



# ISSUE BRIEF: ISRAEL'S STRATEGY IN SYRIA: ANALYZING THE APPROACH TO THE NEW REBELS REGIME

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The situation in Syria has shifted dramatically after years of relative stability under the rule of Bashar Assad, which relied heavily on support from Iran and Russia. The collapse of the Assad regime was facilitated by several factors: the success of decapitation strikes against its ally Hezbollah by Israel in Lebanon, Iranian reluctance to escalate regionally after Hezbollah's losses and its own exchange of limited hostilities with Israel, Russia's weakening military capacity due to its prolonged engagement in Ukraine, and the Erdogan government's recognition of an opportunity and decision to provide a tailwind for the rebels' move. The rapid collapse of the Syrian military caught both the rebels and Assad's Russian and Iranian military advisors by surprise, exposing the fragile nature of the regime.

Israel, like much of the international community, is watching the evolving situation in Syria with a mix of fear and hope. The fear arises from the emergence of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – an Islamist rebel group regarded by the United States and its partners as a terror organization – as the leading de facto authority in Syria, which could pose a direct threat to Israeli security. At the same time, there is hope because Iran's influence in Syria has been significantly weakened, reducing the threat posed by Iranian-backed forces and their regional ambitions. This shift in power dynamics offers a potential opportunity for Israel to navigate the complex situation, while also carefully managing its own strategic interests.

## Recent Israeli Operations in the "Buffer Zone"

In the Six-Day War in June 1967, Israel seized – and then began to settle – the Golan Heights. Following the 1973 Yom Kippur war in which Syrian forces initially overran the Golan Heights but were repelled by Israel, a [Disengagement Agreement](#) was signed between Israel and Syria in 1974 through the mediation of the United Nations and the United States. As part of the agreement, a demilitarized buffer zone was established between the forces of the two countries, monitored by the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF). The buffer zone was designed to reduce the risk of renewed hostilities. Negotiations defined two distinct areas: 1) A **buffer zone** (demilitarized zone) where no military forces are allowed to enter between 1-10 km wide on the Syrian side of the border line; and 2) **Restricted Military Areas** located on either side of the buffer zone, where the number of soldiers, heavy weaponry, and military equipment is limited. During the Syrian civil war, Israel maintained a policy of non-intervention, even as fighting between Assad and the rebels occurred near its border. Israel engaged militarily only when the conflict directly spilled over into the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights, targeting the source of the attack with precision strikes.

Following the swift collapse of Syrian army forces, the [Israel Defense Forces \(IDF\) took over](#) previously Syrian-controlled positions. On December 8, the [IDF began deploying](#) regular forces into the buffer zone, taking control of strategic locations, including the Syrian peak of Mount Hermon and Tel Kudneh, part of a chain of hills that dominates the terrain of the Syrian Golan Heights. These strategic locations were previously used as Syrian army posts, offering

a commanding view of the surrounding landscape. This IDF operation appears to have been [coordinated](#) with UNDOF, which is responsible for enforcing the separation agreement, and with which the IDF maintains regular and continuous contact.

The IDF appears to be maintaining its position without crossing the buffer zone's boundary, known as the "Bravo Line," further into Syria, and is avoiding actions that would displace the small number of residents still living in the villages within the buffer area. Reports suggest that the [IDF plans to engage](#) with the Syrian population in villages along the border, aiming to rebuild relationships between the Syrian residents and Israel. This initiative may include the provision of humanitarian aid to these communities, signalling an effort to foster stability and goodwill.

Israel's operation in the Syrian buffer area aims to protect its border in a highly volatile situation, where the intentions of various rebel factions remain unclear and unpredictable. The leading rebel group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), is a spin-off of Al-Qaeda in Syria, with its leader, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, classified as a terrorist. In recent years, HTS has attempted to distance itself from Al Qaeda, taking some early positive steps to try and signal to the international community that it may govern in a more moderate manner; however, time will tell whether or not this is the case, as the group's conservative Islamist roots are incontrovertible.

Given the recent security challenges Israel has faced on its borders – notably the October 7 massacre along its Gaza border and the discovery of extensive Hezbollah military infrastructure along its Lebanese border – securing its Syrian frontier has become a top priority. This operation is not only about physical defense but also about countering the unpredictable and potentially hostile forces near its borders. It is likely that a prolonged Israeli presence on Syrian sovereign territory will create internal pressure on the new regime, compelling it to resist what will be perceived as an Israeli occupation of their territory. Israel must clearly communicate the conditions under which it would consider withdrawing. These conditions might include an updated mandate for UNDOF and a guarantee that all armed groups will be distanced from the buffer zone.

### **Israeli Strikes on Syrian Military Infrastructure beyond the Buffer Zone**

Israel's [recent strikes](#) on Syrian army infrastructure beyond the Golan buffer zone are aimed at ensuring that rebel groups do not gain access to advanced weaponry left behind by Assad's army. The IDF has claimed to have [destroyed](#) around 80% of Syria's military capabilities, including stockpiles of ammunition, air and naval forces, tanks, artillery, and air defense systems. In addition, Israel targeted the Syrian Scientific Research and Studies Center (CERS), a facility linked to the development of chemical weapons.

Israel's recent military action, which Prime Minister Netanyahu [likened](#) to Winston Churchill's decision to bomb the French navy during World War II after Nazi Germany took control of France, may seem radical. However, this move can be better understood in light of Israel's current security concerns. The Israeli military faces the growing threat of an unknown jihadist player, with its forces already stretched across two fronts. After 14 months of warfare, Israel's reserves and regular forces have been severely depleted, making it increasingly difficult to manage multiple security threats simultaneously. This context helps explain the strategic decision to act decisively, even in the face of potential international criticism. However, it does come with a risk of closing off opportunities for some quiet engagement with the new regime, which views both Iran and Russia – the primary backers of Assad – as major enemies.

## **Initial Strategic Recommendations for Israel and the US Administration**

First and foremost, Israel must avoid opening another active front given the current challenges on its two other fronts: Gaza and Lebanon. While operating in the buffer zone, the IDF should refrain from entering into villages in the area, establishing any permanent infrastructure or presence that could imply intention to occupy territory. Avoiding actions that could be perceived as intent of a prolonged occupation is particularly vital, as they might compel the new regime in Syria to engage in violent confrontations with the IDF. Additionally, the IDF should continue to protect the UNDOF forces in the area and coordinate when and where possible.

Under these guiding principles, Israel should coordinate its strategy with the United States and pursue indirect negotiations with the new regime in Syria to establish a revised separation agreement. The revised agreement should outline conditions for Israel's withdrawal from the buffer zone while preserving its right to self-defense under international law, similar to the [recently signed](#) Israel-Lebanon ceasefire agreement. This agreement should guarantee that no terrorist groups gain control over the Syria-Israel border area, with monitoring responsibilities assigned to UNDOF.

The US administration, in coordination with Turkey under President Erdogan, should seize this opportunity to negotiate a new agreement and protect its interests in the vacuum left by the diminishing presence of Russian and Iranian forces in Syria. This diplomatic effort should be bolstered by economic incentives, contingent on the new regime's commitment to preventing any resurgence of Iranian or Russian military presence within Syrian territory, as well as inclusiveness, non-discrimination and adherence to human rights in governance. Such an approach could stabilize the region, support the rebuilding of Syria, and reinforce US and allied strategic interests in the Middle East.