

Israel blindsides Trump in self-serving effort to break up Syria


By Elfadil Ibrahim
Columnist
O P I N I O N

Just days before Israeli F-35s screamed over Damascus, the improbable seemed within reach. US Special Envoy Tom Barrack, leveraging his dual role as Ambassador to Turkey and point man on Syria, was brokering painstaking back-channel talks between two historic enemies. The Syrian government, led by interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa, the former Islamist militant turned statesman, signaled openness to a non-aggression pact with Israel. Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar publicly welcomed Syria into "the peace and normalization circle in the Middle East".

By July 12, leaks suggested a deal was drawing closer: Al-Sharaa and Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani, forced to move quickly in exchange for much-needed security guarantees, reconstruction aid, and investment, had reportedly met directly with Israeli officials in Azerbaijan. In his ongoing quest for a Nobel Peace Prize, US President Donald Trump had personally met al-Sharaa in Riyadh and thereafter started dismantling decades of sanctions, betting big on Syria's rehabilitation and regional integration.

Central to this US vision was the consolidation of a stable, unitary Syrian state. Barrack is spearheading this arduous task, working to dismantle potential sources of fragmentation. Currently, his most critical, and contentious mission is the merger of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) — America's ground allies against ISIS — into the nascent Syrian national army. Barrack's message to SDF commander Mazloum Abdi during tense Damascus meetings earlier this month was uncompromising: "One country, one army, one people."

Barrack bluntly dismissed Kurdish demands for federalism or autonomous military structures as unworkable and destabilizing, arguing, "In all of these countries, what we learned is federalism doesn't work."

This drive for a unified military command is the bedrock of US strategy to prevent Syria's balkanization and create a viable partner for regional peace, including normalization with Israel.



The eruption of violence in Syria's Druze heartland of Sweida on July 11 provided Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with the perfect catalyst to derail this fragile progress. When clashes broke out between Druze militias and Bedouin tribes, Syria's government intervened to restore order — reportedly notifying Israel in advance about troop movements, clarifying that the move was not intended as a threat to its southern neighbor. According to reports, Syria's government misread the situation, believing it had a green light from both the US and Israel to deploy troops, encouraged by US messaging that Syria should be governed as a centralized state, and influenced by nascent security talks with Israel. Israel, however, viewed the situation as an invitation for escalation. War Minister Israel Katz framed devastating air strikes on Syrian tanks and later in Damascus itself as a moral imperative: protecting a persecuted Druze minority, a group with a substantial and visible presence in Israel, including in the Israeli military. "The regime [Syrian cabinet] sent troops south of Damascus...and began slaughtering the Druze," Netanyahu declared a day after Israeli bombs tore into the General Command Headquarters of


the Syrian Army. Israel's actions — encroaching into Syrian territory and conducting hundreds of air strikes since the fall of Assad and now bombing Damascus during sensitive negotiations — directly undermine US policy by preventing the consolidation of a sovereign and unified Syria capable of reclaiming its south and becoming a viable partner for the US vision. Crucially, the very Druze community Netanyahu claims to protect largely rejects this imposed patronage. Two out of the three spiritual leaders of the Druze community in Syria — Sheikhs Hamoud al-Hanawi and Youssef Jarboun — emphasize their Syrian identity and demand protection from the Syrian state, not external powers. Sheikh Jarboun, on the back of recent events in Sweida, insisted solutions must come from within Syria, also sending a message to Israel that "any attack on the Syrian state is an attack on us...We are part of Syria."

Among Syria's Druze leadership, only Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri champions Israel's intervention, labeling the cabinet "terrorist criminal gangs" — a view rejected by many within his community. This isolation was articulated by Laith al-Balous, leader of the influential "Rijal al Karama" (Men

of Dignity) militia. Formed years earlier to defend the Druze against both the deposed Assad regime and extremists, al-Balous forcefully countered al-Hijri on Al Jazeera: "There is one of the leaders who took the sect to another direction. We, as the people of the Sweida Governorate, reject it and do not accept it," adding that we must "stand with our Syrian people".

Israel's inability to act as sole guarantor of the Druze community's security in Syria was laid bare that Friday when — just days after bombing Syria's Defense Ministry and presidential palace — an Israeli official tacitly admitted Damascus alone could stabilize the crisis. "In light of ongoing instability," the unnamed official told Reuters, Israel would now "allow limited entry of Syrian internal security forces into Sweida district for the next 48 hours".

This reversal implicitly acknowledged that the Syrian government — whose troops and command structure Israel had targeted — remain the indispensable actor needed to restore order and act as a buffer between the warring Bedouin tribes and Druze militias. Indeed, these localized clashes were the underlying trigger that drew in Syrian government forces, whose


Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (L) stands with US President Donald Trump after signing the Abraham Accords in Washington on September 15, 2020.
● TOM BRENNER/REUTERS


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Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad Hassan al-Shibani (2nd-L) stands next to US envoy for Syria Thomas Barrack as he raises the American flag at the US ambassador's residency in Damascus, Syria, on May 29, 2025.
● FIRAS MAKDESI/REUTERS

intervention then became Israel's pretext for bombing. The US administration, blindsided by Israel's bombings, scrambled to contain the fallout. Officials revealed they explicitly "told the Israelis to stand down and take a breath," urging direct talks with Damascus instead of bombs. Secretary of State Marco Rubio publicly framed the strikes as a dangerous impediment to building a "peaceful and stable Syria," undermining months of US political capital invested in al-Sharaa's government. State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce pointedly clarified that "the United States did not support recent Israeli strikes."

Most recently, Special Envoy Barrack went a step further, siding explicitly with Syria and noting that the government "has conducted themselves as best they can...to bring a diverse society together," adding that Israel's air assault "came at a very bad time". Israel's strikes expose a cynical pattern that echoes its sabotage of nuclear talks between the US and Iran. Just as Netanyahu lobbied relentlessly against US-Iran diplomacy — creating conditions for Israel's unilateral strikes that later succeeded in luring Washington into conflict — he now undermines US-Syrian rapprochement. The contradiction here is particularly glaring: Israel has spent the last few weeks publicly urging Syria to join the Abraham Accords; Yet, it also actively attacks the very government forces it claims to want as partners.

Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar — who previously dismissed al-Sharaa's government as a "bunch of jihadists" — openly championed Syria's federalization in February 2025, insisting on dividing the country along sectarian lines to ensure respect for "different ways of life". This vision, which included lobbying Washington to allow Russia to retain its bases on Syria's Mediterranean coast to counter Turkey's influence and keep Syria decentralized, stands in direct opposition to the unified, stable state that the Syrians, neighboring states, and the Trump administration are working to build.

Israel's escalation in Syria, which awkwardly coincides with US efforts to lift sanctions and establish unified military control over Syrian territory, places the Trump administration in a tight corner. Through its recent maneuvers, Israel has signaled its intent to control Syria's destiny, regardless of the damage to US strategy.

With each bomb dropped on Damascus, Israel isn't just attacking Syrian infrastructure. It is dismantling the very pillars of a potential regional order of sovereign states based on stability and integration, revealing a fundamental divergence that is becoming increasingly costly for Washington, and for the wider region.

The ultimate test for the Trump administration is whether it can restrain Israel's aggressive approach and allow its own vision for a unified, stable Syria to take root.

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