

Keystone Peacemakers

Can Azerbaijan and Hungary Help Foster
Peace in Syria?

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Abstract

Syria's fate has long been shaped by the ambitions of powerful external players. Russia and Iran once formed the backbone of Assad's survival, Türkiye championed the rebels, and the United States propped up Kurdish forces, which Türkiye considers a terrorist group. Meanwhile, Israel, in its broader fight against Iranian influence, completely dismantled Hezbollah's leadership and presence. Hence, the battlefield has shifted dramatically. With Iran weakened by Israel's strategic strikes in Lebanon and Russia consumed by its war in Ukraine, the pillars of Assad's support have crumbled. In a stunning turn, Syrian rebel forces launched an unprecedented offensive, capturing Damascus and key strongholds in mere days—reshaping the very foundation of the conflict. Now, Türkiye stands as the dominant power in Syria, determined to prevent the rise of a Kurdish statelet and forge a unitary state. Israel, seizing the moment, has expanded its control, securing strategic positions near the Golan Heights due to its security concerns in the region and its broader fight against Iranian influence. However, with relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv already inflamed by events in Gaza, Syria is teetering on the edge of a larger confrontation. Amidst this fragile and volatile landscape, a critical question emerges: Who can mediate between these deeply entrenched interests? Two unexpected but uniquely equipped actors—Hungary and Azerbaijan—may hold the answer:

- Hungary is the only EU and NATO member state that maintains a strategic partnership with Israel while also holding observer status in the Organization of Turkic States.

- Azerbaijan, on the other hand, is the only country that is a strategic partner of both Israel and Hungary while also being a treaty ally of both Russia and Türkiye.

Could Budapest and Baku redefine the future of Syria? As rising keystone states with the ability to navigate complex rivalries, they may hold the key to transforming the region's chaos into fragile but lasting stability.

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Keystone peacemakers: Yet another opportunity to cooperate

Though perhaps hard to imagine, Hungary and Azerbaijan could be instrumental in bringing peace to Syria, a nation devastated by over 13 years of civil war. The conflict witnessed a dramatic power shift within just ten days between late November and early December 2024. As Hungary and Azerbaijan elevate their ties to the level of a priority strategic partnership, a new avenue for cooperation emerges mediating the peace and stabilization process in Syria. Both nations are keystone states within their respective regions, capable of fulfilling a mediatory role in Syria's intricate conflict.

The war in Syria has drawn numerous actors into its devastating orbit. Russia and Iran have long been staunch allies of Assad's regime, while Türkiye has backed Syrian rebel groups. The United States, meanwhile, has supported Kurdish factions in the northeast, which Türkiye deems a terrorist threat. However, Israel's operations against Hezbollah militias in Lebanon, which had broader destabilization efforts in the region, have delivered a severe blow to Iran's regional position, leaving its foothold in Syria increasingly vulnerable. At the same time, Russia's deepening involvement in Ukraine has restricted its capacity to offer a significant support for Assad's regime.

This shifting landscape created a pivotal opportunity for rebel groups, who launched a sweeping offensive that, within ten days, captured Damascus and other strategically crucial cities such as Aleppo, Homs, and Hama in late November and early December 2024. Such a rapid takeover may have been coordinated by Türkiye with tacit approval from the US and Russia, explaining the minimal resistance encountered from Syrian government forces. A Russian military advisor, Alexander Hoffman, informed Special Eurasia that Russian forces and assets outside the Latakia governorate have since been consolidated within it¹. Notably, the new Syrian leadership has not targeted Russian forces, allowing the Tartus site to continue serving as a Russian military base, while the Khmeimim airbase remains operational for combat aircraft. In contrast, Iran's presence in Syria has been entirely eradicated, with its assets withdrawn following the rebels' decisive victory.

Türkiye, now the predominant power in Syria, remains deeply concerned about the presence of PKK/YPG groups, which it recognises as terrorist organisations, in the northeast and the US's continued support for them under the banner of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Türkiye aims to establish a unitary state in Syria, encompassing all ethnic and religious minorities while preventing any regional or major power from dominating the newly emerging Syria. Meanwhile, Israel, as part of its broader conflict with Iran, has seized the opportunity to take control of the UN administered zone and several strategic points beyond, including the eastern part of Mount Hermon, as a temporary measure until the situation in Syria stabilizes. Given the existing tensions between Israel and Türkiye, exacerbated by Israel's operations in Gaza following the Hamas terror attack on Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023, and

¹ Giuliano Bifulchi, 2025 "Assessing Russia's Strategic Realignment in Syria and the Middle East: Insights from Alexander Hoffmann," Special Eurasia. <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2025/01/02/russia-syria-hoffmann-alexander> (Accessed: 15 January 2025)

its current expansion of control in Syria, the two countries face a possible escalation that could lead to conflict.

As Ragip Soylu wrote for the Middle East Eye, the Committee for the Evaluation of the Defence Establishment Budget and the Balance of Power, established by Israel in 2023, stated that the “origins of the rebels and their leaders,” some of whom have connections to groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, are a matter of concern, as Israel may face a new threat in Syria, possibly greater than that posed by Iran².

In such a complex and rapidly evolving scenario, credible and strategic mediators are essential to balance the interests of various stakeholders and to ensure objectivity in resolving critical matters. Such nations include:

- Hungary, which is the only EU and NATO member state that maintains a strategic partnership with Israel and is at the same time an observer with the Organization of Turkic States.
- Azerbaijan, which is the only country that is a strategic partner of Israel and Hungary and is at the same a treaty ally of both Russia and Türkiye.

Hungary and Azerbaijan occupy strategically pivotal positions within the Danubian and Silk Road regions, respectively. Their policymaking—marked by collaboration with key stakeholders and maintaining delicate balances—has cemented their status as keystone states. Each has proven capable of serving as a strategic mediator and transit hub, underscoring the fact that regional prosperity and stability often hinge upon their roles.

Hungary and Azerbaijan’s robust ties with Israel and Türkiye have been cultivated through years of collaboration across energy, economic, agricultural, and military sectors. Hungary’s strategic relations with the United States, bolstered by the personal connection between President Donald Trump and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, further enhance its potential to act as a valuable mediator. Given that these are the early months of the Trump administration, and considering the rapidly evolving situation in Syria, there is a narrow window of opportunity for Azerbaijan and Hungary to demonstrate their strategic value as mediators to the key actors involved in the conflict.

Collaborative mediation efforts by Azerbaijan and Hungary could thus play a decisive role in Syria’s peacemaking process. The following sections of this article will delve into the current situation in Syria, explore Hungary and Azerbaijan’s relationships with the major powers involved, and offer recommendations for fostering a strategic partnership between these two keystone states as essential players in achieving peace in Syria.

² Ragip Soylu, 2025 “Turkey-backed Syria may be bigger threat than Iran, says Israeli government panel,” Middle East Eye. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkish-backed-syria-bigger-threat-iran-says-israeli-govt-panel> (Accessed 16 January 2025)

Keystone states of the Silk Road region and the Danubian compact

The concept of keystone states was introduced by United States Naval War College professor Nikolas K. Gvosdev in his 2015 publication, “Keystone States: A New Category of Power.” This work opens by referencing the notion of “capable partners” from the 2015 US National Security Strategy. (Gvosdev, *Keystone States: A New Category of Power* Autumn 2015) Gvosdev emphasizes the evolving international landscape and the necessity for “new forms of cooperation,” urging the US to seek out such “capable partners.”

Gvosdev defines keystone states as those whose significance extends beyond their internal capabilities. These states play a pivotal role in stabilizing or destabilizing their regions, thereby contributing to the coherence of regional orders. As Gvosdev explains, keystone states “serve as critical mediators between different major powers, acting as gateways between different blocs of states, regional associations, and civilizational groupings.”

In his subsequent publication for *Baku Dialogues* in the autumn of 2020, titled “Geopolitical Keystone: Azerbaijan and the Global Position of the Silk Road Region,” Gvosdev further refines his theory by identifying the Silk Road Keystone region. He describes this area as the most critical keystone region, emerging as a vital bridge between the European Union (EU) and China along the East-West corridor, and India, Russia, and Türkiye along the North-South axis. According to Gvosdev, Azerbaijan occupies a central position within this framework, describing it as “the central axis of the area.” (Gvosdev, *Geopolitical Keystone: Azerbaijan and the Global Position of the Silk Road Region* Fall 2020)

Through a policy Gvosdev terms “strategic hedging,” Azerbaijan managed to ensure open access for major powers to the region without becoming subordinate to any of them, while maintaining the economic, military, and political means to project influence in global affairs. Gvosdev argues that, since reclaiming its independence from the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan has skillfully counterbalanced Moscow’s influence by re-establishing relationships with regional powers like Türkiye and Iran. Additionally, Azerbaijan has strengthened ties with the US and the EU—its largest trading partner—while recognizing their reluctance to challenge Moscow’s dominance directly.

A parallel but distinct analysis is provided by Carlos Roa, a Visiting Fellow at the Danube Institute. In his works, “The (Habsburg) Empire Strikes Back: The Case for a Danubian Compact” and “Between East and West: The Prospect of Hungary as a Keystone State” (Roa 2024), Roa applies the keystone state concept to Hungary and the broader Danube region. This notion has been further developed and elaborated in detailed manner by Balázs Orbán in his book *Hussar Cut: The Hungarian Strategy for Connectivity*. (Orbán 2024)

Roa highlights Hungary’s strategic geographic position between the West, Russia, and Türkiye, alongside its deliberate policymaking, as foundational to its status as a keystone state. Despite being an EU member, Hungary also holds observer status in the Organization of Turkic States and maintains economic cooperation with Russia, unlike most of its EU counterparts. Hungary’s “Eastern Opening Policy” has fostered

robust economic ties with China, now Hungary's largest investor. This unique positioning allows Hungary to act as a mediator and transit hub among major powers.

Roa argues that the Russo-Ukrainian war has exacerbated policy rifts among the Visegrad 4 (V4) countries, particularly as Poland and Czechia have adopted strong stances against Russia. Hungary, in contrast, has stood out by promoting cooperation within the Danubian region, which lies at the crossroads of East and West, as well as North and South. This approach allows Hungary to balance its position and maintain sovereignty without ceding further control within the EU. He cites Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's statement about the need for Hungary to "explore other opportunities of cooperation among pro-sovereignty states."

Roa suggests that Hungary's role as a keystone state could evolve into elevating the entire Danubian region as a keystone region, drawing on the historical example of the Habsburg Empire, whose longevity was secured through collective resilience.

In the context of a potential peace process in Syria, both Hungary and Azerbaijan are well-positioned to act as strategic mediators, given their cultivated relationships with key interest groups involved in the conflict.

Syria is changing drastically

After years of stalemate, the Syrian conflict reignited dramatically in late November 2024 with a swift and forceful offensive by the rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Long entrenched in the northern city of Idlib near Türkiye's Antakya province, HTS launched a sweeping campaign that, within ten days, captured the strategic cities of Homs, Hama, and ultimately Damascus, the Syrian capital. Notably, as HTS advanced toward Hama and Damascus, various other rebel factions emerged across the country, particularly in the southern provinces near the capital, contributing to the fall of Assad's regime.

Türkiye became the first country to officially recognize HTS as Syria's legitimate representative to establish new government, promptly reopening its embassy in Damascus. In an interview with *Al Jazeera*, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan reiterated Türkiye's recognition of the new administration as a credible partner³, following a high-profile meeting between European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Despite Türkiye's endorsement, the newly established Syrian administration faces formidable challenges in securing broader international legitimacy. Several countries, most notably the United States, continue to classify HTS as a terrorist organization—a designation it has held since May 15, 2014, according to the US Department of State⁴. The group remains on terrorist lists maintained by numerous countries,

³ Al Jazeera (2024), "Turkish FM on post-Assad Syria: Strategy vs reality," <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/talk-to-al-jazeera/2024/12/18/turkish-fm-on-post-assad-syria-strategy-vs-reality> (Accessed: 19 January 2025).

⁴ US Department of State, (2025) "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/> (Accessed: 18 January 2025)

including Türkiye, Russia, and Israel, largely due to United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254⁵, passed unanimously in 2015. The resolution explicitly calls for efforts to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by al-Nusra, the predecessor of HTS.

Anticipating the collapse of Assad's regime, HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani made calculated efforts to rehabilitate his image on the global stage, even adopting his real name, Ahmed al-Sharaa, in formal communications. Despite these attempts at rebranding, the international community remains deeply divided over whether to engage with HTS as a legitimate authority in Syria.

Briefly about Ahmed al-Sharaa's past in Syria

Ahmad al-Sharaa's journey has been one of radical transformation—once linked to ISIS and Al-Qaeda, he later severed those ties, rising to power in Idlib's local administration. Now, as the head of HTS and the leading figure of Syria's rebel forces, he is at the center of shaping the country's new government, a position that cements his controversial yet pivotal role in Syria's future.

In 2011, Ahmed al-Sharaa—then known as Jolani—arrived in Syria to establish the al-Nusra Front, which was initially linked to the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). However, tensions emerged in 2013 when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Levant), declared the merger of ISI and al-Nusra to form ISIS. Al-Sharaa rejected this merger, distancing himself from ISIS's increasingly brutal tactics by aligning instead with al-Qaeda. Consequently, in 2013, al-Nusra was recognized as the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda.

The group's trajectory shifted in 2015 after it captured the city of Idlib, compelling it to collaborate with local administrative structures. This necessity for governance led to al-Nusra's formal separation from al-Qaeda and subsequent rebranding as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, which later evolved into Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in 2017. Al-Qaeda accused al-Sharaa of betrayal, responding by establishing a new Syrian branch known as Hurras al-Din. According to a *BBC* article published on December 9, 2024, HTS forces had successfully defeated Hurras al-Din by 2020. Al-Sharaa's leadership in Idlib also resulted in the suppression of local ISIS factions, further intensifying HTS's adversarial relationship with both ISIS and al-Qaeda.⁶

During the pivotal 2024 operation that led to the fall of the Assad regime, Ahmed al-Sharaa actively sought to present a reformed image of HTS to the global community. In an interview with *CNN* amid the capture of Hama—a critical Syrian city—he

⁵ Conor Lennon, 2024, "The de facto authority in Syria is a designated terrorist group: What happens now?" UN News, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/12/1158126> (Accessed: 18 January 2025).

⁶ Mina Al-Lami, 2024, "From Syrian jihadist leader to rebel politician: How Abu Mohammed al-Jolani reinvented himself," *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0q0w1g8zqvo> (Accessed: 19 January 2025).

articulated his vision for Syria's future governance.⁷ Al-Sharaa emphasized that HTS was part of a broader Syrian framework committed to establishing a new government, administrative systems, and functioning state institutions. He also underscored the importance of integrating minorities into the governance structure, affirming that they are an essential part of Syria's social fabric.

Powers with direct security concerns in Syria

Sharing a border of over 900 kilometers with Syria, Türkiye has emerged as a key player in the situation following the takeover of Damascus by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The Turkish-supported Syrian National Army (SNA), also known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), has actively participated in efforts to topple the Assad regime in Syria, joining the operation initiated by HTS at the end of November.

The Turkish Foreign Minister stated that Türkiye worked closely with HTS during the operation to ensure it was conducted in the most bloodless, problem-free, and cost-effective manner possible. Türkiye was also the first country to reestablish its embassy in Damascus, with the Foreign Minister declaring the new administration as a legitimate partner. Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Türkiye has supported rebel groups in Syria, and the victory of rebel factions, whether directly related to Türkiye or not, has strategically benefited its position in the emerging political landscape in Syria.

Türkiye is home to the largest population of Syrian refugees worldwide. According to official figures from the *UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR)*, Türkiye hosts 3.2 million Syrian refugees. Of these, 98% live in urban, peri-urban, and rural areas, while only 2% reside in Temporary Accommodation Centers⁸. This significant refugee presence has had a profound impact on Türkiye's internal dynamics, resulting in considerable public spending to support the well-being of those seeking refuge.

The Syrian refugee issue has remained a pressing domestic matter in Türkiye over the last decade. However, alongside these domestic challenges, this situation also presents opportunities for stronger future relations between Syria and Türkiye. Many Syrian children who fled a decade ago have now grown up and built their lives in Türkiye. Furthermore, a considerable number of Syrians have taken the opportunity to learn the Turkish language, which is a factor that will foster further relations between Ankara and Damascus following stabilization in Syria.

In an interview with the Turkish newspaper *Yeni Şafak*, the leader of HTS, Ahmed al-Sharaa, praised Türkiye, noting that Syrian refugees were treated better there than in any other country. He expressed hope that Syria would not forget Türkiye's kindness and emphasized preparations for establishing strategic relations with Türkiye. Ragıp Soylu in his article for the *Middle East Eye*, mentions that Ahmed al-Sharaa outlined

⁷ CNN, (2024) "Syrian rebel leader speaks to CNN in exclusive interview," <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/12/06/world/video/abu-mohammad-al-jolani-syria-rebel-leader-karadsheh-digvid> (Accessed: 20 January 2025).

⁸ UNHCR Türkiye, (2025) "Overview," <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/ne-yapiyoruz/overview#:~:text=T%C3%BCrkiye%20is%20home%20to%20the,asylum%2Dseekers%20of%20other%20nationalities>. (Accessed: 20 January 2025).

priorities for the reconstruction of the Syrian state, including fostering strong commercial ties and adopting Türkiye's economic development model⁹.

Türkiye's primary concern in Syria is the presence of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which it considers a terrorist organization. Türkiye views the SDF as a rebranded version of the People's Protection Units (YPG), which is linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Both the YPG and PKK are designated as terrorist organizations by Türkiye, the United States, and several EU countries. Türkiye believes the name "SDF" was adopted at the request of the US, but continues to view the group as the YPG, an extension of the PKK in Syria. The PKK has been responsible for numerous terrorist attacks in Türkiye, resulting in the deaths of 40,000 people, including women, children, infants, the elderly, and Turkish diplomats abroad¹⁰. Consequently, Türkiye sees the group's presence in Syria as a national security threat and is unwilling to negotiate on this issue, insisting on the group's dismantlement.

Before the events of late November 2024, Türkiye conducted number of operations in Syria targeting ISIS and PKK/PYD/YPG terrorist groups. To eliminate ISIS, Türkiye launched Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) on August 24, 2016. According to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF), alongside the Free Syrian Army (FSA), cleared 2,015 km² near the Turkish border of ISIS terrorists. The next operation, Operation Olive Branch (OOB), began on January 20, 2018, involving the TAF and FSA. Its main objective was to clear the city of Afrin, near the Turkish border in northern Syria, of PKK/YPG/PYD and ISIS terrorists. In less than a month, 2,000 km², including Afrin, was secured by the TAF and FSA to eliminate terrorist threats along the border. Operation Peace Spring (OPS), launched on October 9, 2019, required coordination with both the US and Russia. Türkiye sought to establish a safe zone along the entire Syrian border, free from terrorist groups. According to the Turkish Foreign Ministry, OPS was legitimized through a joint statement reached on October 17, 2019, during the visit of then-US Vice President Mike Pence to Ankara. This was followed by a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed on October 22, 2019, after a meeting between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi¹¹.

From the start of the civil war in Syria, Türkiye has actively voiced its intention to clear the Syrian border regions of terrorists linked to the PKK, a group that has caused significant trouble for the country over the past 40 years. With the evolving situation in Syria, Türkiye is demanding the complete dismantling of the SDF, which is backed by the United States. Türkiye advocates for the formation of a unitary Syrian state with no autonomous region in the northeast. However, it also acknowledges the need to

⁹ Ragip Soylu, 2024, "Syria will establish strategic relations with Turkey, says HTS leader," *Middle East Eye*. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-establish-strategic-relations-turkey-hts-leader-says> (Accessed: 21 January 2025).

¹⁰ Ethem Emre Ozcan, Omer Koparan and Mehmet Sah Yilmaz, 2024, "US-backed terrorist group PKK/YPG loses control of occupied territory beyond Deir ez-Zor for 1st time in years," *Anadolu Agency*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/us-backed-terrorist-group-pkk-ypg-loses-control-of-occupied-territory-beyond-deir-ez-zor-for-1st-time-in-years/3421758> (Accessed: 21 January 2025).

¹¹ *President of Russia*, (2019) "Memorandum of Understanding Between Turkey and the Russian Federation," <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5452> (Accessed: 21 January 2025).

establish an administration that includes the participation of all minority groups, such as Arabs (both Sunnis and Alewites), Kurds, Turkmens, Druze, and others.

The handling of this situation will depend on the stance of the new US administration under Donald Trump in 2025. During the civil war, the US partnered with the SDF to combat ISIS, leading to the US-backing of the group. This has created tensions with Türkiye, as Ankara views the SDF as the YPG, a terrorist group linked to the PKK and shows determined stance that it must be dismantled¹². Following the fall of the Assad regime, the city of Manbij, west of the Euphrates River, was cleared of SDF/YPG forces and came under the control of the Syrian National Army (SNA) and Turkish Armed Forces (TAF). Türkiye remains a critical US ally and a NATO member, playing an important role in advancing American interests in the region. It is unlikely that the US would risk damaging its relationship with Türkiye, given Ankara's firm position on this issue.

Another country with major security concerns in Syria is Israel. On December 8, 2024, following the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu released a press statement from the Golan Heights. He stated that the collapse of the regime "is the direct result of our forceful action against Hezbollah and Iran, Assad's main supporters." In the same statement, he mentioned that this development creates new security concerns for Israel, given the collapse of the Separation of Forces Agreement from 1974. As reported by the website of the Prime Minister's Office, Netanyahu ordered the Israeli army to take positions previously held by Syrian soldiers to ensure that no hostile forces establish themselves near Israel's borders, describing it as a "temporary defensive position until a suitable arrangement is found." ¹³

The Separation of Forces Agreement was brokered between Israel and Syria on May 31, 1974, with the involvement of the United States and the Soviet Union. The agreement aimed to halt hostilities between the two countries following the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War. During the Six-Day War, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) advanced and established positions in the Golan Heights. In response, the former Syrian and Egyptian governments launched a surprise attack on the IDF during the Jewish national holiday, but they faced significant resistance and failed to capture any territory.

The protocols introduced by the agreement were later adopted by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) through Resolution 350, leading to the establishment of Alpha and Bravo lines. These lines marked the borders of a UN buffer zone, with United Nations Disengagement Observer Forces (UNDOF) stationed to ensure the demilitarization and security of the area. The buffer zone ends on the Israeli side at the Alpha line and on the Syrian side at the Bravo line. The zone has one border crossing

¹² Sumeyye Dilara Dincer, 2024, "Türkiye's foreign minister calls on Middle East countries to respect each other's borders, sovereign rights," *Anadolu Agency*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkiye-s-foreign-minister-calls-on-middle-east-countries-to-respect-each-others-borders-sovereign-rights/3425483> (Accessed: 22 January 2025).

¹³ *Prime Minister's Office*, (2024) "PM Netanyahu's Statement from the Golan Heights," <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/event-golan081224> (Accessed: 22 January 2025).

at Quneitra, controlled by UNDOF¹⁴. The IDF has been stationed in the UN-controlled buffer zone by order of the Israeli Prime Minister, who instructed them to remain there until the end of 2025. Syrian media has also reported that the IDF moved into the buffer zone and entered the [village of Ma'ariyya and further captured the eastern side of Mount Hermon](#)¹⁵. The IDF stated that their entry into the buffer zone and strategic positions is temporary and will last until the situation in Syria deescalates, with no intention of advancing further. Within 48 hours of the fall of the Assad regime, the IDF launched over 350 strikes on major military facilities across Syria, including ground and naval sites¹⁶. It is evident that Israel is concerned about the potential capture of these facilities by terrorist groups in the region and seeks to ensure security along its borders. This comes as part of Israel's ongoing efforts to combat Hezbollah and other Iran-backed groups throughout the Middle East.

It is important to understand that Israel's security concerns in Syria are closely linked to its efforts to counter Iran's influence in the region. The day after the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, the Israeli Prime Minister gave a speech at a press conference, describing the situation as: "The Assad regime in Syria, the main link in Iran's axis of evil, crumbled after 54 years."¹⁷ He described the collapse of the regime as a direct result of the decisive and severe strikes Israel delivered to Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Iran. In the same press conference, Benjamin Netanyahu stated that two days after the war broke out – following the terror attack by Hamas on Israeli towns and the taking of civilians as hostages – he told local council heads in southern Israel: "We will change the face of the Middle East." So far, Israel has dealt a decisive blow to Hezbollah in Lebanon, resulting in the death of its leader, Nasrallah, severed supply lines from Iran to Hamas, and the fall of the Syrian regime, which led to the removal of Iranian forces from Syria.

Following the Houthi attack on Israel from Yemen, which was linked to Iran, on December 22, 2024, the Israeli Prime Minister declared that Israel "acted forcefully against the terror arms of Iran's axis of evil, and we will do the same against the Houthis."¹⁸ He also emphasized that this fight will be more decisive with the support of the US and other countries that view the Houthis as a threat to international maritime navigation.

¹⁴ *Regional Commands, IDF*, (2020) "What is the Alpha Line?," <https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/regional-commands/northern-command/what-is-the-alpha-line/> (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

¹⁵ Emanuel Fabian, 2024, "Syrian media: IDF operating in villages outside buffer zone," *The Times of Israel*. https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/syrian-media-idf-operating-in-villages-outside-buffer-zone/ (Accessed: 25 January 2025).

¹⁶ *The Guardian*, (2024) "Israel strikes hundreds of military targets in Syria," <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/10/israel-strikes-hundreds-of-military-targets-in-syria> (Accessed: 25 January 2025).

¹⁷ *Prime Minister's Office*, (2024) "PM Netanyahu's Remarks at his Press Conference," <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/spoke-press091224> (Accessed: 26 January 2025).

¹⁸ *Prime Minister's Office*, (2024) "PM Netanyahu: "Just as we have acted forcefully against the terror arms of Iran's axis of evil, so too will we act against the Houthis. The result will be the same",," <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/spoke-statement221224> (Accessed: 26 January 2025).

Increasing possibility of conflict between Türkiye and Israel

While Türkiye and Israel share critical security concerns in Syria, their broader regional strategies and visions for the future diverge, creating contradictions and potential flashpoints. The Turkish Foreign Minister, reflecting on the situation in Syria, remarked that regional countries have achieved a “sufficient level of maturity” with robust foundations, signaling a pivotal moment to embrace cooperation. He underscored the importance of fostering greater regional collaboration and upholding mutual respect for borders, free from territorial ambitions. Türkiye aims to strengthen regional partnerships, including economic collaboration and unified stances on global issues.¹⁹

Addressing Syria, the Turkish Foreign Minister further emphasized, “We do not want Iranian domination in the region, nor do we want Turkish or Arab domination.” However, tensions between Türkiye and Israel have escalated sharply following Israeli military operations in Gaza and Israel’s decision to double the population in the Golan Heights. While Israel remains steadfast in countering Iranian threats, its growing military and civilian presence in the region has triggered alarm in Ankara.

The Turkish Foreign Ministry perceives Israel’s population expansion in the Golan Heights as a blatant act of invasion, refusing to acknowledge Israeli sovereignty over the area and expressing deep concern over the further expansion of IDF-controlled territories. Ankara has called upon Israel to honor its commitments under the 1974 Disengagement Agreement²⁰ — an accord Israel deems obsolete following the collapse of the Assad regime.

Tensions have reached a critical juncture; during the D-8 Summit in Egypt on December 19, 2024, the Turkish President urged member countries to impose an arms embargo on Israel and suspend trade, further intensifying Israel’s diplomatic isolation.²¹

Without robust mediation, the risk of conflict between Türkiye and Israel will continue to grow, fueled by their contrasting visions of regional stability and the evolving dynamics in Syria. With their strong foundations in relations with both countries — rooted in historic ties and decades of tested engagement — Azerbaijan and Hungary are well-positioned to serve as effective mediators.

¹⁹ Sumeyye Dilara Dincer, 2024, “Türkiye’s foreign minister calls on Middle East countries to respect each other’s borders, sovereign rights,” *Anadolu Agency*, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkiye-s-foreign-minister-calls-on-middle-east-countries-to-respect-each-others-borders-sovereign-rights/3425483> (Accessed: 22 January 2025).

²⁰ Efe Ozkan, 2024, “Türkiye condemns Israel’s decision to expand illegal settlements in Golan Heights,” *Anadolu Agency*, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkiye-condemns-israels-decision-to-expand-illegal-settlements-in-golan-heights/3425730> (Accessed: 27 January 2025).

²¹ Alperen Aktas, 2024, “At D-8 summit in Cairo, Turkish president urges arms embargo, trade halt and isolation of Israel,” *Anadolu Agency*, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/at-d-8-summit-in-cairo-turkish-president-urges-arms-embargo-trade-halt-and-isolation-of-israel/3429230> (Accessed: 27 January 2025).

Hungary and Azerbaijan's close ties with Türkiye

Hungary-Türkiye

Hungary's engagement in the region is multifaceted, spanning political, economic, business, and cultural dimensions. Its outreach beyond the EU has transformed significantly since Viktor Orbán's 2010 electoral victory and the adoption of a new third pillar in Hungarian foreign policy, known as the "Eastern Opening." Initially centered on the Turkic states, this policy has, over the past 14 years, elevated relations to the status of "strategic partnership" with all five members of the OTS. Notably, Azerbaijan and Türkiye enjoy even closer ties with Hungary, having established "enhanced strategic partnership" and "priority strategic partnership" relations, respectively — formalized through landmark agreements signed in Budapest in January and December of their respective years.

Hungary achieved observer status in the OTS in 2018 and inaugurated its European Representation Office in Budapest in 2019²², becoming the first and only EU nation to establish institutional ties with Silk Road countries. Following the signing of the priority strategic partnership agreement, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán delivered a symbolic speech, acknowledging that both nations had "lost the previous century" but expressed a shared vision that "Turks and Hungarians will be winners together in the 21st century."²³

Economic cooperation between Hungary and the Turkic states continues to strengthen, underscored by a doubling of trade volume over the last decade and a growing presence of businesses operating in each other's territories. Today, 500 Turkish companies are active in Hungary, while 100 Hungarian businesses operate in Türkiye. During the same meeting, Orbán highlighted that Hungary's 2024 presidency of the Council of the EU would prioritize efforts to modernize the customs union between the EU and Türkiye. Additionally, Hungary views Türkiye as a crucial partner in security, migration management, and energy security.

As NATO allies, Hungary and Türkiye share common interests in regional stability and defense. During a meeting with Turkish Defense Minister Yaşar Güler following the Adaptive Hussars 23 military exercise in early November 2023, Hungarian Defense Minister Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky described Türkiye as "an extremely important player" and emphasized that "its counsel is indispensable regarding the conflicts threatening Hungarian security."²⁴ The two countries align closely on promoting peace in Ukraine, maintaining stability in the Western Balkans, and ensuring NATO's vigilance over terror threats originating from regions such as the Middle East and Africa before they impact alliance territories. This approach supports Hungary's strategy of

²² *Organization of Turkic States Representative Office in Hungary*, "Organization of Turkic States," <https://www.turkkon.hu/EN/> (Accessed: 3 February 2025).

²³ *Viktor Orbán*, (2023) "Turks and Hungarians will be winners together in 21st century," <https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/turks-and-hungarians-will-be-winners-together-in-21st-century/> (Accessed: 3 February 2025).

²⁴ *AboutHungary*, (2023) "Defense Minister: Turkey is a strategic partner of primary importance for Hungary," <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/defense-minister-turkey-is-a-strategic-partner-of-primary-importance-for-hungary> (Accessed: 3 February 2025).

preventing large-scale refugee influxes. Notably, Türkiye remains a pivotal EU partner in managing migration flows from conflict zones across the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Africa.

The defense partnership between the two nations continues to deepen. During talks with Güler, Szalay-Bobrovniczky discussed upgrading Hungary's defense infrastructure, including acquiring NATO-compatible equipment. The collaboration includes a significant agreement to produce Gidrán armored combat vehicles under Turkish license in Hungary, through a partnership between Hungarian automotive manufacturer Rába and Turkish defense company Nurol Makina.²⁵

Energy security also serves as a critical pillar of Hungary's relationship with Türkiye. Key pipelines such as the Turkish Stream, which channels Russian gas, and the Southern Gas Corridor, which includes the TANAP pipeline transporting Azerbaijani gas, pass through Türkiye. In the wake of EU sanctions on Russia, these routes have become essential for Hungary's energy diversification and reliability. Since 2023, Hungary has received 100 million cubic meters (mcm) of Azerbaijani gas, with plans to scale up to 1 billion cubic meters (bcm). Moreover, starting in April 2024, Hungary became the first non-bordering country to import Turkish natural gas, securing a supply of 275 mcm.²⁶

Azerbaijan-Türkiye

Azerbaijan and Türkiye share exceptionally close, fraternal ties, often encapsulated by Haydar Aliyev's famous phrase, "one nation, two states." This deep-rooted relationship spans nearly all spheres, with particular emphasis on energy and military cooperation.

Türkiye has consistently demonstrated solidarity with Azerbaijan, especially concerning Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani territories during the First Karabakh War (1992–1994). In 1993, Türkiye closed its borders with Armenia following the occupation of Kalbajar, a gesture of unwavering support for Azerbaijan. To this day, Türkiye maintains its stance, pledging to keep the borders closed until Armenia and Azerbaijan reach a lasting peace agreement.

Military cooperation between the two nations began early. In August 1992, amid the ongoing war, Azerbaijan and Türkiye signed an agreement on cooperation in military education, making Azerbaijan the first post-Soviet state to allow its military personnel to receive training in a NATO-member country. This collaboration expanded in 1996 through agreements covering military education, as well as technical and scientific cooperation. According to Ali Hajizade, writing for the Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, over 7,000 Azerbaijani military personnel had been trained in Türkiye by 2015. The

²⁵ *HungaryToday*, (2023) "Hungarian-Turkish Defense Cooperation Flourishes," <https://hungarytoday.hu/hungarian-turkish-defense-cooperation-flourishes/> (Accessed: 4 February 2025).

²⁶ Ibrahim Mammadov, 2024, "Meaningful Turkic Alternative to Hungarian Russian Gas Imports Emerges This April," *Hungarian Conservative*, https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/politics/turkish-gas-imports_hungary_eastern-opening_kazakhstan_turkmenistan_diversification/ (Accessed: 4 February 2025).

Joint Declaration of 2010, which established a Council on High-Level Strategic Cooperation, further elevated their military partnership. (Hajizade 2024)

Azerbaijan is not only a purchaser of Turkish arms but also an essential partner in their development and manufacturing. ASELSAN, a prominent Turkish defense company, established a branch in Baku in 1998, marking a significant step in joint technological cooperation. The two countries regularly conduct joint military drills and participate in international exercises. Notably, Turkish F-16 fighter jets remained in Azerbaijan during the 44-day Second Karabakh War (September–November 2020) after exercises held in July-August 2020, serving as a powerful deterrent against foreign intervention. Türkiye's unequivocal support for Azerbaijan during the war, including readiness to mobilize military and economic resources, effectively curbed potential Russian intervention. As the conflict remained within Azerbaijani territory, it avoided triggering the CSTO provisions that would have drawn Armenia's allies into the conflict.

Türkiye also backed Azerbaijan's anti-terror operation in Karabakh in September 2023, aimed at eradicating terrorist groups and ending separatism.²⁷ This unwavering support was further solidified through the signing of the Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations in June 2021.²⁸ This landmark agreement mandates both countries to provide full military support to one another in the event of an attack, effectively placing Azerbaijan under the protective umbrella of a NATO member state.

The energy sector forms another crucial pillar of Azerbaijan-Türkiye relations. As of March 2020, Azerbaijan became Türkiye's top natural gas supplier, surpassing Russia and Iran. Türkiye serves as a vital transit hub for Azerbaijan's major pipelines, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum and TANAP gas pipelines. These routes, forming part of the Southern Gas Corridor, enable Azerbaijani oil and gas to reach global markets and the EU, including countries like Italy, Bulgaria, and Hungary, with plans for further expansion. Azerbaijan's significant investments in Türkiye, particularly in energy, and Türkiye's role as one of Azerbaijan's primary trade partners, further cement this strategic partnership.

The restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity following the Second Karabakh War has unlocked secure trade routes through the South Caucasus into Central Asia. Positioned strategically west of the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan offers an essential alternative to routes passing through Russia and Iran. Central Asia remains a vital region for both economic and strategic interests, institutionalized through frameworks such as the Organization of Turkic States (OTS).

Azerbaijan's value as a mediator has also emerged prominently. During the 2015 crisis triggered by Türkiye's downing of a Russian Sukhoi Su-25 fighter jet, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev played a key role in establishing dialogue between Türkiye and

²⁷ *DailySabah*, (2023), "Türkiye supports Azerbaijan's anti-terror op in Karabakh: Erdoğan," <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkiye-supports-azerbaijans-anti-terror-op-in-karabakh-erdogan> (Accessed: 7 February 2025).

²⁸ *President of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, (2021), "Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Turkey," <https://president.az/en/articles/view/52122> (Accessed: 7 February 2025).

Russia by visiting Belarus to mediate.²⁹ Relations with both Türkiye and Russia have only grown stronger since then. As President Aliyev noted in an interview with Russia Today, Azerbaijan remains the only country allied with both Russia (under the Declaration on Allied Interaction signed in February 2022) and Türkiye (under the Shusha Declaration of 2021).³⁰ This dual alliance underscores Azerbaijan's unique role as a keystone state and a trusted mediator.

Hungary and Azerbaijan's close ties with Israel

Hungary-Israel

The relationship between Israel and Hungary has evolved through several distinct phases of development and crisis. Official diplomatic ties were established in 1948, coinciding with the founding of the State of Israel. However, these relations were severed in 1967 under pressure from Moscow and only reinstated in 1989 after the fall of the Eastern Bloc.³¹

Significant changes in bilateral ties emerged in 2010, marked by the election of the Fidesz government in Hungary, led by Viktor Orbán, and the coalition government in Israel headed by Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu. The personal rapport between Orbán and Netanyahu, established during Orbán's visit to Israel in 2005 where he met then-Finance Minister Netanyahu, laid the groundwork for a strong alliance. Both leaders found themselves aligned on various issues, including political strategy and electoral success in their respective countries.

The Arab Spring and the subsequent 2015 migration crisis in the EU further solidified the partnership between the two nations. Hungary's staunch opposition to illegal migration from its southern borders resonated with Israel, which had successfully addressed a similar challenge involving African migrants between 2006 and 2012. Israel emerged as a key partner for Hungary in its efforts to regulate migration and enhance regional stability, preventing illegal migrants from reaching Hungarian borders.

Hungary's emphasis on security, identity, and sovereignty attracted criticism from Western European governments and Brussels, pushing it closer to Israel, which faced similar international pressures. Israel, in turn, supported Hungary's efforts to

²⁹ *EurAsia Daily*, (2015), "Expert: Aliyev's visit to Minsk could pursue a dialogue between Russia and Turkey at the level of junior partners," <https://eadaily.com/en/news/2015/12/01/expert-aliyevs-visit-to-minsk-could-pursue-a-dialogue-between-russia-and-turkey-at-the-level-of-junior-partners> (Accessed: 7 February 2025).

³⁰ *President of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, (2024) "Ilham Aliyev was interviewed by Dmitry Kiselev, Director General of "Rossiya Segodnya" International News Agency," <https://president.az/en/articles/view/67537> (Accessed: 7 February 2025).

³¹ Dávid Nagy, 2021, "How Hungary Became Israel's Most Reliable Partner in Europe," *Hungarian Conservative*, <https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/politics/how-hungary-became-israels-most-reliable-partner-in-europe/> (Accessed: 5 February 2025).

strengthen ties with the right-leaning Republican Party in the United States.³² While Hungary's relations with the US were strained under the Obama and Biden administrations, they improved significantly during the Trump era, partly due to personal connections between Trump and Orbán.

Hungary has also been a steadfast supporter of Israel in opposing critical EU decisions. While many Western European countries have frequently taken positions against Israeli policies, Hungary has used its veto power to block several resolutions at the EU and UN levels. These include measures condemning Israeli settlements as illegal and objecting to the US embassy's relocation from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Additionally, Hungary initiated the Visegrád 4 (V4) + Israel platform, promoting pro-Israeli stances throughout Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

Home to Central Europe's largest Jewish community, estimated at around 100,000 people, Hungary allocates substantial resources to preserving Jewish cultural heritage. Its pro-Israel stance has been particularly evident in its response to recent crises. Following the October 7 Hamas terror attack on Israeli civilians, Hungary not only condemned the violence but also banned pro-Palestinian protests within its borders. During Hungary's presidency of the Council of the EU in the latter half of 2024, Budapest pledged to work towards restoring EU-Israeli relations.³³

Azerbaijan-Israel

Azerbaijan stands out as one of Israel's closest partners among Muslim-majority countries and serves as a critical ally in the South Caucasus. Their deep strategic partnership is rooted in shared geopolitical interests, particularly concerning regional security, energy, and arms supply. Amid widespread condemnation of Israel's actions following the October 7, 2023, Hamas terror attack on civilians, Azerbaijan has notably refrained from criticizing Israel. While supporting a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine, Azerbaijan's neutral stance towards Israel's operations in the region helps mitigate Israel's isolation.

Israel was among the first countries to recognize Azerbaijan's independence, doing so just two months after Azerbaijan regained its sovereignty from the USSR in October 1991. Israel established its embassy in Baku in 1993. However, Azerbaijan delayed opening an embassy in Tel Aviv due to potential backlash from Muslim-majority countries at the UN, particularly given the ongoing occupation of 20 percent of its territories by Armenia during the 1992–1994 conflict. (Idan 2021) Following Azerbaijan's victory in restoring its territorial integrity during the Second Karabakh War in 2020, the diplomatic landscape shifted in favor of deepening ties. On March 29,

³² Veronika Józwiak, Michał Wojnarowicz, 2021, "The Specificity of Hungarian-Israeli Relations," *Polish Institute of International Relations (PISM)*, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/the-specificity-of-hungarian-israeli-relations> (Accessed: 5 February 2025).

³³ *AboutHungary*, (2024), "FM: Hungarian EU presidency will strive to restore EU-Israel cooperation," <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/fm-hungarian-eu-presidency-will-strive-to-restore-eu-israel-cooperation> (Accessed: 6 February 2025).

2023, Azerbaijan became the first Shiite Muslim-majority country to open an embassy in Israel.³⁴

For Israel, its relationship with Azerbaijan holds immense strategic value, given Azerbaijan's geographic proximity to Iran. Throughout both Karabakh wars, Israel openly supported Azerbaijan, while Iran backed Armenia and continues to obstruct the development of the Zangezur Corridor. Azerbaijan remains a staunch advocate for the corridor's implementation, a key provision in the Trilateral Declaration signed on November 10, 2020, by the leaders of Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia to end the Second Karabakh War.

The Zangezur Corridor promises to enhance trade along the Trans-Caspian route, linking Central Asian countries to broader markets. Following the Ukraine crisis in 2022, Central Asian nations increasingly sought more secure and diversified trade routes. As the EU seeks to enhance its economic competitiveness by tapping into emerging markets, the Trans-Caspian route, which bypasses the heavily sanctioned territories of Russia and Iran, has gained significant strategic importance. This route has driven substantial increases in trade between the EU, Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Central Asian countries.

For over three decades, Israel has worked to counter Iran's influence across the post-Soviet states of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, with Azerbaijan playing a pivotal role. The restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, coupled with evolving dynamics following the Ukraine crisis, has only amplified Azerbaijan's strategic significance, especially through the economic opportunities presented by the Trans-Caspian route.

Military cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan continues to expand. Azerbaijan remains a substantial purchaser of Israeli arms, including drones that proved instrumental during the Second Karabakh War, complementing Turkish drones on the battlefield. In exchange, Azerbaijan is a primary supplier of oil to Israel via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which traverses Georgia, Türkiye, and the Mediterranean Sea. Furthermore, the partnership extends into innovative technologies, particularly in agriculture. Both nations face escalating challenges related to droughts and water shortages, prompting collaboration in developing sustainable solutions. (Idan 2021)

³⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, (2023), "Azerbaijan to open embassy in Israel today," <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/azerbaijan-to-open-embassy-in-israel-today-29-mar-2023> (Accessed: 6 February 2025).

How can Hungary and Azerbaijan contribute to peace in the region?

"Damascus is simply an oasis, that is what it is," wrote the renowned American author Mark Twain. Today, however, it could be described as an oasis of power struggles among dominant forces in the Middle Eastern deserts. The rapidly evolving situation in Syria following the fall of Assad's regime is reshaping the region's power dynamics.

Türkiye envisions a unified Syrian state that ensures representation for all minorities, eradicates PKK/YPG terrorist groups that threaten its national security, and resists Damascus becoming dependent on a single foreign power. Russia is consolidating its presence in Latakia, scaling back elsewhere while preserving its strategic footholds at the Tartus port and Khmeimim airbase. Meanwhile, Iranian influence has been completely eradicated from Syria. Israel, locked in a regional contest with Iran, is determined to secure its borders by claiming temporary control over the formerly UN-administered security zone and extending its reach to Mount Hermon until stability is restored. The United States now faces a defining decision: whether to continue backing the SDF—seen by Türkiye as a PKK/YPG-linked terrorist group—or prioritize alignment with its NATO ally, Türkiye.

Strained relations between Türkiye and Israel, further aggravated by Israel's military operations in Gaza following Hamas' terrorist attacks, have now extended to their conflicting visions for Syria. As journalist Ragip Soylu writes for Middle East Eye, "Ankara wants a Syria that can economically and socially flourish. A conflict with Israel, whether direct or indirect, does not align with that goal." Soylu also highlights Türkiye's measured stance—Ankara did not oppose Israel's dismantling of Syria's remaining military infrastructure post-Assad. However, Israel's expansion beyond the UN-administered zone has sparked concerns, with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan calling for an end to these actions.³⁵ Moreover, an Israeli report referenced by Soylu suggests that Tel Aviv favors a fragmented Syria, a position that stands in direct opposition to Türkiye's vision of a unified Syrian state. This fundamental divergence raises the specter of further escalation, underscoring the urgent need for mediation.

Syria is becoming the epicenter of a growing rift between Türkiye and Israel. Their spheres of influence in the broader region have significantly narrowed, making diplomatic engagement more critical than ever. Although their objectives in Syria are not directly adversarial, they are fundamentally at odds. This precarious balance creates a scenario where either both nations achieve their strategic aims—or neither does. Türkiye is committed to establishing a unified Syrian state free from PKK/YPG terrorist elements. Meanwhile, Israel is focused on securing the Golan Heights and safeguarding itself against Iranian-backed forces such as Hezbollah. To fulfill these objectives, Israel seeks some form of access or presence in Syrian territory.

³⁵ Ragip Soylu, 2025, "Turkey doesn't seek conflict with Israel in Syria. Here's why," *Middle East Eye*, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/turkey-doesnt-seek-conflict-israel-syria-heres-why> (Accessed: 7 February 2025).

Despite these high-stakes tensions, neither Türkiye nor Israel appears to be actively pursuing a formal diplomatic framework. Current exchanges are largely confined to intelligence channels. Without robust mediation, the risk of escalation looms large, threatening regional stability. This is where Hungary and Azerbaijan could step in as potential mediators. Both nations hold strategic leverage and maintain strong ties with key players in the region.

Azerbaijan, as President Ilham Aliyev has emphasized, is uniquely positioned as the only country allied with both Russia and Türkiye while simultaneously being one of Israel's strongest partners in a region where Israel often finds itself isolated. Similarly, Hungary has cultivated deep relations with Israel, remains a key EU member, and has elevated its ties with Türkiye to a priority strategic partnership. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was a notable supporter of Donald Trump during his election campaigns, and thus Trump's victory in the U.S. elections further strengthened Hungary's voice in Washington.

With no direct stake in Syria, Hungary and Azerbaijan are well-suited to facilitate peace efforts and mediate conflicts among the major powers involved. However, time is of the essence. Given the focus of the current Trump presidency on greater peacemaking, Hungary and Azerbaijan must act swiftly to position their mediation efforts as a credible alternative. A successful initiative would not only strengthen their bilateral partnership but also cement their roles as pivotal players in both the Danubian and Silk Road regions.

Beyond diplomacy, both countries are also well-equipped to contribute to Syria's post-war reconstruction. Leading energy companies like Azerbaijan's SOCAR and Hungary's MOL and MVM Groups have extensive experience in resource extraction and transportation across the region. Azerbaijan's post-war rebuilding of cities devastated during the Karabakh conflict serves as a model for similar efforts in Syria, while Hungarian firms, already engaged in Karabakh's reconstruction, possess the expertise to support Syria's recovery.

Thus, Hungary and Azerbaijan are not only capable diplomatic mediators but also potential economic partners in Syria's rehabilitation. Their strategic positioning, diplomatic credibility, and economic resources make them well-suited to play a transformative role—both in stabilizing Syria and redefining their own regional and interregional influence.

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