



Spotlight on Syria (Following the Toppling of the Syrian Regime)

January 1 – 8, 2025

Overview¹

- ▶ The date for convening the national conference of representatives of sects, religions and political groups to discuss the establishment of a committee for framing the new constitution, has been postponed. It is assumed that the conference will take place after Trump is inaugurated.
- ▶ The new regime continued its meetings with leaders of armed organizations in preparation for their disbandment and integration into the Ministry of Defense and the new Syrian army. The Druze announced their willingness to integrate into the army but insisted they would retain their weapons until a constitution had been framed and a government representing all sects and communities had been formed.
- ▶ Ahmed al-Sharaa (Abu Mohammad al-Julani), the de facto leader of Syria, met with the foreign ministers of Germany and France. The Syrian foreign minister headed a delegation of visits to several regional countries. The United States announced a temporary lifting of some sanctions previously imposed on Syria.
- ▶ Ahmed al-Sharaa met for the first time with a delegation from the Kurdish militia of the Syrian Democratic Forces. According to reports, the parties were divided over the integration of the militia into the new security forces and the autonomous status of the Kurds. The Turkish foreign minister threatened military action if the new regime in Syria did not act against the Kurdish "militants."
- ▶ The new regime's security forces began arresting members of the Assad regime, including senior figures in the Syrian army and pro-Iranian militias.
- ▶ IDF forces completed searches and the destruction of weapons on the summit of Syrian Mount Hermon. Israeli airstrikes on security facilities in Syria continued, and ground forces advanced in the Golan Heights buffer zone and beyond.

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

► A first conversation took place between Ahmed al-Sharaa and Lebanon's interim prime minister. The Lebanese army exchanged fire on the Syrian border with smugglers trying to bring weapons into Lebanon.

► A senior Hamas figure expressed hope that Syria would remain part of the "resistance axis."²

Activities of the New Revolutionary Regime

National Committee meeting postponed

► "Five sources," including three from the new Syrian regime and two diplomats, stated it was still unknown when the national conference of the sects, religions and various political groups in Syria would convene to shape a new era in the country. According to reports, the conference was supposed to begin on January 4–5, 2025, but invitations have not yet been sent and in all probability meeting will not begin before January 20, 2025, the date of the Trump's inauguration. The national conference is expected to discuss the establishment of a committee to frame a new constitution and the disbandment of Ahmed al-Sharaa's Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham; al-Sharaa led the uprising which toppled the Assad regime (al-Jazeera, January 3, 2025; al-Nahar, January 5, 2025).

Security system reorganized

► Senior officials of the new regime continued discussions on integrating militias into the Ministry of Defense and the reorganizing Syrian army. Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria's de facto leader, met with representatives of the Liberation and Construction Movement, the First Corps of the pro-Turkish Syrian National Army, which includes several militias such as the Northern Brigade, the Free Eastern Factions, the Army of the East, and the Falcons of al-Sham (Telegram channel of the General Command-Syria, January 4, 2025); Murhaf Abu Qasra, Syrian defense minister, held met with commanders of the armed factions before their integration into the Ministry of Defense (Telegram channel of the Syrian Ministry of Defense, January 3–4, 2025; Syria TV, January 4, 2025).

² Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, the Palestinian organizations, the Shi'ite Houthis in Yemen and the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq.



Right: Al-Sharaa (fourth from the right, suit and tie) with representatives of the Movement for Liberation and Construction (General Command-Syria Telegram channel, January 4, 2025). Left: Defense Minister Abu Qasra (center, dress uniform and tie) with militia commanders (Syrian Ministry of Defense Telegram channel, January 4, 2025)

International activity

► On January 3, 2025, Ahmed al-Sharaa met in Damascus with German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot, the highest-ranking Western diplomats to visit Syria since the fall of the Assad regime. During the reception, al-Sharaa did not shake Baerbock's hand as she was wearing a white pants suit and had no head covering (General Command-Syria Telegram channel, January 3, 2025). Following the meeting, Baerbock stated that al-Sharaa understood that all ethnic groups, including women, had to be included in Syria's transformation and called for credible security guarantees for the Kurds. She noted that lifting European sanctions on Syria depended on Syrian political developments (Reuters and Annalena Baerbock's X account, January 3, 2025). French Foreign Minister Barrot also called for a political process which would allow all Syrian communities to be represented. He added that France and the European Union were providing assistance in framing a new constitution (CNN, January 3, 2025).



Al-Sharaa with the German and French foreign ministers (General Command-Syria Telegram channel, January 3, 2025)

► This past week, Assad Hassan al-Shibani, the new Syrian foreign minister, embarked on a diplomatic tour of several regional countries, marking the first such visit by the new regime since it took power in Damascus. The delegation included Defense Minister Abu Qasra and Intelligence Chief Anas Khatib. The Syrian officials met with their counterparts in the host countries and discussed bilateral relations, cooperation in various fields and efforts to lift international sanctions on Syria. Al-Shibani expressed hope that the visits would contribute to strengthening stability, security and economic prosperity, and lead to building "exceptional partnerships" (al-Watan, January 3, 2025):

◆ On January 1–2, 2025, the delegation visited Saudi Arabia, where they met with Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan, Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman, Chief of Staff Fayyad al-Ruwaili and Syria's ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Iman Sawsan, a veteran of Assad's Ba'ath Party (SANA agency, January 2–3, 2025). The foreign ministers met to discuss preserving Syria's national institutions and "restoring its status and position in the Arab world." The Saudi foreign minister said his country would support anything which brought Syria security and stability while maintaining its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity (Saudi foreign ministry X account, January 2, 2025).

◆ On January 5, 2025, the Syrian delegation visited Qatar and met with Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman and Defense Minister Khalid bin Mohammed al-Attiyah. Al-Shibani called for the removal of American sanctions on Syria and noted that the new Syria would maintain "very good relations with regional countries" (al-Jazeera, January 5, 2025).

◆ On January 6, 2025, the delegation arrived in the UAE and met with Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed. They discussed ways to strengthen bilateral relations and other matters of mutual interest (UAE News Agency, January 6, 2025).

◆ On January 7, 2025, the delegation visited Jordan and met with Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi. At a joint press conference, al-Shibani stated that the new Syria would be based on "the sovereignty of the people and sincere dialogue with neighboring countries." The Jordanian foreign minister emphasized his country's interest in building relations with Syria (al-Jazeera, January 7, 2025).



Right: Members of the Syrian delegation meet with the Saudi defense minister (Khalid bin Salman's X account, January 2, 2025). Left: The Syrian foreign minister meets with Qatar's prime minister (al-Jazeera, January 5, 2025)

► The American embassy in Syria reported that American officials had met in Damascus with Foreign Minister al-Shibani and discussed various issues, among them the importance of the representation and inclusion of all Syrians and the Syrian regime's cooperation with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (American embassy in Damascus X account, January 6, 2025). A few hours later the United States Treasury Department reported a six-month lifting of some of the sanctions imposed on Syria, during which permits would be granted for humanitarian aid to Syria along with easing restrictions on trade and financial transfers to private Syrian accounts. It was also noted that the United States would continue monitoring developments in Syria (United States Treasury Department website, January 6, 2025).

The Druze

► Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, leader of the Druze community in al-Suwayda, said the Druze were cooperating with the new leadership in Syria "with full confidence." However, he said he opposed handing over the weapons held by local militias until a constitution had been ratified and a government representing all sects and communities had been formed, along with the separation of powers. He said that until then, the Druze would maintain the degree of autonomy reserved for them in Jabal al-Arab. He issued his statement after local armed groups in al-Suwayda intercepted a military convoy from the Operations Directorate attempting to enter the city, apparently without coordination. Following the incident, the convoy returned to Damascus (Sharq News Agency, January 1, 2025; Syria TV, January 4, 2025).

► The two largest Druze armed militias in al-Suwayda, the Men of Dignity (Rijal al-Karama) and the Mountain Brigade (Liwa al-Jabal), presented their own roadmap for the next phase in Syria. Both militias said a new national army had to be established not based on sectarianism, as the sole armed national entity which they would join. They also stated their commitment to building a state based on justice and the rule of law, stressing that military factions had to pledge not to interfere in political or administrative matters, adding that that Damascus was Syria's eternal capital [possibly to emphasize their Syrian national identity] (Syria TV, January 7, 2025).



Senior Druze militia leaders present their "roadmap"
(al-Suwayda 24 X account, January 7, 2025)

The Kurds

► Ahmed al-Sharaa, de facto leader of Syria, met with a delegation of the Kurdish militia of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) for the first time since the fall of the Assad regime. Bassam Ishak, head of the Washington office of the Syrian Democratic Council, the militia's political wing, stated that the meeting had been positive and focused solely on military issues, coordination mechanisms and shared concerns. According to Ishak, since the fall of the previous regime on December 8, 2024, the leadership of the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Operations Room of Operation Deterrence of Aggression, led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, had been in direct contact, coordinating all military issues related to developments on the ground. He emphasized that all areas previously controlled by pro-Iranian militias west of the Euphrates River and captured by Kurdish forces had been handed over to the new regime (al-Sharq al-Awsat, January 1, 2025).

► "Sources close to the new regime" reported that al-Sharaa sought negotiations with the Syrian Democratic Forces to resolve issues concerning strategic areas in northeastern Syria, which are rich in grain and oil. According to the report, a meeting took place in late December 2024 to discuss terms for integrating the Syrian Democratic Forces into the new government.

However, the Kurds agreed to join the new Syrian security forces only as an independent unit, demanded the largest share of oil revenues and requested self-rule in Kurdish-majority areas as part of a Syrian federation. On the other hand, the new government agreed to some administrative decentralization, to allocate oil revenues proportionally to the geographical area controlled by the Kurds and to recognize Kurdish cultural rights, including the teaching of the Kurdish language in schools. However, government representatives insisted that military integration would occur individually under the Ministry of Defense. Reportedly, the talks concluded without an agreement (al-Jazeera, January 6, 2025).

► This past week, fighting continued between the Syrian Democratic Forces and pro-Turkish armed groups and Turkish military forces. There were reports of exchanges of fire near the Tishrin Dam in the eastern countryside of Aleppo and Turkish airstrikes on Kurdish positions in the Raqqa area. Kurdish forces also managed to intercept at least two Turkish drones (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 7, 2025).

► Hakan Fidan, the Turkish foreign minister, said Ankara expected the new Syrian government to address the issue of Kurdish militants in the northeastern region. He warned that if no action were taken by the new regime, Turkey would launch a military operation against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (Reuters, January 7, 2025).

► The United States Central Command (CENTCOM) reported that on January 2–3, 2025, its forces had assisted the Syrian Democratic Forces in operations against ISIS operatives in the Deir ez-Zor area in eastern Syria. According to reports, a leader of an ISIS cell had been captured (CENTCOM X account, January 6, 2025).

Internal Syrian Affairs

Members of the Assad regime arrested

► The Operations Directorate and the security forces of the new regime continued arresting former members of the Assad regime, including those who failed to regularize their status and those suspected of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The arrests took place in Homs, the Damascus countryside, Tartus and Latakia, mainly in neighborhoods with Shi'ite and Alawite populations. According to reports, on January 6, 2025, operations in Homs and its surroundings had concluded, resulting in the arrest of approximately 650 people affiliated with the previous regime (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 5–6, 2025). Among those arrested were:

◆ Awas Salloum, aka Azrael Sednaya, one of the most notorious guards at Sednaya Prison, was arrested in Homs. He was accused of responsibility for the torturing of approximately 500 prisoners and the execution of many others (BBC Arabic, January 4, 2025; al-Jazeera, January 5, 2025). Subsequently, Salloum's execution by hanging was documented, with crowds beating his body (al-Ahdath al-Shamiya X account, January 5, 2025).

◆ Ali Aziz Saleh, a colonel in the Republican Guard, formerly led the unit in Quneitra and held senior positions in intelligence in southern Syria. He was one of the leaders of the Assad forces' assault on the city of Baniyas and its surroundings at the beginning of the uprising against the regime in April 2011 and was considered responsible for the deaths of many civilians (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 6, 2025).

◆ Hassan al-Ghazban, who headed a local militia in the Deir ez-Zor area in eastern Syria and was close to the Fourth Division of the Syrian army and pro-Iranian militias. He was accused of drug trafficking and the murder of opponents of the Iranian presence (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 3, 2025).



Right: Awas Salloum (al-Jazeera, January 5, 2025). Center: Salloum's hanging (al-Ahdath al-Shamiya X account, January 5, 2025). Left: Ali Aziz Saleh (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 6, 2025)

Sectarian violence

► According to reports, during the month since the fall of the Assad regime on December 8, 2024, at least 124 people were killed in a series of violent incidents, including score-settling, vandalism, murders and executions in the provinces of Homs and Hama, and in the Syrian coastal cities. The areas were considered strongholds of the former regime and focal points of friction between Sunnis and the Alawite minority. "Sources" attributed the violence to chaos and sectarian clashes following the regime's fall and the takeover by the Operations Directorate led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 7,

2025). Reportedly, a significant portion of the violence was triggered by the spread of videos containing fake news on social media, whose objective to escalate sectarian tensions.

IDF Activities in Syria

► According to reports, on January 5, 2025, IDF forces completed a series of raids on the summit of the Syrian Mount Hermon, during which they searched military structures and key positions. The forces located, confiscated and destroyed weapons, including mines, anti-tank missiles, rockets, launchers and explosive devices (IDF spokesperson, January 5, 2025).



Short-range 107mm artillery shells, probably Iranian, found at a post on the Syrian Mount Hermon (IDF spokesperson, January 5, 2025)

► On the night of January 2, 2025, explosions were reported near the town of al-Safira, south of Aleppo. "Local sources" claimed they were Israeli strikes and that penetrating bombs had been used to attack buildings and underground facilities of the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center (CERS), which had been used by the former Syrian regime for developing chemical weapons and missiles (al-Jazeera and Rona News, January 3, 2025).

► According to reports, IDF forces continued operating in the demilitarized zone along the Israel-Syria border in the Golan Heights and beyond the buffer zone. The forces reportedly took control of the al-Mantara Dam in the Quneitra Governorate, and a convoy of tanks and engineering vehicles entered the villages of al-Asha, Abu Ghara, and Mazra'at al-Hayran south of Quneitra. The forces conducted searches and leveled agricultural lands (Syria TV, January 8, 2025). Reports also indicated that forces destroyed an abandoned military site in the village of al-Rafid south of Quneitra (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 8, 2025). According to a different report, IDF forces restricted the movement of local farmers and shepherds, who were not allowed to reach the northern and western outskirts of the village of Jabhat al-Hasheb. In Tel al-Ahmar al-Gharbi, near Tel Kwadna, digging activities by IDF forces were documented, apparently for the construction of fortifications (Free Horan Facebook page, January 4, 2025).



Israeli earthworks at Tel al-Ahmar al-Gharbi (Free Golan Facebook page, January 4, 2025)

Relations with Hezbollah and Lebanon

- ▶ Najib Mikati, prime minister of the Lebanese interim government, spoke for the first time with Ahmed al-Sharaa, de facto leader of Syria, to discuss bilateral relations. According to reports, they addressed the challenges faced by the Lebanese army along the border with Syria in the Beqa'a Valley, with al-Sharaa stating that Syrian forces were taking all necessary steps to restore calm to the border and prevent a repeat of past incidents. Al-Sharaa invited Mikati to visit Syria to discuss mutual issues and strengthen bilateral relations (Lebanese Prime Minister's X account, January 3, 2025).
- ▶ The Lebanese army reported that while one of its units was working to close an illegal crossing on the border with Syria in the Western Ba'albek area of the Beqa'a Valley, Syrians attempted to reopen the crossing with a bulldozer. In response, the soldiers fired warning shots into the air. According to the report, the Syrians opened fire on the Lebanese soldiers, wounding one, and an exchange of fire ensued. A few hours later, it was reported that the clashes had resumed and armed men on the Syrian side had shot at Lebanese forces, wounding four soldiers (Lebanese Army X account, January 3, 2025). Reports indicated that the clashes occurred between Lebanese army forces and smugglers near the town of Sarghaya in the Damascus countryside, close to the Lebanon-Syria border. According to the report, the smugglers attempted to bring vehicles loaded with anti-tank weapons and other arms into Lebanon (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 3, 2025).
- ▶ "Sources" reported that the Joint Operations Room, the umbrella organization of the revolutionary forces led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, transferred vessels, including combat boats equipped with machine guns, to the Tartus port as part of efforts to monitor the coast and prevent drug smuggling and the infiltration of Hezbollah-affiliated elements into Syrian territory (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 7, 2025).



Transfer of boats to Tartus port (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 7, 2025)

Relations with Hamas

- ▶ Senior Hamas figure Osama Hamdan said the movement was closely following developments in Syria and "wished the country well." He said he hoped Syria would remain part of the "resistance" and be steadfast against the "Israeli occupation" (al-Jazeera, January 7, 2025).
- ▶ According to claims, 94 Hamas operatives were executed in Syrian prisons without trial during the reign of former President Bashar al-Assad. According to documents allegedly uncovered at the headquarters of Syrian security forces after the regime fell, the directive to arrest anyone connected to Hamas continued even after the public reconciliation between the Assad regime and Hamas in 2022 (al-Quds al-Arabi, January 5, 2025).