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Israel and Turkey in Syria

A 'dual security space' amid a shifting
regional power balance

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Summary

- For several years, the United States has supported the remaking of the Middle East regional order by relying on Israeli military supremacy. This has given Israel exceptional operational freedom, fuelling competition and conflict between US allies in the region.
- Two US allies, Turkey and Israel, maintain a ‘dual security space’ in Syria: Israel seeks aerial supremacy and control in the south, while Turkey exerts influence over the Syrian state and the rest of the country.
- Both extend their influence in Syria to a degree that undermines Syrian sovereignty and limits opportunities for political solutions.
- For now, the United States is mediating and containing Turkish–Israeli tensions in line with its own transactional interests, but the regional competition still has the potential to escalate in Syria and beyond.
- The EU and its member states should invest in creating conditions that reduce the risk of external actors instrumentalizing social conflict in Syria, while monitoring the effects of the dual security space in the country.

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Introduction

An important consequence of the US–Israeli war on Iran could be the further sharpening of rivalries between US allies in the Middle East, especially between Israel and several key regional states. Israel’s emerging hegemony and broad scale of military operations are generating growing concern, particularly among Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan, which have recently deepened their mutual coordination.¹

For several years, the United States has backed efforts to remake the regional order by relying on Israeli military supremacy.² The United States has given Israel space to pursue military options against its foes – Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, Syrian actors, and the Houthis. In recent years, Israeli operations have extended into areas that intersect with the interests or territories of other US allies in the region. This has been evident in Israel’s actions affecting Turkish interests in Syria and its strike against Hamas in Qatar in autumn 2025. Israel is also increasingly at odds with Saudi Arabia’s interests in Syria. Indeed, Syria is now emerging as a key arena of competition between regional states allied with the United States.

Largely unnoticed at the global level, relations between Israel and Turkey have been strained for several years, with the two countries now approaching direct confrontation in Syria. Their competition for influence from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Horn of Africa has recently intensified. While media attention has focused on Gaza and Lebanon, Israel

has carried out over 1,600 strikes in Syria over the past six months. Israeli and Turkish leaders regularly frame each other as enemies and national security threats. As a global middle power, Turkey has its own vision of the regional order, and its ability to project power is being challenged by Israel’s emerging hegemony. Turkey has, for example, expanded military coordination with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in an effort to strengthen its deterrence posture.

This Briefing Paper analyses how the shifting regional balance of power is playing out in Syria, the central arena of Israel–Turkey competition. The paper outlines how Syria is shaped by a *dual security space* created by Turkey and Israel, and how its sovereignty is severely constrained by these external powers, affecting its post-war recovery and state-building. The paper also examines how the United States balances the interests of Turkey and Israel and is containing their conflict at present, in line with its own interests. In doing so, the paper discusses the roles of Saudi Arabia and Russia and provides recommendations to the European Union.

Dual security space

Turkey and Israel have each established a security space in Syria, within which they exercise control in two parallel and partly overlapping domains. Turkey maintains a ground-based security sphere in much of Syria through military cooperation with the new Syrian government. Turkey also occupies enclaves in northern Syria. Israel extends its aerial supremacy over almost all Syrian territory, controlling and eliminating possible military threats to its freedom of aerial operation. In addition, Israel holds geopolitically critical areas in the Golan Heights and, since the fall

1 Alhasan, Hasan (2026) “The New Middle Eastern Quadrilateral is Taking Shape”. IISS Online analysis. <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2026/05/a-new-middle-eastern-quadrilateral-is-taking-shape/>.

2 Lynch, Marc (2025) *America’s Middle East. The Ruination of a Region*. Hurst & Co, 19–20, 258.

of President Bashar al-Assad, Mount Hermon and broader areas near the Golan.

The Turkish ground-based security sphere is founded on defence agreements with the new Syrian government, ensuring that Turkey has a nearly exclusive role in providing military advice, restructuring and training the army, and delivering weapons. Turkish military personnel are deployed to the country to cooperate with the Syrian army, but they have also allegedly been involved, for example, in Aleppo and Raqqa, where Syrian government-aligned forces fought against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) earlier this year.³ So far, Israel has effectively constrained Turkish efforts to establish new military bases in Syria, expand troop deployments, and transfer advanced air defence and aerial surveillance systems by striking Syrian military targets when Turkey proceeds with such plans. Nevertheless, Turkey has created a significant military sphere of influence over Syrian government-controlled areas.

Israel maintains de facto aerial control over most of Syria based on the limits it has militarily imposed on Turkey. Israel has a long history of aerial operations in Syria, both during the country's civil war and the remaining Assad era, but their purpose has shifted from limiting Iran to primarily limiting Turkey and the new Syrian government. In southern Syria, Israel also maintains a sphere of influence through a range of methods. These include extended occupation, expanded military positions, control of roads and movement near the Golan, repression of and limited cooperation with local communities, and aerial power. Israel effectively restricts the access of the Syrian army, and other actors it considers hostile, to the provinces of Sweida, Daraa, and Quneitra, thereby enforcing something close to a demilitarized zone – a term Israel itself has used in its demands regarding security arrangements in the south. Israel has also expanded its ground presence in the Golan to “the area of separation” between Israel and Syria established in 1974, and has established a troop presence around Mount Hermon. Its ground presence has recently broadened in Quneitra province, and

reports indicate that it has armed Sweida-based Druze actors.

Both Israel and Turkey seek to impose so-called red lines – thresholds regarding each other's military presence and activities that they will not tolerate. Israel communicates these lines primarily through concrete actions, including military strikes. For example, in spring 2025, Israel bombed Syrian army facilities in Palmyra and the Aleppo countryside, where Turkey was allegedly transferring heavy weaponry and building up a troop presence. The strikes killed Turkish citizens, whom Turkey identified as engineers. Around the same time, Israel claimed to be protecting the Druze community through airpower in the southern province of Sweida against the Syrian army and its local allies. Israel also signalled its red lines to the Syrian government through strikes near the Syrian Presidential Palace and the Syrian army's General Staff headquarters. Turkey communicates its red lines to Israel and the United States through vocal criticism.

These major efforts by both countries to establish military control should not be seen only as parallel interventions. Rather, they create a distinctive dual security sphere to which both countries are tied and by which Syrian actors are, to some extent, defined and restrained. These two neighbours of Syria compete in this buffer country, while also demonstrating significant restraint considering their relative military capabilities and joint alliance with the United States. Their competition unfolds primarily at the operational level, focusing on concrete questions of deployment, presence, and permissible actions. The United States functions as the ultimate boundary-setter, defining the limits of acceptable behaviour.

Extension of Turkish and Israeli influence and limits on Syrian sovereignty

Both Turkey and Israel also extend their influence deep into Syria through means that go beyond military control. Turkey acts as an active political engineer in Syrian politics, whereas Israel's role is more reactive and geared towards constraining developments it perceives as threatening. Together, their engagement limits Syrian sovereignty and narrows the choices available to Syrian actors in the post-civil war era.

3 Lerman, Eran (2026) “As Erdogan Tightens His Grip on Syria, What Can Israel Do?” Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, February 2026. <https://jiss.org.il/en/lerman-as-erdogan-tightens-his-grip-on-syria-what-can-israel-do/>.



Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan shakes hands with Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad Hassan al-Shaibani as us Secretary of State Marco Rubio looks on during a meeting in Antalya on 15 May 2025.

Source: Umit Bektas, AFP/Lehtikuva

Turkey extends its influence into Syria through deep cooperation with the Syrian government. Concretely, it operates within Syrian political and security institutions, as well as critical infrastructure and the economy. During the first year of the new government, the heads of state, Ahmed al-Sharaa and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, met every month – more frequently than any other heads of state in the region.⁴ Another anecdotal example of this close cooperation between Turkey and Syria is the claim that Turkish intelligence officials were embedded in the Syrian official delegation in US-mediated

4 Diplomeds (2026) “Diplomatic Interactions between Mediterranean Heads of State and Foreign Ministers in 2025”. An Annual Diplomeds Report on Developments in Mediterranean Diplomacy. Diplomeds. The Council for Mediterranean Diplomacy, March 2026. <https://diplomeds.org/2025-diplomatic-interactions-mediterranean-heads-of-state-foreign-ministers/>.

negotiations with Israel.⁵ Turkey also expands its economic statecraft in Syria by supplying the Syrian market with Turkish products. Many northern regions are dependent on Turkish supply chains, and, especially in the areas Turkey occupies, most services and critical infrastructure are run by Turkey, even using Turkish currency.

A strong central authority in Damascus is a key tool for Turkey to advance its interests. Through the central government, Turkey gains military influence and leverage over state capacities that are also required to address key challenges that the Syrian war has posed for Ankara. Foremost among these is the dismantling of the Kurdish-led self-administration and military institutions in northeast Syria. It is in Turkey’s interest that the new Syrian government,

5 This paper has benefitted from several discussions with Syrian and regional analysts and political actors.

still in its early phase of consolidation, has sufficient state power to enforce the unity agreement signed in January 2026, which aims to gradually integrate Kurdish forces and institutions into the state. A strong and stable state in Syria also enables Turkish visions for crucial connectivity infrastructure towards the Gulf. At the same time, the United States and European countries have largely remained silent about other political solutions, despite Syria's highly fractured nature and demands by various Syrian actors for autonomy, federalism, and decentralization.

“Since the end of the civil war, the Syrian state’s ability to control territory and extend its institutional, fiscal, and coercive capacities across the country has varied.”

Israel has opposed a strong central government and has largely prevented the extension of the Syrian government’s presence to the south, de facto dividing the country. Israel deeply mistrusts the new government, given its extremist Islamist origins, which is one factor shaping Israeli policy. More importantly perhaps, from Israel’s perspective, military considerations – such as the risks associated with Hezbollah’s proximity and the need for freedom of aerial operation – drive its policy against a strong centralized state.

In the south, Israel also applies pressure that goes beyond military means. It has been accused of controlling the population through house demolitions, arrests, and pressure to relocate.⁶ In the more easterly southern province of Sweida, Israel extends its influence through cooperation with the Druze community, providing, for example, humanitarian aid and arms. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has defined the duration of Israeli control in the south as lasting “for the foreseeable future”.

The dual security space and the associated external interests constrain Syrian sovereignty when it comes to state-building, political transition, national unity, and social cohesion. Since the end of the civil war, the Syrian state’s ability to control territory and extend its institutional, fiscal, and coercive capacities across the country has varied. The Syrian army lacks full territorial control because some areas are occupied or controlled by Israel and Turkey. In addition, some regions remain controlled by non-governmental actors. Israel’s red lines restrict the Syrian state’s military options regarding heavy weaponry, especially air defence and missile technology. The institutional penetration of the state is particularly limited in the south because of Israel. By contrast, Turkey has encouraged state expansion in the northeast, a policy that Damascus supports. The reform of the security sector is heavily influenced by Turkey, for example when it comes to integrating the SDF into the Syrian army.

Despite calls by international and many Syrian actors for an inclusive political transition, Syria has not undergone a transition involving negotiation or even dialogue on power-sharing between its regions, institutions, political forces, and societal components. Instead, power was transferred through formal steps to the new government after the fall of the Assad regime. Key functions of the political system are soon to be completed through the establishment of a new individual-based parliament. The power transfer is expected to be formalized by a new constitution, although the process and schedule remain unclear. The new leadership derives its legitimacy from international recognition and engagement, leaving the new government with little urgency to build domestic legitimacy beyond its revolutionary legacy. At the same time, the new government has been able to expand its governance, begin engaging with society, and maintain a degree of stability, thereby avoiding a resurgence of major political violence.

The dual security space plays a part in controlling, containing, and sustaining tensions between the Damascus-led political order and other localities and social components. This creates an environment that is not conducive to improving national unity or social cohesion. Israel and Turkey seek to control the fate of Sweida and the northeast, while many Syrian groupings and communities also

6 Aouir, Reem (2026) “Smart Borders, Military Gates and Land Seizures: How Israel is Encroaching in Southern Syria”. Middle East Eye, May 2026. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/smart-borders-military-gates-land-seizure-israel-encroachment-southern-syria>.

see different external actors, including Russia or even Iran, as possible sources of leverage. The civil war fragmented Syrian identity and social cohesion to such an extent that national unity has become implausible, even in the absence of external drivers of division.

Other external players and the dual security system in Syria

Transactional mediation by the United States

Both Israel and Turkey are US allies, and it is the United States that is containing the conflict between the two countries. Even if the world has become more multipolar, US primacy in defining the regional order in the Middle East, especially in the Levant, remains deeply structural and independent of changing US administrations. Like other regional states over recent decades, Israel and Turkey will also continue to pursue their interests and settle their differences primarily in Washington.⁷

What has changed during President Donald Trump's term is that US partnerships have become increasingly transactional in nature. New approaches to pursuing stability in the region have also been introduced, emphasizing military options in dealing with Iran, as well as trade and technology cooperation and efforts to increase the number of countries signing the Abraham Accords. In this context, both Israel and Turkey may need to align closely with current US objectives when competing to advance their own objectives in Syria and beyond.

The United States, Israel and Turkey all benefitted from the withdrawal of Iran and its allies from Syria and the significant weakening of Iran's military corridor to Lebanon following the fall of the Assad regime, even though the new government that emerged was not in Israel's interests. For the United States, the change also brought to power a government that cooperates closely with Washington. In addition to shifting sides from Iran and Russia to Turkey and the United States, the Syrian government has fostered good relations with all sides, a development that fits with US efforts to remake the Middle Eastern order. In the eyes of the United States, the new Syrian state

is also capable of containing internal conflict to a sufficient degree and can act as a buffer between potentially unstable Iraq and Lebanon. Moreover, Washington appears to view the new government as possessing an experienced fighting force, and President Trump has even considered the possibility of involving the Syrian army in Lebanon.⁸

Israel's aerial domination in Syria is beneficial for the United States, as it helps ensure that Iran cannot re-enter Syria or significantly rearm Hezbollah through Syrian territory. At the same time, the Syrian government has also effectively targeted Iranian transfers of military equipment to Hezbollah in Syria. The United States has reportedly objected to Turkish missile transfers to Syria, but it is unclear how the US position on this Israeli red line will evolve. The United States has nonetheless publicly criticized Israeli strikes in the country, while working towards a peace agreement between Syria and Israel.⁹

The United States has also gained from the Turkish-driven unity agreement aimed at integrating Kurdish forces into the national framework, as the deal facilitated the long-anticipated withdrawal of US forces from Syria – an objective President Trump had already pushed for during his first term in office. At the same time, according to a former Israeli military official, Israel was engaged in sensitive preparations with the United States for the Iran war in January 2026. This suggests that objecting to Turkish pressure to force a political agreement with the Kurds was not a priority for Israel at that stage.

Saudi support for the Syrian government and Russia's future role

Both Turkey and Israel also use their roles as aspiring middle powers to gain support for their respective sides in the competition and conflict over Syria. Against this backdrop, Saudi Arabia has acted in close coordination with Turkey to limit Israel, deter Iran in the longer run, and likely also balance Turkish ambitions. Saudi Arabia has supported the

⁷ Lynch 2025.

⁸ Middle East Monitor (2026) "Trump says Israel unable to 'put Hezbollah away', suggests Syria could do it". 21 June. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20260621-trump-says-israel-unable-to-put-hezbollah-away-suggests-syria-could-do-it/>.

⁹ Schenker, David (2026) "Prospects for Syria-Israel relations". Policy Analysis, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 2026. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/prospects-syria-israel-relations>.

new Syrian government diplomatically and through economic investment, and has anchored Syria within the regional Sunni sphere. The training of Syrian diplomats and army officials serves as a symbolic tool in this effort.

Saudi Arabia's concerns about Israel's role in Syria can also be seen from the perspective of geoeconomics and geopolitical proximity. Saudi Arabia could advance connectivity infrastructure between the Gulf and Turkey from south to north, but Israel's presence extends from east to west in southern Syria. Saudi Arabia may also have an interest in ensuring that Israel does not fully control Jordan's northern border, given its own long border with Jordan to the south.

The future role of Russia in Syria is closely tied to how the current war in Iran unfolds, as its outcome will shape the broader regional balance. While an Iranian return to Syria remains a concern under certain scenarios, external actors would likely collectively limit Iran's influence in the country. So far, the positions of Israel and Turkey on Russia have sent mixed signals. Israel reportedly asked the United States to preserve Russia's naval and air bases in Syria's coastal areas after the fall of Assad,¹⁰ possibly as a way to balance Turkey.

In autumn 2025, an unexpected discussion emerged around attempts to involve Russia in the Israeli-Turkish conflict over Syria: news reports suggested that Russia could play a role in monitoring a proposed demilitarized zone in the south of the country. This balancing attempt could have been pursued by any of the parties, including the Syrian government, although the idea never reached a concrete stage. Currently, Russia and the Syrian government have an interest in cooperation, but Russia's presence is somewhat tied to Turkish consent. At the same time, it is noteworthy that Israel and Russia have had a long history of military communication during the civil war in Syria.

Europe's potential to reduce tensions

Rising military tension between NATO member Turkey and Israel, a formidable regional military power

with expansionist aspirations and a track record of using excessive force, should be a major concern for Europe. In this context, it is noteworthy that European Union member states Greece and Cyprus are already tied to Turkish-Israeli competition and conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean, given their close political relations and energy cooperation with Israel, as well as their defence purchases from the country. The EU, meanwhile, supports the new Syrian government, thereby aligning more closely with Turkish and Saudi interests in Syria than with those of Israel.

“Regional investments, although desperately needed, could make some of Syria's critical infrastructure vulnerable to regional competition.”

The EU signed a political agreement with Syria in May 2026, and future negotiations seem to be preparing the ground for an association agreement. Going forward, the EU should monitor how its political and economic support for Syria is affected by the dual security space and the evolving regional security situation, and adjust its support accordingly to ensure that it remains effective. At the same time, coordination with Turkey and Saudi Arabia is essential, for example in reconstruction aid and connectivity infrastructure.¹¹

The EU has particular potential to support social cohesion and help mitigate communal conflict, which is on the verge of escalating, especially in coastal regions. These divisions are at risk of being instrumentalized by external actors. Considerable attention should be paid to urgent local economic development needs, with European aid helping to create conditions for long-term stability.

EU member states can also provide support for US mediation efforts related to Syria. In a situation where US attention is insufficient, coalitions of

10 Gebeily, Maya & Humejra Pamuk (2025) “Israel Lobbies us to keep Russian bases in a ‘weak’ Syria, sources say”. *Reuters*, 28 February. <https://www.reuters.com/world/israel-lobbies-us-keep-russian-bases-weak-syria-sources-say-2025-02-28/>.

11 Hanelt, Christian & Celine Plöger (2026) “Acting without Unanimity: How the EU Can Deliver in MENA”. Bertelsmann Stiftung, May 2026. <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/acting-without-unanimity-how-the-eu-can-deliver-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-region>.

European states could support mediation between Israel and Turkey.

Syria is also part of a re-energized discussion in the region and beyond on connectivity, particularly regarding its potential and challenges as a transit node linking the Gulf states with Turkey, Asia, and Europe. Developments in global logistics could either foster cooperation or exacerbate conflict; the EU and its member states should therefore also review connectivity-related investment risks from regional political and security perspectives.

Furthermore, European actors should assess the politics of reconstruction in the country. Regional investments, although desperately needed, could make some of Syria's critical infrastructure vulnerable to regional competition. Experts fear that the Syrian institutional and legal framework is not equipped to manage reconstruction funds with transparency and accountability. Reconstruction aid is also likely to concentrate economic wealth and fuel further conflict.¹²


Conclusions: The future of regional tension and possible conflict in Syria

The dual security space in Syria has evolved in the context of US and Israeli aspirations to remake the Middle East regional order. It has also been shaped by the responses of Turkey and Saudi Arabia to Israel's expanding room for manoeuvre in the region. The US-Israeli war against Iran has further raised the stakes, and its outcome will affect how Israel on the one side, and Turkey and Saudi Arabia on the other, calculate their next steps in Syria and other regional conflict arenas. In early April, Israeli military officials expressed concern about recent steps by the Syrian government to acquire heavy weapons capabilities, including air defence and possibly missiles.¹³ This illustrates how competition in Syria persists and how

the parties may be preparing to test their relative strength after the crisis in the Gulf.

Central to the containment of Turkey-Israel tension in Syria is the US position on these actors after the acute war and negotiations with Iran have reached at least an interim conclusion. Will the superpower continue to balance the interests of Israel and Turkey in Syria while still providing Israel with unchecked space for action in the broader region? It is too early to assess whether President Trump's recent criticism of Israel is limited to the Iran negotiations and Israeli policy in Lebanon, or whether it reflects a real change. It also remains unclear how successful Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt will be in convincing the Trump administration to limit Israel's emerging hegemony. Further regional counter-reactions to several years of Israeli military moves can also be expected.

The tensions between Israel and Turkey, and between Israel and Saudi Arabia, in the Middle East could, however, become long-lasting and even a dominant feature of the regional order. In such scenarios, Syria could become an arena for more direct military exchanges, with Israel and Turkey targeting each other's assets in the country.

Violent proxy conflicts could also emerge between Israel and Turkey in Syria, echoing the violence seen in the coastal regions and Sweida during the new government's first year and in light of the ongoing extremely tense sectarian and local social dynamics. In the event of violent social instability or proxy conflict, Russia could become a proxy player, supporting or acting against Israel, Turkey, or both, depending on how the parties play their cards. Closely linked to Syria, Lebanon could also become a new arena of competition between Israel and Turkey, although it remains the only relevant arena where Turkish balancing attempts against Israel have not been confirmed thus far, despite early reports. 

12 Sidlo, Katarzina (2026) "The Rules of Reconstruction: Why the EU-Syria reset should put institutions first".

Commentary, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 13 May. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/commentary/rules-reconstruction-why-eu-syria-reset-must-put-institutions-first>.

13 Middle East Monitor (2026) "Israeli report says concern growing over Syrian army reconstruction". Middle East Monitor, 7 May. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20260507-israeli-report-says-concern-growing-over-syrian-army-reconstruction/>.

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