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Winners and Losers after Assad's Fall


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Winners and Losers after Assad's Fall

2024 has been a year of political upheaval around the world. Elections in the United States, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and others countries brought major political re-alignments, often reinforcing far-right and populists forces, and brutal large-scale conflicts with tens of thousands of casualties continued in Ukraine and Gaza.¹ 2024 ended with more unforeseen developments, including an attempted coup in South Korea and the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria.

The fall of Assad came after Islamist forces centred on Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a Syrian group led by Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, now using his original name – Ahmed al-Sharaa, captured Damascus. The development seemed to, finally, end the Syrian Civil War, a conflict that had emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring in 2011. While Assad had been at the helm of the Syrian State from the beginning of the war, levelling atrocious violence that included chemical weapons on his own population, the groups opposing him had transformed many times.

Over the years, the ragtag opposition to Assad encompassed various democratic-leaning groups such as the Free Syrian Army, nationalist groups such as the Kurds of the People's Defence Units (YPG)/ Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), various brands of Islamists from the al-Qaeda backed Jabhat al-Nusra, HTS' famous predecessor, to the Islamic State (IS). As the war in Syria progressed, it internationalised, witnessing military interventions by the Lebanese Hezbollah movement (April 2013), which, in turn, led Gulf countries to increase support to anti-Assad opposition groups, and, afterward, by the United States (September 2014), Russia (September 2015), Turkey (August 2016), Israel, and others. In fact, so much changed in Syria over the past decade that it seemed as if the country had not witnessed one conflict but a succession of wars.

During the Syrian Civil War, the fortunes of war shifted several times. In late 2012, Assad seemed on the brink of losing to the Syrian opposition that had taken large chunks of Idlib, Aleppo, and Dar'a governorates and was pushing toward Damascus from the north and south. In 2015, while opposition forces still controlled areas north of Homs, it was the Islamic State that appeared close to cutting regime-held areas in two by advancing toward the highway connecting the cities of Homs and Damascus. Both times, Assad survived. In fact, after 2017, most observers agreed that the worst had passed for him. With formidable backers in Iran and Russia, Assad seemed bound to remain the leader of Syria for the near future while chipping at the remaining fragmented opposition strongholds in Idlib, Aleppo, and Dar'a governorates. Moscow and Tehran were, meanwhile, negotiating with Ankara, the main supporter of the Islamists, and the Kurds over the future political organisation of Syria in the Astana Platform and other forums.

HTS' sudden push created a new reality on the ground. HTS toppled Assad as the Syrian army decided that it would no longer fight for the discredited dictator. Aleppo city had been contested for years before the regime managed to regain it with Russian support in 2016. In November 2024, it fell in a few days. After that, HTS captured the rest of the country in only two weeks. While HTS victory does not mean the end of violence in Syria, the ousting of Assad, who personalised the reviled Syrian regime, is a rupture with the past. It brings the Syrian Civil War, as the world knew it, to an end. Beyond Syria, it is bound to upend the regional balance of power in the Middle East. This rest of this essay surveys the impact of Assad's fall on the regional powers involved in Syria and discusses the main challenges awaiting HTS in Syria.



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Regional Powers and Syria

Iran

The collapse of the Syrian regime has been a blow to Iran. After the weakening of the Hezbollah in the conflict with Israel, culminating in the deaths of the movement's leadership alongside Hassan Nasrallah in September 2024, it further jeopardised Teheran's "Axis of Resistance" to Israel and the United States. Iran lost much of what it had invested in Syria over the years.ⁱⁱ Without the depleted Hezbollah and being itself on the brink of a conflict with Israel, Teheran was not ready to defend the struggling Syrian regime. Its lack of reaction may have come from an assessment that it made little sense to aid a dictator abandoned by his own army. Hezbollah and Iranian forces had fought alongside the Syrian army since 2013, but they could not replace it when it decided to give up on Assad.

Official Iranian reactions thus attributed HTS' victory to the support it allegedly received from Israel, the United States, and Turkey, and to Assad's own mistakes. The Syrian dictator had, according to Tehran, not reached out for Iranian support soon enough and not followed Iranian advice on how to administer Syria.ⁱⁱⁱ The weakening of Iran's support to Assad is therefore also the product of the Syrian dictator's attempts at playing Iran and the Gulf countries against each other. To Teheran, Assad, by courting Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries in recent years,^{iv} had been somewhat ungrateful to it and Hezbollah for their support during the civil war.

Admitting that HTS victory was a setback, Iranian officials, however, maintained that due to Iran's cultural, religious, linguistic, and geographical ties to Syria's population, especially the Shia-linked Alawites who were Assad's main base of support, Tehran would keep a central role in Syrian affairs.

Russia

Arguably, the blow in Syria is as strong for Russia as it is for Iran. Catching the Russians by surprise – to the extent that officials in Moscow could not articulate a clear position even as Assad was preparing to flee, the regime change in Syria marked a reflux for Russia's influence in the Middle East. By losing Syria, Russia lost its only ally in the Middle East, a country with which it had cultivated close ties since the Cold War. It also lost its foothold on the Mediterranean Sea and in the southern part of the Black Sea.

The future of Russia's military base in Khmeimim and its naval facility in Tartus remain in limbo. The potential loss of the port in Tartus would be especially problematic for Moscow, diminishing its role in the Mediterranean Sea where Russia has worked to secure a presence since imperial times. Without Syria, Russian war ships and submarines would have nowhere to replenish supplies and dock. To try to remedy this issue, Moscow swiftly opened talks with HTS to see if it could keep its bases. In response, HTS though remained cautious and promised little. Al-Sharaa explained that he "[did] not want Russia to depart in a manner unbecoming its longstanding relationship with [Syria]".^v If talks with HTS prove unsuccessful, Russia's only option for maintaining a base on the Mediterranean Sea would be to build up its presence in Libya.^{vi} The latter would be though a less preferred option for Moscow.

Russia's about-face toward HTS is ironic given that the fight against radical Islamists and terrorists in Syria and elsewhere had prominently driven Russian foreign policy in the last twenty-five years. In September 2015, Vladimir Putin had justified the Russian intervention in Syria by the sole need to eliminate al-Qaeda and IS Islamist groups that had attracted hundreds of recruits from the Russian North Caucasus. Yet, today, Moscow has moved to remove HTS, along with the Taliban – another Islamist movement, from its list of terrorist organisations as it is trying to enlist both into its ragtag anti-Western coalition.^{vii}

Like Iran, Moscow has passively looked at how the Assad regime lost in days all the territories it had secured with Russian support in years. In this context, the fall of Assad is a symbolic defeat for Moscow. Syria had been a significant foreign policy success for Putin. It had incarnated Russia's return as a world power that is able to influence events outside the post-Soviet space. Russia's intervention had demonstrated how effective Moscow could be in supporting its authoritarian allies. All that has been lost. Instead, after Assad fled to Moscow, Russia and Putin are now associated with a deposed dictator, a loser.

Assad's collapse evokes parallels with the collapse of Ashraf Ghani's regime following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. At the time, Russian pundits and officials had much laughed about the U.S. sad retreat, arguing that it showed the decline of American global influence. They are today confronted with a similar situation. Overall, the unease with which Russian officials reacted to the fall of Assad confirmed how nothing seems to now matter in Russian foreign policy besides the war in Ukraine. By all accounts, Ukraine is the one issue occupying Putin and no resources can be diverted from that conflict to other objectives. In this sense, the swift and sudden fall of Assad is also the result of Russia divesting military resources from Syria to Ukraine since 2022.



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Turkey

By contrast to Iran and Russia, Turkey emerges as the clear winner of the political re-composition in Syria. It had supported the opposition in Syria from the beginning. While Damascus was not captured by the Turkey-sponsored groups that are controlling the buffer zone along the Turkish border, Ankara had always been favourable to the Islamists in Idlib governorate. As HTS took power, Turkey is now pushing for the recognition of the new Syrian authorities and advancing its own interests. Unconfirmed reports suggest that it may quickly expand its military presence in Syria, possibly filling the void left by Russia.^{viii}

Meanwhile, it seems that Russia had reached to Turkey with a request to assist in securing Russian interests in Syria at the time of HTS's offensive. After years of Moscow having the upper hand in deciding Syria's future, it is a considerable reversal in power dynamics. With Assad gone and the rest of the actors relying on Turkey to manage HTS, Ankara is in a better position to organise Syria as it prefers, including in pushing SDF units away from the Turkish border. In December 2024, it forced the SDF to leave the city of Manbij, near the Turkish border, with the support of the United States.^{ix} In the coming months, Ankara is likely to push to expand the buffer zones it controls in North Syria through its proxies.

The picture is, however, not all rosy for Ankara. Subject to Islamist terrorist attacks and growing Kurdish separatism since the start of the Syrian Civil War, Turkey, which shares a long land border with Syria, is most concerned about parts of Syria devolving into ungoverned spaces. A fragmentation of Syria along ethnic and religious lines would be a nightmare scenario for Ankara. It would create safe havens for all sorts of armed and terrorist groups.

Turkey, therefore, calls for not allowing the break-up of Syria – a move aimed first at preventing a Kurdish state – and pushes for the international community to back HTS.^x Luckily, the United States, Russia, Iran, and Israel are similarly intent on keeping Syria together within its current dysfunctional borders which remain a legacy of Western colonialism. Beyond such statements of intent, it remains, nonetheless, to be seen if any of these powers would be ready to militarily step-in to prevent Syria's partition, especially as they have, for now, different allies in Syria.

Israel

Israel's stakes and involvement in Syria were from the start more limited. The fall of Assad remains, nonetheless, a positive development for Jerusalem as it marks a major setback for Iran. Throughout the Syrian Civil War, Israel has been bombing selected Syrian military facilities and Hezbollah groups that it argued could in the future represent a threat to it. It did so after behind the scenes negotiations with Russia. By various accounts, the need to coordinate with Russia in Syria had been a factor that kept Israel out of supporting Ukraine most strongly since 2022. Given the new situation in Syria, Jerusalem may change its approach to Ukraine.^{xi}

After Assad's fall, Israel quickly moved to take maximum advantage of the vacuum of power in Syria. The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) actively bombed strategic government of Syria military bases, ports, and heavy weapons such as ships that used to be off-limits due to Russia's protection. Jerusalem's goal was certainly to destroy as many heavy weapons and military infrastructure in Syria as possible to prevent them from falling into the hands of HTS or any group potentially hostile to Israel.

In parallel, Israel has moved to expand the buffer zone, relatively rich in water resources, it controls in the Golan Heights, hinting that it may annex territories in the Golan in contravention of UN decisions, and increase settler population in areas it already controlled.^{xii} As Syria remains instable and fragmented, Israel's strategy of active interference in Syria affairs is likely to continue too, especially as no regional power seems able to curtail the expanding Israeli influence.

Yet, it also seems that there should be no reasons for Israel not to find some accommodation with HTS. Despite the ideological opposition, the two states have little direct conflict of interests, even given the ongoing war in Gaza. During the Syrian Civil War, Israel has, in fact, supported, on a limited basis, some of the anti-Assad opposition, including Islamist groups, in Dar'a governorate, seeing them as the lesser evil compared to Iranian allies and proxies.

The Gulf Powers and the United States

For the Gulf countries, Assad's fall is a welcome development given that it significantly weakens Iran, even though it creates another factor of instability in the Middle East. Overall, Iran's retreat in Syria clears the way for Saudi Arabia to further assert its regional leadership. HTS's rise, moreover, brings Syria firmly back into the Sunni Arab fold while HTS' Islamist ideology is more aligned with those of the Gulf countries compared to Alawite Assad's Ba'athists. The fact that HTS's first diplomatic visits were to Saudi Arabia shows the political and economic centrality of the Gulf countries for the new Syria.



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On another side, the regime change in Syria is also likely to limit the production and smuggling of Captagon, a synthetic amphetamine-type stimulant drug, which had become Syria's main export under the Assad regime.^{xiii}

For the United States, the fall of Assad to a radical Islamist coalition is ironically both the end of an enemy regime and another anti-American Islamist victory. It creates the potential for a confrontation between the U.S. Kurdish allies, the authorities in Damascus, and Turkey's proxies in which the United States may become embroiled. For now, HTS and SDF have been able to avoid direct confrontation while pro-Turkish forces and SDF have clashed. In the future, HTS would likely have a central role to play in negotiating a political agreement with the Kurds that could be also acceptable to Turkey and its proxy Syrian National Army (SNA).^{xiv}

Beyond this, the fall of the Assad regime may further raise tensions between the U.S. two main regional allies – Turkey and Israel – which are already at loggerheads over the Israeli war in Gaza.

HTS and the Future

A central factor that will determine the implications of Assad's fall for all parties concerned is likely to be the future trajectory of HTS. Will HTS stabilise Syria with a moderate approach that includes the country's different constituencies or will it embrace its al-Qaeda roots? Will it go to war with Syria's religious and ethnic minorities and secular Muslims or accept to engage in a long and difficult process of reconciliation? At this stage, it is impossible to answer these questions.

As it looks to the future, HTS will need to manage the competing interests of regional powers which have used Syria as their playground over the past ten years. Turkey, Russia, Iran, Israel, the United States, and others have interests in Syria that they want to preserve. For HTS, there will be, however, a necessity to rebuild a ruined country and re-establish Syria's sovereignty if it wants to keep the country together in its current borders.

Turkey may be intent on making HTS into a client and exercise widespread tutelage over the government of Syria. Although HTS is interested in Ankara's backing, it certainly does not want to become its proxy. Likewise, it does not want to Turkey to gain territories in Syria either by direct annexation or through proxy groups.

Russia wants to keep its military bases. HTS may negotiate with Moscow to keep it involved in Syrian affairs as a counter-weight to other regional powers and, potentially, as guarantor of the security of the pro-Assad Alawites groups on the Syria coast .

The United States' influence in Syria has decreased but Washington, unlike all the regional powers, is capable to overnight switch to a more forceful policy and dramatically increase its commitment. It is the only country that is today able to do so. In this context, the fact that U.S. foreign policy seems to have lost interest in Syria does not mean that this course could not be reversed. Likewise, the U.S. is for now still committed to its alliance with the Kurds that forces it to remain to a certain extent involved in Syria.

Iran, having suffered a major defeat, needs to be assuaged by HTS as it will remain a large and powerful neighbour with strong relays inside Syria. At the very least, Tehran is interested in not seeing too widespread purges of its loyalists in the army and the preservation of Syria Shia-affiliated Alawite groups.

Ultimately, HTS will also need to deal with Israel, reigning its territorial ambitions in the Golan and stopping its incursions into the Syrian air space.

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