

# Price of reintegrating Syria?

## Become Israel, America's slave

By Rania Hammad and Tawfiq Al-Ghussein  
Researchers on political affairs

### OPINION

The visit of Ahmad al-Sharaa, Syria's de facto leader, to the White House earlier last month is being framed as Syria's return to international legitimacy. In reality, it means something profoundly different: the reshaping of a shattered state into a system of managed dependency — and the process is being overseen by the very powers that helped destroy it. What Washington calls “rehabilitation” uses humanitarian language to mask external control. The key sector where that control is exercised is the energy sector. The limits of Syria's permitted recovery are already clear in the language of Western policy institutes, donor coordination platforms, and Persian Gulf-Western investment forums: low-risk sectors such as logistics, agriculture, and labor-intensive manufacturing are allowed to revive, while strategic sectors — energy, major infrastructure, telecommunications, and defense — remain locked behind political conditions tied to sanctions relief and regional alignment. Energy is the decisive lever in this system: by regulating Syria's access to its own oil and gas fields, refining capacity, electricity generation, and pipeline routes, external actors are setting the parameters for Syrian sovereignty. This means that Syria's diplomatic “normalization,” presented as a step towards stability, is actually designed to entrench dependency rather than overcome it. This is evidenced in Syria's emerging post-war architecture. These dynamics are not speculative. Since 2022, the Brussels Syria Conferences, IMF technical workshops, and analyses from the Atlantic Council, Carnegie, and the European Institute of Peace have openly stated that sanctions relief affecting the energy sector will depend on Syrian compliance with Western regional priorities. Under these conditions, aid ceases to serve reconstruction, instead becoming a technology of political supervision. In this sense, Western consultancies, Persian Gulf sovereign wealth vehicles, and donor agencies function less as partners than as custodians of Syrian recovery. And most importantly, “normalization” is, in practice, the monetization of sovereignty because access to energy revenues is now contingent upon political obedience. Al-Sharaa's political posture mirrors this regional recalibration. As early as 2020, during the acceleration of Arab normalization under the Abraham Accords, Syrian and Lebanese outlets quoted him telling his cadres that “the world is changing.” He went on to say: “Arab states are normalizing relations with Israel. We must read these realities carefully.” His refusal to criticize the Accords and his silence during Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza in 2023–2025 — and during Israel's consolidation of its control over the Syrian Golan Heights

indicate the acceptance of a regional structure built around Israeli military primacy and Persian Gulf-Israeli energy integration. His attempt to recast himself as a statesman in a 2021 PBS Frontline interview — declaring that “we are not a threat to the West...we want to build a balanced relationship with all countries that respect our identity” — fits neatly within this trajectory. The language of “balance” signals an understanding that Syrian political legitimacy now depends on adopting frameworks designed outside Syria, particularly those governing the energy sector. Sovereignty is performed, but increasingly displaced to foreign centers of power.

### Sidestepping Palestine

This alignment extends to his policies towards Palestinian movements in Syria. In a 2022 internal address, he insisted that “we will not allow external groups to drag Syria into wars that serve other agendas.” While couched in the language of sovereignty, the formulation conforms to Western and Persian Gulf expectations that Palestinian factions in Damascus be restricted, especially those linked to Iran or Hezbollah, and thus capable of influencing regional energy and security arrangements. Yet this is not a break from Syrian history. Under Hafez al-Assad, rhetorical solidarity with Palestine existed alongside interventions that weakened the Palestinian movement, from Tal al-Zaatar to the War of the Camps. As Rashid Khalidi and Patrick Seale both observed, Palestinian factions were treated as both assets and liabilities, to be shaped according to Syrian state strategy. Al-Sharaa's stance reproduces this pattern within a landscape now dominated by external powers. His rise unfolded as Israel intensified its dismantling of Syria's military and industrial infrastructure in late 2024. As Gaza endured genocidal destruction, Israel expanded operations across Syria, striking air-defense systems, command centers, power stations, fuel depots, and the fragile national electricity grid. These strikes prevented any reconstitution of deterrence and reinforced Israeli control over Jabal al-Sheikh and the wider Golan Heights. Al-Sharaa's silence signalled acceptance of a regional alignment in which Syrian strategic and energy sovereignty is effectively suspended under the pretext of “security”. For Washington, al-Sharaa offers an anti-Iran axis without direct American intervention. Sanctions relief — especially those governing oil-export waivers and regional electricity transfers — is granted selectively. Israel's actions reveal the scale of external interference. Beyond occupying Jabal al-Sheikh and the sustained air campaign targeting Syrian energy and transportation infrastructure, Israel's intelligence networks have exploited grievances in Suwayda, amplifying Druze separatism to weaken the state. These operations are part of a coherent



A general view of Rmailan oil field is pictured in northeastern Syria, near the border with Turkey, on January 8, 2025.

strategy of keeping Syria militarily incapacitated and economically vulnerable. The objective is to limit Syria's ability to challenge Israeli dominance.

### Israel is the master of the house

This strategy is guided by Israel's doctrine of “calibrated containment,” which treats permanent Syrian fragmentation as a security objective. Israeli operations across Syria and Lebanon, including restrictions on Hezbollah's mobility, help preserve a system of managed instability in the country. The suppression of Palestinian political forces in Damascus fits the same logic, preventing any alternative political pole from emerging that could disrupt the regional energy architecture now being built. Arab regimes reopening their embassies in Damascus present their engagement as a sign of solidarity, yet their calculations are fundamentally transactional. Reintegration under US oversight stabilizes their own regimes and embeds Syria within a regional system governed by Western control over energy flows, transit routes, and infrastructure investment. Turkey has entrenched a parallel form of dependency. Its shift from direct intervention to structural integration has transformed northern Syria into an extension of its border economy, where Turkish currency, contractors, and energy distributors dominate. This is

framed as “stabilization,” but it institutionalizes long-term dependence on Ankara. The Persian Gulf monarchies have become Syria's principal financiers. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar deploy reconstruction capital through corporate vehicles tied to their national energy strategies. Their funding is not aid but leverage, conditioning liquidity on political conformity. These arrangements fold Syria into a Persian Gulf-Israeli energy framework that privileges external interests over national renewal. Russia and Iran, though critical to preventing state collapse, now find their influence shrinking. Moscow remains militarily present but strategically diminished; Tehran's networks have been disrupted by al-Sharaa's restructuring. Their foothold is tolerated only insofar as it does not challenge the architecture shaped by Western, Persian Gulf, and Israeli priorities. And amid all of this, Israel remains the uncontested regional hegemon. As Israel launches periodic strikes across the region with total impunity, it is sending a message to the people of the region: we are the masters of the house. For Syrians, the implications are profound. A state that once claimed centrality in the Arab liberation project risks becoming the conduit through which the Palestinian presence is erased on its own soil. If pressure on the remaining Palestin-

ian factions continues, al-Sharaa faces a historic choice: revive a meaningful liberation project or preside over Syria's absorption into a regional order built on foreign control and energy dependency. This is not rehabilitation: it is annexation through consent. As Gaza burns and Lebanon falters, the same powers that invoke security to justify genocide invoke stability to legitimize Syria's subordination. The vocabulary shifts, but the logic doesn't. Yet Syria's predicament is not solely the result of foreign manipulation. Dependency took root in decades of authoritarian governance, economic mismanagement, and the suppression of dissent. External powers merely exploited vulnerabilities already embedded. True independence begins with self-critique as much as it does with resistance. It demands institutions capable of withstanding external pressure, particularly in the energy sector, where sovereignty is most easily compromised. Sovereignty cannot be reclaimed by aligning with stronger states or through orchestrated defiance. It begins with knocking down the political foundations that allow dependency to take hold. Tell me who your friends are, and I will tell you who you are.

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Debris lies on the ground at the scene of an Israeli strike on a military facility in Syria's southern Hama governorate, on April 3, 2025.



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