



## Spotlight on Syria (After the Fall of the Assad Regime) February 19 – 26, 2025

### Overview<sup>1</sup>

- ▶ Prime Minister Netanyahu's remarks that Israel would act to demilitarize southern Syria and protect the Druze community sparked anger in Syria. Demonstrations were held in southern Syria as well as in Damascus and other sites across the country. Syrian President al-Sharaa (Abu Muhammad al-Julani) told Druze officials that there was no justification for Israel's escalated rhetoric and his country was not interested in war. Two people were killed in Israeli airstrikes in southern Syria.
- ▶ Druze officers and soldiers announced they were joining the al-Suwayda military council, which was established after the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. The major Druze factions distanced themselves from the council and warned of "complications."
- ▶ The National Dialogue Conference for the establishment of a temporary constitution and the creation of a foundation for the new regime convened in Damascus and called for the preservation of the country's unity and sovereignty. President al-Sharaa vowed to forcefully confront anyone who threatened the country's security.
- ▶ Syrian security forces prevented weapons from being smuggled from Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

### Reactions to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's Statements

- ▶ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared IDF forces would remain at the summit of Mount Hermon and in the buffer zone on the Golan Heights "for an indefinite period" to thwart any threat to Israeli territory. He also demanded the complete demilitarization of the Quneitra, Daraa and al-Suwayda provinces in southern Syria and warned that Israel would not allow forces of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham [the jihadist rebel organization led by Syria's de facto president, Ahmad al-Sharaa, which was dismantled at the end of January 2025] or the New Syrian Army to enter the area south of Damascus. He also said Israel would not tolerate any

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

threat to the Druze community in southern Syria (Prime Minister's Office website, February 23, 2025). Netanyahu's statements sparked angry reactions in Syria:

◆ Immediately after the conditions presented by Netanyahu were reported, calls were issued for protest demonstrations in the three southern Syrian provinces. On February 24-25, 2025, demonstrations were held in several localities in southern Syria, including al-Suwayda, al-Rafid and Khan Arnabeh in the Quneitra Province, and the town of Tehsil in Daraa, as well as in other areas, including Aleppo, Tartus and Latakia. The demonstrators waved Syrian flags and chanted slogans such as "We will not sell our homeland's land for gold" and "Netanyahu, dream on, there's no tax on dreams, Syria is free" (Syria TV and the Telegram channel of the daily al-Watan, February 25, 2025).



**Protest demonstrations (SANA news agency Telegram channel, February 25, 2025)**

◆ Following Netanyahu's remarks, Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa met with representatives of the Druze community (Syrian Presidency Telegram channel, February 24, 2025). A "Syrian source present at the meeting" reported that al-Sharaa said Syria did not seek war with anyone and was only interested in building a state and providing services to its citizens. He added that there was no justification for the escalation in Israeli rhetoric, as the threat that Israel once faced from Syria, posed by Hezbollah, Iran and the Assad regime, no longer existed and the new regime was working to confiscate weapons intended for Hezbollah (Kan 11, February 26, 2025).



**Al-Sharaa meets with the Druze delegation**  
(Syrian Presidency Telegram channel, February 24, 2025)

◆ Speaking at the National Dialogue Conference, al-Sharaa said Syria was indivisible, a complete entity composed of all its parts with no allegiance to any particular sect. Regarding Netanyahu's promise to protect the Druze in Syria, al-Sharaa said statements meant to divide Syria's various sects made by people representing themselves as protectors and saviors were "empty statements which will not deceive the Syrian public" (SANA news agency, February 25, 2025).

◆ The National Dialogue Conference summary statement included a condemnation of the Israeli incursion into Syrian territory, claiming it was a "blatant violation" of Syrian sovereignty, and a call for an immediate and unconditional withdrawal. Netanyahu's "provocative" statements were rejected and the international community and regional organizations were called on to pressure Israel to stop its "aggression and violations" (Syria TV, February 25, 2025).

## IDF Activity

► On the night of February 25, 2025, the IDF attacked military targets in southern Syria, including command centers and weapons storage sites which threatened the State of Israel (IDF spokesperson, February 25, 2025). Defense Minister Katz said the attacks were part of demilitarizing southern Syria (Israeli media, February 25, 2025). Israel attacked sites in Tel al-Mana in southwest Damascus, the al-Kiswah area and Tel al-Hara northwest of the town of al-Harah in the rural Daraa region, including the headquarters of the First Division and the 112<sup>th</sup> Brigade in Daraa. At least two people were killed. Simultaneously, there were reports that Israeli ground forces were advancing toward the town of Ain al-Bayda in northern Quneitra Province and the village of al-Bakar in western Daraa Province, outside the buffer zone. An IDF armored unit detonated buildings and weapons caches left behind by the Syrian army within

company-level compounds before withdrawing in the morning hours (Syria TV, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, and al-Sham Agency, February 25-26, 2025).

► Following the nighttime strikes, demonstrations took place in various parts of Syria, including in Umayyad Square in Damascus, in Homs, Salumiyyah and Masyaf. Protesters carried banners with slogans reading "From Hauran to Masyaf... we are not afraid of the Israelis" and "We ask the UN to compel the Zionist entity to implement the 1974 disengagement agreement" (Syria TV, February 26, 2025).

► This past week, IDF forces continued operations in the buffer zone on the Golan Heights, conducting raids to locate weapons left behind by the Assad regime which could threaten Israel's security (IDF spokesperson, February 24, 2025). IDF forces, accompanied by tanks and armored vehicles, carried out raids in the towns of al-Sa'asa' and Ufanya in Quneitra Province. Reportedly, the forces conducted censuses in towns in Quneitra Province near the border on the Golan Heights and offered local residents the option to enter Israel to work for "excellent wages compared to local opportunities," as well as access to medical assistance and food supplies. The offers were reportedly rejected (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, February 19-26, 2025).



**Weapons discovered in an IDF raid in the buffer zone (IDF spokesperson, February 24, 2025)**

► This past week, the IDF attacked smuggling routes on the Lebanon-Syria border used by Hezbollah in attempts to smuggle weapons into Lebanon (IDF spokesperson, February 21-22, 2025). One of the strikes targeted the al-Wawiyat Bridge, which connects Lebanon to Syria in the Wadi Khaled area, after an arms smuggling convoy was detected moving toward Lebanon; several people were injured in the strike (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, February 21, 2025).

## The Druze

► Before Netanyahu made his statement regarding the Druze, a large group of Druze officers and soldiers from the town of al-Gharyyah in the rural area of al-Suwayda announced they would join the military council of al-Suwayda, which was established just days after the overthrow of the Assad regime by a group of defectors led by Tareq al-Shoufi. The council declared its readiness to protect "our land and our honor from any danger." Al-Shoufi called on military forces to join the council and said they aspired to a decentralized, secular, democratic Syrian state. He also said they had the support of the spiritual leader of the Druze community in Syria, Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri (Syria TV, February 2025; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, February 23 and 26, 2025).



**Members of the military council of al-Suwayda (Syria TV, February 23, 2025)**

► The Southern Operations Room, which includes the major Druze military factions in al-Suwayda, stated that the council was not legitimate and they held its members "fully responsible for any complication that may arise." It was further stated that "the military council" was active only in certain areas of the southern rural region of al-Suwayda and had no broader presence in the southern region (Long War Journal, February 24, 2025). Representatives of the factions in al-Suwayda met with Defense Minister Murhaf Abu Qasra. The meeting was one of a series of discussions aimed at incorporating the armed factions in al-Suwayda into the new Syrian army and efforts are underway to establish a military division in al-Suwayda province composed of local soldiers (al-Suwayda24, February 23, 2025).

► "Sources close to the religious leadership in al-Suwayda" reported that the spiritual leader of the Druze community, Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, rejected all ideas of separatism or division. According to the "sources," he supports the concept of a united state with a centralized government which preserves the dignity of all and is based on democracy, justice and equality (al-Akhbar, February 25, 2025).

## Establish the New Syrian Regime

### National Institutions

- ▶ On February 25, 2025, the National Dialogue Conference convened in Damascus to discuss drafting a temporary constitution, the preparation of new economic plans, the renewal of public services, the construction of state institutions and the enforcement of security in public spaces (National Dialogue Conference YouTube channel, February 25, 2025).
- ▶ At the opening of the conference, President Ahmed al-Sharaa said that while Syria had returned to its citizens, the challenges ahead were immense, adding that it was necessary to preserve Syria's territorial unity and to prepare short-term emergency strategic plans. He vowed to confront, strongly and with determination, anyone who threatened the country's security, stating that to that end the state had to possess weapons. He also pledged that Syria would not "import from abroad" governance systems which were inconsistent with Syrian society and culture (SANA news agency, February 25, 2025).



**Al-Sharaa delivering his speech at the conference (SANA news agency, February 25, 2025)**

- ▶ The final declaration of the conference included 18 points for Syria's future, the first of which emphasized the preservation of the country's unity and sovereignty over all its territories and the rejection of any attempt at division or separation. The declaration also called for drafting a temporary constitution suited to the transitional phase and the establishment of a committee to prepare a draft of the permanent constitution; the creation of a temporary legislative council; the promotion of freedom as a supreme value; respect for human rights; prevention of discrimination based on race, religion or sect; upholding the principle of peaceful coexistence among all segments of the Syrian people; fostering economic development; and calling for the removal of international sanctions imposed on the country (Syria TV, February 2025).

## Security Activity

► The Public Security Service arrested groups involved in smuggling and selling weapons to Hezbollah in the al-Qatifah area on the outskirts of Damascus (Telegram channel of Rif Damascus province, February 19, 2025).



**Weapons discovered in the possession of the smugglers  
(Telegram channel of Damascus Province, February 19, 2025)**

► Abdel Razzaq al-Khatib, an official in Syria's General Security Directorate, announced the launch of an operation targeting operatives of the Assad regime as well as drug and arms traffickers in the Daraa countryside in southern Syria, in addition to the confiscation of weapons in the towns of al-Harah and Namar. He called on local residents to cooperate with the forces "to contribute to the establishment of security in the area" (Syria TV, February 20, 2025).

► The Syrian Internal Security Department thwarted an attempt to smuggle weapons into Lebanon. Several suspects were arrested in the Talkalakh area in Homs (Telegram channel of Homs province, February 24, 2025).

## Diplomatic Activity

► The Syrian Foreign Ministry welcomed the decision of EU foreign ministers to lift some of the sanctions imposed on Syria. The ministry said it was a positive development in alleviating the economic hardship faced by the Syrian people and an advance in Syria's relations with the international community. The ministry called for the complete lifting of the remaining sanctions, which hinder Syria's progress and prevent its citizens from rebuilding their lives (Telegram channel of the Syrian Foreign Ministry, February 24, 2025). According to the decision of the EU foreign ministers, restrictions were suspended regarding oil, gas, electricity and transportation, the asset freeze on five Syrian banks was canceled and some sanctions on the Syrian central bank were eased (EU website, February 24, 2025). Reportedly, the Trump administration halted initiatives advanced by the Biden administration to ease restrictions on

Syria until a government was formed which included "various elements of the Syrian people, as opposed to the current government, which is controlled by Sunni Islamists" (The Wall Street Journal, February 24, 2025).

► Syrian Defense Minister Murhaf Abu Qasra hosted a delegation from the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), which is stationed on the Golan Heights and monitors activities in the buffer zone in accordance with the 1974 disengagement agreement. The visit took place while IDF operations were being conducted in various sections of the zone and beyond (SANA news agency, February 20, 2025). According to a "source in the Syrian defense ministry," during the meeting Abu Qasra noted the need for Israel's withdrawal from the areas it had "recently occupied," the importance of strengthening cooperation with UN forces, and the significance of their presence at points of contact along the border with Israel (al-Watan Telegram channel, February 20, 2025).