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CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS

MARCH 2025

Syria Becomes a Front Line in Protecting Saudi Security

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Introduction

Despite taking issue with Bashar al-Assad's regime, Saudi Arabia became greatly concerned about Syria's future following its ouster. The reasons for this are numerous. Türkiye is expanding its authority over northern Syria through its military presence there and its support for Syrian factions that could seek to reorder power arrangements to the detriment of Saudi Arabia. The toppling of the regime in Damascus has also altered the dynamics for Iran, which had helped to keep Assad in power and is now scrambling for a way to regain some measure of influence over the country—a prospect dreaded by Riyadh. Additionally, Israel has emerged as a persistent thorn in the Saudis' side by weakening the new Syrian regime and its armed forces, and also by establishing political and economic links with Druze notables in order gain leverage over the community.

Thus, Saudi Arabia is on edge. Its immediate concerns are preventing sectarian conflict in Syria and ensuring security along its borders with Jordan and Iraq, which

are vulnerable to spillover from Syria—whether of hardline Sunni Islamist ideology, Iranian proxy militia activity, or the Captagon trade. Its long-term interests lie in reviving Saudi influence in Syria as well as in the region as a whole. The feeling in Riyadh is that Saudi Arabia must recalibrate its strategy vis-à-vis Syria in order to strike a balance between stabilizing the country on the one hand and countering rising Turkish, Iranian, and Israeli influence on the other.

The Three-Pronged Challenge to Saudi Interests in Syria

Saudi Arabia has major worries over Turkish, Israeli, and Iranian designs on Syria. Though Riyadh and Ankara both seek to counter Iranian influence in the country, they are also rivals. Moreover, Türkiye is an ally of Qatar, with which Saudi Arabia has long been at loggerheads, meaning that Riyadh looks askance at the expansion of Turkish influence anywhere. As for Israel,

it is exploiting the current uncertain security situation to block the new Syrian military from salvaging what remains of its predecessor's weapons depots and securing abandoned Iranian arms, while also trying to leverage its growing ties with minority groups such as the Druze to expand its sway. Meanwhile, Iran's influence in Syria, though significantly weakened since the Assad regime's downfall, could rebound if Tehran capitalizes on the ongoing security-related turmoil to reestablish military enclaves in the country, as well as supply routes to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Saudi Arabia fears that all this would destabilize Syria, strengthen Iran's regional position, and complicate its own efforts to counter Tehran's proxies across the Middle East.

Already, [Türkiye dominates northern Syria and areas along the Euphrates River](#). Since 2016, [the Turks have conducted several military operations in these regions](#), largely to keep at bay the influence of Kurdish politico-military groups. Indeed, [Türkiye supports the Syrian National Army \(SNA\)](#), a coalition of militias that controls key northern Syrian regions such as Afrin, parts of the Aleppo countryside (including Manbij and Tel Rifaat), and the so-called Euphrates Shield zones. Formed in 2017 under Turkish auspices, the SNA today has an estimated strength of [35,000 to 70,000 fighters](#). The SNA's mandate is in large part to advance Türkiye's strategic objectives by blocking the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) from securing political autonomy in northeastern Syria. [The SDF is a coalition of U.S.-backed leftwing ethnic militias and rebel groups dominated by the People's Protection Units \(YPG\)](#), a Kurdish faction that Ankara views as an extension of its decades-long nemesis, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Ankara remains wary of the PKK despite the fact that its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, who is imprisoned in Türkiye, [recently called on the group to lay down its arms and dissolve itself](#).

Through the SNA's military operations as well as resettlement policies favoring Arab and Turkmen population groups, Ankara has altered local

demographics in areas such as Afrin and Tel Rifaat [to thin out the Kurdish population and weaken its dominance](#). It has also changed education and governance in these areas to impose the Turkish language and culture. This includes [mandating Turkish-language curricula in schools](#) and integrating Turkish administrative systems into the educational infrastructure, thereby reinforcing Türkiye's control of much of northern Syria. Moreover, alongside [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#), the [Sunni Islamist group](#) leading the charge, [the SNA took part in the offensives that dislodged the Assad regime and thus now has a presence beyond the north](#). Riyadh fears that Ankara's expanding role—particularly its use of the SNA and of Syrian refugee repatriation to reshape demographics and secure a loyal populace in Syria—could shift the regional power balance, strengthening Türkiye's position in the country and weakening that of Saudi Arabia.

[Israel's expansion of its military presence in the Golan Heights](#) beyond the area it has occupied since 1967 and into the UN-administered demilitarized zone since Assad's departure in December 2024, its [ground incursions into Syrian territory](#), and its increasingly frequent airstrikes on Syrian targets threaten Saudi Arabia's vision of a stable, unified Syria free of Iranian influence. On March 19, Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs [condemned Israel's bombing of Syrian territory](#) as a blatant violation of international law, and accused Israel of undermining Syria's stability through repeated attacks. Riyadh urged the United Nations Security Council to firmly oppose these actions, prevent escalation, and enforce accountability.

Additionally, the Israelis are attempting to ingratiate themselves with the Druze of Syria through Muwaffaq al-Tarif, the spiritual leader of the Druze community in Israel. Despite pushback from several sectors of the Syrian Druze community, [Tarif has thrown his weight behind Israel's declared aim to "protect" the community from the new regime in Damascus, albeit without direct intervention](#). Meanwhile, Syrian Druze figure

Khaldoun al-Hijri appears to have met with unnamed “U.S. officials” in Washington, D.C., [where he reportedly urged Israeli support for a nationwide armed rebellion against the new Syrian regime](#). Khaldoun is a close associate (and relative) of Syrian Druze religious notable Hikmat al-Hijri, though the latter has asserted that Khaldoun does not represent him. Meanwhile, Israel has also sought to capitalize on the economic difficulties in majority-Druze Sweida Governorate, [offering development aid and work opportunities](#) for some of its Druze residents in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights as part of a broader strategy to expand its influence. [Saudi Arabia fears that all this Israeli meddling in Syria could create a power vacuum](#) by which Israel would inadvertently allow Tehran to make its way back to Syria, a concern compounded by additional worries such as regional instability threatening Saudi influence and security.

Iran’s ability to rebuild its influence network in post-Assad Syria hinges in part on its economic reach, particularly when it comes to the [Captagon drug trade, previously a \\$10 billion industry](#) tied to Damascus, Hezbollah, and Tehran, which was upended by the Syrian regime’s collapse. New actors have emerged to fill the void, though several [Iran-linked networks persist](#). Saudi Arabia is vigilantly monitoring [Iran’s efforts to leverage Iraq as a conduit for projecting its military and economic influence into Syria](#). Of especial concern to Riyadh is Tehran-backed militias exploiting post-Assad instability to reroute drug trafficking from Syria to the Gulf through Iraq’s borders.

Recent events in Syria’s coastal region, such as the [ambush in March by Alawite insurgents](#) of elements of the new regime’s security services, [followed by the latter’s massacre of hundreds of Alawite civilians](#), have further destabilized the country. An aggrieved and inflamed Alawite population may present Iran with opportunities to reinsert itself into the Syrian equation, which in turn would enhance its ability to shore up a battered Hezbollah in Lebanon through new or

renewed supply lines. From the perspective of Israel, such revitalized Iranian influence in Syria would pose a significant security threat and could prompt it to launch a preemptive strike against Iranian-backed militia forces in the process of reconstituting themselves. This in turn would almost certainly lead to clashes and could risk broader regional instability, particularly if Hezbollah is involved.

Ultimately, the interventionist strategies of Türkiye, Israel, and Iran in Syria are wide-ranging and ambitious, spanning the military, political, economic, and demographic realms. Should Saudi Arabia fail to arrest or at least slow their progress, the role it has long attempted to maintain as a regional powerhouse and guardian of Arab interests would suffer a significant setback. For one thing, Türkiye, Israel, and Iran would be emboldened. And for another, Arab states, including Saudi Arabia’s immediate neighbors in the Gulf, might begin to bypass Riyadh and forge new regional alliances or act alone in pursuit of their goals. It is with such alarming scenarios in mind that Saudi Arabia is actively seeking to counterbalance Turkish, Israeli, and Iranian leverage in Syria.

How Saudi Arabia Is Confronting its Syria-Related Challenges

In the wake of Assad’s ouster, Saudi Arabia has pursued a multitrack approach toward shaping Syria’s political landscape. This involves a combination of diplomatic, economic, and security engagements aimed at supporting the new regime in Damascus and reintegrating it into the Arab world, blocking any attempted resumption of Iranian interference in Syrian affairs, and containing Israeli expansionism in Syrian territory. Additionally, [Saudi Arabia advocates the lifting of international sanctions on Syria](#), viewing economic recovery as key to the country’s long-term stability.

There are two standout elements in Riyadh's toolkit for achieving its goals. The first is, somewhat counterintuitively, cooperation with Türkiye, which exerts considerable sway in Syria through its network of proxies. The second is making use of Riyadh's ties to the Arab tribes of the country's multiethnic northeast. When it comes to frustrating Israel's designs, Saudi Arabia has fewer options. It must rely on a program of economic largesse to bring sectors of Syria's population to its side, and simultaneously pressure Israel through indirect political or diplomatic means.

Saudi-Turkish Cooperation

Türkiye's rivalry with Saudi Arabia stems from the two countries' divergent specific interests, but also their more general jockeying for a regional leadership position. Türkiye's support for Islamist rebel factions, some of which are part of the new regime, and Ankara's ambition to control or influence areas such as Idlib and Aleppo, are at variance with Saudi interests. However, despite the rivalry, there is an element of collaboration. For example, Türkiye is [a major supplier of arms](#) to Saudi Arabia, which is [seeking to close more such deals](#), something that gives it economic leverage over Ankara.

More importantly, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye share the goal of reducing Iranian influence in Syria and across the region. In fact, Riyadh sees Ankara as a necessary partner in this effort, given Türkiye's military presence in Syria and historical ties to Syrian opposition groups. Since Assad's defeat, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye have [ramped up collaboration, taking it beyond intelligence-sharing](#). The two countries are increasingly aligned on the matter of confronting security threats emanating from Iran's desire to revive its influence in Syria, and aim to do this by pursuing broader influence over Syria's transition.

There is also potential for cooperation in rebuilding Syria, for which Saudi financial investment could mesh with Turkish construction expertise. Saudi Arabia has

announced that it will [provide assistance to Syria with "no ceiling,"](#) signaling an open-ended commitment to reconstruction and ensuring stability under the transitional government. Additionally, [Saudi Arabia is contributing to a \\$6.5 billion international pledge](#) of reconstruction aid for the transitional government. Meanwhile, Türkiye has deployed [engineering firms to Aleppo and Damascus](#) to assess infrastructure needs. The alignment between Saudi Arabia and Türkiye extends beyond economics, [as the two nations are negotiating a joint framework to influence Syria's constitutional process](#), aiming to sideline Iran's lingering allies and bolster a Sunni-led governance model. This could evolve into a formal Saudi-Turkish axis in Syrian affairs, potentially reshaping power dynamics in the Levant.

Saudi Influence on Syrian Tribes

Saudi Arabia has long cultivated ties with northeastern Syria's Arab tribes, such as the [Shammar, Baggara, Tayy, Albu Saray, Uqaydat, Anaza, Al-Dhafir, Bani Khalid, Al-Jabour, and Nu'aymi](#), leveraging shared tribal lineage, historical trade routes, and financial support to align them with its interests. These tribes, which are prominent in the Deir ez-Zor, Hasakah, and Raqqa regions, [are key players in local power struggles](#). The Saudi engagement with the tribes, which sharpened after 2014, when [Riyadh mobilized several of them against the Islamic State and the Assad regime](#), has included providing them with [financial and logistical backing](#).

Countering Iran's role in the growing multinational campaign against the Islamic State would become a main Saudi goal, particularly when Tehran seemed poised to translate battlefield successes by its proxies in northern Iraq into greater control of northeastern Syria across the border. In 2017, when the Assad regime, the U.S.-led military coalition, and Iran-backed Iraqi militias were separately fighting the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, Saudi involvement in the campaign [became apparent in areas such as Deir ez-Zor](#); Riyadh supported tribal

networks and opposition forces to disrupt both the Islamic State and Iranian influence.

In mid-2018, Saudi Arabia intensified its engagement with the SDF, [pushing for greater Arab tribal involvement](#) within the Kurdish-led coalition. The aim was to weaken Iranian influence in eastern Syria, particularly in areas near the Iraqi border, such as Deir ez-Zor, while simultaneously leveraging the Kurdish issue as a strategic advantage against Türkiye. This included significant financial support from Saudi Arabia for the SDF, with [a \\$100 million investment](#) in late 2019 meant to stabilize and rebuild areas liberated from the Islamic State in eastern Syria, particularly in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. Direct diplomacy was a key component of the strategy, as evidenced by [a Saudi minister of state visiting SDF-controlled territories in Deir ez-Zor in late June 2019](#), during which he urged Arab tribal leaders to help maintain stability under the governance of the SDF, and by the latter's dispatching of a delegation to visit Saudi Arabia in November 2019.

Following Assad's ouster, Saudi Arabia intensified its Syria-related diplomacy. This was highlighted as early as January 2025, when [Syria's foreign minister visited Riyadh](#). At the moment, no direct evidence confirms that Saudi Arabia has continued using its tribal connections to secure backing for the Syrian transition. However, Riyadh's historical playbook suggests it could be quietly working to bolster the new government and further weaken Iran's waning influence, drawing on its economic wealth as well as its links to Arab tribes.

Countering Israeli Stratagems

Israel's continued attacks on military sites and its increased political meddling in Syria erode Saudi Arabia's leadership role in the Arab world by making Riyadh look weak and ineffective. As such, Saudi Arabia has tried to pressure Israel through condemnation and diplomatic action. For instance, on December 10, 2024, the Saudi Foreign Ministry [condemned Israel's seizure](#)

[of a Syrian buffer zone](#) as a destabilizing act. Riyadh has said the same of Israeli airstrikes on Syria, labeling them [flagrant violations of international law](#) and accusing Israel of seeking to undermine Syria's stability.

Additionally, Saudi Arabia has rallied the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) into a unified stance in support of Syria, as [confirmed by GCC Secretary-General Jasem Albudaiwi](#), overcoming initial differences with Qatar, the UAE, and Oman.¹ This unified GCC position bolsters the legitimacy of Syria's new regime and presents Israel with an Arab oppositional front. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's influential state-linked traditional media, such as Al Arabiya, has sought to shape Arab and international opinion against further Israeli expansion through [editorials](#) and [reports](#). And [an array of state-aligned social media accounts](#) has supported the new Syrian regime against Israel by [denouncing Israeli airstrikes](#). The platforms in question are shaping a pro-Syrian government narrative among the Arab public.

Collectively, these efforts reflect growing Saudi pushback against Israeli influence in post-Assad Syria. Riyadh's main concern is that Israel's military actions and political interference weaken the new caretaker government led by HTS. This risks fragmentation of the sort that could allow Iran to reassert control of parts of the country through its proxies. Hence the Saudi diplomatic push to rally international support for holding Israel accountable and compelling it to change its behavior.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia has committed to supporting the emerging political dispensation in Syria. Riyadh is keen for the new regime to succeed on several fronts. It should govern effectively, prevent the resurgence of jihadist groups, block any return by Iran, refrain from allowing itself to fall completely under Türkiye's sway, limit Israeli

expansionism, and wean the country off the Captagon trade. To help Damascus achieve these goals, Saudi Arabia may increase direct economic support to Syria by investing in reconstruction projects and the like. Regionally, Riyadh will almost certainly continue with diplomatic initiatives that aim to normalize Damascus' relations with Arab states. And internationally, Riyadh is lobbying for the lifting of sanctions on Damascus and the provision of aid.

What remains to be seen is whether all this will suffice to enhance the viability of a Syrian regime that not only faces domestic challenges to its legitimacy, but must also confront outside threats to its country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The success of Saudi Arabia's initiatives will hinge in large part on the ability of the caretaker government to unify a fractured nation, an undertaking that will become all the more daunting should sectarian and ethnic tensions flare or if external powers exploit Syria's vulnerabilities. Should Riyadh's economic and diplomatic backing wane, or if regional rivals such as Iran outmaneuver Saudi Arabia, the new Syrian leadership might struggle to consolidate power. This would leave the country open to renewed instability and make it that much more difficult for Riyadh to regain influence at a later stage.


Note

- 1 The author obtained information regarding Saudi Arabia's efforts to unify the GCC stance on Syria during a private meeting conducted under Chatham House Rules; further details can be found at <https://gcc-sg.org/ar/MediaCenter/News/Pages/news2025-2-25-2.aspx>.



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 **UK International Development** *This material has been funded by UK International Development from the UK government. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.*