



Landscape of Change: Syria and the Middle East after the Assad Regime's Fall

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A successful offensive by Syrian rebels in December this year led to the fall of one of the most brutal modern regimes. Most Syrians have welcomed the end of Bashar al-Assad's rule, although divisions within the opposition forces pose a risk to Syria's potential stability after 13 years of civil war. To reduce them, international assistance is needed to rebuild Syrian institutions and to help hold accountable those regime members responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Regime Collapse. After [taking Aleppo on 29 November](#), the armed group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) seized more cities on the road to Damascus (including Hama and Homs), taking advantage of the regime troops' weakening or lack of will to fight. These successes motivated previously inactive opposition armed units in southern Daraa, Suwaida, and Damascus to join the offensive, helping to surround the capital. After 12 days of fighting, the fall of the regime was declared after some government military officials agreed with the HTS to cede control of the capital to the group, wanting to avoid a clash with the rebels. On that day, Assad's key allies, Iran and Russia, issued a communiqué ending [military aid to the regime](#) and called for an agreement between it and opposition forces. Faced with a lack of foreign military support, Assad and his family fled to Moscow. The Syrian public responded enthusiastically, and some refugees from Lebanon, Jordan, and Türkiye returned to their homeland. Public legitimacy for the HTS government was also significantly bolstered by the opening of prisons where the regime held thousands of political prisoners. Documentation gathered after the takeover of the facilities revealed the scale of the crimes against humanity it committed. After initial calculations, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights stated that it is likely that most of the more than 100,000 people missing since the beginning of the war had been murdered or died in connection with the regime's actions.

The fight against the regime was accompanied by intensified clashes between the other two major opposition groups, the pro-Turkish Syrian National Army (SNA) and the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) led by Kurdish groups. The pro-Turkish forces seized, among others, Manbidj, one of the key cities in northern Syria, from the Kurds. The situation has been partially calmed by a ceasefire agreement negotiated with U.S. support that allows the SDF and civilians to leave Manbidj safely, but which was not being fully respected. Most refugees are seeking refuge in the Kurdish-controlled cities of Raqqa and Hasaka, where the humanitarian crisis is currently worsening. Destabilisation in Kurdish areas poses a serious threat to the security of detention centres there where the SDF has incarcerated [ISIS militants](#) and their families.

The Beginning of the Transition. Amid the fighting, the HTS communicated not only with Assad's military but also with members of the government of the day to establish a potential mechanism for taking power and securing control. On 10 December, Muhammad al-Bashir, the leader of the so-called Syrian Salvation Government (SSG; the civilian offshoot of the HTS) who has relatively moderate views, was appointed interim prime minister, having previously managed territories in Idlib. He is expected to lead the country's transition until March 2025 when a new government should emerge, although it has yet to be indicated by what route. In official communications, HTS stresses that it would represent all ethnic and religious

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groups in Syria. This, however, is unlikely given its current composition, which includes only SSG members. The new government has met with previous government representatives, stressing its willingness to cooperate and continue administrative procedures, as well as with SDF members. In turn, HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani met with minor rebel groups from the south to discuss further cooperation.

HTS is also focused on gaining international legitimacy. This is manifested, among other things, in cooperation with other countries in the search for their citizens missing in Syria (on 12 December, it was announced that U.S. citizen Travis Timmerman had been found), as well as the dismantling of [drug production centres](#) whose products went mainly to the Gulf States. These actions, along with open rhetoric on minorities, dialogue with other groups and the bloodless seizure of power, have helped to soften the narrative on HTS. There have been suggestions from UN representatives and U.S. authorities to revise the group's designation as a terrorist organisation. Damascus was also visited by Turkish intelligence chief İbrahim Kalın and the head of Qatar's Security Services, Khalfan bin Ali bin Khalfan Al-Batty Al-Kaabi. The 6 Arab states, Türkiye, and Italy have resumed the operation of their missions in Damascus, and Michael Ohnmacht, head of the EU delegation to Syria, met with the new authorities on 16 December.

Regional Context. Due to the involvement of many regional actors in Syria, some of them see the fall of the Assad regime as an opportunity to take advantage of more favourable conditions for themselves. Israel seeks to benefit militarily and politically from the changes in Syria. On 8 December, its army seized the demilitarised area on the Syrian side of [the Golan Heights, pledging to retain it in the coming months](#); in addition, it launched airstrikes against Syrian army targets to destroy its assets (including its navy, air force, chemical weapon depots), which hostile groups could have used. Israel has expressed a willingness to reach an agreement with the new authorities, but sees the dominant position of Islamist groups (including those declaring support for Hamas) as a potential threat. Hence, [the future restoration of contacts](#) and support for the opposition factions, such as the Druze and Kurds, is not excluded.

From Türkiye's perspective, Assad's fall is an opportunity to change the dynamic in its relations with Iran and [Russia](#), with which it has so far had to seek [compromises in Syria](#) due to conflicting interests between these countries and their threats to escalate. Türkiye is counting on the support it is providing HTS and its long history of cooperation to enable it to exert influence over the organisation's transformation of Syria. In this regard, Türkiye's key interest remains the

establishment of [a zone free of Kurdish groups](#) in the border territories ([as Türkiye considers them a threat to its stability](#)), which is facilitated by the ongoing fighting against the SDF.

The fall of Assad, preceded by the weakening of the Iran-linked Hezbollah [in its battles with Israel](#), has also weakened the position of rival Türkiye. The change of power in Syria will make it more difficult for Iranian-backed armed groups to control, among other things, the smuggling routes that are necessary for their operations in the region. At the same time, the rebel offensive has become an excuse for both Iran and Russia to end support for Assad, whose policies and intransigence have hindered cooperation and, according to these countries, the consolidation of control over Syria.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The rebel victory has undermined the effectiveness and sustainability of conflict solutions based solely on force and total ignorance of the public will. It has also shown [the lack of a stabilising nature of Russia's involvement](#) in the region, despite [the normalisation of relations with Assad by most Arab states \(except Qatar\)](#) and several European ones over the past years. During its EU presidency, Poland could focus on this message in its communications with the countries of the Global South, which have been strengthening relations with Russia in recent years.

Qatar and Türkiye can now act as intermediaries with the new Syrian authorities, which, in Qatar's case, is served by [its previous experience in negotiating with isolated organisations](#) like the Taliban and Hamas. Along with other Arab states, it can also pressure Israel to ensure that its operations against Iran and Hezbollah do not undermine the stabilisation process of the new Syrian authorities or their position. Türkiye, in turn, will try to use its position to limit the influence of U.S.-backed Kurdish forces in Syria and gain support for this approach from Western partners.

On the domestic level, the biggest challenge remains the conflicting interests of the opposition forces and the potential desire to take on the criminal activities expanded by Assad and the forces that support him. Therefore, for a successful political change in Syria, it will be necessary to hold senior members of the regime and the instigators of these activities accountable. The experience in Iraq indicates that in doing so, it is required to retain some of the lower-level positions and involve local civil society as much as possible in the process. The chances of this will be enhanced by establishing a dialogue with the HTS by the international community in pushing for the protection of minorities. This is because the group will claim control over the transition process and have a dominant role in power, and the victorious offensive increases its legitimacy in this regard.