

SURİYE'NİN ABD/İSRAİL – İRAN SAVAŞINDAKİ KONUMU

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SYRIA'S POSITION IN THE U.S./ISRAEL–IRAN WAR

The large-scale military operations launched by the United States and Israel against Iran on February 28, 2026, quickly escalated into a regional crisis, affecting nearly every country in the region. The war marked a pivotal turning point in terms of the Middle East's security equation and regional geopolitics. Iran, in turn, responded swiftly to the attacks by launching missile and drone strikes against Israel and U.S. bases in the Gulf, causing tensions in the region to escalate rapidly¹. On the same day, eight countries—including Iran, Israel, Iraq, Jordan, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates—announced the closure of their airspace, and airline flights were suspended. Syria, meanwhile, announced that it had closed a portion of its airspace along the southern border with Israel for 12 hours². In this context, properly assessing Syria's response to the February 28 operations necessitates an understanding of the political and strategic transformation the country has undergone following the 2024 leadership transition.

The new political structure that emerged following the change in leadership in Syria in 2024 has reshaped the country's foreign policy orientations. The administration led by Ahmed al-Shara is striving to recover from the devastation caused by the civil war while simultaneously facing the influence of regional powers in Syria. In this process, the tension between Iran and Israel, in particular, has become one of the key factors directly influencing Syria's foreign policy.

The new administration has inherited a legacy that prevents it from completely severing the Iran-centered military and political ties established in the past; conversely, Israel's ongoing attacks on Iran-linked targets within Syrian territory have left the country facing the risk of direct conflict. However, Syria's limited response to these attacks and its avoidance of becoming a direct party to the conflict indicate that the country has not embarked on a clear shift in alliances.

This analysis argues that, contrary to claims that Syria has chosen a side in the Iran-Israel tension, it has instead pursued a policy of necessary balance. In this context, the historical background and current state of Syria's relations with Iran will first be examined, followed by an analysis of Israel's military activities in Syrian territory and Syria's responses to this situation. Finally, the reasons why the Syrian government has been compelled to adopt a cautious and balanced policy due to both

external pressures and internal vulnerabilities will be assessed.

The Historical Background and Current State of Syria–Iran Relations

The foundations of Syrian–Iranian relations date back to the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution. During this period, while Syria became one of the first countries to swiftly recognize and support the new regime in Iran—despite its regional isolation—Iran began to pursue anti-imperialist and anti-

¹ <https://tr.euronews.com/2026/02/28/abd-ve-israil-irana-saldiri-baslatti-simdiye-kadar-neler-oldu>

² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/28/airspace-closed-airlines-halt-flights-as-us-israel-attack-iran-responds>

Israel policies. Thus, the relationship between these two nations evolved into both a strategic partnership and an alliance (Sinkaya, 2011; 39). One of the key developments that elevated Syria-Iran relations to a higher level was Syria's explicit support for Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, which broke out in 1980. Syria shut down the pipeline enabling Iraq's oil exports; in return, Iran provided cheap oil and significant material aid, some of which was provided without compensation (Sinkaya, 2011; 39-40). Their joint efforts in the establishment of Hezbollah in Lebanon in 1982 further strengthened this cooperation, and the perception of a common enemy (Israel and Iraq) became the foundation of these relations.

This historical context also explains why Iran swiftly and resolutely supported the Assad regime when the civil war began in Syria in 2011. As Sinkaya emphasizes, from Iran's perspective, Syria is not merely an ally but also the key link in the chain extending to Hezbollah in Lebanon. For this reason, the survival of the regime in Damascus has become a strategic necessity for Tehran to preserve its regional influence. This relationship, described as a "marriage of convenience," is noted to be based more on a shared perception of threat and a calculation of interests than on ideological affinity.

Ożarowski's (2018) study also reinforces this framework. According to the author, Iran has been involved in the Syrian war from the very beginning at "political, diplomatic, military, and financial" levels; it has sent military advisers, established local militia structures, and supported the regime alongside Hezbollah. Particularly after 2012, Iran's support took on a more institutional form, with paramilitary structures directed by the Quds Force

expanding Iran's influence on the ground. This support was not only military but also had an economic dimension; the aim was to keep the Damascus regime afloat through credit lines, energy investments, and financial aid.

According to Ziarat and colleagues (2025), Iran-Syria relations deepened gradually during the 2010-2024 period. First came advisory support, followed by regionalization, and then a process of internationalization alongside Russia. The same study notes that Iran maintained its influence in Syria in the post-war period across the fields of culture, education, energy, and reconstruction; thereby deploying elements of soft power alongside its military presence. This situation demonstrates that Iran views Syria not only as a strategic sphere of influence during the war but also in the post-war period.

By 2024, with the overthrow of the Assad regime, Syrian-Iranian relations had entered a new era. The administration formed under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa has had to confront the foreign policy legacy inherited from the previous regime while simultaneously striving to repair the devastation caused by the civil war that spanned many years. The military, political, and economic sphere of influence that Iran has established in Syria is one of the most significant elements of this legacy. While the complete elimination of this structure in the short term does not appear feasible, it stands out as a structural factor that directly constrains the new administration's foreign policy choices.

The transitional government has adopted a more cautious and distanced approach, avoiding the continuation of Iran-centered relations established during the Assad era

with the same intensity. Iran's military presence in Syria and Israel's regular attacks on this presence carry the risk of drawing the country into a direct conflict zone. For this reason, while the Damascus government seeks to maintain its relations with Iran without completely severing them, it is pursuing a policy of controlled and limited responses to avoid direct military confrontation with Israel. This situation demonstrates that a security-focused and risk-averse approach has been adopted in Syria's foreign policy.

Israel's Military Activities in Syrian Territory and Syria's Response

There is a specific strategic rationale underlying Israel's targeting of Syrian targets during the Israel/U.S.–Iran conflicts. Syria has long served as a critical hub for Iran's military and logistical activities in the region, and it plays a significant role in the deployment of Iranian-backed forces and the continuity of supply lines extending to Hezbollah. For this reason, rather than engaging in a direct and costly conflict with Iran, Israel aims to limit Iran's regional capabilities and neutralize potential threats before they materialize by striking Iranian-linked targets in Syria. In this context, Israel's interventions in the Syrian theater have evolved into a multidimensional structure encompassing both airstrikes and limited ground operations.

Israel's military strategy in Syria has entered a clear escalation phase beginning

in the first week of March 2026. At the outset of this process, the Damascus regime deployed its elite units and heavy weaponry to the Lebanon border on March 3–5 in an attempt to bring Hezbollah's operational space under control. This move reflects the new administration's desire to minimize potential friction with Israel and prevent Syrian territory from being used as a proxy battlefield³. However, despite these preventive efforts, on March 20, 2026, the Israeli Air Force carried out a large-scale airstrike targeting military facilities in Suwayda. Israel sought to justify this intervention by citing active protection against pressures targeting the Druze community in the region, thereby demonstrating a strategy to establish a local sphere of influence through Syria's internal social dynamics⁴.

Israel's attacks against Syria have not been limited to airstrikes. Following the attack on military facilities in Suwayda, the operation appears to have intensified with ground incursions carried out in the rural areas of Deraa and Quneitra between March 21 and 23⁵. In response to these developments, which pose the risk of creating a de facto buffer zone along Syria's southern border, the government led by Ahmed al-Shara has limited its reaction to a diplomatic condemnation rather than direct military engagement⁶. Combined with diplomatic support⁷ from regional actors, Damascus's cautious stance clearly highlights the risk-averse and balance-seeking nature of Syria's foreign policy post-2024. According to a report in Arab

³<https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2026/03/03/syria/>

⁴<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2026/03/20/israel-struck-syrian-army-camps-after-druze-attacked->

⁵<https://qna.org.qa/en/news/news-details?id=israeli-occupation-forces-conduct-incursion-in-western-daraa-in-southern-syria&date=21/03/2026>

⁶<https://qna.org.qa/en/news/news-details?id=syrian-foreign-ministry-denounces-israeli-airstrike-on-southern-syria&date=20/03/2026>

⁷ <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/arap-ulkeleri-israil-in-suriye-deki-askeri-tesislere-saldirisini-kinadi/3873619>

News⁸, Israeli forces advanced toward settlements in the Quneitra countryside, conducting limited ground movements with military vehicles and carrying out short-term entry-exit operations in some areas. Such recurring ground incursions demonstrate that Israel is not limited to airstrikes alone but is also pursuing a strategy of low-intensity yet sustained military pressure in southern Syria. While this strategy complicates Syria's efforts to remain neutral in regional tensions, it emerges as a consequence of the regime's priority to safeguard its survival.

Conclusion: The Syrian Government's Policy of Balance

Syria's avoidance of taking a clear side in the U.S./Israel–Iran conflict is not merely a preferred foreign policy orientation but also a result of structural imperatives. In the post-2024 period, the administration taking shape under the leadership of Ahmed al-Shara is emerging as an actor with limited maneuverability due to both internal political fragilities and intense external pressures. This situation is forcing Syria's foreign policy onto a security-focused and pragmatic trajectory rather than one driven by ideological preferences.

The institutional weakness, social fragmentation, and economic collapse resulting from the protracted civil war stand out as the fundamental internal dynamics limiting the new administration's capacity. The factors that largely prevent Syria from taking risks in foreign policy include the fact that state capacity has not yet been fully reestablished, the central authority's inability to maintain homogeneous control across the country, and the continued presence of various

armed actors. In this context, the devastating consequences of engaging in direct military conflict with Israel are viewed as an unacceptable cost for the regime's survival.

Syria's need for foreign aid and international legitimacy is another key factor directly shaping its foreign policy choices. Indeed, the new administration's efforts to establish more balanced relations with Western actors and regional countries—in order to regain acceptance within the international system and secure resources for the reconstruction process—support this assessment. However, Iran's ongoing military and logistical presence in Syria, combined with historical economic and strategic dependencies, makes a sudden and complete severance of these ties both costly and risky. This situation not only makes it difficult to completely sever ties with Iran but also prevents these relationships from deepening to the extent they did in previous periods.

From the perspective of external factors, Syria lies at the intersection of a multi-layered power struggle. Iran's military and logistical presence on the ground, Israel's regular attacks against this presence, and the U.S.'s military capabilities in the region have turned Syria into a direct arena of competition. In this context, Syria's overt shift toward the Iranian axis carries the risk of triggering harsher military interventions by Israel and the U.S. Conversely, a sudden and radical severing of ties with Iran could destabilize the position of Iran-backed elements on the ground, leading both to the emergence of security vacuums and a weakening of the central government's control capacity.

⁸ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2637775/middle-east>

For this reason, the Damascus regime is pursuing a controlled policy that seeks to maintain relations with Iran without completely severing them, while simultaneously avoiding direct conflict with Israel. Through this necessary balancing strategy, Syria aims to both minimize current threats and protect its fragile internal structure.

Consequently, Syria's position in the U.S./Israel–Iran conflict should be interpreted not as a clear-cut choice of sides, as is often claimed, but as a search for balance shaped by multifaceted pressures. The Syrian government's cautious and limited responses reflect a rational survival strategy under current conditions rather than a sign of weakness. This suggests that, in the near term, Syria will continue to function as a balancing force seeking to manage the effects of regional power competition rather than as an active participant in that competition.

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