



Spotlight on Syria

February 26 – March 5, 2025

Overview¹

- ▶ The Syrians were angered by threats issued by Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Katz to take action against the regime in Damascus if the Druze in the town of Jaramana were harmed by the Syrian security forces. Leaders of the Druze community said they supported a united state and rejected foreign intervention.
- ▶ Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa (Abu Muhammad al-Julani) called on Arab states to assist his country against "Israeli violations" and hinted Syria might respond to the continued activities of IDF forces in the Golan Heights and the airstrikes on Syrian military installations.
- ▶ President al-Sharaa participated in the Arab emergency summit on the Gaza Strip held in Cairo and said he opposed plans to "uproot" Palestinians.
- ▶ The commander of the Kurdish militia of the Syrian Democratic Forces said the ceasefire of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey did not apply to them.

The Issue of Syria's Druze and Israel's Involvement

- ▶ On February 28, 2025, violent clashes broke out in the town of Jaramana, on the southeastern outskirts of Damascus, home to a large Druze population, when local armed residents from the Jaramana Shield Brigade manning a checkpoint prevented the entry of operatives from the Syrian Operations Directorate and opened fire on their vehicle. One regime security officer was killed, another was wounded, captured and later released following the involvement of local dignitaries (Sham Agency, March 1, 2025). The following day there were exchanges of fire, including mortar shelling, between local gunmen and security forces, leading to additional casualties on both sides. A ceasefire was reached by negotiations between Syrian regime officials and Druze dignitaries (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, March 2, 2025).
- ▶ The events in Jaramana prompted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Israel Katz to instruct the IDF to prepare to defend the town. They said Israel would not allow "the extremist Islamist regime" in Syria to harm the Druze (Israeli media, March 1,

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

2025). Syria rejected their statements as interference in its internal affairs and an attempt to undermine its unity:

► Druze Sheikh Laith Wahid al-Bal'ous, commander of the Druze Men of Dignity Militia, who arrived in Jaramana to mediate between the sides, said the violence had begun as a personal dispute. He said the situation was moving toward a resolution and had no need of external sponsorship, as they wanted Syria to remain united (Ashbal Bani Maarouf YouTube channel, March 1, 2025). Later, al-Bal'ous said Israeli intervention in Jaramana was unacceptable and accused Israel of attempting to exploit the events in Jaramana to pressure the Syrian government, destabilize the region and provoke conflicts among sectors of the Syrian people (Aram News, March 3, 2025).

► Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, spiritual leader of the Druze community in Syria, meeting in al-Suwayda with a delegation of Jaramana residents, said the Druze community's top priority was strengthening Syrian unity, its territory and people. He said unity would be achieved through the collective efforts of the entire Syrian people, across all its sects and citizens. He said it was a purely national project based on internal Syrian principles without the need for international or foreign involvement, and the transitional phase required uniting ranks at both the community and national levels. He added that the Druze had no separatist demands and did not plan to defect from Syria, they wanted only to preserve their traditions and national and historical identity (al-Suwayda 24 YouTube channel, March 4, 2025).

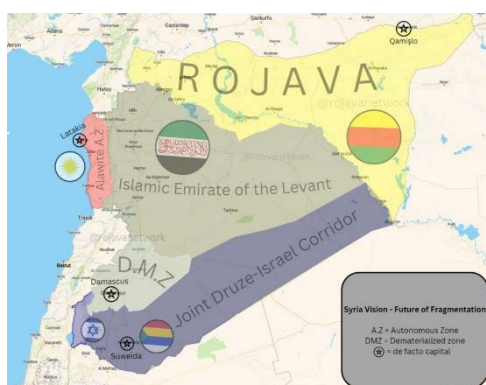
► Ahmed al-Dalati, deputy commander of Ahrar al-Sham and an official in the Operations Directorate which led to the overthrow of the Assad regime and who mediated on behalf of the administration with Druze dignitaries in Jaramana, said the new Syria belonged to all its citizens and they had the right to build its institutions in solidarity and unity so they could collectively block those seeking to harm and disgrace the country (Syria TV, March 3, 2025).



**Al-Dalati (center) with Jaramana town dignitaries
(Damascus Countryside Governorate Telegram channel, March 3, 2025)**

► Before and during the events in Jaramana, Israeli statements about intentions to protect the Druze and demilitarize southern Syria continued to spark controversy:

◆ A map circulated on social media depicting the "future division of Syria," including, a "shared Druze-Israeli corridor" from southern Syria along the Jordanian border, extending to the tri-border area with Iraq, where it connects with Rojava, the Kurdish autonomous region in northern and eastern Syria. The Alawites were allocated autonomy along the coastal region, Damascus was designated as a demilitarized zone and the rest of the country was marked "the Islamic Emirate of the Levant," meaning an Islamic state under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa (Abu Muhammad al-Julani). The objective of the campaign, which was based largely on false information, was to glorify Druze resistance to the central government in Damascus while highlighting the factors shared by the Druze and the Kurds, both of whom aspire to a democratic, secular, decentralized state (Dr. Maalouf's X account, February 26, 2025).



Map of the New Syria (Dr. Maalouf's X account, February 26, 2025)

◆ Hundreds of residents of the Druze town of Khirbet Ghazaleh, north of Daraa, protested Israel's involvement in Syria. One of the signs, written in Hebrew, read, "Any invasion of Syrian lands is a violation of the rights of its inhabitants; we say no to occupation!" (FREE HORAN Facebook page, February 28, 2025).



Protesting Israeli activity in southern Syria (FREE HORAN Facebook page, February 28, 2025)

On March 3, 2025, a picture of an Israeli flag being raised in the Druze city of as-Suwayda was posted to the social media (ivarmm's X account, March 3, 2025). In a video posted later, local residents were photographed lowering the flag and then burning it (Syria TV, March 3, 2025). It is unclear who was responsible for raising or burning the flag.



Israeli flag in al-Anqoud Square, al-Suwayda (ivarmm's X account, March 3, 2025)

◆ Turkish President Erdoğan related to the Israeli statements regarding Syria and said they would not allow regional maps to be redrawn. He said that "those who seek to exploit instability in Syria by strengthening an ethnic group must understand that will not happen" (Anadolu Agency, March 3, 2025).

IDF Activity

► This past week IDF forces continued operating inside the buffer zone in the Golan Heights and beyond, mainly conducting short raids into villages and military outposts of the Assad regime. According to reports, the forces entered the village of al-Rafid in southern Quneitra Governate to collect questionnaires distributed to residents and as they exited the village there was a confrontation with local residents; the forces fired into the air. In another incident, the forces reportedly blocked the road connecting the town of Mashara in Quneitra and the town of al-Tiha in northern Daraa, firing their guns while helicopters hovered overhead. The forces also entered the town of Tal al-Mal on the border between Daraa and Quneitra Governates, searched a camp which had been used by pro-Iranian militias, and later detonated warehouses (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, March 26 - April 5, 2025).



IDF forces in the village of al-Rafid (Daraa24 X account, February 28, 2025)

► On March 3, 2025, the IDF carried out an airstrike on a site where weapons belonging to the previous Syrian regime were stored, in the Qardaha area near Latakia on the Syrian coast (IDF spokesperson, March 3, 2025). Syrian media reported that fighter jets of the Israeli "occupation" carried out airstrikes in the Tartus area, with no casualties reported (SANA, March 3, 2025). On March 5, 2025, an Israeli airstrike reportedly targeted a weapons depot of the 155th Missile Brigade near the village of Hala, in the rural area northeast of Damascus. No casualties were reported (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, March 5, 2025).



Smoke following airstrikes in the Tartus area (Syrian TV, March 3, 2025)

► Senior Syrian regime officials condemned Israel's continued operations in the south of the country and the airstrikes, and called for international intervention:

- ◆ Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa, speaking before the Arab emergency summit in Cairo, said his country remained committed to the 1974 disengagement agreement and it was unacceptable for Israel to "continue disregarding the agreement." He also accused Israel of continuously "violating the rights of the Syrian people" since the occupation of the Golan Heights in 1967. He said Syria would not allow Israel to continue ignoring agreements and destabilizing the region through airstrikes and military incursions. He called on Arab states to support Syria against the "escalation" of Israeli strikes and to

unite efforts to combat its "aggressive policies," whose objective was allegedly regional destabilization. He also urged the international community to pressure Israel to withdraw its forces from southern Syria "to achieve peace" (Syria TV, March 4, 2025). Al-Sharaa said in an interview that Israeli strikes were exploiting the previous regime's collapse under the pretext of security concerns. He added, "The intentions to expand the aggression are clear. How will we respond? I won't elaborate" (SANA, March 4, 2025).

◆ Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shibani informed Geir Pedersen, the UN envoy to Syria, about Israeli strikes on Damascus, Daraa and Quneitra on February 25, 2025, claiming they violated Syria's sovereignty and threatened regional stability. He added that Israel had to bear responsibility for its actions and the strikes violated international law and the 1974 ceasefire agreement between Israel and Syria (al-Majalla, March 3, 2025). Pedersen condemned the "Israeli escalation" and airstrikes in Syria. He said they were unacceptable, risked further destabilizing an already fragile situation, increased regional tensions and undermined de-escalation efforts. He called on Israel to halt its "violations," meet its international obligations and not undertake unilateral steps which exacerbated the conflict. He added that all parties had to respect Syria's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity (UN Special Envoy to Syria website, March 4, 2025).

Establishing the New Regime

Diplomacy

► On February 26, 2025, Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa paid his first visit to Jordan, where he met with King Abdullah II and Crown Prince Hussein bin Abdullah. They discussed expanding cooperation in trade, energy and water, and increasing coordination on border security. The king of Jordan condemned Israeli strikes in Syria and expressed support for Syria's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity. He also pledged to assist in Syria's reconstruction to make it possible for refugees to return (Syria TV, February 26, 2025).



Al-Sharaa (left) and the king of Jordan (Jordanian royal court X account, February 26, 2025)

► On March 4, 2025, al-Sharaa arrived in Egypt for his first visit, to participate in the Arab emergency summit on the Palestinian issue. On the sidelines of the summit he met with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Lebanese President Joseph Aoun, Palestinian Authority chairman Mahmoud Abbas, UN Secretary General António Guterres, and European Council President António Costa. Speaking before the summit meeting, he thanked Arab leaders for their support of Syria and said the country's return to the Arab League was a historic moment which reinforced Arab unity and solidarity. Relating to the Palestinian issue, al-Sharaa accused certain actors of attempting to redraw "new geographical maps" at the expense of Palestinian blood, stating that calls for the uprooting of Palestinians were a "stain on humanity" and a threat to the Arab nation, urging all Arabs to stand against the plans (SANA, March 4, 2025).



Al-Sharaa speaking at the Arab summit (SANA, March 4, 2025)



Right: Al-Sharaa with Abbas. Left: Al-Sharaa with Lebanese President Aoun (SANA, March 4, 2025)

► According to reports about the ongoing negotiations between the new Syrian regime and Russia, Russian military bases are expected to continue their operations in Syria in exchange for diplomatic backing from Moscow, financial compensation from Russia, and "deep involvement" in Syria's economy and defense. It was also reported that the issue of extraditing ousted Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who is currently in Russia, was raised in discussions between the two countries, but is not currently on the agenda (Reuters, March 2, 2025).

The Kurds

► Mazloun Abdi, commander of the Kurdish militia of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), stated in response to the announcement by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) that it is implementing the call of its imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan, for a unilateral ceasefire with Turkey and a willingness to disarm, that the announcement was unrelated to the activities of the Kurdish militia in Syria. He praised the ceasefire and emphasized that once peace was achieved in Turkey, there would be no justification for continued Turkish attacks in Syria (North Press Agency, February 27, 2025). Turkey said Öcalan's announcement should also apply to the Syrian Democratic Forces (Reuters, February 28, 2025).