

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Fall of Assad: Geopolitical Implications

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S*ummary*

The end of the Assad family rule marks the beginning of a new era in Syrian politics as well as the regional geopolitics of West Asia.

The fall of the Assad regime in Syria at a time of heightened tensions in its neighbourhood adds to the already intricate geopolitical and security dynamics of West Asia. As the region grapples with the far-reaching consequences of the devastating Israel– Hamas War, the power vacuum in Syria emerges as yet another potential source of prolonged instability in the region.

With opposition forces capturing Damascus, the future of leadership and the political process in Syria remain uncertain. The opposition that toppled Assad from power consists of several political, ideological and armed groups that have severe differences among them. They have also fought among themselves on several occasions in the past since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011.

Therefore, forging a unity government among such vast groups with different ambitions would be a difficult challenge facing Syria. If not properly managed, the transition in Syria could lead to further deterioration which has been witnessed in the past in countries like Libya and Yemen where the long-serving leaders were removed but a stable government could not be established because of the continuing disagreement among different factions and involvement of multiple armed groups.

The departure of Assad will have a significant impact on the ongoing Israel– Hamas War. Assad had a close relationship with Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah. With the fall of Assad, Iranian influence and the role of Hezbollah in Syria also weakens drastically. This would work to the advantage of Israel in the ongoing war against Hamas and containing the future military challenges from Hezbollah.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that “this is a historic day in the history of the Middle East”¹ and offered to cooperate with the people of Syria. Israel has been apprehensive about the fast-paced developments taking place in its neighbourhood. Concerned about the Syrian military’s weapons and infrastructure falling into the hands of the terrorists, the Israeli Defence Forces launched hundreds of attacks at several targets and destroyed a lot of weapons including missiles as well as military sites in Syria as Assad left the country. Israel has also captured the buffer zone in Golan Heights created in 1974 to prevent the Syrian rebel forces from occupying the territory.² This has drawn condemnation from regional countries including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkiye.

With the removal of Assad, Iran has lost a reliable partner in the region and is a major jolt to Iran’s ‘Axis of Resistance’ against Israel. The substantial weakening of

¹ [“Netanyahu Claims Credit for Starting ‘Historic’ Process That Led to Fall of Assad Regime”](#), *The Times of Israel*, 8 December 2024.

² [“Israeli Air Force Captures Syrian Side of Mount Hermon, Located Within Buffer Zone, Without Resistance”](#), *The Times of Israel*, 8 December 2024.

Hezbollah and the fall of Assad is a major strategic loss for Tehran in the region and a weakening of Iranian influence. Iranian supply lines to Hezbollah in Lebanon will be substantially affected as Syria was used as a bridge for that purpose. A weakened Iranian network of resistance works to Israel’s advantage. While, like other countries, Iran has been surprised with the pace of the rebel attack on the Assad regime, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi stated that the behaviour of Syrian rebel forces and their approach towards Iran will shape the Iranian approach towards them.³

Russia, while fighting a long war against Ukraine, has lost its most important stronghold in West Asia. Russia has offered political asylum to Assad and his family but it has lost its influence in Syria where the US and Turkey would be the major external players influencing the future course of action. Besides, the security of the Russian military infrastructure in Syria, particularly, the port of Tartus, remains to be seen.

Turkiye has emerged as a major player and it will have a dominant voice in the future political process in Syria. Turkiye has been the main supporter of the Hayat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS), the group that spearheaded the rebel military offensive on the Assad regime. Turkiye has always been concerned about its national security over the presence of the Kurdish armed groups operating in Syria which it has designated as terrorist organisations.

On several occasions in the past, Ankara has made military incursions into Syria to create a buffer zone to ensure its security. Despite Turkish military incursions into Syria, Erdogan has expressed his support for Syrian territorial integrity and is firm on fighting terror groups.⁴ Besides, Turkiye has remained concerned over around 3.6 million Syrian refugees in its territory. Erdogan has stated that he did not receive any positive response from Assad to resolve the bilateral issues despite several initiatives made by Turkiye.⁵

Turkiye opened the border for the Syrian refugees to return home. Turkish gain in Syria would be a major strategic challenge for the Gulf Arabs and Iran who will have to look for new partners in Syria. In the fast-evolving situation, Turkiye projects itself as a stabilising factor in the ongoing turmoil in Syria.

In the initial years of the protest against Assad, the Gulf Arab countries supported the opposition coalition, and in alliance with the US, called for the overthrow of the regime. But in recent months, in a major change in their approach towards Syria,

³ [“Syrian Army’s Inability to Respond and Unexpected Pace of Developments was Surprising: FM”](#), *Press TV*, 8 December 2024.

⁴ [“Erdogan Vows to Stand with Syria Against Threats to Freedom, Integrity”](#), *TRT World*, 10 December 2024.

⁵ [“Erdogan Sees Syrian Opposition Advance Without ‘Disasters’”](#), *TRT World*, 6 December 2024.

the Gulf countries decided to bring Syria back to the Arab fold and it was readmitted to the Arab League in 2023 after more than a decade of suspension.⁶ This led to differences between the Gulf countries and the US over their policy towards Syria. Since the Gulf countries have changed their approach towards Assad, the new situation now poses a major challenge to their diplomacy as they eagerly watch the unfolding developments in Syria.

The US has remained constantly engaged in Syria, fought against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and has supported the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces. Around 900 US troops are deployed in Syria currently to fight against the ISIS.⁷ President Joe Biden stated that the fall of Assad is “a moment of historic opportunity for the long-suffering people of Syria to build a better future for their proud country” while at the same time stating that there are uncertainties over the future as to what comes next in Syria.⁸ But the president-elect Donald Trump has stated the US should not get involved in the Syrian conflict.⁹ With Assad gone, the incoming Trump Administration will need to frame a new policy towards Syria in the changed circumstances.

The end of the Assad family rule marks the beginning of a new era in Syrian politics as well as the regional geopolitics of West Asia. The future of political leadership and the political process remain uncertain. The behaviour of the rebels and the ability to reach an understanding among the various competing interests within the opposition will decide the future course of Syria.

Similarly, the response of the regional and external powers will be crucial in the coming days as they continue to weigh their options. In the last few days, Israel has crossed into the buffer zone in the south and has hit Syria’s military infrastructure, Turkey has launched attacks on Kurdish militias and their ammunition in the north while the US continues its attacks on ISIS in Syria.

Given the stakes of multiple regional and external players, the new leadership in Damascus would face the challenges of accommodating their interests. A stable government in Damascus will help normalise the situation, while prolonged instability in the country would exacerbate regional turbulence, which has intensified since the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023.

⁶ [“Arab League Re-admits Syria After 11-year Absence”](#), *Arab News*, 7 May 2023.

⁷ [“Pentagon Press Secretary Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder Holds an Off-Camera, On-The-Record Press Briefing”](#), U.S. Department of Defense, 2 December 2024.

⁸ [“Remarks by President Biden on the Latest Developments in Syria”](#), The White House, 8 December 2024.

⁹ [“Trump Says US Should 'Not Get Involved' in Conflict in Syria”](#), *Reuters*, 7 December 2024.

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