



AMIDST RISING TENSIONS, SEIZING HISTORIC OPPORTUNITY FOR SYRIA, ISRAEL, AND THE US

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Rising Tensions in Southern Syria

This week, sectarian violence in post-Assad Syria came to a head with another [cycle of violence](#) between Druze militias and Bedouin tribes in the Druze-majority Sweida region of southern Syria. Ahmed al-Sharaa, the new interim president of Syria, deployed his forces to restore order and they clashed with Druze armed groups. More than [300 deaths](#) have been reported thus far, and the Syrian government has [committed](#) to holding the perpetrators accountable. The Druze minority in Syria distrusts the new government and perceives the military intervention in southern Syria as a defense of the Bedouin and attack on the Druze. Roughly 1,000 Druze Israelis [crossed](#) into Syria from the Golan Heights in solidarity with their fellow Druze.

Israel is conducting airstrikes in Syria as part of its commitment to Druze Israelis, and to prevent a buildup of hostile forces near its border and violent spillover into Israel. However, the IDF has also taken the highly escalatory step of [striking](#) Syria's Defense Ministry and presidential palace in Damascus, which could have profound implications for Syria's long-term stability. The Syrian government [condemned](#) the Israeli attack, which [killed](#) at least three people and injured 34 others, as a "blatant violation of the sovereignty of the Syrian Arab Republic."

Meanwhile, residents of Sweida are [sheltering](#) at home, many without electricity and unable to flee, while hospitals are [running out](#) of medical supplies. Secretary of State Marco Rubio [characterized](#) the latest escalation as a "direct threat to efforts to help build a peaceful and stable Syria," and US Special Envoy for Syria Tom Barrack [confirmed](#) that "we told the Israelis to stand down and take a breath." The Trump Administration is [pushing](#) for a ceasefire, hoping to thwart regional destabilization and return the parties to the negotiating table.

Syria-Israel Negotiations in the Background

Israel and Syria have been holding "[advanced talks](#)" focused on security issues and the possibility of Syria-Israel normalization. There has been much [speculation](#) about these bilateral negotiations, including a [report](#) that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Syrian President Ahmed Al-Sharaa are expected to meet at the White House in September to sign a security agreement as a first step to normalization.

President Trump has [expressed](#) a desire for Syria to join the Abraham Accords and Special Envoy Barrack is [hoping](#) to broker the deal. There is also reporting that Trump is [offering](#) Prime Minister Netanyahu normalization with Syria in exchange for ending the war in Gaza. Barrack has [cautioned](#) that President Al-Sharaa "cannot be seen by his own people to be forced or coerced into the Abraham Accords," and "so he has to work slowly." Meanwhile, leadership on both sides have publicly demonstrated an openness to ending hostilities. Most recently, Netanyahu during his visit to Washington this week, [said](#) that the new Syrian government

“presents opportunities for stability, for security, and eventually for peace.” For his part, Al-Sharaa in a recent interview with the *Jewish Journal* [proclaimed](#) that “the era of endless tit-for-tat bombings must end.”

Al-Sharaa also [emphasized](#) the importance of the Golan Heights – which Israel captured from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War and annexed in 1981 – and [insisted](#) that the safety of the Druze community there is “non-negotiable.” Regarding the final status of the Golan, Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa’ar recently [affirmed](#) that the territory “will remain part of the State of Israel” in any peace agreement with Syria. According to one [US official](#), border delineation and the future of Israeli-occupied Syrian territory is “up to them, not up to us.”

Another point of contention is the threat to Israel posed by Turkey’s growing influence in Syria following the collapse of the Assad regime in December of last year. Turkey has sought to fill the void left by Iran and Russia, allies of former Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, through increasing Turkish military presence in Syria. In pursuit of regional hegemony, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is directly challenging Israel’s freedom of action in Syrian airspace, used by Israel to counter Iranian proxy activities.

Trump’s Latest Actions on Syria

On June 30, President Trump [issued](#) Executive Order 14312 “Providing for the Revocation of Syria Sanctions.” The new EO rescinded most US sanctions imposed on Syria since the 1970s, while [maintaining](#) sanctions on Bashar al-Assad and his associates, ISIS and its affiliates, Iranian proxy groups, human rights abusers, and other criminals (including those linked to weapons of mass destruction).

Trump announced this decision at a Gulf Cooperation Council summit in Riyadh back in May, [ordering](#) the “cessation of sanctions against Syria to give them a fresh start” after the fall of Assad. While in Saudi Arabia, Trump also [met](#) with Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa – the first such meeting in 25 years – and subsequently [revealed](#) that the US is “exploring normalizing relations with Syria.”

Following this announcement, the State Department [issued](#) an initial 180-day sanctions waiver and the Treasury Department [issued](#) a general license authorizing certain transactions with Syria. Upon the issuance of EO 14312 last month, the Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control [implemented](#) the termination of the Syria sanctions program by removing 518 individuals and entities from the List of Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons. The US sanctions [remaining](#) in place “are a tool to promote accountability for Assad, his cronies, and others who seek to destabilize Syria or the region,” according to State.

Crucially, while Trump’s EO recognizes the “fundamental change” in Syria over the past six months and “positive actions” taken by the new Syrian government, the White House [explained](#) that the US remains committed to accountability for the Assad regime, addressing foreign terrorism in Syria (including Palestinian terrorism), preventing a resurgence of ISIS and

assuming responsibility for ISIS prisons, as well as advancing Syria-Israel normalization. During a White House meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu, Trump [claimed](#) that the Israeli prime minister requested the lifting of US sanctions against Syria.

Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad Hassan al-Shaibani [called](#) US sanctions relief an “historic turning point” that will enable his country’s “reconstruction and development.” On July 7, Secretary Rubio announced another “important step” in Syria’s postwar recovery: Under “Sec. 8 Counterterrorism Designations” of EO 14312, the Trump Administration [revoked](#) the Foreign Terrorist Organization designation of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (or Al-Nusra Front) – the Sunni Islamist group formerly led by Al-Sharaa.

Historic Opportunity for Syria, Israel, and the United States

No opportunity comes without risk – and risks both to and from the new government remain considerable. President Al-Sharaa’s Islamist roots and association with terrorist organizations initially slowed the West’s embrace of him, even as he deposed Assad’s ruthless, terror-supporting regime. While Al-Sharaa has made considerable moves to greater inclusivity and transparency in the interim, his ability to unify the Syrian security forces remains questionable and violence has flared with former Assad loyalists, the Druze community, and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Israel, in particular, has well-founded concerns over newly intensifying instability along its border – including over the Golan. Likewise, after decades of oppressive rule and crippling sanctions, it is unclear whether the new Syrian government can succeed in delivering services for its population and restructuring the economy to enable growth. Amidst this considerable uncertainty, though, lies a moment of historic opportunity for all three countries that may yet not be realized, but will almost certainly vaporize if not seized upon very quickly.

- For **Israel**, locking in a pathway to formal normalization of relations with Syria would deny Iran and its proxies access to territory from which it has resupplied Hezbollah in Lebanon and terrorized Israel for decades and potentially secure its northern border. Entering into direct negotiations on a peace settlement with Syria should also lead to a final resolution of the status of the Golan Heights, resolving issues over a long-disputed border. Building better ties with the Syrian government would also offset some Israeli concerns over Turkish influence in the new government. Finally, opening the door to expanded trade and engagement would almost certainly serve as a moderating influence on a rapidly evolving Syrian society.
- For **Syria**, normalization with Israel would set it firmly on a path to joining the community of moderate Arab states and all of the accompanying benefits of expanded access to more developed economies and social systems. Closer to home, access to the Israeli market could be a dynamic driver of economic growth and reform. This would, in turn, solidify the new government as a credible representative of the Syrian people and diminish the potential for extremist groups to challenge its authority.
- For the **United States**, normalization of relations between Israel and Syria (potentially culminating in formal accession to the Abraham Accords) would support President

Trump's vision of a transformed Middle East. Removing another ideological Israeli adversary could serve as further incentive for Lebanon and other countries in transition to pursue a path consistent with their evolving definitions of national interest defined more by economic opportunity than outdated ideologies.

Policy Recommendations

Acknowledging that Syria's path ahead is unlikely to be linear, a policy decision to expand engagement with the Al-Sharaa government should be based on an embrace of the opportunities and qualified acceptance that some backsliding and/or security lapses are likely inevitable along the way. While a difficult prospect for an Israeli population exhausted by near constant conflict, the long-term payoff almost certainly outweighs the risks as they currently exist. With reports that a meeting between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Al-Sharaa could occur as early as September, key actions that could be offered as part of the operationalization of that long-term vision include:

- Israel should expand and institutionalize nascent security cooperation with the Al-Sharaa government. Israel's security is paramount to the long-term viability of normalization between the two countries. The dialogue that has been opened between security services and which exists outside of political channels will serve to underpin any future progress.
- The US and Israel should incentivize Al-Sharaa to continue a policy of moderation toward relations with Israel, building for example upon reports of tacit Syrian approval for overflight of its territory for operations against Iran's nuclear program. Actions and statements that commit Syria to full acceptance of, followed by cooperation with, Israel, should be met with concrete and pre-defined support for Syria's economy and reconstruction, including in critical areas of Israeli expertise such as water management, healthcare, infrastructure, and education.
- Pursue negotiations aimed at ending the ambiguous status of the Golan Heights, securing the border, ending Israeli incursions deeper inside Syrian territory, and coming to a formula that can address both the security concerns and political needs of both sides.
- The US and other international actors should pressure all parties to immediately de-escalate the situation in Sweida. The US should take a direct role in negotiating a ceasefire aimed at ensuring protection of the Druze and other civilian communities, as well as ending Israeli incursions and attacks on the Syrian government that further destabilize and inflame the situation. The US should also press the Syrian government to ensure accountability for any attacks on civilians and exercise command and control of all security elements operating within its borders. Rather than regionalizing the sectarian violence in Syria, the supporters of the various sects must work towards restoring calm.