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# Israel's Syrian Revolution

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## Authors

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On November 27, attacks launched by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Organization against the Assad regime in Syria led to unprecedented developments in the 13-year Syrian civil war. Within a very short time, the rebels captured Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city, and then seized Hama before advancing toward Homs, the country's third-largest city. After capturing Homs, located on the M5 Highway, they took Syria's capital Damascus, without encountering any resistance.

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## Unforeseen Outcomes for the U.S. and Other Actors

What factors played a decisive role in HTS seizing almost all of Syria, except the Kurdish region, in less than two weeks? How did an organization confined to the Idlib region for years suddenly take control of Syria's destiny? What were the key factors in this latest "revolution" in Syria? What internal and external dynamics granted HTS this victory?

Clearly, even the U.S. did not anticipate that the regime would collapse within a matter of days. Just a few weeks earlier, the Biden administration had initiated talks with Assad, through the United Arab Emirates, aimed at lifting U.S. sanctions on Syria. In a column published on December 3, *Washington Post* writer David Ignatius noted that the Biden administration and its Arab allies were considering a deal with Syria, under the condition that it cuts off the flow of arms and ammunition from Iran to Hezbollah. In fact, even after HTS captured Aleppo, the U.S. did not expect Damascus to fall. While HTS was advancing from Aleppo toward Hama, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stated to CNN: "We're not shedding tears because the Assad government, supported by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, is facing certain pressures."

But wow did the Assad regime fall apart so suddenly? How is it that the Assad regime, which had a chance to reach an agreement with both the U.S. and Arab countries, collapsed? Back in 2015, Assad was on the brink of downfall, but Russian intervention and intense bombardments saved him, extending the regime's life by almost another decade. Could Assad not have seized a similar opportunity by reaching an agreement with the U.S.? Moreover, such a move could have paved the way for Syria to reconcile with other Arab countries and restore normal relations. Undoubtedly, if a settlement had been reached, a completely new era could have begun for the Assad regime. Leaving aside the U.S. and Arab countries, even Turkey was seeking ways to reach an agreement with Syria just a couple of months ago.

## The "Invisible Hand" of the Syrian Revolution: Israel

Several factors played a decisive role in the fall of the Syrian regime. The first and most critical was the heavy blow dealt by Israel to Hezbollah. **Hezbollah had been the closest ally and supporter of the Syrian regime during the civil war, both militarily and logistically.** For years, Hezbollah was the key force keeping the Syrian army standing, which had been in a state of moral and psychological collapse. Throughout the civil war, Hezbollah was not only a supporter and reserve force for the Syrian army but practically its backbone.

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Israel did not merely neutralize Hezbollah in the Syrian conflict; it also incapacitated Iran, which had been sustaining Syria both militarily and financially, with the assistance of its ally, the United States. Israel, which had been conducting air operations against Iran's military presence in Syria for years, recently shut down all air and land supply routes providing logistical support from Iran to Syria and Hezbollah. The blows Israel dealt to Iran and Hezbollah were so severe that both forces, which had shaped the outcome of the Syrian war for years, were suddenly rendered ineffective.

In addition to the roles of Iran and Hezbollah, the third key actor in the Syrian civil war since 2015 had been Russia. However, Russia's recent focus on the war in Ukraine, requiring it to divert all its attention and resources, and its inability to support Syria through air operations as it once did, became the second major factor leading to Assad's downfall.

## Israel's Role in Crushing Long-Standing Dreams

Israel shattered Iran's 40-45-year-old dreams of reaching the Mediterranean through Syria and Lebanon and implementing its Neo-Persian policies step by step. **In recent years, Iran had started to become a significant actor in the Mediterranean region via Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. However, with its latest moves, Israel managed to push Iran back to the Iraqi border for now.**

Israel didn't just destroy Iran's ambitions; it also crushed Russia's centuries-old dream of accessing the Mediterranean.

The third factor that led to the fall of the Assad regime was the Syrian army, which had become demoralized and war-weary, losing the will to fight. This army, sustained by support from Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia, collapsed like a lifeless skeleton when deprived of external assistance.

## External Dynamics Have Shaped the Syrian War

From the very beginning, external dynamics played a decisive role in the Syrian war. The transformation of a few civilian protests into a nationwide conflict causing massive human losses was not due to internal factors but external interventions. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reports that Israeli airstrikes in 2024 claimed the lives of 416 Syrian soldiers. Even after the fall of the Assad regime, Israel continued its airstrikes in Syria. Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar argued that these recent airstrikes were aimed at preventing chemical weapons from falling into the hands of extremists (BBC Türkçe, December 9, 2024).

Most recently, Israel destroyed Syria's navy and naval facilities, and despite warnings from the United Nations, it continues bombing strategic locations in Syria. UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen urged, "We continue to witness Israeli operations and bombings on Syrian territory. This must stop" (The Washington Post, December 10, 2024). Israel's intense targeting of Syria's military and logistical positions stems from its awareness that the jihadist structures now in control of Syria will eventually turn their focus toward Israel. Without the backing of Iran, Russia, or Hezbollah, Assad's regime would not have posed a threat to Israel. However, all jihadist organizations in the Islamic world consider Israel their primary enemy. It seems even Israel did not anticipate the fall of the Assad regime.

## Hamas's October 7 Attacks Brought the End of Assad

Israel continues its ground and air operations in Syria without regard for the UN or other international actors. Following the fall of Damascus and Assad's flight to Russia, Israel claimed that the 1974 disengagement agreement with Syria had collapsed and established a buffer zone around the Golan Heights. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu stated, "We will not allow any enemy forces to settle along our border," emphasizing that no threats from Syria toward Israel would be tolerated.

The Golan Heights, located 60 km from Damascus, were occupied by Israel during the Six-Day War in 1967. Later, Israel unilaterally annexed the territory, with the U.S. recognizing this annexation in 2019. Given that the population around the Golan Heights is predominantly Druze, any future threats to the Druze population might lead Israel to expand this buffer zone even further. From the elevated positions of the Golan Heights, Israel can easily monitor Damascus, just 60 km away.

Assad's downfall demonstrated how interconnected Middle Eastern developments are. While the 13-year Syrian war resulted in approximately 430,000 deaths and millions displaced, it failed to dethrone Assad. However, the war Hamas initiated against Israel on October 7, which expanded to include Lebanon, Syria, and even Iran, ultimately led to the collapse of the Assad regime.

**In summary, Assad's regime did not fall due to internal factors. The downfall of the 53-year Assad dynasty came about because Israel neutralized the external forces sustaining Syria.**