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Middle East

# Where is Syria headed?

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**While observing the amazing historical events that unfolded since last Friday, the first thing that came to mind was relief and joy at the images of detainees being freed from the hell of the carceral society that Syria had become under the Assad family's regime. Our feelings were also overwhelmed by delight at the sight of Syrian families suddenly able to return from nearby exile, whether from another area within Syria or from Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey, to visit the towns and homes they were forced to flee from years ago. Add to this that the dream of millions of Syrian refugees, in the countries surrounding Syria and in Europe, of returning to their homeland, even if only for a visit, this dream that looked impossible a few days ago, has begun to seem achievable.**

Now, as the Arabic saying goes, the time has come for meditation after elation. Let us reflect on what has happened so far to try to foresee what the future may hold. First of all, it is worth pointing out to those who supported the hateful Assad regime and claimed that it was representative of the Syrian people's will and that everyone who opposed it was but a mercenary for some foreign power, whether regional or international, and who also claimed that this regime, which had not moved a finger for half a century against the Zionist occupation of its own land, and which had intervened in Lebanon in 1976 to suppress the forces of the alliance of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Lebanese National Movement and rescue the forces of the Lebanese Christian sectarian right, and which had joined the camp of the war on Iraq led by the United States and the Saudi kingdom in 1990, was the beating heart of the "axis of resistance" – it is worth point out to those that reality has conclusively proven that the hateful Assad regime was standing only thanks to two foreign occupations, out of the five foreign occupations across Syrian territory.

The truth is that if it were not for the Iranian intervention that started in 2013, especially through Lebanon's Hezbollah, and for the Russian intervention that started in 2015, and also for the US veto that prevented the Syrian opposition from receiving any type of anti-aircraft weapon for fear that it might be used against the Israeli Air Force – if it were not for these three factors, the Assad regime would have fallen more than a decade ago, as it was on the brink of the abyss in 2013, and again in 2015 despite Iranian rescue. The plain fact is that once external support dried up, the regime collapsed like any "puppet regime" that is abandoned by the power that used to hold its strings. The latest striking example of such a collapse was what happened to the puppet regime in Kabul in the face of the Taliban's advance, after US forces gave up propping it in 2021.

Thus, after Russia had withdrawn most of its forces from Syria due to getting bogged down in the quagmire of its invasion of Ukraine (Moscow left only 15 military aircraft in Syria, according to Israeli sources), and after the Lebanese Hezbollah had suffered a severe defeat, which its new Secretary-General desperately tried to portray as a "great victory... that surpasses the victory achieved in 2006" and which prevented it from being able to rescue its Syrian ally this time, all this while Iran carried on with its cautious approach terrified at the prospect of an escalation of Israel's aggression against it and the possibility that the United States might join it directly, after Donald Trump's return to the White House – in the face of these facts combined, when Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) seized the opportunity thus created to launch an offensive on the areas under the control of the regime and its allies, starting with the city of Aleppo, the Syrian puppet regime collapsed like its Afghan counterpart.

The big difference between the Afghan and Syrian cases, though, is that HTS is much weaker than the Taliban were when they completed their control of their country. The forces of the Assad family's regime collapsed not out of fear of a mighty enemy, but because they had no incentive to defend the regime any longer. The army, constructed on a sectarian basis through the Assad family's exploitation of the Alawite minority to which they belong, no longer had an incentive to fight for the Assad family's control over the entire country, especially in light of the collapse of living conditions that led to the nosedive of the purchasing power of soldiers' incomes. The regime's miserable last-minute

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attempt to raise their salaries by fifty percent could not change anything. As a result, the current situation in Syria is very different from that of Afghanistan following the Taliban's victory. HTS only controls some of the Syrian territories, and its control is fragile in part of them, especially the area surrounding the capital Damascus, where the regime collapsed before HTS reached it, preceded by the forces of the Southern Operations Room.

Syria is now divided into several areas under the control of heterogenous, even hostile, forces. First, there is the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, where the Zionist state has seized the opportunity to expand into the buffer zone that separated the territories it occupies and did formally annex in 1981 from the territories controlled by the Syrian regime, while its air force has begun to destroy some of the key military capabilities of the defunct regime to prevent whoever succeeds it from seizing them. There is also the vast area that HTS now controls in the north and centre, but the extent of this control in general, and especially in the coastal region that includes the Alawite mountain, is highly questionable. Then there are two areas on the northern border under Turkish occupation, accompanied by the deployment of the "Syrian National Army" (which should rather be called the "Turkish-Syrian Army"); a considerable area in the northeast, east of the Euphrates River, under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces dominated by the Kurdish movement, allied with some Arab tribes (which HTS will certainly seek to win over to its side) under the protection of US forces; a large area in the south, west of the Euphrates River, under the control of the Syrian Free Army, also linked to the United States and centred around the US base at al-Tanf inside Syrian territory, close to the borders with Jordan and Iraq; and finally, the southern region, where forces in the Daraa region that rebelled against the Assad regime, some of which were under Russian tutelage, and forces emerging from the popular movement in the Suwayda region, have gathered together to form the Southern Operations Room, which is the Syrian Arab armed faction the most closely linked to the popular democratic movement.

Now, where might things go from here? The first observation is that the possibility of all these factions agreeing to submit to a single authority is almost nil, even if we put aside the Kurdish movement and limit ourselves to the Arab factions. Even Turkey, which has a longstanding relationship with HTS, and without which HTS would not have been able to hold out in the Idlib region in northwest Syria, will not abandon its occupation and its puppets as long as it does not achieve its goal of curtailing the Kurdish movement. The second observation is that those who hoped or believed in the transformation of HTS and Ahmed al-Sharaa, aka al-Julani, from Salafist jihadism to non-sectarian democracy have begun to realize that they were delusional. The truth is that HTS would not have been able to spread in place of the forces of the collapsed regime had it not pretended to change its skin and open up to a democratic, non-sectarian future. Otherwise, local forces from Homs to Damascus would have fiercely resisted it, whether under the wing of the defunct regime or after emancipating from it. Now, al-Julani's haste to claim that he has turned the "Salvation Government" that ruled the Idlib region into the new Syrian government, frustrating the hopes of those who expected him to call for a coalition government, highlights a fact that should have remained in people's minds: the fact that the residents of the Idlib region themselves demonstrated only eight months ago against HTS's tyranny, demanding the overthrow of al-Julani, the dissolution of his repressive apparatuses, and the release of detainees in his prisons.

Last but not least, the joy over the tyrant's fall should not make us overlook the haste of various European governments to stop considering Syrian asylum applications, and the beginning of various countries, especially Lebanon, Turkey, and some European countries, to consider expelling the Syrian refugees and forcibly returning them to Syria under the pretext of the Assad regime's termination. Syria has not yet emerged from its long historical ordeal that began 54 years ago (with Hafez al-Assad's 1970 coup) and tragically worsened 13 years ago (after the 2011 popular uprising). All countries must keep respecting the right of asylum granted to Syrians, and continue to consider granting it to Syrians who demand it.

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