

Syrian air force's planes have been bombed in the hangar by Israel while Damascus was being handed over to the HTS faction.

● NICOLE TUNG/THE NEW YORK TIMES



now has no army, navy, or air force. It has only lightly armed factions such as HTS, other rebel militias like the misnamed Syrian National Army, and Kurdish groups. Under CIA and Turkish tutelage, HTS could be strengthened, but only enough to repress dissent in Syria.

HTS would have powers but on license. Its survival would depend on keeping things quiet for Israel, both through a reign of intimidation against other Syrian groups, including the Palestinian refugee population, who threaten to fight Israel, and by keeping out other regional actors resisting Israel, such as Iran and Hezbollah.

And as with Abbas, al-Jolani's rule in Syria would be territorially limited.

The Palestinian leader has to contend with the fact that large swaths of the West Bank have been carved out as Jewish settlements under Israeli rule and that he has no access to critical resources, including aquifers, agricultural land, and quarries. Off-limits to HTS would likely be Kurdish areas policed by Turkey and the US, where much of the country's oil is located, as well as a swath of territory in Syria's southwest that Israel has invaded over the past two weeks.

It is widely assumed Israel will annex these Syrian lands to extend its illegal occupation of the Golan, which it took from Syria in 1967.

'Love' for Israel

Al-Jolani understands only too well the options ahead of him. Perhaps not surprisingly, he appears far keener to become a Syrian Abbas than a Syrian Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas leader killed by Israel in October.

Given his clean-cut military makeover, al-Jolani may imagine that he can eventually upgrade himself to the Syrian equivalent of the US-backed leader of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky.

However, Zelensky's role has been to fight a proxy war against Russia, on behalf of NATO. Israel would never countenance a leader of a country on its border being given that kind of military muscle.

Al-Jolani's commanders have lost no time explaining that they have no beef with Israel

and do not want to provoke hostilities with it.

The heady first days of HTS's rule were marked by its leaders thanking Israel for helping it to take Syria by neutralizing Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon. There were even declarations of "love" for Israel.

Such sentiments have not been dented by the Israeli army invading the large demilitarized zone inside Syria next to the Golan, in violation of the 1974 armistice agreement.

Nor have they been damaged by Israel's relentless bombing of Syria's infrastructure — a violation of sovereignty that the Nuremberg tribunal at the end of the Second World War decried as the supreme international crime. This week, al-Jolani meekly suggested that Israel had secured its interests in Syria through air strikes and invasion and could now leave the country in peace.

"We do not want any conflict, whether with Israel or anyone else, and we will not let Syria be used as a launchpad for attacks [against Israel]," he told the London Times.

A Channel 4 reporter who tried last week to press an HTS spokesman into addressing Israel's attacks on Syria was startled by the response.

Obeida Arnaout sounded as though he was following a carefully rehearsed script, reassuring Washington and Israeli officials that HTS had no bigger ambitions than emptying the bins regularly. Asked how HTS viewed the attacks on its sovereignty by Israel, Arnaout would only reply: "Our priority is to restore security and services, revive civilian life and institutions, and care for newly liberated cities. There are many urgent parts of day-to-day life to restore: bakeries, electricity, water, communications, so our priority is to provide those services to the people."

It seems HTS is unwilling even to offer rhetorical opposition to Israeli war crimes on Syrian soil.

Wider ambitions

All of this leaves Israel in a strong position to entrench its gains and widen its regional ambitions.

Israel has announced plans to double the number of Jew-

ish settlers living illegally on occupied Syrian territory in the Golan.

Meanwhile, Syrian communities newly under Israeli military rule — in areas Israel has invaded since Assad's fall — have appealed to their nominal government in Damascus and other Arab states to persuade Israel to withdraw. With good reason, they fear they face permanent occupation.

Predictably, the same Western elites so incensed by Russia's violations of Ukraine's territorial integrity that they have spent three years arming Kyiv in a proxy war against Moscow — risking a potential nuclear confrontation — have raised not a peep of concern at Israel's ever-deepening violations of Syria's territorial integrity.

Once again, it is one rule for Israel, another for anyone Washington views as an enemy.

With Syria's air defenses out of the way, Israel now has a free run to Iran — either by itself or with US assistance — to attack the last target on the neocons' seven-country hit list from 2001.

The Israeli media have excitedly reported on preparations for a strike, while the transition team working for incoming US president Donald Trump are said to be seriously considering joining such an operation.

And to top it all, Israel looks like it may finally be in sight of signing off on "normal" relations with Washington's other major client state in the region, Saudi Arabia — a drive that had to be put on hold following Israel's genocide in Gaza.

Renewed ties between Israel and Riyadh are possible again in large part because coverage of Syria has further disappeared from the West's news agenda, despite Palestinians there — starved and bombed by Israel for 14 months — likely dying in larger numbers than ever.

The narrative of Syria's "liberation" currently dominates western coverage. But so far, the takeover of Damascus by HTS appears only to have liberated Israel, leaving it freer to bully and terrorize its neighbors into submission.

The article first appeared on Jonathan Cook's Blog.

Feeding chaos

Israel cripples Syria's defence



By Binoy Kampmark
Scholar

OPINION

The justifications are always the same. We are moving into territory for security reasons. We are creating a temporary buffer zone from which tactical advantage can be gained against potential dangers. Then, over time, these buffers become strategic fixtures, de facto real estate seizures, and annexations. Israel now finds itself in what was a United Nations-patrolled buffer zone on the Golan Heights, and Turkey is established in parts of northern Syria, keeping a watchful eye on Kurdish militants.

Since October 7 last year, Israel's response to the attacks by Hamas has been one of sledgehammers and chisels, a conscious attempt to broaden the conflict beyond its Palestinian confines to targeting the Lebanese armed group Hezbollah and its sponsor, Iran. In doing so, Israel has played an increasingly destructive role in Syria, where Hezbollah targets and Iranian supply lines have been struck with regularity. The move is intended to cripple Tehran's Axis of Resistance, a patchwork of Shia armed groups spanning Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria.

With the collapse of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, Israel intends further disruption. This marks a departure from a policy it had maintained with Assad for some years, one that permitted him and the Syrian Arab Army to operate without molestation subject to one stern caveat: that Hezbollah and, by virtue of that, Iran's influence could also be contained. This point is made in documents recently unearthed by the New Lines magazine, one that directly involved a channel of communication between an Israeli operative code-named "Mousa" (Mosses) and the Syrian Defence Minister Lt. Gen. Ali Mahmoud Abbas.



An aerial photo shows Syrian naval ships destroyed during an overnight Israeli attack on the port city of Latakia on December 10, 2024.
● AAREF WATAD/AFP

A message dated May 17, 2023, outlines Israel's indignation at an incident involving the firing of three rockets on Israel from the Golan Heights, an action purportedly instructed by Khaled Meshal and Saleh al-Arouri of Hamas. "Lately, because of Quds Day and Flag March, we are observing Palestinian activities on your land [...] We warn you of the prospect of any activity of these parties on your territory and we demand you to stop any [Iranian] preparations for the use of these forces on your territory — you're responsible for what is happening in Syria."

The collapse of Assad's rule, spearheaded by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), has brought Israeli intentions to the fore. The group's leader, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, has made previous mutterings favouring the Hamas October 7 attacks and expressing solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Since then, al-Jolani has expressed no desire to do battle "with Israel or anyone else and we will not let Syria be used as launchpad for attacks," promised to protect minority rights and disband rebel groups for incorporation into the Ministry of Defence, and dissembled on whether the new administration would be focused on Islamic law. On December 10, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made fairly redundant remarks that his cabinet had no intention of meddling in Syria's internal affairs, only to warn Assad's successors that any move allowing "Iran to re-establish itself in Syria or allows the transfer of

Iranian weapons or any other weapons to Hezbollah, or attacks us — we will respond forcefully and we will exact a heavy price from it."

Defence Minister Israel Katz similarly warned Syria's triumphant rebel forces that "whoever follows in Assad's footsteps will end up like Assad did. We don't allow an extremist Islamic terror entity to act against Israel from beyond its borders... we will do anything to remove the threat."



Since Assad's fleeing on December 7, Israel's air force has made it a priority to destroy the military means of any successor regime in Damascus, citing concerns that material would fall into the hands of undesirable jihadists. Over December 10 and 11, 350 strikes were conducted on anti-aircraft batteries, airfields, weapons production sites including chemical weapons, combat aircraft, and missiles (Scud, cruise, coast-to-sea, and air-defence varieties) in Damascus, Homs, Tartus, Latakia, and Palmyra. "I authorised the air force to bomb strategic military capabilities left by the Syrian army," reasoned Netanyahu, "so that they would not fall into the hands of the jihadists."

Israeli soldiers cross the security fence moving towards the so-called Alpha Line that separates the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights from Syria on December 15, 2024.
● MATIAS DELACROIX/AP

the state that awaits the fledgling ruling parties in Syria, who can only count themselves as a ragtag transitional entity at this point, stirs an already turbulent, precarious situation. The very scenario that Netanyahu and his planners wish to avoid, and Assad sought to prevent, may well be realised.

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