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The Fall of Syria's Bashar al-Assad: What it Means



Syrian rebels celebrate the toppling of Bashar al-Assad. Youtube screenshot.

The overthrow of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, marking the end of more than 50 years of the Assad dynasty (1971 – 2024), is a dramatic event in the Middle East. It is difficult to make definite short- and long-term predictions in the wake of such a momentous event. But it deserves a brief comment about what may lie ahead.

In a country of 25 million with almost 75 percent Sunnis and only about 15 percent Alawite Shia Muslims, the Assad regime of the Alawite minority was sustained over half a century by brutal repression. Bashar's father, Hafez al-Assad, was a significant Arab leader along with Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt and Muammar Gaddafi of Libya. Together, they were close allies of the Soviet Union, and formed the anti-Western front in the Arab world. Syria's Assad dynasty, above all, was particularly shaky. It ruled with an iron fist, creating both fear and resistance which exploded into full-scale civil war in the early 2010s.

Other Arab regimes and much of the world found the Assads awkward to deal with. Once the Soviet Union had disintegrated, the United States sought the overthrow of the Syrian ruling order. The US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in the Obama administration openly declared that “Assad must go.” However, the Islamic State at the time posed a greater threat to regional and Western interests. And America’s drive to remove the Assad dynasty failed, because the opposition was disunited, and it was convenient for the US-led Western powers to let the Syrian military fight ISIS.

Significant changes have, however, occurred in the geopolitics of the Middle East since October 7, 2023. With America’s backing, the Israeli military now dominates the region. Israeli war tactics in Gaza, where at least 45,000 Palestinians are known to have been killed, have been widely condemned by international courts, NGOs, human rights organizations, and activists. However, no country or agency can take enforcement action in the face of the American veto in the UN Security Council. Hamas and other Palestinian groups in Gaza and the West Bank have been severely weakened, as well as the Shia militia Hezbollah in Lebanon. In Israel’s multi-front war in the region, Iran, Yemen, and Syria have all been hit. And to protect Israel from enemy missiles, American warships, and air-defense batteries are deployed in the region.

The outgoing US president, Joe Biden, is a longtime close friend of Prime Minister Netanyahu and an ally of Israel. Biden is counting his final days in the White House. The President and his officials often speak about the Middle East, but hardly anything meaningful for mediation. The incoming president, Donald Trump, awaits his inauguration on January 20, 2025. Trump is even more aggressive. When it comes to America’s policy in Middle East, there is little difference between Democratic and Republican administrations.

In this perplexing scenario, how can the United States policy be explained? The American experience in previous conflicts offers some clues. The lessons of the Vietnam War ending in America’s withdrawal in the twentieth century were repeated in the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq in the twenty-first century. Washington has developed great aversion to sending American troops to fight wars in distant lands as a consequence of the loss of American lives and moral capital in those conflicts. Having learned those lessons, America’s new military doctrine is about deploying Israel to fight for itself, and for the United States using the latest American weapons. This doctrine makes Israel both an ally and a proxy of the United States to keep the Middle East in control.

In the latest events in Syria, America’s foe has been overthrown. Syrians celebrate in the streets of Damascus. Crowds take down statues and murals associated with the deposed

ruling dynasty. Government buildings are set on fire. The erstwhile rebels who have won the war against the dictatorship are in charge. The victors belonging to the Sunni Islamist movement, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Organization for the Liberation of the Levant), are a mix of various armed factions led by Islamist commanders. HTS has roots in al Qaeda, which the United States regards as a terrorist group. Will Syria after Assad see stability? Or will the country become another Afghanistan, Iraq or Libya? Such questions may be answered as events unfold.

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