



TURKEY AND THE MIDDLE EAST AFTER THE ISRAEL/IRAN WAR AND THE FALL OF ASSAD

The 12-day Israel/Iran War and the fall of Assad in Syria had a cascading effect on the entire region, affecting Turkish Foreign Policy objectives (and Turkish-US relations in particular), but also have ushered in a period of uncertainty with the potential of a true cataclysm in Syria and the potential of direct conflict between Turkey and Israel, which will significantly impact the entire region.

These events will affect Turkey, Syria, Israel and the entire region. We are seeing a tectonic shift in relations between the various players in the Middle East.

Turkey has been deeply involved in Syria, most recently as the backer and sponsor of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) formerly an Al-Qaeda affiliate known as the Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra). HTS was successful in overthrowing the Assad regime in Syria with just about 30,000/35,000 or so fighters and has been led by Ahmed al-Sharaa (nom de guerre Abu Mohammad al-Jolani), who is now the President of Syria. HTS and al-Sharaa formerly had their main influence in Idlib but now claim authority over the entire country. HTS now states that it is “an independent entity that follows no organisation or party, al-Qaeda or other”ⁱ.

Turkey's objectives are not clear – one main objective is to suppress the influence of Syrian Kurds (YPG) who are organised within the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) and control a large swath of land in the Northeast of Syria. The SDF is actually composed of a very diverse group of fighters, including Kurds, Arabs, and other minorities.

The SDF, together with US Forces (CENTCOM) succeeded in defeating ISIS, and oversees prisons with ISIS prisoners. In March 2025 the leader of the SDF, General Mazloum Abdi agreed to integrate the SDF fighters into the Syrian military. The number of American CENTCOM troops has been significantly reduced by President Trump. One issue is what to do with the ISIS prisons if the Syrian Kurds no longer oversee them.

Turkey has claimed that the YPG is an extension of, and part of, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey – the PKK has been responsible for terrorist acts in Turkey for many years, and is on the US State Department terror list (note that

the YPG is not on the State Department's listing of terrorists). In Turkey itself a peace process has been underway with the PKK, in which the PKK has agreed to put down its arms – a deal negotiated with the PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan who has been imprisoned for many years on the island of Imrali. The question remains whether the peace process in Turkey with the PKK will influence the Syrian Kurds of the YPG and SDF to work out a deal with the Syrian government that Turkey wants, namely for the SDF to become integrated within, and under the control of, the Syrian central government. Turkey's main fear is that the Syrian Kurds would establish a statelet in Syria which then might unite with Kurds in Turkey. Interestingly, Turkey has been very close to Kurdistan in Iraq, which is an autonomous area.

Turkey's view has been that the al-Sharaa government in Syria is the go-to party and that Syria must be unified under al-Sharaa and his presidency.

Turkey has entered into a defence agreement with the Syrian government which provides, inter alia, training to Syrian forces, but no bases. Turkey has also agreed with the Syrian government to provide infrastructure assistance, including (as has been rumoured) rebuilding the airports in Syria.

Most recently, it has been reported that the Syrian military has been responsible for atrocities against the Druze, Christians, Kurds and Alawites (Assad was an Alawite).

Turkey's view has been that the al-Sharaa government in Syria is the go-to party

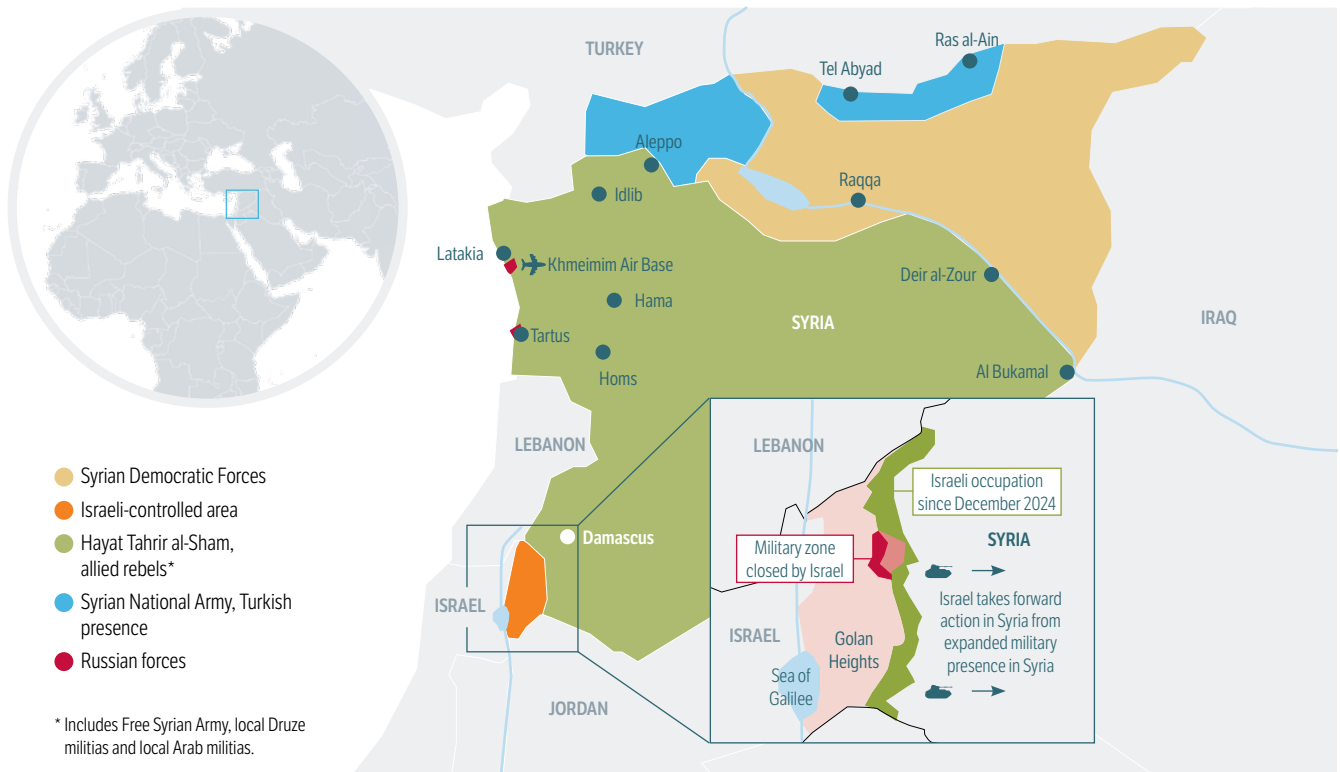
and that Syria must be unified under al-Sharaa and his presidency (and administration).

The American approach is complicated and often convoluted. President Trump lifted sanctions against Syria and al-Sharaa, although the State Department issued a 180-day waiver of secondary sanctions under the Caesar Act – which allows transactions with Syrian individuals and entities for a 180-day period, although the waiver must be reviewed every 180 days. Secretary of State Marco Rubio in his phone call with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan “highlighted the need for an inclusive transition in Syria, ensuring the new government prevents Syria from becoming a source of international terrorism, and denying foreign malign actors the opportunity to exploit Syria's transition for their own objectives”ⁱⁱ. Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D-New Hampshire), Ranking Member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee recently visited Syria and sponsored bipartisan legislation to lift the Caesar Act Sanctions completely. Senator Shaheen also “conveyed the importance of upholding the rights of Syrians from all ethnic and religious backgrounds and inclusivity in the governance structures of Syria”ⁱⁱⁱ.

Accompanying the Shaheen delegation was US Ambassador to Turkey and Special Envoy for Syria Tom Barrack. Barrack has been a strong advocate of supporting the Syrian central government and opposing any move towards federalism with the Syrian minority groups. Barrack also is a staunch supporter of the Turkish position on Syria, and also of Turkey's foreign policy initiatives to restore Turkey to the US F-35 program (from which Turkey was removed because it acquired the Russian S-400 missile) and also for Turkey to receive the F-16's that Turkey has re-

FIGURE 1. ISRAEL AND TURKEY PURSUE SECURITY INTERESTS IN SYRIA

Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit 2025.



requested from the United States. Turkey is also the subject of sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) which were imposed by President Trump (as mandated by Congress in the National Defence Authorization Act) at the end of Trump's first term in December 2020. One element of the sanctions included action against Turkey's Presidency of Defence Industries and various key individuals in the Turkish government. Senator Jim Risch (R-Idaho), the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee stated in the nominating hearing for Ambassador Barrack that so long as Risch was chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Turkey would not get the F-35.

Israel now comes into the mix. Indeed, al-Sharaa (with his limited number of fighters) was able to overthrow the Assad regime because of Israel – having taken out Iran's defences and decapitated Hezbollah – and with Russia (which had bases at Tartus, a key base with a warm water port in the Mediterranean, and at Hmeimim) being preoccupied in Ukraine. Israel has been at war with Syria literally from the founding of the State of

Israel. Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria in the Six Day War in 1967. A disengagement agreement was signed in 1974. Most recently, Israel has extended its control over the UN buffer zone beyond the Golan Heights. Israel and Syria have been meeting to discuss their relations and the possibility of an agreement. With the rising atrocities against minorities in Syria by forces affiliated with the Syrian Military, Israel has entered the fray to defend the Syrian Druze who have been massacred in Suweyda. After al-Sharaa seized power, Israel bombed various Syrian bases which Turkey wished to take over. There are (and have been) Turkish troops in Syria – but Israel was concerned about expansion of Turkish forces to the south of Syria and declared a "security zone" in the area. Israel has advocated for a demilitarised zone in southern Syria to create a buffer against hostile forces and prevent the Turkish military from expanding to areas near the Golan Heights. Prime Minister Netanyahu declared a "red line" such that Israel will not allow Syrian forces south of Damascus. Israel's additional concern is the continuing sectarian violence against Syrian minority groups.

Turkey and Israel have met in Baku to deconflict – but recently there has been a tremendous rise in tension between Turkey and Israel, following the October 7 attack by Hamas and the takeover of Syria by HTS. Turkey closed its airspace to Israel although this apparently only applies to official aircraft and not commercial airliner; closed its ports to Israeli ships; terminated trade with Israel; and withdrew its ambassador from Israel. In addition, Turkey has not identified Hamas as terrorists and President Erdogan has labelled Hamas operatives as freedom fighters. Erdogan has, further, argued that NATO (of which Turkey is a member) should cease its partnership with Israel^{iv}. While there have been serious disagreements between Turkey and Israel in the past (including the Mavi Marmara incident), eventually relations were re-established – and Turkish-Israeli trade continued unaffected throughout even the most challenging times. However, since October 7th, Turkey has also accelerated the rhetoric against Israel and is now in league with other States that are proposing to recognise a Palestinian State. So, this time around, Turkey's actions against Israel are increasing and are unabated.



Also key to understanding this situation is the role of the Arab States in Syria and the region. It was made crystal clear by the Arab States that Syria is an Arab State – indeed various minorities argued that the State's official name should be changed to the "Syrian Republic" but this was rebuffed and the name of the State is, and will be, the "Syrian Arab Republic". The Arab States will simply not allow Turkey (the heir to the Ottoman empire) to achieve hegemony over Syria.

The potential for a clash between Turkey and Israel is real and worrisome. So long as the minorities in Syria are threatened or attacked, Israel will come to their aid. Further, one can assume that Israel will not permit Turkey to establish bases in Syria, and certainly not in the area south of Damascus – and extend its influence significantly over the Syrian regime. That is a non-starter.

It has been suggested that Ambassador Barrack is changing his ideas about Syria (and perhaps about Turkey also) by possibly entertaining the idea that a federalist system for Syria with separate jurisdictions for the minority groups might be workable. Clearly, as long as al-Sharaa either is intentionally ordering the massacre of minorities or is unable to control his forces and prevent them from massacring the minorities, the United States and the international community will not support Syria in its quest for financial and other support. The giant leap of faith accorded to al-Sharaa either has been a worthwhile gamble or a complete con job by a jihadist ruler who wants to establish an Islamist Jihadi State in Syria. That would also be mortally dangerous for Israel's security, and the region, and would lead to conflict between Israel and Syria – and also, with deep concern, possibly even between Turkey and Israel.

Here is where the United States comes in – President Trump needs to step in soon and prevent the situation from escalating into calamity. President Trump said when he was in Saudi Arabia that he was doing his friend Mohammed bin Salman a favour by removing sanctions against Syriaⁱ. But there must be progress on the part of al-Sharaa and his government concerning the persecution and murder of minority groups. As it stands now, there will be no elections for four years and Sharia law will be the law of the land

– and the governing committees are simply not inclusive of the minorities in Syria. Russia may get to keep its bases – but Iran will likely not be able to make any inroads in.

The well-dressed Al-Sharaa who looks like a modern and moderate leader may actually be a Janus-faced Jihadist who dreams of Syria becoming an Islamist State. If this is not the case, then al-Sharaa's actions must meet his commitments. As for Turkey, the more entrenched Turkey is in Syria and the more influence (militarily or otherwise) it is able to achieve, the more dangerous the situation will be with Israel – and any chance for Turkey's getting back into the F-35 program, or obtaining the F-16's will most likely evaporate. Whatever the US President and his people might agree to, Congress must act on these measures and they will not support Turkey's request if it continues to accelerate tensions in Syria and with Israel. Also, it is unlikely that the Arab States, especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia, will permit Turkey to "Finlandize" Syria and make Syria Turkey's vassal State, completely dependent on Turkey for its military, financial and infrastructure needs.

The potential for a clash between Turkey and Israel is real and worrisome.

It is hoped that Syria and Israel will achieve a better understanding (which will surely diminish Turkey's influence) and that Turkey and Israel will restore even the level of a "détente" – rather than falling down the slippery slope of utter disaster. The future of the region, and the world, depends on this. ●

Notes

ⁱ Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), TNT Terrorism Backgrounder, CSIS. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/programs/former-programs/warfare-irregular-threats-and-terrorism-program-archives/terrorism-backgrounders/hayat-tahrir>

ⁱⁱ "Secretary Rubio's Call with Foreign Minister Fidan", US Department of State, January 23, 2025. Available at: www.state.gov/secretary-rubios-call-with-foreign-minister-fidan

ⁱⁱⁱ "Ranking Member Shaheen's Travel to Syria and Meeting with President Ahmed Al-Sharaa", Foreign Relations Committee, August 25, 2025. Available at: www.foreign.senate.gov/press/dem/release/readout-ranking-member-shaheens-travel-to-syria-and-meeting-with-president-ahmed-al-sharaa

^{iv} "Erdogan says Turkey will not approve NATO attempts to cooperate with Israel", Reuters, July 12, 2024. Available at: www.reuters.com/world/erdogan-says-turkey-will-not-approve-nato-attempts-cooperate-with-israel-2024-07-11/

^v "Trump pledges to lift Syria sanctions as he seals \$142bn arms deal on Saudi visit", BBC, May 14, 2025. Available at: www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4g239dwxw2o

