ASSAD'S SYRIA GOES TO HISTORY

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By **Edward Tashjian**, Lebanon, 15 December 2024

Only one day into the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire, Syria witnessed the beginning of an unprecedented political transformation within 12 days. President Bashar al-Assad's regime collapsed when the coordinated attacks by the rebels from the Idlib Province met almost no opposition as they headed south to Damascus, sending Assad to flee to Russia.

The roots of the crisis go back to 2011 when mass demonstrations against the repressive Assad regime got rapidly escalated into an all-encompassing rebellion. It soon spiraled into an intricate civil war, drawing in the involvement of many powers. Iran, Russia, the United States, Turkey, and Israel became deeply involved in the armed conflict as they supported different factions, each pursuing different strategic goals. It was in Eastern Syria that the sudden ascendancy of al-Qaeda's successor ISIS complicated the already intricate geopolitical situation. The most violent period of the civil war (2012 to 2017) was highlighted by shifting allegiances, horrific fighting, and constant territorial adjustments.

The Assad army went through radical changes during the war. Having started as a strong army of 300,000, step by step it disintegrated. According to estimates made in 2013-2014, the army's size had shrunk to 110,000-125,000 soldiers, while other sources put the number to 70,000.

External support was crucial for the survival of the Assad regime. Iran stood in the first line to support the formation of the National Defense Forces, which participated in battles along with the Syrian Arab Army. They were local militias which expanded rapidly--up to 100,000 members, according to assessments made in 2014. Badly equipped and inexperienced, they were still helpful in obstructing the advance of the rebels while enabling Assad's main forces to focus their efforts on more valuable strategic offensives.

In addition, the involvement of the Lebanese Hezbollah mattered greatly: the militant Shiite organization sent experienced fighters from Lebanon to Syria, eventually increasing its numbers from 2,000 in 2013 to 10,000 by 2017. Iranian forces and Shiite militias of Iraq also participated in the war, mobilizing as many as 4,000 soldiers in 2013 and up to 15,000 between 2015 and 2018.

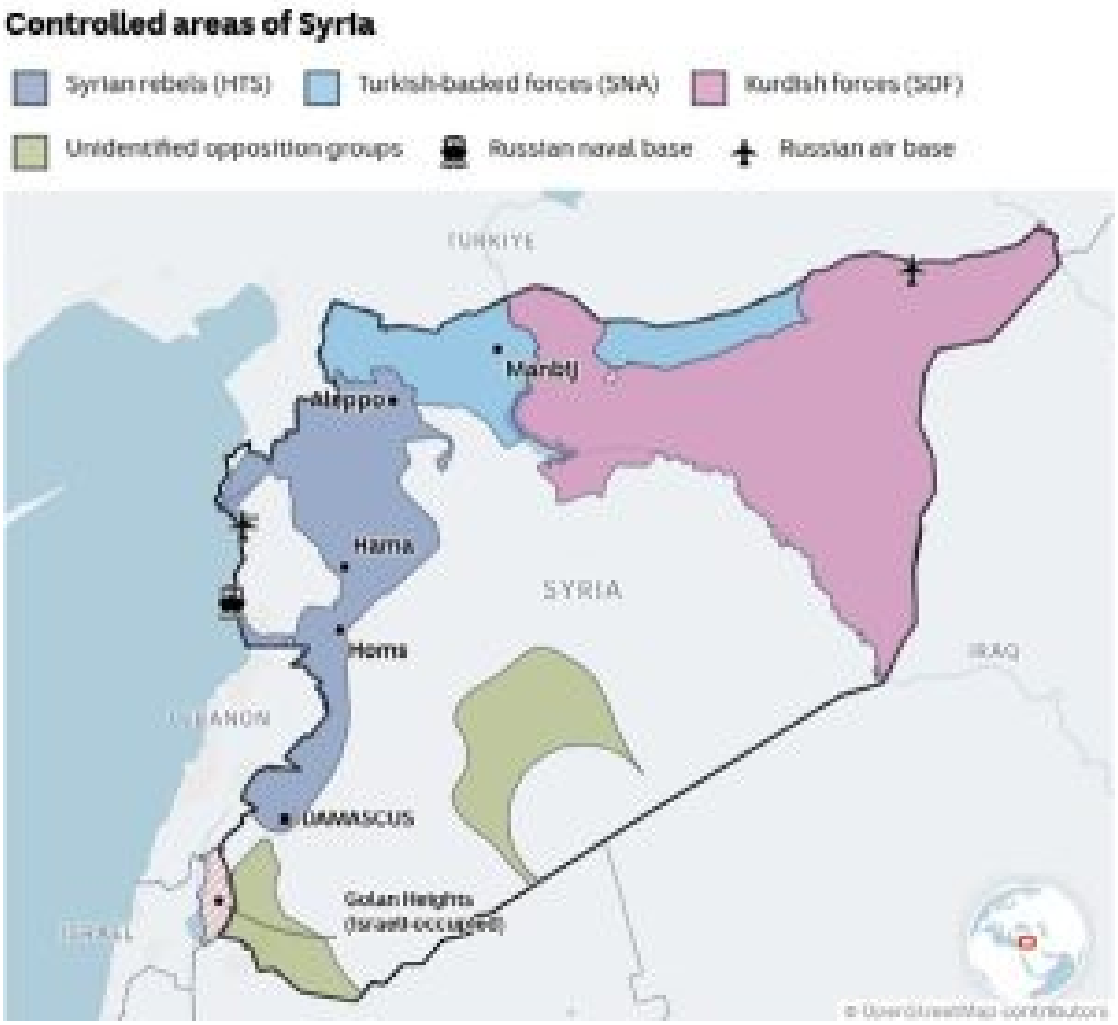
Equally fundamental was Russian military support. By 2015, there were 4,000 Russian troops in Syria, most of them to guard and work in large military bases, airfields, and ports. In 2017, the Wagner Group, a non-state Russian private military contractor, reportedly deployed an estimated 5,000 battle-hardened fighters in the region while providing heavy equipment, including aircraft.

The revolution was a multi-dimensional opposition of the Assad regime. Once the chaotic first years and the marginalization of ISIS were overcome, two main Sunni Arab-oriented key players emerged: the Syrian National Army (SNA) and *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS)*;* the latter arose out of the previous *al-Nusra* Islamist organization.

The less religiously oriented coalition of the Syrian National Army (SNA) was funded and trained by

Turkey. Comprising up to 70,000 fighters, it consisted of many local factions and former elements of the Free Syrian Army, positioning itself to be more moderate than other rebel groups such as ISIS and *al-Nusra.*

The more difficult to categorize would be the HTS. Rooted in *al-Qaeda* and previously named *al-Nusra*, the group has undergone radical changes. Formed principally by conservative Sunni Muslims, HTS rebranded and reportedly built its forces into tens of thousands. In the rebel stronghold of Idlib, its leadership began instituting a system of governance not unlike parliamentary rule in an attempt to distance from its extremist past and authoritarian tendencies.



Reported control of territory as of December 10, 2024.
ABC News Source: Institute for the Study of War

The other major player was the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF. Concentrated in northeast Syria, it had 50,000 fighters. While receiving US support in their fight against ISIS, the Kurds continued to have complicated relations with other regional actors.

The most recent rebel offensive started on November 27, which strategically coincided with the ceasefire between Lebanon (Hezbollah) and Israel. The success of the offensive was due to a number of interrelated factors: external military support for Assad had significantly decreased, U.S.-initiated economic sanctions had devastated Syria's infrastructure -- particularly its economy -- military morale had declined to an unprecedented level, and the rebels employed smart tactics -- particularly making effective use of drones -- while Assad's forces remained technologically outdated.

The fall of Aleppo served as a decisive turning point: 10,000 to 20,000 reported Assad forces throughout northern Syria - with all heavy armaments - collapsed in days. A great many soldiers either deserted or defected to the rebels, while some isolated units continued to resist. The regime's desperation became evident when Assad raised military salaries by 50% in a final attempt to maintain loyalty.

The fall of Hama, followed by Homs and later the capital, Damascus, has left a power vacuum in Syria which will have far-reaching consequences. It means Iran has now lost key routes for the transfer of weapons to Lebanon. Tehran has for years strived for an uninterrupted land corridor from Iran to Lebanon, using Shiite populations to advance its goals. Assad's overthrow collapsed that corridor at the Lebanese border. Israel seized the moment to extend its defensive zones and eliminate perceived threats originating from Syria. The Israeli army widened its presence inside the Golan Heights and carried out targeted attacks with the apparent purpose of reducing the Hezbollah and Iranian strongholds in Syria. All these coincide with the longtime objectives of Israel, namely to weaken Iran's regional reach and ensure Syria will not become a threat to Israel's northern border.

Meanwhile, Turkey has extended its influence in northern Syria, in a bid for full control of areas previously controlled by the SNA. Ankara's primary goal is to do everything possible to block the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region on its southern border. Turkey has also attempted to broker agreements among various Sunni rebel factions, presenting itself as a protector of Sunni interests in post-Assad Syria. Erdogan has said: "Syria will be cleansed of terrorists, and this will be our answer to those who were asking why we are in Syria."

Russia, one of Assad's most ardent and long-standing supporters, has accepted the regime's downfall. Interventions by Moscow have been limited to those cities that ensure access to the Mediterranean, such as Tartus and Latakia, home to its military bases. In an effort to retain a modicum of influence in Syria's evolving political landscape and to present itself as an honest broker, Russia has met rebel leaders, Kurdish forces, and Turkish officials.

The United States, which had reduced its involvement in Syria, revisits the region. Washington once again voiced its concern about the congregation of extremist groups, the fragmentation of Syria, and what these developments mean for regional stability. Although the US has refrained from direct military intervention, it continues to back the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces and presses for an

inclusive political transition process.

The future of Syria is uncertain. A set of critical questions remain unanswered: How will the different rebel factions work together? Will HTS evolve into a political actor or retreat to its radical origins? What is the future for the Alawite minority which enjoyed privileges under Assad's regime? What lies ahead for the Druze community stretched along the border with Israel, and the Kurdish aspirations for autonomy? For the Armenians in Syria, and Christians at large, the rebels' offensive, utterly unexpected, came as a shock, just as it did for all Syrians. When Aleppo fell to the Islamist groups and their Turkey-backed allies, many Armenians, where means available and roads open, fled the city. As early as the seizure of Aleppo, rebel leaders met with the Armenian community leaders in the city. After the collapse of the Assad regime, they also met with them in Damascus, Latakia, and Kessab presenting them with assurances that the Syrian Christians, Armenians included, would be granted safety, freedom of religion and civil rights equal to those of all Syrians.

Despite these assurances, anxiety and fear prevail in the Christian communities of Syria. A possible new wave of exodus of Armenians would raise pressing questions, chief among them being whether a large enough Armenian population remains—especially in Aleppo, the historic heart of the Syrian Armenian community—to preserve a common communal life in the future.

While more conflicts are reshaping the political map of the Middle East, the direction of a solution is not defined. The interrelations of domestic factions, the state of diverse national and religious communities, and the prospects for economic stability remain unresolved. Though some analysts talk about enormous opportunities for reconciliation and political realignment, the Syrian experience underlines that peace is not an agreement, but a complex and many-layered process that demands compromise, understanding, and political will that challenges the most determined diplomatic efforts. Finally, the Syrian experience reminds us what happens when political leaders are unable or unwilling to promote consensus. Will the new leaders of Syria be able and willing?

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