



DOMESTIC, REGIONAL, AND INTERNATIONAL REACTIONS TO THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION

Mehmet Emin Cengiz
Mohamad Fawaz

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Introduction:

The Syrian regime's 61-year-old tyranny has finally fallen. The country's new rulers have been trying to pave the way for a political transitional process. Regional countries also do not stay idle in this new period. Some regional countries have already started engaging in political talks with HTS and its allies through the Department of Political Affairs of the new government in the country. So far, meetings have been held with ambassadors of Iraq, Bahrain, Oman, Egypt, UAE, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Italy. It was also announced that Qatar would soon open its embassy in Damascus.

It is safe to say that following the December 8th Revolution, Iran (and its proxies) emerged as the biggest losers along with the deposed Assad regime after the sweeping offensive led by HTS and Türkiye-backed Syrian rebels started on November 27th and ended on December 8th. Russia's influence in the country has also shrunk. Nonetheless, it is still in a better position than Iran.

In an environment where developments are unfolding rapidly, it is essential to enumerate and understand the stances of Syrian, regional, and global actors to forecast what may come next.

Syrian Actors:

After the revolution, Syria is de facto divided into two main axes: Opposition forces (the new administration in Damascus) and the Syrian Democratic Forces. The new government controls approximately 70 percent of the country, while SDF controls around 30 percent. The SDF was expelled from Western Euphrates (Tel Rif'at and Manbij) through the Türkiye-backed Syrian National Army's 'Operation Freedom Dawn'. In addition, the SDF withdrew from the Western Bank of Deir ez-Zour after the local Arab population revolted against it. In the upcoming period, the Arab-populated Eastern Syria will likely face new revolts, leading to the shrinking of the SDF control zones. New clashes between the SNA forces and SDF seem to be underway. A wing from the SDF's Deir Ez-Zour Military Council also defected from it and joined the HTS-allied coalition. That said, SDF is trying to reach out to Damascus and cut a deal with HTS. By deciding to raise the flag of revolution, the SDF is trying to reconcile with HTS in the post-Assad regime era.

On the other side, the HTS-backed Syrian Salvation Government's Prime Minister Mohammad Bashir has been appointed as the transitional period Prime Minister in the country, with a mandate that will expire on March 1, 2025. The transitional Prime Minister has already met with the HTS-backed Salvation Government's and the ousted regime's ministers in a meeting.

Although the situation on the ground seems to be on track among the new rulers of Syria, it is beyond doubt that they will vie for power in the upcoming period. Thus, a challenging period is ahead. And the new government has no option but to share power among different actors.

Regional Actors:

Türkiye

Türkiye emerged as the primary winner in the recent developments. The triumph of the new rulers of Syria is likely to incentivize a big chunk of the Syrian refugees in Türkiye to return to their homeland. Moreover, Türkiye also found the chance to clear SDF from the Western Euphrates, and it is now doubling down to do the same in the Eastern Euphrates in an effort to guarantee the safety of its southern borders due to the threats it has been perceiving from the SDF. Türkiye will also likely increase its trade activities with Syria as the dust settles slowly in the upcoming period.

Diplomatically, Türkiye was also the first country to send its officials to Damascus. The Turkish Intelligence Chief Ibrahim Kalın visited Damascus and held meetings with the new faces of the government in Damascus. Additionally, Türkiye has appointed Burhan Köroğlu as the charge d'affaires to Damascus, and opened its embassy after 12 years of hiatus.

Iran

Iran is undoubtedly the biggest loser in recent events. Iranian influence and investments through the sectarian militias and billions of dollars that Tehran has invested in Syria have evaporated during the lightning offensive. As a result, Tehran abandoned Bashar al-Assad to its fate following the blows that it had to deal with in the aftermath of the repercussions of the 7th of October. The Iranian officials continue to frame the

revolution in Syria as an American-Israeli plot. Moreover, they also interchangeably accuse the Syrian regime, Türkiye, and Russia.

Although Iran has softened the rhetoric towards the new rulers of Syria, it is implausible that the new government in Syria will have a positive relationship with Iran due to Tehran's track record of destroying Syria by supporting al-Assad via IRGC and Shiite militias from many countries including Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nonetheless, Iranian officials still claim that they got guarantees from the new administration in Damascus regarding the security of their embassy. Thus, they are willing to reopen it soon.

Iraq

In recent years, amid a series of political and regional shifts, Iraq has adopted a more introspective approach, leaning toward disengagement from external conflicts.

Iraqi officials have increasingly focused on preventing the spillover effects of the Syrian conflict from impacting their own country. As part of this strategy, Iraq has closed its borders with Syria to limit potential security threats, particularly following the arrival of around 4,000 Syrian soldiers who fled their military service. Various Iraqi factions remain on edge as they await new political leadership in Syria while maintaining a cautious stance by avoiding direct involvement in regional power struggles.

This cautious approach reflects the socio-economic internal fatigue and broader regional trends, such as Iran's setbacks, which affected its proxies in the region in their regional role as well as their domestic power.

Lebanon

On the official front, Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati has called for Lebanon to distance itself from the Syrian conflict and to secure its borders at a time when the country has yet to recover from its war with Israel, and the ceasefire agreement remains fragile. After ensuring stability in the south, the Lebanese hope that the upcoming presidential election, scheduled for January 9th, will pave the way for recovery and the restoration of institutional order, beginning with the election of a president.

However, the fall of the Syrian regime is expected to embolden the Lebanese opposition forces against Hezbollah and its allies, reflecting a regional weakening of the organization. In response, Hezbollah is likely to cling more firmly to its socio-political role in Lebanon, seeing it as its last chance. This dynamic suggests that Lebanon is poised for a period of political tension and power struggles before reaching stability as the political landscape is reshaped to reflect the shifting balance of regional power. On the other hand, focus is expected to increase on the return of Syrian refugees, who number more than two million, as the reasons for their displacement have diminished.

Jordan

Jordan initially supported the Assad regime during the Syrian rebels' offensive. Later, it changed the rhetoric and welcomed the change in the country. Also, the Jordanian ambassador in Damascus met with the new rulers of Syria.

Many Arab countries fear the return of the specter of the uprisings or a second rise of the Islamists that could threaten their rule, similar to the initial rise following the Arab Spring revolts.

For Jordan, in addition to these fears, its primary focus regarding Syria over the past years has been controlling borders and halting smuggling operations, a goal it has pursued through engagement with the Assad regime without achieving the desired outcomes. After the Assad regime's downfall, Jordan, through its officials, expressed its readiness "to provide any assistance needed by the brotherly Syrian people." Jordan fears that Syria might "slide into chaos," a scenario that poses a major concern for maintaining security and stability within Jordan itself. In addition, Jordan has not hidden its concerns, as expressed by its officials, about the Israeli advances in Syria, which naturally represent a threat to Jordan's security. Therefore, it is expected to see more significant Jordanian engagement with Syria's new rulers, especially regarding border issues.

Egypt

Egypt's response to the fall of the Syrian regime was cautious and delayed. When it came, the Egyptian Foreign Minister described the situation as a "change" and affirmed

Egypt's willingness to assist in easing the suffering of the Syrian people, supporting safe refugee returns, and participating in reconstruction efforts.

As a leading opponent of political Islam, Egypt remains deeply concerned about the transformation in Syria, fearing a second Arab spring wave, especially with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, an Islamist group, at the forefront of the change in Syria. Also, the Egyptian leaders fear the potential spread of jihadist movements, which could threaten its governance or compromise national security.

Despite economic challenges, Egypt has faced relatively fewer issues with its Syrian refugee population than other nations. However, it sees an opportunity to strengthen its economy and reclaim some of the regional influence it has lost in recent years by supporting refugee returns and participating in reconstruction efforts. Amidst these fears, the Egyptian ambassador met with the new administration officials in Syria.

Israel

Israel has maintained a military-centric approach to its view of the region. While the fall of Assad's regime worked in Israel's favor by disrupting the Iran-Hezbollah supply corridor and curbing Iranian influence near its borders, it has remained wary of the implications of Islamist control in Syria. This concern has led Israel to adopt a proactive military strategy.

Israel has struck hundreds of military targets across Syria to deter potential threats. Moreover, Israel has reportedly extended its reach into southern Syria, coming as close as 25 kilometers from Damascus—a significant development not seen in decades. This reflects Israel's strategic objective to neutralize risks posed by remnants of Assad's arsenal that may be useful for any government that might emerge.

Israel's overarching goal remains to prevent the emergence of a strong, unified state along its border, regardless of the leadership. Instead, it aims to weaken any future Syrian government while using diverse tools, including military actions and indirect means.

Gulf Countries

Gulf Arab states had divergent views regarding Bashar al-Assad's regime over the years, especially during his final days in power. The UAE was among the most enthusiastic advocates for his reintegration into the Arab League, with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain following a similar path. Meanwhile, Oman and Kuwait showed less enthusiasm, and Qatar remained firmly opposed to normalizing ties with Assad's regime.

Deposed Bashar Assad received solidarity calls from the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Oman in his last days. However, after his regime fell, these countries sought to regroup and open a new chapter. Ambassadors from Bahrain, Oman, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia met with Syria's new political leadership in Damascus, a meeting described as positive.

Saudi Arabia viewed Assad's downfall as a "positive" step. However, like its Gulf neighbors and most other Arab regimes, it harbors concerns about the potential for a new wave of Arab Spring uprisings that could threaten its rule. Additionally, they perceive it as an opportunity for Türkiye to expand its regional geopolitical influence. Also, they threaten chaos and divisions in Syria, which could perpetuate smuggling and security challenges along its southern borders. Syria had become a major producer of Captagon, with the Gulf serving as its primary market.

The Gulf states' outreach to Bashar al-Assad was primarily driven by efforts to sever his ties with Iran, their regional rival. While relations between Iran and Gulf countries have improved recently, Assad's fall weakens Iran's influence, reassuring the Gulf states. Additionally, Gulf states may be key players in Syria's reconstruction, which could expand their regional influence.

Distinct from its Gulf counterparts, Qatar emerged as a clear victor by maintaining its opposition to normalizing ties with Assad. The regime change in Syria, led by Islamist forces, further bolsters Qatar's position as a gateway to Islamic movements and a close ally of Türkiye, which has been a primary beneficiary of the Syrian developments. This enhances Qatar's influence ahead of significant geopolitical shifts and before Donald Trump takes office in the US.

Global Actors:

US

US President Biden described Assad's fall as a "historic moment." From a strategic perspective, the US has maintained its goal of reducing direct involvement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region while safeguarding its interests. In recent years, American efforts have focused on ensuring Israel's security by countering the Iran-led resistance axis. The fall of Assad signifies a significant disruption to the territorial corridor connecting Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon, a development that aligns with U.S. objectives.

Additionally, the U.S. prioritized combating ISIS in Syria, a mission primarily accomplished. Following Assad's fall, General Kurilla, the top commander of CENTCOM, visited areas under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces. This visit signaled a commitment to supporting the SDF, even as the US presence in Syria may decrease in the future after achieving primary objectives.

The US will closely monitor the actions and orientation of Syria's new government to assess potential relations. Notably, HTS and its leader, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, remain on the terror list. Even though HTS is sending positive signals, Washington will likely wait to see tangible outcomes before altering its stance on the group's designation.

Russia

Although Russia is undoubtedly one of the losers of the downfall of the Assad regime, the presence of Russians is unlikely to fade away in the country. This situation creates a stark difference with the presence of Iran and its allied militias, which emerged as the biggest losers following the events that unfolded on November 27th.

Moscow has been seeking a way to reconcile with the new rulers of Syria to protect its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. As a matter of fact, the new rulers of Syria are also open to working with Syria. During 'Operation Deterrence of Aggression,' the Syrian opposition forces released a statement in which they called on Moscow to abandon the Assad regime and establish ties with the Syrian opposition based on mutual respect and interests. Reportedly, Russia is close to cutting a deal with the new administration in Syria regarding staying in the country via its bases in Tartous and Lattakia.

Additionally, Moscow calls for stability in Syria in the new period, signaling its willingness to work with the new administration in Damascus. Moreover, the revolution flag was raised at the Syrian embassy in Moscow. This situation can also be read as a way for Moscow to show goodwill to the new Syrian administration.

China

China's position on the fall of the Assad regime reflects a cautious and pragmatic approach. While China had maintained strong ties with the deposed tyrant Bashar al-Assad through diplomatic support, economic investments, and Syria's inclusion in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the regime's overthrow by opposition forces led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham created uncertainty for Beijing. In response, China emphasized the importance of a political solution and avoided taking sides overtly, reflecting its preference for non-intervention. China might adopt a flexible strategy to establish relationships with Syria's new leadership if it aligns with Beijing's economic and geopolitical interests. Despite the disruption to its plans, China remains focused on preserving stability in the Middle East and leveraging opportunities to maintain its influence in the region.

European Union

European statements welcoming the fall of Assad followed one after another from EU member states. For example, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Kaja Kallas, described the event as a "positive development." Despite European apprehensions about HTS, which is classified as a 'terrorist organization' by the EU, and fears of chaos and instability, the change in Syria opens significant prospects for Europe. It presents opportunities for involvement in reconstruction efforts and addresses the refugee issue, which remains central to European political discourse. Several European countries have already moved to freeze asylum applications for Syrians following the regime's collapse.

Conclusion:

The downfall of the Assad regime represents a significant event in the region's history, marking a defeat for its allies, Russia and Iran, and possibly signaling the end of Iran's expansionist project in the region, at least for the near future. However, this does not necessarily mean a complete victory for the West, as they fear the emergence of a strong Sunni rule that could pose a long-term threat to Israel, impact its absolute interests, and undermine the West's minority protection policies. Similarly, it could trigger an Islamic wave that unsettles Arab regimes as well as Western interests. Consequently, the coming period is expected to witness intensified efforts to influence Syria's direction and governance.

About the Authors:

Mehmet Emin Cengiz is a Research Fellow at the Istanbul-based international think tank Al Sharq Strategic Research, focusing on Syria, Turkey, and the wider Middle East. After receiving his B.A. from the Sociology Department at Ege University in 2016, Cengiz completed his master's degree at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of the Middle East at Marmara University in 2020. Cengiz's pieces regarding Turkish foreign policy, the Syrian war, and non-state armed actors have appeared in national and international media outlets and think tanks. His research interests are the Syrian conflict, non-state armed actors, Turkish foreign policy, volunteer foreign fighters, and regional Kurdish politics.

Mohamad Fawaz is a researcher specializing in international relations. He holds a master's degree in international relations from the Lebanese American University, focusing on Middle Eastern affairs.



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Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza
Floor:6 No:68 Postal Code: 34197
Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey
Telephone: +902126031815
Fax: +902126031665
Email: info@sharqforum.org