
Post-Assad Syria: What the Fall of the Regime Means for the World

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Summary : Less than a month ago, Assad, in the Arab League, was confidently advising the leaders of Islamic countries on what to do. This situation seems to confirm the well-known saying, "In totalitarian regimes, everything seems normal until 15 minutes before they collapse." Indeed, it was just 15 minutes before Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its allies captured Aleppo on November 27, followed by the rapid fall of other cities, like a line of falling dominoes.

In recent days, I had planned to write about the domino effect of the fall of Aleppo and the need for the world to prepare for the post-Assad era. However, before I could gather the necessary interviews and information, Shaam fell, and Assad was forced to leave office, making it impossible to finish my article. The pace of events in Syria has not only been sudden for my writing but also marks one of the most significant political and military oversights in today's world.

Less than a month ago, Assad, in the Arab League, was confidently advising the leaders of Islamic countries on what to do. This situation seems to confirm the well-known saying, "In totalitarian regimes, everything seems normal until 15 minutes before they collapse." Indeed, it was just 15 minutes before Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its allies captured Aleppo on November 27, followed by the rapid fall of other cities, like a line of falling dominoes.

Until yesterday, Assad's international supporters and adversaries, from Iran to Russia and the United States, had been calling for dialogue between the government and the opposition. This may suggest that they did not want Assad to be forced from power, though the initiation of dialogue would have ultimately meant his departure—albeit through an agreed-upon and controlled process.

What does the fall of Assad by force mean for states?

For Russia, this is a direct threat to its interests, particularly its military bases on the Syrian coast in Latakia and Tartus. This may explain Russia's hesitation to fully support Assad, as it sought to maintain some space for potential negotiations with Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in the future. The situation in Syria is likely to serve as a precedent for Ukraine and some European countries, to challenge Russia's nerve elsewhere, such as in Africa or the republics of the former Soviet Union.

For Israel and the United States, the news is both positive and negative. The fall of Assad increases the likelihood of a new, potentially Islamic-radical state emerging as Israel's neighbor—one that may not align with Washington and Tel Aviv's interests and approval. However, with Assad's departure, it is unlikely that Hamas and Hezbollah will get rearmed and reorganized at least in the short term.

Assad's fall marks the third significant political and military setback for Iran in the past year, following the conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon. With Assad gone, the Iran-Iraq land corridor to Syria—and from there to Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea—will either be blocked or severely restricted, disrupting a key supply route that the "Front Resistance" has been working on for years. Earlier this year, the news of a US-Iraq withdrawal agreement, set to be completed by 2026, had raised hopes in Iran for maintaining this corridor, which stretches from three points on the Iraqi-Syrian border. This geographical connection has been crucial to Iran's military strategy for sustaining its proxy groups, which serve as tools for balancing regional power and influence.

Another point to consider is that, from the ideological perspective of some Shiite politicians, the fall of Assad may, through the lens of Islamic eschatology, be linked to several prophesied battles along the Euphrates River. These battles are often viewed as part of a larger fitnah (tribulation) that precedes the coming of Imam Mahdi. Given this, Iran's involvement in Syria is likely to persist even after Assad's departure. Most likely, Iran will have little choice but to engage with the Kurds, however, it must also wait in line to see where Turkey's and the United States' policies with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) will lead.

The Turkish president had hoped that the opposition's advance into Syria would continue without significant disruption. However, the complete overthrow of Assad was an outcome that Turkey liked, and it may have been used as a tool of pressure, especially a day after, Iran called on Assad to begin dialogue with the opposition. Assad's forced removal could create the conditions for the autonomous administration in eastern Syria to become more stable, though this may not align with Turkey's current objectives. Neither the United States, Israel, nor Russia may want to see a strong Islamic state

emerge in Syria, so administrative division appears to be the most viable option for them. For instance, an administration shared by Alawites, Sunnis, and Kurds could serve the interests of all parties involved.

In the next phase, there is a real possibility of a conflict between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and the Syrian National Army over control of territory and power. This could trigger another wave of migration to Turkey, which is the last thing Ankara wants at this moment.

On the other hand, the excessive strengthening of HTS could pose future challenges for Turkey. An Iraqi source, under the condition of keeping his name anonymous, told me that while we had known for a month that something significant was about to happen, we were still uncertain whether Turkey was behind it all. After Assad's fall, HTS may become so powerful that Turkey could lose control of the situation.

Furthermore, the current situation in Syria, which strengthens HTS, also signals an increase in Turkey's regional influence in Syria and Iraq, especially with Trump's return to power. This may prompt Iran, Russia, and even Iraq to support the SDF to counterbalance Turkey. As a result, Assad's fall might force Turkey to consider the option of dialogue with the SDF, especially now that talks with Abdullah Ocalan are becoming a hot topic within Turkey.

First, the advances of the three main opposition groups to Assad (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Jaysh al-Izza, and Ahrar al-Sham) cannot be explained by military factors alone, though these are important. The deepening resentment stemming from Assad's post-2011 crackdown on demonstrators, followed by his alliance with Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia against the predominantly Sunni opposition, created the latent energy that fueled such an explosion. Regardless of the organizations involved or whether external interference played a role, the core issue lies in the marginalization of Syrian society, especially in Sunni areas. This situation could also reignite the desire among Iraqi Sunnis to play a larger role in Iraqi politics. Although talk of Sunni or Shiite tribes in Iraq has quieted in recent years, the issue of identity has deep historical roots and is likely to resurface if an inclusive democratic system fails to unify the population.

Non-governmental organizations are learning from each other, and HTS's military evolution may become a new model for Sunni armed groups across the Middle East, which also has ties to Iraq; first of all, HTS has wrested control of the monopoly of drone usage from Shiite armed groups. After Shiite groups in the Middle East, supported and trained by state actors, became the primary users of drones and missiles, HTS has emerged as a significant Sunni group with its own drone capabilities in Syria. Whether HTS developed these capabilities independently or with external assistance is less important than the fact that it now possesses the ability to use drones effectively. This has proved to be a game-changer, especially in Syria, with drones being used to target military bases and even high-profile individuals.

Apart from the military lapses that began with the November 27 attack, HTS has demonstrated a clear intent to distinguish itself from other jihadist groups in terms of military tactics and strategy. An expert on Syrian armed groups told me that since 2020, HTS has translated over 100 books on warfare and combat strategies, enhanced its military knowledge, and established a military academy.

Beyond its ground tactics, HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani's messages about potentially disbanding HTS in the future, as well as his attempts to reach out to Iran and Iraq, signaling a desire for peaceful relations, reflect a rejection of the global jihadist strategy. Instead, he aims to position HTS as a jihadist group confined to the borders of Syria. The global jihadist policies of ISIS and al-Qaeda have faced significant resistance worldwide, so if Jolani's strategy succeeds, other groups may follow suit.

However, the most immediate threat to Iraq is the future of the al-Hol camp, Roj, and SDF prisons, which house 350-400 ISIL fighters in the Syrian Desert. If the Syrian civil war intensifies or a conflict erupts in SDF-controlled areas, the future of these camps and prisons will pose a serious threat to Iraq. Additionally, Iraq may worry about the impact of Turkey's

regional growing influence on the Kurdistan Region, particularly if Turkey advances militarily under the pretext of combating the PKK.