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The Fall of the Assad Government in Syria



Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, military leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Screenshot from CNN interview.

As the rebel forces led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Syria Liberation Committee) seized Damascus, Syria's capital, on December 7, 2024, the president of Syria, Bashar al-Assad boarded a flight to [Moscow](#), Russia. It was the end of the rule of the Assad family that began when Hafez al-Assad (1930-2000) became president in 1971, and continued through his son Bashar from 2000—a 53-year period of rule. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which seized Damascus, was formed out of the remnants of the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra (Front for the Conquest of Syria) in 2017, and led by its emir Abu Jaber Shaykh and its military commander Abu Mohammed al-Jolani.

For the past seven years, HTS has been restrained in the city of Idlib, in Syria's north. In 2014, a group of al-Qaeda veterans created the Khorasan network (led by Sami al-Uraydi, the religious leader), whose intent was to control the city and the Islamist movements. Over the next year, al-Nusra tried to form alliances with other Islamist forces, such as Ahrar al-Sham, particularly for the governance of the city. The Russian military intervention in 2015

damaged the ability of these groups to advance out of Idlib, which led to the formal break of many of the Islamists from al-Qaeda in 2016 and the creation of HTS in January 2017. Those who remained linked to al-Qaeda formed Hurras al-Din (or Guardians of the Religious Organization). By the end of the year, HTS had seized the initiative and become the major force inside Idlib, took over the local councils across the city and declared that it was the home of the Syrian Salvation Government. When the Syrian Arab Army, the government's military force, moved toward Idlib in early 2020, Turkey invaded Syria's north to defend the Islamists. This invasion resulted in the Russian-Turkish ceasefire in March 2020 that allowed the HTS and others to remain in Idlib unscathed. HTS rebuilt its ranks through alliances with Turkish-backed armed forces and with fighters from across Central Asia (including many Uyghur fighters from the Turkistan Islamic Party).

Operation Deterrence of Aggression, launched by HTS in November 2024 with Turkish and Israeli support, whipped down highway M5 from Aleppo to Damascus in about fourteen days. The Syrian Arab Army dissolved before them and the gates of Damascus opened without enormous bloodshed.

The Jihadi Blitzkrieg

The surprise victory of HTS had been predicted in November by Iranian officials, who informed Assad about the weakness of the state's defenses because of the sustained Israeli attacks on Syrian army positions, of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and of the war in Ukraine. When Iran's foreign minister Abbas Araghchi [met](#) with Assad in Damascus after Aleppo fell to the rebels, Assad told Araghchi that this was not a defeat but a "tactical retreat." That was clearly illusionary. Araghchi, knowing this, told Assad that Iran simply did not have the capacity to send new troops to defend Damascus. It had also been made clear to the Assad government that the Russians did not have the surplus capacity to defend the government, not even the Russian naval base in Tartus. During the HTS drive against the Syrian army, the Russian presidential envoy for Syria Alexander Lavrentyev [said](#) that he had been in touch with the incoming Trump administration to discuss a deal between "all parties" over the Syrian conflict. Neither Russia nor Iran believed that the Assad government would be able to unilaterally defeat the various rebels and remove the United States from its occupation of the eastern oil fields. A deal was the only way out, which meant that neither Iran nor Russia was willing to commit more troops to defend the Assad government.

Since 2011, Israel's air force has [struck](#) several Syrian military bases, including bases that hosted Iranian troops. These strikes degraded Syrian military capacity by destroying ordinance and materiel. Since October 2023, Israel has increased its strikes within Syria,

including hitting Iranian forces, Syrian air defenses, and Syrian arms production facilities. On December 4, the heads of the militaries of Iran (Chief of Staff Major General Mohammad Bagheri), Iraq (Major General Yahya Rasool), Russia (Defense Minister Andrey Belousov), and Syria (General Abdul Karim Mahmoud Ibrahim) met to assess the situation in Syria. They [discussed](#) the movement of HTS down from Aleppo and agreed that with the fragile ceasefire in Lebanon and the Syrian government's weakened forces, this was a "dangerous scenario." While they said that they would support the government in Damascus, there were no concrete steps taken by them. The Israeli attacks inside Syria meanwhile increased the demoralization within the Syrian army, which has not been properly reorganized after the stalemate began with the rebels in Idlib in 2017.

When Russia entered the conflict in Syria in 2015, the Russian military command insisted that the Syrian government no longer permit pro-government militia groups (such as the Kataeb al-Ba'ath and the Shabbiha) to operate independently. Instead, these groups were integrated into the Fourth and Fifth Corps under Russian command. Meanwhile, the Iranian officers organized their own battalions of Syrian soldiers. The soldiers' declining economic standards combined with the foreign command accelerated the demoralization. Even the Republican Guard, tasked with defending Damascus and in particular the presidential palace, had lost much of its historical power.

At no point after 2011 was the Syrian government in control of the territory of the country. Already, since 1973, Israel had seized the Golan Heights. Then, during 2011, Turkey had eaten into the borderlands of northern Syria, while the Kurdish resistance forces (YPG and PKK) had formed a zone alongside the Syria-Turkey border. Northwestern Syria had been taken by the rebels, who included not only HTS but also a range of Turkish-backed militia groups. Northeastern Syria was occupied by the United States, which had taken charge of the oil fields. In this region, the US forces contested the Islamic State, which had been pushed out of both northern Iraq and northeastern Syria, but which continued to appear in spurts. Meanwhile, in southern Syria, the government had made a series of hasty agreements with the rebels to provide an appearance of peace. In cities such as Busra al-Sham, Daraa, Houran, and Tafas, the government could not send any of its officials; these, like Idlib, had come under rebel control. When HTS moved on Damascus, the rebels in the south rose up as did the rebels in the country's eastern edge along the border with Iraq. The reality of Assad's weakness became apparent.

Israel's Advantage

As if in a coordinated fashion, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu went to the occupied Golan Heights, which Israel seized from Syria in 1973, and [announced](#), “This is a historic day in the history of the Middle East.” He then said that his government had ordered the Israeli army to invade the UN buffer zone between the Israeli occupation of Golan and the Syrian army posts that had been established during the armistice of 1974. Israeli tanks moved into the countryside of Quneitra Governorate and took over the main town. The border between Israel and Syria has now been shaped by this invasion, since Israel has now moved several kilometers into Syria to seize almost the entire length of the border.

During the final days of the HTS advance to Damascus, the Israeli air force provided the rebels with [air support](#). They bombed military bases and the headquarters of Syrian intelligence in the center of Damascus. With the excuse that they wanted to destroy weapons depots before the rebels seized them, the Israelis struck bases that housed Syrian troops and stockpiles of weapons that the Syrian army might have used to defend Damascus (this [included](#) the Mezzah Air Base). Israeli officials have [said](#) that they will continue these air strikes, but have not indicated whom they plan to target.

The Israeli assault on Syria deepened during the protest movement in 2011. As fighting between the rebels and the Syrian government spread across southern Syria, near the Israeli border, Israel began to fire across the border at Syrian forces. In March 2013, for instance, the Israelis fired missiles at Syrian military posts, weakening them and strengthening the rebels. At the end of 2013, Israel created Division 210, a special military command, to begin engagements along the Israel-Syrian armistice line. Importantly, when the HTS predecessor and al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra began to make gains along the Israeli line of control, Israel did not strike them. Instead, Israel hit the Syrian government through shooting down Syrian air force jets and assassinating senior Syrian allies (such as General Mohammad Ali Allahdadi, an Iranian general, in January 2015, and Samir Kuntar, a Fatah leader, in late 2015). A former press officer in Damascus told me that the Israelis effectively provided air support for the HTS assault on the capital.

Syria’s Future

Assad left Syria without making any announcement. It is said by former government officials in Damascus that some senior leaders left with him or left for the Iraqi border before the fall of Damascus. The silence from Assad has bewildered many Syrians who had believed fundamentally that the state would protect them from the onslaught of groups such as HTS. It is a sign of the collapse of the Assad government that his Republican Guard did not try to defend the city and that he left without any words of encouragement to his people.

The country is polarized regarding the new government. Sections of the population that had seen their way of life degraded by the war and sanctions welcome the opening, and they have been on the streets celebrating the new situation. The larger context for the Middle East is not their immediate concern, although depending on Israel's actions, this might change. A considerable section is concerned about the behavior of the Islamists, who use terms of disparagement against non-Sunni Muslims such as *nusayriyya* (for Alawites, the community of the al-Assad family) and *rawafid* (such as the large Shia population in Syria). Calling non-Sunni Muslims *ahl al-batil* or the "lost ones" and using strong Salafi language about apostasy and its punishment sets in motion fear amongst those who might be targets of attacks. Whether the new government will be able to control its forces motivated by this sectarian ideology remains to be seen.

Such sectarianism is only the opening of the contradictions that will emerge almost immediately. How will the new government deal with the Israeli, Turkish, and US incursions into Syrian territory? Will it seek to win back that land? What will be the relationship between the Syrian government and its neighbors, particularly Lebanon? Will the millions of Syrian refugees return to their home now that the basis for their migration has been removed, and if they return, what will be awaiting them inside Syria? And centrally, what will all this mean for the ongoing genocide of the Palestinians by the Israelis?

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Vijay Prashad's most recent book (with Noam Chomsky) is *The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and the Fragility of US Power* (New Press, August 2022).