

Israel is at a strategic crossroads in Syria. What's next?

written by Prof. Kobi Michael | 05.08.2025

Israel's recent intervention to assist the Druze community in Syria through airstrikes targeting their assailants and regime-related sites reinforced Israel's credibility as a reliable protector of its allies and as an actor capable of maintaining effective military control in a demilitarized zone that it has defined. This operation also contributed to Israel's deterrence posture vis-à-vis the Syrian regime and bolstered its regional standing in a "violent neighborhood."

At the same time, Israel's forceful response raises important questions about the broader implications of using significant, and arguably excessive, military force in the Syrian arena. This is particularly sensitive given Israel's interest in maintaining regime stability in Damascus, expanding its security coordination and laying the groundwork for Syria's potential future integration into the Abraham Accords. Israel must also preserve close alignment with the United States, which appears uneasy with the forcefulness of Israel's actions and its potential impact on American interests in Syria.

With the potential for renewed clashes between Bedouin and Druze communities in southern Syria, Israel's strategic dilemma becomes even more acute. It must determine an approach that effectively advances its interests in three dimensions—security, diplomacy and values—while managing inherent tensions between them.

Israel stands at a strategic fork in the road. Alongside its clear security interests—securing the buffer zone along the northern border, keeping the area south of Damascus demilitarized and ensuring the safety of the Druze community—it must maintain open channels of communication with the Syrian regime. These channels are critical to enabling future understandings between Israel and Syria under American auspices and through sustained coordination with Washington.

In essence, Israel needs to strike a careful balance between maintaining its essential military presence and advancing its diplomatic and political objectives, while honoring its moral and historical commitment to the Druze citizens of Israel

and the Druze minority in the broader region.

Looking ahead, Israel must adopt an integrated strategic approach to achieving its goals. Military force will remain a central element of its policy, especially for enforcing demilitarization requirements, but any consideration of strikes against regime symbols must be weighed with caution, based on careful risk-benefit analysis.

Simultaneously, Israel should constantly examine opportunities for stabilizing and calming the Syrian arena and integrating it into a new regional architecture, without trading away core security assets for theoretical promises or short-term achievements.

Another important element is the use of diplomatic levers. This includes exerting political pressure on the Syrian regime through closer coordination with the United States and leveraging the influence of key regional allies, chief among them Saudi Arabia. Enhancing Saudi Arabia's role in the Syrian arena, particularly through its economic and political contributions to reconstruction efforts in Damascus, could serve as a powerful lever for nudging the regime toward a more moderate path, thereby reducing the influence of extremist actors and counterbalancing the emerging Turkey-Qatar axis, which operates as a destabilizing force.

Regarding the Druze, Israel must make clear that its commitment is not unlimited. Domestically, Israeli society must reshape its relationship with the Druze community based on a clear civic principle: Druze citizens are full and equal members of Israeli society, enjoying the same rights and bearing the same responsibilities as all citizens. Accordingly, Israel will not turn a blind eye to violations of law and order, especially dangerous and irresponsible actions like crossing the border into Syria, even if done in solidarity.

Externally, Israel should define clear and limited boundaries to its responsibilities toward the Druze outside its territory. A prudent policy would involve enabling the Druze to defend themselves through measured assistance, while avoiding Israeli entanglement in Syria's civil war, an entanglement that could jeopardize broader Israeli security interests.

Ultimately, the strategic mix that Israel must pursue should serve a range of vital interests alongside value-based commitments. The interworkings between these

elements require a delicate blend of statesmanship and military strategy, woven together into a coherent and effective Israeli policy capable of reshaping the regional landscape.

Published in JNS, August 05, 2025.