



The Geo-Political Implications of New Syria and Future Pathways

By

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The unceremonious ouster of Syrian President Bashar al Assad marks the demise of the last Ba'athist regime in the Middle East. The end of the 54-year-long Assad dynasty can herald a new era in the fragile body politic of Syria.

The relatively well-organized Hayat Tahrir al Sham rebel force liquidated the resistance power of government forces within just a few days. The regime change, and the resultant uncertainty in Syria, invite regional powers to intervene for political and strategic spoils. Israel also conducted [numerous air strikes](#) to dismantle Syrian military and strategic capabilities.

The Assad regime posed a significant challenge for the US, which led the [US to support rebel factions](#). The loss of the regime is a [major setback](#) to Iran's [axis of resistance](#) and also puts [Russian strategic interests in jeopardy](#). In the aftermath of the current development either the model of Libya or Iraq can be the possible trajectories for Syria.

Middle Eastern Ba'athist regimes emerged, in the second half of the century, as Arab nationalist leaders, championed the ideologies of Pan-Arabism, socialism, secularism, anti-imperialism, and anti-Zionism. Despite their lofty ideals, these regimes, exemplified by Assad's rule in Syria, devolved into deeply authoritarian systems characterized by the centralization of power, political repression, and a departure from their original revolutionary aspirations.

Political oppression by the Assad regime created numerous ethnic and sectarian fault lines that were later exploited by the regional and extra-regional powers. The alleged [Iranian support and Russian aerial cover](#) seem to have kept the Assad regime in power even after the so called Arab Spring removed numerous autocratic regimes across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Syria exemplifies the emerging threat of rebel movements to dysfunctional polities and how they gain national legitimacy. [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS) is a Salafi-Jihadist organization and a splinter group of al-Qaeda. The avowed pronouncements of HTS allude to independence from al-Qaeda's influence, thus forsaking any territorial claim in the name of the caliphate beyond Syria.

Assad's Syria had also long been an irritant for US and Israeli interests by being a crucial component of Iranian perfidy in the region. HTS, however, is a United Nations [designated terrorist organization](#) and is also considered one by the European Union and the US. Irrespective of this fact, America and its partners expressed jubilation over the HTS takeover, which creates room for speculation that the US and others [covertly supported](#) HTS regime change in Syria.

Millions of Syrian refugees and the ongoing [Kurdish](#) desire for independence prompted Turkish involvement in the Syrian quagmire. Ankara makes little secret of its desire to neutralize the ambitions of Kurdish leaders demanding autonomy in the North of Syria. President Donald Trump described Turkey as the [most important player](#) on the Syrian chessboard after the fall of Damascus.

Having much at stake in the future of Syria, Turkish involvement and material support cannot be ruled out in the overthrow of the Syrian government under Assad. Kurds control 25 percent of Syrian territory, including much of the [oil-rich area](#), while being less than 10 percent of the total population. Kurdish administration of North and East Syria is also a strong bulwark

against the [ISIS threat](#), and it was [supported by the US](#) in the past. HTS's pronouncements regarding the formation of a secular and inclusive government will be tested in the crucible of time considering Kurd-Turkish animosity.

Relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Assad regime stood the test of numerous crises in the Middle East. The so called Shia Crescent, along with the Houthis, provided a sense of strategic depth to Iran vis-à-vis military threats in the Middle East. With the axis of resistance being torn apart, Iran finds itself [deprived of deterrence capabilities](#), in the backdrop of the fall of Damascus. Hence it must explore other strategic options to achieve its aims and objectives.

Russia has long used its strategic partnership with Damascus to project power across the MENA region through military and naval assets. Russian airstrikes were crucial instruments of subversion of the political dissent and armed struggle against the Syrian despot. The fall of Assad does not mean the strategic retreat for Russia. As Mohammad Al Jolani, the leader of HTS, stated, "[We don't want Russia to leave.](#)"

This statement underscores the strategic importance of Russia in Syrian geopolitical calculus. It seems that Russia will stay in the region despite many analysts predicting a possible diminishing Russian presence in Syria.

China has emerged as a [credible mediator](#) on the Middle Eastern political horizon after the Saudi-Iran deal. China could potentially help resolve the differences among the warring factions within Syria. It could potentially transform the zero-sum strategic contestation in Syria. The importance of Syrian conflict for China could be discerned by its use of the veto [eight times](#), on related issues, during the past decade at the United Nations Security Council.

Syrians made history with their success in toppling the Assad regime, but their greatest challenge lies ahead, building a positive future. Syria is exactly at the point of its national history where Iraq and Libya were after the fall of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi, respectively.

Both nations followed a contrasting trajectory with Libya continuing its struggle to end its violent conflict and build state institutions while Iraq had a series of elections since 2005, which helped to develop mechanisms for political bargaining, particularly between Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish factions. Syria faces similar challenges including the sectarian fault lines and Kurd minority.

The consociationalism model for governance practiced in Iraq may best fit the social and political imperatives in Syria. Although foreign aid and rescinding the sanctions could help build the Syrian state and society, internal reconciliation and power-sharing mechanisms could only satiate the concerns of stakeholders for lasting peace. The idiosyncratic socio-political climate of Syria requires the restraint and political acumen on the part of the victorious group to avoid another civil war.

HTS's leadership has announced that it may take [at least four years before Syria will have a general election](#). Confidence in the state's institutions must be restored and strengthened to create a viable state. Lifting sanctions and technical and humanitarian assistance can help build the Syrian state and society. But it will ultimately require the peaceful resolution of difference for any form of liberal government to succeed in Syria.

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