

Prospects for Syria-Israel Relations

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Articles & Testimony

Israel may believe the tense status quo is sustainable, but Washington is frustrated about the potential implications for Arab normalization, Turkish military friction, and near-term economic plans.

Prospects for more normal if not formally peaceful relations between Syria and Israel were diminishing in recent months. Thus it was positive that Syrian and Israeli officials met in Paris on January 5-6 to discuss security arrangements.

These talks were mediated by US officials. President Trump says he wants Israel to “get along” with Syria. But reconciling Israel’s security requirements post-October 7 with Syria’s sovereignty post-Asad regime remains a challenge.

President Trump prides himself on his closeness with Israel. But in early December, he [criticized](https://www.timesofisrael.com/trump-speaks-to-netanyahu-warns-israel-not-to-interfere-in-syria/) [\(https://www.timesofisrael.com/trump-speaks-to-netanyahu-warns-israel-not-to-interfere-in-syria/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/trump-speaks-to-netanyahu-warns-israel-not-to-interfere-in-syria/) Israeli military operations in southern Syria. After an Israeli raid on November 28 killed 13 Syrians, the president warned Israel in a Truth Social post to refrain from activities that could “interfere with Syria’s evolution into a prosperous State.” This wasn’t the first time President Trump and his administration have critiqued Israel’s military operations in Syria. In July, after the Israeli Air Force bombed Syria’s Ministry of Defense and a target next to the presidential palace, senior administration officials [accused](https://www.axios.com/2025/07/20/israel-syria-strikes-trump-netanyahu-divide) [\(https://www.axios.com/2025/07/20/israel-syria-strikes-trump-netanyahu-divide\)](https://www.axios.com/2025/07/20/israel-syria-strikes-trump-netanyahu-divide) Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of having an “itchy” trigger finger. “He bombs everything all the time,” one White House official complained. “This could undermine what Trump is trying to do.”

In Syria, Rhetorical Change Toward Israel

Trump isn't the only one frustrated with Israel's attacks inside Syria. Lately, Syria's new president, Ahmed al-Shara'a, has also made his displeasure public. During an early December interview at the Doha Forum, he accused Israel of engaging "in a fight against ghosts." Since taking power, al-Shara'a claimed, he had sent Israel messages of peace and stability. But instead of embracing the new Syria, "Israel has met us with extreme violence," conducting more than 1,000 airstrikes, staging some 400 incursions, and occupying swaths of Syrian territory adjacent to the Golan border.

To be sure, the Doha Forum often inspires shrill language toward Israel. But al-Shara'a's broadside represented a departure from his largely conciliatory posture toward Israel during his first year in power.

Syrian government agencies are increasingly echoing his harsher tone. In November, the Syrian Foreign Ministry publicly **condemned** (<https://www.trtworld.com/article/63d8f329d81f>) Netanyahu's visit to Israeli troops deployed in the buffer zone between Israel and Syria, formerly patrolled by UN peacekeeping units, as a "serious violation" of sovereignty and an attempt to impose a "fait accompli" on the frontier. Meanwhile, Syrian state media now **refer** (<https://wehda.alwehda.gov.sy/?p=171657>) to Israel, as they used to do, as "the Zionist enemy." This trajectory is not encouraging.

For much of the past year, al-Shara'a and his regime sought to verbally reassure Israel that Damascus wasn't interested in conflict. Weeks after coming to power, he **stated** (<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. The governor of Damascus offered a similar **talking point** (<https://www.npr.org/2024/12/27/g-s1-40144/syria-israel-relations-damascus-governor>): "Our problem is not with Israel," he said, "We don't want to meddle in anything that will threaten Israel's security."

When **asked** (<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2025/02/03/an-interview-with-ahmed-al-sharaa-syrias-president>) about prospects for normalization with Israel, al-Shara'a was negative but not entirely dismissive. "We want peace with all parties," he explained, but he highlighted "a great sensitivity regarding the Israeli matter" since the Israelis "have been occupying" the Golan Heights. So "it is too early to discuss." Instead of normalization, al-Shara'a has been advocating an Israeli withdrawal from the buffer zone established by the 1974 UN-monitored Disengagement Agreement and other adjacent areas along with the Golan Heights border.

The new government in Damascus had engaged in regular exchanges with Israel. This past summer and fall, al-Shara'a repeatedly dispatched his foreign minister, Asad al-Shaibani, to conduct direct negotiations on security arrangements with Ron Dermer, Israel's strategic affairs minister. More recently, Shaibani met in Paris with Israeli Ambassador to Washington Yechiel Leiter as well as the designee to lead the Mossad.

Israeli Military Actions in Syria

At least some of Israel's military operations in Syria since Asad's fall in December 2024 seem justified. Israel's decision to destroy Syrian weapons prevented these assets from falling into the hands of jihadists or other nonstate malefactors. Israel's initial cross-border deployment prevented a security vacuum along the Golan frontier in the chaotic days following al-Shara'a's rebellion.

Israel's most justified ongoing military operations in Syria aim to contain Turkey's increasing influence in Syria. Israel is targeting Turkish anti-aircraft systems and missiles either deployed in, or provided to, Damascus.

Perhaps understandably, in the aftermath of October 7, Israel has adopted a more forward-leaning military posture. This approach appears to be working in Lebanon, where Israel smashed Hezbollah, continues to target its personnel

and assets, and seems to be pressuring Beirut to disarm that dangerous, Iran-backed militia.

The Israeli military intervention to protect Syria's Druze community in summer 2025 appears to matter less for Israeli national security. Back in 2018, Netanyahu chose not to intercede when ISIS assaulted the Syrian Druze town of Suwayda, killing nearly 250 civilians. Last summer, however, Israel launched airstrikes against Syrian government forces after the same town once again came under attack by Sunni Arab militias affiliated with the Syrian regime. Israel is reportedly now arming Druze in the Suwayda province.

Israel's Strategy Is Unclear

Israel's long-term strategy is hard to ascertain. Skepticism may be warranted about al-Shara'a, a former member of al-Qa'ida. But it's not clear what Israel hopes to achieve with its kinetic approach. Israel has drawn a red line barring advanced Turkish systems in Syria. But efforts to forge a new border-security regime with Damascus haven't yet borne fruit.

Syria is a key element in a regional alliance to contain Iranian influence. The al-Shara'a regime routinely interdicts arms shipments sent by Iran and Iran-backed Iraqi militias intended for Hizbullah in Lebanon. Most recently, on December 17, Syria **ambushed** (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2626614/middle-east>) smugglers attempting to resupply Hizbullah with dozens of rocket-propelled grenades.

Israel may believe the tense status quo in Syria is sustainable. The Trump administration seems to disagree. US hopes for Israel-Syria normalization and having Syria join the Abraham Accords are premature, but Israel's current posture also seems to preclude even a non-belligerency agreement.

Netanyahu may not realize it yet, but Trump and his Arab partners in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are invested in Syria's success. Israel may have a free hand in Lebanon, but not indefinitely in Syria. Jerusalem's approach is having an impact on regional perceptions. Arab states see Israel's robust kinetic activity in Syria as destabilizing. This perception will not help advance Israel's regional integration.

For Washington, the most pressing issue is the rising tensions between Israel and Turkey. US mediation will be required to negotiate ground rules to prevent Syria from becoming an arena of Turkish-Israeli conflict. The United States should also continue to increase engagement between Damascus and Jerusalem to reach a modus vivendi along the Golan frontier. The short-term goal is to return Syria from being a hostile neighbor to Israel to becoming a more neutral one. For Jerusalem, in the absence of Damascus' agreement to Israeli demands for a demilitarized zone in south Syria, compromise may be required to reach an agreement with the new Syria.

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