



Spotlight on Syria

May 14-21, 2025

Overview

- Israeli security officials reportedly held direct talks with representatives of the Syrian government in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan; the IDF denied the meeting. Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa (Abu Muhammad al-Julani) reportedly approved the transfer of the Syrian archive on the late Mossad agent Eli Cohen to Israel as a goodwill gesture.
- Syrian President al-Sharaa welcomed American President Trump's decision to lift sanctions on Syria and pledged that the country would no longer serve as a battleground for external power struggles. Syrian Foreign Minister al-Shibani met with United States Secretary of State Rubio, who praised the regime in Damascus for its calls for peace with Israel.
- Syrian security forces prevented the smuggling of weapons, some of which were reportedly intended for Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Israeli Activity in Syria

The IDF in Syria

- This past week IDF forces continued targeted operations in and around the buffer zone in the Golan Heights. Activity was reported near the villages of Jaba, Jabata al-Hashab, Rasem al-Halabi and Quneitra in the Quneitra Governate (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights; Syrian TV, May 14–21, 2025). IDF forces briefly entered the village of Ma'ariya in the Yarmouk Basin of the western Daraa countryside (Telegram channel of Daraa24, May 20, 2025).
- Residents of Quneitra and surrounding villages alleged that IDF activity had damaged wells and caused water shortages for hundreds of local families and farmers. They called for intervention from the Quneitra Governate authorities and international humanitarian organizations to resolve the crisis. Later, pictures were published allegedly showing damage to water facilities caused by the IDF (X account of Quneitra al-Youm, May 17–20, 2025; Facebook page of the Horan Free Union, May 20, 2025).



**Alleged damage to water pipes near Tel al-Ahmar in Quneitra
(Facebook page of the Horan Free Union, May 20, 2025)**

Indirect contacts between Syria and Israel

- An “Israeli source familiar with the details” reported that Israel and the new Syrian regime had held direct talks in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. According to the source, the head of the IDF’s operations directorate met with Syrian government representatives in the presence of Turkish delegates. The IDF denied that a direct meeting had taken place, but stated that indirect discussions had been held as part of ongoing talks between Israeli and Turkish security officials regarding the situation in Syria under the new regime (Ynet, May 15, 2025; CNN, May 16, 2025).
- “Three sources” reported that the Syrian leadership had approved the transfer of the late Mossad agent Eli Cohen’s belongings to Israel as part of an effort to ease “Israeli hostility” and demonstrate the new regime’s goodwill to President Trump. The sources, identified as a “Syrian security source, an advisor to President Ahmed al-Sharaa and a person familiar with the secret talks between the countries,” said the archive was brought to Israel as an indirect gesture from al-Sharaa (Reuters, May 20, 2025). Previously, on the 60th anniversary of Cohen’s execution in Damascus, the Mossad announced that in a complex covert operation conducted with a “strategic partner agency,” it had brought the official Syrian archive on Eli Cohen to Israel, including approximately 2,500 documents, photographs and personal items, as well as recordings and files of the investigation that had been highly classified by Syrian security forces for decades (Israeli Prime Minister’s Office website, May 18, 2025).
- Alongside reports of talks between Israel and Syria, Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shibani continued to publicly condemn Israeli activity in Syria. In a speech at the Arab League summit he accused Israel of continuing to “violate” international law in southern Syria by attacking Syrian territory and threatening regional and local stability. He called on the Arab states to support Syria’s right to full sovereignty (Telegram channel of the Syrian Foreign Ministry, May

17, 2025). In a meeting in Damascus with Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi, al-Shibani said that Israeli attacks threatened not only Syria but all the regional countries and prevented the creation of safe conditions for the return of refugees. He said Syria's borders had to be secure and stable and accused certain countries and actors of seeking to prevent Syria's stabilization. Safadi said Jordan stood by Syria in the face of "unjustified and illegal Israeli aggression" (Telegram channels of Syria TV and the Syrian Foreign Ministry, May 20, 2025).

Consolidating the New Regime

Diplomatic activity

► Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa praised the new regime's diplomatic activity in a speech to the nation following his first meeting with the American president. He described Trump's decision to lift United States sanctions as "courageous," adding that the "new Syria" had participated in major international forums and conferences, raised its flag at the UN, succeeded in opening closed doors and paved the way for strategic relations with Arab and Western countries. He promised that Syria would no longer be a battleground for power struggles or a stage for foreign ambitions, and the country would not be divided, as it belonged to all Syrians regardless of ethnic background (SANA, May 15, 2025).

► Following the al-Sharaa –Trump meeting, Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shibani met in Antalya with American Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan. They discussed the lifting of sanctions and ways to strengthen strategic relations between the countries (Syrian Foreign Ministry Telegram channel, May 15, 2025). Rubio said the United States supported lifting sanctions to promote stability. He noted the need to fully eliminate chemical weapons in Syria and welcomed the "Syrian government's calls for peace with Israel" and efforts to end Iranian influence. He also noted the importance of protecting the human rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religion (United States Department of State website, May 15, 2025).



Meeting between Syrian Foreign Minister al-Shibani and American Secretary of State Rubio in Turkey, with Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan present (Syrian foreign ministry Telegram channel, May 15, 2025)

► Secretary of State Rubio told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that in the assessment of various United States agencies, the transitional regime in Syria, given the challenges it faced, could be merely weeks away from possible collapse and a full-scale civil war of epic proportions, which would mean the disintegration of the state. Therefore, he said, support was necessary for the regime, which was why the president had decided to lift sanctions to enable countries to assist in reconstruction efforts (Reuters, May 20, 2025).

► On May 20, 2025, EU Foreign Affairs Chief Kaja Kallas announced that the EU foreign ministers had agreed to lift sanctions imposed on Syria's economy. She said the EU sought to help the Syrian people build a "new and peaceful Syria" (Kaja Kallas's X account, May 20, 2025).

Security activity

► Syrian Defense Minister Murhaf Abu Qasra announced the integration of most of the "military units" in the country into the Syrian ministry of defense. He called on the remaining small armed groups to join within ten days, warning that any delay would necessitate "appropriate measures" (Murhaf Abu Qasra's X account, May 17, 2025).

► Syrian security forces continued to prevent the smuggling of weapons, some of which were reportedly destined for Hezbollah in Lebanon:

► Security forces seized a warehouse containing hundreds of explosive devices in the Qardaha area of Latakia. They later uncovered other weapons caches in Qardaha, including advanced anti-tank missiles (Telegram channels of the Latakia Governate and Al Jazeera, May 15–16, 2025).

- Security forces raided weapons and ammunition storage sites in a Damascus suburb and seized the arms, which had been prepared for smuggling (X account of Syrian News Agency, May 18, 2025).
- Dozens of ammunition boxes were found hidden in an underground warehouse in the Jandar area in southern Homs (X account Qalaat al-Mashiq, May 18, 2025).
- Security forces launched a security operation targeting arms and drug traffickers in the Albukamal area near the Iraq border, which had been a stronghold of pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias before the fall of the Assad regime. The forces seized large quantities of weapons, including various types of advanced anti-tank missiles (Syrian Ministry of Defense Telegram channel; X account Qalaat al-Mashiq, May 20, 2025).



**Weapons seized by Syrian security forces near the Syria-Iraq border
(X account Qalaat al-Mashiq, May 20, 2025)**