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The fall of the house of Assad

The Middle East is once again in a state of dramatic flux that calls for everybody, winners and losers alike, to recalibrate their policies

The swift collapse, after 54 years, of Syria's al-Assad dynasty has just transformed the Middle East's geopolitical landscape. The lightning offensive by the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) militia took all of Syria's neighbours – and everyone else – by surprise. The news that President Bashar al-Assad had fled to Russia confirms the one binding truth about wars: unintended consequences can extend far beyond the theatre of battle.

The 7 October 2023, attack that Hamas carried out against Israeli civilian communities bordering Gaza triggered earthquakes across the Middle East. Israel's ruthless offensive to destroy Hamas in Gaza, and in Lebanon against Hezbollah, practically obliterated Iran's 'axis of resistance', while the United States and the United Kingdom pummelled the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen in response to Houthi attacks on international shipping.

Syria's civil war began in 2011 when the Assad regime crushed peaceful 'Arab Spring' protests. But the fighting largely subsided after 2015, when Russia's intervention, together with assistance from Iran and Hezbollah, turned the war in Assad's favour. Today, with Iran's proxies destroyed and Russia's war-fighting capabilities drained by its Ukraine quagmire, the rebels saw their chance. With Turkish assistance, and apparently Qatar's as well, the rebels easily overran the regime's surprisingly thin defences, and Assad's army capitulated without a battle. After Assad's Iranian and Russian patrons hastily evacuated their forces and left him to his fate, a regime built on torture and mass slaughter no longer inspired fear.

Many actors and many interest

The end of Iran's alliance with Syria, its main stronghold in the Arab world, will reshape the regional balance of power. As Mohammad Ali

Abtahi, a former Iranian vice president, put it two days before Assad fled, the Syrian government's fall 'would be one of the most significant events in the history of the Middle East. … Resistance in the region would be left without support. Israel would become the dominant force.' The name Hayat Tahrir al-Sham stands for the liberation of the Levant, which in the early Caliphate's political lexicon comprises Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. But Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, the HTS leader, has tried to project an image of a new kind of Islamist. He seems to have drawn the necessary lessons from the failures of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) and now sees himself as a pragmatist who aspires only to bring about the 'liberation of Syria from its oppressive regime.'

A sign of this new pragmatism is Jolani's instructions to his men to allow Syria's prime minister, Mohammad Ghazi al-Jalali, to continue to run public institutions until they are formally handed over. ISIS would have carried out mass executions of soldiers and officials. Still, al-Jolani leads a hard-line Islamist organisation. Those who expect that Turkey may temper HTS's extremism assume that Jolani would be an obedient soldier of Turkey. In any case, al-Jolani faces powerful political constraints. He must reckon with myriad rival militias that united just to topple Assad, and also with the Kurdish forces who rushed to take control of more parts of eastern Syria, while under attack from Turkish forces in the north. To Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the ambitions of Syria's Kurds threaten to spur nationalist subversion within Turkey's own Kurdish communities. In 2019, Erdoğan sent his army to establish a 30-kilometer-wide 'security zone' in northern Syria and push Kurdish fighters away from the Turkish border, an area where the Kurds had seized the opportunity of the civil war to consolidate an autonomous enclave.

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Jolani now must work hard to find a compromise between the Kurds' desire to maintain their autonomy and Turkey's ambitions to keep them away from the border area. Will Erdoğan tolerate Kurdish territorial gains that he sees as a threat to Turkey's national security? Will Jolani, who aspires to nationwide support, allow Turkey to wage war against the Kurds while he tries to form a governing coalition with them and uphold Syria's territorial sovereignty?

Notwithstanding his chronic conflict with Syria's Kurds, Erdoğan views Assad's fall as a grand achievement. He was ecstatic in following the rebel forces' advance. 'Idlib, Hama, Homs, and the target, of course, is

Damascus. … Our wish is that this march in Syria continues without incident', he said after last Friday's prayers in Istanbul. For years, Erdoğan and his Qatari allies have been supporting Islamist groups throughout the Middle East. He saw himself in competition with the Iranians on what model of Islamic democracy should prevail in Muslim lands: the Shia fundamentalist brand or Turkey's more moderate form. Now he believes he has won the opportunity to shape such a model close to home.

Although Syria's rebels have much to thank Israel for in creating the conditions for their success, Israel harbours no illusions about its new neighbours. Al-Jolani was born in Syria's Golan Heights (hence the name Jolani), which Israel captured in the 1967 war, and whose annexation and sovereignty was recognised by US President Donald Trump in 2019.

Key US allies in the region are similarly worried. They, too, would have liked to see Assad remain in power, fearing that an Islamist-controlled Syria could become a haven for terrorism.

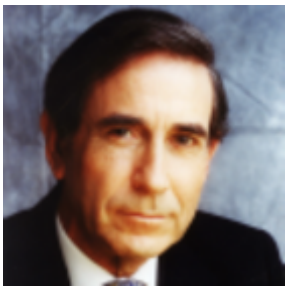
With the rebel march on Damascus, Israel lost no time in deploying combat units along the Syrian border. Israel is concerned about potential spill overs of armed groups into the Golan Heights and attempts to attack Druze villages on the Syrian side of the border, whose residents have relatives in villages on the Israeli side. With the memory of 7 October still raw everywhere in Israel, there is no complacency about weapons stockpiles in the hands of Islamists on the border.

But Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's hubris should not be underestimated. If the Syrian tyranny collapsed, why not try to topple Iran's as well? Already, Netanyahu could not resist the temptation of going beyond mere defensive measures: arguing that the 1974 agreement that regulated the separation of forces between Israel and Syria had collapsed, he ordered Israeli troops to seize control of the Syrian part of Mount Hermon, as well as the buffer zone in Syria's sovereign territory and the dominant positions adjacent to it.

Key US allies in the region are similarly worried. They, too, would have liked to see Assad remain in power, fearing that an Islamist-controlled Syria could become a haven for terrorism. In their view, Assad was a known quantity — and better than an Islamist rebel-led government, however moderate it claims to be.

But now Assad is gone. The Middle East is again in a state of dramatic flux that calls for everybody, winners and losers alike, to recalibrate their policies.

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