suwayda province and the Druze villages on Mount Hermon could then strike a deal with Damascus to formalize their integration into government institutions while keeping armed Sunni Arab units out of the area, instead entrusting security tasks to local units under the aegis of the national Defense Ministry.
- **Replace the 1974 separation of forces agreement.** The new agreement could extend the limitations imposed on troop numbers and weapon types to a much wider area, as well as establish a mechanism for monitoring and coordination. Third-party monitoring could be ensured by either revising UNDOF’s mandate through the UN Security Council or forming a new organization led by a U.S. representative.
- **Coordinate activities in the Sunni border provinces.** Israelis have been cultivating ties with certain Sunni villages in Deraa and Quneitra for over a decade. Meanwhile, Sharaa is now trying to mobilize local ex-rebels and army defectors to join the planned 40th Division, which is supposed to serve as the government’s garrison in these provinces and place local recruits under the command of an officer who hails from there (Col. Bunyan Ahmed al-Hariri has already been appointed to the post). Continued Israeli patrols in these areas and contacts with local clans could conceivably clash with the Syrian government’s efforts to assert control.
- **Cooperate to prevent the return of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah.** Both actors are already attempting to re-infiltrate Syria.
- **Share intelligence to help dismantle Palestinian armed cells in Syria.** Factions like Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine are still active both inside and outside Syrian refugee camps. Sharaa’s government has taken steps to address this problem, but more work remains.
- **Address Syria’s acute shortages of fuel and natural gas.** The parties may want to revive the plan proposed by former Biden administration envoy Amos Hochstein, who called for pumping Israeli supplies to Syria (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/does-syrias-electricity-crisis-have-israeli-solution>) via the Arab Gas Pipeline that runs through Jordan. (This flow would probably extend to Lebanon over time, though that is now a separate discussion (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/power-people-scrutinizing-us-arab-effort-supply-energy-lebanon-syria>).) Gulf states and Western governments could cover the costs in order to promote future peacemaking—though there is no great advantage to letting a player like Qatar take credit for

getting gas flowing through the Arab pipeline, since Doha would likely disguise the fact that it originates from Israel.

- **Clear up the Mount Dov/Shebaa dispute.** If Sharaa cuts through the long decades of ambiguity and affirms that this Israeli-held area was under Syrian sovereignty before 1967, he would not only refute Hezbollah's claim that the land was Lebanese, but also help facilitate the recently renewed negotiations over demarcating the Israel-Lebanon border.
- **Consider whether Israel can assist Syria's urgent efforts to ease U.S. sanctions** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/navigating-syria-sanctions-conundrum>). This would help Damascus secure the funding needed for reconstruction, investment, and the return of millions of refugees.

It may be premature to raise another important issue: the prospect of Syria (and, perhaps, Lebanon) joining the Abraham Accords and officially normalizing with Israel. Yet direct dialogue could hopefully produce a new framework for relations—one that includes effectively ending the state of belligerency, accepting Israel's special relationship with the Druze, and agreeing on spheres of coordination throughout southern Syria.

The United States has taken the lead on brokering talks between Lebanon and Israel even while the IDF still operates across the border. There is a strong case for Washington to do the same in Syria.

*Ehud Yaari is The Washington Institute's Lafer International Fellow and a Middle East commentator for Israel's Channel 12 television.* ❖

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