



## A Still Unstable Syria Attempts to Stay out of the War in Gaza

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Since the beginning of the war in Gaza last October, there has been an increase in attacks on targets in Syria by both Israel and the U.S., as well as by Iran and its affiliated militias. This is due, on the one hand, to Hezbollah's strong presence in the country and, on the other, to Iran's motivation to raise the cost of U.S. support for Israel. The regime of Bashar al-Assad perceives these actions as a threat, especially as his government is avoiding becoming involved in the Gaza war for fear that an escalation would threaten the fragile stability of his rule.

**Permanent Destabilisation.** Despite Assad regaining control of most of Syria's territory (approximately 63%), the country remains in a state of permanent crisis characterised by territorial divisions, clashes between pro- and anti-government forces, attacks by terrorist organisations including ISIS, a humanitarian crisis, and the production and [smuggling of drugs](#) and weapons. According to a report by the UNSC Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, the number of attacks and armed clashes has been increasing recently. Observers counted more than 500 attacks by ISIS since the beginning of this year, [indicating a strengthening of the organisation in Syria](#) and the continuation of its trade collaboration with the Assad regime. In January, Jordan carried out airstrikes on the Syrian border region following an increase in drug and weapons smuggling from that direction. There have also been armed clashes between Turkey and the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which control around 25% of Syria's northeastern territories.

The UN commission pointed to increasing lawlessness, violence, detentions, and threats by government security forces. At the same time, the impact of the lack of access to state services has been exacerbated by the decline in humanitarian funding in Syria, which in July this year was around 20% of requirements. Across Syria, an estimated 90% of the population now lives below the poverty line. The scale

of public frustration is illustrated by the ongoing mass protests in Suwayda since last August organised mainly by the Druze population, which so far has avoided entanglement in the civil war that has been ongoing since 2011. Although the government responded with a campaign of detentions and violent attacks, the demonstrations have not stopped to this day.

The humanitarian situation is also deteriorating in territories controlled by the SDF and [Turkey](#) and its partners, where there are reports of unlawful detentions, torture, and rape. In February, unprecedented protests began in the northwestern territory controlled by the Turkish-backed Islamist group Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), followed in May by demonstrations in SDF-controlled territories.

**The Assad Regime and the War in Gaza.** Assad's priority remains avoiding active involvement of the regime in operations against Israel while maintaining its alliance with Iran and its collaborating organisations, including Hamas, in the so-called Axis of Resistance. This is a key alliance for Iranian regional politics and is based on resistance to the U.S. and Israel. The balancing act for the Assad regime is further complicated by the increase in Israeli attacks on Iranian commanders based in Syria and key facilities for both Syria and Iran, such as the Syrian Scientific Research Centre, destroyed in September, where missiles were manufactured. Iran and its affiliated militias have also

stepped up attacks on U.S. targets in Syria, with nearly 200 carried out since October 2023. There have also been numerous reports in recent months of a growing presence in Syria of Yemeni Houthi fighters, which is part of Iran's preparations for operations against Israel from Syrian territory.

Despite the growing pressure, the Syrian regime remains the only member of the "[Axis of Resistance](#)" not to have actively engaged in operations against Israel since 7 October. This may be related to Assad's still difficult relationship with Hamas, which was only revisited in 2022 after the Syrian regime broke it off in 2011 when Hamas backed the Syrian rebels. Assad's partners have expressed a hostile attitude to his passivity, indicated, for example, by the reception of Syrian intelligence chief Hussam Luka in Lebanon where he was refused by Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah. However, Assad is hoping that remaining on the sidelines will make it easier for him to break his international isolation and diversify foreign relations, especially as the escalation in Lebanon deepens. He is also under pressure to stay out of the war by [Arab](#) governments, which over the past few years [have re-established relations with Syria](#) after severing them following the outbreak of the civil war in 2011. Shortly after the Gaza invasion began, diplomats from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has gained the most influence over Assad among Arab states thanks to announcements of investments in Syria, pressed the regime not to get involved in the war.

Avoiding regional escalation is also important for Russia, whose military support was decisive in Assad regaining control of Syria. Russia fears that a potential return of war to Syrian territory could threaten Assad's power, relations with whom are an important tool of Russian [influence on the situation in the Middle East and Africa](#). Russia's presence in Syria forced the U.S. to agree with it on mechanisms of deconfliction in Syria and became [an important argument](#) for the reinstatement of Syria's membership of the League of Arab States last year. Russia's involvement in Syria also raised the cost for countries in the region, including Lebanon and Jordan, of a potential deterioration in relations with Russia. For this reason, following the launch of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Syria's neighbouring states (including Israel) cited Russia's presence as a factor that made it difficult for them to take a position converging with the West on the war in Ukraine.

**Syria as part of the "Axis of Resistance"**. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 Iran has supported Assad militarily, politically, and economically. Like Russia's assistance, cooperation with Iran and its affiliated militias (especially Hezbollah) has been crucial to the regime's survival. This made the Syrian regime part of the axis despite its lack of strong ideological ties with Iran, and made ending the war in Syria impossible without taking its interests into account. Indeed, Syrian territory has become crucial for arms smuggling between pro-Iranian organisations operating in

Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, as well as for training and arms production and attacks on targets in Israel. Since May this year, Hezbollah has stepped up attacks on Israeli military targets in the [Golan Heights](#), which is Israeli-occupied Syrian territory, hoping to avoid escalation inside Lebanon. Hezbollah has also increased its presence in the area due to its involvement in the smuggling of drugs and weapons to the West Bank militias through Jordanian territory.

Iran's support for Assad has also contributed to rapprochement between Russia and members of the axis. Iran and Russia have strengthened military cooperation, Russian forces have received training in Syria in the use of Iranian drones used in Ukraine, and Russia, together with Hezbollah, has contributed to rapprochement between Hamas and the Assad regime. Nevertheless, their interests in Syria are not always aligned. In recent years, disputes have included the future shape of the Syrian security forces. Iran prioritised strengthening paramilitary organisations, at odds with Russia's policy of supporting the Syrian army, consecutively hampered by the withdrawal of some Russian soldiers for military operations in Ukraine. This has consolidated Iran's position in Syria, which is viewed negatively by some Syrians who support the government.

**Conclusions.** The escalation of tensions in Syria linked to the Gaza war highlights the crucial importance of the alliance with Assad for Iran's regional policy. Although Assad is attempting to use his reluctance to open a "solidarity front" in Syria to reduce his dependence on Iran, the consolidation of Iran's position in Syria in recent years and the growing regional escalation may prevent him from succeeding. Russia, which is keen to strengthen its influence in Syria, has lost some of it recently in favour of Iran, but will strengthen cooperation with Arab states to prevent the Gaza war from spreading to Assad-controlled territories.

Increased attacks by Israel intensify the pressure on Iranian-linked organisations on Syrian territory. These actions may serve to provoke disputes between members of the Axis of Resistance and Assad and, as a result, urge him towards further rapprochement with states favourable to Israel like the UAE. So far, however, while Assad has improved relations with the leaders of other Arab states, his regime has not reduced relations with Iran or involvement in smuggling activities. Nor has this approach improved the situation of the population living in regime-controlled territories, where both demonstrations by the political opposition and the activities of terrorist organisations have increased. Therefore, when considering the potential normalisation of relations with Assad, the Syrian regime's decision not to engage in Israel's war against Hamas should not be decisive. Unpunished war crimes, the lack of political will to curb human rights violations, corruption, and the impunity of the security services, as well as Syria's role in strengthening Russia's position in the region, should remain key aspects of continuing the West's policy towards Syria.