



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

January 22 – 29 , 2025

Overview¹

- ▶The new Syrian security forces continued searching the country for senior officials of the Assad regime and weapon stockpiles. The forces intercepted a truck carrying weapons en route to Hezbollah in Lebanon.
- ▶Ahmed al-Sharaa (Abu Mohammed al-Julani), de facto Syrian leader, held meetings in Damascus with visiting leaders and diplomats, including the Palestinian Authority prime minister and the Russian president's special envoy to the Middle East. The Syrian foreign minister welcomed the EU decision to gradually lift sanctions.
- ▶Disagreements continue between Damascus and the leadership of Kurdish organizations regarding the integration of the Syrian Democratic Forces into the new Syrian army. The Syrian defense minister warned that the army would be prepared to use force if the issue were not resolved peacefully.
- ▶IDF preparations for a prolonged presence on the Syrian Hermon and the buffer zone led Ahmed al-Sharaa to warn Israel that if it did not withdraw its forces, Syria would "apply pressure." Residents in the Quneitra area held demonstrations to protest the presence of Israeli forces and called for UN intervention.

Activities of the New Regime

Security operations

- ▶This past week, operatives from the Operations Directorate and the General Security Apparatus continued searching Syria for weapons and for senior officials and former security personnel who had served in the Assad regime. In the town of Beit Jinn, about 10 kilometers from the Israeli border, they located weapons in an underground storage facility which had belonged to the Fourth Division of Assad's army (Syria TV and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 22–29, 2025).

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►Operatives from Syria's General Directorate for Border Security intercepted a truck carrying a shipment of weapons for Hezbollah in Lebanon. According to reports the weapons were to pass through smuggling routes along the Syria-Lebanon border near the town of Serghaya (Syrian News Agency, January 26, 2025). Reports indicated that operatives from the Operations Directorate and local residents joined forces to construct embankments to block a side road which had been used for smuggling to Hezbollah under the previous regime (Gregory Waters' X account, January 24, 2025).



The weapons seized in Serghaya (Syrian News Agency, January 26, 2025)

►Syrian Army Chief of Staff General Ali al-Naasan met with Brigadier General Michel Boutros, head of the Cooperation and Coordination Unit in the Lebanese army. They discussed ways to monitor activities along the Syria-Lebanon border by means of a control mechanism. It was the first meeting of its kind between military officials from Syria and Lebanon since the fall of the Assad regime (Syrian News Agency, January 23, 2025). Smuggling and chaos in the border region have worsened following the fall of the Assad regime, with security and economic instability leading to hundreds of Syrians crossing the border into Lebanon daily through areas near Homs (al-Modon January 23, 2025).



Ali al-Naasan (left) and Michel Boutros (Syrian News Agency, January 23, 2025)

►According to reports, the Biden administration shared classified intelligence with the new Syrian government in response to threats from ISIS and for the first time, direct meetings were held between American and Syrian intelligence officials amid concerns over the resurgence of

ISIS. Reportedly, American intelligence helped Syrian security forces prevent an ISIS attack on the al-Sayyidah Zaynab shrine, sacred to Shi'ites, in the Damascus area (The Washington Post, January 24, 2025).

Diplomacy

►Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria's de facto leader, and Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shibani continued meeting with delegations visiting Damascus to discuss developments in Syria, promote cooperation and invest efforts to lift the sanctions imposed on the country during the Assad regime. They met with Belarusian Foreign Minister Maksim Ryzhenkov, Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi and Turkish intelligence chief İbrahim Kalın.

►Al-Sharaa met with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, the Russian president's special envoy to the Middle East. It was the first visit of a senior Russian official to Damascus since the fall of the Assad regime. According to reports they discussed respect for Syrian sovereignty and territorial integrity, and establishing a mechanism to ensure justice for victims of the Assad regime during the civil war. The Syrian leadership noted that the renewal of bilateral relations had to deal with past mistakes, respect the will of the Syrian people and serve their interests. According to reports, the meeting focused on Russia's role in rebuilding trust with the Syrian people through tangible steps, such as compensation and reconstruction (Syrian News Agency, January 29, 2025). Al-Sharaa reportedly requested that Russia extradite Bashar Assad and his senior aides who had sought asylum in Russian territory (Reuters, January 29, 2025).

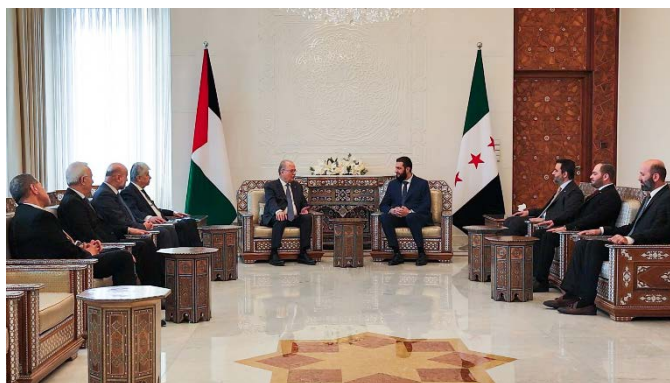


Al-Sharaa (right) and Bogdanov (Syrian News Agency, January 29, 2025)

►Russia is reportedly finding it difficult to negotiate with the new Syrian government and to maintain its two key military bases in Syria, the Khmeimim Air Base and the Tartus Naval Base, which has led to operational difficulties (Bloomberg, January 28, 2025). Bogdanov stated they would continue consultations regarding the future of Russian military bases in Syria and so far

there had been no change in their status. He added that Moscow believed solutions acceptable to Syria could be found regarding the management of Tartus (Sputnik News Agency, January 28, 2025).

►Al-Sharaa also met with Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Muhammad Mustafa. Mustafa reportedly noted "Palestine's" support for Syria and the unity of its territories. He said the visit reflected "Palestine's" support and its goal to strengthen bilateral cooperation and political and economic coordination for progress and prosperity. Mustafa added that the stability and prosperity of Arab states reinforced efforts to confront challenges and advance the national goal of ending the Israeli "occupation" of Palestinian and Arab lands (Wafa, January 28, 2025).



Al-Sharaa (right) and Mustafa (Wafa, January 28, 2025)

►Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shibani participated in the World Economic Forum in Davos, the first time a Syrian representative had attended the meeting. In a public conversation with former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, al-Shibani emphasized the new government's commitment to rebuilding Syria through the governance of all communities in the country, monetary reforms and fostering international partnerships to drive economic growth and stability. He also called on the international community to lift sanctions on Syria and pledged to change the image of the Assad regime's era, which portrayed Syria as a source of Captagon and refugees. He also reiterated that Syria would not pose a threat to any country and would be a "nation of peace" (Syria TV, January 22, 2025).



Al-Shibani and Tony Blair at the Davos Economic Forum (Ahram Online, January 22, 2025)

►During a meeting of EU foreign ministers, a roadmap was approved for lifting sanctions imposed on Syrian energy, transportation and banking. EU Foreign Minister Kaja Kallas stated that the lifting of sanctions would be gradual and reviewed after one year. She pledged to reverse the decision if "wrong steps" were taken in Syria (Kaja Kallas's X account, January 27, 2025). Syrian Foreign Minister al-Shibani welcomed the decision and expressed hope that it would have a positive impact on all aspects of life for the Syrian people (Asaad al-Shibani's X account, January 27, 2025).

Relations with the Kurds

►Despite efforts to bridge gaps between the leadership of Kurdish organizations and the new Syrian leadership, significant differences remain between the two sides. The primary issue is the integration of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into the Syrian army and the degree of autonomy they would retain. Syria's de facto leader Ahmed al-Sharaa stated that the government was open to discussions with the Syrian Democratic Forces but the state had the right to use all means necessary to restore its territorial integrity. He added that the government would not allow the possession of weapons outside state authority or any division of Syria (Turkish A Haber, January 23, 2025). Syrian Defense Minister Murhaf Abu Qasra also expressed hope that the issue would be resolved peacefully but emphasized that if necessary, the Syrian army would use force (Agence France-Presse, January 23, 2025).

►Mazloum Abdi, commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces, said negotiations with the new government were ongoing. He said he had met with Ahmed al-Sharaa and they had found common ground for the future of the SDF and their place in the future Syrian army, the unity of Syrian territory, opposition to internal divisions and the need for dialogue and a political resolution. According to Abdi, the SDF should be part of the new Syrian army, but it remained unclear how they would be integrated, and disagreements persist over the timeline for forming the army (ANHA, January 28, 2025).

IDF Activities in Syria

►The IDF established temporary facilities for its forces stationed on the Syrian Hermon, including residential buildings, kitchens and medical facilities. Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said IDF forces would remain in the area indefinitely to prevent hostile forces from establishing a foothold and would maintain ties with the Druze population in Syria (Israeli media, January 28, 2025).

►New satellite images showed IDF construction activities within the buffer zone along the Israel-Syria border in the Golan Heights. Pictures from January 21, 2025 revealed new structures more than 600 meters inside the buffer zone, as well as a newly built one-kilometer access road connecting to an older road leading into Israeli territory. Drone pictures showed trucks and other engineering equipment at the construction site. Under the 1974 disengagement agreement between Israel and Syria, the IDF is prohibited from crossing the Alpha Line, the western edge of the buffer zone, but the pictures showed that the work was being done beyond the line. The IDF spokesperson stated that forces were operating within the buffer zone and at strategic points to protect the residents of northern Israel (BBC, January 23, 2025).

►Over the past week, senior Syrian officials continued to demand Israel withdraw its forces from Syrian territory, claiming that they were not seeking a military confrontation:

◆Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria's de facto leader, warned that if Israel continued its current activities, Syria would "apply pressure," although he did not specify what pressure (Turkish A Haber, January 23, 2025).

◆Syrian Defense Minister Murhaf Abu Qasra said Israel had to stop its "violations" in Syria, adding that efforts were being made to address the issue. He added that Syria was tired of wars and wanted to focus on building its army and government institutions (al-Majallah, January 22, 2025). On another occasion, Abu Qasra said that mediating countries were working to pressure the "Israeli occupation" to withdraw from the area it had entered (Agence France-Presse, January 23, 2025).

◆Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shibani and Defense Minister Abu Qasra met with a UN delegation led by Under Secretary General for Peace Operations Jean-Pierre Lacroix, along with Patrick Gauchat, acting commander of the UN peacekeeping force in the buffer zone (UNDOF). The Syrian ministers said Syria was willing to cooperate with the UN and to man its positions along the border as stipulated by the 1974 disengagement agreement, provided that Israeli forces withdrew immediately. The UN officials reaffirmed their full commitment to resolving the issue and restoring stability to the border region (Syrian News Agency, January 29, 2025).



Syrian ministers meet UN representatives (Syrian News Agency, January 29, 2025)

► During a visit by a UN delegation, Syrian residents in the city of al-Baath in Quneitra Province held a demonstration to protest the incursion of Israeli forces. The protesters, standing only 300 meters from IDF forces, held signs reading "We condemn the Israeli incursion into our lands" and called for the deployment of UN peacekeeping forces. No clashes were reported (Enab Baladi and Syria TV , January 27, 2025).



Protest demonstration in al-Baath (Enab Baladi, January 27, 2025)