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Middle East

Free Syria scares Israel, that's why it sows hatred and occupies

- Features -

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Israel does not care about Syrian suffering, but rather interested in a spread of chaos within the country in order to instrumentalise such dynamics for its own interests, writes Joseph Daher [photo credit: Getty Images]

Israel's ruling classes has long viewed the democratisation of Arab and regional countries as a threat to its political interests, a perspective that has intensified since 2011. This has also been the case with Syria, following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 after 54 years of despotic rule.

Syrian solidarity with Palestine can now be expressed freely. Remember, under Assad's rule no protest or any form of solidarity with Palestine was permitted beyond the realm of the state and its interests, also preventing any forms of resistance near the border with Israel.

Israel, clearly concerned with this shift in popular resistance, has therefore taken several measures to weaken and divide the Syrian transition process.

Just days after the fall of Assad, the Israeli army occupied new Syrian lands, including the Syrian side of Mount Hermon in the Golan Heights and southern territories, while destroying Syria's military sites and infrastructure. These raids sent a clear political message: Tel Aviv can and will threaten Syria's political stability if the nascent state adopts a belligerent stance.

Furthermore, the Israeli government officially confirmed the plan — Resolution No. 864 of 2021 — which allocates \$11 million to increase the population of settlements in the occupied Golan Heights to 50,000 by 2025. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated, "Strengthening the Golan is strengthening the State of Israel, and this is especially crucial at this time." Currently, around 31,000 Israelis live in settlements deemed illegal under international law in the Golan Heights, alongside roughly 20,000 Syrians, most of whom are of Druze faith.

In its campaign of destruction, the Israeli army invaded localities and bulldozed roads, water and electricity networks, many houses, farms, and agricultural lands in addition to besieging the civilian population, preventing food supplies from entering their villages and terrorising them to uproot them from their areas. Demonstrations and various forms of protest took place in localities located in southern Syria, on the Golan Heights, to denounce the invasion and occupation of new territories.

Moreover, the extension of the Israeli occupation of Syrian territories does not seem to be limited in time. According to satellite images published in mid-February 2025 by Haaretz, the Israeli state has established between seven and nine new military posts in the newly occupied Syrian territories, from the strategic Mount Hermon in the north to Tel Kudna in the south.

Analysis of images by the American company Planet Labs also reveals that housing, command centres, clinics and showers have been built on these Golan Heights, which are home to significant water resources.

In recent weeks, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu declared at the end of February the complete demilitarisation of southern Syria, including the provinces of Qunaytra, Daraa and Suwayda, and would not tolerate the deployment of forces of the new Syrian government south of Damascus.

While the government led by HTS has adopted a relatively moderate stance towards Israel, officially referring to it as the "State of Israel" and no longer as the "Zionist entity", a change in terminology aimed at appealing to Western states, popular indignation has spread rapidly across the country, denouncing the threats from the State of Israel and affirming the unity of the country.

Keeping Syria on life support

Israeli fighter jets flew over protesters in Qunaytra, provoking them, and in the days that followed, bombed military positions in southern Syria, particularly near Damascus and in the Deraa province. These airstrikes occurred during the national dialogue conference, which was intended to set the stage for a political transition in the country, but it fell far short of this goal.

Similarly, the Israeli government sought to stir up sectarian tensions in the country by presenting itself as the defender of the Druze populations in southern Syria and threatening to intervene militarily for their "protection", while the main Druze social and political actors have largely rejected Israeli leaders speeches and reaffirmed their belonging to Syria and the unity of the country.

In this context, Israel sees positively the outbreak of sectarian violence which occurred in the coastal areas, resulting in the death of more than 1400 persons and seeks to instrumentalise such events.

Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz for instance lambasted Syrian ruling authorities, calling Ahmad al-Sharaa "a jihadist terrorist of the al-Qaeda school who commits horrific acts against a civilian population". He added that "Israel will defend itself against any threat from Syria" while promising that the Israeli occupation army would remain in Syria and continue to work to keep southern Syria demilitarised.

Israeli officials do not care about the Syrian population's suffering but are rather interested in a spread of chaos within the country to instrumentalise such dynamics for its own interests. Moreover, Israel has been lobbying the United States to keep Syria weak and decentralised.

At the same time, any attempts to decrease tensions and the fragmentation of the country are perceived negatively by Israel, such as the recent deals made between the Syrian presidency on one side and on the other side the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to "integrate" their institutions, both civilians and military, into the Syrian state.

A few hours after the agreement made between the SDF and Damascus, Israeli occupation aircraft carried out several strikes on the surroundings of the towns of Jbab and Izraa in the north of Daraa province. This is no coincidence.

Let's be clear, Syria's future and challenges are not only connected to Israeli threats but to multiple factors such as the lack of democratic inclusivity and authoritarian practices of the ruling authorities led by Hayat Tahir Sham, Turkish military, political and economic ambitions and influences in Syria, sanctions and economic structural challenges.

Moreover, no regional and international powers have an interest in a successful democratic transition in Syria, but rather the imposition of a new form of authoritarian stability, mostly achieved through the empowerment of the state's armed apparatus.

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The Israeli army's attacks and extension of its occupation of Syrian territories demonstrate once again the link between the struggles for the democratisation of regional societies and the US hegemonic imperial project in the region and its armed wing Israel opposing the self-determination of the regional popular classes and occupying Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian lands.

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