

SWP Comment

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The Fall of the Assad Regime: Regional and International Power Shifts

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On 8 December 2024, the Assad regime in Syria was overthrown by a rebel alliance led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The collapse of the family dictatorship was made possible by shifts in regional and international power dynamics. Key factors included Turkish support for the rebels, the weakening of Iran and Hezbollah owing to Israeli military strikes and Russia's changing priorities in the context of its war against Ukraine. At the same time, the fall of the Assad regime has led to another shift in power relations in the region. The interests, priorities and actions of regional and international actors will define the room for manoeuvre of the new rulers in Damascus. Turkey and Israel have occupied territories in the north and southwest of the country, respectively. The Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf are expected to exercise influence, too, as they will play a crucial role in the reconstruction of Syria. And the United States still maintains a military presence in Syria, although its future involvement in the country is uncertain.

A forthcoming SWP Comment on the fall of the Assad regime will analyse the effects of the regional and international power shifts on the political transition in Syria.

Following its military intervention in the Syrian civil war in 2015, Russia established the so-called Astana Format some two years later. Within this framework, it cooperated with Turkey and Iran to freeze the conflicts in Syria, curb the violence and map out spheres of influence. As a result, the balance of power in the region shifted, as did the priorities of the regional and international actors in Syria. Notably, the supporters of the Syrian opposition ceased to focus on toppling the regime and instead prioritised their own national, economic and security interests. The United States concentrated on fighting the so-called Islamic State (IS). Tur-

key sought to prevent the establishment of a contiguous territory under the control of the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) along its southern border and called for the return of Syrian refugees. And Israel, which had remained neutral in Syria's internal power struggle, bombed positions and convoys of Iranian and Iranian-aligned militias to prevent hostile bases from being established in the border region, the construction of arms factories and the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah.

In May 2023, Syria was readmitted to the Arab League, its membership of the regional organisation having been suspended in



2011. That development was thanks mainly to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Syria's Arab neighbours and took place against the backdrop of the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The role of external actors in the overthrow of the regime

The regional balance of power shifted once again following the 7 October 2023 attacks carried out by Hamas and other armed Palestinian groups against Israel and Israel's response to them. By October 2024, the "axis of resistance" led by Tehran had been severely weakened by Israeli military operations. This was true, above all, for Iran itself as well as for the Lebanese Hezbollah, which, alongside Russia, had been the main supporters of the Assad regime. For its part, the Russian military was focused on the war in Ukraine. These changing priorities and strategic calculations of the key regional and international actors in Syria paved the way for the rebels to seize power in December 2024.

Turkey

According to the Turkish government, the fall of Bashar al-Assad was due to his inability and unwillingness to use the frozen conflict situation that had prevailed in Syria since the 2017 Astana agreements to stabilise and reconstruct his country. Portraying the rebel offensive led by HTS as an operation planned and executed by Syrians, Ankara denied direct Turkish involvement. However, pro-government media suggested that Turkey's military and intelligence services had not only closely monitored the offensive but had also directly supported the Syrian National Army (SNA) and Arab tribes. Just two months before the demise of the Assad regime, in October 2024, the Turkish military reinforced its presence and equipment in northern Syria, particularly in Idlib and around Aleppo, where it had maintained a presence since 2017.

Of the groups involved in the rebel offensive, HTS and the SNA (which comprises

elements from the Free Syrian Army and the Islamic Front) have particularly close ties with Turkey. Since 2015 – 16, Ankara has struck various agreements with these armed groups and continued to empower them as its priorities in Syria shifted. Whereas earlier Turkey had focused on Assad's overthrow, its primary goal became preventing the establishment of Kurdish autonomy under the leadership of the PYD/YPG (the Syrian affiliate of the PKK, which is designated as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the EU and the US) and stemming new waves of refugees into Turkey. The SNA, which is entirely dependent on Ankara militarily, financially and logistically, operates in the northern Syrian territories that, one by one, were occupied by Turkey between 2016 and 2019 and have since been largely integrated into the Turkish economy and administration. Ankara's relationship with HTS is more one of patronage. While Turkey classifies HTS as a terrorist organisation, it assumed the role of protective power in Idlib under the terms of the 2018 Sochi agreement with Russia. Turkey's military intervention in 2020 prevented the Assad regime from retaking Idlib and strengthened Ankara's relationship with HTS.

The rebel offensive of 2024 would not have been possible without a green light from Turkey. However, Turkish President Erdoğan later expressed unease over the pace of the rebel advance, which suggests that Ankara had expected a limited operation only. It is likely that the objective of backing the rebel offensive was to pressure Assad to take part in talks on normalising Turkish-Syrian relations and facilitating the return of Syrian refugees.

Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf

Of the Gulf Arab states, it was, above all, Qatar that contributed to the overthrow of the Assad regime as Turkey's junior partner. At the turn of the year 2011 – 12, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE had all supported rebels in Syria. But disagreements soon arose, mainly over Qatar (and Turkey) supporting

Islamists, Salafists and Jihadists. Between 2015 and 2017, Saudi Arabia and the UAE tended to back ideologically indifferent rebels in the south of the country while leaving the north to Qatar and Turkey. When the uprising in southern Syria collapsed in 2017–18, Saudi Arabia was no longer a player, while the UAE had withdrawn its support even earlier.

For a long time, the Salafist rebel group Ahrar al-Sham was Qatar's most important client in Syria. At the same time, it is likely that Doha was supporting the jihadist Nusra Front, which originated from al-Qaeda. Qatari policy enjoyed a major success when Nusra leader Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani broke away from al-Qaeda in 2016, adopted a Syrian national Islamist stance and allied himself with similarly minded groups. This made it much easier for Turkey and Qatar to support HTS, which Jawlani and his followers established in 2017.

The full extent of Qatari support for HTS between 2017 and 2024 remains unknown. The Gulf emirate likely played no military role. However, it can be assumed that the "Salvation Government" established by HTS in Idlib province in November 2017 and perhaps HTS itself received financial aid from Qatar. Additionally, the influential Qatari television network Al Jazeera has unequivocally sided with HTS, often equating it with the broader Syrian opposition.

Iran

From the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, Iran played a key role in ensuring the survival of the Assad regime. It intervened in the civil war on the side of Assad and spent more than a decade building an extensive military infrastructure in Syria, including bases in strategic locations, weapons depots and factories supplying Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as a network of local and foreign militias. At the same time, Iran gained political influence within Syria's military and security apparatus. On the diplomatic front, the Islamic Republic participated in the Astana Format, alongside Russia and Turkey.

Despite such intensive involvement, Iran was unable to prevent the collapse of the Syrian regime at the end of 2024. A key reason was that it had been gradually reducing its military presence in that country in the preceding years. On the one hand, this had to do with Assad's desire to reconcile with Arab states that were demanding a reduction in Iranian influence. On the other hand, it was linked to the intensified Israeli airstrikes on Iranian facilities and Iranian-aligned militias in Syria, which forced Tehran to pull out key personnel and send them home. By late 2024, the Islamic Republic had only a contingency force in Syria to protect its bases and interests. That is why it was unprepared for the rapid advance of the rebels. Another decisive factor was the Syrian army's lack of combat readiness, according to statements by Iranian commanders, who explained that Iran could not go into battle on behalf of Assad's demoralised and unmotivated troops.

More important, the "axis of resistance" led by Tehran was disintegrating after a year of intense military confrontations with Israel. Neither the Lebanese Hezbollah, weakened by a devastating war with Israel, nor Iraqi militias, which were wary of potential US and Israeli retaliatory strikes, showed willingness to intervene in Syria. Israel's attacks on Iranian supply routes, which targeted land crossings, air corridors, and convoys, further restricted Tehran's options, a fact even Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei acknowledged. At the same time, Tehran's ability to respond was also constrained by fears of direct escalation with Israel. An unprecedented Israeli military operation in late October 2024 had severely weakened Iran's air defences and raised concerns about a potential follow-up attack. Tehran responded by prioritising its own national security over regional influence and left Assad to his fate.

Russia

Similarly, Russia, which had intervened in Syria from September 2015 onwards to ensure Assad remained in power, was unable

to prevent the Syrian president's overthrow at the end of 2024. This was because of Moscow's reduced military posture in Syria owing to the war in Ukraine and its shifting political priorities.

Moscow's military presence in Syria had always been limited. Estimates suggest that in 2024, the Russian contingent numbered around 7,500 personnel and comprised mainly air force units, special forces and military police. The number of ground troops, which was low from the beginning, dwindled further following the redeployment of "Wagner" fighters to Ukraine from 2022 onwards and the dismantling of the mercenary group in 2023. Moreover, Russia was prioritising the war against Ukraine, which prevented it from bolstering its ground forces in Syria and left it reliant on pro-Iranian militias and the Syrian army. However, Russia's intervention model reached its limits when confronted with the 2024 rebel offensive. Assad's troops offered little resistance and/or rapidly collapsed, including the Fifth Corps of the Syrian army, which had received strong financial and military support from Moscow.

From that point onwards, Russia focused on damage control. The airstrikes on rebel positions, previously carried out by Moscow, were halted on 8 December. Assad and his family were persuaded to go into exile in Moscow – a move that the Kremlin hoped would preserve its image as a reliable protector of its authoritarian allies. At the same time, Putin was intent on removing Assad as a disruptive factor, since his continued rule would only have complicated Russia's efforts to reshape its Syria policy under the new geopolitical realities.

Regional and international consequences of the fall of Assad

The collapse of the Assad regime has led to further shifts in the balance of power in the region and beyond. While Russia and Iran, along with their allies, have been weakened, Turkey and Qatar see themselves in the ascendancy, as they are close partners

of Syria's new rulers. Israel, too, has been able to improve its strategic position in the region.

Russia

The fall of Assad has done more than just inflict reputational damage on Russia; it has also undermined one of the more important pillars – if not the most important pillar – of Russian policy towards the Middle East over the past decade. After largely withdrawing from the region following the Cold War, Moscow saw its influence diminish even further during the 2003 Iraq War and the "Arab Spring". However, following its military intervention in Syria in 2015, Russia reaffirmed its ambition to re-establish itself as a key actor in the region and thereby regain global recognition as a great power. In this vein, the Kremlin went on to expand its ties with such important regional powers as Turkey, Israel and the Gulf monarchies and thus avoided excessive dependence on Iran.

Russia's top and immediate priority right now is to retain its military bases in Syria, particularly the Tartus naval base and the Hmeimim military airfield, both of which are essential not only for operations in Syria but also for Russia's military posture in the broader region. Tartus remains Russia's only permanent naval base in the Mediterranean and provides access to the Red Sea. And because of the restrictions on Russian warships passing through the Bosphorus since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Tartus repair and supply facilities have been playing an even more crucial role. For its part, the Hmeimim airbase has served as a logistical hub for Russian military and mercenary operations in Libya and various other African countries. Moscow has already relocated part of its military equipment from Syria to airfields in eastern Libya, which is under the control of General Khalifa Haftar, the commander of the Libyan National Army. But even if Russia has successfully concluded a deal with the leadership of Sudan to establish a

naval base at the Red Sea, as was reported in mid-January 2025, and/or could potentially secure additional usage rights for ports and airfields in Libya or Algeria, the usage rights and infrastructure capacities of those facilities would be more limited than those in Syria.

Against this background, Moscow is seeking to reach a deal with the new Syrian leadership on the continued operation of its two military bases. Those sites were leased to Russia for 49 years under a contract signed in 2017. While Syria's new rulers have generally acknowledged Russia's global importance, they cancelled a leasing agreement with the Russian company Stroytransgaz for the civilian section of the port of Tartus in January. It remains unclear whether the closure of the Russian military base will follow or if the cancellation of the lease is merely the prelude to further negotiations in which Moscow may be allowed a reduced military presence in return for concessions in other policy areas.

The fact that Russia's presence in Syria has weakened both militarily and politically will impact its relations with other regional actors. For example, as Moscow does not have control over Syrian airspace, it loses significance for Israel. From 2015 onwards, Israel relied on military deconflicting with Russia to carry out strikes on Iranian positions and Iran-backed militias in Syria. This coordination has now ceased, which means it may be easier for Israel to adjust its Ukraine policy. At the same time, Russia's growing cooperation with Iran – especially in the military sphere – is expected to deepen. In January 2025, Tehran and Moscow signed a strategic partnership agreement.

Meanwhile, the fall of Assad will further shift the recalibration of Russian-Turkish relations to Moscow's disadvantage. Russia's influence has diminished not only in Syria but Turkey has also gained in influence in Russia's immediate neighbourhood and claimed a zone of interest in the South Caucasus, where Ankara has increased its influence in recent years. Moscow is likely to seek common ground with Turkey in the

energy sector and efforts to contain Western policies. Its goal would be to gain Ankara's support for Russia's inclusion in regional conflict-resolution frameworks, similar to the Astana Format.

Iran

The fall of the Assad regime is a significant setback for Iran's regional influence and strategic ambitions; and the Tehran-led "axis of resistance" is particularly hard hit by this development. Geographically, Syria was a central component of a "land corridor" that connected Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Mediterranean coast via Iraq. This corridor was crucial in facilitating arms transfers and logistical support to Hezbollah, whose military capabilities have been severely weakened by the recent war with Israel. The collapse of this land route will make it much more difficult for Iran to rearm Hezbollah and maintain its broader regional network of allied militias.

Under Assad's control, Syria also played a key role in Iran's geo-economic ambitions. Tehran aimed to position itself as a major player in China's "Belt and Road Initiative" and leverage Syria as part of a land route linking China to the Mediterranean. Losing Syria as a close partner undermines this vision. Additionally, Turkey's growing influence threatens Iran's geopolitical influence not only in the Levant but also in Iraq and the South Caucasus. Of particular concern to Tehran is Ankara's push for the construction of the so-called Zangezur Corridor, a transit route linking Turkey to Azerbaijan via Armenian territory. If built in accordance with Turkish and Azerbaijani plans, the corridor would bypass Iran and cut off that country's direct land access to Armenia; as a result, Iran would be economically isolated and its role in the region's trade and transit routes weakened.

The potential resurgence of jihadist groups in Syria, such as IS, could further negatively impact Iran's regional interests, as these actors pose a threat both to Tehran's allies in Iraq and to Iran itself. At the

same time, the Islamic Republic is alarmed by Israel's growing presence in Syria — not just its occupation of more Syrian territory but also its contacts with Syrian Kurdish groups, which could lead to strengthened cooperation. Within Iranian political circles, it is feared that a “David Corridor” could emerge, providing Israel with access to the Euphrates and allowing it to expand its influence. In such a case, Tehran would be further marginalised.

Turkey

With the fall of the Assad regime, Ankara believes it has significantly more room for manoeuvre in Syria. From 2020 onwards, Turkey was in a diplomatic and military stalemate; not least, that was true of its efforts to prevent Kurdish self-rule in north-eastern Syria and facilitate the return of Syrian refugees to their home country. To achieve those ends, Ankara pursued two strategies: normalising relations with Assad and launching a military operation in northern Syria aimed at pushing the Kurdish-dominated SDF out of key cities such as Tel Rifaat and Manbij. However, both strategies failed. No compromise was reached with Assad and normalisation efforts faced resistance from Syrian opposition groups. At the same time, Ankara was unable to initiate a large-scale military offensive in the north of Syria without a green light from the US and Russia. Meanwhile, the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria was able to further consolidate its governance structures.

For Turkey, Assad's fall represents a “now or never” moment to prevent the scenario of Kurdish autonomy dominated by the PYD/YPG. During the rebel offensive in November and December 2024, Turkish-backed SNA militias seized control of Tel Rifaat and Manbij; Ankara subsequently supported the SNA offensive with airstrikes with the aim of redrawing the front lines in northern Syria. Today, Turkey views Donald Trump's return to the White House as an opportunity to push Washington to abandon its support for the SDF, which the US

has backed in its fight against IS and continues to protect. Whether Turkey succeeds will depend largely on the policy decisions of the Trump II administration.

With HTS at the helm, the interim government in Damascus is now filled with actors whom Turkey sees as cooperative and friendly and with whom the Turkish leadership maintains close personal ties. This means Ankara should be able to exercise significant influence over Syria's future trajectory. At the same time and amid the recalibration of its foreign policy priorities, the weakening of Iran and the continued lack of a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Turkey is pursuing its rapprochement with Arab states. Thus, in its efforts to stabilise Syria, Ankara hopes to cooperate with regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan and Iraq, according to Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan.

Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf

The fall of the Assad regime has significantly altered the balance of power between the Gulf Arab states. Qatar's support for jihadist groups, such as the Syrian Nusra Front, was one of the reasons why Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt imposed a land, sea and air blockade on the emirate in 2017. Although the crisis was resolved in January 2021, there has been no fundamental change in Doha's policies, meaning that tensions between the Gulf Arab monarchies could reignite at any time.

Assad's downfall and HTS's takeover of power are major successes of Qatari policy. Since the “Arab Spring” in 2011, Doha has bet on Islamists of various orientations as the forces of the future, in the belief that forging alliances with them would increase its own regional influence.

By contrast, Saudi Arabia and the UAE positioned themselves as leaders of the counterrevolution, supporting the restoration of autocratic rule in Egypt and Tunisia while taking on Islamist movements militarily elsewhere. The UAE was particularly uncompromising: it even backed Assad from

2015 onwards to prevent further Islamist gains; and in 2018, it became the first Arab state to restore ties with Syria after they had been severed owing to the civil war. Abu Dhabi then sought to rehabilitate Assad within the Arab world. While the UAE may welcome the fact that Iran is weaker owing to the loss of Syria as a key ally, the fall of the Damascus regime remains a significant setback for Emirati policy.

Saudi Arabia's attitude towards the power shift in Syria is similarly ambivalent, although it views HTS's victory from the standpoint of greater pragmatism than does the UAE. While Riyadh supported reconciliation with Assad's Syria, it did not restore relations until 2023 – much later than the UAE – and kept more distance from Damascus. Like the Emirati leadership, Saudi Arabia worries about the broader regional impact of an Islamist takeover in Syria; however, it is less ideologically driven than Abu Dhabi in its fight against Islamist movements. At the same time, Riyadh welcomes the weakening of Iran and Hezbollah. Recently, there have been growing signs of Saudi Arabia's willingness to engage – pragmatically – with HTS-led Syria.

Israel

The fall of the Assad regime has further shifted the regional balance of power in Israel's favour, not least because Iranian troops and allied Afghan militias (such as the Fatemiyoun Brigade) have been pulled out of Syria. Before those developments, Israel had inflicted significant losses on its adversaries – including Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran – in the wake of the 7 October 2023 attacks.

Immediately after the fall of Assad, Israel declared the collapse of the 1974 Israeli-Syrian ceasefire agreement and launched the “Arrow of Bashan” operation. According to Defence Minister Israel Katz, Israel's objectives were to establish an observation post on Mount Hermon overlooking Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, a Hezbollah stronghold; create a new buffer zone and deterrence against the rebels in Damascus; and prevent

the weapons that belonged to the Assad regime falling into the rebels' hands. Despite their mild rhetoric, the new rulers in Damascus were deemed untrustworthy by Israel owing to their extremist past and ongoing ties to extremist groups.

Accordingly, the Israeli military took over control of the demilitarised zone established under the 1974 ceasefire agreement (and previously overseen by the UNDOF mission) and the peak of Mount Hermon. Both sites are on Syrian territory extending beyond the Golan Heights, which Israel occupied in 1967 and annexed in 1981. Israel also set up checkpoints outside the UN buffer zone. And it seized the opportunity to destroy most of the Assad regime's remaining military capabilities. The Israeli Air Force carried out more than 130 air-strikes across Syria – primarily, but not exclusively, in the western and southern regions of the country. Within 48 hours, according to an Israeli military spokesperson, 70–80 per cent of Syria's military capacity was wiped out, including the near total destruction of its air defence and radar systems. An obstacle to future Israeli air-strikes against Iran was thereby removed.

In mid-December 2024, the Netanyahu government announced plans to expand settlements in the Golan Heights and double the Israeli population there. This move is likely to stand in the way of a peaceful resolution with Syria, regardless of who holds power in Damascus.

United States

The balance of power in Syria and the broader region has also shifted in favour of the US: the Assad regime was an adversary and both Iran and its allied militias have been weakened. At the same time, US policy goals vis-à-vis Syria have not yet been fully achieved and remain problematic for Turkey: Washington continues its campaign against IS alongside the Kurdish-dominated SDF, while Turkey and the SNA are actively targeting the SDF. Meanwhile, Damascus is seeking to integrate SDF fighters into its new army, albeit as individuals, not as mem-



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bers of the SDF. Against this background, the US government has been working towards a peaceful settlement between HTS and the SDF, on the one hand, and between the SDF and Turkey, on the other.

A sustainable solution is also needed for the IS fighters and their relatives who are being held in prisons, detention centres and internment camps controlled by the SDF. When the Trump administration suspended all US foreign aid in January 2025, a temporary workaround was established to pay the guards at detention camps such as al-Hol and al-Roj. However, if such funding were to be halted permanently, there could be significant instability.

Right now, what course the Trump II administration is going to follow remains uncertain and US policy towards Syria could shift abruptly. Not least, this uncertainty extends to the presence of American troops on Syrian territory in the future and America's partnership with the SDF. Shortly after the fall of Assad, Trump himself called for the US to refrain from involvement in Syria's internal dynamics, while National Security Advisor Mike Waltz has supported withdrawing American forces from the country. By contrast, Secretary of State Marco Rubio argued in January 2025 for continued US engagement in Syria and ongoing support for the SDF. According to him, the priority is not only to pave the way for an "inclusive transition" but also to ensure that hostile actors do not exploit the transitional process in order to push their own agendas. Syria, he emphasised, must not become a "source of international terrorism".

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