



Analysis

Syria at the Margins of the Belt-and-Road Rivalry

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Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has evolved into an ambitious strategy to redirect global trade and influence eastward. Beijing hopes new overland and maritime routes will reorient world commerce away from the U.S. and Europe toward China's economic orbit¹. A decade on, this effort has intensified great-power competition: the United States strives to uphold a unipolar system of American primacy, China aspires to a bipolar world where it is a peer superpower, and Russia (though weakened by war and sanctions) agitates for a more multipolar order.

In this contest, the Middle East has reemerged as a pivotal arena. The region sits at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa – precisely the junction the new Silk Roads aim to span. Two U.S.-aligned powers in particular, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, have gained importance in light of BRI's expansion. Saudi Arabia anchors key maritime routes and energy supplies on China's "Maritime Silk Road," while Turkey controls critical land corridors bridging Asia and Europe. Both countries have leveraged their strategic positions to court Chinese investments even as they remain U.S. security partners. This balancing act reflects a broader trend of Middle Eastern powers hedging between Washington and Beijing in an increasingly multipolar era.

Amid these shifts, Syria – though not on the BRI map – has unexpectedly become a test case of U.S. efforts to counter China's influence. Devastated by war and isolated by Western sanctions, Syria was initially peripheral to BRI routes² - no major rail or pipeline was slated to cross its territory. Yet Syria's location in the Levant, and its reopening to regional engagement, now make it a place where U.S. and regional interests intersect. For Washington – especially under a second Trump administration – re-engagement in Syria offers a way to shore up alliances with Turkey and Saudi Arabia, constrain China's (and Russia's) reach in the Levant, and deny adversaries a foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean. But this approach is fraught with uncertainty, requiring the U.S. to reconcile the often-conflicting agendas of its partners – especially given Israel's hardline stance on Syria's future. In sum, Washington's attempt to curb China's Belt-and-Road expansion hinges not only on far-flung infrastructure projects, but also on navigating volatile Middle Eastern politics from Riyadh and Ankara to Damascus and Jerusalem.

¹ Council on Foreign Relations. *China's Belt and Road: Implications for the United States*. 2021. [Link >](#)

² The Diplomat. *Syria Is Not One of China's Strategic Priorities*. 19 December 2024. [Link >](#)

The Belt and Road's Ambitions and Great-Power Contest

Xi Jinping's 2013 launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become one of the tools of Beijing's bid for global clout. China has poured hundreds of billions of dollars into overseas projects – ports, highways, and rail lines across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe – expanding its economic reach. The strategic goal is to reorient global commerce away from Western dominance toward China's advantage. By financing and constructing critical infrastructure, Beijing gains leverage over participating countries, making them more dependent on Chinese trade and investment and less likely to challenge Beijing on contentious issues. BRI projects also give China access to ports and logistics hubs abroad, potentially supporting a Chinese military or intelligence presence. In short, the Belt and Road is laying the groundwork for a more China-centric international order.

Washington sees BRI as a threat to its post-Cold War hegemony. American officials argue it burdens countries with unsustainable debt and erodes their sovereignty – a charge Beijing denies. The U.S. has responded by promoting alternative infrastructure partnerships (such as the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure) and strengthening its alliances. By 2025, U.S.-China rivalry resembles a new Cold War, with both powers vying for influence in key regions. The Middle East is one such arena. China's growing investments and high-profile diplomacy (for example, Beijing's brokering of a Saudi–Iran rapprochement in 2023) signal Beijing's rising influence in the Gulf even as U.S. sway is perceived to ebb. Thus, maintaining U.S. leadership in the Middle East – and denying China a strategic foothold – has become an explicit priority for Washington.

Importantly, the contest is not strictly bipolar. Other actors, especially Russia, also shape dynamics. Moscow advocates a “multipolar” order and has aligned with Beijing against U.S. initiatives. In the Middle East, Russia's military intervention in Syria (since 2015) and its ties with Iran complicated U.S. plans. However, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine drained Moscow's resources and prestige, driving some Middle Eastern partners closer to China for investment and diplomatic cover even as they maintained security links with the U.S. The war in Ukraine also disrupted China–Europe land trade via Russia, spurring interest in alternate corridors – including those through Turkey, as we will see – and intertwining Eastern Europe's and the Middle East's strategic theaters in the BRI competition.

In sum, a new great-power game is underway. The U.S., China, and others are maneuvering across interconnected regions from Eastern Europe to the Levant. Syria, at the nexus of Arab and Turkish spheres, has become one of these contested areas. For China, integrating the Middle East into BRI secures energy supplies and new markets – Beijing imports roughly half its oil from the region and depends on partners like Saudi Arabia for stable supply lines. For the U.S., trying to block China's regional inroads has meant doubling down on support for traditional allies and even reconsidering old policies (including outreach to former pariahs like Syria) to build a united front. Whether this approach will succeed is far from guaranteed, given Washington's checkered history in the region.

Saudi Arabia: Maritime and Energy Pivot of the New Silk Road

Saudi Arabia's geography – spanning from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea – makes it a critical hub for east–west trade and energy flows. Chinese analysts often call the kingdom an “indispensable partner” in BRI's Middle East chapter, and with good reason. Saudi Arabia is the world's largest oil exporter, and China is now its largest oil customer, having surpassed the U.S. over the past decade (roughly one-quarter of Saudi oil exports went to China³). This deep energy interdependence has prompted Riyadh to hedge its bets: Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) carefully nurtures ties with Beijing (and other partners) even as he maintains Saudi Arabia's longstanding security alliance with Washington. The strategy is one of leverage – ensuring Saudi oil will have a stable Chinese market for decades while signaling to Washington that Riyadh has alternatives if U.S. support falters. In MbS's view, a stronger relationship with China gives Saudi Arabia extra cards to play vis-à-vis Washington, even as the U.S. remains essential for the kingdom's security.

Beyond oil, Saudi Arabia is positioning itself as a logistical linchpin of China's Maritime Silk Road. The Red Sea along Saudi's western coast is a vital leg of the BRI sea route connecting East Asia to Europe via the Suez Canal. Some 12–15% of global trade passes through the Red Sea and Suez chokepoints⁴, including a large share of China–Europe commerce. Saudi ports like Jeddah and the new King Abdullah Port (opened in 2019 near Rabigh) sit astride this corridor, handling growing volumes of container traffic between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. These ports are being expanded and modernized – often with foreign (including Chinese) partners – to capture more transshipment business. King Abdullah Port, for example, has quickly grown into a major container hub, strategically located at the crossroads between East and West on the Red Sea coast.

Saudi Arabia's maritime reach extends beyond its own shores. Under MbS (in tandem with the UAE), Gulf states have pushed to control both sides of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The Emirates have invested in port projects in Somaliland, Djibouti, Sudan and Egypt⁵. The goal is to ensure this crucial shipping lane remains secure and under friendly control, so that the lifeline of trade to Europe and Asia is not threatened by rivals like Iran or by local conflicts. Beijing, for its part, has also established a naval base at the Red Sea's entrance in Djibouti⁶ and invested in numerous African ports⁷, underscoring how vital this route is to Chinese strategic planning. In this emerging Red Sea cold war, Saudi Arabia and China share a rare alignment of interest: keep the trade flowing. This convergence was evident in late 2023, when Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen attacked ships in the Red Sea

³ Retrieved from Saudi General Authority for Statistics. [Link >](#)

⁴ Atlantic Council. *A lifeline under threat: Why the Suez Canal's security matters for the world*. 20 March 2025. [Link >](#)

⁵ ISPI (Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale). *One Port, One Node: The Emirati Geostrategic Road to Africa*. 13 June 2023. [Link >](#)

⁶ Congressional Research Service (CRS), US Congress. *China's Engagement in Djibouti*. 06 June 2025. [Link >](#)

⁷ Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). *Assessing the Risks of Chinese Investments in Sub-Saharan African Ports*. 4 June 2019. [Link >](#)

amid the Israel–Gaza war, prompting both the U.S. and China (along with regional states) to intervene to secure the corridor⁸.

However, Riyadh’s deepening ties with China have not come at the expense of its Western relationships. Instead, Saudi Arabia is pursuing a deliberately multi-aligned strategy. In 2023, it joined the BRICS economic bloc (along with other Middle Eastern states) even as it secured major new investments from the United States. The kingdom eagerly engages in Chinese-led initiatives while also preserving its U.S. defense partnership. MbS exemplifies this balance: he welcomed Xi Jinping to Riyadh in 2022, and also hosted U.S. President Donald Trump while inking huge deals with American firms. Saudi officials insist they do not want to choose sides in a U.S.–China rivalry – casting the Gulf as a “bridge for peace” that works with all major powers⁹. The underlying calculation is pragmatic: Saudi interests are best served by maximizing options and extracting benefits from both directions.

This multi-directional approach was also evident in Saudi Arabia’s Syria policy. For years, Washington and Riyadh had worked together to isolate Bashar al-Assad’s regime. But as the war dragged on and Russia’s intervention kept Assad in power, Riyadh reconsidered. By 2023–24, Saudi Arabia led a regional rapprochement with Damascus, breaking from Washington’s pressure campaign. The shift was driven by Saudi interests: preventing Syria’s fragmentation, countering Iran’s influence there, and fostering regional stability to enable trade and infrastructure. In essence, Riyadh decided that keeping Syria intact and in the Arab fold was more urgent than adhering to the old U.S. policy of ostracism. By taking this initiative, MbS positioned his kingdom as a regional agenda-setter, signaling to Washington that Saudi Arabia would pursue its own solutions (even if that meant engaging a Russian-backed Assad) when American policy proved ineffective. Notably, this Saudi outreach dovetailed with a U.S. pivot under President Trump – bringing Washington into alignment with Riyadh’s approach, as both sought to stabilize Syria after Assad and limit China’s opening.

⁸ UK Parliament, Commons Library. *UK and international response to Houthis in the Red Sea 2024/25*. Research Briefing. 4 February 2025. [Link >](#)

⁹ Arab News. *GCC secretary-general says Arab Gulf is ‘bridge for peace’ amid US-China competition*. 8 December 2024. [Link >](#)

Turkey: Eurasia's Middle Corridor Bridge

If Saudi Arabia is a pillar of China's maritime route, Turkey has become a linchpin of an emerging overland route known as the Middle Corridor¹⁰. This Trans-Caspian corridor connects China to Europe through Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey, bypassing both Russia and Iran. It long carried only a small fraction of Eurasian freight – the vast majority moved via Russia's railways (the Northern Corridor) or by sea through the Suez Canal – but Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine changed that. War and sanctions made the Russian route politically and commercially fraught, causing its China–Europe rail traffic to plummet by about 50% by 2023. Shippers began looking south. The Middle Corridor saw freight volumes surge by roughly 80–90% in 2023 as cargo was re-routed away from Russia¹¹. This trend continued into 2024, underscoring how Turkey and its neighbors seized the opportunity to become a new transit bridge between Europe and China.

For Ankara, this is more than an economic windfall – it is a geopolitical opportunity. Turkish leaders have long promoted their country as a “Eurasian connector,” and now they can back that claim with new infrastructure. The Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway (completed 2017) and Istanbul's Marmaray rail tunnel under the Bosphorus enable continuous rail service from China's Xinjiang to Europe via Turkey. By 2023, freight trains from China were regularly arriving in Turkey and reaching Europe in about 12–15 days¹² – roughly half the time of a sea voyage. Turkish officials tout the Middle Corridor as faster and, in some respects, safer: it avoids Russia's war zone and the long detour via the Bab al-Mandeb Strait and Suez (which in late 2023 saw Houthi rebel attacks on shipping). In short, Turkey's route offers diversification and resilience for global trade at a time of instability.

This role gives Turkey leverage. Controlling this Silk Road juncture boosts Ankara's bargaining power with both East and West. Chinese companies have invested in Turkish transport infrastructure (for example, China's COSCO owns a stake in Istanbul's Kumport port terminal¹³), and Turkey can attract more Chinese logistics and manufacturing interest by positioning itself as China's gateway to Europe. At the same time, European countries and the U.S. have a renewed strategic interest in Turkey as a corridor that reduces reliance on Russia and bolsters supply chain security. For President Erdoğan – who prides himself on a multidirectional foreign policy – this situation is ideal: Turkey can play China and the West off each other to extract concessions from both. Indeed, in recent years Erdoğan has leveraged Turkey's pivotal position (in NATO and in regional conflicts) to demand European investment and U.S. arms sales even as he deepened trade with China and Russia.

Nonetheless, Turkey's Middle Corridor ambitions come with challenges. Many in Beijing still view Turkey's route as secondary, prioritizing the bigger corridors through Russia or planned routes via Iran and Pakistan. The Middle Corridor also depends on coordination among numerous countries

¹⁰ Atlantic Council. *Why the Middle Corridor matters amid a geopolitical resorting*. 2 June 2025. [Link >](#)

¹¹ UN Trade & Development (UNCTAD). *The new corridors of global trade*. 24 March 2024. [Link >](#)

¹² Türkiye, Directorate of Communications. *China-Europe freight train reaches Türkiye in 15 days via “Middle Corridor”*. 5 August 2025. [Link >](#)

¹³ Türkiye, Investment & Finance Office. *Chinese consortium buys into Turkish port with USD 940 million investment*. 28 September 2015. [Link >](#)

and requires costly infrastructure upgrades – progress has been slow due to limited funding. Current capacity remains modest (in 2024 it carried only a small fraction of the freight moved via Russia¹⁴). Turkey also faces competition. Greece’s COSCO-run port of Piraeus provides another avenue into Europe for Chinese goods, potentially siphoning traffic that might otherwise run across Turkey. And despite occasional disruptions, the Suez Canal remains a well-established rival with far greater capacity. Ankara will need to convince shippers that a trans–Central Asian rail route can be efficient and reliable enough to be a true alternative over the long term.

Another potential friction point is Turkey’s relationship with China’s Muslim Uyghur population in Xinjiang. In the past, Ankara’s outspoken criticism of Beijing’s repression of Uyghurs caused diplomatic strains. In recent years, Erdoğan’s government has muted such criticism to safeguard economic ties, but the issue could resurface. Furthermore, Turkey’s growing engagement in Central Asia – home to Turkic peoples in places like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – could raise concern in Beijing (and Moscow), which traditionally regard that region as their sphere of influence. Thus far, China has tacitly accepted Turkey’s role so long as it facilitates commerce and does not threaten Chinese interests.

Turkey’s approach to BRI projects at home illustrates its balancing act. Ankara welcomes Chinese investment in its railways and ports, yet uses the prospect of closer ties with Beijing as a lever in negotiations with the West. Ankara has even hinted at joining Chinese-led initiatives or buying Chinese arms if Western support lags – only to backtrack when it wins concessions. This skillful maneuvering shows that Turkey, much like Saudi Arabia, is determined to maximize its strategic gains from both sides of the global rivalry.

Finally, Turkey’s interests in Syria are entwined with its broader strategy. Decades of trade routes, pipelines, and roads linking Turkey to the Arab world have been severed by Syria’s war. Restoring stability in Syria could reopen overland links from Turkey down through Jordan to the Gulf, boosting Turkey’s economy and regional influence. Moreover, containing Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and managing millions of Syrian refugees in Turkey are paramount domestic concerns for Ankara. Thus, Turkey is a critical player in any Syrian endgame – and its Belt and Road role gives Ankara added leverage to shape a favorable outcome. The U.S. cannot realistically craft a Syria policy to counter China without accounting for Turkey’s stance.

¹⁴ The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst. *The Middle Corridor Remains Supplementary to Major Trade Routes between the EU and China*. 30 April 2025. [Link >](#)

Syria:

From Isolated Battleground to Strategic Crossroads

For much of the past decade, Syria was a “missing piece” in Middle Eastern geopolitics – a once-central country reduced to chaos and isolation by war. As the fighting waned and Assad remained in power until late 2024, Syria tentatively reemerged as an arena for regional competition and power maneuvering. In the context of the Belt and Road and U.S.–China rivalry, Syria represents both a potential weak link and a minor prize. Its continued instability offered openings for extremist groups, Iran, and Russia to expand their influence during the war. Conversely, a more stable, reintegrated Syria could tilt somewhat toward the China–Russia axis (if left under their patronage) or back into the pro-Western Arab group (if guided by U.S.-aligned states – a process fraught with uncertainty given Syria’s fragility). In short, Syria’s ultimate orientation may influence the Middle East’s alignments at the margins of the emerging world order, even if it is not the centerpiece.

China, who generally prioritized wealthier and more stable states for BRI projects, eventually included Syria in its long-term plans. In early 2022, Damascus joined BRI by signing an MOU with Beijing for future cooperation¹⁵. At the time, many saw this as largely symbolic – Syria was under heavy Western sanctions, the war had caused hundreds of billions in damage, and no major Chinese investments materialized immediately¹⁶. Still, the move signaled that China was positioning itself for Syria’s post-war future, hoping to fill any vacuum left by Western retreat. In 2023, President Assad was even invited to China and treated as a special guest of Xi Jinping (at the Hangzhou Asian Games), and Beijing proclaimed a “strategic partnership” with Syria¹⁷. This unnerved Washington, offering a preview of how China might capitalize on U.S. indecision by stepping into a conflict-ravaged country as a benefactor when the dust settled. (To date, most of Beijing’s grand promises in Syria remain unfulfilled – talk of cooperation has far outpaced reality.)

From Washington’s perspective, Syria became a test of how to prevent China (and Russia or Iran) from gaining ground amid perceived U.S. inertia. Throughout the 2010s, U.S. policy in Syria fixated on defeating ISIS and pressuring (or overthrowing) Assad, with little progress toward a political resolution. By the early 2020s, as Arab states began normalizing with Assad, Washington appeared out of step. The Biden administration (2021–2024) maintained sanctions and opposed formal normalization, but it pointedly did not penalize its Arab partners for reopening ties with Damascus. This tacit tolerance reflected an emerging recognition that isolating Syria was no longer tenable – especially as allies like the UAE and Jordan argued that bringing Syria “in from the cold” would better counter Iran. In May 2023, Syria was readmitted to the Arab League over U.S. objections, a milestone that the United States grudgingly accepted since it could not veto the Arab consensus. In short, even before President Trump returned to office, a bipartisan realization had set in that the

¹⁵ China, National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC). *China and Syria sign MoU on Belt and Road Cooperation*. 27 January 2022. [Link >](#)

¹⁶ Reuters. *Assad's fall in Syria exposes limits of China's Middle East diplomacy*. 10 December 2024. [Link >](#)

¹⁷ France 24. *China's Xi hails 'strategic partnership' with Syria in Bashar al-Assad visit*. 22 September 2023. [Link >](#)

longstanding U.S. approach had failed and that American interests might be better served by a managed rehabilitation of Syria rather than an endless ostracism that only pushed Damascus further into Moscow and Tehran's (and Beijing's) orbit.

These shifts set the stage for a dramatic reversal after Bashar al-Assad's regime fell in late 2024. In May 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump met with Syria's new president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, in Riyadh – an encounter arranged by Saudi Crown Prince MbS¹⁸. This meeting marked a 180-degree turn in U.S. Syria policy. The new government in Damascus desperately needed international legitimacy, and Trump decided to lift U.S. sanctions on Syria and effectively blessed Syria's reintegration into the regional order¹⁹, on the condition that the new authorities distance themselves from extremist groups and seriously consider making peace with Israel²⁰. It was a stunning moment that upended decades of American policy.

Trump justified this shift as a push for Middle East peace. Indeed, Trump extracted a vague assurance from al-Sharaa that Syria would eventually be willing to make peace with Israel under the right circumstances. Strategically, though, Trump's gambit was about pulling Syria out of the East's orbit (Russia and Iran) and preventing Syria from becoming a failed state that jihadists could exploit once more. And underlying it all was a calculation about China. By unshackling Syria's economy, the U.S. opened the door for Western companies and aid agencies to compete with any Chinese offers. Lifting sanctions also removed a Chinese talking point – that American sanctions were chiefly responsible for Syria's humanitarian crisis. In bringing Syria back into a U.S.-led regional fold (with Saudi mediation), Washington aimed to pre-empt Beijing from swooping in as Damascus's savior. In essence, the Trump administration decided that engaging Syria was the lesser evil compared to leaving it as a void for China, Russia, or Iran to fill.

Crucially, Trump's outreach aligned with what Saudi Arabia and Turkey wanted. MbS reportedly encouraged Trump's move, sweetening the proposition with promises of massive Saudi investments in the U.S. and assurances (still unfulfilled) of Gulf funding for Syria's reconstruction. Turkey, too, was kept on board: during the Riyadh summit, Trump and MbS called President Erdoğan to brief him on the plan²¹ and to signal that Turkey's concerns (such as the role of SDF) would be addressed. This high-level coordination aimed to show Riyadh and Ankara that their interests in Syria would be safeguarded. This was critical for rebuilding trust, since both partners had felt burned by prior U.S. fickleness. Trump's implicit message was that "we're in this together." The goal was to turn Syria from an arena of U.S.-ally discord into one of cooperation – all while quietly outflanking China (plus Russia and Iran). Whether these assurances will hold remains to be seen.

For Syrians themselves, Washington's reversal offered a desperately needed reprieve. The lifting of U.S. sanctions promised to allow some trade and investment to resume. Reconstruction – long

¹⁸ Chatham House. *The meeting of al-Sharaa and Trump has shifted the balance of power in the Middle East*. 16 May 2025. [Link >](#)

¹⁹ The White House, USA. *Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Provides for the Revocation of Syria Sanctions*. 30 June 2025. [Link >](#)

²⁰ Time. *Breaking Down Trump's Plan to Lift U.S. Sanctions on Syria*. 15 May 2025. [Link >](#)

²¹ Time. *Trump Meets With Syria's President After Announcing Plans to Lift U.S. Sanctions on Country*. 15 May 2025. [Link >](#)

stalled – might even accelerate if Gulf money arrive (a big if). For a war-weary populace, these moves raised cautious hopes of economic relief after nearly 14 years of devastation. The new government in Damascus understood that it must meet Turkish, Saudi, and U.S. conditions in order to secure external backing. President al-Sharaa’s domestic legitimacy, in fact, hinges on delivering what Assad never could: normalization with neighbors and an end to pariah status. By mid-2025, Syria was witnessing the first glimmers of a diplomatic opening, entirely dependent on staying in the good graces of Riyadh and Washington. This opportunity was extremely fragile and could evaporate quickly if regional support wavers or if Syria fails to meet the heavy expectations placed upon it.

That tentative optimism soon ran into a formidable roadblock: Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government viewed the U.S.–Saudi embrace of Syria’s new regime with deep dismay. From Israel’s perspective, even a post-Assad Syria led by an ex-jihadist offered little improvement and could prove even more hostile toward Israel. Moreover, Israel resented that U.S. sanctions on Syria were being lifted without ironclad guarantees that Iran and Hezbollah’s presence in Syria would be eliminated. Netanyahu’s administration publicly opposed the U.S. outreach and intensified its military campaign in Syria. In the months after al-Sharaa took power, Israel dramatically escalated airstrikes across Syria – hitting weapons depots and even Syrian army positions – under the pretext of preventing arms transfers to Iran-backed militants. In southern Syria, Israeli forces also pushed their lines forward in the Golan Heights area, encroaching into territory that had been demilitarized since 1974. Netanyahu bluntly stated that Israel would not tolerate the reconstitution of a Syrian army in the south – effectively staking out a sphere of influence. Critics noted that Israel was trying to engineer the region to its liking by fragmenting Syrian authority – perhaps paving the way for a permanent buffer zone or even de facto partition in the south.

There were indications that Israel’s actions were part of a broader strategy. Hardliners in Tel Aviv had reportedly proposed a so-called “David’s Corridor” plan, whereby Israel would support autonomous zones for various Syrian communities (Druze, Kurds, and others) to splinter the country. By aligning with certain minorities – much as Israel historically aligned with Lebanese Christian militias and later with South Sudan – Israel hoped to establish client enclaves that could serve as buffers against Iran and footholds for Israeli influence. In southern Syria, for instance, Israeli emissaries courted Druze leaders with the aim of setting up a friendly local militia to secure the border and give Israel access to water resources in the Golan region. Meanwhile, Israel’s air force continued pounding Syrian infrastructure, even striking the surroundings of the Defense Ministry and Presidential Palace in Damascus, to weaken the central government. Some described Israel’s approach as an effort to partition Syria into Sunni, Alawite, Kurdish, and Druze entities, exploiting sectarian rifts so that Syria remains weak. Although that view is contested, Israel’s intensified interference after 8 December 2024 gave it some plausibility. Netanyahu’s government was essentially intent on preventing Syria’s reunification unless Israel’s terms were met.

Israel’s posture created a sharp dilemma for Washington. The United States counts Israel as a close ally, yet here Israeli and American strategic priorities were at odds. To achieve its anti-China, pro-stability goals in Syria, Washington would have to pressure Israel to moderate its maximalist approach. Saudi Arabia made this trade-off explicit. Fresh from hosting the Trump–Sharaa meeting, MbS quietly warned that Saudi normalization with Israel would be impossible unless Israel respected Syria’s sovereignty. In practical terms, Riyadh signaled that Israel needed to cease its strikes in Syria

and pull back any support for Syrian separatist factions as part of the price for Saudi–Israeli peace. This was a striking shift – only a year earlier, discussions of a U.S.-brokered Saudi–Israel deal had included the Palestinian issue. Now Syria had been added to the mix: Saudi Arabia essentially added Syrian territorial integrity as a new condition (alongside progress on Palestine) for any deal with Israel.

By mid-2025, the regional alignment had shifted. The U.S., Saudi Arabia, Turkey and most Arab states were converging on a plan for Syria that prioritized stability, territorial integrity, and curbing Iran’s influence – aiming to reintegrate Syria fully into the Arab world. Israel, by contrast, found itself isolated in insisting on keeping Syria weak through use of force. This realignment all but ended Israel’s quest for further integration into the region, at least for now. Netanyahu’s hopes of a landmark rapprochement with Saudi Arabia were slipping away; instead, Riyadh and Washington were focused on rehabilitating Syria – a development he viewed as empowering a foe on his border.

Confronting the Israel problem became a new puzzle piece in Washington’s Syria strategy (and, by extension, its Belt-and-Road counterstrategy in the Middle East). The U.S. was compelled to play mediator between its allies – on one side reassuring Saudi Arabia and Turkey by showing commitment to Syria’s stability, and on the other managing Israel’s security concerns without letting Israel sabotage the wider initiative. Quiet diplomacy was set in motion. U.S. officials began brokering indirect talks between Syrian and Israeli representatives²² to defuse tensions in southern Syria. Proposals emerged for a security and economic arrangement along the Golan Heights frontier. In exchange, Israel would be expected to halt its deep strikes inside Syria, giving the new government in Damascus a chance to consolidate. As of January 2026, these negotiations were ongoing. Washington’s envoy - Tom Barrack - shuttled between capitals in the Middle East in an effort to craft interim understandings and prevent an unintended escalation that could unravel the progress made. Barrack even invoked Syria’s ancient role as a crossroads, suggesting that if peace takes hold, Syria could again serve as a nexus of regional trade – albeit a distant prospect.

Barrack’s work underscored Syria’s latent potential: this nation sits at the intersection of continents, and its trajectory will subtly shape the flow of commerce and influence across the Levant. Whether that potential is realized in alignment with U.S. and allied interests, or whether Syria collapses back into chaos (to the advantage of Beijing or other adversaries), now hinges on the outcome of these diplomatic hurdles. And those hurdles remain formidable.

²² France 24. *Syria, Israel hold US-mediated talks in Paris on regional de-escalation*. 20 August 2025. [Link >](#)

Conclusion

Syria's trajectory over the past 15 years – from war to tentative reconstruction – has taken on new significance in the unfolding U.S.–China rivalry. What once might have been seen as a parochial Middle Eastern conflict now carries wider implications, intertwined with China's Belt and Road ambitions and America's efforts to reclaim influence. The United States' ability to curb China's expansion via BRI does not hinge only on distant infrastructure projects or financial statecraft; it depends on empowering a coalition of regional allies who anchor strategic corridors. Saudi Arabia and Turkey, by virtue of geography, are indispensable in securing trade routes and political alignments that favor a U.S.-led order. Recognizing this, American policymakers have adjusted their approach – including on Syria – to reinforce those allies' interests. In practical terms, that meant abandoning a failed strategy of isolating Damascus and instead working with Riyadh and Ankara to bring Syria back in from the cold. The logic is straightforward: a Syria that is relatively stable and at least neutral is far preferable to a broken Syria that serves as a playground for competitors.

However, integrating Syria into a pro-Western orbit faces a critical test: aligning Israel with this new regional paradigm. This is a classic clash of U.S. foreign policy priorities. Can Washington persuade or pressure one close ally – Israel – to restrain its unilateral impulses for the sake of a broader strategy that benefits America's other allies and undercuts its adversaries? The answer remains uncertain. Netanyahu's vision of Syria should align with the collective interests of the U.S., Arabs, and Turks. If Israel refuses this alignment, it could sabotage Syria's recovery and alienate the very Arab partners whose cooperation Washington needs to contain China. After the Paris talks in January 2026, it seems Washington was able to broker a modus vivendi whereby Israel's core security needs are met and it is to refrain from further destabilizing Syria. A new Saudi–Turkish–American consensus is emerging – one that prioritizes state stability and development over endless war. Such an alignment would undercut Beijing's narrative that Chinese mediation or investment can deliver peace, by demonstrating that Middle Eastern states can address their own problems with Western support.

In the end, Syria may well prove a bellwether. In an ideal scenario, a united Syria that heals and reconnects would show (Washington hopes) that even late-arriving U.S.-backed diplomacy can yield results, and that America's allies can again count on Washington to support them against common challenges. In theory, such a success would also narrow the space for China's influence: there would be fewer vacuums for Beijing to fill, fewer embattled regimes desperate for new patrons, and a stronger U.S. economic footprint in the region's future. Let's see how this optimistic vision will unfold in the near future. If instead Syria fails to unite – and turns into a patchwork where foreign powers strike at will – then China can patiently court whatever local actors prevail on the ground. Such a chaos could even drive regional players to look beyond Washington; for example, if U.S. efforts falter and Israel resumes its military interference in Syria, some Arab states might once again turn to Russia or China as alternative guarantors of stability. Many in the region know that this darker outcome is possible.

Ultimately, the stakes extend beyond Syria itself. The outcome in Damascus will reverberate in how the Middle East positions itself in the U.S.–China competition. More broadly, it will test whether American strategy can still deliver in a multipolar world.

