



POLICY COMPASS

**Trump's Gulf Visit
and Implications for Syria**

By

Gulf State Analytics



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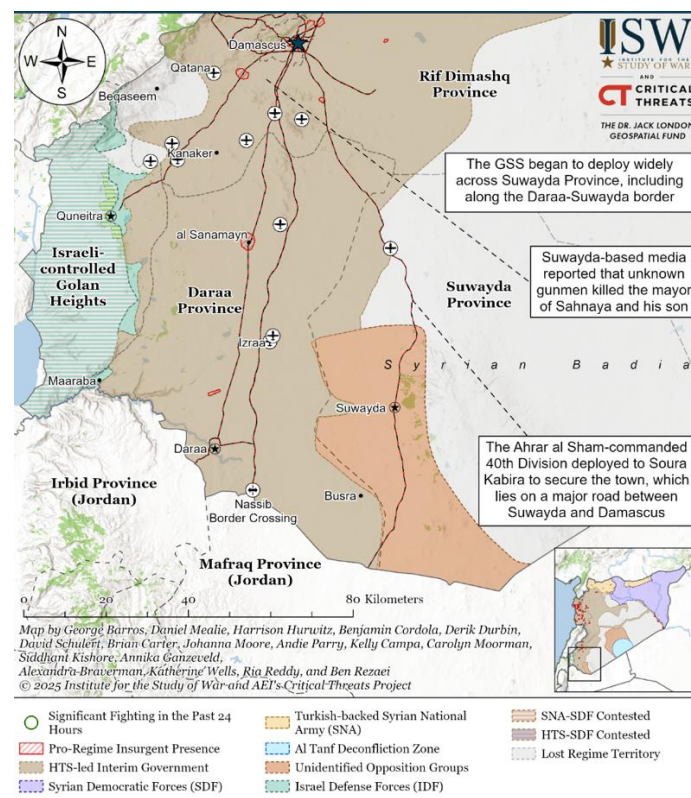
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Executive Summary

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- ✧ Trump will visit the Gulf sub-region from 13-16 May, marking his first visit to the Middle East since returning to the Oval Office.
- ✧ While Trump is in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, issues related to Syria will come up in his discussions with Gulf Arab leaders and policymakers.
- ✧ The Trump administration's approaches to post-regime change Syria do not sit well with Gulf Arab states, which will see Trump's visit as an opportunity to exchange views and offer their perspectives.
- ✧ Arab states are opposed to the West's economic sanctions on Syria and want the Trump administration to lift the Caesar Act.
- ✧ GCC members want to invest in Syria's reconstruction and redevelopment, but the imposition of Washington's sanctions is the main obstacle.
- ✧ Gulf Arab leaders will try to persuade Trump to pressure Israel into halting its military aggression and destabilisation campaign in Syria.
- ✧ Saudi, Qatari, and Emirati officials will share with Trump their conceptions of lasting stability in Syria and warn about the risks of state collapse in the war-torn country.
- ✧ Officials in the GCC would like to see Washington recognise the new Syrian government as legitimate and work closely with the Gulf when it comes to stabilising and reconstructing Syria. But with some US officials seeing the Sunni Islamist government in Damascus as an al-Qaeda regime there are significant differences to address.

Key Picture: IDF Airstrikes in Southern Syria (1st May 2025)



Source: [Institute for War Studies](https://www.instituteforwarstudies.org/)

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The Importance of Trump's Visit and GCC's Goals

When US President Donald J. Trump visits Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) from 13-16 May, he will be discussing a host of important regional and global issues with officials in all three Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members. The tense situation in post-regime change Syria will be one of files addressed.

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While the leadership in Riyadh, Doha, and Abu Dhabi have their disagreements with the Trump administration's Syria policies, the American president's upcoming trip to the Gulf will be an opportunity for them to try to persuade Trump into changing course. There are three areas where GCC members want to see the White House shift its policies toward post-Ba'ath Syria.

1. The Caesar Act Sanctions

First, the Gulf Arab monarchies have called for a lifting of sanctions on Syria. The Caesar Act sanctions, imposed on Syria during Trump's first term, continue to strangle Syria's economy. While these stringent sanctions were, at least officially, implemented to punish Bashar al-Assad's regime, their continued imposition by Washington is part of the Trump administration's strategy for using US leverage to pressure President Ahmed al-Sharaa's government into pursuing certain actions in line with American and/or Israeli interests. These include bringing Syria into the Abraham Accords, banning armed Palestinian groups from having a presence in Syria, and closing down Russian military bases.

GCC states, however, fear that the continued crippling of Syria's economy through these secondary sanctions threatens to leave the war-torn country as an economic black hole in the heart of the Arab world. The risks include a breakdown of the state, the emergence power vacuums that violent extremists can fill, and a worsening of economic conditions that force Syrians to enter black markets such as the Captagon trade. The Gulf Arab leaders want their countries investing Syria and helping to advance its redevelopment and reconstruction following years of warfare.

2. Israel's Military Operations in Syria

Second, leaders in GCC members are staunchly opposed to Israel's military operations in Syria which breach the country's sovereignty. Tel Aviv is open about its determination to prevent Syria from achieving post-civil war unity. This foreign policy strategy is in line with a decades-old Israeli policy of trying to exploit and deepen ethnic and sectarian divisions in Arab states. The Israeli leadership's perspective is that Syria's delicate transition offers a unique opportunity to inflict damage on the Syrian state and exacerbate tensions between minority groups such as the Druze and Sharaa's government in Damascus.¹ This agenda is completely at odds with the Gulf Arab states' desire to see Syria emerge as a strong unitary state with its territorial integrity fully preserved.

When Trump is in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, these countries' leaders and high-ranking authorities will seek to convince Trump to use Washington's leverage to rein in Israel's military aggression toward post-Assad Syria. In Riyadh, Doha, and Abu Dhabi, Trump will hear about Israel's conduct being destabilising and dangerous. The Gulf Arab policymakers will stress that a weak and divided Syria will be the source of new security dilemmas not only for the region but also for countries worldwide, especially given Islamic State's ability to exploit power vacuums.

3. Recognition of a Legitimate Syrian Government

Third, GCC states will seek to convince Trump that it is important for the US and other western powers to recognize Sharaa's government as legitimate. On this front, there are some divisions in Trump's administration. On one hand there are figures such as Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard who essentially see Syria's post-Assad government as an al-Qaeda regime.

Given Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Sharaa's jihadist roots in Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, Gabbard and others in Washington are skeptical about this narrative of Sharaa being a figure who has evolved and moderated.² Yet, Trump's Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff has made statements indicating his view of Sharaa as a leader whom the West should see as having moved past his days as a militant jihadist in Iraq and Syria.

Put simply, the Gulf Arab leaders will seek to persuade Trump that Sharaa, despite his past, is the new Syrian leader and he deserves the benefit of the doubt. Most likely, officials in the Gulf will seek to convince Trump that engagement with Damascus and recognition of the new Syrian government as legitimate is the best course of action, and that refusal to engage will push Syria toward non-western powers which do not share Washington's interests such as China and Russia.

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GCC's Strategic Approach to Washington

Statesmen in the Gulf took away a lot from the tense exchange between Trump, Vice President JD Vance and Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the White House earlier this year.³ One key point they observed is that Trump sees foreign countries that want something from Washington as either having cards to play or not. As GCC states seek to persuade and cajole Trump into changing course vis-a-vis Syria, these oil- and gas-rich Arab countries do have cards.

As Trump's economic and trade policies backfire, possibly costing him significant political support at home, he will come to the Gulf seeking hundreds of billions of dollars in investments in the US economy. He will also seek greater Saudi/GCC help with winding down the Ukraine war and restoring Red Sea security, while also trying to pull the Gulf Arab monarchies away from China. The leadership in Riyadh, Doha, and Abu Dhabi will be open to discussing all these issues and helping Trump to varying degrees on various fronts. But they will also be bargaining on behalf of their countries' national interests, including those pertaining to Syria.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it remains to be seen whether Trump's first Middle East trip of his second term will bring about any change in his administration's foreign policy toward Syria. Perhaps efforts to push Trump to make such changes will require more time and diplomatic energy. Yet, Trump's visits to three Gulf states this month will mark a key point in the process. With Trump as well as Gulf Arab leaders being known for transactional approaches to foreign policy while also making personal relationships central to their statecraft, it is difficult to overstate the importance of Trump's upcoming Gulf tour. The stakes could be high for Sharaa's government and the people of Syria.

NOTES

¹<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-says-it-carried-out-warning-strike-extremists-syria-preparing-attack-2025-04-30/>

²<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/30/key-takeaways-from-tulsi-gabbards-us-senate-confirmation-hearing>

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/28/europe/analysis-trump-zelensky-split-intl-latam/index.html>