

Can Ahmed al-Sharaa's Syrian Regime Distance Itself from Terrorism?

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September 17, 2026

Overview¹

- ▶ The current Syrian regime is headed by President Ahmed al-Sharaa (Abu Muhammad al-Julani), who seized power with the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 and has a history of prolonged ties to terrorist organizations with a radical Islamic agenda, including ISIS and al-Qaeda.
- ▶ Since seizing power, al-Sharaa has pursued a pragmatic course aimed at drawing closer to Western countries, which he regards as an essential component in repairing the extensive damage the country sustained during the years of civil war. His policy is characterized by openness toward Western leaders, foremost among them the American president, as well as conveying various messages to Israel regarding his desire to avoid friction and advance toward a security arrangement and even a peace agreement.
- ▶ Despite the past ties of al-Sharaa and senior figures in the current regime to ISIS and al-Qaeda, the regime conducts an ongoing campaign against global jihad organizations which are trying to renew their activity in Syria and have attempted to assassinate the Syrian president.
- ▶ The al-Sharaa regime is also hostile to and suspicious of Iran and Hezbollah, which supported the Assad regime during the civil war, and prevents them from again turning Syria into an arena for anti-Israel activity and a smuggling route to Lebanon. The regime has expressed support for the Palestinian Authority, takes action against the Palestinian terrorist organizations and so far has rejected Hamas efforts at rapprochement.
- ▶ **However, among the Syrian security forces there have been calls in support of jihad against Israel and the Jews.** Violent massacres of the Alawite and Druze minorities have also occurred, but they appear to have reflected the Damascus government's loss of control over events on the ground, and were quickly disavowed.

¹ Click <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en> to subscribe and receive the ITIC's daily updates as well as its other publications.

► In the Amit Institute's assessment, the new Syrian regime's desire and need for Western assistance, with an emphasis on the involvement of foreign companies in rebuilding physical infrastructure, are top priorities among senior regime officials. To that end, Damascus is determinedly combatting terrorism, both rhetorically and in practice, based on its understanding that such a policy is a necessary condition for maintaining relations with Western countries. Syria's dependence on Western assistance is an important restraint on attempts to advance a jihadist terrorist agenda.

► The combination of the pragmatic shift of senior figures at the top of the Syrian regime and the country's dependence on Western assistance will probably remain firm in the coming years because of the extensive damage requiring reconstruction and the possibility that Syria could serve as an alternative route for transporting oil, given Iranian control of the Strait of Hormuz and Houthi control of the Bab al-Mandab Strait. That reduces the possibility Syria will promote a state-sponsored terrorist agenda and pose a direct terrorist threat to Israel in the foreseeable future. However, a successful attack on al-Sharaa by jihad organizations could lead to the rise of more radical elements which could once again raise the question of the Syrian regime's commitment to combating terrorism.

The Syrian Regime's Rapprochement with the West

► On December 8, 2024, a rebel coalition led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham² under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa, aka Abu Muhammad al-Julani, captured Damascus and overthrew the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad after a 12-day military campaign.³ On January 29, 2025, the Syrian Revolution Victory Conference was held, attended by senior officials of the new government, during which Ahmed al-Sharaa was officially appointed president for a transitional period of unspecified duration (Syrian presidency Telegram channel, January 29, 2025). In October 2025, the first parliamentary elections were held (BBC, October 5, 2025).

► Over the years, al-Sharaa has demonstrated pragmatism and an ability to adapt to the conditions in his operational environment to advance his political objectives. He is apparently ideological flexible and no fixed, firmly established jihadist agenda guides him. He began his

² *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* was a militant Islamist group in Syria which led the rebel offensive to topple the Assad regime in December 2024; it dissolved in January 2025.

³ See the December 2024 ITIC [the Amit Institute since May 2026] report, [The Power Groups in Syria after the Fall of the Assad Regime](#).

career as an operative in the Islamic State organization in Iraq and was sent to establish its branch in Syria. In April 2013, he completely broke with the organization, now called ISIS, after concluding that his subordination to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's radical jihadist agenda impaired his ability to advance his interests in Syria, which required cooperation with rebel organizations which held more moderate, Syrian national views. He subsequently joined al-Qaeda, but left it in July 2016 because of the conflict between its radical Salafist agenda and his Syrian national objectives. While he controlled the rebel enclave operating in Idlib in northwestern Syria under Turkish patronage, he combined conservative Islamic elements with granting rights to women and projected a moderate image by switching to civilian dress and publicly distancing himself from the radical Islamism of ISIS and al-Qaeda.⁴

► Since seizing power in Syria, al-Sharaa has continued to pursue a pragmatic political course while seeking to draw closer to the moderate Sunni states and the West, in an effort to rebuild the Syrian state and secure foreign investment, essential to efforts to reconstruct the country's infrastructure and institutions after more than a decade of civil war.

► Therefore, and with the assistance of his patrons in Turkey and Saudi Arabia, al-Sharaa held a series of meetings with prominent international leaders: he met with the American president three times, and in November 2025 made the historic first visit by a Syrian president to the White House in decades; he met with French President Macron at the Élysée Palace in May 2025 and subsequently hosted Macron in Damascus in July 2026, the first visit by a Western leader to Syria in the post-al-Assad era; he also made historic diplomatic visits to Berlin and London and addressed the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2025, and is also expected to participate in the General Assembly session in September 2026.⁵

⁴ See the January 2025 ITIC report, [Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria's New Leader: From Jihadist to Stateman?](#)

⁵ For al-Sharaa's diplomatic activity, see the Syrian presidency office's Telegram channel.



Right: The first meeting between al-Sharaa and the American president, also attended by the Saudi crown prince (Syrian presidency office Telegram channel, May 14, 2025). Left: Al-Sharaa speaks at the UN (Syrian presidency office Telegram channel, September 24, 2025)

► The meetings gave al-Sharaa considerable legitimacy in the West and paved the way for the lifting of the economic sanctions imposed on Damascus by the American administration in 2019 (SANA, August 25, 2025) and Syria's removal from the list of state sponsors of terrorism (US Treasury Department website, August 25, 2026). In September 2026, a large US Chamber of Commerce delegation, with representatives of dozens of companies, visited for the first time for discussions with al-Sharaa and senior Syrian officials on investment in the country (SANA, September 14, 2026).

► In June 2026, Hussein Salama, head of the Syrian General Intelligence service and formerly a senior Hayat Tahrir al-Sham figure, participated in the UN counterterrorism conference held in New York, an unprecedented step that marked Syria's transformation into a legitimate participant in the international campaign against terrorism (Al Jazeera, June 28, 2026).

The Regime's Stance on Israel

► Along with pragmatic messages and moves toward rapprochement with the West, the new regime in Damascus has been conciliatory toward Israel to avoid military friction. A few days after seizing power in Damascus, al-Sharaa delivered a speech in which he declared Syria did not intend to enter into a confrontation with Israel or to wage a campaign against it, and would not allow itself to be used for launching attacks against Tel Aviv (al-Mayadeen, December 14, 2024).

► Immediately after the fall of the Assad regime, IDF forces took control of the buffer zone in the Golan Heights and seized control of the Syrian Hermon to rid southern Syria of armed forces of the new Syrian regime and armed organizations. Since then, IDF forces have conducted routine activity in the buffer zone and in the al-Quneitra and Daraa provinces to prevent possible terrorist activity against Israeli territory.

► With American mediation, there were contacts at various levels between senior officials in the new Syrian regime and senior Israeli officials, whose objective was to prevent escalation, preserve stability between the countries and reach a security arrangement. Rounds of contacts were held in Paris, Azerbaijan and Jordan, including meetings between Israeli Minister Ron Dermer and Mossad Director Roman Gofman and Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani (*Jerusalem Post*, July 30, 2025; Al Jazeera, January 6, 2026 and August 24, 2026). Although no formal agreement was reached, the channels of communication between Damascus and Jerusalem remain open, and senior Syrian officials have also indicated they want talks with Israel. President al-Sharaa said a security agreement could pave the way for a peace agreement (Al Jazeera, July 26, 2026), while Foreign Minister al-Shaibani said that although they did not trust Israel, they wanted the talks to continue to effect an Israeli withdrawal (Reuters, August 23, 2026).

► On the ground the Syrian forces have been careful to avoid direct friction with Israel, and no clashes have been recorded between IDF forces in southern Syria and the Syrian army or security forces. There is ongoing Israeli activity in the al-Quneitra and Daraa provinces but the Syrian foreign ministry confines itself to condemning Israeli violations and calling for a return to the 1974 Disengagement Agreement (Syrian foreign ministry Telegram channel, various dates).⁶

The Regime's Relations with Iran and the "Resistance Axis"⁷

► Al-Sharaa's Syria has taken a firm stance against Iran and its proxies, especially Hezbollah, which actively supported the Assad regime during the civil war and in practice helped it survive until the uprising in December 2024. In his first speech after seizing power in Damascus, al-Sharaa called the fall of the Assad regime a victory over "Iran's dangerous regional project" (al-Mayadeen, December 14, 2024).

Activity against Hezbollah

► The al-Sharaa regime systematically exposes and destroys Hezbollah's remaining facilities and assets in Syria. The Syrian ministry of the interior announced the exposure of a Hezbollah

⁶ See the December 2025 ITIC report, [IDF Operation in Beit Jinn amid Efforts to Promote Terrorism Against Israel in Southern Syria](#).

⁷ Iran, Hezbollah, the Palestinian terrorist organizations, the Houthis in Yemen and the Shi'ite militias in Iraq.

terrorist cell which planned operations to undermine the country's stability (SANA, April 19, 2026). In an operation against Hezbollah in the areas of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Tartus and Latakia, an extensive terrorist network was exposed whose operatives had been trained in Lebanon, accumulated large quantities of weapons and were preparing to carry out acts of sabotage and assassinate senior officials of the new Syrian regime (SANA, May 5, 2026).

► Meanwhile, the Syrian regime conducts an ongoing campaign against the smuggling of weapons intended for Hezbollah in Lebanon, after Syria under Assad served as a major route for smuggling weapons and money from Iran to Hezbollah.⁸ The Syrian security forces exposed an attempt to smuggle large quantities of weapons from Iraq to Lebanon through Syria, concealed inside a fuel tanker, including approximately 100 fiber-optic first-person-view (FPV) explosive drones (SANA, July 16, 2026). On another occasion, they exposed the large-scale smuggling of Kornet anti-tank missiles and other weapons concealed inside a vegetable truck en route from the area of the Syrian city of Qusayr to Lebanese territory (al-Arabiya, June 5, 2025).



Right: Weapons for Hezbollah seized on the Iraq-Syria border (Shafaq News, July 16, 2026). Left: Arrest of suspects belonging to Hezbollah cells in the Damascus area (SANA, March 27, 2025)

Activity against the Palestinian Terrorist Organizations

► Since al-Sharaa came to power he has expressed solidarity with the Palestinian issue. In his first speech before the Arab League, he said the Syrians would stand alongside their Palestinian brothers "until liberation and justice," and condemned attempts to impose solutions seeking to redraw regional maps "at the expense of Palestinian blood" (Al Jazeera, March 4, 2025).

► Nevertheless, the Syrian regime has a strict policy against the Palestinian terrorist organizations belonging to the "resistance axis." Syrian security forces arrested two senior Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) officials in Damascus, Khaled Khaled, head of the movement in

⁸ See the December 2024 ITIC report, [Captured documents reveal how Iran smuggles weapons via Syria and Jordan](#).

Syria, and Abu Ali Yasser, responsible for the organization's Syrian activity (Sky News Arabia, April 22, 2025), and Talal Naji, secretary general of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, who lived in Damascus (Al Jazeera, May 3, 2025). The arrests took place shortly after al-Sharaa held his first official meeting with Palestinian Authority chairman Mahmoud Abbas, who arrived in Damascus for an official visit (al-Arabiya, April 19, 2025). The arrests can therefore be viewed as intended to show the new regime's support for the Palestinian Authority as the official representative of the Palestinians, and to deter Palestinian terrorist organizations which remained loyal to the Assad regime during the civil war.



**Mahmoud Abbas' official visit to Damascus, for the first time in 16 years
(Syrian presidency office Telegram channel, April 18, 2025)**

► The regime is also hostile to and suspicious of Hamas, even though the movement was forced to remove its headquarters from Damascus after Khaled Mashal, while head of the political bureau, criticized the Assad regime and refused to condemn the protest demonstrations at the beginning of the civil war in 2011.⁹ Al-Sharaa's remarks a few days after coming to power, in which he made it clear that he would not permit hostile activity against Israel from Syrian territory, constituted an unequivocal message to Hamas that the new regime did not intend to allow it to renew its activity in the country (Independent Arabia, December 26, 2024).

► Hamas tried to placate the new Syrian regime and renew relations with Damascus. The movement was quick to congratulate al-Sharaa after he came to power and show support for the freedom of the Syrian people, in what appeared to be an attempt to draw closer to the new regime and bring about the renewal of its activity in the Syrian arena. Hamas also sent messages of support to the al-Sharaa regime, while condemning terrorist activity by Sunni jihad organizations against the new regime and attempting to use its connections in Turkey to open new channels of communication with Damascus. However, senior Hamas officials

⁹ See the ITIC report, [Khaled Mashal, Hamas' "external" leader, is a controversial figure, as documented in documents found by the IDF in the Gaza Strip.](#)

acknowledged that for the time being there was no indication that the regime in Damascus was willing to renew relations with the movement and there were no plans for an official bilateral meeting (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, July 9, 2026).

The "Resistance Axis" Terrorist Threat in Southern Syria

► Since IDF forces began operating in southern Syria in December 2024, limited attempts by terrorist elements affiliated with the "resistance axis" to attack Israel have been identified. In June 2025, Hamas operatives were detained in the village of Beit Jinn on suspicion of working to promote terrorist attacks against Israel (IDF spokesperson, June 12, 2025); in July 2025, IDF forces detained a terrorist cell operated by Iran in southern Syria and seized weapons, including several firearms and grenades (IDF spokesperson, July 3, 2025); in November 2025, there were exchanges of fire during a detention operation in Beit Jinn of terrorist operatives belonging to al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, the Muslim Brotherhood branch in Lebanon which is close to Hezbollah and Hamas;¹⁰ and a weapons depot used by al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya terrorist operatives was also exposed in Beit Jinn (IDF spokesperson, February 10, 2026).

► During 2025, an organization called the Islamic Resistance Front in Syria – Men of Valor began operating in southern Syria. It issued statements against the Israeli presence in Syrian territory and claimed responsibility for attacks on IDF forces in the area, although in most cases there was no confirmation from the IDF. It also declared its affiliation with the "resistance axis" and completely supported Iran, Hezbollah and the Palestinian terrorist organizations. The organization may be an entity established by Iran and Hezbollah in an attempt to act against IDF forces and thereby provoke an Israeli military response against the security forces of the al-Sharaa regime, which would further destabilize the internal situation in Syria.¹¹

Syrian Regime Activity against Sunni Jihad Organizations

► During the civil war in Syria, a number of Salafi-jihadist organizations operated against the Assad regime. Their operatives, some of whom are still active in Syria, hold extreme anti-Israel positions. However, since the new regime in Damascus came to power, no activity carried out by them has so far been recorded against IDF forces stationed in southern Syria or against Israeli territory.

¹⁰ [IDF Operation in Beit Jinn amid Efforts to Promote Terrorism Against Israel in Southern Syria.](#)

¹¹ See the September 2025 ITIC report, [Is South Syria a Terrorist Threat to Israel? The Islamic Resistance Front in Syria, a Test Case.](#)

► Meanwhile, the new Syrian regime worked to integrate jihadist elements into itself, and approximately 3,500 foreign fighters who fought against the Assad regime were absorbed into the ranks of the reestablished regular Syrian army, while commanders of Islamist militias also received key positions in the security forces and government. The initiative received American approval and was viewed as a step to establish Damascus' control over those elements and prevent them from operating independently or joining the jihad organizations still operating on Syrian soil (Al Jazeera, June 4, 2025).

The Campaign against ISIS¹²

► The new Syrian regime formally joined the American-led international coalition against ISIS during President al-Sharaa's historic visit to the White House in November 2025. Syrian Information Minister Hamza al-Mustafa declared it showed Syria's willingness to take part in the campaign against terrorism and promote regional stability (Al Jazeera, November 11, 2025).

► The growing cooperation between the Syrian regime and the international coalition against terrorism could make it more difficult for ISIS to increase its activity, although the organization continues its efforts to establish itself in areas where regime control remains weak, such as the Syrian desert, and attack the Syrian security forces and civilian communities. Other jihad organizations opposed to the regime may also attempt to undermine the stability of the al-Sharaa regime.

► The Syrian regime's position regarding the campaign against ISIS led its senior figures to publicly criticize al-Sharaa. In February 2026, the ISIS leadership issued an audio statement calling on its supporters to fight the new Syrian regime (Sky News Arabia, February 22, 2026), and Syrian security officials revealed that ISIS operatives were behind two failed attempts to assassinate al-Sharaa (Sky News Arabia, November 10, 2025). Subsequently, the Syrian interior ministry revealed that ISIS was responsible for the attacks carried out in the capital, Damascus, during the French president's visit to the city in July 2026 (SANA, July 13, 2026).

The Campaign against al-Qaeda

► The Syrian regime is hostile to al-Qaeda, to which al-Sharaa formerly belonged. Al-Qaeda previously declared al-Sharaa a traitor, which led some of his men to split away and establish a separate organization in 2018 called Hurras al-Din, which was declared al-Qaeda's official branch in Syria (BBC Arabic, December 10, 2024). In subsequent years, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham,

¹² See the January 2026 ITIC report, [Jihad Activity under the al-Sharaa Regime in Syria, a Potential Threat to Israel](#).

led by al-Sharaa, conducted a prolonged campaign against Hurras al-Din operatives, along with American strikes targeting the organization's operatives. After al-Sharaa seized power in Damascus, Hurras al-Din announced its dissolution, stating that the objectives of the civil war had been successfully achieved (Al Jazeera and Al Majalla, February 27, 2025).



Hurras al-Din announcement of the organization's dissolution (social media, January 29, 2025)

► On the ground, global jihad organizations currently pose a very limited threat to Israel, and IDF forces and Syrian security organizations periodically attack local networks, primarily affiliated with ISIS, operating in southern Syria. For example, in December 2025, IDF forces detained an ISIS operative and exposed a weapons cache in the village of Rafid (IDF spokesperson, December 21, 2025), and the Syrian ministry of the interior announced the arrest of several ISIS operatives in the town of Khan Arnaba, near the border with Israel (SANA, August 13, 2026).



ISIS weapons discovered in the village of Rafid (IDF spokesperson, December 21, 2025)

Support for Terrorism within the Regime's Ranks

► Along with the regime's official pragmatic policy, both through public statements and operations against a long list of terrorist organizations, signs periodically emerge of extreme anti-Israel positions among operatives and supporters of the new regime.

► Examples are songs against Israel and Jews heard during military ceremonies and statements by junior figures among the security or military forces subordinate to the regime.

For example, during a military parade marking one year since the fall of the Assad regime, participants were heard chanting slogan in support of the Gaza Strip and against Israel (The Arab News, December 10, 2025); at a graduation ceremony for a special military units course held in Deir ez-Zor, the graduates chanted anti-Semitic slogans (MEMRI, January 28, 2025).

► Other indications of the presence of extremist views within the ranks of the Syrian security forces occurred during the bloody events targeting the Alawite minority in the Syrian coastal region in March 2025, during which approximately 1,700 civilians were killed (Al Jazeera, March 9, 2025), and targeting the Druze minority in the al-Suwayda area in the summer of 2025, during which dozens of civilians were reported killed (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, July 15, 2025). However, the regime in Damascus condemned the events, which reflected its loss of control over some of the forces subordinate to it during the first months after it seized power, and in both cases a commission of inquiry was established to investigate (al-Arabiya, March 9, 2025; *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 1, 2025).