

## Between Israel and Turkey, Implications for the New Syria (Part 2)

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay), [Assaf Orion \(/experts/assaf-orion\)](/experts/assaf-orion)

Apr 10, 2025

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Senior Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



[Assaf Orion \(/experts/assaf-orion\)](/experts/assaf-orion)

Brig. Gen. Assaf Orion (Res.) is The Washington Institute's Rueven International Fellow, a senior research fellow at the INSS, and former head of the IDF Strategic Planning Division.



Brief Analysis

**A former Israeli military official and a Turkey expert discuss what each government wants from Syria, how they can address their most glaring friction points, and what the Trump administration can do to mediate the process.**

**O**n April 9, The Washington Institute held a two-part virtual Policy Forum, with Soner Cagaptay and Assaf Orion appearing on the second panel. Cagaptay is the Institute's Beyer Family Senior Fellow, director of its Turkish Research Program, and author of its recent paper "[Building on Momentum in U.S.-Turkey Relations \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/building-momentum-us-turkey-relations\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/building-momentum-us-turkey-relations)." Orion is the Institute's Rueven International Fellow, a senior research fellow at Israel's Institute for National Security Studies, and former head of the IDF Strategic Planning Division. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks; [read a summary of the first panel with Maya Gebeily \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/between-israel-and-turkey-implications-new-syria-part-1\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/between-israel-and-turkey-implications-new-syria-part-1).

## Soner Cagaptay

Ideally, Turkey and Israel should recognize the strategic benefits they offer each other. For one, Israel has significantly undermined Hezbollah, one of the key groups that provided praetorian guard-like protection to Bashar al-Assad's regime during the civil war. Last year, with Hezbollah on the run in Lebanon, Ankara took advantage of the group's diminished support for Assad to back Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in toppling him. In turn, Israel is reaping the benefits of Iran's ejection from Syria, which ended the dominance Tehran has exerted across Israel's northern front for decades.

Yet Turkey and Israel also have differing visions for Syria's future, driven by their national interests and security concerns. In recent years, entities like the Islamic State and the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) have taken advantage of Syria's decentralization, which Ankara perceives as a threat. Additionally, Turkey is still hosting around four million Syrian refugees, creating domestic pressure from anti-immigrant and nationalist parties. If Syria begins to stabilize under the new government, some of these refugees might return home.

In the short term, Ankara wants to see HTS re-centralize Syria and improve the security situation. In the long term, Turkish officials want to flip Syria from their most problematic neighbor into a regional ally. Yet Israel does not trust HTS and is leery about watching the country rapidly re-centralize under the group's authority. Hence, it sees a long-term Syria-Turkey alliance as a concern.

The United States can play a critical role in bridging these differences, particularly if President Trump leverages his rapport with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to facilitate dialogue and even detente. Israel and Turkey have managed to avoid military confrontation so far, yet tensions could mount over Syria. To promote detente, the Trump administration should encourage both governments to pursue dialogue and deconfliction, pointing out that the United States needs to focus on broader strategic interests such as China and global great power competition. One viable outcome could be a negotiated arrangement in which a centralized government in Damascus allows Israel to neutralize certain threats inside Syria when necessary, in coordination with Turkey and the United States.

Successful diplomacy also depends on Israel not conflating Turkey with Iran. Despite Ankara's fiery rhetoric toward Jerusalem throughout the Gaza war, Erdogan has been careful not to sever bilateral ties. He appreciates the fact that Turkey cannot be regarded as a serious regional or global player unless it engages with all sides. He also understands that building strong ties with Trump hinges in part on positive relations with Israel.

In this sense, Erdogan should be viewed through two lenses: as a populist and a realist. His populist, often anti-Israel rhetoric caters to domestic concerns such as appeasing his conservative base, fixing the struggling economy, and fighting Turkey's culture wars. Yet his realist side remembers the lesson learned from the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla incident in 2010: never cut ties with Israel. Hence, Erdogan the realist has agreed to initial deconfliction mechanisms in Syria.

Stabilizing Syria would also serve Israel and Turkey's mutual interest in preventing Iran's return—a major U.S. strategic goal. Accordingly, President Trump should facilitate a meeting between Netanyahu and Erdogan to foster cooperation and position them as de facto regional neighbors responsible for enhancing each other's security.

Although HTS is not a direct Turkish client, Ankara does hold influence over the group, and Damascus understands that achieving international legitimacy and sanctions relief will require Turkish mediation. Trump and Erdogan should use these powerful carrots strategically. Officials must also carefully consider how the Kurds, Druze, and other minority groups will be integrated into a centralized Syrian government. A smart approach would grant these communities political participation, including the right to stand in elections.

When Trump meets with Erdogan again, they should focus on pressing the new government in Damascus to take the following steps:

- **Ensure that Syria will never again be a source of jihadist threats to the United States or its allies, including Israel**
- **Dismantle all capabilities related to chemical arms and other weapons of mass destruction**
- **Include minority factions and women in governance**
- **Normalize relations with neighboring states**

On the latter point, Turkey could even facilitate Syrian diplomatic recognition of Israel. Although this would be a tall task requiring sensitive negotiations on deconfliction zones and spheres of influence, obtaining formal recognition from Damascus would be another big step toward improving Israel's security and standing in the Middle East.

## Assaf Orion

Israel and Turkey look at Syria differently, and the most important goal is to prevent their potential conflicts of interest from becoming a conflict of militaries. Officials should therefore explore ways of better aligning their interests.

Israel's current policy stems from three sometimes contradictory elements: perceived security threats, post-October 7 trauma, and a newfound sense of great power and opportunity in the region. On the first point, Israel wants to prevent future threats on the border and deeper inside Syria (e.g., airborne threats, proxy militia activity). In trying to decide what arrangements are in its best interests and what kind of neighbors it wants, Israel tends to compare Turkey and HTS to Iran and the "axis of resistance," essentially "copy-pasting" its past experience and trying to prevent those threats from arising again.

Israel can live with a centralized Syrian government but does not see that outcome in the current cards. Alternatively, it is willing to work with a weaker government by establishing "spheres of security concern." Israel is not looking for a "sphere of influence" in the political sense, since its interest in (and understanding of) Syrian politics is low.

Either way, communication is key to preventing threats and working together to eliminate them when they do arise. Toward that end, Israel could work

on functional understandings with the Syrian government and Turkey so that they can collectively counter Hezbollah and Iran. These understandings should include clear rules of conduct and channels of communication.

New frameworks are also needed for security arrangements in the Golan. The 1974 agreement was crafted under the Cold War paradigm and sought to prevent a 1973-style war between standing armies. Everything is different now, from monitoring systems to ranges, depths, weapons, and forces.

In addition to avoiding inflammatory statements toward each other, Israel, Turkey, and the Sharaa government should pursue deconfliction at the tactical level. Here again, dialogue is key, particularly on areas of mutual interest such as getting rid of chemical weapons, monitoring Russian activity, preventing Iranian infiltration, and curbing Hezbollah weapons smuggling. All of these efforts will be easier than reaching alignment at the strategic level.

Currently, the Israel Defense Forces are under great strain from their ongoing efforts against Hamas and Iran. Engaging Turkey and Syria could help Israel avoid increasing that load, among other interests. Accordingly, Ankara and Jerusalem should come together and find a way to resolve more technically approachable issues, beginning with potential tactical friction and deterioration in the sensitive air domain. Later, they can move on to longer-term, strategic-level aspirations.

*This summary was prepared by Fatma Siddique. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family.* ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Setting Up the Next Phase of U.S.-UAE Nuclear Cooperation](#)

Apr 11, 2025



Noam Raydan

(/policy-analysis/setting-next-phase-us-uae-nuclear-cooperation)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Between Israel and Turkey, Implications for the New Syria \(Part 1\)](#)

Apr 10, 2025



Maya Gebeily

(/policy-analysis/between-israel-and-turkey-implications-new-syria-part-1)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [Trump's Gulf Trip Will Test Regional Nerves and Alliances](#)

Apr 9, 2025



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/trumps-gulf-trip-will-test-regional-nerves-and-alliances)

## TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](/policy-analysis/israel)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](/policy-analysis/turkey)