FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 22.04.2025 | Ruslan Suleymanov

The silent remnant

As Assad's regime collapsed like a house of cards, Russia's narrative changed. Its interests didn't

Russia has been waging what it portrays as an anti-terror campaign in Syria for around 10 years. Its own military operations in the Arab Republic began in 2015 and cost the Kremlin an estimated $2.5 million a day. Journalists have found that at least 534 Russian soldiers have lost their lives as a result. The large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, signalled a turning point also for Russia's policy on Syria. Since then, Moscow has been gradually reducing its military presence in the region.

Despite this withdrawal, at first, the situation seemed to stabilise, enabling dictator Bashar al-Assad to cling on to power. He still controlled broad swathes of the country, and in May 2023, he was readmitted to the Arab League after being frozen out for 12 years.

During this period, the Kremlin increasingly shifted its focus from military influence towards political mediation. Moscow called on Assad repeatedly to instigate talks with the armed Syrian opposition and to reach an agreement with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Contrary to the widespread assumption that Assad was Putin's puppet, however, he set his own priorities. For example, he made the complete withdrawal of Turkish troops from Syrian national territory a condition for dialogue with Ankara. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov later criticised this approach: 'despite our urgent recommendations and active support, the government was not in a position to get a genuine political process underway.'

Assad's overconfidence ultimately brought him down, however. At the end of 2024, out of the blue, his regime collapsed like a house of cards, largely without meaningful resistance from Syria's armed forces. Putin was by then fully occupied with Ukraine and unable to bail out his fellow dictator this time, in contrast to 10 years prior. In the end, Russia did grant Assad asylum, but Moscow no longer proclaimed his legitimacy. It was as recent as 2021 that the Kremlin congratulated him on his disputed election victory with 95 per cent of the votes. Assad's fall thus contrasts

sharply with the flight of the former pro-Russian president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovych, in 2014, whose legitimacy Russia continued to insist on after he was toppled.

New potential

The Kremlin accepted the seizure of power by the terrorist militia HTS (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham), which is banned in Russia, largely without comment. It was only in 2015 that Moscow was still actively pushing for the HTS to be added to the United Nations terrorist list. At that time, the destruction of the group and allied militias was one of the top priorities of Russia's Syria policy. Today, by contrast, the Russian authorities largely refrain from open criticism. In state media, the term 'terrorists' has been substituted almost imperceptibly by the neutral formulation 'armed opposition'.

Such cynical pragmatism is dictated by Russia's need to maintain two military bases in Syria under the new government: the naval base at Tartus and the airbase near Latakia. Both facilities are of strategic importance to Moscow. Their location on the Mediterranean, in close proximity to several NATO countries, makes them geopolitically invaluable. They also serve as logistical hubs for the transfer of troops and weapons to Africa, which is becoming increasingly important to Russia in terms of security and economic policy.

In these circumstances, it is lucky for Moscow that the new Syrian leadership – to the surprise of many Western observers – is interested in cultivating better relations with Russia. During their advance in 2024, HTS fighters deliberately avoided Russian military bases in Syria, even though militarily they could have taken them. By contrast, when they moved into Damascus on 8 December, while the rebels attacked the Iranian embassy – the second long-standing ally of the overthrown regime – the Russian embassy was left unscathed. As early as the end of January, a Russian delegation led by Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov made a first visit to Syria post-Assad.

It is instructive how Russia comported itself during the recent escalation in western Syria, heartland of the Alawite religious minority, of which Assad is a member.

It became evident that Moscow and the new rulers in Damascus have common interests, even though initially no concrete outcomes were discernible. A mere two weeks later, Putin called HTS leader and self-appointed President of Syria Ahmed al-Sharaa. The Syrian leader talked of 'strong strategic ties' between Moscow and Damascus in the wake of this conversation, but he needs Russia primarily for geopolitical

reasons. In his view, the presence of Russian troops in the west of his Arab Republic counterbalances the Turkish units in the north, the US military in the east and the Israeli forces in the south of Syria. A further motive here is HTS' desire to be removed from the UN Security Council's list of terrorist organisations. Russia, of course, has a veto and could thus play a key role. According to some observers, it is possible that the militia might change its name or restructure to this end.

For the time being, Moscow will remain in cautious dialogue with the new Syrian government and see what happens. Only time will tell how stable its power base really is. It is instructive how Russia comported itself during the recent escalation in western Syria, the heartland of the Alawite religious minority, of which Assad is a member. The Kremlin stressed its neutrality and confined itself to expressions of 'concern'. By contrast, institutions of the European Union, for example, were much more forthright in apportioning blame. In their view, 'pro-Assad elements' had attacked the forces of the transitional government, resulting in hundreds of civilian deaths.

Assad himself remains a bone of contention. According to press leaks, the new Syrian government is demanding that Moscow hand him over, together with the $2 billion in assets he fled with. It is highly unlikely, however, that Moscow will accede to these demands. It may grant Damascus food aid or modest technical military assistance, tied down as it is in Ukraine. It may also well be that Putin finds a certain satisfaction in the fact that he continues to hold Assad's fate in his hands, having supported him both politically and militarily for so many years.



Ruslan Suleymanov
Cairo

Ruslan Suleymanov is a Russian orientalist and journalist. He was the

senior Middle East correspondent of the TASS news agency in Cairo until February 2022. He resigned from this post in protest against the Russian invasion of Ukraine.