

Battle in Sweida

Where Israel, Turkey clash over Syria's trade routes

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OPINION

With the fall of former Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and the ascent of Ahmad al-Sharaa (Abu Muhammad al-Jolani) to power in Damascus — with backing from Turkey — Syria has shifted from an integral part of the Axis of Resistance to contested terrain between rival regional projects. Two competing visions have emerged: Turkey's Development Road, a proposed transport corridor connecting Basra to Turkey and onward to Europe; and Israel's Peace Line, which aims to link the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean via Jordan and the occupied port of Haifa.

Regional battle for Syria's southern gateway

These infrastructure corridors are not mere economic initiatives; They are the battlegrounds of a new regional order. Sweida, long viewed as peripheral, has become a strategic flashpoint in this war of logistics. This Druze-majority province has become a potential gateway to a regional war over trade and transportation corridors. These plans extend into neighboring Lebanon, too. The strategic weight of Sweida stems from its location at the nexus of these rival projects. The province could serve as a vital artery for Ankara's overland ambitions or as a chokepoint threatening Tel Aviv's efforts to bypass Turkish and Iranian territories. Thus, the vital southern Syrian governorate of Sweida suddenly finds itself on the frontline — not due to a dispute over a localized conflict, but because it is a strategic key in the railway battle where roads become borders and pipelines turn into fronts. Meanwhile, Sweida's Druze religious leadership issued a strongly worded statement rejecting the use of their region as a bridge for foreign projects that ignore their sovereignty or existence. The statement declared, "Those betting on the violation of Sweida will lose. The mountain's fate will be decided in the mountain itself." The elders emphasized Sweida's geography as a crossroads and demanded the opening of land corridors with Jordan and with areas held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the north.

Old-new Katz project

In November 2018, then-transport minister and current Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz unveiled at an international transport conference in Oman the Railway of Peace project, aiming to connect Persian Gulf countries to Israel via Jordan, as part of a strategic plan to boost economic integration and link West Asian markets to Israeli Mediterranean ports. Katz — who arrived less than two weeks after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's surprise meeting with the late Sultan Qaboos in Muscat — presented the project as a massive infrastructure undertaking involving railway lines linking the port of Haifa in northern Israel to Persian Gulf cities via the Jordanian capital Amman, with the



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possibility of connecting Palestinians to Haifa port to facilitate trade exchange. Katz said during the conference: "This project is not just a bridge for transport, but a bridge for peace and economy among the region's peoples. We aim to create faster, cheaper, and safer transportation, opening new horizons for economic and political cooperation." He added: "The Railway of Peace will allow avoiding security risks at the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab and open vital alternatives for shipping goods between the Persian Gulf and Europe." The project stands out as an important alternative, allowing Persian Gulf states to bypass security threats at the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab, providing a safer and cheaper land route for goods transport, with significant economic benefits for all participating countries, including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, other Persian Gulf states, and potentially Iraq and Syria. The project also plans to establish modern logistics centers, such as the cargo zone in Irbid, Jordan, to boost the local economy. Katz highlighted the project's importance for Palestinians, saying, "By connecting Palestinians to Haifa port, we give them a chance to participate in global trade, which will bring them economic and social benefits."

The inclusion of Jordan and the occupied Palestine was floated as economic sweeteners. But the true aim was regional hegemony through infrastructure. While Katz's statements were laced with euphemisms about peace and development, the underlying logic was clear: Use transport infrastructure to normalize Israel's regional role while locking out Iranian and Turkish competitors. Despite most Arab states involved lacking official diplomatic relations with Israel, the project received clear American support, with then US envoy Jason Greenblatt considering it part of Washington's efforts to push the Deal of the Century for regional peace.

Goeconomics as political warfare

Alongside the Turkish-Israeli competition over railway corridors through southern Syria, Saudi Arabia's ambitious project NEOM — along with the infrastructure system linked to the UAE's Al-Ain 2030 — emerges as a third actor reshaping the geopolitical game. The project aims to transform northwestern Saudi Arabia into a global economic and logistical hub, including railway lines and transport networks extending from the heart of the Arabian Peninsula to the Red Sea, inevitably repositioning regional trade routes. This shift directly ties into Tel Aviv's plans to build a railway

line stretching from Eilat (adjacent to NEOM) to Aqaba, then to southern Syria, and onward to Beirut or Tripoli. This functions as a land-based extension of NEOM — and a strategic complement to Riyadh's ambition to bypass chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz by linking the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean. Here, Sweida becomes an indispensable strategic node that could serve as the gateway crossing from Syria's occupied Golan to Kurdish-controlled areas in Syria and Iraq. The Israeli media and officials have at times referred to this as the route of David's Corridor — a corridor that reimagines Israel's role in the region through infrastructural dominance, fusing settler colonialism with logistics. In other words, NEOM's rise as a maritime-land axis enhances the geopolitical value of the Aqaba-Sweida line, pushing the occupation state to be more stringent. For Tel Aviv, any Turkish expansion southward is an existential threat to these designs. For Ankara, securing Sweida is essential to asserting influence over the Levant's southern flank.

Sweida becomes battlefield

Before setting his sights on Sweida, Sharaa's rise was marked by brutal campaigns in the coastal region, including massacres of Alawite communities that cleared space for Turkish-backed dominance. With those opera-

tions complete, attention turned south toward the Druze stronghold. In the post-Assad vacuum, Sharaa chose Sweida as the base for consolidating power and advancing Turkey's project — with the aim of securing Syria's southern border crossings, creating strategic depth, and extending influence toward Lebanon and Jordan. Turkey backed this trajectory through direct and indirect agreements with Syrian factions aligned with it, particularly Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which now plays a central role in administering areas from Idlib to the eastern Hama countryside, where the desert meets the roads leading south toward Sweida. Ankara's ambitions have also expanded toward Lebanon — especially the northern city of Tripoli and its surroundings — where it has built social, political, and economic influence through networks of institutions, associations, and newly naturalized citizens. The port of Tripoli, which Turkey hopes to transform into an alternative to Beirut's port, is envisioned as a key station along the regional transit route. Sharaa based part of this conviction on secret understandings made in the Azerbaijani capital, Baku, involving Syrian and Israeli figures under unofficial Turkish auspices. These understandings were interpreted as implicit approval for his southward expansion, in exchange for guarantees against the return of Iranian influence and Turkish commitments not to threaten Israeli security.

But this ambition triggered an Israeli red line. Netanyahu warned of the emergence of a "new southern Lebanon" in Syria. Katz declared, "The Druze are our brothers, and we will not leave them alone facing this expansion," signalling readiness to intervene. Soon after, Israeli warplanes targeted Damascus and Sharaa-aligned units advancing south. Ankara, meanwhile, has publicly reasserted its own red lines. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated after a cabinet meeting on July 17: "We did not agree to the division of Syria yesterday, nor today, and we will categorically not agree tomorrow. Those who descend from the well, holding on to the rope

of Israel, will sooner or later realize what a serious mistake they have made." In reality, there is no open confrontation between Turkey and Israel, but a tacit division of spoils, with each pursuing its own corridor ambitions while managing the conflict through proxies and backchannels.

Vegetable truck incident

The security explosion in Sweida did not arise from an explicit political decision but was triggered by a seemingly minor incident: A dispute over the cargo of a vegetable truck at a checkpoint. Intelligence information later revealed that this incident was the spark igniting a wide clash involving local Druze groups, Sharaa's HTS-led factions, and remnants of armed groups unofficially reintegrated on the ground with indirect Turkish support.

The incident quickly escalated into an open battle involving Israeli reconnaissance drones, local armored units, and armed groups bearing conflicting flags — some close to Ankara, others linked to extremist organizations recently reactivated. Within a week, over 700 were dead.

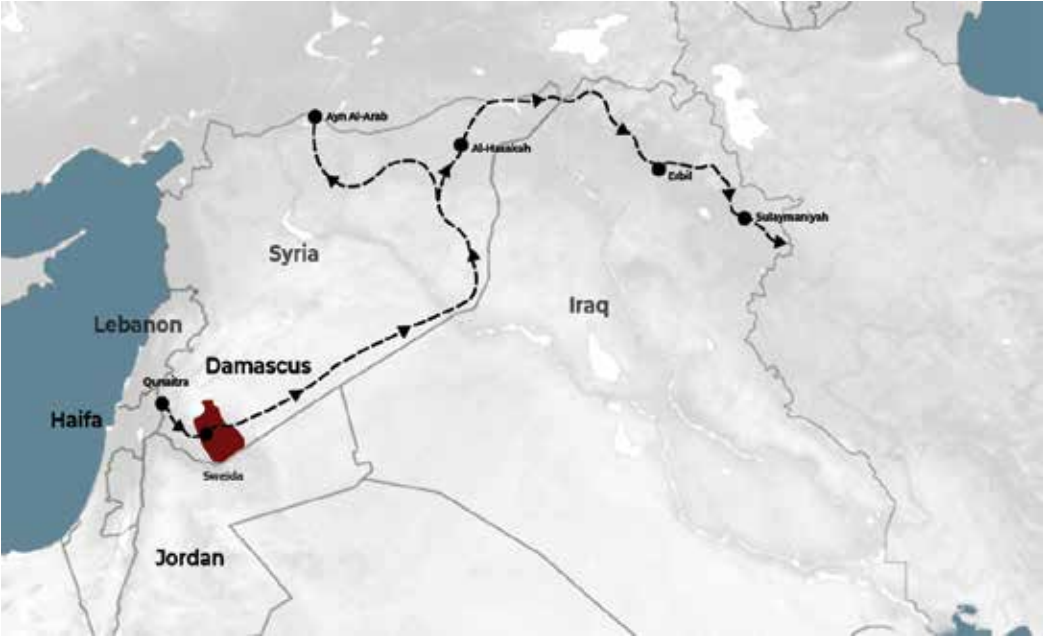
Washington watches, regulates, but won't decide

The US was not absent from the scene. Washington expressed its welcome to Sharaa's assumption of power on multiple occasions, seeing him as an internationally acceptable figure compared to the previous government. However, it did not grant him a free mandate to move southward. US envoy to Syria, Tom Barrack, clearly stated that Washington supports Syria's territorial unity but simultaneously warned against unilateral actions that could threaten regional stability. In truth, Washington's role has grown, but as an observer rather than an active player. This passivity has created room for regional powers like Turkey and Israel to draw new influence maps across a devastated Syrian geography. Washington appeared keen to regulate the pace but was unwilling to make a decisive decision. It seeks to avoid direct confrontation with Turkey or Israel, but is also not ready to allow unchecked Turkish expansion.

War of projects

The battle for Sweida is not really about sectarianism or governance. It is a war between two infrastructural visions: one Turkish, one Israeli. Each project aims to dictate the routes of trade, energy, and influence in post-Assad Syria. Sharaa, despite his roots in Al-Qaeda and ISIS, has become a placeholder for Turkish interests. But without genuine alliances or internal legitimacy, he faces the full weight of Israeli hostility. The Battle of Sweida is the first real test for the post-Assad era. Its outcome will shape not only Syria's future borders, but the entire transport and power map of the region. It will also determine whether the new Syria will follow Turkey's Development Road or Israel's so-called Peace Line.

The article first appeared on The Cradle.



The map depicts David's Corridor, a planned project aiming to connect Israel to Kurdish-controlled areas in Syria and Iraq. ● THE CRADLE