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The fall of Syria's Assad could be the start of a regional realignment



The fall of the Assad regime in Syria is reverberating throughout the Middle East and beyond and might well reshape the region in the coming years, irrespective of what happens next in Damascus. While some of the first signs from the country are **encouraging**, the potential for more instability and conflict is clearly present.

Those who witnessed the so-called Damascus Spring of the early 2000s, when a young, Western-educated Bashar al-Assad took over after the death of his tyrannical father, Hafez, will be loath to be too optimistic. Then too, the signs were hopeful, with one EU diplomat predicting a 'soft landing' for the country.

Instead, Assad and his cronies in what was in effect a corrupt mafia state where several families controlled the economy and illicit trades, including in drugs, cracked down and filled their notorious prisons with human rights lawyers and Islamist opponents.

He also facilitated the flow of jihadist fighters into Iraq after the 2003 American invasion and ruthlessly undermined Lebanon.

Now the chickens have come home to roost, as Abu Mohammed al-Jowlani, the leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, HTS, the main rebel faction that toppled the regime, was one of those jihadist fighters that Assad channelled towards Iraq some twenty years ago.

Syria's patchwork of communities

This is not just karmic justice, it also shows how **complex** and interrelated Syria's patchwork of communities and groups is. The well-known Alawite-Sunni divide is real and has played a prominent role in the country for at least the past half century.

But the Alawite-dominated regime also included powerful and wealthy Sunni families. It used Sunni Islamist figures and fighters when it saw fit, not just in Iraq, but also domestically and in Lebanon.

HTS, a Sunni Islamist, possibly ex-jihadist, faction is now in charge of the Alawite heartland around the coastal city of Latakia and has even entered Qardaha, the Assads' ancestral village. For now, there are no signs of revenge killings or other violence, but the potential remains.

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Not only the Islamists but others too have reason to hate the former regime and its supporters. It is quite an achievement that the country has not immediately experienced a spasm of bloodletting upon the collapse of the old order.

It could be a sign that, just as in neighbouring Lebanon at the time, the whole of Syrian society is too exhausted by more than a decade of civil war and will now want to progress non-violently.

But the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990 was to a large degree a Pax Syriaana, under the heel of Hafez al-Assad. No similar outside force is currently present in Syria to impose peace, however cruelly and precariously.

Will the US abandon the Kurds?

Even without violent revenge against the old regime, there is a history of confrontation between the rebel factions themselves, including HTS. The fact that many of the people in charge in the interim government seem to come from HTS-controlled Idlib and its Salvation Government, could signal HTS's determination to seize power and might not sit well with other factions, both Islamist and secular.

Then there are at least two major factions that operate outside the scope of any foreseeable domestic political alignment. These are the

Islamic State remnants in the Syrian interior and the US-supported Kurdish-led SDF.

With the first, no compromise is foreseeable, while the Kurds will in all likelihood hold out at least for autonomy similar to the arrangement in Iraq.

The SDF is being **confronted** both by HTS, which in recent days took the city of Deir ez-Zur from the Kurdish alliance, and by the Turkey-supported Syrian National Army faction, as well as by Turkey itself.

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Meanwhile, the US has said it will not abandon the Kurds, but that might well change once the Trump administration takes over. Still, the largely Kurdish force is well-entrenched and could prove difficult to dislodge entirely, even if Syria's new leadership attempts it.

The Islamist nature of HTS and many of the factions now in charge, could also pose additional challenges to the future stability of the country. The fault lines are not just along ethnic and Sunni-Alawite sectarian lines but also follow secular-religious and socio-economic divides. Minority groups, such as Christians and Druze, could regard a Sunni Islamist dominated government with apprehension.

Wider repercussions

The stability and direction of the new Syrian arrangement is set to affect at least several of the neighbouring countries, and may well have much wider repercussions, for Iran and the Sunni-Shia balance in the region.

First to feel the consequences is likely to be Lebanon. Even with the situation as it is at the moment, Hezbollah has suffered a huge setback because of the fall of the Assad regime.

Immediate concerns over its arms supply via Syria might be overblown, as sea and air routes have also always played a role. But it will certainly pose logistical challenges to the group, crimp its strategic depth and undermine its standing inside Lebanon.

The latter could prove especially perilous for the country in the coming years, if Lebanese Sunni Islamist groups feel emboldened by Hezbollah's troubles and/or start getting material support from the new Syrian power that be.



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Israel is another neighbour that might feel the effects of the changing winds from Damascus sooner rather than later. It is now carrying out airstrikes inside Syria and carving out a larger buffer zone around the occupied Golan Heights but might not be doing itself any favours in the process.

While relations with an Islamist-dominated neighbour are bound to deteriorate at some point, no Syrian group can ignore such provocations for long. Israel would be well-advised to take a step back and reaffirm its commitment to the 1974 armistice and the status quo.

Regionally, the irony of the Sunni Gulf countries, particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia, re-engaging with the Assad regime shortly before its fall, should not obscure the rebalancing of the strategic balance in their favour. This is not in the last place because of the blow to Iran's position, but also extends beyond it.

While much is made of the Saudi and UAE supposed antipathy towards Jihadist groups, it is very unclear how this plays out on the ground. While the governments might officially keep them at arm's length, amid concerns that they might also turn on them, much of the funding often still comes from the Gulf, ostensibly from private donors not just in Qatar but also the other Gulf countries.

Saudi Arabia's regional orientation, including vis-à-vis Israel, could change if a new Sunni-dominated government emerges in Damascus. Especially if cordial relations are established, it would provide the Saudis with more leverage towards both Lebanon and Iraq. As the main Arab Sunni power, Riyadh will certainly be vying with Turkey for influence in Syria.

Saudi Arabia will be even less likely to engage with Israel if a Sunni-dominated Syria is in open confrontation with the Jewish state. Eventually Israel could be facing a more Sunni-dominated region that is as unsympathetic to its interests as the more Iran-influenced old dispensation was.