

Syria and Israel: Navigating a Year of Transformation

By

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Introduction

The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 and the subsequent rise of Ahmad al-Sharaa’s Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham - HTS-led government marked the most dramatic transformation in Syria’s modern history. One year into the new order, Syria remains caught between hopeful promises of reconstruction and the persistent realities of sectarian fragmentation, militia autonomy, and external intervention. This article offers a joint assessment by experts from both Syria and Israel on Syria’s dramatic and turbulent transition, examining the challenges of rebuilding a state following a decade and a half of war, amidst competing ideological agendas, weak central governance and with 40 percent minority populace who face acute political and security challenges amid recurrent cycles of violence.

We analyze the emergence of the nascent “Syrian National Project,” its institutional architecture, and its struggle to establish legitimacy while navigating Turkish influence, Russian interests, and the evolving strategic alignment with the United States.

We also take a deep dive on Syria’s southern neighbor, Israel, that was quick to react to the changes in Syria shifting from tactical

military intervention to minority-protection operations and later to cautious exploration of long-term coexistence with a post-Assad Syria. We argue that despite deep mistrust and escalating flashpoints, a narrow but significant opportunity still exists to activate previously inaccessible channels in Syrian-Israeli relations, provided both states move beyond the reactive threat management measures and toward an interest-based cooperation. To that end, we propose an integrated framework for Syrian stabilization built on four pillars: constitutional guarantees, decentralized power-sharing, inclusive educational reform, and the institutionalization of an inclusive national identity combined with incremental bilateral confidence-building measures.

Ultimately, we contend that the success or failure of al-Sharaa's national project will determine whether Syria becomes a renewed adversary, a fragmented failed state, or a pragmatic neighbor capable of a different regional trajectory. The current moment presents a rare and fragile opening: if leveraged wisely, it could redefine not only the future of Syria and Israel but, also, the further development of the axis of stability in the Middle East.

A New Syria is Born

Back in 2011, when the Syrian uprising first erupted through social media,¹ long-standing sectarian and political divisions resurfaced in a country that never enjoyed a stable representative system capable of integrating its diverse population into a shared social contract. The Assad regime responded with a brutal crackdown that relied heavily on the Alawite minority for security and military support. In reaction, Qatar and several other GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) states funneled targeted logistical assistance to extremist Sunni factions, which further deepened the conflict. Sensing an opportunity in Syria's instability, Iran invested heavily in radical Shia militias. This intervention intensified sectarian polarization and indirectly legitimized the emergence of Sunni extremist groups.

The rise of ISIS soon drew foreign intervention, which in turn empowered Kurdish actors in the northeast. Turkey countered by

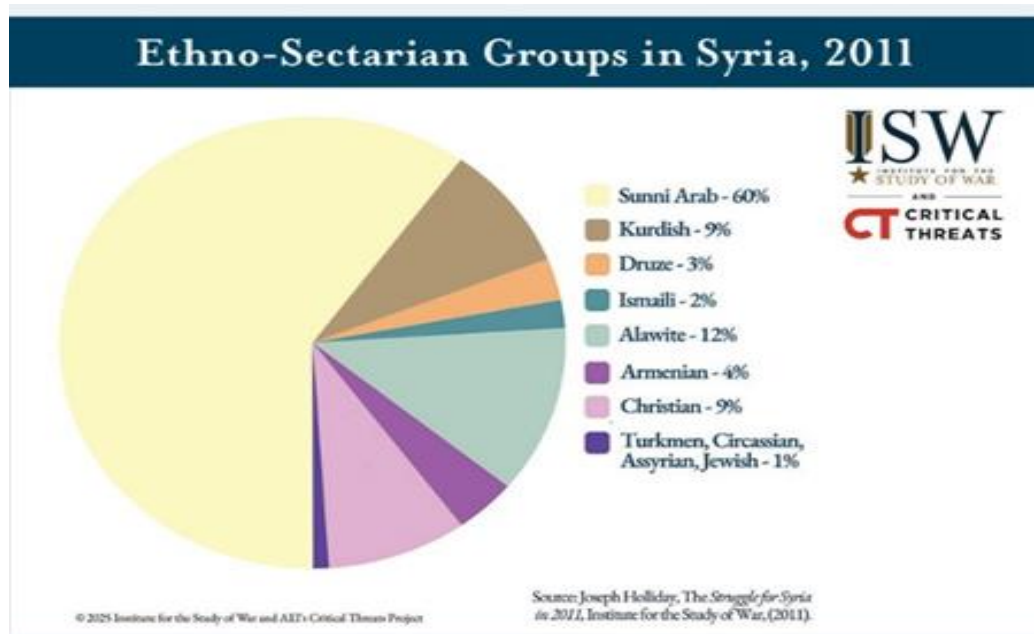
supporting local Sunni factions to limit Kurdish autonomy and by carving out buffer zones along its southern border. Russia, wary of repeating its Afghanistan experience, entered the conflict cautiously. Its involvement focused on bolstering the Assad regime through airpower while helping maintain the influence of allied Shia militias. For years, these competing interventions produced a tense but relatively durable balance of power among Syria's warring factions. That equilibrium began to unravel after Hamas's October 7th attacks and Israel's subsequent campaign against the Iranian-backed militias that served as the backbone of the Assad regime. The regional shockwaves triggered a cascade of strategic realignments. In Syria, HTS capitalized on the resulting vacuum, ultimately toppling the Assad regime and forming a transitional government in Damascus. Yet the underlying sectarian and political fractures quickly re-emerged, reinforcing the exclusionary nature of HTS's leadership and exposing the fragility of the new transitional order.

For the past decade, the Assad regime had been synonymous with systematic brutality and widespread human rights abuses against the Syrian population. A year in the making, Ahmad Al-Sharaa's new Syria still struggles with the vision of peace and tolerance outlined by its new ruler and its minorities still seek the promised integration following a series of ethnic and sectarian clashes which resulted in numerous violent crimes, targeting the Alawites in the coastal region and others aimed at the Druze community in the southern region. The lack of a unified national military and the prevalence of armed factions and militias challenging the central transitional government signify the collapse of the Weberian state's monopoly on force, placing Syria at high risk of becoming a failed state.² While Al-Sharaa was able to successfully position himself on the international arena, transitioning to diplomacy and bringing Syria back to the world's stage and the oval office, challenges at home persist, as the country only begins to recover from 15 years of brutal civil war. Power voids are still filled with local militias, some of which have agendas different from those of the central government in Damascus.

The presence of a 40 percent minority population coupled with significant religious and ideological cleavage lines, makes remaking a stable Syria a formidable challenge. Achieving stability will require deep constitutional and political reforms and a workable model of power sharing that will provide minority groups a permanent stake in the state and mitigate their fear of majoritarian rule. However, historical precedents in deeply divided societies, such as Lebanon or Bosnia-Herzegovina, demonstrate that even well-designed constitutional arrangements frequently risk entrenching sectarian divisions, fostering political gridlock, and ultimately fail to overcome the fundamental doubt many minorities harbor toward the leadership of a former Islamist insurgent.

Ahmad Al-Sharaa, formerly Abo-Mohammad Al-Joulani, has taken a pragmatic approach and gained significant endorsements by pointing to the new Syrian project he seeks to create: “The Syrian population has lived together for thousands of years.”³ Moreover, “we will have dialogue and ensure everyone is represented.” “The old regime always played with sectarian divisions,” he added, “but we will not I think the revolution can contain everybody.” These ideas are pivotal to the success of the potential Syrian National Project that Al-Sharaa seeks to create. However, they also underscore the challenge that lies ahead in bringing together a divided country still struggling to recover from a brutal and prolonged sectarian war.

Six months following the fall of Assad, Israel found itself bombing the presidential palace in Damascus for the first time, a move that meant to send a symbolic signal to the new Syrian government when it failed to prevent a massacre in the Druze areas. As Israel determines whether the new Syrian administration is a potential good neighbor or, rather, a new foe, there might still be time to engage with those in Syria who seek to build a country whose future trajectory will differ from that of the past.

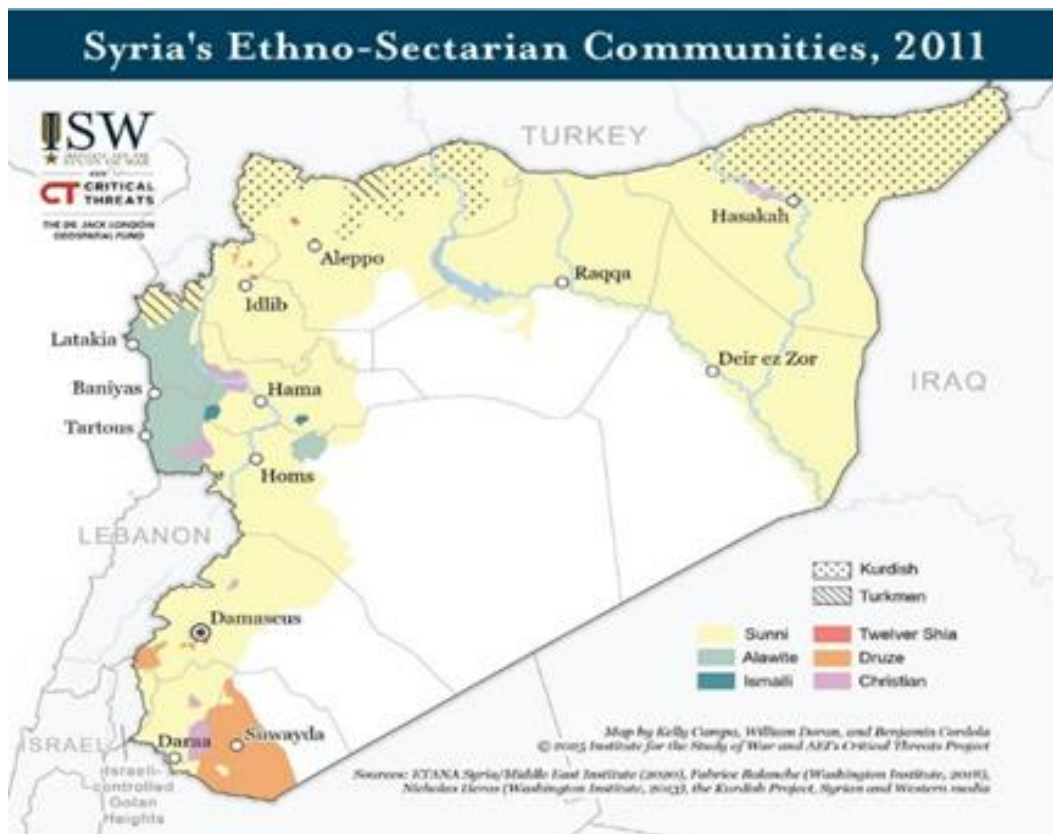


Between Old Syrian Divisions and a New Syrian Project

Old Divisions

Syria is home to a mosaic of ethnic and sectarian groups, with most of the population being Arab and Sunnis, which comprised over 70 percent of its pre-war population. In addition to Arabs, Syria has Kurdish, Armenian, and Assyrian populations. The Kurds, primarily in the northeastern regions, have distinct language and culture. The Armenian community, many of whom are descendants of survivors of the Armenian Genocide, is concentrated in several urban centers. Assyrians, an ancient ethnic group, also have a presence, particularly in the northeast. Other minorities, such as Alawites, Druze, Circassian and Turkmen, further add to the country's ethnic and complexity. Under the rule of the Assads, the Alawites – estimated to have been 12 percent of the pre-war population – claimed to have adopted the minorities, realizing that allies are needed as a small group seeks to rule over the Arab Sunni majority.

The years of war have begun to change the demographic composition of Syria. The majority of those killed in the rebellion - over 600,000 according to most estimates and close to a million according to some estimates⁴ - were Sunni Arabs. The same applies to the number of refugees who fled Syria, which is estimated to be between 6 to 7 million out of a pre-war population of 23 million.⁵ These dynamics place Syria's minorities at an estimated 40 percent of the population today.



Unfortunately, Syria's divisions do not end with ethnic, religious, or sectarian tensions. The protracted civil and proxy war that has ravaged Syria since 2011 formed additional cleavages that quickly translated into armed groups with local, regional, or ideological agendas. While some ethnic groups - specifically the Kurds and the Druze - maintain significant fighting forces, other powerful, autonomous armed forces exist on the ground. Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham

(HTS), the Turkish-allied Islamic group that took-over Damascus and formed the new government, is not a unitary military force. It was formed in 2017 as a merger of various armed factions, most notably Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham (JFS). Its commander, now President Ahmad Al-Sharaa, must navigate between his core supporters, who brought him to power on the back of an exclusionary Islamist agenda, and the broader constituencies of Syria who view this agenda as a threat. Furthermore, multiple reports suggest that Iran and its proxy networks are plotting an assassination attempt against Sharaa and that he has been the target of at least three attempts since assuming power in December 2024.⁶

These tensions already manifested in a series of sectarian and ethnic clashes involving the minority communities fostered by exclusionary political structure and enabled by lack of measure to counter violence incitement and inability to rein in the tribal elements, as illustrated by the following key points:

- 1) *Old Regime Remnants and the Alawites minority at the coastal region:* Between the 6th and 17th of March – when HTS government’s GSF (General Security Forces) were ambushed by armed men - described as former regime fighters or loyalists - during a targeted arrest operation of General Mohammed Kanjo Hassan aka “Butcher of Sednaya” (an Assad loyalist who was responsible for the notorious Sednaya prison). This initial act of resistance resulted in deaths of 14 GSF personnel and quickly escalated into a wider government mobilization and clashes in the coastal region led to a massacre of over 1,400 people predominantly civilian adult men, but victims included around 100 women, the elderly, and children as per the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria/OHCHR (August 2025 Report). According to Rami Abdulrahman, the head of the observatory group Syrian Observatory for Human Rights/SOHR, the death toll was among the highest recorded since

the 2013 chemical attacks by Assad’s forces, which then killed around 1,400 people in a Damascus suburb. While the Syrian government succeeded eventually to defuse the tension with President Al-Sharra forming a committee of inquiry, this sequence of events highlighted the volatility and intensity of the sectarian tensions and put into question the HTS government's ability to assert control over and establish legitimacy to govern Syria.

- 2) *The Druze Community in the Suburbs of Damascus:* Another violent event took place in April and May 2025, when Islamist forces, some associated with the government, mobilized and initiated a series of attacks against the Druze community on April 29, following an alleged recorded audio insulting prophet Mohammed attributed to a Druze Sheikh circulated widely on social media. The violence, concentrated in the Druze-majority Damascus suburbs of Jaramana and Sahnaya, resulted in over 100 Druze fatalities, a grim toll that provoked widespread protests from the Israeli Druze community and triggered a military response from Israel. The Israeli military actions were measured but loud and clear, specifically the warning strike near the presidential palace in Damascus, which aimed to deliver a message to the HTS government that Israel “will not allow forces to be sent south of Damascus or pose any threat to the Druze community.”⁷ The Israeli government justified the strikes as necessary for the direct protection of the Druze as well as applying pressure on the Syrian government to ensure the Druze’s security.
- 3) *The Druze Community in Suwaida Province:* The most severe sectarian escalations so far targeted the Druze community in Suwaida in July 2025, when clashes erupted following the abduction of a Druze merchant

on the Damascus–Suwaida highway, sparking retaliatory violence between Druze armed groups and Bedouin tribal fighters. The violence rapidly spread to Suwaida city and surrounding villages, leaving over 1,300 people dead, including an estimated 833 Druze (533 fighters and 300 civilians) according to later monitoring reports.⁸ Government troops entering the region were accused of committing “shocking violations” during their operations, deepening local resentment toward Damascus.⁹ Amid escalating hostilities, Israel launched airstrikes on Syrian military and government positions near Suwaida and in Damascus, citing the need to protect the Druze minority. Despite a cease-fire announced days later, sporadic fighting persisted, communication lines collapsed, and hospitals were rendered inoperative. The Israeli strikes were notable for targeting the Ministry of Defense headquarters and the vicinity of the Presidential Palace in Damascus, sending another direct and emphatic warning to the new Syrian government.

- 4) *Bedouin and Tribal Element*: The Bedouin tribes represent a pervasive and uncontrolled destabilizing factor across the Syrian geography, historically posing a significant challenge central authorities have struggled to manage. Acting as the primary mobilized force in the violent incidents cited above, tribal elements often shift allegiances based on patronage rather than ideology. Currently, they are embedded within the ranks of opposing factions, including both the Kurdish-led (SDF) Syrian Democratic Forces and the HTS government forces, effectively serving as the foot soldiers for conflicting agendas. This volatility is compounded by the community's unique transnational nature, maintaining deep kinship ties and presence across artificial borders in Iraq, Jordan,

and Israel. Consequently, successful stabilization in Syria necessitates a decisive policy to transition these groups from independent militias into a professionalized cadre integrated within the Syrian Armed Forces, replacing the current vacuum of authority with state-centered accountability.¹⁰

- 5) *Structural Permission for Incitement:* The current transitional period suffers from a “structural permission” for the incitement of violence, in which the information vacuum is filled by weaponized disinformation and sectarian rhetoric. This is further entrenched by the conspicuous lack of representation and participation of minorities in official and popular media outlets, which prevents cross-sectarian dialogue and leaves minority narratives susceptible to malicious distortion. The direct correlation between unchecked hate speech and physical violence was demonstrated during the April 2025 events in the Jaramana and Sahnaya crisis when the weaponization of an unverified audio clip triggered mass mobilization and over 100 fatalities, mainly from the Druze community. Similarly, the ability of groups like *Saraya Ansar al Sunnah* to publicly broadcast calls for the extrajudicial killing of Alawites and “regime remnants” without digital platform or legal repercussions creates a permissive environment that normalized the violent incidents. Without intervention, social media platforms and local rumor networks will continue to act as catalysts that transform isolated crimes – such as the Suwaida abduction – into existential communal wars.
- 6) *Persistent Extremist Threat:* Salafi-jihadi groups (ideologically close to ISIS) continue to be active, and some are conducting extrajudicial killings against Syrians perceived to be tied to the former al Assad

regime. One group - Saraya Ansar al Sunnah - called for the killing of an Assad informant in Aleppo in April 2025 and has already claimed several killings. The group has conducted dozens of attacks targeting former Assad officials and the Alawite minority in western Syria as well. The group has also announced that it will attack the Druze community in southwestern Suwaida Province.¹¹ Jamaat Ansar al-Islam (JAI) - a group originated as an al-Qaeda-linked group in Iraq in 2007, but has been operating in Syria since 2011 - was responsible for a significant clash with Israeli forces in November which resulted in the death of 14 in the village of Bit Jan.

Although the new Syrian government's (DDR) Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration mission aims to collect weapons and merge various armed groups into a unified Syrian Security and Armed Force, the enduring autonomy of independent armed factions and the uncontrolled armed tribal elements present significant challenges, constantly triggering clashes and undermining the state's sovereign control over its citizens.

The New Syrian National Project

In a party speech made days after the Al-Sharaa's conquering of Damascus, Turkish President Erdoğan talked openly about his ambitions to "revise the outcome of World War I and annex Syrian territories (formerly Ottoman provinces) into Turkey." Contrary to Western Europe, where a post-modern and post-nationalist mindset is still dominating the elites, the rest of the world is moving on to a neo-imperialist mindset.¹² Turkey supports and trains the Syrian National Army (Al-Jaish Al-Watani),¹³ which is an offshoot of the Free Syrian Army that began its activities in Syria with Turkish, Gulf and Western backing. This faction consists of over 30 armed groups that do not necessarily operate under a unified command. Other factions of the Free Syrian Army, mainly secular groups that rejected Turkish

patronage, are spread throughout Syria and beyond, receiving support from various parties, including the U.S. and Gulf states.

The statement released on December 24, 2024, regarding an agreement with the leaders of former rebel factions to dissolve and consolidate all groups under a new Syrian Defense Ministry is undoubtedly promising but also revealing. Many armed groups – including the minority groups have resisted surrendering their weapons¹⁴ due to ideological differences or fear for their safety. Some of these groups are aligned with political factions that do not recognize the Al-Sharaa-led Syrian National Project. The recent armed clashes in Syria reflect both the challenges and dangers that lie ahead. If the Syrian National Project fails – or if a formula cannot be developed to unite the diverse minorities, tribal, ideological, and ethnic groups into an effective power-sharing arrangement – Syria may face fragmentation. This could lead to the continuation of violence and ultimately threaten to plunge the country back into turmoil.

If and when Syria is able to overcome its divisions, herculean efforts will be needed to achieve statehood. State monopoly on the use of force is widely regarded as a defining characteristic of the modern state¹⁵. It has been reported that the new Syrian government aspires to form a 300,000-strong army with the help of Turkey, with Turkish military advisors playing a central role. Turkish Armed Forces personnel would oversee the process at five strategic locations.¹⁶ While Syria's new government has called for the disbanding of all armed groups, few have adhered to the challenge. The fighters from the Druze religious minority say they prefer to rely on their own men, rather than the promises made by Syria's transitional authorities.¹⁷ The Kurds will be the last to trust a Turkish-backed effort, as indeed will be all secular groups, whom the West formally backed.

On 29 March 2025, President Ahmad Al-Sharaa announced the formation of a 23-member transitional cabinet. Under the new interim constitutional declaration, the position of prime minister was eliminated, consolidating executive authority within the presidency. Key cabinet appointments include Foreign Minister Asaad Al-Shibani,

Defense Minister Murhaf Abu Qusra, Interior Minister Anas Khattab, and Finance Minister Mohammed Yisr Barnieh. Hind Kabawat, the sole female minister and a Christian, was appointed to oversee Social Affairs and Labor, signaling an effort toward greater inclusivity.

While al-Sharaa said at the ceremony to mark the new cabinet's appointment that "we witness the birth of a new phase of our national journey", the new cabinet has drawn significant criticism. Indeed, the concentration of power in the hands of the president and the absence of a prime minister have raised fears of potential authoritarianism and the marginalization of diverse political voices. While the government has taken steps to promote inclusivity by appointing ministers from various ethnic and religious backgrounds, persistent sectarian tensions and the limited representation of minorities continue to fuel concerns about the depth and sincerity of these reforms.¹⁸

The transitional legislature of the People's Assembly of Syria (210 seats) reflects a significant structural shift:¹⁹ approximately two-thirds of its members are selected through indirect electoral colleges, while one-third are directly appointed by the interim president. Notably, regular political parties remain banned, and no mechanism exists yet for free party competition (meaning all candidates stand as independents). The elections, held on 5 October 2025, were further marred by the exclusion of entire regions – most prominently the Kurdish-controlled northeast and the Druze-majority province of Suwaida – from participation, leaving seats vacant and raising questions of legitimacy.²⁰ Together, these features have prompted critics to argue that the process lacks the fundamentals of representative democracy and failed to secure a truly inclusive parliament.²¹

Pillars for Stability and National Cohesion

For Syria's National Project to transcend the failures of its past regime and lay the foundations of a sustainable post-conflict order, the reconstruction of its political and social institutions must rest on four interlocking pillars: constitutional and legislative guarantees, power-

sharing through decentralization, educational reform and the institutionalization of an inclusive national identity. These measures are essential to transform Syria from a state fragmented by decades of authoritarian manipulation and sectarian warfare into a cohesive and inclusive polity.

(1) Constitutional and Legislative Guarantees

The first pillar involves embedding minority rights within Syria's constitutional framework. This requires explicit provisions prohibiting discrimination and guaranteeing proportional representation in governance. Furthermore, legal recognition of linguistic and cultural autonomy must be enshrined to ensure that all communities see themselves as stakeholders in the state's future. The failure of previous Syrian constitutions to recognize such diversity contributed significantly to the alienation of minority groups and the erosion of national unity.²² Constitutional pluralism, combined with robust judicial oversight, would create a legal architecture capable of protecting minorities from both state coercion and majoritarian dominance. Despite several high-profile initiatives, including the National Dialogue Conference and the establishment of a Reconciliation Committee, many minority leaders and activists remain publicly skeptical of the process's inclusivity and legitimacy taking into consideration that the current Syrian Parliament reflected inadequate representation of minorities and women.²³

(2) Power-Sharing and Decentralization

The second pillar lies in a reformed state structure that should institutionalize a power-sharing formula that, on the one hand grants local communities' meaningful administrative autonomy while, on the other, ensures allegiance to the Syrian nation-state and its security structure. While the two might initially appear contradictory, a formula which will empower local administrative structures at the township, county and city level might offer an innovative solution to ease ethnic and communal tensions. This approach should draw lessons from post-conflict arrangements such as Iraq's 2005

constitution or Lebanon's Taif Accord, where devolved powers initially helped diffuse post-war sectarian tensions but eventually lead to perpetual political gridlocks, entrench sectarian divisions, and ultimately weakened the effective authority of the central state²⁴ which eventually created a critical gap for malign and destabilizing regional foreign influence. A balanced system of decentralization would not only empower local governance but also strengthen the legitimacy of the central state by building trust between citizens and national institutions.

(3) Educational Reform

The third pillar focuses on reimagining education as a national integrative tool rather than an instrument of ideological control. Historically, Syrian curricula under the Ba'ath regime propagated Arab nationalism at the expense of ethnic and linguistic diversity. Integrating the histories, languages, and cultural contributions of all communities – Arab, Kurdish, Armenian, Assyrian, Druze, and others – into the national curriculum is therefore vital for cultivating a shared civic identity. Education should no longer function as a mechanism of exclusion or homogenization, but rather as a vehicle for reconciliation, pluralism, and inclusivity. Comparative studies in post-conflict societies, such as Lebanon and Bosnia-Herzegovina, underscore that inclusive educational systems can play a pivotal role in reshaping collective memory and preventing the reemergence of sectarian divides.²⁵

(4) Institutionalization of an Inclusive National Identity

To dismantle the “structural permission” for incitement currently destabilizing Syria, the transitional authority must immediately enforce strict hate speech regulations while simultaneously breaking the monopoly of sectarian echo chambers. This is not achievable via mere censorship; the state must actively utilize official platforms to elevate the authentic political representation of all polities. By ensuring that legitimate leaders from diverse communities have the visibility to voice grievances and engage

in national dialogue, the information vacuum is filled with credible alternatives to radical rhetoric. Historical precedent supports this approach; the Allied stabilization of post-WWII Germany successfully neutralized radicalization through the rigorous control of mass media and the deliberate promotion of pluralistic discourse.²⁶ Applying these lessons to Syria is essential to ensure that digital platforms and rumor networks do not continue to act as accelerants for existential communal wars.

Collectively, these four pillars offer a blueprint for the emergence of a new Syrian political order, one rooted not in coercion or sectarian privilege, but in civic inclusion and shared sovereignty. By embedding these principles into the foundational architecture of the state, the new Syrian leadership could gradually transform its fragile legitimacy into a durable form of governance capable of sustaining peace and cohesion.

The adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2799 on November 6, 2025,²⁷ serves as the critical geopolitical turning point that operationalizes the “Syrian National Project,” elevating it from a fragile domestic experiment to an internationally sanctioned mandate. By formally delisting President Ahmed al-Sharaa from the U.N. sanctions regime, the Council has effectively dismantled the “legitimacy gap” that previously threatened to strangle the transitional government in its cradle.

Crucially, the resolution’s explicit endorsement of “lifting obstacles to economic recovery” allows for the economic viability necessary for stabilization rather than mere security enforcement, unlocking the global financial architecture required to sustain the nascent state. This development fundamentally alters the strategic calculus for all regional actors: the Syrian National Project is no longer just a theoretical aspiration for internal reform, but the internationally backed blueprint for the region's future, compelling skeptics – including Israel – to pivot from a posture of containment to one of engagement with a recognized sovereign partner.

Regional and Global Power Struggle: Challenges and Opportunities

The soul of the new Syrian state hangs in the balance, torn between its new leader's pragmatic, pluralistic promises and the entrenched Islamist ideology of his core supporters, which fuels persistent sectarian violence. This internal struggle directly dictates Syria's nature as a regional power; its profound weakness and dependence on Turkish military and economic support risk reducing its hard-won sovereignty to that of a client state, a mere façade for Ankara's neo-Ottoman ambitions. For Israel, this precarious reality presents a fundamental strategic choice: to continue viewing Syria through a narrow lens as a permanent enemy, or to recognize a rare, if fraught, opportunity to forge a new *modus vivendi* with a fragile neighbor whose internal preoccupation and potential for moderation could serve Israel's long-term interest in a stable northern border.

President Erdoğan of Turkey has signaled that he looks upon Syria with an expansive vision, asserting that Turkey cannot be "confined" to its current borders and that its regional potential must not be limited. Addressing the nation's future, he famously remarked that "Turkey is not just a place confined in an area of 782,000 square kilometers," underscoring a destiny that extends far beyond its sovereign map. For Israel, this precarious reality presents a fundamental strategic choice: to continue viewing Syria through a narrow lens as a permanent enemy, or to recognize a rare, if fraught, opportunity to forge a new *modus vivendi* with a fragile neighbor whose internal preoccupation and potential for moderation could serve Israel's long-term interest in a stable northern border.

Turkey has advanced negotiations with Syria for a defense pact that would include a train-advise-assist (TAA) component, thereby significantly expanding Ankara's influence over the Syrian Armed Forces beyond its current presence in Aleppo, Idlib, and Hama.²⁸ In parallel, Syria's foreign policy has sought to balance these regional overtures through renewed engagement with Moscow. In mid-October 2025, interim President Ahmad Al-Sharaa conducted his first official visit to Russia, where he met with President Vladimir Putin to

reaffirm Syria's commitment to existing bilateral defense and energy agreements and to explore the potential for renewed arms cooperation.²⁹ The visit underscored Damascus's intent to maintain its strategic partnership with Russia as a means of compensating for weakened state capacity and ensuring continuity of security assistance.

Meanwhile, the United States has continued to promote the integration of the Kurdish led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into the Syrian Arab Army as part of a broader disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) strategy. The integration process reached a breaking point in early 2026, however, following the expiration of the March 2025 agreement's implementation deadline. After negotiations over decentralization stalled, Syrian government forces – supported by Turkish-backed elements – launched a decisive offensive into the Northeast. By mid-January, Damascus had reclaimed strategic hubs including Raqqa and Tabqa, effectively forcing the SDF to accept the “January 30 Comprehensive Agreement” under military duress. To mitigate the risk of prolonged insurgency, the United States pressured the new Syrian leadership to enshrine Kurdish cultural and political rights within a formal Constitutional Declaration. This legal framework guarantees a degree of wide decentralization, allowing Kurds to appoint the governors of their respective areas and recognizing Kurdish as an official regional language.

U.S. attempts to integrate Kurdish forces, designed to ultimately link Syria to the U.S.-led coalition's counterterrorism architecture, would position Washington as an offshore balancer capable of mediating regional rivalries and supporting Syria's gradual incorporation into a cooperative and stable regional security framework. For Israel, this precarious reality presents a fundamental strategic choice: to continue viewing Syria through a narrow lens as a permanent enemy, or to recognize a rare, if fraught, opportunity to forge a new *modus vivendi* with a fragile neighbor whose internal preoccupation and potential for moderation could serve Israel's long-term interest in a stable northern border.

To counterbalance Ankara's expanding footprint in post-war Syria, Saudi Arabia is aggressively pursuing a "first-mover" economic strategy aimed at securing early dominance in high-stakes sovereign sectors. By fast-tracking over \$6.4 billion in investments,³⁰ Riyadh has prioritized critical infrastructure where long-term dependency is created: specifically, telecommunications, digital platforms and financial services. This capital injection, spearheaded by state-backed giants like STC, is designed to institutionalize Saudi influence within the nervous system of the Syrian state, seeking to counter Turkey from monopolizing the reconstruction market and ensuring Damascus remains economically tethered to the Arab fold rather than solely to the Turkish-Qatari axis.

On the international arena, and during his Washington visit on November 10, 2025, Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa announced that Syria will join the international anti-terrorism coalition, signaling a decisive and rapid geopolitical realignment toward the Western sphere. Syria's current realignment carries echoes of Egypt's dramatic pivot toward the Western sphere under President Anwar al-Sadat in the 1970s.³¹ Sadat's outreach to Washington and his peace treaty with Israel transformed Egypt's regional role but also fractured its internal political and ideological balance, alienating segments of the military, the Arab nationalist bloc, and Islamist movements, tensions that ultimately culminated in his assassination. The pattern reappeared decades later after Egypt's 2011 revolution, when the Muslim Brotherhood's brief rule collapsed under the weight of its failure to reconcile internal divisions with competing regional alignments, leading to a military coup.

These precedents highlight the dangers of rapid strategic realignment that outpaces domestic consensus or misreads the regional balance of power. As Syria moves to engage the United States and integrate into the international coalition against terrorism, its leadership must navigate similar cross-pressures between regime preservation, societal cohesion, and external expectations. The lesson from past is clear: bold foreign policy shifts can open new

opportunities but also generate internal and external fractures if not anchored in a coherent, inclusive national strategy.³²

Israel and Syria – an Opportunity and a Deadlock

Israel's initial approach has been tactically opportunistic. The collapse of the Assad regime and the subsequent expulsion of the Iranian Shi'a axis represented a significant strategic gain with significant ramification to the Lebanese arena as well. However, Israel's response, framed by the trauma of October 7th has been overwhelmingly militaristic. PM Netanyahu declared that "we have no intention of interfering in Syria's internal affairs, but we intend to do what is necessary to ensure our security," and added that he authorized the Air Force to "bomb strategic military capabilities left behind by the Syrian army so that they would not fall into the hands of the jihadist."³³ Subsequently, Israel seized control of the 1974 demilitarized buffer zone,³⁴ established permanent positions within Syrian territory. Additionally, it publicly embraced a "minority engagement" policy,³⁵ forging alliances with Kurdish and Druze communities.³⁶

This policy was invoked during the Suwaida massacre. In response to the sectarian violence in Suwaida and the perceived failure of the new Syrian authorities to protect the Druze minority, Israel intervened to push the Syrian and Militias forces away from the main Druze city. In an attempt to send a stronger message to Damascus, it launched air-strike with profound symbolic weight in Damascus on 16 July 2025, targeting the headquarters of the Defense Ministry and outskirts of the Presidential Palace.³⁷ The strikes came after Israeli warnings to Damascus not to deploy forces south of the capital and was described by Netanyahu as the enforcement of two "red lines": the demilitarization of the region from the Golan Heights to the Druze Mountains and "protecting the brothers of our brothers, the Druze in the Druze Mountains."³⁸ He affirmed that "a cease-fire achieved through strength" reflected Israel's doctrine and reiterated that "we will not allow the Druze to be harmed." The air strikes and the 340 documented land excursions,³⁹ thus represent a marked shift in Israel's

posture toward Syria, from a defensive buffer-driven approach to an active interventionist policy under the banner of Israel's actions reinforced the entrenched suspicions of Damascus hardliners, who view it as a destabilizing force, undermining trust required for a potential security agreement.⁴⁰

The handling of the longstanding Syrian-Israeli animosity must avoid the mistakes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where reducing the dispute to a territorial issue, while neglecting its deep-seated historical and psycho-social dimensions, resulted in an utter failure of peace efforts. Policymakers must distinguish between the two arenas: unlike the visceral, inter-communal friction of the Palestinian file, the Syrian-Israeli dynamic has, in recent history, been defined by a "cold" hostility, waged primarily through proxies rather than direct, state-on-state conflagration. Yet, this distance is deceptive. As a direct border nation, Syria represents an immediate strategic flank where instability is not theoretical but physical.

Neglecting these nuances has previously left the parties in further entrenched animosity and a gridlock that fosters vicious cycles of violence. Instead of rushing into judgements that may lead to courses of action that may repeat the mistakes of the past and miss the current opportunities, the expectations need to be clear on what is the process and what is the outcome and who are the actors that can bring it home. If peace is the ultimate goal, more creative and courageous solutions need to be discussed. The events of October 7th, 2023, in Israel are a brutal and stark example of an escalated cycle of violence as a result of failure to achieve peaceful solutions to chronic conflicts. If the Syrian National project were to succeed in the tremendous task of creating a formula to stabilize the fragile Syrian state, its leader Ahmad Al-Sharaa may emerge as a rare alternative ruler with ample national consensus to change the state of everlasting animosity between the two neighbors.

The Israeli position should indeed be seen as a temporary move as it does not address the pivotal policy questions Israel must consider when it comes to Syria. While a military force might address

immediate security concerns, longer-term prospects for relations should consider other strategic interests and in turn other policy options. The current Israeli presence in Syria – which is already regarded as an “occupation” – has been met with demonstrations and hostile activities against Israel, which, in turn, triggered an Israeli response that resulted in multiple deaths of unarmed Syrian civilians.⁴¹ Although Israel has so far remained largely peripheral to the evolving dynamics within Syria, its continued military activities had begun to change public perception and, more so, the tone of Al-Sharaa’s statements. Before the Suwaida tragic incidents, Al-Sharaa spoke in a reconciliatory tone and was positive even regarding the potential of joining the Abraham Accords “[u]nder the right conditions.”⁴² Nevertheless, after the Israeli air strikes on Damascus, his statements reflected a different position, one as of solidarity “with the people of Gaza, its children and women” and pointing that “Israeli strikes and attacks against my country threaten new crises and struggles in our region.”

Crucially, avoiding a state of entrenched animosity and conflict in Syria is a prerequisite for realizing the broader strategic prize: a comprehensive peace accord with Saudi Arabia, stabilization in Lebanon, and normalization with the wider Sunni Arab world. This approach recognizes the long-term positive impact of having a *modus vivendi* with the majority demographic population, the Sunnis. For Riyadh and the rest of the Sunni majority states in the region, the treatment of a post-Assad Syria serves as a geopolitical litmus test; an aggressive Israeli posture perceived as undermining a nascent Sunni-led government or one that cynically exploits sectarian divides that would be viewed as an assault on the Sunni majority, making public rapprochement with Israel politically toxic for Arab leaders.

Conversely, if Israel can demonstrate that its security doctrine allows for the success of a stable, sovereign Arab neighbor, it dismantles the narrative of inevitable existential conflict. This shift is essential for Lebanon, where a calm Syrian border de-escalates internal tensions, and for the Gulf, where it signals that Israel is the key partner in regional stability rather than a source of chaos. By facilitating rather

than obstructing Syria's reintegration, Israel clears the most significant psychological and political hurdles remaining on the path to a deal with Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Sunni Islamic world.

The emerging reality with Syria demands new tools and strategies to navigate effectively. Jonathan Adiri reminded us that Israel continues to embrace the “villa in the jungle” mindset – a phrase coined by former Prime Minister Ehud Barak to describe Israel's national security posture that continued to be embraced by his successors – that frames the region primarily through the lens of military threat suppression, rather than through a proactive vision of a desired future. This approach misses the opportunity for sophisticated engagement with dynamically evolving regional actors such as Syria. Israel should reassess the enduring “villa in the jungle” paradigm that continues to frame its regional security thinking and adopt a broad, regional strategy built on a strategic security infrastructure underpinned by the global coalition against terrorism and the CENTCOM coalition nations.⁴³ The current isolated and reactive cycles underscore the limitations of Israel's prevailing security mindset, which prioritizes unilateral and immediate threat suppression over an integrated and proactive vision for regional stability. Ultimately, Israel's posture oscillates between tactical opportunism and strategic ambiguity, an approach that risks alienating potential partners and entrenching hostility.

Ultimately, the durability of any comprehensive security agreement rests on the implementation of robust Third-Party Security Guarantees. In a landscape scarred by broken ceasefires and deep strategic mistrust, neither Israel nor Syria's internal minority factions will accept a roadmap based solely on the verbal assurances of a transitional government. A credible enforcement mechanism is therefore required to bridge this “credibility gap.” More specifically, a neutral international monitoring body is needed that is empowered to verify demilitarization zones and oversee the protection of vulnerable communities, especially in the south. Unlike the current Turkish military presence, which is viewed with deep suspicion by key actors, a non-aligned guarantor – modeled on the Ceasefire

Monitoring Mechanism in Lebanon – would serve as the operational linchpin of the agreement. By providing objective verification, such a body offers Israel the strategic assurance necessary to relinquish its risky, highly intrusive and unsustainable military-based security measures, while simultaneously granting Damascus the sovereign cover to accept security limitations without appearing capitulatory.

A more strategic path requires moving beyond this binary framework. In Syria, the Assadist doctrine of reflexive enmity towards Israel has been discredited, creating a potential, if fragile, opening to reevaluate this long-standing animosity. The choice is not between an old pro-Iranian Assad and a new Jihadi regime. It is about influencing whether Syria becomes a renewed adversary or a preoccupied, pragmatic neighbor. Ahmad al-Sharaa himself embodies this crossroads. A former jihadist with roots in the Golan, he could be driven back toward militancy or encouraged toward moderation.

Israel's insistence on normalization with Syria is predicated on the theory of strategic interdependence,⁴⁴ specifically, the transition from hard military leverage to soft-power influence. This approach is modeled on the Israeli-Jordanian relationship that is safeguarded by tight security cooperation and by Israeli critical supply of water to the kingdom.⁴⁵ Interdependence can provide necessary security guarantees and preclude kinetic conflict. The Israeli-Jordanian stability has endured despite hostile public sentiment in Jordan, resulting in a state of cold peace. Whether Israeli-Syrian relations will be framed in a similar way remains to be seen.

We believe that Syrian and Israeli long-term interests offer an opportunity for a convergence. The two countries seek stability and they both have realized that uncontrolled militias, non-state actors and proxies must be eradicated to achieve this.⁴⁶ Both countries are now attached to the American orbit, although the presence and influence of Russia and Turkey in Syria remains of concern when looking through the Israeli lens. And there are gaps in the level of trust in the ability of the new Syrian government to fulfill its commitments and implement policy agenda.

There are also starting points and arguments to be made regarding the Israeli interest in the success of Al-Sharaa's new Syrian project. A successful Syria, divorced of militias, governed by a functional and sustainable power-sharing structure that ensures an internal balance of minority rights, will be a better place for Syrians, and may also turn into a better neighbor for Israel. Such stability would help bring an end to the region's chronic state of attrition, effectively shifting the arena of competition from the battlefield to the marketplace, a shift which allows Israel to leverage its absolute competitive advantage as a global technological and economic powerhouse to create a regional platform of soft-power interdependence that can provide starting point for durable stability.

The cross-border communities, particularly the Druze and Bedouin, must be reconceptualized as a strategic bridge rather than a potential security threat. With members serving in the armed forces of both Israel and Syria, these groups possess a unique dual agency and represent a tangible human link between the two nations. They are the ultimate stakeholders in this geopolitical dynamic, positioned to be either the natural beneficiaries of normalization or the primary casualties of continued hostility. Leveraging their shared heritage and presence on both sides of the divide offers a pragmatic foundation for stability, transforming the border region from a line of confrontation into a zone of connectivity.

Incremental, interest-based confidence-building measures based on shared interests, such as joint border security mechanisms, discreet diplomatic channels, humanitarian coordination and trade relations could begin to transform the border regions such as the Golan Heights from potential flashpoints into a corridor for cautious coexistence. Additionally, successful people-to-people exchanges between Israeli and Syrian Druze, Bedouin and other communities may offer a viable model for coexistence. While the obstacles are monumental and recent developments have been negative, this rare window of opportunity must not be ignored, but instead used to forge a new framework for

relations before the gate closes, and the volatile new status quo hardens into another permanent conflict.

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