



Syria's Options in the Management of Relations with Israel



‘Atef al-Joulani

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Executive Summary

The new Syrian administration faces political, economic, and security pressures and incentives to move closer to Israel. While Israeli forces continue their military operations in Syrian territory, numerous Western and Arab actors are opening diplomatic channels with the Syrian leadership. US and European sanctions on Syria have been lifted, the US State Department has removed Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) from its list of terrorist organizations, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE have signed economic agreements worth around \$7 billion with the Syrian government. In response to these pressures and incentives, the Syrian administration has held security meetings with Israeli delegations, justifying them as an attempt to avoid escalation and prevent sliding into military confrontation.

Looking ahead, Syria's options in managing its relationship with Israel range across four paths: overturning the table and refusing to yield to pressure; adopting positive adaptation with calculated resistance, leveraging elements of strength without entering normalization; gradual engagement with Israel; or pursuing full normalization, broad openness and alignment with the Abraham Accords.

The Syrian administration's responses thus far appear likely to range between positive adaptation, calculated resistance, and the activation of its leverage to break through the current impasse, on the one hand, and gradual openness toward Israel under the influence of pressures and incentives, on the other. This paper's recommendations, however, caution against normalization, warning of its detrimental outcomes and adverse repercussions for the new Syrian regime and Syria's future. They emphasize the importance of drawing on the broad and resilient popular base that rejects normalization and supports the Palestine issue, while managing the matter prudently and upholding normalization as a red line.

Introduction

The new Syrian administration is facing sustained external pressure to shape its political orientation, recalibrate its regional and international relationships, and address pressing domestic issues, foremost among them the status of religious, ethnic and sectarian minorities, women, and educational curricula. External actors have tied their political and economic engagement with the new political order to its policy choices on

* A Jordanian journalist and author of Palestinian descent. An expert in Palestinian and Jordanian political and strategic affairs, he has authored hundreds of articles, analyses, and working papers, and is a regular contributor to broadcast media.



these matters, as well as to its willingness to meet their conditions and demands. It is evident that the Syrian leadership's position on managing relations with Israel, and its readiness to engage with it, has become a pivotal factor in the calculations of the US administration and several European actors as they determine their future approach to the new reality in Syria.

First: Political and Economic Pressures and Incentives

Following the change in Syria, international actors sought to confront the new leadership with two difficult options: either adapt to Israeli, US and European requirements by offering the necessary concessions and fulfilling the required commitments—thereby securing increased Western and Arab political and economic support and openness, strengthening its regional and international legitimacy, and preventing the ignition of internal Syrian fronts—or face serious consequences for refusing to comply with external demands and pressures, consequences that would undermine its stability, erode its regional and international legitimacy, and hinder the Syrian economy's recovery from its difficult and complex conditions.

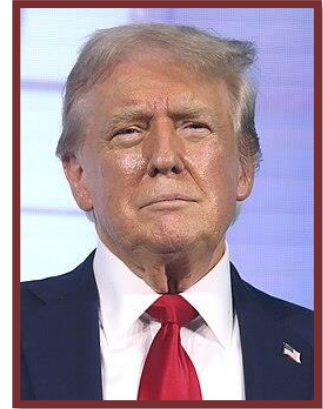


In the context of a carrot-and-stick policy, Israel continued its military operations on Syrian territory, striving to weaken the new leadership and prevent it from extending its political and security control over the state's lands. Israel positioned itself as the protector and defender of the rights of Syrian minorities, particularly the Druze community. Concurrently, numerous incentive measures and steps were taken to influence the behavior of the new Syrian leadership and incorporate it into an internationally accepted regional equation.

On the political and diplomatic openness front, many official delegations visited Syria after the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime. These delegations included representatives from various Arab and Western countries. Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa was received in France, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Qatar, Jordan, Bahrain and Kuwait. Additionally, the Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani and other ministers conducted multiple visits to countries worldwide.

Alongside the diplomatic opening toward the new Syrian administration, several additional incentivizing steps can be identified:

- 1. On 14/5/2025, US President Donald Trump announced from Saudi Arabia, “I will be ordering the cessation of sanctions against Syria in order to give them a chance at greatness.” He noted that the discussions on this matter were held directly with the Saudi leadership (and with Erdogan), which played a pivotal role in achieving this outcome. In implementation of this decision, the US Department of the Treasury announced sweeping sanctions relief on 23/5/2025, and on 30/6/2025, Trump signed an executive order titled “Providing for the Revocation of Syria Sanctions.” While several sanctions were lifted immediately, others required additional procedures before suspension, including those under the Caesar Act, which necessitate consultation with Congress.



Donald Trump

- 2. On 28/5/2025, the European Union aligned with the US position by “lifting all economic restrictive measures on Syria,” aiming to support the country’s post-Assad transformation and recovery.
- 3. On 8/7/2025, the US Department of State officially revoked the designation of al-Nusrah Front, also known as HTS, as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). The Syrian government welcomed the move, viewing it as a positive step toward rectifying what it described as an obstacle to “constructive engagement,” and expressed hope that the remaining restrictions affecting Syrian institutions and officials would also be lifted—implicitly referencing the UN Security Council’s designation of HTS as a terrorist organization in Resolution 2254. In early August 2025, Washington circulated a draft resolution to the UK and France urging the UN to remove Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa and Interior Minister Anas Khattab from its counter-terrorism sanctions list, as well as to “expand sanctions exemptions to better facilitate commercial activity in Syria.”



- 4. On 13/7/2025, Syria’s General Authority for Land and Sea Ports signed a strategic \$800 million agreement with UAE’s DP World to invest in, operate, expand, and manage the Port of Tartus, while upgrading the port’s infrastructure and enhancing its operational and logistical capacity.
- 5. On 24/7/2025, the Syrian-Saudi Investment Forum convened in Damascus, culminating in the signing of 47 economic agreements valued at \$6.4 billion, spanning the sectors of infrastructure, telecommunications, cybersecurity, agriculture, and financial services.



Second: Cautious Syrian Responses

In responding to international and regional pressures and incentives, the new Syrian administration has exhibited a range of responses in managing its relations with Israel, both direct and indirect. Among the most notable:

- ▶ 1. On 7/5/2025, Reuters reported, citing three informed sources, that the UAE had set up a backchannel for Syrian-Israeli talks. The indirect contacts focused on security and intelligence issues, noting that efforts to open the communication channel began days after President Ahmad al-Sharaa visited the UAE on 13/4/2025.



- ▶ 2. On 7/5/2025, Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa told a press conference in Paris with French President Emmanuel Macron that indirect talks were underway with Israel through intermediaries to ease tensions. He was referring to the Syrian-Israeli talks in Azerbaijan, which included the Head of Operations of the Israeli Army, Oded Basyuk, Syrian government representatives, and Turkish officials.



- ▶ 3. On 27/5/2025, Reuters reported that Syrian and Israeli officials had held direct meetings in recent weeks. Citing five sources, the agency stated that the two sides were in direct contact and had held at least three face-to-face meetings, including one in the border area aimed at preventing escalation and containing security tensions. The report noted that Ahmad al-Dalati, head of security in Sweida Governorate, led the Syrian delegation, and that the discussions were primarily security-focused.

- ▶ 4. On 24/7/2025, a high-level meeting took place in Paris between Israel's Minister of Strategic Affairs, Ron Dermer, and Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani, under the auspices of President Trump's special envoy Tom Barrack. According to Israeli officials cited by the US news site Axios, the meeting lasted four hours and sought to



“reach security understandings regarding southern Syria in order to maintain the ceasefire.”

All meetings between the Israeli and Syrian sides have been strictly security-focused, aimed at containing escalation and preventing a slide into direct military confrontation. No political or economic engagements have been announced, reflecting the Syrian administration’s deliberate avoidance of such encounters due to their potential political and public sensitivities.

Notably, Syrian-Israeli interactions have gradually progressed from indirect, mediated contacts to direct meetings between official delegations. They have also transitioned from secrecy to relative transparency within a short period, indicating a decline in Syrian caution regarding the disclosure of these security-oriented meetings, which coincide with recurring episodes of tension between the two sides.

Third: International Pressures and Syria’s Options

Amid efforts by the US and certain international actors to present the Syrian leadership with a constrained choice that limits its maneuvering room, pressuring it toward rapprochement and normalization with Israel, a range of options arises for Syrian decision-makers in managing their relationship with Israel and responding to international pressures and conditions. The most significant among these are:



- ▶ 1. Rejecting external pressures and overturning the table: Syria refuses to yield to international and regional influences, steadfastly upholding national principles and fundamentals, while maintaining alignment with its traditional stance against normalization and strengthening ties with Israel.
- ▶ 2. Adapting intelligently to current realities: Syria exercises measured resistance and strategically mobilizes its intrinsic strengths, applying extreme caution and precise balancing of regional and international considerations. This approach addresses Syria’s undeniable political and economic challenges, while preserving its core principles and fundamentals.
- ▶ 3. Responding to Israeli and Western pressures: Syria engages in gradual openness toward Israel, offering selective concessions under prevailing pressures. These steps are justified as a means to consolidate the new political reality, address pressing challenges, and navigate critical bottlenecks.



- ▶ 4. Full normalization and broad engagement with Israel, including participation in the Abraham Accords track, reflects adherence to the official Arab position and the adoption of its rhetoric and justifications in circumventing the Palestine issue.



Fourth: Factors Influencing Syrian Choices

Several factors may encourage the new Syrian administration to pursue a more open engagement with Israel in the coming period, including:

- ▶ 1. The regime's need to enhance political legitimacy, secure regional and international recognition, and avoid isolation and sanctions.
- ▶ 2. Syria's desire to achieve stability and overcome internal security challenges stemming from sectarian and ethnic divisions, particularly given that numerous sects and ethnic groups maintain armed formations and militias, many of which are influenced by external agendas hostile to the new Syrian administration.
- ▶ 3. The imperative to address Israeli threats, including direct military interventions, territorial incursions within Syrian lands, continued assaults and strikes, and support for Syrian minorities and their sectarian militias. A notable instance occurred in Sweida on 16/7/2025, when Israeli forces intervened to support Druze militias and bombed the Syrian Armed Forces headquarters.
- ▶ 4. The impact of economic factors amid the profound challenges facing the Syrian economy, coupled with the desire to lift sanctions and secure the continued flow of aid and assistance.
- ▶ 5. The influence of Türkiye's supportive stance toward the Syrian administration in fostering flexibility and a gradual opening to relations with Israel, aimed at achieving domestic stability and strengthening the legitimacy of the political system.
- ▶ 6. The role of certain Arab states engaged in normalization and the Abraham Accords, which encourage the Syrian administration to emulate their approach to managing relations with Israel—an influence amplified by Syria's need for their political and financial backing.



On the other hand, several obstacles hinder the drive toward openness and normalization with Israel, as well as any substantial progress in relations with it. Chief among these are:

- ▶ 1. The ideological and political legacy and convictions of the Syrian president and his faction HTS, with its conservative Islamic background that rejects any relations with Israel.
- ▶ 2. The Syrian public's opposition to normalization with Israel and its strong support for the Palestinian people.
- ▶ 3. The new Syrian administration's awareness of Israel's hostility toward it, which views it as an Islamist-oriented government holding anti-Israel positions, while maneuvering to project a different image for temporary, pragmatic considerations.
- ▶ 4. Israel's sustained aggressive conduct in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, alongside its growing appetite for expansion, control and the use of military force, reflects its determination to achieve strategic objectives and impose dominance over the region.
- ▶ 5. The experiences of Arab states that joined the peace process through early normalization, without securing the promised gains once promoted and widely publicized, underscore the futility of such engagement. Neither Egypt nor Jordan has reaped tangible benefits from normalizing relations with Israel; indeed, the Camp David and Wadi Araba treaties failed to deter the Israeli threat, restrain its expansionist ambitions, or prevent its security penetration of both countries. On 23/7/2025, the Israeli Knesset approved a non-binding motion in favor of annexing the West Bank (WB) under Israeli sovereignty, an act Jordan regards as a direct threat and a precursor to the displacement of WB residents into Jordan. A parallel development unfolded in the Gaza Strip (GS), where, on 8/8/2025, Israel's security cabinet approved a plan aimed at securing full control over Gaza City. This plan is part of a broader plan to consolidate Israel's dominance over GS, disarm Hamas and establish a civil administration under Israeli oversight. The decision is likely to produce environments that drive displacement, which Egypt regards as a direct threat to its national security.



Fifth: Assessment and Recommendations

Given the factors shaping and constraining the Syrian leadership, along with its initial responses, and cautious steps toward engagement with Israel, its behavior in the coming period is likely to fall between the second option, “Adapting intelligently to current realities, exercising measured resistance and strategically mobilizing its intrinsic strengths,” and the third option, “Responding to Israeli and Western pressures, through gradual openness toward Israel.”



The likelihood of the first option, “rejecting external pressures and overturning the table, where Syria refuses to yield to international and regional influences,” is waning in light of the Syrian administration’s responses to date. Similarly, it appears unlikely that Syria will, in the short term, pursue the fourth option, “full normalization and broad engagement with Israel, including participation in the Abraham Accords track,” which, if realized, would constitute a complete reversal of the national position and a direct challenge to both the Syrian public and the fundamental principles of the Arab and Muslim nations.

Although the Syrian–Israeli meetings and communications remain largely security-focused, avoiding political and economic issues for now, this does not reduce the significance of the steps taken. They particularly create incentives for international and regional actors to apply additional pressure and influence, aiming to shape the Syrian position and push it toward greater political and economic engagement with Israel. Furthermore, notable progress in the normalization of Saudi–Israeli relations in the near future could strongly influence the Syrian administration’s strategic orientation.

In light of the above, it is important to stress the following, in order to safeguard the highest national interests of the Syrian state and to maintain Syria’s prominent and proactive role on issues affecting the Arab and Muslim nation (*Ummah*):

- 1. If pursuing the first option, overturning the table and rejecting regional and international pressures, is deemed unfeasible by the Syrian administration given current circumstances and anticipated costs, then the second option becomes viable: positive adaptation, calculated resistance and leveraging sources of strength, without engaging in normalization. This approach requires strong resolve and a bold

commitment to withstand pressures and temptations. A broad and robust Syrian popular base can serve as a foundation, treating normalization as a red line.

It is crucial for the Syrian administration to appreciate the risks of prioritizing short-term or tactical gains over long-term strategic interests that will shape the future of the Syrian state. Likewise, it must recognize that yielding to international and regional pressures will not end them, but rather intensify coercion and blackmail. Moreover, complying with US and Western demands regarding normalization may offer little benefit to the current regime, as Israel, the US, and certain Western powers perceive al-Sharaa and his allies as a temporary phase to be eventually bypassed, while aiming to place upon them the responsibility for normalization and its consequences.

- 2. It is both necessary and urgent for the Syrian government and people to recognize the significant strengths at their disposal, which can be harnessed to reinforce Syria's position. They are not limited to a path that entails opening up to Israel and normalizing relations. The events in Sweida in mid-July 2025, where the Syrian authorities successfully asserted their position and will over Israel and the international community, clearly demonstrate that resistance and the strategic use of available leverage can achieve far better outcomes than yielding to external pressures.
- 3. The Syrian people, their active political forces, and civil society institutions carry a crucial responsibility in reinforcing the official stance against external pressures. A broad and active popular movement showing solidarity with the Palestinian people and opposing brutal extermination will significantly strengthen the official position. At the same time, it sends a clear message to all parties: there exists a vibrant public that refuses to be co-opted or positioned against national, Arab and Islamic fundamentals.



The “rejection of normalization” is a winning popular strategy. It consolidates public support for the Syrian leadership, strengthens its internal resilience, limits the capacity of Israel, the US and their allies to apply pressure, and provides greater flexibility in responding to such pressures, particularly given the serious risks and unintended consequences if these pressures are overextended.