



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

January 15 – 22, 2025

Overview¹

- ▶ According to Murhaf Abu Qasra, the Syrian defense minister, the armed factions were willing to join the new military structure. He said the Kurdish militia of the Syrian Democratic Forces would not be able to maintain an independent identity in the new army, while the militia commander said they had not yet decided if they were going to hand over their weapons.
- ▶ Ahmed al-Sharaa (Abu Muhammad al-Julani), de facto leader of Syria, and Asaad al-Shibani, Syrian foreign minister, met in Damascus with diplomats. Al-Sharaa also congratulated President Trump and expressed confidence he would help bring peace to the Middle East.
- ▶ The new regime's security forces continued operations to locate senior figures from the Assad regime still inside Syria, focusing on the Daraa province in the south. The forces thwarted an attempt to smuggle weapons into Lebanon, including Iranian UAVs.
- ▶ According to reports, three people were killed in an Israeli airstrike on a convoy of the Syrian military operations directorate in the al-Quneitra area. Syrian officials called for the withdrawal of IDF forces and claimed Syria was no longer a threat to Israel.

Activities of the New Regime

Reorganization of the security system

- ▶ The Syrian defense ministry reported that the new Syrian administration had met with representatives from more than 60 armed factions, who had agreed to integrate into the new defense ministry. A committee was established to create a unified database of the armed forces which would include information regarding human resources (officers, noncommissioned officers, soldiers and academic staff) and regarding military assets (headquarters, technology and weapons). The information would be submitted to the defense ministry leadership, followed by meetings with the armed organizations to determine the structure of the security forces and to appoint commanders (Syrian defense ministry Telegram channel, January 19, 2025).

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

► According to the defense ministry, since assuming office, Murhaf Abu Qasra, Syrian defense minister, held 47 meetings with leaders and officers from rebel organizations and armed factions across the country. He said he had presented the defense ministry's vision to the leaders and had addressed all their questions. He claimed the responses of the factions had been "wonderful," and all were prepared to join the new military structure (Syria TV, January 22, 2025).

► Abu Qasra also met with a group of eight officers who defected from the Syrian army, led by Riad al-Asaad, who defected at the start of the Syrian civil war and established the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which became a central military force opposing the Assad regime in the early years of the war (al-Wahda, January 17, 2025). Al-Asaad said the officers would be integrated into the Syrian army in stages, initially incorporating officers currently leading military factions. He added that efforts were being made to establish a professional army based on modern technology with cooperation from all countries, including Russia, and that in the future the army might rely on Western weapons (al-Araby al-Jadeed, January 20, 2025).



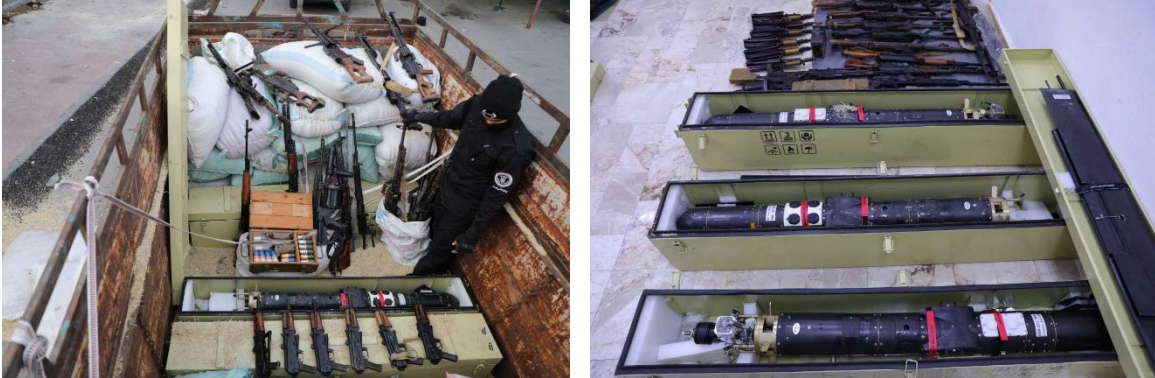
Abu Qasra (right) and al-Asaad (al-Wahda, January 17, 2025)

Security activity

► This past week, operatives of the directorate of military operations and the general security apparatus continued efforts to eliminate senior officials and former security personnel who had served under the Assad regime and to locate weapons. The forces launched operations in the rural areas of Daraa Province in the south of the country, in coordination with the southern operations room, during which suspects involved in sabotage were arrested and large quantities of weapons were confiscated. Reportedly, two operatives of the directorate of military operations had been killed when Assad regime supporters attacked a checkpoint in the city of Jableh in the Latakia province (Syria TV, January 15-22, 2025).

► The Syrian ministry of the interior announced that the public security directorate in Tartus, in coordination with the intelligence service in the province, had successfully thwarted an

attempt to smuggle weapons destined for Lebanon through illegal border crossings. According to the statement, **the confiscated shipment included weapons and missiles, but published documentation also showed parts of Shahed 101 UAVs, which are manufactured in Iran** (Telegram channel of the Syrian ministry of interior, January 17, 2025).



Right: Iranian UAVs in the shipment. Left: Other confiscated weapons (Syrian ministry of the interior Telegram channel, January 17, 2025)

Diplomatic activities

► Ahmed al-Sharaa, de facto leader of Syria, and Assad al-Shibani, the Syrian foreign minister, met in Damascus with foreign delegations. They discussed recent developments in Syria, cooperation and efforts to lift sanctions imposed on the country during the Assad regime. Al-Sharaa and al-Shibani met with Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani, Qatar's prime minister and foreign minister; José Manuel Albares, Spanish foreign minister; Hadja Lahbib, EU commissioner for equality, preparedness and crisis management, Karim Khan, chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court; an Arab League delegation led by Hussam Zaki, deputy secretary general; Espen Barth Eide, Norwegian foreign minister; and Geir Pedersen, UN special envoy for Syria. Al-Sharaa also spoke with Mohammed bin Zayed, UAE president, and discussed ways to strengthen bilateral relations (Syrian General Command Telegram channel, January 15-22, 2025).



Right: Al-Sharaa and the Spanish foreign minister (Telegram channel of the Syrian General Command, January 16, 2025). Left: Al-Sharaa meets with Chief Prosecutor Khan (Syrian General Command Telegram channel, January 17, 2025)

► Syrian Foreign Minister al-Shibani headed a Syrian delegation to Ankara, the first visit since the fall of the Assad regime. He met with President Erdogan and Hakan Fidan, the foreign minister. According to reports, they discussed recent developments in Syria and measures for preserving the country's territorial integrity. Erdogan said Turkey would support the needs of their Syrian "brothers" and the country's reconstruction (Anadolu Agency, January 15, 2025).



Al-Shibani and Erdogan in Ankara (Syrian Television, January 15, 2025)

► Al-Sharaa sent Trump congratulations on his inauguration. He noted that after a decade of immense suffering in Syria, the Syrian people were confident that Trump was the leader who would bring peace to the Middle East and restore regional stability. He added that he hoped for improved bilateral relations based on dialogue and mutual understanding, and that the two new administrations would seize the opportunity to create a partnership reflecting the aspirations of both nations (Syrian General Command Telegram channel, January 20, 2025).

The Kurds

► Murhaf Abu Qasra, Syrian defense minister, said the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) would not be able to maintain the status of an "independent military bloc" within the Syrian army. He criticized the SDF leadership, accusing them of being slow to address integrating into the army,

which he said was important for the country. He also said the Kurdish forces could join the defense ministry according to its hierarchy and would be divided among army units (Reuters, January 19, 2025).

► Mazloum Abdi, SDF commander, reported on his meeting with Ahmed al-Sharaa, it had been proposed to establish a joint military committee to examine the integration of army forces and connecting them to the defense ministry. He said he opposed the existence of two separate armies in Syria, adding that his forces had not yet decided whether to hand over their weapons or disband, but had expressed interest in joining the future army. Abdi also reported the SDF had not been invited to the meeting for integrating military factions into the defense ministry, noting they would judge al-Sharaa by what he did, not what he said (al-Arabiya, January 20, 2025).

► On another occasion, Abdi said they were prepared to integrate their forces and institutions into those of the state, based on partnership, not quotas. He rejected accusations that the Kurds wanted to divide Syria and noted Kurdish support for granting rights and roles to all Syrians, based on equality and without discrimination. He noted the need for a roadmap to reach agreements with the government in Damascus (ANHA Agency, January 20, 2025).

► "Twelve sources" reported that diplomatic and military negotiation teams from the United States, Turkey, Syria and the SDF were making progress toward an agreement for dismantling the Kurdish militia. According to the "sources," under the future agreement, some Kurdish fighters would leave northeastern Syria while others would integrate into the Syrian defense ministry. However, the "sources" said complex issues remained, including how trained fighters would be incorporated into the Syrian security apparatus and the question of control over northeastern Syria, a region rich in wheat and oil (Reuters, January 19, 2025).

► Foreign Minister al-Shibani tweeted in Arabic and Kurdish that the Kurds in Syria added "beauty and wisdom" to the diversity of the Syrian people. He said the Kurdish community in Syria had been treated unfairly under the Assad regime but together it would be possible to build a country where everyone felt equal and received justice (Asaad al-Shibani's X account, January 21, 2025). In response, Ilham Ahmed, head of foreign relations in the autonomous administration of north and east Syria, welcomed the statement but said it was important that the new Syrian constitution ensured the rights of the Kurds (Syria TV, January 22, 2025).

IDF Activities in Syria

- ▶ An Israeli UAV reportedly attacked a military convoy of the Syrian directorate of military operations in the town of Ghadir al-Bustan to the south of Quneitra, killing three people, two of them military directorate operatives. According to the report, the Syrian force was participating in an operation to locate weapons in residents' homes (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 15, 2025). Reportedly, the third casualty was Abdo al-Quma, the village mukhtar, (Syria TV, January 15, 2025).
- ▶ According to reports, IDF forces established seven new military checkpoints in Quneitra Province, some of them outside the buffer zone in the Golan Heights. One checkpoint was reportedly set up southwest of the town of Hadar, while another was established inside a residential building located southwest of the al-Mantra Dam (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 21, 2025).
- ▶ Syrian officials called on Israel to withdraw its forces from Syrian territory, claiming that after the Assad regime had been toppled and its allies, primarily Iran and Hezbollah, had been removed, Syria would no longer pose a threat to Israel:
 - ◆ Asaad al-Shibani, Syrian foreign minister, said Syria would not pose a threat to any country, including Israel. He claimed that under Assad, Israel had exploited Hezbollah's presence to attack Syria, but now Israel had to respect Syrian sovereignty and not invade it. He added that just as Israelis wanted to maintain their security, they had to respect the borders and security of others. He added that the new administration was committed to the disengagement agreement along the shared border with Israel in the Golan Heights. He called on the UN, the international community and friendly countries to pressure Israel to withdraw its forces from the territories it had entered in recent weeks, claiming Syria was prepared to prevent any possible threats (Aram News, January 16, 2025).
 - ◆ Qusai al-Dahhak, Syrian ambassador to the UN, said his country demanded the UN Security Council compel Israel to withdraw from the Syrian territories it recently entered. He added that Syria rejected Israel's "excuses" and called on the Security Council to order Israel to cease its "aggressive" actions against the residents of the "occupied" Syrian Golan (Syrian delegation to the UN YouTube channel, January 20, 2025).
- ▶ A "source at Damascus airport" reported that the "authorities" had instructed airlines operating in Syria not to permit Israeli or Iranian citizens to board flights to the country (Agence

France-Presse, January 17, 2025). Turkish Airlines, which announced the resumption of flights to Damascus airport after a hiatus of more than a decade, also stated that due to Syrian government directives, Israeli and Iranian citizens would not be allowed to fly to Syria (Daily Sabah, January 16, 2025).²

² Under Israeli law, Israelis are prohibited from traveling to Syria and therefore were also unable to travel to Syria during the Assad regime, unlike Iranians, who visited Syria without restrictions.