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Rival Strategies, Shared Threat: Israel–Türkiye Competition and Syria’s Future

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Abstract

In late 2024, the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria signified the removal of an oppressive authoritarian government. This was an unprecedented opportunity for political consolidation, however Syria has not transitioned toward unified governance. This paper argues that post-Assad Syria is best understood as a stable equilibrium produced by regional strategic interaction. Focusing on Israel and Türkiye as the two most consequential external actors, the paper demonstrates how divergent threat perceptions generate incompatible preferences for Syria's political future. Israel seeks managed fragmentation to preserve operational freedom and prevent hostile state consolidation, while Türkiye pursues conditional unification to stabilize its borders, suppress Kurdish autonomy, and shape a Sunni-aligned political order.

Drawing on Regional Security Complex Theory, balance of threat theory, proxy intervention literature, and an informal repeated-game framework, this analysis shows how fragmentation and partial integration persist due to veto power, proxy autonomy, spoiler behavior, and unresolved commitment problems. Domestic Syrian actors such as militias, tribes, and semi-autonomous administrations are not passive recipients of external influence. Instead, they are strategic agents who hedge, resist integration, and preserve autonomy to exploit regional competition. Due to the absence of a credible coordinating actor, particularly following major shifts in U.S. foreign policy, the system is locked into a spoiler-driven stalemate.

The paper contributes to scholarship on civil wars with overlapping external interventions by reframing fragmentation as a rational equilibrium rather than a transitional failure. Beyond the Syrian case, it offers a transferable framework for analyzing post-conflict political orders shaped by regional rivalry, proxy dynamics, and strategic interaction.



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Introduction

On November 27, 2024, a “Cinderella story” operation was launched to remove Bashar al-Assad from power in Syria. This operation was spearheaded by Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Military Operations Command with the Southern Operations Room and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army. By December 7, Damascus was the only major territory Assad still controlled. That day, UN Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. Geir O. Pederson urged for “orderly political transition” and called for “de-escalation, for calm” in a statement to the press. The next day, on December 8, 2024, after more than 50 years of brutal rule and 13 years of conflict, the world was shocked by the fall of the Assad regime. A caretaker government was quickly established by the leader of HTS, Ahmed al-Sharaa. Since then, there has been a massive struggle to regain autonomy, recognition, and legitimacy within the region and the world.

Despite cooperation between opposing Islamist, tribal, and military factions to take Damascus, there continues to be uncertainty about the post-war governance and fragmentation caused by competing visions for Syria’s future. External powers seek to use their footholds within local authorities, militias, and de facto autonomous zones to shape governance according to their priorities. Both the division within Syria and growing recognition for al-Sharaa have opened space for competing regional visions for Syria’s political future. Syria has turned the page from a state engaged in civil war over regime survival. It has rid itself of the Assad regime, but still faces significant hurdles in consolidating power due to external interference. While the U.S. and Russia have both receded in their interventionist approaches, Israel and Türkiye have emerged as the primary actors with long-term stakes and the operational reach to exert influence. Syria is treated like a prize to be won in a larger regional rivalry.

Israel, Türkiye, the Gulf states, and the U.S. all identify Iran as a primary strategic threat in the region. They, along with the former HTS leadership now embedded within the interim government, view the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), an Iranian military branch, as a central issue. Its entrenchment within Syria’s infrastructure is pressing. An additional concern is the Tehran-Damascus-Beirut corridor Iranian militias work to preserve, as it supplies Hezbollah, an essential proxy to Iran. This shared threat perception should generate a common goal among



these actors. However, despite broad opposition to Iran's presence, due to divergent threat hierarchies, Türkiye and Israel propose opposite outcomes for Syria's political future.

Israel prefers a fragmented, weak Syria because its first priority lies in preventing a powerful, unified state. The Israeli state believes that easily controlled fragments will also deter Iran, despite clear intentions and actions by the caretaker government to eliminate Iranian presence in Syria. Türkiye seeks political unification or semi-unified governance aligned with its interests to stabilize its southern border, prevent Kurdish autonomy and to capitalize on the opportunity to become the "protector" of Sunni populations. The state is working directly with the Gulf states to achieve this, although their priorities slightly differ. The Gulf states want to finally defeat Iran in their cold war and instill a controlled Sunni ally to extend their political prowess through the Levant. Several states share the goal of eliminating Iran as a powerful regional actor, however there are mutually incompatible strategies developed. This demands an examination of competing regional ambitions and structural incentives behind fragmentation versus unification.

How do competing Turkish and Israeli strategies shape the political landscape of post-Assad Syria, despite all state actors sharing the goal of expelling Iranian influence?

Türkiye's desired outcomes require larger political coherence, and unified structures. If Türkiye continues to bolster the government with Gulf help, there are higher prospects for political cohesion. In contrast, Israel has long preferred fractured neighbors that are manageable, localized threats. Its military doctrine encourages decentralized governance, local autonomies, and fragmented enclaves to prevent potentially hostile strong states. Achieving fragmentation would not only deliver a deathblow to Iran's corridor to Lebanon, but also weaken Syrian state capacity and facilitate Israeli freedom of action. Israel is attempting to achieve this through repeated military intervention. Prospects for unification remain low as long as Israel continues its encroachment. While the U.S. will not forcefully shape the end-state, it sets red lines for escalation, manages alliance contradictions, and provides limited oversight. Currently, Israel often operates independently of U.S. preferences, however U.S. influence is not vital in determining outcomes, rather in limiting Israeli/Turkish actions.

This paper hypothesizes that Israel's security strategy in post-Assad Syria renders fragmentation a stable equilibrium due to its views of a strong, unified Syrian state as a reopened



Iranian corridor, but deeper than that, it sees the potential for a strong regional power, a military threat, and general constraint on Israeli operations. Fragmentation offers a security buffer, operational flexibility, and the upper hand in regional competition. Türkiye's preferred outcome is stabilizing unification as it seeks suppression of Kurdish separatism, reintegration of Syrian opposition structures, and Sunni-led governance aligned with Turkish interests. A more unified Syria supports long-term border stability, Turkish regional leadership, resumed trade and reconstruction ties, and dominance over its historic competitor Iran. The United States' main strategy is to contain Iran, ISIS, and avoid new commitments. President Donald Trump has shifted U.S. foreign policy from its traditional interventionist approach to allowing states their own autonomy. Despite the historical importance of the U.S. in the region, Israel and Türkiye drive the political contest for Syria.

In the following methodology section, I will justify my qualitative strategic-interaction approach and explain comparative logic using Israel and Türkiye as case studies. The empirical context will map Israel's footprint, Türkiye's territorial control, Gulf financing, U.S. constraints, and the range of Syrian actor autonomy. In my literature review, I will survey existing scholarship on regional competition, Israel's Syria doctrine, Türkiye's regional strategy, Gulf involvement, U.S. policy shifts, and Syrian proxy dynamics. I will discuss the lack of research on Israel and Türkiye as the key determinants of post-Assad Syria. My theoretical and conceptual framework will introduce the regional security complex theory, balance of threat theory, proxy theory, spoilers and commitment problems, and game theory. These concepts illuminate fragmentation vs. unification as post-conflict results. I will then present strategic interaction equilibrium outcomes. Following is the interpretation of findings and the evaluation of conditions shaping each equilibria. I will conclude with a summary of contributions, a reflection on regional implications, and an identification of areas for future research.

Methodology

Research Design: Qualitative Strategic Interaction Analysis

A strategic interactive framework is necessary for understanding Syria's post-Assad trajectories, rather than a single-case study, pure process tracing, or quantitative analysis. My research examines how external actors make choices in response to each other, producing different



equilibrium outcomes such as fragmentation or unification. Strategic interaction analysis is suitable for multi-actor environments, asymmetric capabilities, sequential decision-making, proxy dynamics, and commitment problems and spoiler behavior. My design is qualitative, theory-informed, and oriented toward generating stylized strategic equilibria supported by empirical patterns. This design allows the study to capture interdependent incentives that cannot be understood through single-actor or dyadic analysis alone.

My study integrates external competition with domestic fragmentation, builds a simplified non-cooperative strategic framework, clarifies how fragmentation creates and constrains strategic options, and addresses a methodological gap. Existing research isolates competition with fragmentation, but Syria's conflict outcomes depend on their interaction. My contribution will fill the intersection. I narrow the actor set to Israel and Türkiye, conceptually encoding payoffs such as security, territorial control, influence, and legitimacy, and analyze cooperative, defective, coercive, accommodating, and proxy-shift strategies. This analysis shows that fragmentation is not only an outcome, but a strategic resource, a constraint, and a tool shaped by external players. Much of the scholarship on Syria is empirically rich but analytically fragmented, with few works developing formalized strategic interaction models that can be applied beyond Syria.

My research advances understanding of civil wars with multiple overlapping external interventions, and offers a transferable framework for other fragmented conflicts. It helps explain strategic misalignment among actors, illuminates mechanisms behind stalemate, de facto partition, and spoiler risks. My work demonstrates how external competition shapes conflict duration and settlement prospects.

Comparative Case Logic

Comparing multiple external actor interventions reveals divergent strategic outcomes. Using Israel and Türkiye as the main cases, with the Gulf states and the United States as secondary actors, is the most analytically useful manner to understand regional competition over Syria. Israel's behavior in southern Syria shows how fragmentation is a security buffer actively maintained through airpower, deconfliction arrangements, and deterrence posture. Türkiye's governance experiments in northern Syria demonstrate a unification-oriented external strategy applied with local councils, policing structures, and economic integration. As secondary stakeholders, the Gulf



states and the U.S. also have an impact on the main player's decision-making. The Gulf states place importance on investments and political influence patterns, attempting to gain state-building leverage by reconstruction, diplomatic engagement, and political alignment. The U.S. acts as a veto actor, postured towards Syrian unification, constraining action, but not highly directing regional equilibria. U.S. priority lies in airspace control, sanctions, stabilization assistance, and withdrawal signals.

Comparing these cases allows for the identification of diverging strategic goals, differing patron-proxy dynamics, variation in mechanisms of influence, and how these differences map onto the equilibrium outcomes. The same arena sees players using different strategies to achieve different outcomes.

Data Sources and Limitations

I will cross-verify claims, reduce bias from single-source narratives, and identify repeated patterns across independent sources. I will use primary sources such as policy documents, think-tank publications, as well as secondary literature. Sources include government and UN statements, CNAS, Carnegie, Chatham House, CSIS, RAND, INSS, and academic works on RSCT, balance of threat theory, civil war fragmentation, proxy dynamics, Syrian local governance, and regional interventions. This will capture both official strategy and behavioral evidence from the ground. Methodological constraints include limited transparency, attribution challenges, and temporal uncertainty. Findings should be interpreted as stylized outcomes and strategic logics, not deterministic forecasts.

Empirical Context

The Post-Assad Vacuum and Syria's Fragmented Map

Syria's fragmentation produces a complex competitive arena where external powers operate through interacting footprints and domestic groups act with substantial autonomy. The collapse of central authority in Syria led to an administrative vacuum, a security void, and a loss of a nationwide command structure. Core state institutions such as the justice apparatus, ministries, and service delivery remain severely disabled. In many areas, local communities and pre-existing administrative networks filled gaps left by the state's withdrawal by assuming responsibility for



essential governance tasks. The current government has reached agreements with local enclaves to help stabilize the state, and established a role for them in administering their areas (Waters, 2025). Existing subnational administrative arrangements are widely viewed as obsolete, and the new central authority is working with tribal leaders, former government employees, and businessmen to manage sectors.

Governance remains patchy between local councils, militia-run authority, tribal justice networks, new government state structure, and DAANES administrative bureaucracy. In much of rural Syria, there are already established networks of local administrative structures. There is persistent mistrust between civilians and the new government. Residents indicate that service delivery and living conditions have not meaningfully improved despite official outreach efforts (Waters, 2025). Carnegie Endowment interviews indicate that governance has remained largely limited to restricted security coordination, service provisions, and needs assessments (2025). Waters notes this has led to the development of an uneven rule of law across regions due to alternative justice models by local authorities.

There have been several direct conflicts and attacks against minority groups. Pro-central authority militia factions attacked Alawi people in Latakia and Tartus, following Assad loyalist militia attacks on March 6, 2025. From March 6 to 17, there were at least 1400 deaths including summary executions, mostly within the Alawite groups (Zayadin, 2025). There was also torture and widespread property destruction, and the violence is being investigated as a war crime according to the UN. As of October 2025, revenge killings targeting minorities are on the rise, per data reports from ACLED. There were 133 incidents of sectarian violence in al-Sweida, Daraa, and Quneitra between January and July 25, 2025. There were at least 832 fatalities and mass displacements from 95 incidents between July 13-25 alone (Ezzeddine, 2025). Between September and October 2025 there were 49 attacks against members of the Alawite sect, which “continues to be associated with the former regime” (Mehvar et al., 2025). The attacks against the Alawite minority predominantly took place in Hama, Tartus, Latakia, and Homs, and have not been claimed by any group.

Following December, there was a complete geographic rupture of the already fragmented state. The northwest, northeast, south, and center of the state separated. As of May 27, 2025, much of



the state remained independent of any central authority. The Israeli defense force (IDF) maintains control over the Golan heights, the HTS-derived interim government controls much of the northwest, with factions of Assad-loyalists and Baathist armed groups mixed within. The Syrian national army holds two large separate footholds in the north, with the SDF having massive territory in the northeast, known as DAANES or Rojava. In the southeast, the Al-Tanf deconfliction zone and U.S. military outpost remains. Druze communities dominate Sweida and surround Al-Tanf (Rojan, 2025). Economic geography fragmented into key border crossings, smuggling and war economy corridors, and oil, agriculture and taxation points.

Israel's Operational Footprint in Syria

Israel's operational footprint can be characterized by its geographic zones, mechanisms of coordination & monitoring, and operational patterns. Reported strike totals vary by source. Within the first 48 hours of Assad's fall, the IDF reported that Israel destroyed as much as 70-80% of the regime's weapon stockpiles, air defense systems, and military infrastructure (Knell, 2025). Since December 2024, Israel has carried out over 1,000 airstrikes on Syria and more than 400 cross-border raids into the south (SNHR, 2025). The Syrian Network for Human Rights documented more than 450 Israeli airstrikes in Syria between Dec 8 to Dec 15 alone. On July 14, ACLED recorded Israeli strikes to a military compound in Damascus, followed by 15 incidents of Israeli strikes on Bedouin and regime positions in southern Syria, stated to protect Druze areas (Ezzeddine, 2025). These actions reflect a continuation of Israel's long-standing "campaign between wars" doctrine, which aims to degrade hostile military capacity before it can threaten Israel's borders.

Israel immediately seized the Golan buffer zone on December 8, following the collapse of Assad's army, with PM Netanyahu claiming the 1974 disengagement agreement had "collapsed" (Atkinson & Burgess, 2025). Israel attacked remaining Syrian military assets and had troops operating slightly beyond the buffer zone, preparing to stay on the border peak of Mt Herman for the winter. On December 15, 2024 Israel's government approved a plan to encourage the expansion of settlements in the area, with PM Netanyahu stating it was a necessary move following the fall of Assad to "an Islamist-led rebel alliance". Netanyahu declared he wanted to double the population of the Heights, which is considered illegally occupied under international law. As of



Dec 15, 2024 there are more than 20,000 people and 30 Israeli settlements in the heights (Atkinson & Burgess, 2024). Israel uses the Golan Heights for intelligence collection and deterrence. The state has set up monitoring networks with Druze communities adjacent to the Golan border, which provide local awareness and early-warning capacity in areas where state authority has collapsed. Netanyahu announced in February 2025 in a speech to Israeli military cadets that Israel had prevented unification in the south by blocking the interim government from moving “south from Damascus” (Usher, 2025).

Türkiye’s Territorial, Political, and Military Footprint

Türkiye maintains a multi-layered presence across Syria with significant territorial occupation, military deployment, administrative penetration, and governance integration. Several operations established territorial control across the northern region. Operation Euphrates Shield (Kasapoglu & Ulgen, 2016), which lasted from August 24, 2016 to March 29, 2017, and was enacted by the Turkish Armed Forces, and the Free Syrian Army, served as Türkiye’s initial step to occupying the region. The Jarabulus-al-Bab-Azaz triangle functions as Türkiye’s primary entry corridor and hub for SNA logistics. The triangle hosts several Turkish bases and local councils tied to Gaziantep/Kilis municipalities. Operation Olive Branch in 2018 (Kasapoglu & Ulgen, 2018) secured the Afrin region as Turkish-backed forces replaced YPG governance structures. Türkiye installed parallel security institutions such as police, military police, and intelligence units. Turkish currency, curriculum, and administrative documents were widely adopted. The last fundamental operation, Peace Spring, acquired Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn in 2019 (Aydıntaşbaş, 2020). This split the areas into eastern and western sectors under SNA control. The region functions as a buffer preventing YPG/SDF territorial continuity along the border and the operations increased the integration of local councils with the Şanlıurfa governorate.

Current Turkish military presence and security architecture can be characterized by military outposts, monitoring networks, drone operations, and security forces. Since the fall of the Assad regime Türkiye has reduced its direct military footprint in the north, however the now integrated Syrian National Army remains. As of August 2025, there have been sporadic military exchanges between Türkiye and the Kurds in the northeast, particularly Deir ez-Zor and the surrounding areas. This contact led to a ceasefire agreement on October 7, however it has been violated several times



with Türkiye persistently threatening military action since January 2025 (Al Jazeera, 2025). Ankara has repeatedly tried to prevent the transitional government from coming to an agreement with the SDF that would allow the Kurds to integrate into the national army as a unified military block rather than as individuals (Sharawi, 2025).

Türkiye demonstrates a long-term strategy of control and governance integration rather than temporary intervention. It has a layered military, territorial, and administrative presence in the north, however it has rolled back its direct military occupation. Türkiye continues to shape post-Assad outcomes through proxy forces, institutional influence, and persistent opposition to Kurdish military consolidation.

Gulf States' Role in Shaping Turkish Ambitions

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar are important to the new Syrian state due to their financial leverage, diplomatic recognition, reconstruction capital, and political signaling. Gulf funds flow toward energy, transport, and critical service sectors, which enable local stability. The Gulf is highly interested in future energy transit routes through Syria.

Within the first week of the new central government, Qatar reopened its embassy in Damascus, sent aid, launched infrastructure projects, and invested in public and energy sectors. On August 6, 2025, the Qatari UCC corporation, along with Emirati and Italian companies, opened 12 large projects worth \$14 billion. The largest ones included the construction of a new airport and subway (Reuters, 2025). Qatar has also financed a program to pay the salaries of Syrian public sector employees for three months, pledging \$87 million (Al Jazeera, 2025), and paid the state's \$15.5 million debt to the World Bank with Saudi Arabia (World Bank, 2025).

Saudi presence is particularly vital to Syria. In May, Saudi Arabia hosted President Donald Trump's first major international trip of his second term. Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince hosted a meeting with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, where Syria was discussed (Turak, 2025). The Gulf Cooperation Council, composed of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain, had a summit which Trump attended, along with leaders and representatives from all members. At this summit, bin Salman advocated once again for the Arab



Peace Initiative, which calls for complete Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, the Golan Heights, Gaza and Lebanon (GCC, 2025).

There have been two Saudi-Syrian Investment forums, in which over \$24 billion in agreements were announced. The first was held in Damascus in July 2025, with another in Riyadh in August. The agreements focus on 12 sectors, particularly agriculture, manufacturing, real estate, tourism, energy, infrastructure, finance, and technology. Also, the Saudi-Syrian Business Council was established to foster private-sector collaboration and implement a 2025-2030 action plan. These plans include new medical cities, cultural centers, and skyscraper projects, aiming to create tens of thousands of jobs. These summits have already seen trade growth with increased bilateral trade and Saudi exports to Syria expected to exceed 2 Billion Saudi Riyal in 2025 (Saudi Press Council, 2025).

The United States: Guardian of Constraints

Since the fall of the Assad regime and HTS's step into the spotlight, the U.S. has taken part in normalizing engagement with the former HTS leadership now embedded within the interim government. They have expressed support to the new regime by ceasing all comprehensive sanctions against Syria in June 2025, including partially suspending the Caesar Act for 180 days in November 2025 (Office of Foreign Assets Control, 2025). After Trump's Middle East trip in May, Marco Rubio, U.S. Secretary of State announced the removal of HTS from the Foreign Terrorist Organizations list on July 7 (U.S. Department of State, 2025), and subsequently hosted al-Sharaa in the White House in November, the first time a Syrian leader has ever gone. The United States has openly supported Qatar in its position as a leading actor in shaping the new Syrian order, and signed a \$7 billion memorandum with Qatar and Türkiye to construct four power plants and one solar farm, expecting to satisfy more than 50% of Syria's electricity needs. The U.S. has also extended its support by sending U.S. Ambassador to Türkiye Tom Barrack to Syria as a special envoy.

U.S. President Donald Trump has even urged Israel to engage in dialogue with the new Syrian government, warning them not to continue interfering in Syria. In a Truth Social post, he stated "It is very important that Israel maintain a strong and true dialogue with Syria, and that nothing takes place that will interfere with Syria's evolution into a prosperous State" (Stepansky, 2025). Despite



continual Washington support to Tel Aviv, the U.S. has diverged from backing Israel and is overseeing Türkiye and the Gulf in their new regional relationships. Should Israel make serious advances that would jeopardize the stability in Damascus, the U.S. will act to constrain the state.

Domestic Syrian Actors as Strategic Instruments

The Interim Government.

Hay'at Tehrir al-Sham was formed in 2017. After heading the takedown of the Assad regime, they officially dissolved and became the interim government of Syria. It made the transition from an insurgent proxy organization concentrated in the north to the primary governing actor. HTS has made significant efforts to rebrand its overt military identity in order to achieve international recognition as a legitimate rational actor, governing without overt coercion (Carenzi, 2020). It controls the northwest, with its previous stronghold in Idlib remaining an important hold as well as Damascus and administrative nodes around the country (Rojan, 2025). Its authority ranges from nominal to enforced, with its largest difficulty in the northeast and an inability to project authority southward (Waters, 2025). The interim government has faced many limits to consolidation and has absorbed slow moving integration from the Syrian National Army and domestic actors. Its effective control remains uneven, with significant portions of the country governed by autonomous armed actors or external patrons.

It has inherited ministries and bureaucratic elements, and has used former regime technocrats to uphold remaining institutions. Rather than constructing institutions, the interim government has relied heavily on pre-existing administrative networks to maintain basic governance functions. They have enacted several agreements with local councils to approach governing from the top and the bottom, attempting to consolidate existing governance mechanisms with its attempts to rebuild institutions. These attempts demonstrate the inherited institutional shells that lack sovereignty. The integration of groups has ranged from successful, to stalled attempts, to outright rejection, which has shaped the security architecture to be fragmented (Waters, 2025). The interim government lacks a unified national security apparatus, relying instead on negotiated arrangements with local armed groups whose loyalty remains conditional and reversible.



Although they have achieved legitimacy and a high level of autonomy relative to local actors, the government has an external dependence on Türkiye, the Gulf, and the US for financial viability, diplomatic recognition, and territorial stability. Türkiye facilitates border access, deconfliction, and trade routes, while the Gulf financially supports salaries and reconstruction, and the US has relieved sanctions and given vital diplomatic recognition (Günay et al., 2025). Despite efforts to project national authority, the interim government faces persistent legitimacy deficits among minority communities and local powerbrokers.

SDF/YPG.

U.S. backing allows the SDF to maintain a quasi-state structure in Rojava. However, since the U.S. has declared vocal support for al-Sharaa and the interim government, they have less power to fight Türkiye, which prioritizes its security goals against the SDF. They also further struggle in achieving their goals for autonomy. The Kurds also have increasingly tense relations with Arab tribes in Deir ez-Zor, and Raqqa. In the northeast governorate Deir ez-Zor, Islamic State jihadists have taken advantage of the gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops and have stepped up attacks against the SDF (Sallon, 2025). In the former capital of the Islamic State organization, Raqqa, SDF control has become increasingly contested.

In March, agreements were signed between the current government and the SDF establishing a ceasefire and the integration of all civil and military institutions of DAANES to the central government (SANA, 2025). However, the developments were stalled and in April, al-Sharaa's office announced it "reject[s] any attempt to impose a partition or create separatist cantons under the terms of federalism or self-autonomy without a national consensus" (Al-Khalidi, 2025). On October 6, clashes broke out between the SDF and the interim government forces, leading to an immediate ceasefire brokered by the US, still largely in effect (Security Council Report, 2025). Although the SDF has retained its structures, it is facing increasing constraints on autonomy.

Syrian National Army.

The Syrian National Army formed through the consolidation of Assad opposition factions under Turkish sponsorship. Their purpose was to enforce border security, contain Kurdish forces, and instill territorial control in northern Syria, distinct from a revolutionary opposition force. They



served to project Turkish influence without direct annexation or formal occupation. Their areas of control included Afrin, Azaz, al-Bab, Jarabulus, and parts of Tel Abyad, all gained in Türkiye's major operations (Grinstead & Muaz, 2019). They were heavily dependent on Turkish military presence and administrative support to function. Due to their position as a manufactured militia group with no ideological or ethnic ties, there was a weak central command and factionalism throughout the organization, competing over resources and checkpoints.

After the fall of the Assad regime, the SNA was ordered by Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan to incorporate into the interim government's security apparatus (Daily Sabah, 2025). There continues to be nominal civilian oversight and coordination as a broader effort to signal state reconstruction and legitimacy. The group is still funded, trained, and running logistic flows from Türkiye, signaling institutional integration rather than sovereignty (Al Nofal, 2025). The group's factional autonomy persists at the operational level, with uneven command cohesion and externally constrained strategic decision-making. Local commanders have retained de facto control over personnel and resources.

The control of the interim government over the security force has been blocked by SNA dependence on Turkish material and political support. The SNA functions as an integrated but externally anchored force which contributes to partial unification while constraining the emergence of a sovereign national military. They have shifted from a direct Turkish proxy to an integrated proxy that is institutionally absorbed, strategically constrained, and operationally fragmented. While the integration of the SNA into the interim government represents an effort to project institutional coherence, the SNA remains structurally dependent on Turkish support and retains significant operational autonomy, which limits the creation of a unified national army (Al Nofal, 2025).

Local Militias and Tribes.

In the northeast region of Hasakah, the Shammar tribe uses its forces called the Sanadid and operates under the SDF umbrella (Rojan, 2025). Near the Iraqi border along the Euphrates in Deir ez-Zor, the Al Ougaidat tribe has factions working with and against the SDF (Goldenberg et al., 2016). The Arab Tribal and Clan Forces, an anti-SDF coalition formed with other tribes such as the Baggara and had multiple clashes against the SDF, primarily in 2023 (Hayek & Robertson,



2024) while the Deir ez-Zor Military Council, composed mostly of Arabs, integrated into the SDF after it was expelled by the Islamic State in 2014 (Hassan, 2017).

In Aleppo and the surrounding areas, the al-Baqir Brigade operated before the fall of Assad as a pro-government militia composed mainly of members from the al-Baggara tribe. The group served as a cornerstone of Iran's presence in Syria. Since 2013, many members have converted to Shia Islam due to Iranian proselytization efforts. They played a significant role during the conflict fighting alongside regime forces and becoming highly involved in local governance (Botti & Triebert, 2018). On the coast, particularly in Latakia and Tartus where Russia has its strongest presence in Syria, are the coastal Shabiha, pro-regime legacy networks (Holliday, 2013).

In the south, particularly in Sweida are the Druze, which have some links to Israel, and comprise the Rijal al-Karama militia, working slowly to integrate into the new central government. ACLED reports "Some Druze activists have accused Israel of instrumentalizing their suffering, while others point to discreet aid, such as the reported issuance of Golan work permits and intelligence sharing, as evidence that Israel is acting in their favor (Ezzeddine, 2025). Also in the south, but mostly concentrated in Daraa are Bedouin networks that are local armed actors with no formal ties to a larger organization or militia.

Literature Review

Syria in the Regional Security Complex

Scholars have increasingly moved beyond treating Syria solely as a civil war case, or one to be analyzed through the U.S.-Russia or internal-only lens. Buzan and Wæver's theory (2013) posits that regional security complexes (RSCs) arise when security threats are clustered regionally rather than globally. Several studies assert that Syria's conflict has rapidly become one of the core arenas of Middle Eastern RSC dynamics. External involvement is understood to reflect regional threat perceptions, balance-of-power shifts, and geopolitics unique to the Middle East such as the Iran-Israel rivalry, Türkiye's border security, and Gulf-Iran competition. Because the U.S. and Russia have become secondary stakeholders in Middle Eastern regional competition, Cold War framing is no longer adequate to explain Syria's post-Assad landscape.



The Syrian civil war catalyzed a reordering of the regional balance and successfully created a shift from U.S. dominance while intensifying intra-regional competition (Hussain, 2013). The Middle East was described as a competitive multipolar system with no logical hegemon, and multiple middle powers projecting influence (Kausch, 2014). Similarly, Martini, York, and Young (2013) argue that Syria is inherently an “arena of strategic competition,” where external powers use the conflict to advance broader geopolitical objectives. They wrote that Syria is less a domestic battleground, and more a contested space shaped by external agendas. While much of the literature was produced during the civil war, its core insights about external rivalry, patronage, and fragmentation remain applicable to the post-Assad transition.

Syria’s fate is now primarily determined by regional actors, rather than superpower bipolarity. Günay et al. (2025) describe post-Assad Syria as a “tug-of-war” between regional actors whose visions for Syria diverge sharply. Multiple actors pull Syria in incompatible directions, raising the risk that “the rope snaps”. Their analysis emphasizes that Syria’s future cannot be understood without examining how regional powers view their strategic stakes in the country. There are specific post-Assad security threats impacting all regional players outlined by Idlbi et al. (2025) to be militia proliferation, governance vacuum, and competing non-state actors. These threats arise precisely because Syria is embedded in a regional security complex where each actor intervenes to shape Syria in its own image.

These sources collectively demonstrate a clear pattern by illustrating a new Syria that has moved from the U.S.-Russia proxy battlefield to the central arena of regional competition among mid-level powers. The post-Assad state will continually be characterized by regional conflicts operating simultaneously rather than great-power settlements. Sources agree that Syria’s fragmentation, governance prospects, and long-term stability depend on the interactions of regional actors within the RSC, rather than internal Syrian dynamics. Israel and Türkiye have emerged as the two most consequential strategic competitors shaping the country’s political future.

Israel’s Strategic Doctrine Toward Syria

Analysis posits that due to its capacity to exert unilateral military pressure, shape security dynamics in the south, and strategically benefit from preventing re-emergence of a unified Syrian state, Israel is a primary actor in post-Assad Syria. Israel sees Syria as a primary theater in its



confrontation with Iran and Hezbollah, and its strategic plays are rooted in security concerns, in addition to regional competition (ICG, 2018). Iran and Russia have both deeply entrenched themselves into Syria, however according to Ahmed and Nair (2025), they have lost their leverage since the fall of Assad. ACLED reporting indicates that Israel’s presence in the south represents broader goals to prevent the Syrian army from gaining control of southern Syria due to the strategic depth and surveillance advantages into Lebanon and Syria (Ezzeddine, 2025).

Israel’s long-term strategic thinking favors a decentralized governance in Syria, because they see opportunity in instability. A weak state with fragmented governance would mean a limited military threat and reduced Iranian influence, as well as operational freedom for Israeli strikes (Boms, Valensi, & Alsaloum, 2025). Fragmentation increases Israeli maneuverability and decreases risk of state-led retaliation (ICG, 2024). Some analysts argue Israel’s policy is shifting from complete non-engagement to “active support for ethnic minorities, particularly the Druze” (Valensi, 2025a).

Valensi, an academic at INSS, an Israeli think tank, gives an insight into current strategic thought in Israel. She asserts that Israel recognizes the need to shape local governance patterns to prevent extremist or Iranian penetrations. Diplomatic outreach to local leaders in southern Syria is considered to be an effective, non-military approach to further assert influence. Israel must balance containing Iranian backed groups, avoiding empowerment of radical factions, and maintaining stability to protect the occupied Golan Heights (Valensi, 2025b). Boms, Valensi & Alsaloum (2025) clarify that Israel sees Syria as an opportunity to reshape the northern front to steer emerging governance structures and expand deterrence. It is important to balance this perspective with third party analysis. The International Crisis Group writes that state collapse in Syria creates militia competition that could spill into Israel (2025). There would be a dangerous fractured state where no actor can impose order. Israel continually and deliberately engages in Syria, and multiple sources have shown it avoids supporting any unification project.

Türkiye’s Strategy Toward Syria

Türkiye is described as Syria’s most deeply embedded regional actor in the post-Assad landscape (Günay, Paulsen & Adachi, 2025). Scholars emphasize Türkiye has the longest border with Syria, they are the largest host of Syrian refugees with more than 3 million people. Also, the



state has direct military presence in the Euphrates Shield, Afrin, Idlib, and Tel Abyad (Martini et al., 2013). Most importantly, analysis highlights, they hold direct political influence over the now central governance structure, HTS-origin leadership (Idlbi et al., 2025). Türkiye's policies are driven by multiple factors. Preventing Kurdish autonomy by blocking the YPG and SDF, border security, rolling back Iranian influence are all characterized by Hussain (2013) to be main drivers. Türkiye's strategy is thought to blend counterterrorism, demographic engineering, and geopolitical competition (Martini et al., 2013).

Scholarship emphasizes that Türkiye operationalizes its strategy by using proxies and local partners. Türkiye has long managed large structures within Syria, including the Syrian National Army, the now-interim government, and HTS-adjacent local councils in Idlib (Idlbi et al. 2025). This involvement includes building parallel institutions like police forces, local councils, educational systems, and circulating its currency the Turkish Lira (Günay et al., 2025). Studies argue its largest commitment has been continuous training and military support.

Scholars situate Türkiye's role in Syria within a broader shift toward regional multipolarity, where Ankara positions itself as a primary regional power shaping the political order of the Levant (Kausch, 2014). In this environment, Türkiye's influence in Syria reflects its broader ambition to consolidate leadership within the Sunni regional bloc and counterbalance Iran's ascendancy (Hussain, 2013). Türkiye's strategy can be summarized from literature to be limiting Iran, preventing Kurdish autonomy, and asserting regional leadership.

Gulf States' Conditional Support for Turkish Strategy

Todman (2016) argues the Gulf states' policies on Syria. He asserted Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE have long viewed Syria as a battleground for Sunni influence and a frontline against Iran's regional expansion. Todman argued they recognize Syria as a central node for the Iran-Hezbollah corridor. He also asserted that the Gulf seized a perceived strategic opportunity to reshape the Levant in favor of their interests by supporting opposition forces. The Gulf states diverged over Islamist influence, internal security, and their relations with the U.S. and Russia. The policy differences Todman identified are relatively durable as Qatar and UAE/Saudi Arabia are still tense with disagreements, and there was no unified enforcement mechanism within the Gulf Cooperation Council. Qatar and Saudi Arabia's longstanding rivalry stemmed from Qatar's



support of the Muslim Brotherhood and the AKP in Türkiye, and the interim government must appeal to both parties (Günay et al., 2025).

While the Gulf is not embedded militarily, it plays a critical enabling role through financing, political sponsorship, and reconstruction capital. Günay, Paulsen & Adachi believe the Gulf states are the only regional actors with the investing power to make a substantial difference in Syria's reconstruction. The report argues that they are wary of militias, proxies, or a successor regime that is Islamist-linked. Gulf support for Türkiye is pragmatic, not ideological. The report also posits that the interim government has made significant efforts to diversify partnerships and have proactively reached out to the Gulf states. Recent analyses confirm that Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE are all thoroughly involved within Syrian reconstruction efforts (Günay et al., 2025). The Gulf states share Türkiye's goal of limiting Iran's influence and look to extend their political reach (Kausch, 2014). In this literature, Gulf capital functions less as a driver of security outcomes than as a conditional instrument that can enable institutional consolidation where security conditions permit.

U.S. Involvement: Constraint, Not Leadership

The U.S. uses indirect tools like partnered operations and humanitarian stabilization to maintain their distance from the Syrian situation. In the 2018 case study written by Dalton et al. and published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, it is argued that U.S. influence is mediated through their SDF partnership, civilian protection, humanitarian corridors, and localized stability. In 2019, Hof argued that the U.S. still matters in the region, but only as a stabilizing force. After ISIS's territorial defeat, policy and intervention were shifted toward containment of Iranian militias and preventing IRGC corridor consolidation (Hof, 2019). In 2019, Heras & Thomas argued that Syrian fragmentation would be better for external partners, especially the United States. The Center for a New American Security believed that the U.S. could more effectively pursue counterterrorism and counter-Iran goals in a fragmented Syria with controllable zones. This would allow for continued U.S. partnership with the SDF, blocking Iran from establishing a unified corridor, and limiting a resurgence of an Iranian/Russian-backed Assad. This has since changed.



The overriding priority is avoiding involvement in a larger conflict (U.S. Central Command, 2025). Washington has made it clear their goal is to contain escalation and allow Syria to flourish as a unified state without further support other than approval of al-Sharaa and lifting of sanctions. On June 10, 2025, USCENTCOM put out a posture statement that stated the U.S. believes Syria is part of broader regional threat management. Washington treats Syria as a secondary theater to prevent ISIS resurgence, constrain Iranian expansion, and avoid direct conflict with Russia or Türkiye. The U.S. has a narrow mission made clear in the CENTCOM report: stop Iran and ISIS above all. U.S. partnership with the SDF was initially driven by counter-ISIS operations. However, it lacks enforcement, as the CENTCOM report gave suggestions, however they have yet to be implemented. The U.S. has no ambition to construct national institutions and is functionally agnostic about unification, despite vocal support, as they won't pay the costs of unification.

Domestic Actors as Proxies of External Competition

The Syrian National Army (SNA), Hay'at Tahrir el-Sham (HTS), and local Sunni councils were Türkiye's primary proxies. HTS is both externally shaped and an autonomous actor. Heller (2017) describes their strategic logic after cutting ties with al-Qaeda. She stated that HTS seeks to outcompete rivals in local governance legitimacy, adapting pragmatically rather than ideologically. Since 2017, it has acted as a "proto-state" actor in Idlib. They have successfully shifted from a Jihadist organization toward localized governance (Carenzi, 2020). As of 2020, the group was both influenced by global jihad networks and driven by local survival dynamics.

Scholars and analysts have extensively documented how Iran, through its Revolutionary Guard Corps (particularly the Quds Force) and allied militias, built and sustained a proxy network in Syria that complemented and extended the Assad regime's capabilities. According to Jahanbani & Levy (2022), Iran's support to proxies included training, weapons, funding, logistics, recruitment, and socio-political outreach. The most active Iranian-backed groups involved in Syria were Hezbollah and Shia militia formations. These units were integrated operationally and tactically. Iranian advisors and IRGC elements facilitated coordinated battlefield actions against opposition forces and embedded Iran deeply within Syria's military landscape. Existing literature positions these actors as extensions of Tehran's strategic footprint, used not only to support regime survival



but to establish durable leverage in key geographic zones such as Damascus, Aleppo, and the Lebanese border.

Gap in Literature

Scholars have outlined territorial fragmentation, external actor competition, proxy warfare & patron-client dynamics, as well as conflict resolution and post-conflict order. There are studies on Syria's "zones of control," de facto partition, wartime governance and non-state actors. There is scholarship touching on themes of SDF and rebel governance, HTS local administration, regime reconsolidation, and Turkish-controlled areas. There is also significant research on U.S.-Russia contestation, Iran's proxy network, Türkiye's border strategy, and Gulf involvement. Literature covers how militias depend on foreign patrons, and how sponsors shape local decision-making. There are works analyzing the relationships between the SDF/YPG and the U.S. as well as HTS and Türkiye, and tribal actors. Existing analyses consider political settlement prospects, reconstruction dilemmas, and fragmentation as end-state vs. a temporary condition. Works apply bargaining models, commitment problems, or strategic competition frameworks, but not often systematically or for Israel and Türkiye.

There is an abundance of scholarship surrounding Syria since 2011, but it clusters around specific themes, and works from the post-Assad era are still limited. Literature on proxies focuses on patronage, but rarely models how domestic actors strategically respond to multiple patrons at once. Tribal groups, HTS, and SDF are often analyzed descriptively, not strategically, and there is a lack of integration of domestic and external dynamics. Additionally, fragmentation is treated as a static condition. Many analyses treat Syria's fragmentation as a fact rather than as a set of strategic choices by actors adjusting to incentives. There is little discussion of why certain actor alignments persist despite shifting incentives, how external patrons balance competing objectives like countering ISIS, limiting Iran, containing Türkiye, and deterring HTS. Scholarship does not question why de facto autonomy zones survive or collapse, or how domestic actors exploit competition like tribes leveraging the Islamic State vs the SDF. These patterns are described in narrative form, but rarely formalized for Israel-Türkiye interaction and post-Assad governance equilibria.



Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

Buzan and Wæver describe the regional security complex theory as security outcomes being clustered regionally. The theory proposes that states' security concerns are interlinked because threats cross borders and cannot be insulated. RSCT also emphasizes that security threats are not distributed evenly within a region, stating that certain territories become disproportionately consequential because they serve as the epicenter of insecurity dynamics. The collapse of the Assad regime was a magnification of regional vulnerability, signifying that external intervention is not just opportunistic, but also structurally driven. Due to its geographic centrality, porous borders, and the density of armed actors operating within its territory, Syria is highly consequential to the Middle Eastern regional security complex. This means instability there immediately affects surrounding actors.

Security calculations of neighboring states are altered by militia advances, refugee flows, and shifts in territorial control. States such as Türkiye, Israel, Iran, and the Gulf cannot avoid paying close attention to developments within Syria. They are geographically proximate, impacted by transnational militants, threatened by missiles and insecure borders as well as spillover effects. While RSCT identifies which external actors are most relevant, my model spotlights their strategic prioritization of Syrian fragmentation in the Middle East complex. It sets the macro-structural constraint that external involvement is not optional, but inevitable in this regional system.

The theory also posits that regional security competition becomes most intense when the state at the center of the complex is fragmented or undergoing political transition. This condition increases unpredictability and the salience of cross-border threats. This causes states to engage in preemptive strategies. Türkiye aims to secure its border and shape northern governance, while Israel monitors militias and prevents movement in the south. Gulf states aim to limit the expansion of actors they perceive to be destabilizing and invest capital into their preferred outcome.

In addition, RSCT helps explain why external actors often work at cross-purposes. When multiple states view the same territory as essential to their security, coordination becomes difficult and competition becomes the default mode of interaction. This dynamic aligns directly with my



model's structure: Syria's fragmentation is not merely an internal outcome, but a regional equilibrium produced by overlapping and conflicting security imperatives.

Balance of Threat Theory

Walt's balance of threat theory explains why Israel-Türkiye cooperation fails despite the shared Iranian threat. Walt argues that alliances form to counter threat, not raw power. He defines threat as the combination of capability, proximity, offensive power, and perceived intentions. Türkiye's primary perceived threat is Kurdish autonomy, which can be established considering the proximity and extent of the issue. Israel's threat is a unified Syria aligned with hostile actors or capable of constraining Israeli freedom of action. These threat hierarchies do not overlap, therefore, cooperation breaks down. Türkiye and Israel are responding to different threats, showing their incentives are misaligned. The balance of threat theory explains why the states do not form a shared alliance structure, why each pursues separate outcomes to shape Syria's future, and why coordination is shallow, or easily reversible. RSCT explains why the actors are pulled into Syria, while balance of threat theory elucidates how they interpret and prioritize threats differently, producing strategic divergence.

Moments of tactical convergence do not translate into sustained strategic alignment. Balance of threat theory supposes that each state ranks threats differently by evaluating the costs and benefits of cooperation through incompatible lenses. For Türkiye, any arrangement that strengthens Kurdish institutions in Syria represents an existential security dilemma because internal Kurdish institutions will be dissatisfied with their standing. Kurds are beneficiaries of fragmentation as they perceive it to be a continued opportunity to retain autonomy. For Israel, any moves that empower a centralized Syrian authority or unify governance structures in the south



increase long-term risk of hostile state reconstruction. Israel perceives a Sunni power coalition between Türkiye, Syria, and the Gulf to be a serious issue that would risk its power within the region. As a result, actions that enhance security for one actor generates insecurity for the other.

Threat perception is dynamic, which compounds the divergence. Israel and Türkiye continually reassess which developments in Syria are more dangerous. This reinforces asymmetry as different advances by either party may be perceived as a direct barrier to their own goals. Ultimately, applying this theory helps explain not only the absence of cooperation but the structural persistence of competition. When threat hierarchies diverge this sharply, alliance formation becomes improbable, coordination becomes costly, and the default equilibrium becomes parallel but conflicting strategies inside the same battlefield.

Proxy Intervention in Civil Wars

Duner's classic proxy theory from 1981 explains local actors' behavior within the fragmented map. Proxy theory explains the use of local groups by external patrons to project power indirectly. Using proxies is low-cost, low-risk, and patrons can deny intervention, but also the limits like proxies' own agendas and imperfect control. Modern agent-based approaches see local actors exploit patrons for resources, legitimacy, and autonomy. Patron-proxy ties are fluid, transactional, and vulnerable to defection. Also, proxies can increase their leverage by using multiple patrons competing over the same territory. Some actors were created as proxies, while others evolved into semi-autonomous partners, however they all behave as strategic entrepreneurs rather than passive recipients. The SNA, HTS-derived actors, the interim government, tribes, DAANES, and southern factions all balance between patrons, shift alliances, extract rents, and pursue local goals. This provides an explanation for unstable alignments, limited patron control, and inconsistent implementation of external strategies.

Proxy theory also highlights how fragmentation multiplies the opportunities for local actors to assert autonomy. A highly fractured territorial environment means no patron has full enforcement capacity, which allows armed groups and local councils to strategically manipulate information, exaggerate threats, or withhold cooperation in order to secure more resources. These behaviors represent rational adaptations to a habitat where patrons increasingly depend on local



actors for presence. In a fragmentation situation, proxies are strengthened due to an increased bargaining power inaccessible in a unified state.

Oftentimes patrons underestimate long-term political ambitions of proxies. Groups created or supported for narrow missions have the capacity to evolve into actors with their own aspirations for governance, revenue streams, and ideological commitments. This complicates patron control and generates divergence in incentives over time. In Syria, this dynamic can be seen in the new central government that offered a deal considered too favorable by Ankara to the SDF. It is also visible in how the SDF leveraged its utility to the United States to expand administrative authority beyond counter-ISIS operations.

Proxies operate in their own environments with unique agendas, and make choices to maximize their autonomy. Proxy theory explains why external strategies in Syria often have unpredictable results. Proxies do not strictly follow sponsor preferences, despite attempts from patrons to direct behavior to specific outcomes. The post-Assad landscape produces fluid coalitions, fragile alignments, and persistent strategic ambiguity.

Spoilers and Commitment Problems

Stedman (1997) sets up my core spoiler framework while Kirschner (2010) explains commitment problems and information asymmetry. In peace and transition processes, spoilers are actors who benefit from continued fragmentation to resist stabilization. Hard-line factions, opportunistic militias, or patrons with divergent goals can all derail the system. No actor can credibly commit to future power-sharing in a fluid conflict, especially when information asymmetry is prevalent, as well as shifting military strength, and patron uncertainty.

In Syria, fragmentation exists because no actor trusts future arrangements, or can enforce credible commitments in the post-Assad vacuum. Spoilers such as the SDF and militias and external veto players like Israel and Türkiye destabilize any emerging equilibrium. Spoilers interact with proxy dynamics because they gain leverage in fragmented systems with multiple patrons. They can also credibly threaten defection, which exacerbates patron mistrust and undermines Türkiye/Israel coordination.



Spoiler theory further discusses why transitions fail when actors perceive their future position as insecure. Every faction in the Syrian case suspects that any negotiated structure may marginalize them later. This uncertainty then produces incentives to sabotage early rather than risk exclusion. The SDF spoils unification efforts because fragmentation guarantees them more autonomy and operational freedom. Israel behaves as a spoiler by striking the new central government and not allowing them to move south. Türkiye functions as a spoiler in regards to Kurdish autonomy. Each actor has at least one unacceptable outcome, therefore every attempted settlement triggers an immediate veto from an actor with the capacity to undermine it.

Spoiler instability is deepened by commitment problems. Even if actors come to a verbal agreement over territorial lines or rules, none can enforce future compliance without risk of provoking other actors. Local groups fear abandonment by patrons, patrons avoid entrapment by proxies, and regional rivals dread that compromise will empower future threats. This mistrust ensures that incentives favor preemptive action, constant repositioning, and short-term gains over compromise. Spoilers flourish under these conditions because they can support the vacuum created by mistrust.

Spoiler dynamics and commitment failures are central tools in my models. They explain why no stable equilibrium emerges, why cooperation collapses even when interests partially align, and why fragmentation remains a rational strategy for actors who fear the consequences of centralization. Spoiler theory ties together patron behavior, local opportunism, and structural insecurity in the post-Assad environment.

Informal Game Model

Using De Mesquita's journal article discussing game theory and the study of war and peace, I will use an informal model to conceptualize Türkiye and Israel as players interacting in a non-cooperative game mediated through proxies and fragmented territory. My players are Türkiye, Israel, and local actors as strategic agents. My environment is the current post-Assad fragmentation where central authority struggles. My moves will be to support proxies, deny rivals' influence, secure borders, and disrupt others' alliances. Payoffs include the reduction of perceived threats, the expansion of influence corridors, and the denial of adversarial territorial footholds. The game model captures strategic logics like incentive misalignment from balance of threat theory leading



to no coordinated equilibrium, high proxy autonomy from proxy theory leading to unstable strategies, spoilers and commitment problems meaning the game gets repeated with defection incentives, and RSCT structural pressure guaranteeing sustained involvement.

Actors do not interact in isolation, each move reshapes the payoffs of the others, therefore an informal game model is necessary. Türkiye's military incursions alter Israel's perception of Syrian unification risks. Israel's airstrikes alter Türkiye's confidence in secure political structures. Tribes, SDF units, and Islamic State factions shift allegiances in ways that change the strategic landscape after each move. These interdependencies show a dynamic, repetitive game rather than a singular interaction.

Game theory modeling also clarifies that Türkiye and Israel face a repeated game with no incentive-compatible cooperative equilibrium. Both states prefer unilateral strategies because joint action would require trust, credible commitments, and aligned threat perceptions. The situation in Syria lacks all conditions. Türkiye's dominant strategy is to pursue unification through military support, while Israel's primary plan is to seek fragmentation to prevent a hostile state resurgence. Because neither can accept the other state's preferred outcome, every round of the game produces further divergence.

Local actors, despite their unpredictability, operate as sub-players who modify payoffs. When tribes defect from SDF control, Israel perceives instability that justifies further strikes. When the central government gains territory, Türkiye sees an opportunity for the SDF to dissolve and join the national army. The game is deeply interlinked as micro-level moves shift macro-level incentives. Therefore, the informal model illustrates the systemic instability produced by multiple patrons interacting with multiple proxies.

By using this model, I can map how strategies evolve, why escalation is recurrent, and why fragmentation becomes a stable equilibrium despite being suboptimal for multiple actors. Game modeling operationalizes the interaction of my theories into a strategic framework that captures the competitive logic of current Syria.



Integrated Analytical Model

The Syrian post-Assad vacuum requires a multi-level theoretical model because no single theory captures regional competition, threat perception, proxy autonomy, instability in fragmented civil wars, and strategic interaction among patrons.

In my multi-level model I integrate RSCT, balance of threat, proxy theory, spoilers and commitment problems, and informal game model. RSCT defines who the key actors are and why the regional system compels intervention. Balance of threat defines what each actor fears and why cooperation fails. Proxy theory explains how actors try to shape Syria indirectly. Spoilers and commitment problems explicate why fragmentation and instability persist, while informal game models formalize how actors compete strategically. The informal game model allows me to analyze equilibria for Türkiye and Israel, conditions under which rivalry intensifies or stabilizes, how proxy autonomy shapes strategic outcomes, why external actors fail to coordinate even when they share partial interests, and how domestic actors manipulate the vacuum. The following section uses this integrated model to formalize these dynamics into strategic interactions.

By integrating theories, I can capture the interaction between structure, threat perception, proxy autonomy, and strategic decision-making. Where balance of threat does not cover why proxies reshape incentives, proxy theory explains patron limits. Spoiler theory illustrates why cooperation collapses even when interests align, while game theory connects all mechanisms into a unified strategic model. This integrated model also allows for multi-level causal chains. Regional security pressures described by RSCT create incentives for intervention, while divergent threat hierarchies attributed to the balance of threat theory produce competitive rather than cooperative strategies. Proxy autonomy discussed in proxy theory complicates implementation and spoiler behavior combined with commitment failures undermine any negotiated equilibrium.

This combined model enables a deeper analysis of Türkiye's state-building and military consolidation efforts alongside Israel's pursuit of fragmentation and deterrence, while also accounting for how local actors amplify, resist, or redirect each actor's strategic objectives. It also clarifies how secondary players such as the U.S., Gulf states, tribes, and the SDF/YPG shift the equilibrium space by altering payoffs. The structural environment compels involvement, threat hierarchies produce misalignment, proxies generate unpredictability, spoilers erode trust, and the



game structure rewards unilateralism. The integrated model provides a coherent framework for analyzing the strategic logic underlying Israel's and Türkiye's behavior and the current fragmentation of Syria. The following section applies models to analyze their strategic outcomes and the competitive games unfolding across Syria's territorial zones.

Strategic Interaction and Equilibrium Outcomes

Environment and Constraints

Syria's post-Assad environment is currently a choice-constrained strategic environment rather than a state experiencing a transitional phase of disorder. Fragmentation is the operating condition under which all domestic and external actors must make decisions. Authority is diffuse, territorial control is at best uneven, and enforcement mechanisms are weak. All actors operate under high levels of uncertainty, incomplete information, and limited ability to credibly commit to long-term arrangements. In this context, political and military outcomes are formed by the constraints imposed by the strategic environment itself, and less by stated preferences.

The environment is conditioned by multipolar regional competition, in which no single external actor possesses sufficient dominance to impose a preferred political end state. Israel, Türkiye, and external stakeholders lack the ability to unilaterally enforce durable solutions despite the retained capacity to block unfavorable outcomes. This results in veto power being more consequential than control. The presence of multiple veto players raises the costs of coordination, while the credibility of cooperative commitment is lowered. Even if actors share overlapping interests, the absence of an enforcement mechanism and the risk of unilateral defection undermines sustained cooperation even if actors share overlapping interests.

This multipolar setting raises proxy forces and local militias to intermediate strategic actors from passive tools. Patron control is constrained by their autonomy, introducing endogenous instability into the system. Local armed groups are enabled by survival incentives, territorial interests, and bargaining strategies to hedge between patrons or resist integration when consolidation threatens their autonomy. This unique dynamic has transformed Syria from a bilateral or hierarchical conflict into a strategic arena in which state outcomes emerge from layered interactions among external powers, interim authorities, and local actors.



Due to fragmentation of authority and a limited enforcement capacity, no actor can impose a preferred end state without provoking counter-moves from rival powers or domestic stakeholders. Therefore, efforts toward centralization or unification are conditionally destabilizing, as they signal irreversible shifts in the balance of power and invite preemptive obstruction. The persistence of fragmentation and partial integration reflects the blocking of alternatives within a constrained strategic environment rather than policy failures or miscalculations. These conditions foster fragmentation and incomplete unification to be the emerging equilibrium outcome, setting the parameters for the equilibria analyzed in the following section.

Fragmentation as a Stable Security Equilibrium

Post-Assad fragmentation constitutes a stable security equilibrium for Israel because it minimizes long-term strategic threats under conditions of uncertainty, despite failing to produce order or predictability. Israel's strategy is oriented towards preventing outcomes that would fundamentally alter the regional balance of power in irreversible ways. Israel shapes its strategic decision-making in Syria by planning for the worst-case scenario under high uncertainty, rather than toward an ideal political outcome. The state evaluates potential futures asymmetrically in the current strategic complex in Syria. They are characterized by distrust of the interim government, shifting alliances, and incomplete information. Fragmentation is assessed to be dangerous but manageable, while unification under an adversarial authority is viewed as existentially destabilizing, therefore it accepts and sustains chaos. The asymmetry lies in the consequences of the outcomes they deem most likely. Within the current Syrian environment, fragmentation emerges as the least-worst outcome that Israel can tolerate and actively pursue.

The generated challenges of a fragmented Syrian landscape include militia proliferation, instability near Israel's borders, and episodic escalation. These challenges are containable through unilateral military action. In contrast, a unified Syrian state would possess diplomatic recognition, territorial depth, and the ability to coordinate military and political pressure across multiple fronts. This would represent an irreversible shift in Israel's security environment that would carry unacceptable costs, especially if the state is aligned with hostile actors as state consolidation cannot be easily undone without large-scale war or prolonged occupation.



This results in Israel's dominant strategy to prioritize option preservation over resolution. Israel does not seek to shape Syria into a stable political entity, instead it aims to prevent the emergence of any centralized authority capable of credibly challenging its interests. This underpins Israel's acceptance of fragmentation as a persistent condition rather than a temporary failure. However, fragmentation is not without risk as it produces uncertainty, localized violence, and a proliferation of armed actors whose behavior is difficult to predict within the Middle Eastern security complex. This raises the probability of miscalculation and episodic escalation, especially along Israel's northern front. However, Israel determines these risks to remain bounded and reversible without fundamentally altering their strategic posture, managed through deterrence, surveillance, and targeted military action.

Israel calculates the structural risks of unification to be both larger in magnitude and harder to reverse. A unified Syrian governance power would have the capacity to coordinate across territory, integrate armed forces, and formalize alliances. Even if the state were to continue to present itself as pragmatic and neutral, Israel would be forced to assess its long-term trajectory rather than short-term intentions. Under a consolidated authority, shifts in alignment or leadership could rapidly transform the state into a major hostile actor, an outcome which Israel would have fewer tools to reverse. Israel's rational tolerance of higher levels of short-term instability to avoid significant strategic loss are explained by this asymmetry. In a fragmented environment, Israel can maintain freedom of action, deny adversaries strategic depth, and intervene as seen necessary. Unification would foreclose these options due to the enmeshment of threats within a recognized sovereign framework. In this calculus, instability has a cost, but consolidation is a much higher risk.

Israel operationalizes its preference for fragmentation through unilateral military capabilities. Instead of ensuing proxy warfare or institutionalizing local alliances, the state exerts its robust airpower. Due to its function as an extension of Israel's deterrence and enforcement strategy, airpower enables Israel to degrade emerging threats without assuming governance responsibilities. Airstrikes both eliminate perceived immediate risks and disrupt consolidation processes by signaling the vulnerability of centralized authority. By using airpower, Israel can easily break commitments and intervene against any attempts by the interim government to integrate forces, expand control, or project power. Domestic actors then recognize that alignment



with the central authority increases exposure to external attack, undermining the prospects of integration. Airpower is a tool with which Israel shapes behavior without requiring formal alliances.

Israel also engages in selective, non-institutional local contact for intelligence gathering, early warning mechanisms, and deterrence signaling. These interactions are limited, deliberate, and tactical, functioning as fragmentation insurance. They allow for Israel to monitor developments and retain veto capacity without the creation of durable dependencies, avoiding the cultivation of meaningful partnerships with local groups. This mechanism's most vital design is to deny consolidation capacity. Israel seeks to prevent the emergence of a sovereign authority capable of constraining freedom of action.

The culmination of these dynamics render intentional self-reinforcing fragmentation. Israel generates persistent uncertainty around the viability of centralized authority by repeated military interventions and the ever-present threat of external disruption. Thus, rational domestic actors respond by hedging rather than committing, viewing integration into a central structure as risky. This weakens the interim government by reinforcing perceptions that consolidation is not credible or sustainable, resulting in further fracturing, and serving as justification for further external intervention. In this feedback loop, attempts at centralization provoke the very dynamics that undermine them. No actor can credibly commit to a centralized authority without triggering a spoiler response from rivals who perceive consolidation as a strategic threat.

Within this equilibrium, fragmentation persists because alternatives are blocked, not because it is optimal for any actor. Israel's strategy requires that unification fails, not precisely for fragmentation to succeed positively. As centralization continues to be destabilizing and reversible, fragmentation remains manageable, constituting a stable security equilibrium sustained by rational behavior under uncertainty, not miscalculation or policy error.

Unmaterialized Conditional Unification

Türkiye's unification strategy to post-Assad Syria is structurally constrained, despite its coherence. Unlike Israel, Türkiye seeks a form of managed centralization capable of stabilizing border regions and containing Kurdish autonomy as it does not benefit from persistent



fragmentation. However, both states seek to reinforce their role as a regional power broker. Nonetheless, Türkiye's strategy consistently fails to fully materialize into sovereign authority despite external support and institutional integration efforts. This shortfall is not due to strategic incoherence or insufficient effort. This reflects the interaction of Israeli veto power, proxy autonomy, and unresolved commitment problems. Together, these factors render unification partial, reversible, and fragile.

Türkiye's strategic preference for unification is oriented toward controlled stability, having consistent objectives for Syria greater than ideological state-building. A unified Syria presents the opportunity to secure its southern border, prevent the consolidation of Kurdish autonomous regions, and maintain influence over Syria's political trajectory. From their perspective, fragmentation would generate persistent, costly, difficult to manage security externalities such as refugee flows, militia violence, and cross-border threats. In this ongoing disordered environment, a centralized authority is preferable, even if imperfect.

Unification is a means to establish a centralized framework capable of coordinating security, administering territory, and integrating armed actors in a Turkish-aligned framework. Türkiye does not seek ideological reconstruction, but aligned authority. The promise of predictability, border security, and a reduced need for continuous military intervention is what drives Türkiye's unification efforts. Türkiye's strategy is pragmatic, incremental, and rational within the constraints it faces.

Türkiye's unification strategy hinges on economic and diplomatic foundations capable of sustaining authority over time. Military coordination and institutional integration are not enough as post-conflict governance requires regular salaries for security forces, functioning infrastructure, and access to external markets and financial systems. There is no ability to command loyalty or enforce compliance without these elements as centralized institutions remain hollow. Gulf financial support and international political recognition are therefore essential components of Türkiye's approach. As external financing sustains basic state functions, diplomatic recognition signals durability and reduces hedging incentives for local actors. Economic reconstruction is a precondition for political consolidation, not ancillary to it. Institutions require material capacity and external legitimacy to achieve authority, they cannot survive on coercion alone.



Despite these combined efforts, the conditions created for unification remain insufficient. Financial flows are conditional, recognition is uneven, and reconstruction is a lengthy process, vulnerable to external disruption. This results in Turkish-created institutions that lack the depth and resilience required to transform shallow integration into sovereign authority. The persisting gap between institutional formation and authoritative functionality leaves Türkiye's unification project entirely dependent on continued external facilitation rather than internal consolidation.

Israel's veto power and domestic actor behavior are a structural ceiling that Türkiye's strategy encounters. The persistent uncertainty into any consolidation effort is ultimately produced by Israel's capacity to conduct unilateral military action. Israeli strikes degrade the credibility of centralized authority and signal to domestic actors that integration may increase vulnerability rather than security. Local incentives are therefore reshaped. Armed groups and political actors recognize that retaining autonomy preserves flexibility, resulting in conditional, reversible integration. In the Syrian landscape, loyalty is contingent on continued protection and patronage.

Further compounding these constraints is the unresolved Kurdish issue. The limitation of Kurdish autonomy that Türkiye pursues is incompatible with broader integration efforts as it reinforces mistrust among actors whose cooperation would be necessary for lasting unification. Israeli intervention prevents the consolidation of the sovereignty required to operate the institutions and formal command structures Türkiye is building. In this environment, authority is thus assembled, but insecure, resulting in partial integration without consolidation. Governance functions persist without sovereign authority as security structures operate under nominal unified command without effective enforcement capacity and ministries exist without monopolies of force. Despite the presence of institutional forms, their power is limited by internal fragmentation and external vetoes.

Central command remains constrained even where armed forces are formally integrated and coordinated with Turkish support. Enforcement is dependent on continued external backing, while compliance is conditional, not guaranteed. Thus, governance is administrative, capable of managing day-to-day functions, but not sovereign as it is unable to impose binding authority across territory. The institutional shells are not a reflection of failure, as Türkiye's unification strategy stalls, but it does not collapse. Integration advances to the point where it threatens rival interests,



prompting disruption of consolidation, resulting in a system that appears increasingly unified, but remains fragmented in practice. The broader equilibrium in which unification remains perpetually incomplete, reversible, and vulnerable is reinforced by this pattern.

Spoiler-Driven Stalemate

The interaction of Israeli and Turkish strategies produces a spoiler-driven stalemate in which fragmentation persists because no actor can avoid it without incurring unacceptable security costs, rather than because it is preferred by all actors. The persistence of fragmentation is an equilibrium outcome generated by rational behavior under constraint. Israel and Türkiye's strategies collide in practice because each actor's defensive measures directly undermines the other's core objectives. They do not pursue mutually exclusive goals by design, but Türkiye interprets Israel's efforts to prevent Syrian consolidation as offensive actions that obstruct unification, undermine institutional credibility, and prolong instability along borders. Conversely, Israel interprets Türkiye's attempts to integrate armed groups and build centralized governance structures as steps toward consolidation which threaten Israel's long-term security position.

This strategic interaction creates a condition in which neither actor can afford to concede without enabling its worst-case outcome. For Israel, allowing consolidation risks the emergence of a sovereign authority capable of constraining Israeli freedom of action. For Türkiye, abandoning unification efforts risks entrenching disorder, empowering autonomous militias, and leaving the Kurdish question unresolved. The logistical core of this stalemate is that cooperation is not incentive-compatible as it would require mutual trust and aligned threat perceptions. Even in the absence of direct hostility or miscalculation, each actor's rational attempt to secure its own interests functions as a spoiler to the other's strategy.

Repeated-game dynamics are generated, and defection is the rational action even when cooperation might produce higher collective gains. Commitments cannot be credibly verified as any agreement to limit intervention or support consolidation would require confidence that the other party will not defect once its interests are secured. There is no external authority capable of guaranteeing compliance or punishing deviations, while threat perceptions diverge fundamentally as Israel prioritizes long-term strategic constraints while Türkiye seeks near-term stabilization. Future leveraging is therefore preserved by defection in this setting as each actor avoids being



locked into an unfavorable outcome by maintaining the ability to intervene or obstruct. In contrast, cooperation risks loss of strategic flexibility, resulting in a stable pattern of cautious engagement and selective obstruction rather than coordinated action.

This rivalry is exploited by domestic actors such as militias, tribal groups, and partially integrated forces who exploit it. Local actors extract resources, preserve autonomy, and resist full integration into centralized structures in the competitive environment between Türkiye and Israel that creates these opportunities. External sponsorship is leveraged by proxy forces to secure funding, weapons, and political protection, while avoiding binding commitments to national authority. Tribal actors offer conditional cooperation without surrendering independence by hedging between patrons. When centralization threatens access to resources or exposes militias to external attack, militias resist integration. These behaviors are rational responses to incentive structures created by external competition, not ideologically driven practices. Local actors reinforce fragmentation by undermining consolidation efforts from within in their adaptation to the current environment. Domestic actors become spoilers because their hedging behavior weakens central authority, increases mistrust, and raises the costs of coordination. These actors align with the equilibrium incentives of the system.

Any unilateral step toward consolidation risks triggering counter-moves from rivals or exposing the initial mover to disproportionate costs, creating a coordination problem. Individual incentives favor caution and defection, despite the potential improvement of collective outcomes under cooperation. Türkiye prefers managed unification, domestic actors prefer stability with autonomy, and external stakeholders benefit from predictability. Relative to other actors, Israel has the strongest incentive to maintain the status quo as the actor least harmed by fragmentation. Other actors lack the ability to impose a different outcome they may prefer without Israel's acquiescence. This results in the least-worst equilibrium to be fragmentation sustained by rational behavior, not preference.

Fragmentation persists in a spoiler-driven equilibrium produced by the interaction of Israeli and Turkish strategies. No actor can overturn it without worsening its own security position as the equilibrium emerges from the structural constraints of the post-Assad environment, the absence of enforcement mechanisms, and the rational calculations of both external and domestic actors. The



equilibrium does not depend on misperception, ideological rigidity, or policy error, and is therefore the strongest outcome.

Implications for Strategic Games

Actors continuously reassess their choices in light of future consequences rather than seeking immediate resolution in the repeated game that best characterizes strategic interactions in post-Assad Syria. In this setting, present behavior is shaped by the preservation of leverage over time rather than collective efficiency. Actors discount cooperative outcomes that require long-term trust because commitments are difficult to verify. Instead, they favor strategies that maintain flexibility as defection consistently dominates cooperation within the repeated interaction. By maintaining the ability to hedge, obstruct, or intervene, actors preserve bargaining power in subsequent rounds of interaction. If rivals defect, any move toward consolidation or restraint would expose the cooperating actor to asymmetric risk. Even when all parties recognize that cooperation would yield higher collective benefits, over time, this dynamic creates patterns of cautious engagement and selective obstruction.

Fragmentation is the equal balance of the lack of stable cooperative equilibrium. Coordination is destabilizing in an environment where outcomes are difficult to reverse, not because actors misunderstand their incentives or fail to coordinate. Cooperation remains fragile and reversible, while defection remains safe and repeatable due to the absence of a credible mechanism to guarantee compliance. These implications then extend beyond Syria as post-conflict transitions are likely to produce similar patterns of partial integration and stalled consolidation. In multipolar interventionist environments like the Syrian case, external actors possess veto power, but lack enforcement authority. This post-Assad landscape illustrates how fragmentation is not a temporary failure of governance or policy design. Instead, it persists as the rational product of strategic interaction under uncertainty, setting the foundation for evaluating the broader consequences of the equilibria, addressed in the following discussion.



Discussion

Regional Competition and the Structure of the Syrian Conflict

Domestic factions are not the only decisive shapers of Syria's post-Assad political geography. The conflict is primarily structured by regional actors, consistent with regional security complex theory. The security concerns of proximate powers are directly implicated by on-the-ground outcomes that shape patterns of fragmentation, partial consolidation, and external intervention. The dominant external axis is constituted by the rivalry between Israel and Türkiye as the Middle Eastern security complex is largely self-contained. Regional actors can impose costs more rapidly and credibly than extra-regional powers. Their influence over Syria's political evolution is amplified by their proximity. In contrast, distant actors' involvement lacks comparable immediacy or enforcement capacity. Regional rivalries are therefore projected onto local actors and institutions, preventing internal dynamics from acting as isolated determinants of Syria's future. Domestic political interactions are thus a reflection of layered interactions embedded with, and constrained by, broader regional competition.

Consequences for Domestic Syrian Groups

Domestic incentives are reshaped by Israel's preference for fragmentation. In this landscape, local actors are encouraged to retain autonomy, diversify patronage, and exploit internal competition. Actors capable of hedging and resisting integration are rewarded by fragmentation as they position themselves as indispensable spoilers. Domestic groups are not passive recipients of external influence, but operate as strategic agents consistent with core insights from proxy theory. By preserving flexibility, militias and semi-autonomous forces like the SDF gain leverage.

In conditions of persistent fragmentation, autonomy becomes the most reliable source of security. Groups prioritize independent governance, diversified revenue streams and territorial control. The repeated disruption of consolidation efforts signals that centralized authority is both fragile and reversible, and groups respond by distancing themselves from national integration projects. The political landscape in which veto players proliferate is therefore reinforced. In this environment, fragmentation is further entrenched by any actor capable of undermining unification, as they acquire strategic value to external patrons seeking to preserve leverage.



In contrast, a different incentive structure is generated by Turkish and Gulf-backed efforts toward managed unification. Compliance with emerging governance hierarchies is incentivized whereas autonomy is rewarded under fragmentation. Alignment with centralized institutions has been encouraged by longstanding investments in policing, local councils, and service delivery in northern Syria. Material benefits such as salaries, security guarantees, and political recognition have been offered, and further enforced by Gulf reconstruction financing. The cost of defection has risen by tying economic access to stability and administrative coherence, constraining spoiler behavior.

Domestic actors continue to behave strategically across both contexts, but their optimal strategies diverge in the differing equilibria. Actors aim for long-term survival, and diversify and hedge where fragmentation dominates, while in managed unification, they consolidate within a hierarchical framework. Syria remains suspended between competing equilibria, partially explained by the divergence in incentive structures. The fluid, multilayered post-Assad political landscape is shaped by the continuous reassessments of payoffs in autonomy or integration by local actors.

Implications for Syria's Post-Assad Political Order

As long as Israel persists in its interventions in the South, it is unlikely that Syria will reconstitute into a strong, centralized unitary state. The most plausible outcome of this is a form of partial unification under external oversight. However, there will be greater institutional consolidation in the north under Turkish and Gulf influence despite continued fragmentation in the south. Both equilibria configurations generate forms of managed instability rather than full sovereignty or a decisive political resolution. An integrated model produces a set of constrained equilibria, in which regional rivalry, patron-proxy dynamics, and spoiler behavior are consistent.

Efforts by Türkiye and the Gulf to build administrative capacity, coordinate security structures, and support economic recovery have led to a northern zone that is conducive to institutional consolidation. A functional, but externally dependent state has been created due to emerging incentives for local actors to align with centralized governance arrangements. This configuration reinforces regional asymmetries in authority and governance due to higher degrees of coherence than in other regions and incomplete, conditional integration. However, any attempt



to rebuild a unified Syrian state is met with a structural ceiling imposed by Israeli intervention. Israel limits the interim government's ability to project coherent authority across national territory by repeatedly disrupting efforts at military consolidation. Israeli security doctrine prioritizes an environment in which no hostile actor can accumulate sufficient capacity to threaten its borders. Therefore, even where administrative integration advances, the southern front remains resistant to unification. This results in the fragmentation of sovereignty from the inception of the post-Assad Syrian state, and the emergence of geographically and institutionally uneven structures.

The interactions of external overseers whose strategic preferences cannot be reconciled into a single objective is the determinant of Syria's political future. Internal dynamics alone are insufficient to produce a stable equilibrium. Türkiye's regional ambitions and political alignment goals favor managed unification, while Israel emphasizes fragmentation due to long-term security objectives. The United States' underlying presence pushes toward risk management through unification without directly constraining Israeli action. Full sovereignty is prevented by these competing preferences, which stabilize the system around constrained outcomes shaped by external competition. Syria is the embodiment of the integrated theoretical framework advanced in this paper. Regional security dynamics draw external actors inward, divergent threat perceptions generate incompatible strategies, and proxy relationships limit domestic autonomy. Spoiler dynamics ensure that attempts at consolidation provoke countermeasures, producing neither state collapse nor full reunification, but a mediated political order whose structure reflects regional rivalry more than domestic consensus.

Mechanisms of Equilibrium Persistence

The interaction of structural constraints embedded within the regional security complex best explains the durability of Syria's post-Assad equilibria. These equilibria persist because the strategic environment systematically absorbs shocks. Outcomes are not optimal or static, with equilibria transforming into bounded adjustments rather than transformational shifts. External actors perceive continued involvement in Syria as mandatory. Regional security complex theory helps explain why overlapping threat perceptions make disengagement costly and unilateral resolution remains infeasible.



Path dependence within patron-proxy relationships is a central mechanism that reinforces equilibrium persistence. Switching alignments becomes increasingly difficult once local institutions, militias, or governance structures are formed under the sponsorship of a particular external actor. Several strands of literature imply domestic actors are locked into specific configurations as patronage creates durable funding streams, security guarantees, and administrative routines. Thus, defection requires abandoning material support, risking retaliation, and undermining local legitimacy. This dynamic results in the entrenchment of fragmentation patterns or partial consolidation at the regional level, even when external incentives evolve.

Commitment problems among external actors intensify these dynamics. No major stakeholder believes that rivals will adhere to negotiated arrangements once their immediate interests are secured. The absence of credible enforcement mechanisms make long-term guarantees lack plausibility. Therefore, rather than speculate on uncertain political settlements, actors rationally prefer to maintain existing alignments and preserve leverage. The renegotiation of the equilibrium is prohibitively costly, even when cooperation could theoretically produce collective gains.

Spoiler actors introduce persistent veto points, exacerbating restrictions as domestic actors retain the capacity to obstruct transitions toward either full unification or decisive fragmentation. Internal militias, semi-autonomous forces, hard-line factions, and some tribal groups have the ability to defect, escalate violence, or withhold cooperation. This forces external patrons to design strategies that accommodate spoiler behavior. Spoilers do not merely disrupt outcomes as they become integral to sustaining existing equilibria.

Another mechanism that prevents realignment in Syria is the absence of a credible coordinating actor like the United States. The U.S. no longer functions as an external arbitrator capable of enforcing agreements on aligning incentives across rivals. It remains diplomatically engaged, but its strategic ambivalence removes the potential apparatus for breaking the equilibrium. No other actor currently possesses both the legitimacy and coercive capacity to impose a settlement acceptable to all parties.

Together, these mechanisms produce a bounded, dynamic equilibrium. As it does not generate a decisive political transformation, the competitive system absorbs territorial control, leadership



changes, and institutional reforms. Syria remains suspended within a constrained strategic order as neither Israel's preferred fragmentation, nor Türkiye's unification can fully materialize.

Limitations and Alternative Scenarios

This paper explains the persistence of fragmentation and partial unification under current conditions, however its conclusions are contingent on several structural assumptions that could shift over time. The constraints sustaining the present equilibria could be most significantly altered by changes in external alignment, the reconfiguration of major power involvement, or endogenous Syrian political realignment.

A strategic detente between Israel and Türkiye would be the most direct challenge to the model. The developed equilibrium logic rests on divergent threat perceptions and incompatible strategic payoffs between the two states. The blocking dynamics currently maintaining fragmentation and stalled consolidation would be weakened by any movement toward sustained coordination or reconciliation. If a shared framework emerged to manage Kurdish autonomy, border security, or residual Iranian influence that would also ensure credible security guarantees, Israel and Türkiye might tolerate limited versions of either fragmentation or consolidation. Such coordination could help enable hybrid governance arrangements that fall outside the equilibria identified in this analysis, despite the persistence of structural differences.

The level of United States' involvement within Syria presents a second major contingency. The U.S. could restore an external coordinating function in the state if it expands military presence, economic investment, or diplomatic enforcement. This could discipline spoiler behavior, constrain Israeli intervention, and pressure Türkiye toward convergence. However, a full U.S. withdrawal would remove a key stabilizing actor. Rather than issuing a coherent alternative, the absence of American deterrence would push the intensification of Israeli operations in the south, leading to a vacuum domestic spoilers could exploit.

A critical variable to consider is Iran's trajectory as a regional power. Should the state successfully reconstruct its military or re-entrench itself within Syria, it could reintroduce a counterweight that constrains Turkish expansion and political role, while intensifying Israeli threat perceptions. This could significantly narrow the divergence between fragmentation and unification



strategies. Alternatively, if Iran were to remain weakened, Turkish-led consolidation could be accelerated in certain regions as previously Iran-reliant domestic actors would shift realignment.

Finally, the dynamics described in this paper could be partially altered by endogenous Syrian political realignment. The mechanisms sustaining fragmentation or externally managed unification would be significantly weakened should local actors consolidate authority organically, form cross-regional coalitions, or reduce dependence on external patrons. These developments underscore that the equilibria identified are structurally durable, not immutable, despite such developments appearing unlikely in the near term. Collectively, these contingencies highlight that while the model explains the current strategic ecosystem, future shifts in external alignment or domestic organization could generate new equilibria beyond those presently observable.

Conclusion

This paper rejects the dominant framings of post-Assad Syria. I postulate the Syrian state has entered a constrained strategic equilibrium in which fragmentation and partial unification persist because they represent the least-worst outcomes rationally available to key actors. Using my framework, I determined that Syria is not a failed transition, a temporarily stalled reconstruction, or a governance vacuum awaiting resolution. Its current condition is not the result of policy failure or indecision. Fragmentation is actively produced and maintained through strategic interaction. Despite thirteen years of conflict, Syria's current political landscape is not simply inherited from civil war dynamics. Repeated strategic choices have stabilized the state at a lower level of political order that is durable, self-reinforcing, and resistant to marginal policy adjustments. This equilibrium is not the preferred end state for Israel nor Türkiye. Israel has succeeded in preventing consolidation but cannot impose stable fragmentation, while Türkiye has constructed institutional frameworks without securing sovereignty.

This study shifts the analytical focus away from explaining the origins of Syria's fragmentation and toward understanding why fragmentation remains rational and persistent under multipolar rivalry. No single theory adequately captures Syria's post-Assad condition. Regional Security Complex Theory explains why external actors are structurally drawn into Syria; balance of threat theory explains why their priorities diverge; proxy theory explains how influence is exercised indirectly; spoiler and commitment theories clarify why cooperation collapses; and game theory



explains why defection dominates over time. The contribution of this paper lies in integrating these approaches to show how they interlock to generate equilibrium persistence. Fragmentation is therefore not merely an outcome, but a strategic resource. Domestic actors are not passive proxies but payoff-shaping agents operating within competitive environments. Persistence is best explained not by static incentives, but by repeated-game dynamics. This equilibrium logic clarifies why policy tools fail even when rational and why suboptimal outcomes endure.

The persistence of fragmentation is paradoxical. Although nearly all actors prefer improved stability, no actor can credibly move first toward consolidation. Strategic logic resolves this paradox. The equilibrium is sustained by reinforcing mechanisms. Israel's veto asymmetry can block consolidation at a lower cost than others can enforce it, even in the presence of widespread rhetorical support for unification. Shifting power balances undermine trust, as no stakeholder can guarantee future compliance, enforcing commitment failure. Domestic actors further exploit this uncertainty by resisting closure, increasing their leverage, and deepening mistrust among patrons, empowering spoilers. Fragmentation persists not because alternatives are inferior in theory, but because they are riskier in practice. Cooperation fails because it is not incentive-compatible in a repeated game. Fragmentation thus emerges as the most stable equilibrium, rather than a transitional phase.

In multipolar post-conflict environments, fragmentation can constitute a rational equilibrium. Syria is not unique in this respect. Post-conflict transitions often stall because regional rivals rationally block one another. Consolidation has been constrained due to overlapping security complexes, proxy-heavy competition, and the absence of an external enforcer. The framework developed in this paper therefore travels beyond Syria and can function as a diagnostic tool for identifying when stabilization is structurally infeasible and when policy interventions are likely to stall. Fragmentation may increasingly become the default post-conflict outcome in multipolar systems.

Policymakers should consequently focus on managing equilibria rather than forcing resolutions. Spoiler incentives must be anticipated rather than treated as anomalies, and it should be recognized that some equilibria cannot be overturned, only bounded. Overconfidence in institution-building is risky, as shared threats do not necessarily generate coordination. In Syria,



U.S. ambivalence toward unification has functioned as a stabilizing but equilibrium-locking mechanism. External strategies premised on eventual convergence therefore risk misdiagnosing the structural constraints at play.

While equilibria are durable, they are not immutable. Syria's post-Assad future is not stalled by indecision but structured by strategic interaction. This model offers avenues for future research. It can be extended through formal modeling of repeated proxy games, micro-level analyses of domestic actor payoff calculations, and comparative studies across regional security complexes. Understanding post-conflict outcomes requires analyzing not only what actors want, but what they cannot afford to do.



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