

Between Israel and Turkey, Implications for the New Syria (Part 1)

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Apr 10, 2025

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Maya Gebeily is the Reuters bureau chief for Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan.



Brief Analysis

A regional media bureau chief explains how continued Israeli military incursions in Syria are complicating efforts to stabilize the country, and why multilateral foreign assistance is a must.

On April 9, The Washington Institute held a two-part virtual Policy Forum. The first session included Maya Gebeily, the Reuters bureau chief for Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, based in Beirut. The following is a rapporteur's summary of her remarks; [read a summary of the second session with Soner Cagaptay and Assaf Orion \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/between-israel-and-turkey-implications-new-syria-part-2\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/between-israel-and-turkey-implications-new-syria-part-2).

Israel and Turkey's postures and objectives in Syria are increasingly coming up against each other. Turkey wants to see a stable, centralized Syria and is interested in the success of the new political project under Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the group that led the campaign to topple the Assad regime. As Ankara pursues deeper political, economic, and military cooperation with Damascus, Israeli military incursions across the border are on the rise, with authorities stating that they want to establish a demilitarized zone in Syria.

Interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa has tried to signal Israel that Syria does not pose a security threat, in part by asking allies to convey this message. He has also tried to leverage international law, calling on Israel to respect Syrian boundaries under the 1974 disengagement agreement and asking Qatar to mediate. Israeli strikes and incursions have continued, however, leaving the Syrian public angry and fearful about what they perceive as unjustified military action. Israel insists that its moves are primarily defensive, pointing out that in the post-October 7 environment, it needs buffer

zones to protect against cross-border attacks. Yet Syrians are trying to prioritize actions that keep their country together rather than threaten its territorial integrity.

Indeed, Sharaa has numerous challenges to address before he can fully stabilize Syria, and Israel's continued military presence further complicates these thorny issues. For one, he is still trying to consolidate authority over various actors throughout the country. His current inability to fully control Syria's many armed factions was recently on display during the widespread retaliatory killing of Alawites in the coastal region. Sharaa is aware of the stakes involved in his plan—although negotiations are ongoing, previous attempts to create a unified national movement to replace the Assad regime all failed.

As such, many Syrians believe that other countries must be involved in stabilizing the country, emphasizing the need for unified Gulf support. In their view, rebuilding Syria is not workable if just one country—whether Turkey, Qatar, or another state—has to deal with all of the post-Assad challenges. Instead, different countries can take on various security and economic roles.

Outside the region, military relations between Syria and Russia are progressing. Moscow will apparently retain its bases there, though figuring out the details of this defense relationship will be complicated.

Assessing U.S. policy toward Syria is more difficult. President Trump's statement that his administration is willing to mediate between Turkey and Israel has given Syrians the sense that the United States can play a larger role in their country going forward. Yet Washington is currently divided between those who believe Sharaa should be treated as a former jihadist and those who believe he is worth engaging in the interest of promoting regional security. The State Department has published a list of criteria that Damascus needs to meet before Washington can lift its Assad-era sanctions on the country; until then, U.S. sanctions remain a significant obstacle to rebuilding the economy.

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

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