



**Analytical report**

# **The Syrian Puzzle: Between Reality and the Probability of an Anti-Jihadist Belt**

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## **The Syrian Puzzle: Between Reality and the Probability of an Anti-Jihadist Belt**

This analytical report, prepared by experts from the Dor Moria Policy Center, examines the dramatic transformation of Syria's political landscape in the aftermath of the Assad regime's collapse in December 2024. The analysis centers on Ahmed al-Sharaa—better known in the past as Abu Mohammed al-Julani—who has undergone a stunning transformation from jihadist leader to internationally recognized Syrian president in just six months.

The document provides a comprehensive assessment of the emerging regional power dynamics, where traditional alliances have given way to pragmatic partnerships. Particular attention is paid to the escalating confrontation between Turkey and Israel, the paradoxical convergence of Russian, American, and Israeli interests in Syria, and the ambitious investment plans of Gulf monarchies, with pledged investments running into the billions.

The authors critically evaluate the concept of establishing an "anti-jihadist belt" comprised of religious minorities, drawing parallels with Israel's failed alliance with Lebanese Maronites. The analysis highlights the risks of sectarian violence, particularly in light of the systematic killing of Alawites in spring 2025 and the crisis in the Druze province of As-Suwayda.

Special consideration is given to Syria's potential accession to the Abraham Accords—an ambitious project for normalizing relations with Israel that is fraught with both domestic and regional challenges. The report examines diplomatic initiatives, backchannel negotiations, and the complex web of regional interests that could either facilitate or derail this historic possibility.

The conclusion presents three future scenarios with probability assessments: "managed chaos" (60%), direct military confrontation between Turkey and Israel (25%), and authoritarian stabilization (15%). The analysis emphasizes that Syria's future remains highly uncertain, with the region's stability hanging precariously between pragmatic cooperation and catastrophic conflict.

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## **Foreword: Paradoxes of the New Syria**

Something unthinkable happened in May 2025: Donald Trump shook hands with Ahmed al-Sharaa—a man who recently ran an Al-Qaeda affiliate. The Riyadh meeting, brokered by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, capped off a stunning transformation from underground jihadist to internationally recognized Syrian leader<sup>1</sup>.

This handshake captures the Middle East's new reality. Pragmatism trumps ideology. Yesterday's enemies become today's partners. Yet beneath the diplomatic fanfare lies an explosive truth: Syria remains torn by sectarian bloodshed, regional powers play dangerous games for influence, and Israel scrambles to carve out buffer zones from the Syrian wreckage.

## **Chapter 1. From Jihadist to Statesman:**

### **Al-Sharaa's Remarkable Journey**

Abu Mohammed al-Julani's metamorphosis into President Ahmed al-Sharaa reads like a political thriller. The former Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) commander—whose organization traces back to Al-Qaeda—went from international pariah to welcome guest in world capitals within months.

December 2024 marked the turning point. Assad's lightning collapse opened al-Sharaa's path to power. By February 2025, he was in Saudi Arabia, where MBS received him as Syria's legitimate leader. The transformation peaked with Trump's handshake in Riyadh—the first U.S.-Syrian presidential contact in 25 years<sup>2</sup>.

Al-Sharaa's May 2025 Paris visit required special UN clearance, given his formal sanctions status. Macron walked a tightrope: "France will support a free, stable Syria, but you must protect all Syrians without exception"<sup>3</sup>. Marine Le Pen blasted the meeting as "provocative and irresponsible," calling Macron out for legitimizing a "jihadist"<sup>4</sup>.

Sanctions fell like dominoes. Trump announced their "cessation" during his Saudi visit, saying Syria deserved "a chance at greatness"<sup>5</sup>. By June 2025, Treasury had lifted restrictions

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<sup>1</sup> [CNBC](#)

<sup>2</sup> [NPR](#)

<sup>3</sup> [France24](#)

<sup>4</sup> [France24](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Axios](#)

on 518 individuals and entities, keeping only Assad's family blacklisted<sup>6</sup>. The EU followed suit in May<sup>7</sup>, while Britain unfroze key Syrian bank assets in April<sup>8</sup>.

The Syrian pound surged 27% on Trump's announcement<sup>9</sup>. Yet economists warn that without reforms and massive investment, recovery will take decades. Syria's Economy Minister Mohammed Nidal al-Shaar broke down on live Saudi TV, declaring the country was "entering a new phase"<sup>10</sup>.

## **Chapter 2. Turkey's Power Play: Regional Ambitions on Steroids**

### **Military Game-Changer**

Turkey unveiled its Tayfun Block 4 hypersonic missile on July 23, 2025—a weapon that reshapes regional power dynamics. At 7,200 kilograms and 10 meters long, it hits Mach 5 (6,000 km/h) with a 1,000-kilometer range. Translation: Every inch of Israel, including Dimona's nuclear facility, sits within reach of a weapon that existing air defenses can barely touch.

Turkey isn't stopping there. It's pushing through a 40-fighter Eurofighter Typhoon deal with German and British backing. This upgrade would vault Turkey's air force to regional supremacy, directly challenging Israeli air dominance. Add potential F-35s—which Erdogan's lobbying hard for in Washington—and Turkey gains a decisive edge over all regional rivals.

### **Syria as Turkey's Playground**

Turkey's Syrian expansion has shifted into high gear. Ankara's shipping modern armor to the new regime, ostensibly to "fight terrorism"<sup>11</sup>. The first batch of Ejder 6x6 APCs already sits with Syrian forces. These eight-person vehicles hit 110 km/h, pack 800-km range, and mount automatic mortars plus heavy machine guns.

Here's the kicker: Israeli social media lit up with photos of an 82nd Division Syrian soldier sporting an ISIS patch. So much for Turkey's "anti-terror" narrative. The truth? Syria's new regime serves as Ankara's proxy, wrapped in Islamist rhetoric.

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<sup>6</sup> [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Euronews](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Covington & Burling LLP](#)

<sup>9</sup> [CNN](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Al Arabiya in CNN](#)

<sup>11</sup> [The Times of Israel](#)

### **Chapter 3. Turkey vs. Israel: When Allies Become Adversaries**

What started as tactical friction over Syria has exploded into strategic rivalry between Israel and Turkey. These NATO allies now square off across the regional chessboard<sup>12</sup>.

April 2025 marked the tipping point. Israel preempted Turkish air defense deployments with strikes on Syrian bases in Hama and Homs<sup>13</sup>. Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar didn't mince words, accusing Turkish officials of trying to turn Syria into "a Turkish protectorate"<sup>14</sup>. Erdogan fired back, calling Israeli actions "banditry" and vowing to make "the Zionist regime pay".<sup>15</sup>

By May, tensions ran so high that both militaries established a 24/7 hotline to prevent accidental clashes<sup>16</sup>. Azerbaijan quietly mediated talks about a "Palmyra Line"—a proposed influence boundary. Israel might stomach Turkish forces north of this line but draws a hard red line at southern air defenses that would clip Israeli wings<sup>17</sup>.

The classified Nagel Commission report rates Israel-Turkey military conflict risk as "real"<sup>18</sup>. JINSA experts sound the alarm, warning that a clash between two U.S. partners could shatter regional security architecture<sup>19</sup>.

### **Chapter 4. Strange Bedfellows: The Russia-U.S.-Israel Convergence**

Forget "New Cold War" narratives. Syria reveals an unlikely reality: Russia, America, and Israel finding common cause. These rivals discovered shared interests in containing Turkey and Iran.

Russia lost Assad but kept its bases after al-Sharaa promised to preserve Moscow's Mediterranean foothold. As he told Reuters: "We don't want a split with Russia. We endured their bombing without retaliating, leaving room for post-liberation dialogue."

Washington plays kingmaker in Syria's new order. Kurdish sources credit the U.S. with an "active and central role" in their deal with Damascus—one that recognizes central authority while keeping oil fields under Kurdish (read: American) influence.

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<sup>12</sup> [Carnegie Endowment](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Washington Post](#)

<sup>14</sup> [The Times of Israel](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Al Jazeera](#)

<sup>16</sup> [Middle East Eye](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Middle East Eye](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Asia Times](#)

<sup>19</sup> [Fox News](#)

Israel faces a paradox. Defense Minister Israel Katz brands al-Sharaa a "jihadist terrorist from Al-Qaeda's school." Yet this same regime, preoccupied with consolidating power and checking Iran, lets Israel hold southern territories and strike Iranian proxies at will.

This creates space for unspoken coordination. Russia shields Alawites. America backs Kurdish autonomy. Israel maintains operational freedom against Iran. All three share one goal: preventing Turkish hegemony or Iranian resurgence.

## **Chapter 5. Bloody Spring: Syria's Sectarian Nightmare**

March 2025 shattered illusions about peaceful transition. Systematic Alawite killings in coastal regions shocked observers with their scale and savagery. Latakia and surroundings saw 1,700+ dead in days, mostly civilians<sup>20</sup>. Banyas neighborhoods burned whole. Families wiped out. Jableh's city square hosted mass executions.

Al-Sharaa plays both sides. He publicly denounced killings as "threatening national unity" and promised investigations<sup>21</sup>. He assured Macron in May that "perpetrators will be found and punished"<sup>22</sup>. Reality check: Zero arrests. Zero trials. Witnesses report regime forces joining the carnage.

Desperate Alawites fled to Russian bases at Khmeimim and Tartus. Moscow faces a no-win dilemma: intervene and risk the bases, or abandon traditional allies. Rumors swirl of secret Russian-Israeli talks on protecting Alawites.

## **Chapter 6. July Crisis: Syria's First Real Test**

As-Suwayda's July 11-25, 2025 events became the new regime's trial by fire. A simple Druze merchant kidnapping by Bedouins spiraled into intercommunal warfare featuring government forces, Israeli jets, and American diplomats<sup>23</sup>.

Violence spread fast. Four days brought tit-for-tat kidnappings and killings province-wide. Government forces jumped in July 16—backing the Bedouins<sup>24</sup>. Israel responded July 17, hitting government columns and Damascus's Defense Ministry HQ, just 500 meters from the presidential palace.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> [Syriac Press](#)

<sup>21</sup> [Reuters](#)

<sup>22</sup> [France24](#)

<sup>23</sup> [Al Jazeera](#)

<sup>24</sup> [The Times of Israel](#)

<sup>25</sup> [Al Jazeera](#)

Turkey erupted. Erdogan called it "state terrorism," accusing Israel of using Druze as an expansion pretext<sup>26</sup>. Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan warned Israeli actions were "paving the way for regional instability".<sup>27</sup>

U.S. envoy Tom Barrack shuttled furiously, securing a July 18 ceasefire<sup>28</sup>. It barely held, broken by fresh incidents. Final toll: 1,100+ dead, 128,000 displaced<sup>29</sup>.

## **Chapter 7. Paris Talks: Diplomacy Hits the Wall**

July 24, 2025: As As-Suwayda burned, closed-door talks convened in Paris. Ron Dermer (Netanyahu's right hand), Asaad al-Shaibani (Syria's FM, ex-HTS commander), and Tom Barrack (Trump's envoy) sought to prevent escalation.

Their "Southern De-escalation Zone" proposal: HTS forces pull back 20 kilometers from Israel's border, local Druze take control, international monitors oversee. More disagreements than agreements emerged.

Israel's demands: Complete Iranian proxy withdrawal, verification mechanisms, Hezbollah-return guarantees. Syria's counter: End Israeli strikes, evacuate buffer zones, provide economic aid. Talks stalled, kicking solutions down the road.

## **Chapter 8. Saudi Billions: Marshall Plan or Mirage?**

Damascus hosted the Syrian-Saudi Investment Forum on July 24, 2025—a showcase for the region's new order. Investment Minister Khalid al-Falih led 150 investors, inking \$6.4 billion in deals<sup>30</sup>.

Eye-popping numbers: \$2.93 billion for real estate/infrastructure (including three cement plants); \$1.07 billion for telecom/IT; 50,000 direct jobs, 150,000 indirect<sup>31</sup>. MBS called it proof of the Kingdom's "firm and supportive stance toward brotherly Syria".<sup>32</sup>

The economic veneer masks geopolitical maneuvering. Saudi aims to lock Syria into the Sunni orbit, block Iranian return, and create Damascus's economic dependence<sup>33</sup>. Qatar's not

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<sup>26</sup> [Al Arabiya](#)

<sup>27</sup> [Washington Post](#)

<sup>28</sup> [CNN](#)

<sup>29</sup> [U.S. News](#)

<sup>30</sup> [Arab News](#)

<sup>31</sup> [Al Jazeera](#)

<sup>32</sup> [FDD](#)

<sup>33</sup> [The National](#)



far behind with \$7 billion for energy infrastructure<sup>34</sup>. UAE's DP World scored Tartus port control for \$800 million.<sup>35</sup>

Economists flash warning lights. With reconstruction costs at \$400-600 billion, current investments barely scratch the surface<sup>36</sup>. Corruption could devour 40% of aid. Legal uncertainty scares Western business. Sectarian tensions threaten any long-term project.

## **Chapter 9. The Anti-Jihadist Belt: Necessary Evil or Fool's Errand?**

Israel's "anti-jihadist belt" concept echoes Ben-Gurion's classic "periphery alliance" doctrine. Creating minority buffer zones against the Sunni majority looks good on paper. History says otherwise.

Lebanon's Maronite alliance offers a cautionary tale. Decades of cooperation, military aid, and 1982's "Peace for Galilee" operation ended badly: Israeli isolation, Hezbollah's rise, and 18 years of fruitless occupation. Maronite divisions exposed the danger of banking on local allies.

Today's landscape is messier. As-Suwayda's Druze distrust northern Druze. Kurdish factions (SDF vs. ENKS) feud constantly. Alawites remain shell-shocked and leaderless post-massacre. Each group pursues its own agenda, often clashing with Israeli interests.

Turkey sees autonomous enclaves as existential threats. For Ankara, Syrian Kurdish autonomy could ignite Turkey's own southeast. Even cultural autonomy reads as separatism's first step.

Resource constraints compound problems. Three separate enclaves need sustained military presence, intelligence infrastructure, and billions in support—all while juggling multiple threats with limited bandwidth.

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<sup>34</sup> [Enab Baladi](#)

<sup>35</sup> [Asharq Al-Awsat](#)

<sup>36</sup> [UN Development Programme](#)

## Chapter 10. Abraham Accords: Historic Opening or Wishful Thinking?

### Breakthrough or False Dawn?

Trump dropped a bombshell after meeting al-Sharaa in May 2025: "I told him, I hope you join the Abraham Accords once you get your affairs in order, and he said yes"<sup>37</sup>. Cue speculation about historic Israeli-Syrian reconciliation—ending 77 years of formal war.

Multiple channels buzz with activity. Some say UAE mediates, others point to Qatar<sup>38</sup>. Azerbaijan hosts meetings where IDF Operations chief Major General Oded Basiuk engages Syrian officials alongside Turkish delegates<sup>39</sup>. National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi confirms "daily direct contact"<sup>40</sup>.

U.S. Representatives Marlin Stutzman and Cory Mills emerged from their April 2025 al-Sharaa meeting claiming he's "open to relations with Israel within the Abraham Accords framework"<sup>41</sup>. Al-Sharaa himself told The Economist: "We want peace with all parties, but the Israeli issue remains extremely sensitive regionally".<sup>42</sup>

### The "Coalition for Regional Security" Gambit

June 2025 saw Israel's "Coalition for Regional Security"—100+ ex-military and diplomats—launch provocative billboards across Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Washington. "Time for a New Middle East" splashed above Arab leaders: Bahrain's king, Oman's sultan, UAE and Saudi royals—and controversially, Ahmed al-Sharaa beside Netanyahu<sup>43</sup>.

Co-founder Lian Pollack-David explained: "We're saying Israel must convert military gains into bold diplomacy, uniting regional moderates under the Abraham umbrella". The group claims 70% Israeli support for expansion.

Arab backlash came swift and harsh. Syrian Telegram channels raged about their president appearing "alongside the Zionist enemy". Iraq's pro-Iran Sabrin agency labeled al-Sharaa and Mahmoud Abbas "normalization terrorists". Lebanese media connected the campaign to U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff's hints about "major announcements coming".

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<sup>37</sup> [The Times of Israel](#)

<sup>38</sup> [The Times of Israel](#)

<sup>39</sup> [FDD](#)

<sup>40</sup> [The Times of Israel](#)

<sup>41</sup> [The Jerusalem Post](#)

<sup>42</sup> [The Times of Israel](#)

<sup>43</sup> [Ynetnews](#)

## Roadblocks to Peace

Despite the hype, normalization faces massive hurdles. Israeli sources say al-Sharaa's inner circle prefers limited non-belligerency over full peace<sup>44</sup>.

### Key obstacles:

**Domestic constraints:** Al-Sharaa's base includes jihadists who cheered October 7. Any "Zionist" deal risks civil war<sup>45</sup>.

**The Golan Heights:** Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar won't budge: "The Golan Heights will remain Israeli in any peace deal"<sup>46</sup>. For Syrians, that's a non-starter—Golan return equals national honor<sup>47</sup>.

**Turkey's veto:** Pro-Turkish elements fear normalization puts Syria under Israeli-Saudi sway, sidelining Ankara<sup>48</sup>. Turkey will pull every lever to kill any deal.

**Ongoing violence:** July 2025's Israeli strikes during the As-Suwayda crisis torpedoed trust. Secretary of State Marco Rubio expressed "serious concern," warning Israeli actions could derail talks<sup>49</sup>.

### Expert Doubts

Aaron Zelin (Washington Institute): "Definitely too early for Syrian Abraham Accords right now". Joshua Landis (University of Oklahoma): "The U.S. and Israel hold diametrically opposed views on Syria. Israel still sees al-Sharaa as a terrorist".

Carmit Valensi (INSS) strikes a hopeful note: "Al-Sharaa pursues restrained, cautious Israel policy. Despite IDF presence and airstrikes, they haven't retaliated"<sup>50</sup>. Her caveat: "What he considers 'right conditions' remains the million-dollar question."

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<sup>44</sup> [The Times of Israel](#)

<sup>45</sup> [Foreign Policy](#)

<sup>46</sup> [The Times of Israel](#)

<sup>47</sup> [Al Jazeera](#)

<sup>48</sup> [The Times of Israel](#)

<sup>49</sup> [Foreign Policy](#)

<sup>50</sup> [The Times of Israel](#)

## **Chapter 11. Future Scenarios: Choose Your Syrian Adventure**

### **Most Likely: "Managed Chaos" (60%)**

Syria maintains unity's facade while fragmenting underneath. Weak central authority depends on external patrons. Sectarian flare-ups get contained before full civil war erupts.

Turkey consolidates northern control via proxies and economic leverage. Israel keeps operational freedom in border zones and airspace. Russia clings to bases as influence wanes. America juggles allies while backing Kurds and preventing escalation.

Economic recovery limps along unevenly. Investment clusters in "safe" zones, deepening regional disparities. Corruption and inefficiency eat huge chunks of aid.

### **Escalation Risk: "Direct Confrontation" (25%)**

Turkey-Israel tensions could explode into open conflict. Triggers include: Turkish S-400s in Syria, mass Druze/Kurdish violence, or deadly accidents.

Such conflict puts America in an impossible position between allies. NATO fractures. Regional players pick sides. Outcomes remain unpredictable but universally catastrophic.

### **Optimistic Case: "Authoritarian Stabilization" (15%)**

Stars aligning, al-Sharaa might consolidate power and impose order. This requires satisfying Turkish ambitions while maintaining wiggle room with others.

Gulf billions could jumpstart growth, incentivizing cooperation over conflict. War-weary populations might accept authoritarian stability.

Even this "best case" means crushing democratic hopes, sidelining minorities, and entrenching Islamists on Israel's doorstep.

## **Epilogue: Syrian Lessons for a Chaotic Middle East**

Syria 2025 teaches hard truths about regional politics.

First: Traditional alliances dissolve into situational partnerships. Russia, America, and Israel—global rivals—find Syrian common ground. NATO ally Turkey becomes Israel's primary threat. Saudi Arabia bankrolls an ex-jihadist's regime.

Second: Military power hits walls. Israel strikes anywhere in Syria but can't build stable buffers. Turkey's military might faces unexpected coalition pushback. Russia keeps bases but hemorrhages influence.

Third: Money matters but isn't magic. Billions can't buy security, rule of law, or social cohesion. Syria risks Lebanon's fate—cosmetic reconstruction masking deep fractures.

Fourth: Ideological flexibility rules. Yesterday's terrorist becomes today's president, winning recognition and investment. Dangerous precedent? Yes. But it reflects an era valuing stability over principles.

For Israel, these lessons demand new thinking. Forget ambitious regional redesigns. Focus on achievable goals: contain immediate threats, selectively support vulnerable groups, balance regional powers.

The Syrian puzzle defies neat solutions. Understanding its complexity, ditching illusions, and playing the long game with multiple actors offers the only path through this unpredictable Middle Eastern maze.

Syria potentially joining the Abraham Accords adds fresh complexity. Breakthrough to stability? Or conflict catalyst? History shows simple Middle East solutions breed catastrophe. Yet Syria 2025 reminds us that pragmatism sometimes makes the impossible possible.