

SHIFTING FRONTLINES: SYRIA-ISRAEL DYNAMICS AFTER THE FALL OF BASHAR AL-ASSAD

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

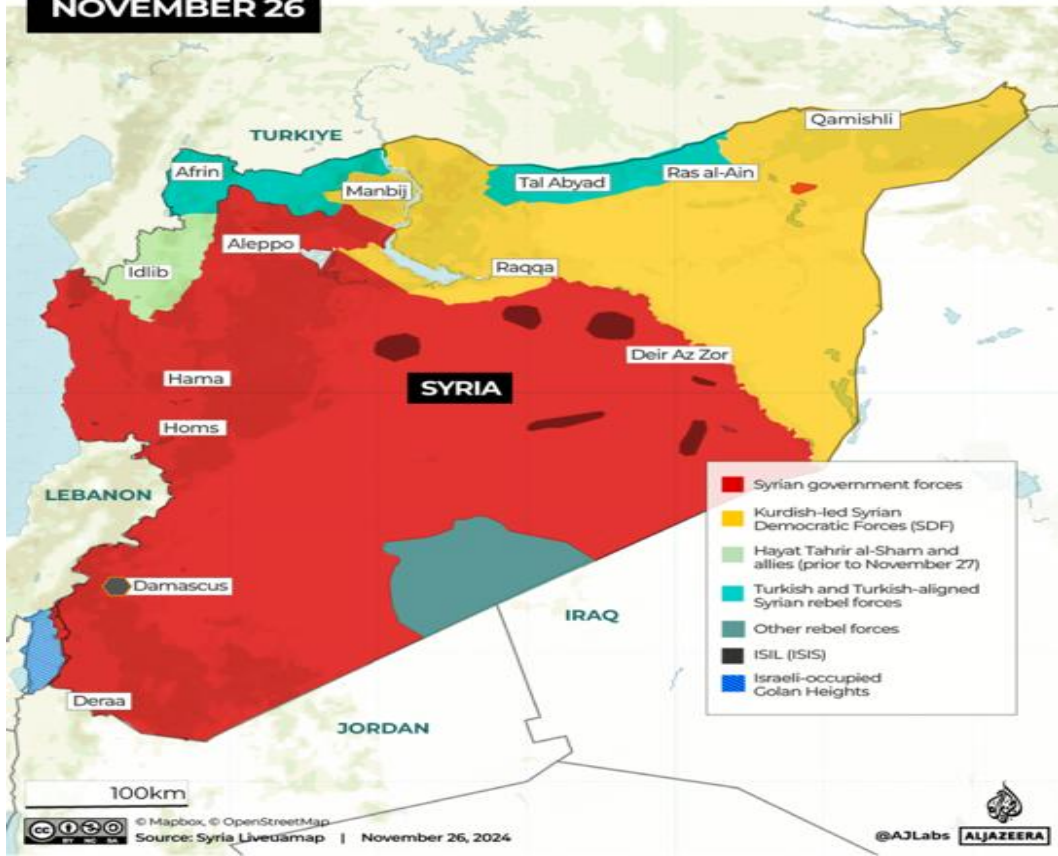


The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024 has ushered in a new chapter in Syria's political landscape, significantly impacting regional stability, particularly with reference to Israel. For over five decades, Assad's government maintained consistent hostility towards Israel, driven by Syria's claim to the Golan Heights and broader support for the Palestinian liberation movement. Assad's departure has changed the internal power dynamics and altered Syria-Israel relations, with immediate consequences for regional security and geopolitics.

MIDDLE EAST

Who controls what in Syria?

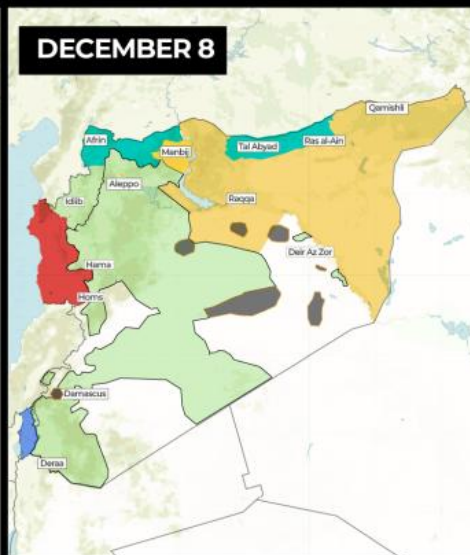
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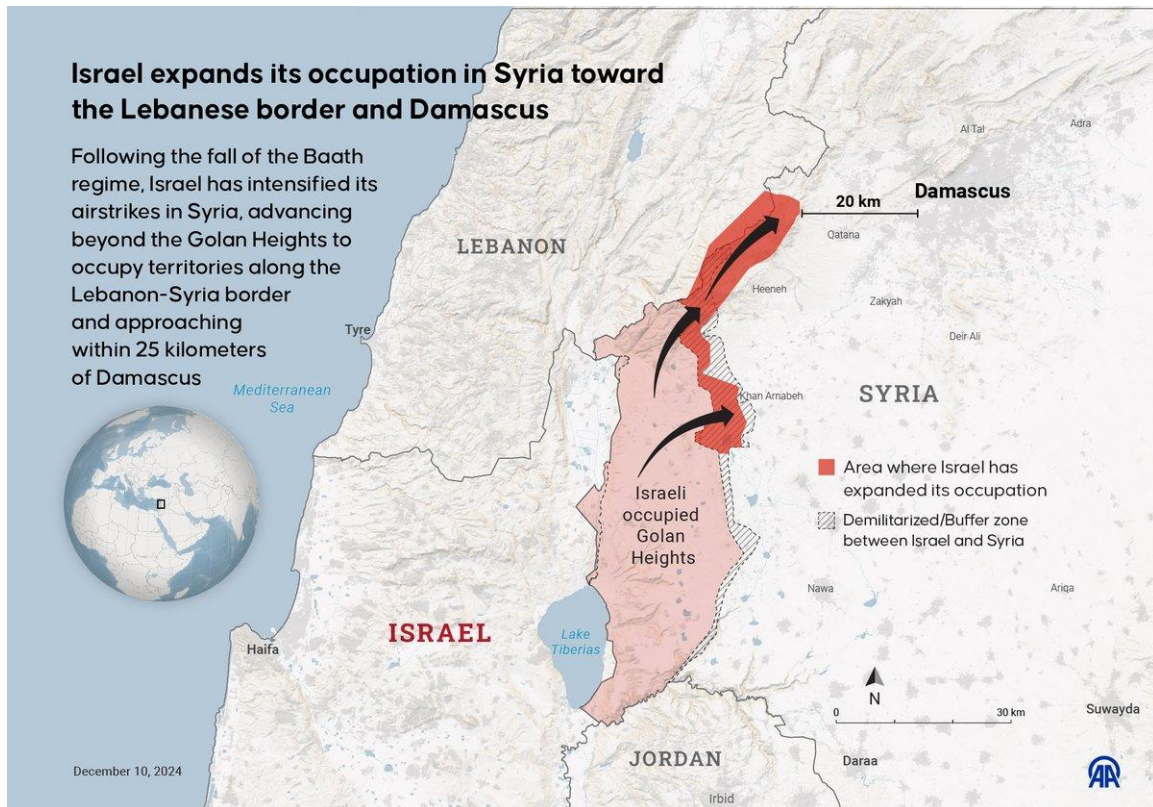
Post-Assad Transition and Israeli Military Operations

Following months of intensified conflict, Syrian opposition forces captured Damascus on December 8, 2024, effectively toppling the Assad government. Assad fled to Moscow, leaving behind a fragmented state grappling with political uncertainty and economic collapse. The transitional government, led by Ahmad al-Sharaa, a former minister with moderate Islamist leanings, faces challenges in consolidating power, rebuilding national institutions, and addressing long-standing socio-political divisions. Al-Sharaa's leadership has been supported by a coalition of opposition groups, including secularists, moderate Islamists, and former regime defectors. However, tensions within this coalition risk undermining the fragile post-Assad governance structure. The roots of Syria's fragmentation trace back to the 2011 Arab Spring protests, which were met with brutal repression by the Assad regime, sparking a decade-long civil war. Over time, the conflict drew in international actors, with Iran and Russia backing Assad, while the opposition received varying degrees of support from Western and regional powers. The eventual collapse of Assad's regime left a power vacuum, intensifying geopolitical rivalries in Syria.

Prominent groups operating in post-Assad Syria include Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a dominant force in Idlib with jihadist origins; the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of Kurdish and Arab fighters backed by the United States and focused on combating ISIS and securing northeastern Syria; and the Syrian National Front (SNF), a Turkish-backed umbrella group consisting of various armed factions in the northwest. These groups reflect the fragmented and factionalized nature of Syria, with competing interests and external sponsors shaping their agendas. In the immediate aftermath of Assad's fall, Israel escalated military operations in Syria, citing concerns over advanced weaponry potentially falling into hostile hands. The Israeli Air Force conducted over 350 airstrikes targeting strategic military sites, including air defence systems, missile depots, and weapons production facilities.¹ These operations aimed to dismantle Syria's military capabilities and prevent the proliferation of advanced arms to groups like Hezbollah.

¹ "Israel Wipes Out Bulk of Syria's Strategic Weapons Stockpile in Airstrikes," New York Post, December 11, 2024.
<https://nypost.com/2024/12/11/world-news/israel-wipes-out-bulk-of-syrias-strategic-weapons-stockpile/>

The Golan Heights: Strategic and Political Dimensions



The Golan Heights remains central to Syria-Israel tensions. Occupied by Israel during the 1967 Six-Day War and annexed in 1981, the Golan Heights hold immense strategic value due to the elevated terrain and proximity to northern Israel. The area provides vital water resources and arable land, contributing to Israel's agricultural sector. Syria has consistently regarded the Golan Heights as occupied territory, with successive governments demanding its return as part of any peace negotiations. In the wake of Assad's fall, Israeli forces have advanced into the demilitarized buffer zone adjacent to the Golan Heights, citing security concerns and the need to prevent hostile entities from establishing a foothold near its borders. Reports indicate incursions reaching up to 25 kilometers southwest of Damascus and 18 kilometers into the buffer zone around the Golan Heights, with forces seizing positions in Quneitra and Mount Hermon.² This advancement has led to the demolition of homes and restrictions on local farmers, drawing criticism from residents and international observers.

² "We Don't Mean Trouble, Say Israeli Troops on Border with Syria," The Times, December 20, 2024. <https://www.thetimes.com/world/middle-east/article/syria-border-israeli-troops-demilitarised-buffer-zone-95q7r6qx2>

The Druze Community and Border Dynamics

The Druze, an ethno-religious minority residing in southern Syria and the Golan Heights, play a unique role in the Syria-Israel equation. Approximately 150,000 Druze live in Syria, with around 25,000 residing in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.³ Historically, the Druze community in Syria maintained a pragmatic relationship with the Assad regime, while those in the Golan Heights have navigated a complex identity dynamic, balancing their Syrian heritage with the reality of Israeli governance. In the post-Assad period, the Druze community in the Golan Heights has expressed opposition to Israeli settlement expansion, fearing the erosion of their land rights and cultural identity. The new Syrian government has yet to outline a clear policy regarding the Druze, focusing instead on broader national recovery efforts. The Druze issue underscores the complexities of the Golan Heights dispute, where local communities are at the intersection of larger geopolitical struggles.

International and Diplomatic Reactions

The international community has exhibited a spectrum of responses to the fall of Assad and subsequent Israeli military actions in Syria. The United Nations has expressed concern over escalating tensions, urging all parties to exercise restraint and adhere to international law. UN Secretary-General António Guterres emphasized the importance of protecting civilian lives and infrastructure, calling for immediate humanitarian access to affected regions. The UN Security Council convened in January 2025 to discuss the situation, with calls for Israel to halt military operations in Syria and respect Syrian sovereignty under Resolution 242.⁴

Regional actors have also reacted to the shifting dynamics. Türkiye, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has reiterated its commitment to preventing any attempts to fragment Syria further, emphasizing the necessity of maintaining Syrian territorial integrity.⁵ Ankara's primary concern revolves around the presence of Kurdish forces in northern Syria, but President Erdoğan has made it clear that any Israeli expansion in the Golan Heights or deepening occupation in southern Syria will

³ "A Tiny Arab Minority Stands Between Israel and Syria," Wall Street Journal, October 5, 2023. <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/israel-syria-border-golan-heights-druze-0aa2f629>.

⁴ "UN Extends Peacekeeping Mission Between Syria, Israeli-Occupied Golan Heights," Reuters, December 20, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/un-extends-peacekeeping-mission-between-syria-israeli-occupied-golan-heights-2024-12-20/>.

⁵ "Turkey's Erdogan Says He Remains Hopeful About Reconciliation with Syria," Associated Press (AP), December 23, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-syria-erdogan-hopeful-reconciliation-84f85bddc16f7de23bff6099869e695e>.

be met with diplomatic pushback. Türkiye has also increased dialogue with the new Syrian government, fostering cooperation on counter-terrorism efforts along the shared border.

Iran condemned Israeli airstrikes and vowed to continue supporting Hezbollah and other proxy groups operating within Syria. Tehran framed Israeli operations as a violation of Syrian sovereignty and accused Israel of exploiting the post-Assad transition to expand its influence.⁶ Russia, despite providing Assad with asylum, has adopted a cautious stance, maintaining strategic influence through naval bases but refraining from direct involvement.

Syria's Diplomatic Outreach

In a bid to garner regional support and rebuild international relations, Syria's new Foreign Minister, Asaad al-Shibani, embarked on a trip to the Gulf countries. In early January 2025, al-Shibani visited Saudi Arabia, marking his first official trip abroad since assuming office. During the visit, he met with Saudi officials to discuss support for Syria's political transition and reconstruction efforts.

Following the Saudi visit, al-Shibani traveled to Qatar, where he met with Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani. Discussions focused on lifting international sanctions and securing economic partnerships to aid Syria's recovery. Al-Shibani emphasized that existing sanctions hinder the rapid development of the Syrian people and called for their removal. The Foreign Minister's regional tour also includes planned visits to the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, aiming to strengthen diplomatic ties and attract investment for Syria's reconstruction. These efforts reflect the new government's strategy to reintegrate Syria into the regional fold and secure the necessary support for rebuilding the nation after years of conflict.

Conclusion

All in all, the evolving dynamics between Syria and Israel in the aftermath of Assad's fall present a significant shift in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. The fall of the Assad regime has intensified the regional power struggle, with Israel expanding its military footprint in Syria to counter threats from Hezbollah and pro-Iranian groups. This shift risks further destabilizing border regions, as competing actors like Türkiye and Iran seek to shape Syria's post-conflict landscape to secure their strategic interests. As the transitional government works to stabilize the country, external actors continue to shape the path forward through military actions and diplomatic initiatives. Long-

⁶ "Ayatollah Khamenei Defiant Even as Iran Evacuates Thousands from Syria," Financial Times, December 15, 2024. <https://www.ft.com/content/e0c2ff31-3952-4d59-9d9f-5eb15968cb98>.

term peace and stability in the region will depend on sustained diplomatic engagement, adherence to international law, and addressing the root causes of the conflict.