

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Changing Fault Lines in Israel-Syria Dynamics

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S*ummary*

The 18 August IDF strike on Abu Duhur airbase has heightened Israeli-Turkish tensions and complicated the fragile Israel-Syria negotiations.

The Israel Defence Forces’ (IDF) 18 August 2026 airstrike on the Abu Duhur airbase in Syria’s Idlib province has aggravated tensions with Türkiye, complicated the fragile Israeli-Syrian negotiations and undermined US efforts to re-integrate the Syrian government under Ahmed Al-Sharaa. The episode reflects unresolved strategic fault lines underpinning Israel-Syria relations, i.e. Türkiye’s expanding military and political footprint in Syria, Damascus’ access to advanced weapons systems, the parameters of the demilitarised zone, the status of the occupied Golan Heights, the IDF withdrawal from southern Syria and the prospects for normalisation. These tensions underscore the constraints of formulating a stable security framework between Israel and the Al-Sharaa-led Syrian government.

Israeli Concerns

Israel’s concerns towards close Syria-Türkiye ties reflect intensifying competition over the regional balance of power, the configuration of the new Syrian state and the boundaries of military and security influence. For Türkiye, Syria is a critical component of its national security framework encompassing state stability, border control, preventing armed groups’ resurgence, resolving the Kurdish issue and facilitating the return of Syrian refugees. Türkiye has emerged as the primary partner of the Ahmed Al-Sharaa government in rebuilding state institutions and facilitating restructuring, commando training, military academy-building, weapons supply and integrating Syrian forces, including the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), into the national army.¹

Israel’s threat perception has expanded beyond Iran to encompass Türkiye, viewing it as a strategic adversary, amid growing tensions with Ankara and its expanding regional influence. Following Hamas’ 7 October 2023 attack and Israel’s war in Gaza, Türkiye has adopted an increasingly critical stance towards Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government, leading to deterioration of political and trade ties between both states.² Israel has interpreted the Erdogan government’s close ties with Hamas, including Türkiye’s hosting of several key figures and supply of

¹ Shaher al Shaher, [“Türkiye And Israel: From A Struggle For Influence To The Brink Of Regional Confrontation?”](#) *Middle East Political and Economic Institute*, 25 August 2026.

² Jasper Jolly, [“Turkey Stops All Trade With Israel Over ‘Humanitarian Tragedy’ In Gaza”](#), *The Guardian*, 2 May 2024; [“Türkiye Closes Airspace To Israel, Bans Israeli Ships From Turkish Ports”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 29 August 2025; Merve Berker, [“Türkiye Seeks Interpol Red Notice For Netanyahu Over Gaza Aid Flotilla Case”](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 21 August 2026.

arms and finances, as indicative of Ankara’s regional strategy and antagonism towards the Jewish state.³

In this context, Israel views Türkiye’s military deployment and air defence infrastructure, including the SIPER system, as potentially altering the strategic equation, placing Turkish armed forces closer to Israel’s borders; limiting IDF’s operational freedom in Syrian airspace and territory and enabling Ankara to shape the military balance across southern and central Syria.⁴ From Israel’s perspective, preserving freedom of action in Syria is essential, given Israeli mistrust of the Al-Sharaa government’s extremist links, to counter hostile armed actors including Hamas and Hezbollah and to sustain access for Israeli Air Force operations against Iran. Israel is concerned that Turkish air-defence systems could impede such operations.⁵ During negotiations, Israel insists that any emerging security arrangement should include clear limits on foreign military deployments, particularly Turkish combat aircraft, air-defence systems and permanent bases.⁶

Israel’s limited strike on 18 August 2026 should be viewed as a tactical warning conveying the IDF’s readiness to use force to prevent Syria’s military development that could deepen Türkiye’s foothold within Israel’s strategic sphere.⁷ The IDF therefore seeks to constrain Syria’s military reconstruction, signalling to Damascus that state-rebuilding and security arrangements remain subject to Israeli consent.⁸ Ankara, through its engagement with Damascus, seeks to support state and institutional stability under Al-Sharaa, secure its southern border and maintain

³ Soner Cagaptay, [**“Israel-Turkey Relations Nearing A Rupture”**](#), *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 9 August 2024; [**“Israel Puts Turkey In Tight Spot With Accusation Of Arming Hamas”**](#), *The Arab Weekly*, 23 July 2024.

⁴ Jacques Neria and Oded Ailam, [**“Syria’s Precarious Balancing Act: Iran, Turkey And The Israeli Calculus”**](#), *Jerusalem News Syndicate*, 21 August 2026; [**“Turkey Denies Military Visit To Syrian Base; Damascus Confirms It But Refutes Deployment Plan”**](#), *The Times of Israel*, 20 August 2026.

⁵ Carmit Valensi and Amal Hayek, [**“Israel’s Red Line In Syria – And The Price Of Confrontation With Turkey”**](#), *The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)*, 27 August 2026.

⁶ [**“US Envoy Suggests Israeli Strike In Syria Sought To ‘Bait’ Turkey Ahead Of Elections”**](#), *The Times of Israel*, 22 August 2026.

⁷ In March 2025, IDF attacked two Syrian airbases, T4 in Homs and Palmyra airbase, following visit by Turkish military delegation. Israel repeated attack at T4 airbase in April 2025 after Türkiye began talks to establish an air base and air defence systems. [**“Israeli Strikes On Syria In March 2025: Objectives, Distribution, And Implications”**](#), *The Arab Centre for Contemporary Syria Studies*, 5 April 2025; Muaz al Abdullah, [**“Did Israel Strike A Syrian Airbase To Block Turkey’s Military Ambitions?”**](#), *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)*, 18 August 2026.

⁸ Shaheer al Shaheer, [**“Türkiye And Israel: From A Struggle For Influence To The Brink Of Regional Confrontation?”**](#) no. 1.

strategic posturing against Israel, whose military activities in neighbouring states, particularly Syria and Lebanon, pose a national security concern for Türkiye.⁹

Syria’s Quest for Advanced Weapons Systems

Following Bashar al-Assad’s ouster on 8 December 2024, the IDF launched hundreds of airstrikes inside Syrian territory, destroying 80 per cent of Syria’s heavy weapons, radar sites, and air-defence systems to prevent these facilities from reaching the new government under Al-Sharaa. Türkiye’s engagement aligns with Damascus’ objectives to re-develop military and security capabilities and determine its partnerships based on national interests and threat perceptions. Damascus views the restoration of its military capabilities as both a sovereign right and an existential security imperative to counter Islamic State (IS) cells, cross-border smuggling and terror networks, former regime remnants, armed militias, and Iran-backed allied groups.¹⁰

Syria has argued that building a functioning military, rehabilitating military bases, and restoring control over the state’s borders and airspace are essential conditions for stabilisation, consolidating governance and deterring fragmentation, rather than an attempt to challenge Israel. Accordingly, Syria has accelerated military reconstruction by integrating militias into a unified force, rebuilding its air force through recruitment and training of new pilots with Turkish support and participating in international military exercises in Türkiye in May 2026.¹¹

Syrian Foreign Minister Assad al-Shaibani, while denying a Turkish military build-up, characterised the visits and exchanges as part of ongoing military cooperation between allies. Although Türkiye remains Syria’s dominant military partner, Damascus seeks to avoid long-term strategic dependence on Ankara by diversifying external ties with Gulf and European states, the US and Russia to preserve

⁹ Kersten Knipp, [“Could Syria Become The Focus Of An Israeli-Turkish Conflict”](#), *Deutsche Welle*, 26 August 2026; Eran Lerman, [“As Erdogan Tightens His Grip On Syria, What Can Israel Do?”](#), *The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS)*, 24 February 2026.

¹⁰ [“Defense Ministry Holds Graduation Ceremony For 1000 Air Force Academy Cadets”](#), *Syrian Arab News Agency*, 23 July 2026; Ricardo Meier, [“Video Reportedly Shows Syrian Air Force SU-22S Back In Flight”](#), *Air Data News*, 12 August 2026.

¹¹ Syria is estimated to possess 150,000 personnel, 104 military aircraft, including 52 fighter jets, of which 21 are expected to be operationally ready. Ahmad Sharawi, [“Israel Is Drawing The Line Against Turkey In Syria”](#), *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, 19 August 2026; Adnan Ali, [“Syrian Participation In Turkish Military Exercises”](#), *The New Arab*, 21 May 2026.

autonomy, rebuild its military and civilian institutions and secure alternative sources of funding, training, equipment, and operational support.¹²

Israel seeks to deter Syria from building a strong military state with advanced air, missile and air-defence capabilities or becoming a platform for competing regional influence. Israel broadly advocates a "demilitarised" southern Syria along with restrictions on advanced weapons including missiles and drones, safeguards against renewed Iranian or Hezbollah influence and stronger mechanisms for border monitoring and security.¹³

Israel's Mistrust of the Al-Sharaa Government

President Al-Sharaa seeks to rehabilitate his image and boost regional and global acceptance by espousing inclusive power-sharing, minority rights safeguards and economic development, non-engagement with armed Palestinian groups, curbs on arms smuggling by Hezbollah, adherence to the 1974 disengagement agreement, conflict-avoidance, and openness to normalising ties with Israel.¹⁴ Al-Sharaa has emphasised non-confrontation with Israel and curbs on the use of Syrian territory to launch attacks by foreign actors.¹⁵

Despite Al-Sharaa's moderate rhetoric, Israel remains sceptical of his ideological and historical background, given his past affiliation with Al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Israel's distrust has continued to shape its approach towards Syria. Moreover, the promotion of anti-Israeli and anti-Druze sentiments by sections of the Syrian army and allied forces has reinforced Israeli concerns.¹⁶ In light of the Al-Sharaa government's plans to increase troop strength to 200,000 personnel, including through the integration of foreign fighters, HTS and other radical groups, Israeli analysts have called for scrutiny of the backgrounds of senior

¹² ["Turkey Denies Military Visit To Syrian Base; Damascus Confirms It But Refutes Deployment Plan"](#), *The Times of Israel*, 20 August 2026; Stav Levaton, ["Strike On Syrian Airbase Signals Israel's Growing Unease With Turkey's Regional Ambitions"](#), *The Times of Israel*, 24 August 2026.

¹³ ["What Do We Know About The Syria And Israel Meeting In Jordan, And Efforts To Revive Negotiations?"](#) *The New Arab*, 25 August 2026.

¹⁴ Dan Diker, ["Understanding Israel's 'Strong Horse' Strikes On Syria: Prevention, Security, Perception In The Shadow Of Iran"](#), *Jerusalem Center for Security and Foreign Affairs*, 21 July 2025.

¹⁵ Alia Chughtai and Mohammed Haddad, ["Israel Attacked Syria More Than 600 Times Over The Past Year"](#), *Al Jazeera*, 9 December 2025.

¹⁶ On 16 August 2026, Syrian army soldiers outside Damascus citadel chanted slogans such as "I am coming for you, Jew ... I will make your blood flow in rivers." Ahmad Sharawi, ["Israel Is Drawing The Line Against Turkey In Syria"](#), no. 13.

commanders.¹⁷ Israeli security officials also noted an increase in Hezbollah’s attempts to smuggle weapons from Syria into Lebanon.¹⁸

Following the takeover by the Al-Sharaa government, Israel has prioritised safeguarding the Syrian Druze community and fostering geographic and social links between Druze areas in southern Syria and northern Israel. It facilitated Israel’s embedding within the region’s communal fabric, integrating Syrian Druze areas as part of a buffer zone strategy, allowing an accessible avenue of influence into Syria, preventing a security vacuum and preserving operational freedom to contain threats¹⁹ and conduct strikes in July 2025 and March 2026.²⁰

Israel’s Control of Syrian Territory

Following Assad’s ouster in December 2024, the IDF crossed the 1974 UN-patrolled disengagement line, occupied the demilitarised buffer zone next to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, captured Mount Hermon peak on the Syrian side, built nine military installations and observation posts and covertly supplied weapons and aid to Druze militias in Suwayda governorate.²¹ These measures seek to alter facts on the ground, provide leverage to the Israeli delegation and weaken Syria’s position during negotiations. Moreover, far-right Israeli settlers known as the ‘Pioneers of Bashan’ attempted to enter southern Syria to establish Jewish civilian settlements between April and August 2026, further contributing to destabilisation.²²

¹⁷ Danielle Greyman-Kennard, [“Syrian Army Soldiers Filmed Chanting Death Threats Against Jews In Damascus”](#), *The Jerusalem Post*, 17 August 2026.

¹⁸ Emanuel Fabian, [“Katz: Israel Won’t Leave Syria Buffer Zone So Long As ‘Jihadist Threats’ Remain”](#), *The Times of Israel*, 25 August 2026.

¹⁹ [“Israel Vows ‘Unlimited’ Military Presence In Syria”](#), *Xinhua*, 29 January 2025.

²⁰ Omar Albarazi, [“As-Suwayda: The Events Of The Four Days In July 2025”](#), *Syrian Center for Security and Defense Studies*, 17 August 2026; [“Israel Says It Hit Syrian Government Targets After Attacks On Druze Civilians”](#), *Reuters*, 20 March 2026.

²¹ Israel has pursued geopolitical engineering by expanding the buffer zone deeper inside Syrian territory conducting around 1004 incursions between January 2025 and August 2026, six airstrikes and 61 ground attacks killing six Syrians between January and 5 September 2026. Israel has detained around 49 Syrians until September 2026. Neville Teller, [“Lebanon And Syria – Are Deals Possible? – Opinion”](#), *The Jerusalem Post*, 16 April 2026; [“Since Fall Of Former Regime | SOHR Documents 1,004 Israeli Infiltrations In Syrian South”](#), *The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, 28 August 2026. [“Syria: Accountability, Inclusion And Non-Recurrence Central To Successful Transition, UN Syria Commission Says”](#), *UN Human Rights Council*, 8 September 2026; [“Ongoing Violations | Israeli Forces Fire Artillery Shell On Farmland In Al-Quneitra”](#), *The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, 6 September 2026.

²² Emanuel Fabian, [“Dozens Of Settler Activists Cross Into Syria And Lebanon, Are Escorted Out By IDF”](#), *The Times of Israel*, 22 April 2026; [“Israelis Cross Syria Border Seeking Settlement”](#), *Enab Baladi*, 18 May 2026; [“IDF Detains Israeli Civilians Who Attempted To Breach Syrian Border”](#), *The*

Between July 2025 and January 2026, Israel and Syria held five rounds of negotiations mediated by US envoy Tom Barrack, addressing demilitarisation, ceasefire and security understanding in southern Syria, IDF withdrawal and updating the 1974 disengagement framework.²³ After the 18 August strike, Mossad chief Roman Gofman met Syrian Foreign Minister Al-Shaibani on 23 August 2026 to discuss de-escalation, curbs on Israeli military operations, detentions and resumption of Syria-Israel negotiations towards a security agreement.

Syria has prioritised diplomacy to advance demands for sovereignty, territorial integrity, military rebuilding, a US-backed security pact, state stability and preventing Israel-Turkish tensions from spilling into Syrian territory. Damascus, reaffirming Syrian sovereignty over the Golan Heights, considers final-status negotiations premature and currently prioritises IDF withdrawal to the pre-December 2024 lines and restoration of the 1974 Disengagement Agreement. During negotiations, Syria has advocated for mutually agreed security zones, a UN-controlled buffer zone and limited Syrian force deployment.²⁴

Syria, despite low trust, has few viable alternatives but to maintain engagement with Israel to secure concessions, preserve state authority and avoid spillover of Israeli-Turkish tensions. At the diplomatic level, Israel’s reluctance to resume talks with Damascus and separate negotiations with Lebanon since April 2026 has heightened Syria’s concerns. Damascus fears Israel may exploit both tracks to extract concessions, delay the Syrian process, consolidate positions in southern Syria, and pressure Syria to accept arrangements agreed between Israeli and Lebanese governments.²⁵

Israel’s Syria policy is heavily security-oriented, prioritising pre-emptive military intervention, forward defence and assessing threats based on capacities and

Jerusalem Post, 22 July 2026; Emanuel Fabian, [**“Three Settlement Activists Illegally Enter Syria Overnight, Are Detained By IDF”**](#), *The Times of Israel*, 11 August 2026.

²³ The fifth round of talks in January 2026 led to the establishment of a joint fusion mechanism in Amman, Jordan to facilitate intelligence sharing, military de-escalation and promptly addressing any dispute and prevent misunderstandings, diplomatic engagement and commercial opportunities. Barak Ravid, [**“U.S. Proposed Demilitarized Economic Zone On Israel-Syria Border”**](#), *AXIOS*, 6 January 2026; Barak Ravid, [**“Senior Israeli And Syrian Officials Hold U.S.-Brokered Talks On De-Escalation”**](#), *AXIOS*, 24 July 2025.

²⁴ Cathrin Schaer and Omar Albam, [**“Why Is Israel’s Military Presence Growing In Syria?”**](#) *Inquirer*, 23 August 2026.

²⁵ [**“Syria In The Face Of Israeli Actions: Stalled Talks And Shifting Realities On The Ground”**](#), Emirates Policy Center, 17 June 2026; [**“US Envoy Says Syria Has Become ‘Laboratory’ For New Regional Order”**](#), *The Arab Weekly*, 18 May 2026.

potential rather than stated intentions.²⁶ Israel’s proposed ‘humanitarian corridor’ into Suwayda province to protect the Druze community, control of Mount Hermon under any security arrangement, a broad demilitarised area and no-fly zone, an aerial corridor to Iran, and a normalisation agreement without full withdrawal have further complicated negotiations.²⁷ Israel’s approach has therefore weakened the US-led deconfliction mechanism.²⁸

Conclusion

The Syria-Israel negotiations remain constrained by fundamentally divergent objectives. Damascus seeks restoration of sovereignty, Israeli withdrawal, an end to IDF attacks, freedom to rebuild its capabilities and alliances and curtailing Israeli-Turkish tensions. At the same time, Israel prioritises long-term security guarantees and operational freedom. Israel has capitalised on the impasse in negotiations to consolidate its military presence and establish new realities in southern Syria. These developments, combined with deep mistrust and continued Israeli intransigence, make rapid progress in negotiations unlikely. While a limited security arrangement to end Israeli attacks under US pressure is probable, the questions over the Golan Heights, borders, normalisation, and diplomatic relations are unlikely to be resolved in the near future. Consequently, renewed negotiations are more likely to focus on managing escalation rather than achieving a comprehensive settlement.

²⁶ Dareen Khalifa and Mairav Zonszein, “[How Israel’s Overreach In Syria May Backfire](#)”, *International Crisis Group*, 17 March 2025; “[Israel And The New Syria: Contextualising Israel’s Evolving Interests And Challenges](#)”, *Israel Policy Forum*, November 2025.

²⁷ Barak Ravid, “[Israel Presented Syria With Proposal For New Security Agreement](#)”, *AXIOS*, 16 September 2025; Lazar Berman, “[Latest Round Of Israel-Syria Negotiations Kicks Off In Paris](#)”, *The Times of Israel*, 5 January 2026.

²⁸ Justin Salhani, “[US Pressure On Israel Needed For Peace In Syria](#)”, *Al Jazeera*, 19 August 2026; “[Syria, Israel Hold US-Mediated Talks In Jordan To De-Escalate Tensions](#)”, *Al Jazeera*, 24 August 2026.

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