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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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Jordan Shilton

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Syrian government collapses after Bashar Al-Assad flees to Russia

Islamist militia supported by the United States and Turkey seized Damascus, the capital of Syria on Sunday, after Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad fled to Russia.



US-backed opposition fighters celebrate as they burn down a military court in Damascus, Syria, Sunday, December 8, 2024. [AP Photo/Hussein Malla]

After nearly 14 years of war, the so-called “rebels,” dominated by the al-Qaeda-affiliated Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) militia, won a lightning victory. Reports Saturday evening were that HTS forces had entered into the central Syrian cities of Hama and Homs. However, news broke barely a few hours later that the Syrian capital, Damascus, had fallen, and that Assad had taken a plane to flee the country. Last night, Russia’s Interfax news agency reported that Assad was in Moscow.

Assad's collapse could not have occurred without the complicity of factions of the Syrian, Iranian and Russian regimes. On Sunday morning, HTS leaders announced they were in discussion with Syrian Prime Minister Mohamed al-Jalali. On Telegram, they instructed their troops that "public institutions [should] stay under the supervision of the former prime minister until they are formally handed over." Jalali, for his part, declared he is "ready for cooperation" with the new authorities.

Yesterday, the Russian government announced that, after talks with the "rebel" factions, Assad had ordered his troops not to fight the HTS-led offensive. The Russian Foreign Ministry stated: "As a result of negotiations between Bashar al-Assad and a number of participants in the armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, he decided to leave the presidential post and left the country, giving instructions to transfer power peacefully." It added that "the Russian Federation is in contact with all groups of the Syrian opposition."

The Iranian government similarly called to "end military conflicts as soon as possible, prevent terrorist acts, and initiate national dialogue with the participation of all segments of Syrian society."

The imperialist powers responded in a celebratory mood to news of Assad's downfall. French President Emmanuel Macron enthused, "The barbaric state has fallen," while German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock declared it was a "great relief" for the Syrian people. Kaja Kallas, the European Union's foreign affairs representative, gloated that the fall of Assad was "a positive and long-awaited development," adding, "It also shows the weakness of Assad's backers, Russia and Iran."

HTS and its leader, Abu Mohammad al-Golani, a former al-Qaeda asset who had ties to Islamic State, have become the darlings of Western media outlets virtually overnight. Even though HTS was designated a foreign terrorist organisation by Washington and Golani was the subject of a \$10 million bounty in 2018, he has received overwhelmingly favourable coverage in the US and European media. Perhaps giving away more than it intended, CNN observed in an article based on an "exclusive interview" with Golani on December 5 that he "exuded confidence" and sought to "project modernity" during a meeting "which took place in broad daylight and with little security."

The HTS-led forces' pro-imperialist character was underscored soon after they seized Damascus. Fighters ransacked the Iranian embassy, destroying pictures of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander Qasem Soleimani, assassinated at Baghdad's international airport by the Trump administration in January 2020, and Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah, assassinated in the Lebanese capital, Beirut, by the genocidal Zionist regime in

September 2024. International media outlets were all conveniently on hand to capture these events.

By acquiescing to a handover of Syria to an al-Qaeda-linked militia, Assad and his allies in Moscow and Tehran are falling in line with longstanding foreign policy objectives of Washington and its NATO allies. Particularly since Israel began its US-backed genocide of the Palestinians in October 2023, the Zionist regime has waged a low-level war on Syria with US-supplied bombs and missiles. *Al Jazeera* reported that Israel Defence Forces (IDF) warplanes have struck Syrian military sites three times a week on average over the past 14 months.

These attacks were directed not only at Syrian forces but also at weakening Iran's presence in the country. The most high-profile of these was the April 2024 bombing of Iran's Damascus consulate, killing a high-level IRGC commander and other officials. Israel's attacks continued over the weekend, striking the Mazzeh district of Damascus and southern areas of Syria following Assad's downfall on Sunday. IDF soldiers have also advanced into Syrian territory on the Golan Heights, where a "closed military zone" has been declared.

Offensive operations by the "rebels" were launched less than a day after US President Joe Biden unilaterally announced a ceasefire between its regional attack dog, Israel, and Lebanon's Hezbollah from the White House. The announcement brought to an end a two-month savage bombardment of Lebanon by the IDF that decimated one of the Assad regime's most important allies and suppliers of military manpower.

During the ongoing genocide against the Palestinians and the war in Lebanon, Israel also struck—with US approval—targets in Iran, Assad's key regional backer. These attacks included the July assassination of Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh, present in the Iranian capital as an official guest of the regime, and the 26 October strikes on Iranian military facilities. All of this unfolded amid an illegal, years-long occupation by 900 US troops of northeast Syria, denying the Assad regime any revenue from the region's substantial oil reserves.

The HTS offensive is closely linked to the war in Ukraine, where the imperialists are recklessly escalating towards a direct conflict with Russia. Just weeks before fighting erupted in Syria, the Biden administration approved Ukraine's firing of long-range missiles into Russia, bringing NATO and Moscow ever closer to all-out war. This reckless step was taken to avert Ukraine's collapse on the battlefield, where Russia is making substantial advances.

Indeed, it appears this explosive international situation, with Europe teetering on the verge of a vast military escalation, played a critical role in the decision of Moscow and Tehran to

acquiesce, for now at least, to the HTS-led takeover of Syria. The offensive and the sudden collapse of Assad's regime come amid signs that the incoming Trump administration may believe opening negotiations is the best way to secure its interests. Trump himself issued a long post on Syria and the Ukraine war on his Truth Social network.

Trump wrote:

Assad is gone. He has fled his country. His protector, Russia, led by Vladimir Putin, was not interested in protecting him any longer. There was no reason for Russia to be there in the first place. They lose all interest in Syria because of Ukraine, where close to 600,000 Russian soldiers are wounded or dead, in a war that should never have started... Too many lives are being so needlessly wasted... I know Vladimir well. This is his time to act. China can help. The World is waiting!

The decision to place an al-Qaeda-linked organization at the head of the Syrian government is, however, monumentally reckless, and the events in Syria are by no means fully under US imperialism's control.

On the contrary, the contradictory and mutually antagonistic interests of multiple imperialist and major powers, as well as regional players, in and around the country give an especially explosive character to the sudden revival of the 13-year-old Syrian civil war. Provoked in 2011 by Washington's arming and training of the predecessors of HTS, with the aim of ousting Assad, the conflict has claimed at least 500,000 lives and forced millions to flee the country.

The volatility of the Syrian events is chiefly due to the fact that American imperialism and its allies are engaged in a region-wide war to secure Washington's hegemony. The US is determined to exert control over the Middle East's rich energy reserves and geostrategic location on key trade routes as a gateway to the Eurasian landmass. It is one front in a rapidly escalating third world war involving the US and its European imperialist allies against Russia in Eastern Europe and China in the Asia-Pacific. As David North wrote in his 2016 preface to *A Quarter Century of War: The US Drive for Global Hegemony*:

The last quarter century of US-instigated wars must be studied as a chain of interconnected events. The strategic logic of the US drive for global hegemony extends beyond the neocolonial operations in the Middle East and Africa. The ongoing regional wars are component elements of the rapidly escalating confrontation of the United States with Russia and China.

All of these conflicts find a reflection in Syria, which is forcing major and regional powers to pursue their own interests ever more aggressively and could trigger a region-wide bloodbath

endangering millions of lives. Washington, which inflamed the Syrian civil war in 2011 by funding and supplying Islamist terrorist groups, including the al-Qaeda-linked Al-Nusra Front, one of the forerunners of HTS, never accepted the outcome of Russia's 2015 intervention, which stabilised the Assad regime.

The Putin regime profited with the establishment of the Khmeimim air base near the city of Latakia, which served both as a base for Russian air operations in Syria and a transit point for flights to Africa. Russia's naval military base at Tartus, the only such base Moscow has in the Mediterranean, is a holdover from the Soviet era, having been established in 1971. Together with Iran, which depended on Damascus for land access to Lebanon to supply its ally Hezbollah, Russia was the Assad regime's main backer.

In the north, Turkey has patronised Islamist militias under the Syrian National Army banner. Although these militias are not directly part of the forces led by HTS, the latter could only operate and received their military supplies through Turkey, a NATO member state. As a result, it is widely acknowledged that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had foreknowledge of the HTS-led offensive.

Erdogan declared Saturday that "a new political and diplomatic reality" existed in Syria. Ankara's principal concern is to prevent the emergence of a unified Kurdish territory on its southern border, which it has sought to do by funding SNA operations and launching invasions of its own to target the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). For their part, the Kurds receive backing from the US. Reuters reported last Tuesday that US-backed Kurdish forces launched an offensive in eastern Syria against Assad's troops, resulting later in the week in the capture of Deir Ezzor.

While the timing of the Islamists' advance and its rapid progress speak to the deep involvement of the imperialist powers and Turkey, the ignominious collapse of Assad's forces demonstrates the utter bankruptcy of the region's bourgeois nationalist regimes. The Assad family, first under the regime of Hafez al-Assad (1971-2000) and then his son Bashar (2000-24), ruled Syria as a one-party dictatorship for 53 years. But by the end it effectively worked to dissolve itself and hand over power to the forces it had fought against for 14 years. The only way to oppose the imperialist reconquest of the Middle East, the ongoing genocide in Gaza, and the rapidly developing third world war is through the independent political mobilisation of the working class throughout the region and in the imperialist centres of North America and Europe.

An international anti-war movement led by the working class must be built on a socialist and internationalist programme. Such a movement must link the major strikes and struggles that

have developed among workers against the deepening economic crisis and onslaught on their social rights with the broad-based opposition to imperialist barbarism that has found expression in mass protests against Israel's onslaught on the Palestinians and Lebanon. This movement must counterpose the socialist transformation of society to the imperialists' unrestrained drive for global hegemony, which is rooted in the crisis-ridden capitalist profit system.