

Why Did Israel Attack Syria? What Comes Next?

Former Israeli peace negotiator Daniel Levy breaks down what Netanyahu hoped to gain at home and in the region with his latest escalation.



Prior to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's [visit](#) to Washington, DC on July 7, Israeli media was packed with background briefings and speculation suggesting an imminent breakthrough in Israeli-Syrian relations. Commentators cautioned that this would perhaps not be [full Abraham Accords style normalization](#), but senior officials were meeting, and some kind of US-endorsed non-aggression pact as a step towards relations was in the offing.

For Syria's new rulers, it might be the price to pay for Donald Trump having put aside US sanctions against the country, for his [rescinding](#) of the terror designation for the al-Nusra Front, also known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, and for having met with [President Ahmad al-Sharaa](#) in Riyadh in May.

For Israel, it would be a further embellishment of Netanyahu's case that what can't be achieved by force can be achieved by more force, and that relations with Arab states can be bludgeoned through in the midst of Israel's genocidal war against the Palestinians.

An added bonus would be the entrenching of Israel's unchallenged status as [sovereign on the Golan Heights](#) – proof that Israeli illegal annexation of territory can endure. The Israeli read across to its plans for the future of the West Bank is rather obvious.

But it wasn't even a week after wheels went up for Netanyahu as he headed home from DC, and Israel was bombing [central Damascus](#), its Diaspora Affairs Minister, [Amichai Chikli](#), was threatening al-Sharaa with assassination, and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich was busy reposting the Israeli flag alongside the [Druze flag on social media](#) (on closer inspection, not so much the Druze flag as the Seychelles flag, but heck, they look similar, and Israel's accuracy in flags should surely not be held to a higher standard than its accuracy in bombing schools, churches and aid distribution centers).

Al-Sharaa, meanwhile, [held a call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan](#), reiterating their shared opposition to Israel's actions.

Early Saturday local time, the US envoy Tom Barrack, followed by al-Sharaa, confirmed a cessation of hostilities, including a partial deployment of Syrian forces in the south – agreed to by the warring factions as well as Israel, and endorsed by neighboring countries.

Unlike its decades-long displacement, dehumanization, and denial of Palestinian rights, Israel has not been a prime mover in the misery that has befallen war-ravaged Syria for more than a decade.

So, why did Israel bomb Damascus this week?

The Backdrop: Trump, Domestic Politics, and Gaza Plans

To understand Israel's current maneuvers and positioning vis-à-vis Damascus, it is necessary to unpack Netanyahu's handling of Trump and how he is navigating the Palestinian and overall regional terrain.

Netanyahu went to Washington not to close the Gaza deal, or even primarily to enjoy a post-Iran war victory lap with his bombing buddy in the White House. Sure, a week away from the Israeli courts was a boon for a prime minister wilting under an unflattering [cross-examination](#) in his corruption trial, and with his eye very much on the prize of both the Israeli court and parliamentary summer recess, which begin next week and continue through October.

Netanyahu's DC meetings were primarily designed to test his room for maneuver and to drive the agenda for what comes next.

It is true that after the [12-day Iran war](#), Netanyahu has possible political options that did not exist for him before. He also has new political headaches as the tension with ultra-Orthodox Haredi factions over military enlistment reaches a new peak, with the two ultra-Orthodox parties [formally withdrawing](#) from the government (although negotiations continue and the commitment is not to bring down the coalition or force elections – yet).

If it looks to Netanyahu like it might improve his political prospects, especially if elections appear unavoidable, the Israeli premier may indeed look to close this chapter of his war against the Palestinians in Gaza, and to lock in a ceasefire. But he is a long way from having reached that conclusion, and his continued intention is apparently to [prolong the war](#),

continue the slaughter, with or without another ceasefire pause (in which an additional number of Israelis held in Gaza would be released). Netanyahu might agree to a temporary ceasefire during the summer Parliament recess and plan to be back bombing Gaza before the Knesset reconvenes.

It is Netanyahu's continued rejectionism that prevents a Gaza ceasefire, nothing more. The new Rafah pre-expulsion concentration zone is both a real goal for much of the government and simultaneously a provocation to undermine negotiations.

One complicating issue in ceasefire negotiations is therefore the increased level of transparency around Israeli intentions regarding the displacement of Palestinians and the openly declared goal of [kettling the population](#) into a small area near the Egyptian border in advance of relocation and ethnic cleansing to outside of Gaza. Netanyahu and his coalition will be loath to fully concede what they consider to be significant progress in advancing this agenda.

Netanyahu's horizons, of course, extend beyond Gaza – hence the speed with which Israel again intervened in a dramatic fashion in Syria. For three decades, Netanyahu has had a narrative that if Iran is downsized and contained, its wings sufficiently clipped, then a new and reorganized Middle East can be birthed. It is not a position he was going to abandon, having claimed victory over Iran and pulled the US into his war. Netanyahu is therefore doubling down on a zero-sum approach to the region.

What Is Israel's Endgame in Syria?

Israel has been asserting its dominance vis-à-vis Syria, partly because it can.

Syria poses no military threat to Israel. Israel has struck multiple targets in that country on a number of occasions since the downfall of the Assad regime, bombing far more than it did while Assad was in power. If Israel decides that the remit of the central government in Damascus should not extend to parts of the south (or elsewhere), then that is how it shall be.

In the Syrian context, Netanyahu was frustrated that al-Sharaa had not delivered on the partial normalization being touted. Al-Sharaa likely considered that warming relations at this moment with Israel would carry costs both at home (in encouraging opposition to his rule) and regionally (playing badly in Ankara, for instance).

Netanyahu has just reminded al-Sharaa of the cost of not bending the knee. Israel does not offer peace; it offers subjugation. Following the newly announced ceasefire, Israel will resume its pressure on al-Sharaa towards partial normalization while continuing its occupation in parts of southern Syria beyond the already illegally annexed Golan. Of course, this is not really a ceasefire at all; it is more word laundering (Syria was not firing on Israel) – this is Israel agreeing to pause certain of its military actions until it decides otherwise, and American interest wanders. In other words, the Gaza model.

Netanyahu also wants to retain options on various fronts for his brand of being a perpetual war leader.

Israeli officials have highlighted the idea that this intervention was about protecting the Druze minority, which also has an Israeli domestic relevance given its own small [Druze community](#). It is revealing to follow the language Israeli politicians and commentators have used to describe developments in Syria – [referencing the threats of slaughter](#) and ethnic cleansing of the Druze community. There is apparently [no capacity for self-awareness or irony](#).

But the claims being made around supporting the Druze are not entirely spurious. Israel's goals, more broadly, are not only to prefer countries where state capacity and central governance remain weak, but also to encourage fracturing and division along ethno-religious lines. A region with more small ethno-states is to be welcomed – just as long as they are without a military, technological edge, or nuclear weapons, which are the exclusive purview of the Jewish ethno-state.

In Syrian terms, that scenario would see Druze, Kurd, and Alawi communities empowered at the expense of the central State. Israel is not alone in encouraging irredentism; its support also tends not to extend to helping deliver tangible successes.

It's an approach that would also seem to align with Israel's preferences for future chaos in Iran. Neat regime change is not a realistic goal, but Israel's leaders apparently consider that state collapse around competing claims of Kurdish, Baloch, Azeri, and Avazi communities might be possible. So far, they have been wrong. Iranians largely [rallied to the flag following US and Israeli strikes](#) (who woulda thunk it!), the state was not brought to its knees, and Iranian resolve on the nuclear and other fronts may be fortified.

Israel has, in fact, recently been [threatening a resumption of strikes](#) against Iran. Its active promotion of weak surrounding states is of long vintage, as is its hyping of largely imagined threats and enforcement of buffer zones inside the territory of others.

What Is Israel's Goal in the Region? Will It Succeed?

Israel's pursuit of a multiple-front permanent war is rather new and has become the modus operandi of latter-era Netanyahu.

It could be called an updated and improved version of revisionist Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky's "Iron Wall" doctrine. One way of understanding this is Israel seeking to establish itself as a regional hegemon. Except hegemon doesn't quite capture this reality. Nobody is buying Israel's narrative; it does not have a hegemonic project beyond unmatched military power with a technological capacity, financial strength, and US muscle to back it.

So, Israel has launched multiple attacks on multiple fronts, enjoying its expanded freedom of military operation – Lebanon, Syria, and across the Palestinian territories. Exchanges with Iran have been briefer and more two-directional, while Israel has failed to deter the Houthis in Yemen (who have committed to continuing their resistance until Israel desists from its actions in Gaza).

It is almost certainly on the Palestinian front (the question most existential for Zionism) that Israel's ambitions are most far-reaching and perhaps most overreaching – pursuing an irreversible change and total victory endgame, not only in Gaza, but also in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Were there to be a ceasefire in Gaza, one should probably anticipate an even larger escalation against the Palestinians in the West Bank – where in the last year [tens of thousands have been displaced](#) (largely from refugee camps), there has been greater destruction of infrastructure, and restrictions on Palestinian access to land.

But as Harvard professor Stephen Walt [has noted](#) in the context of Israel – hegemonic power without legitimacy or restraint is unsustainable, and Israel has shown itself unable to demonstrate “a degree of forbearance.” Israel is failing to offer a project that others in the region can feel comfortable with.

It is a dominance so heavily dependent on the US – witness, for instance, the need for a constant conveyor belt of American weapons to Israel, the American intervention to back up

Israel against Iran, as well as the extent of American diplomatic deployment to guarantee Israeli impunity and prevent costs and consequences for its genocidal actions.

Worryingly for Israel, that dependence reaches new levels just as debates inside US politics around Israel have witnessed deepening discomfort on the [Democrat side](#), and newly [emerging divisions on the MAGA side](#), with leading influencers playing in the fault line between America First and Israel First. And it coincides with the accelerated geopolitical weakening of the US itself on the global stage. That's the possible trifecta – a more exposed and needy Israel alongside a less willing and able America.

Meanwhile, the sense of Israeli dominance has recently been further embellished by claims that the markets have [anointed their winner in the Middle East](#), with the [Tel Aviv Stock Exchange](#) showing the best returns in the period since October 7, 2023. It is hardly news that capitalism can thrive in the most grotesque of circumstances, but as economic historian Adam Tooze has [pointed out](#), market successes can belie deeper vulnerabilities.

Israel's attempt to project itself as invincible and untouchable is now something that must not only be sustained at all costs, lest collapse be dramatic, but it increasingly depends on intensifying that journey up the escalatory ladder.

Israel's attempt to assert this hegemonic positionality by necessity draws the attention of other actors and brings into sharp relief the possibility of new and previously unimagined alliances being formed to prevent this apparently unbridled threat that Israel poses.

One hears now from Israel that [Turkey is next in the crosshairs](#), but Turkey will [not sit on the sidelines](#) waiting for that to happen. More states will draw the conclusion that Israel is too dangerous, too out of control, and needs to be contained (and over time, they will pursue acquiring the military and technological kit to sustain that challenge – the impressive performance of Chinese-supplied equipment in Pakistan's recent military exchange with India is worth paying attention to).

By dint of the extremity of its intentions and actions towards the Palestinians, and the cruelty it is inflicting in Gaza, Israel may be feared, but it is more reviled than respected. The conclusion increasingly being drawn is that Israeli war crimes are the primary destabilizing and radicalizing influence in the region that must be reined in – not where Israel thought it would be five years after the signing of the Abraham Accords.

Israel is pursuing a high-risk/high-stakes strategy of zero-sum outcomes. The story of 21 months of impunity during its genocide in Gaza and its ability to bomb multiple other capitals, most recently Damascus, suggests it may succeed. But zero-sum projects have a tendency to blow back on their originators. Genocidal campaigns are costly to sustain in general, let alone when there is a hostile hinterland. Israeli society remains polarized with multiple vulnerabilities, questionable resilience, and a low threshold of tolerance for pain. While the current trajectory is disastrous for Palestinians and unnerving for others, do not assume it ends well for Israel.

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