

The Fall of Al-Assad's Dynasty Has Shifted the Geopolitical Landscape of the Middle East*

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On 8 December 2024, the Bashar al-Assad regime fell with lightning speed. The cruel dictatorship – described by Michel Seurat as “the State of barbarism”¹ – that ruled Syria for 54 years has crumbled. In less than 10 days, a coalition of anti-Assad fighters led by *Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham* (HTS) recaptured Aleppo, Hama and Homs, before storming into Damascus, the Syrian capital. Like the Tunisian President, Ben Ali, some 13 years before, Bashar al-Assad fled the country in the dead of night. Jubilant Syrians took to the streets and Syrian refugees lined up at the borders of Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon, eager to return. Prisoners were set free. Clearly, what happened on 8 December was a watershed moment and an epochal shift in the regional balance of power.

The Fall of a Dictator

The rapid collapse of the Syrian regime took everybody by surprise. But the story of when and how the “Syrian rebels” decided to launch the battle remains to be told. Some indications, however, are emerging. According to al-Dalati, the deputy commander-in-chief of *Ahrar al-Sham* (freedom fighters of the Levant), the

rebels' second most potent fighting force after HTS, the decision to launch the battle was made in 2020, just weeks after the Russian President Putin and Turkish President Erdogan agreed to de-escalate tensions in Syria, where both were backing rival parties.² Al-Dalati describes how the various groups of rebels had to shelve their disputes, establish unified institutions and kickstart common planning for liberation. The establishment in 2020 of the al-Fatah al-Mubin Operation Room was “a key step” in the coordination of military activities. Gradually “the resistance,” explains al-Dalati, “was fully prepared” not only in terms of military planning but also with regard to methods of running the State.

In another interview, conducted by al-Majallah, Syria's interim defence chief, Murhaf Abu Qasra, gave new details on the plan to oust Bashar al-Assad. Abu Qasra played a key role in planning the operation and overseeing training, armament and strategy. He candidly recognized that “the initial goal was to focus on Aleppo.” Finding almost no resistance, as the regular Syrian troops melted away rather than fighting, the rebels became “convinced that the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime was possible.”³ Undoubtedly, the rebels themselves were surprised by the swift collapse of the regime. Other interviews with commanders and officers highlight the rebels' professionalization and intensive military training, the increased focus on manufacturing military equipment and even the infiltration of Assad's army. Unsurprisingly, the unrelenting bombardment by the Syrian regime, since 2011, and the Covid pandemic, which began in 2020, delayed the offensive.

* This article was written in March 2025 (editor's note).

¹ SEURAT, Michel. *Syrie, l'État de barbarie*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012.

² See the interview conducted by Ibrahim Hamidi: Al-Majalla.com, 18 January 2025. <https://en.majalla.com/node/323930/politics/syrian-military-leader-we-decided-overthrow-assad-2020>.

³ Interview in Al-Majalla.com, 23 January 2025, <https://en.majalla.com/node/324007/politics/syria-defence-chief-murhaf-abu-qasra-plan-oust-assad>.

Before the fall of al-Assad on 8 December 2024, the Syrian regime foolishly believed that the opposition was defunct. And although Syria was in ruins, with a bankrupt economy, corrupt political system, fragmented territory, exhausted and impoverished army, massive displacement and constant international meddling, Bashar al-Assad conveyed the impression that he was firmly “in charge,” regaining a degree of regional and international “legitimacy.” In recent years the Syrian regime was beginning to be welcomed back into the international community and, in 2023, was even “readmitted into the Arab League.” In 2024, some European countries began to review their relationship with Syria: Italy even appointed an ambassador to Damascus in July 2024. The general belief was that there was no “alternative,” and “that without Mr Bashar al-Assad there would be only chaos, violence, sectarianism and fundamentalism.”⁴ One must recognize that al-Assad outfoxed everybody by releasing radical jihadists from prison to discredit the Syrian revolution and show that the alternative to his “secular rule” is jihadism and fanaticism.

The main backers of the Syrian regime – Russia, Iran and Hezbollah – were weakened (Iran and Hezbollah) or distracted by another war (Russia)

It is therefore little wonder that the regime's swift collapse took everybody off guard. From the rebels' perspective, 2024 provided a window of opportunity for three main reasons: the Covid pandemic was over, the Resistance movement was fully prepared and the main backers of the Syrian regime – Russia, Iran and Hezbollah – were weakened (Iran and Hezbollah) or distracted by another war (Russia). Indeed, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has exhausted and drained the Russian military, and President Putin decided to withdraw Russian forces and equipment (including aircraft) from its naval and air bases in Tartous and Hmeimim. Meanwhile,

the Gaza onslaught and its ripple effects on Lebanon (Israel-Hezbollah war in 2024) and on Iran (Israeli bombardment of the Iranian consulate in Damascus and military sites in Iran itself) weakened the so-called “axis of resistance,” spearheaded by Tehran and of which Syria was a central part, exposing the vulnerability of a regime whose political survival was dependent on foreign allies and the production and export of Captagon.

Syrians Are Rejoicing but Remain Anxious

As the rebels entered Damascus, Syrians took to the streets waving the new Syrian flag. They felt they could breathe again, after freedoms had been off limits for the 54 years of the Assad “dynasty.” “Damascus, our capital, has returned to us,” said one cheering Syrian. Another Syrian explained that “when they felt this renewed sense of ownership, people came out to rediscover their city.”⁵

For most Syrians, it was good riddance to Assad: this was a moment of shock, joy, liberation, relief, grief and hope; it is enough to listen to the liberated prisoners' moving accounts of their daily lives of torture in the most brutal prison system in the world, or to see the tears of joy of millions of Syrian refugees scattered across the globe.

However, this new complicated chapter in Syria's recent history is fraught with anguish, risks and uncertainty. Syrians are looking on anxiously, to see how the new rulers will behave and govern. The new Syrian President, Ahmed al-Sharaa recently said that it could take three years to draft a new constitution and up to four years to hold elections, stirring fears among Syrians that democracy does not seem to be an urgent task for the new regime. Syrians have not forgotten that Ahmed al-Sharaa was Abu Mohammad al-Joulani, the head of the al-Nusra Front, in turn a spinoff of al-Qaeda. Understandably, Syrians wonder if the HTS has fully severed its affiliation with al-Qaeda, and if its leader, the de facto new Syrian President, is capable of successfully managing a peaceful and inclusive transition.

⁴ MALEK, Alia. “What Did the World Learn From Syria?” *The New York Times*, 28 January 2025: www.nytimes.com/2025/01/26/opinion/syria-assad.html.

⁵ Quoted by ABDULRAHIM, Raja, “In Damascus, Syrians Reclaim Freedoms Off Limits Under al-Assad.” *The New York Times*, 5 January 2025: www.nytimes.com/2025/01/05/world/middleeast/damascus-syria-freedoms-al-assad.html.

For the time being, the new Syrian leaders have given multiple assurances to religious and ethnic minorities. They dismantled the Ba'ath party, disbanded the old regime's army and promised to bridge divisions, prevent external meddling, put the country on the path of reconciliation and recovery and turn Syria into a player rather than a battleground, a protagonist of its own destiny and not a pawn in geopolitical rivalries.

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The removal of the al-Assad regime opened a new chapter in Syria's tumultuous history, presenting both opportunities and challenges. Amid these challenges there are some key issues which must be addressed without delay:

1. There is an urgent need for security sector reform, including a fully integrated army with a common mission: to preserve the country's territorial integrity, avert sectarian strife, ensure equal representation and citizenship for all Syrians (Sunnis, Alawites, Kurds, Christians, Druzes and others) and empower civil society organizations.
2. Sovereignty must be restored by reclaiming all occupied territories (mainly the Golan Heights, which was occupied and annexed by Israel), the oil-rich eastern region (occupied by the United States), and large swaths of territory in the north (occupied by Turkey).
3. Participatory democratic institutions must be built that promote efficiency, transparency, inclusivity and accountability. It is a strategic imperative to transform a non-state rebel governance (in Idlib) to a state-like technocratic administration (in the whole of Syria).
4. Transitional justice must be pursued for the victims of war crimes and human rights violations.

5. The international community needs to be reintegrated through an inclusive political process. It is a "condition sine qua non" for sanctions relief, the removal of the HTS terrorism designation and reconstruction funding.

The task is clearly a daunting one, and the path ahead is thorny. Yet, despite the hurdles, risks and uncertainties, the future of Syria will be different but not worse. A Syrian author elegantly pointed out: "It is easy to look at a dark past and warn of a dark future, but we should not mistake that for seeing the future."⁶ The stunning fall of Bashar al-Assad has geopolitical implications that extend beyond Syria, reshuffle the regional cards and even have an impact on the international system.

Assad's Downfall Is a Blow to Russia

"Assad's collapse is a blow to Russia's Middle East strategy," writes Zeineb Riboua.⁷ In establishing a naval base in Tartous and an air base in Hmeimim in Latakia, Russia has turned Syria into the centrepiece of its Mediterranean strategy and regional logistics operations. Russia used its presence in Syria to gain a strategic position in the Mediterranean, bolster its influence abroad and facilitate arms trafficking, gold smuggling and illicit operations of the Wagner Group in Libya and the Sahel. This military presence allowed Russia to shore up the failing and corrupt Assad regime since 2015, by actively participating in the crushing of Syrian rebels.

The fall of their Syrian "protégé," laid bare President Putin's miscalculations and strategic mistakes. Inadvertently, Putin believed that time would improve the situation, and that the Arab countries and even the United States would gradually "accept a degree of normalization with Assad, and that this could shift the game in his favour."⁸

The collapse of al-Assad's regime was clear evidence of Russia's miscalculations. Contrary to 2015, this time Moscow did little to stave off Assad's collapse.

⁶ MALEK, Alia. *The Home That Was Our Country: A Memoir of Syria*. Bold Type Books, 2018. The quotation is from MALEK, Alia. "What Did the World Learn From Syria?" *The New York Times*, 28 January 2025: www.nytimes.com/2025/01/26/opinion/syria-assad.html.

⁷ RIBOUA, Zineb: "Assad's collapse is a blow to Russia's Middle East Strategy." Hudson Institute, 11 December 2024: www.hudson.org/defense-strategy/assads-collapse-blow-russias-middle-east-strategy-zineb-riboua.

⁸ RIBOUA, Zineb: *ibid*.

But by washing its hands of the regime and giving up on its survival, not only has Russia's image, "as protector of global authoritarians, lost most of its credibility," but also its capacity of projecting power in Libya or in Africa has been diminished, with the future of its military bases in Syria now uncertain. Clearly the fall of al-Assad is seen as a humiliation, a setback and "a *huge defeat*," writes Hanna Notte,⁹ for Russian ambitions in the Mediterranean. Moscow had to pivot from shoring up a dictator to opening up to the new Syrian leaders. Paul Sonne and Christina Goldbaum aptly comment: "Moscow hopes to charm the people it bombed, to salvage its bases in Syria."¹⁰ Indeed, at the end of January, Putin sent a delegation to Damascus to secure Russia's foothold in Syria with as yet unknown results. But it wouldn't surprise me if the new leaders in Syria were not willing to make some kind of pragmatic accommodation with Russia to counterbalance the US-Israel strategic partnership. Whatever the outcome of the diplomatic efforts already underway, Russia's regional clout in the region and beyond will not be the same.

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Iran and Hezbollah Are Major Losers

Undoubtedly, Syria's seismic change has had a profound impact on Russia, but Iran and its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, are also major losers. Both supported Syria under Bashar al-Assad, and Iran used Syria to project power in the region. In late 2024, Hezbollah was decimated by its war with Israel. It could no longer send foot soldiers to save Assad's regime. More importantly, the weakening of Hezbollah shifted

the balance in Lebanon, allowing for the election of President Aoun and the constitution of a government. Iran has been dealt various blows in Syria and at home. After the fall of Assad, the Iranian embassy in Damascus was ransacked, and Iran has now been pushed out of Syria. Speaking a few days after Assad's fall, an Iranian General admitted defeat in Syria.¹¹ General Behrouz Esbati candidly recognized that he didn't "consider losing Syria something to be proud of... we were defeated and defeated very badly. We took a very big blow and it's been very difficult." Indeed, not only has Iran's standing as a regional key player been severely tarnished but, without Syria, Iran can no longer resupply Hezbollah. One consequence of this could be a renewed appetite within Iran's leadership to develop nuclear weapons as a deterrent, a development which may trigger a regional nuclear race and fundamentally change the equation in the Middle East.

The Alawite, Christian, Druze and Kurdish Communities Are on Their Guard

The Alawite community in Syria – 12% of Syria's population – feels unsafe. It has been the backbone of Assad's regime and occupied top positions in government, military and intelligence services. With the collapse of their protector, they fear possible revenge. Syrian Christians and Druze also fear they may become targets. But in the Idlib province, which HTS has been running since 2016, the group has reached out to Syrian minorities. After the seizure of Aleppo in December 2024, the HTS leader promised Christians that they would be safe, and the initial declarations of Syria's new leaders seem reassuring. Alawites, Druze and Christians, however, remain cautious. Will Syria become a pluralistic democracy or be steered towards being an Islamist state? Only time will tell. The Syrian Kurds are also on the losing side. For years, the Kurdish-dominated Democratic forces worked with the United States to fight the Islamic State (ISIS) and enjoyed de facto autonomy in east-

⁹ NOTTE, Hanna. "Putin Just Suffered a Huge Defeat." *The New York Times*, 12 December 2024: www.nytimes.com/2024/12/10/opinion/syria-assad-russia-putin.html.

¹⁰ SONNE, Paul and GOLDBAUM, Christina. "Russia, Seeking to Salvage Military Bases, Goes Hat in Hand to Syria." *The New York Times*, 2 February 2025: www.nytimes.com/2025/02/02/world/europe/russia-syria-bases.html.

¹¹ FASSIHI, Farnaz. "Iran Was 'Defeated Very Badly' in Syria, a Top General Admits." *The New York Times*, 8 January 2025: www.nytimes.com/2025/01/08/world/middleeast/iran-general-syria-defeat.html.

ern Syria. But there is no guarantee that the US, under the newly elected President Trump, will be in the mood for keeping its 900 soldiers in Syria, endangering American lives in the clashes that may break out between Turkey's military and Kurdish fighters. Moreover, given Ahmed al Sharaa's recent visit to Ankara on 4 January 2025, and Turkey's new assertiveness as a regional power, the Kurds will almost certainly be worried that they will be paying the price for the rapprochement between Turkey and the new Syria.

The Syrian People: The Main Winners

The number one winners of Syria's regime change are clearly the Syrian people themselves. Unlike the American invasion of Iraq which led to the killing of Saddam Hussein, Assad's regime was not toppled by an external military invasion, but by a homegrown operation, one that has been carried out by the Syrians themselves. After 13 years of devastation and displacement, the Syrians have finally liberated their country, restoring hope to a people who have endured unbearable suffering. Whether or not Syrian dreams of a better future will materialize hinges on the capacity of the new leaders to successfully manage a peaceful, democratic and inclusive transition, and to stave off the spectre of external spoilers.

Turkey: Regional Winner

Among the regional actors, Turkey emerges as the regional winner,¹² with a greater ability to assert its leverage and influence in Syria and in the whole Middle East. With the weakening of Russia and Iran, Turkey is set to fill the vacuum. As Murat Guneylioglu writes:¹³ "Turkey has been the steadfast supporter of Syria's opposition forces, with the strongest communication channels and enormous leverage mechanisms." The Turkish support of Syrian opposition forces to the al-Assad regime has put Turkey at loggerheads with both the United States (a NATO ally) and Rus-

sia (a pro-Assad ally). Indeed, after the surge of the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014, the US decided to rely on the Kurdish-led People's Defense Units (YPG) by arming them in the growing fight against ISIS. Turkey complained that the US was empowering the Kurds and that US arms to the YPG were later transferred to the PKK, considered by Turkey to be a terrorist organization. Relations between Turkey and the US turned sour.

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Escalating tensions appeared in Turkey-Russia relations for another motive. Two months after Russia's pro-Assad military intervention, in September 2015, the Turkish air force shot down a Russian SU-24 fighter jet (November 2015), triggering increased Russian support of Kurdish forces along the Turkish-Syrian border and the establishment by Russia of a de facto no fly zone for Turkey's air forces.

Turkey found itself in a bind. On the one hand, it couldn't antagonize the US, and on the other, it needed a Russian green light to operate against the Kurds in northern Syria. Turkey therefore took the decision to initiate a rapprochement with Russia in 2016 to "increase its bargaining power vis-à-vis the US and to secure a military presence in Syria..."¹⁴ The Astana Peace process, in 2017, between Russia, Iran and Turkey was the culmination of the rapprochement process. Turkey secured military observation points in northern Syria. But the de-escalation agreement proved fragile as the al-Assad regime, with the support of Russia and Iran, retook the first three zones, squeezing 4.5 million Syrians and almost all rebel fighters into a narrow strip in the Idlib province, along the Turkish border. Developments looked favourable

¹² GALL, Carlotta. "Turkey Emerges as a Big Winner in the Wake of Al Assad's Ouster." *The New York Times*, 13 December 2024: www.nytimes.com/2024/12/13/world/middleeast/turkey-syria-rebels-erdogan.html.

¹³ GÜNEYLIOĞLU, Murat, "Reconsidering Turkey's influence on the Syrian conflict." Royal United Services Institute, 31 January 2025: www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/reconsidering-turkeys-influence-syrian-conflict.

¹⁴ Ibid.

for the Assad regime. What it had not foreseen was that the rebels, shielded by the Turkish military, were training in Idlib, preparing to launch their offensive, which culminated in the regime's collapse. Turkey has clearly been instrumental in HTS' victory. It supported, trained and financed its major ally among the rebels, the Syrian National Army (SNA), and shaped the dynamics which led to Assad's fall. Undoubtedly, it is positioned to reap the benefits of the Assad regime's demise, to increase its influence on the new Syrian regime, to curb Kurdish PKK separatists, eventually by creating a buffer zone inside Syria, to reinforce its economic ties and to project power in the whole region and beyond, to the detriment of Iran, its geopolitical rival and a key backer of Assad's regime. No wonder Turkey voiced strong support for the new regime in Damascus, urging the West to lift sanctions on Syria and reach out to the new regime.

Will Syria become a pluralistic democracy or be steered towards being an Islamist state? Only time will tell

It comes as little surprise, therefore, that Turkey has been the second country, after Saudi Arabia, to receive the new Syrian leader on 3 February 2025. During the visit, al-Sharaa thanked Turkey for its support and said that Syria sought a "deep, strategic relationship in all fields" that would benefit both countries. Turkey is very keen to see Syria stabilized, seeing itself in a leading position to shape its future. It is well placed to secure major contracts and reap the benefits of Syria's reconstruction, the cost of which is estimated to reach \$400 billion.¹⁵ Turkey hopes that the new Syrian regime will recognize Turkish Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZs) claims in the eastern Mediterranean, strengthening Ankara's position in ongoing disputes with Greece and Cyprus. The re-

gime change in Syria offers Turkey an opportunity to become a key transit point between gas producers in the Gulf and European markets, taking advantage of its energy infrastructure: seven gas pipelines, five LNG terminals, three floating storage units and two underground storage facilities.¹⁶ Finally, the stabilization of Syria will facilitate the return of the three million Syrian refugees currently living in Turkey.

Israel: A Self-Proclaimed Winner

Contrary to Daniel Byman's assertion that al-Assad's fall "removed an anti-Israeli dictator,"¹⁷ in the eyes of many Israelis, the Assad dynasty was its "best possible enemy": since 1973, Syria fired not one single bullet against Israeli soldiers and settlers in the Syrian occupied Golan Heights. As a matter of fact, the Lebanese used to ridicule the Assad regime by saying "Assad fi Loubnan, Arnab fil Joulan," which translates as "LION (Assad means lion in Arabic) in Lebanon, and RABBIT in the Golan."

But Assad's fall was celebrated as "good news" in Israel for another reason: it marked a setback for Iran, which used Syria as a supply conduit for arms and men for Hezbollah, its Lebanese branch of the so-called "axis of resistance." Assad's demise has cut off the Iranian supply chain.

But Israel wanted to further its advantage from Syria's new volatile situation. Expressing concern that the instability in Syria could spill over into its territory, on 7 December, the Israeli army entered the UN-patrolled demilitarized buffer zone and seized more Syrian territory, including the peak of Mount Hermon. The incursion raised awe, anxiety and shock among Syrians. The seizure of the demilitarized area violated the 1974 agreement. Israel described it as "limited and temporary" intended to secure its borders. The global outcry against this overt violation of Syrian sovereignty was met with total disregard.

Moreover, as soon as it became clear that Assad had fled the country, Israel began an aerial campaign. At least 400 airstrikes levelled military assets, destroy-

¹⁵ ELGENDY, Karim. "Turkey's energy hub ambitions have new momentum after Assad's fall." Chatham House, 17 December 2024: www.chathamhouse.org/2024/12/turkeys-energy-hub-ambitions-have-new-momentum-after-assads-fall.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ BYMAN, Daniel, "Al-Assad's Syria Was Brutal. Will What Comes Next Be Better?" *The New York Times*, 9 December 2024: www.nytimes.com/2024/12/09/opinion/assad-syria-whats-next.html.

ing almost everything. Netanyahu justified the attack on 10 December: "We have no intention to meddle in Syria's internal affairs, but we certainly intend to do whatever is needed to guarantee our security."¹⁸

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Despite these illegal violations of Syrian sovereignty, Ahmed al-Sharaa "spoke about Israel in a cautious, restrained and somehow positive manner," reported Carmit Valensi of the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies.¹⁹ This reading of al-Sharaa's declarations is totally erroneous: the reality is that the new regime in Syria has more immediate priorities and is focusing on internal challenges. Ahmed al-Sharaa is pinning his hopes on Turkey, the Arab League and the international community to force Israel to withdraw from the newly conquered Syrian territories and the buffer zone. The day will certainly come when the new Syrian regime opens the Occupied Golan Heights file.

Mixed Feelings in the Gulf Region

In most Gulf countries, the Assad regime was abhorred. His cruel dictatorship, his full-mouthed claim of being champion of Arab nationalism, his reliance on drug exports to the Gulf and his alliance with Iran and Hezbollah alienated the sympathy of Gulf countries. Except Oman, the other five countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council severed their diplomatic relations with the Assad regime and were instrumental in the expulsion of Syria from the League of Arab States in November 2011.

Al-Assad's regime weathered the storm and showed a remarkable degree of resilience, relying on Captagon exports (estimated to reach \$5 billion), and on the unwavering support of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah. The frozen relations with Gulf countries started to thaw. The UAE was the first to take the lead. In an astounding turnaround, in 2018, the United Arab Emirates re-opened its embassy in Damascus. At the Dubai Expo of 2020, an official delegation represented Syria. In 2021, a Syrian Emirati Joint Business Council was set up. Both countries planned to develop a 300-megawatt PV solar project in Widyan al-Rabi' on the outskirts of Damascus.

After the devastating earthquake in Spring 2023, Gulf countries channelled humanitarian assistance to Syria and, in the same year, were pivotal actors in re-integrating Syria into the League of Arab States. Saudi-Syria relations had soured years before the crackdown on the Syrian opposition in 2011. Already in 2005, Saudi Arabia had accused the Syrian regime of being behind the assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri, a Saudi protégé. After 2011, Saudi Arabia started to support the Salafi Jabhat al-Islamiyah (Islamic Front) in its fight against the Syrian regime, although in the wake of its military campaign in Yemen, in 2015, Saudi Arabia reduced its engagement in Syria. But it remained concerned by the smuggling of Syrian Captagon pills into Saudi Arabia.

From 2011 on, Qatar lent its unwavering support to the Syrian opposition. It cut its diplomatic relations with Damascus and, in 2023, showed no enthusiasm in the reintegration of Syria into the Arab League.

Oman stuck to its traditional position of mediator and facilitator. It maintained relations with the Syrian regime and did not call for a change of government. It sent its ambassador back to Damascus as early as October 2020 and, in February 2023, even received Bashar al-Assad in Muscat.

As Sebastien Sons correctly writes: "The divergence in their stance on normalization with al-Assad underscored the fact that Gulf monarchies are not a monolithic entity."²⁰

¹⁸ Quoted by NICAS, Jack. "Israel, Seeing an Opportunity, Demolishes Syria's Military Assets." *The New York Times*, 10 December 2024, www.nytimes.com/2024/12/10/world/middleeast/israel-strikes-syria.html.

¹⁹ VALENSI, Carmit. "A New era in Syria, winners, losers and implications for Israel." The Institute for National Security Studies, 12 January 2025: www.inss.org.il/publication/syria-new-era/.

²⁰ SONS, Sebastian: "Causing Mixed Feelings: The Fall of the Assad Regime and the Gulf States." Brussels International Center, 3 January 2025: www.bic-rhr.com/research/causing-mixed-feelings-fall-assad-regime-and-gulf-states.

Except Qatar, the five other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council were driven by opportunism, either focusing on business or regional reconciliation, reduction of regional tensions or, as was the case of Saudi Arabia, steering Syria away from Iran and Hezbollah. The fall of al-Assad was, therefore, met with “mixed feelings,” presenting new challenges but also new opportunities.

The first challenge is related to the uncertainty surrounding the new Syrian regime. Gulf states fear the potential resurgence of Jihadi forces, which would threaten their security and regional stability. Since 2011, Gulf countries have fought the Muslim Brotherhood, perceiving the empowerment of political Islam as a potential danger for their stability. Given HTS’ past affiliation with al-Qaeda, the takeover of Damascus is seen as cause for concern.

Gulf states fear a “domino effect” and the reverberations of Syria's seminal moment in their region

The second challenge is related to Turkey’s newly asserted role, which Gulf states fear may translate into a renewed rivalry for regional power.

The third challenge relates to Israel’s belligerent behaviour. The seizure by Israel of the buffer zone in the Golan Heights and the occupation of swaths of Syrian territory are viewed with great concern by Gulf countries, as these illegal actions may exacerbate regional tensions.

But the fall of Assad also presents an opportunity for the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, which for decades, have been “locked in a competition with Tehran for power and influence across the region.”²¹ Iran and Saudi Arabia fought each other, through the Houthis of Yemen, the Iranian proxy, prompting Saudi Arabia and UAE to launch aerial attacks on Houthi assets in Yemen. Although Saudi Arabia resumed its diplomatic relations with Iran following Chinese mediation (in 2023), it was not unhappy to see Iran pushed out

of Syria. A stumbling block in the securitization of the Middle East region has been removed. As a result, Gulf states hope that the Ansar Allah will ultimately stop their militant activism in Yemen, while Shia minorities in the Gulf region will lower their profile.

Nevertheless, the fact that a long-standing Arab authoritarian leader has been overthrown by a popular Islamist rebellion is cause for concern in the Gulf region. Gulf states fear a “domino effect” and the reverberations of Syria’s seminal moment in their region. That is why, back in 2013, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates supported al-Sisi’s coup against the Muslim Brotherhood’s first elected President.

Yet, despite the Islamist nature of the new Syrian leaders, Gulf states are willing to work with the new Syrian “Sunni” leaders. Only six days after the fall of al-Assad, on 14 December, the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar met in Jordan with other Arab countries and issued a communiqué calling for a “peaceful, inclusive transition in Syria through a comprehensive national dialogue.” After pushing for the normalization of the al-Assad regime, Gulf countries are pivoting to dealing with the new one, as demonstrated by the Saudi conference on Syria (12 January 2025), during which the participants discussed steps to support Syria’s political transition, called for lifting the sanctions imposed on Syria, welcomed the positive steps taken by the new Syrian regime and condemned Israel’s incursion into the buffer zone and beyond.

Undoubtedly, Gulf countries have adopted an approach driven by pragmatism, as none of them wants Syria descending into chaotic infighting. As Emily Tasinato has pointed out, “all Gulf countries share a common interest in trying to make the new Syria work.”²²

For its part, the new Syrian regime has a deep interest in reaching out to Gulf countries and reassuring them. Ahmed al-Sharaa told the Saudi outlet al-Shark al-Awsat that, “the Syrian revolution ended with the fall of the regime, and we shall not allow it to be exported to any other place.” This moderate tone can be explained by the need for diplomatic backing, reintegration into the Arab League and reconstruction support. It is also, therefore, unsurprising that

²¹ NAAR, Ismael, “Saudi Arabia and U.A.E. Tread Cautiously With Syria’s New Leaders.” *The New York Times*, 3 January 2025: www.nytimes.com/2025/01/03/world/middleeast/syria-saudi-arabia-uae.html.

²² TASINATO, Emily, “All change: How Europeans and Gulf Arab States can promote Syria’s political transition.” European Council on Foreign Relations, 3 February 2025: <https://ecfr.eu/article/all-change-how-europeans-and-gulf-arab-states-can-promote-syrias-political-transition/>.

Riyadh, Abou Dhabi and Doha were chosen as destinations on the caretaker Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani's first trip, or that Saudi Arabia was the destination chosen for the new President al-Sharaa's first foreign visit.

Behind the show of moderation, some Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, remain cautious, with some officials casting doubt on HTS' ability to construct a truly national project and deal with regional spoilers – mainly Israel, which seized the moment to expand its occupation of Syrian territory, and Turkey, which is scrambling for more influence.

Egypt Also Fears the Domino Effect

Egypt watched the storming of Damascus by Syrian rebels on 8 December 2024 with embarrassment, fear and trepidation. Egyptian officials were nervous that the Syrian "example" may embolden the Muslim Brotherhood and encourage it "to mount a challenge to the Sisi regime's authority."²³ President Sisi harbours strong animosity towards the Muslim Brotherhood and, on 13 July 2013, led a military coup that ousted the first elected Egyptian President, Mohamed Morsi, from power and sent him to prison until his death.

That's why the first Egyptian reactions were tepid and cautious, in contrast with other Arab countries, which sent messages of support. As mentioned, many Gulf countries received the incumbent Syrian Foreign Minister, Al Shaibani. Saudi Arabia hosted the new Syrian President while the Emir of Qatar, Tamim Ben Hamad al-Thani, was the first to pay a visit to Damascus. Egypt's engagement with Syria was limited to a phone call between foreign ministers, a humanitarian aid flight to Damascus and the participation in the Aqaba and Riyadh meetings on Syria.

Undoubtedly, Syria's revolutionary fervour spells trouble for Egypt. But Egyptian officials have other concerns:

1. Other Arab states, Russia, the United States and Europe are all talking to the new Syrian leader-

ship, due to its pragmatic approach. The West may remove HTS from its terrorist list and lift sanctions on Syria. This normalization of a Syrian "Islamist" leadership sounded a note of disarray in Egypt.

2. Turkey is set to reap the profits of Syria's regime change and this development, from the Egyptian perspective, is felt as a loss of the latter's influence in the Middle East.
3. Al-Assad's fall sent shivers down the spine of President al-Sisi. The message he received was unmistakably clear, exemplified by a hashtag that gathered steam on Egyptian social media: "it is your turn, dictator."²⁴ In a speech, al-Sisi tried to shield himself from criticism. "My hands have never been stained with anyone's blood and I have never taken anything that wasn't mine," he said.²⁵

Yet, Egypt cannot afford to remain on the sidelines. Over time, its concern over Syria's ideological orientation and its fear of the "domino effect" following the country's successful revolution may fade. If the new Syrian leadership sticks to its promise of a peaceful and inclusive transition and if Syria re-integrates the international community, "Cairo may have no choice but to engage positively with the new government in Damascus."²⁶

The EU: Cautious Engagement

The EU watched Assad's downfall in disbelief. Taken off guard, it now had to navigate a new situation in which rebel groups, led by HTS, designated a terrorist organization by the EU and US, have toppled a long-standing and cruel dictator. Their first reactions were therefore circumspect and tepid, calling for inclusive transition, respect for international law and protection of minorities. In her first statement on Syria's new developments, Kaja Kallas, the EU High Representative for Foreign affairs and Security Poli-

²³ AFTANDILIAN, Gregory, "Egypt remains cool to the New Syrian government." Arab Center Washington DC, 23 January 2025: <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/egypt-remains-cool-to-the-new-syrian-government/>.

²⁴ YEE, Vivian, "Egypt Fears Syria's Revolutionary Fervor Could Be Contagious." *The New York Times*, 31 January 2025: www.nytimes.com/2025/01/31/world/middleeast/egypt-syria.html.

²⁵ Quoted by YEE, Vivian: *ibid*.

²⁶ HASSAN, Mahmoud, "Egypt and the new Syria: concerns about the spread of revolution." *Middle East Monitor*, 7 January 2025: www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250107-egypt-and-the-new-syria-concerns-about-the-spread-of-revolution/.

cy, underlined that the EU stands with Syrians and urged all actors to support an “inclusive Syrian-led and Syrian-owned dialogue.” Speaking in the European Parliament on 10 December 2024, Kallas remarked that there were “positive signs,” but that it was still “very, very early to tell whether this goes in the right direction.”

Similar messages were voiced during the first high-level EU visit to Damascus, on 3 January 2025. The German Foreign Minister, Baerbock, said that she was travelling to Syria with an “outstretched hand,” while Barrot, the French Foreign Minister, insisted on the need for “a political transition that allows all of Syria’s communities to be represented,” adding that France and the EU are offering Syria’s transitional authorities the “technical expertise to assist the Syrian people in the drafting of this new constitution.”

These expressions of support contrast with the precipitous decisions of many European Member States, who announced that they were suspending, pausing, or putting on hold the processing of Syrian migrants’ asylum applications (Belgium, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Austria Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Sweden). Only Norway (which is not a Member State) makes asylum exceptions for unaccompanied children. Portugal, Slovenia and Slovakia are monitoring the situation. Cyprus was the only country to say that talking about Syrian migrants is “premature.”²⁷ The haste of many European countries to suspend asylum applications for Syrian refugees, while the situation in Syria was still volatile, has prompted a wave of criticism from various international organizations. The chief of the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) called for patience and vigilance and criticized the “cynical turn” of some Member States.²⁸ Arab media (al-Ahram, Middle East monitor, Middle East eye, al-Quds al-Arabi, Arab news, etc.) were also shocked by the precipitous decisions of European Member States on Syrian refugees and called on them to support the Syrian transition, to ensure the representation of all Syrian minorities, increase humanitarian aid (the EU has already promised 235 million euros to Syrians inside and outside Syria in January

2025), offer sanctions relief, reopen the EU’s diplomatic representation and contribute with their Arab partners to the reconstruction efforts and stabilization of Syria.

As of today, almost one third of Syrian territory is controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

As the EU’s top priority is to ensure security in Syria and in the region, it is not in its interest that Syria’s transition derails or plunges into chaos. That’s why the EU must offer advice, assistance and political support. This may imply curbing *Israel’s interventionist approach in the Golan Heights, repairing Syrian-Lebanese relations and paving the way for a peaceful relationship* between Ankara and the Kurd-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

The US and the New Syria: A Wait and See approach

In his first statement after the overthrow of Assad’s regime, President Biden called it a “fundamental act of justice. It is a moment of historic opportunity for the long-suffering people of Syria to build a better future for their proud country.” But he went on to say, “It is also a moment of risk and uncertainty,” before disclosing the US policy actions in the next phase: support for Syria’s neighbours, ensuring stability in north-eastern Syria, maintaining the mission against ISIS, ensuring the security of detention facilities where ISIS fighters are being held and engaging with all Syrian groups to establish a transition away from the Assad regime to an independent and sovereign Syria. But therein probably lies the rub. HTS, the leading rebel group, has been designated by the US as a foreign terrorist organization. How can the US engage with all Syrian groups while the main one remains on

²⁷ ALAOWS, Tareq. “The fall of the Assad regime: A time for hope but tinged with uncertainty.” The European Council of Refugees and Exiles, 13 December 2024: <https://ecre.org/op-ed-the-fall-of-the-assad-regime-a-time-for-hope-but-tinged-with-uncertainty/>.

²⁸ DESMIDT, Sophie; TEEVAN, Chloe and KNOLL, Anna. “Key questions for the EU following al-Assad’s fall in Syria.” European Centre for Development Policy Management, 11 December 2024: <https://ecdpm.org/work/key-questions-eu-following-al-assads-fall-syria>.

its terrorist list? The first step should be to remove HTS from that list. The US should also start phased sanctions relief and engage diplomatically with the new regime, thereby seizing the moment to take positive actions that can support the Syrian transition.

A key factor shaping Syria-US future relations is the question of Syrian territorial integrity and sovereignty. As of today, almost one third of Syrian territory is controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). But the region hosts more than 900 US troops. The declared mission is to fight ISIS, to protect the Kurds, who are overseeing prisons housing thousands of ISIS fighters (around 9,000) and their families, and to deter clashes with Turkish-backed groups. The Kurds have established in the region a sort of autonomous state called "Rojava" and are now calling for "decentralization." But the region remains strategically critical for Syria's economic recovery, as it accounts for 70% of Syria's oil and gas fields. The new leaders of Syria seem fully opposed to the "federalization" of Syria. Ahmed al-Sharaa only pledged "no more injustice... on our Kurdish people." But the Kurds are unlikely to relinquish their gains, without guarantees for some form of local autonomy.

The presence of American bases on Syrian soil is another challenge for Syria's new leaders. How can they defend Syria's territorial integrity while American troops are stationed in the northeastern region? Will they call for the American bases to be dismantled? For the moment, at least, this question has no certain answer, for a number of reasons. Firstly, ISIS remains a threat and Syria cannot face the danger alone. Secondly, Syria needs major foreign investment in its oil industry, and is the only legitimate authority to sign contracts with foreign investors and governments. The US troops "ensured that oil fields stayed out of both ISIS and the al-Assad government,"²⁹ *a mission that is no longer necessary given the new reality.* Yet new Syria needs American investments,

and the US will not hurry to invest if their Kurdish "protégés" do not have an important role in the new government. And thirdly, although elected US President Trump declared in December that Syria "is not our fight," there are some officials in his government who are strongly advocating for maintaining a US military deployment in Syria to fight ISIS and deter Turkish operations against the Kurds, as they risk creating chaos that could spiral out of control.

Conclusion

On 8 December 2024, Syria's long-standing dictator was toppled. This watershed moment has already triggered an epochal shift in the regional balance of power. But it is fraught with risks and uncertainties. Assad's fall has dealt a severe blow to Russia; Iran and Hezbollah are also major losers; Israel is a self-proclaimed winner; Syrian minorities are on their guard; Gulf states are anxious, but have decided to support the new regime; Turkey is seen as the primary winner; and the EU and US, caught by surprise, were initially hesitant before engaging with the new regime.

But the number one winners in this situation are the Syrian people. The new Syrian regime's ambition is to transform Syria into a player and not a playground for external actors. But the road ahead is a daunting one: the economy is in ruins, the reconstruction cost is estimated to reach \$400 billion, the territory is fragmented and new regional powers are vying for influence.

As Syria transitions into a post-Assad era and initiates a new chapter in Syrian history, it is of paramount importance to support the new regime diplomatically, economically and financially. Otherwise, Syria may descend into chaos with dramatic consequences for the whole region and beyond.

²⁹ STEPANSKY, Joseph, "What is behind US strategy of keeping troops in post-Assad Syria." *Al-Jazeera*, 6 January 2025: www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/6/what-is-behind-us-strategy-of-keeping-troops-in-post-assad-syria.