

# ISRAEL, FROM ALLY TO OBSERVER: A PRAGMATIC SHIFT IN NORTHEAST SYRIA

Noor Omer | January 25, 2026



### **Key Takeaways :Israel's Pragmatic Silence**

- Israel has secured its southern Syria buffer zone, achieving core political objectives through reduced threats and accepted demands.
- Israel maintains no territorial ambitions in northern Syria, while southern buffers protect against spillover and Damascus engagement counters Iran's Shia crescent.
- Israel recognizes Al-Sharaa's government as viable, aligning with Trump and Gulf preferences for potential normalization across Syria despite Israeli military presence in Southern Syria.
- The January 6 Paris deal establishes intelligence-sharing and economic ties under US supervision, prioritizing de-escalation and cooperation.
- US security guarantees enable Israel's strategic role in new Syria, countering Turkish dominance while compromising ground allies like the Kurds.
- The international community and Israel's silence risks ISIS resurgence as weakened Kurdish forces lose control of northeast Syria's detention camps, creating security vacuums that extremists rapidly exploit.

While European countries are fighting an attrition war in Ukraine and reacting to the President of the United States' demands to seize Greenland, a resurgent Jihadist threat (ISIS 2.0) from Syria appears to be looming. With the West focusing on Iran, it would not be the first time that the impending creation and rebirth of terrorist organizations in Syria has escaped the sober attention of the international community.

The Kurds under the leadership of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who fought the Islamic State (ISIS) war from 2014 to 2017 with the backing of the United States, are now under increasing pressure from the Syrian interim government to withdraw from a quarter of

the territories they have been controlling since the Syrian Civil War in 2012. Under the ceasefire agreement with the Syrian interim government, the SDF is required to fully disarm and integrate into the new Syrian army as individuals rather than as a combined force or units. With US blessing and the support of regional powers, the Syrian interim government under President Ahmed Al-Sharaa aims to control all Kurdish territories in an effort to establish a centralized government, thus ending a decade-long Kurdish self-rule in Northeast Syria. Kurds made up about 10% of Syria's population of 23 million before the country's civil war began in 2011.

Meanwhile, Israel, perceived by the Kurds as a traditional and dependable ally, remains uncharacteristically silent during this entire process. Israel has occasionally undermined Syria's new government, such as by mobilizing troops to defend the Druze minorities in Southern Syria and ultimately declaring a unilateral buffer zone. However, Israel's unusual silence towards the Kurds in the north signals a strategic shift in Tel Aviv's calculus towards Syria and, by extension, the Kurds in the Northeast.

As of January 22, the Kurds have lost more than 50% of territories, and the four-day ceasefire signed on January 20 leaves little room for the Kurds to claim any form of self-rule or autonomy in the new Syria.

The unilateral role Türkiye plays in Northeast Syria, whose leaders believe the SDF is a terrorist organization affiliated with the PKK, is concerning for the future security and stability of the lands under Kurdish self-rule, as it remains unclear whether the ceasefire agreement will hold and to what extent Damascus is in control of the forces advancing on Kurdish lands under the guise of the Syrian Arab Army. The Kurds are betting

on Israel's counterbalancing role towards Türkiye's unilateral and central interventions in Northeast Syria.

However, the facts on the ground suggest that even US interests have pivoted in light of the Syrian government joining the Global Coalition Against Daesh as its 90th member. Broader geopolitical shifts have also diverted US attention from protecting the Kurds—the US's only long-standing ally in the fight against ISIS terrorists, starting in 2014 until the group's territorial defeat in December 2017.

### **Kurdish Strongholds Crack in Northeast Syria**

The stakes are especially high as the withdrawal of Kurdish forces combined with the persistent threat of ISIS risks the resurgence of ISIS 2.0 and regrouping across Iraq and Syria. Türkiye's President Erdogan, in a speech before the Turkish Parliament, affirmed that the definitive objective is the complete disbandment of Kurdish forces, which he characterized as terrorists, and emphasized that engaging in provocations at this stage constitutes a form of self-destruction. Israel, which has opposing visions for post-Assad Syria, is yet to show willingness to protect the rights of Kurds, as it previously did in the case of the Druze minorities in the As Suwayda region south of Damascus who faced persecution by the Syrian army or Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)-affiliates.

The crackdown on the Kurdish strongholds is the biggest shift in Syria's power dynamic since the fall of Assad. The security implications of the ceasefire signed on January 20 are clear; the SDF losing grip on the areas under its control will directly impact the political status of Kurds in Syria, who are under the threat of losing political representation. If neither Israel nor the United States acts to protect the Kurds, the regional consequences of weaker

Kurdish representation may potentially expose minorities to violence, eliminate buffer zones, and create an environment in which extremist forces regroup and steadily move outside Syria's borders —towards southern Syria, Jordan, and Iraq, and ultimately the wider Levant.

## **The Ceasefire**

The tensions unfolded following a ceasefire agreement between the Syrian interim government and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and mediated by Tom Barrack, President Trump's envoy to Syria and ambassador to Türkiye. Under the terms of the agreement, the previously US-backed SDF forces withdrew from Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa on the Euphrates River. The SDF later withdrew from Al-Hol camp, housing tens of thousands of ISIS-linked families, including some of the most radical jihadi women who remain loyal to the Islamic State (ISIS). There are 10,000 ISIS fighters imprisoned across Northeast Syria who are under the watch of Kurdish-led SDF forces. According to the amended 14-point ceasefire, the authorities and protection forces that run the prisons and camps will merge into Syrian government security units that will become "fully in charge" of the legal and security affairs of jails and camps.

The Agreement demands the SDF to fully integrate into the Syrian Army as individuals and withdraw from all Kurdish-held territory west of the Euphrates. The agreement guarantees in return that Syrian government forces would not enter the city centers of Hasakah and Qamishli, the latter a key Kurdish-controlled city on the Turkish border. The ceasefire agreement comes after failed negotiations on January 18 between President of Syria Ahmed Al-Sharra and Mazloum Abdi, the SDF General who rose to prominence for

his military leadership and warfighting capabilities against ISIS. The January 20 amended ceasefire agreement, set to last for four days, asserts the following:

“Both parties have agreed to integrate all military and security forces of the SDF into the ministries of defense and interior, with discussions continuing on the detailed mechanisms of integration, and that civilian institutions will be integrated into the structure of the Syrian government.” *Statement by the Syrian Government.*

The governance of Northeast Syria remains particularly important to the Syrian interim government, rich with natural resources, such as oil and gas, from which the SDF controls some of the oil fields. The region gained de facto autonomy in 2012 following the Syrian Civil War and became home to self-governing sub-regions in areas such as Lazirah, Euphrates, Raqqah, Tabqa, and Deir ez-Zor. The rapid collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 swept Ahmed Al-Sharaa HTS forces southward from its Idlib stronghold and seized all major cities within a matter of days. However, the Northeast regions remained under direct Kurdish control, where the SDF has been a key military force (with Arabs as a key element of its fighting force) in addition to YPG-PKK-affiliated fighters. Meanwhile, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) was established to oversee the region's governance.

Al-Sharaa's rise to power led to armed campaigns against Syria's ethnic minorities, first towards the Alawites and then the Druze and subsequently the Kurds. Thus, it is not an overstatement to say that there is a staggering amount of warranted mistrust in the one-year-old interim Syrian government.

Nonetheless, the Syrian interim government is a state actor and has been widely recognized as legitimate by the US and the international community despite its fragile and unelected status, while the Kurds, being a non-state actor, are currently only able to project limited political and diplomatic power, if any.

### **Israel's Role in Syria Since December 2024-Present**

Israel has been suspicious of Al-Sharaa's rise to power since the first days of HTS forces' capture of Damascus. Within seven months of Assad's fall, Israel, given its perceived strategic threat from the new Syrian government, attacked Syria more than 1000 times. First, Israel started seizing control of the entirety of Mount Hermon and the Syrian side of the 1974 demilitarized zone, where it established nine Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) military installations. Second, the bombardment was followed by an aerial campaign that eliminated much of the former Assad regime's military capabilities, including chemical weapons. Third, the persecution of the Druze minority further widened Israel's footprint in southern Syria. Israel's interventions have reportedly extended to villages far beyond the former buffer zone in the Daraa and As Suwayda governorates.

Ever since, Israel has positioned itself as the protector of the Syrian Druze minorities, and Israeli officials have openly threatened retaliation against the Syrian interim government should the Druze come under attack again. Upon signing a ceasefire agreement between the Druze and the Syrian interim government, and at President Trump's insistence, Israel backed down from its previous demand that Al-Sharaa's forces avoid deploying troops to As Suwayda. The Kurds from Northeast Syria could benefit from an Israeli-brokered deal under the pretext of an alliance with the US backing, similar to the Druze ceasefire agreement, which remains to be effectively successful. However, it is uncertain how Israel's role as an ally to the Kurds can be examined as tensions unfold in the region.

## Israel's Pragmatic Silence

The current state of affairs indicates that the Kurds have lost their status of privilege from a purely transactional US perspective, as they have outlived their usefulness to the US. While the Kurds have experienced US abandonment before, the near-absolute silence by Israel has been noteworthy. Without US support and Israel's intervention, the Kurds may fail to prevent an unbroken belt of Islamist-controlled territories from Idlib to the south of Syria. Yet from a security perspective, there are some tactical reasons why Israel might choose to remain uninvolved for now:

**First:** The reduced level of threat in southern Syria and the broad acceptance of Israeli demands have resulted in the achievement of Israel's political objectives.

**Second:** Israel has no territorial ambition in the north, and its buffer from the south of Syria shields it from unintended consequences should clashes spread to other areas. Israel would also need to pragmatically pursue a policy of engagement with Damascus to counter Iranian presence through proxies. Cooperating with Syria proves beneficial to check Iran's Shia crescent from Tehran to Beirut. Thus, Israel may need to accept or at least tolerate terror/Jihadi risks for the bigger win of containing Iran as Sunni armed factions become more extreme. From Israel's perspective, the security situation in Syria seems to prioritize strategic depth over ideological alignment.

**Third:** Israeli officials recognize that the country can work with Al-Sharaa's government, which would be in line with President Trump's preference, who has met with Al-Sharaa in person, encouraged by the Gulf countries. Also, Al-Sharaa has repeatedly communicated his desire to avoid conflict with Israel. If the new Syria under Al-Sharaa leadership takes an interest in normalization, despite IDF's enduring presence in the Golan Heights, it would be in Israel's best interest to exert strategic influence across Syria.

**Fourth:** Israel seeks more than establishing a political sphere of influence in Syria. The Israel deal in Paris with Al-Sharaa on January 6 provides a necessary framework to share intelligence and allows the two countries to pursue economic ties. The Paris deal creates a mechanism for facilitating de-escalation and diplomatic and commercial opportunities between the two countries under the supervision of the US. Israel and Syria's willingness to "turn a new page in their relations for the benefit of future generations," as stated by US officials facilitating the deal, leaves little cause for Israel to jeopardize its mending relations with the new interim government of Syria.

**Fifth:** Persistent American pressure, along with Donald Trump's interest in a quick deal, has led to the materialization of steps towards a security agreement under Trump's vision for achieving peace in the Middle East. This largely compromises allies on the ground in Syria that may hamper this vision for a quick deal. The US has declared that it is ready to provide the security guarantees Israel demands that will be acceptable to everyone in exchange for its withdrawal from Syrian territory. Such an agreement is a pragmatic step that does not only create a sense of comfort for Israel and Syria, but it also allows Israel to play a role in the future of Syria and counter an ever-strengthening Turkish presence as Al-Sharaa's foreign patron in a new Syria.

### **Pragmatism As a Consequence**

Israel's pragmatic outlook raises tough questions about alliance and regional stability for the Kurds, considering the signs of rising Sunni militancy in Syria and potentially Iraq. This tactical non-interventionist approach combined with international silence may risk repeating the pre-ISIS chaos that flooded Europe with refugees and unfolded episodes of extreme violence and bloodshed in the Levant and beyond. If the US and Israel bet that these

extremist groups stop short of a full jihad, then it is worth remembering that history has proven that without clear off-ramps, momentum builds toward uncontrolled escalation.

Extreme organizations like ISIS can swiftly regroup in the absence of clear deterrence and international engagement. Without intervention, these groups may exploit security vacuums, enabling extremism to gain ground and potentially destabilizing the Iraq-Syria border region.

Nonetheless, the perceived backdoor deal between Israel and the Syrian interim government, demonstrated by Israel's selective silence, and the roles of both Türkiye and the United States as state brokers, may mean that Kurdish integration and reunification into the Syrian interim government is a deal the Kurds cannot avoid. Meanwhile, the US military presence closely monitors ISIS movements, thereby containing the group's potential resurgence in the region.

For now, the new Syria under interim President Al-Sharaa faces more than terrorism and foreign policy issues: a pressing domestic issue dealing with various ethnic minorities. Grant too little self-rule to ethnic communities, and grievances may grow, sometimes violently. Grant too much, and state unity may gradually erode.



## ABOUT

Nestled in the mountains of Sulaymaniyah, the Culture Capital of KRI, iNNOV8 Research Center pioneers cutting-edge research and innovation. We aspire for excellence as an independent research center by providing valid, valuable, and timely products to the public. We deliver impactful solutions and contribute to our industry's vibrant and forward-thinking community.

# ISRAEL, FROM ALLY TO OBSERVER: A PRAGMATIC SHIFT IN NORTHEAST SYRIA



## CONTACT

CHANNEL8 BUILDING,  
KURDSAT QTR., SULAYMANIYAH, IRAQ  
+964-773-608-8885  
[CONTACT@INNOV8.KRD](mailto:CONTACT@INNOV8.KRD)