

Middle East war

Israel strikes Syrian capital in warning to new leader

Strike targeting Palestinian group is first since interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa established control



Syrian security forces guard the site of an Israeli air strike on a building in Damascus on Thursday © Louai Beshara/AFP/Getty Images

Mehul Srivastava in Tel Aviv and **Sarah Dadouch** in Beirut

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Israeli warplanes on Thursday struck a building in the suburbs of Damascus, the first air strike in the Syrian capital since interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa established control of the country late last year.

The Israeli military claimed to have hit a headquarters for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad group that has a major presence in the besieged Gaza Strip and fighters in the occupied West Bank.

It said the strike was intended as a warning to Sharaa, claiming that PIJ was planning attacks on Israel from that location. “Wherever terrorist activity is organised against Israel, the leader of extremist Islam, Jolani, will find air force planes circling above him,” said Israel Katz, Israel’s defence minister, in a statement, using Sharaa’s nom de guerre from his days as an Islamist fighter.

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The IDF conduct an airstrike on a building in Damascus © IDF/Reuters

PIJ said on Telegram that the building struck had been empty, and denied that it was a headquarters for the Iran-backed group.

The White Helmet first responders said the strike had destroyed a residential building in the Dummar area that injured three people, with one man in a serious condition and two women being treated for minor injuries.

Israel has expanded its military operations within [Syria](#) in the months since Sharaa's takeover in December, as it seeks to convert a previously demilitarised and UN-monitored buffer zone that separates the countries into a broader zone of influence.

It has bombed and destroyed most of Syria's military assets, established outposts within [southern Syria](#), and sent its troops into the demilitarised zone. Those troops have been attempting to make inroads with the local Druze population with aid handouts, the possibility of work in the Israeli occupied Golan Heights and the promise of protection if Syria's transition from Bashar al-Assad's regime turns chaotic.

The Damascus air strike was a blow to Sharaa's authority on the same day that he signed into effect a temporary constitution to govern the country during a transitional period lasting five years. It grants the president — a position held by Sharaa — executive authority and the right to call a state of emergency.

The document has yet to be officially published, but the committee in charge of drafting it said it offered protection for freedom of speech, the press, women's rights and the independence of the judiciary, as well as respecting "cultural privacies". It retained Assad-era requirements that the president be Muslim, and that Islamic jurisprudence is the basis of law.

It remains unclear how the temporary constitution will protect minorities and how inclusive Syria's new political system will be. The US and European countries have been cautious in lifting Assad-era sanctions until they see guarantees of inclusivity and minority rights.

The removal of western sanctions is crucial in securing deals the new government needs to deliver on its promises of fixing the economy, one of the biggest challenges facing Sharaa's new government.

Syria's economy has been ravaged by decades of war, corruption and sanctions. The UN estimates 90 per cent of Syrians live below the poverty line.

Cartography by Aditi Bhandari

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