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SYRIA'S COLLAPSE: STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR IRAN

DIANA RAHIMA

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In December of 2024, the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus fell unexpectedly to opposition Islamist forces spearheaded by the rebel group Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham. The collapse represented a major strategic setback – and not only for Syria's Ba'ath Party, which had clung to power in Damascus since March of 1963. It was also a significant reversal for the Iranian regime, which had spent years and invested billions in cultivating the Assad regime as a strategic partner and regional ally.

LONGSTANDING COOPERATION

In the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, relations between Tehran and Damascus had flourished despite the ideological differences between Iran's clerical regime and the ruling Ba'ath Party in Syria. Although Iran's new rulers were devout Islamists while Syria's Ba'ath was formally atheist, both saw in the other a dependable regional partner and force multiplier for their own foreign policy agenda.[1]

Regional events, among them the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) and the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), served to strengthen this connection. Ties were further bolstered by Syria's isolation, as Hafez Assad (and subsequently his son, Bashar) made strategic decisions that distanced his regime from other Arab states – and provided Iran with a preferential position for partnership. Additionally, Iran played a pivotal role in propping up the Assad regime following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in March 2011, supplying military, economic, and political support that helped to stabilize Assad's rule.[2] All this created a deep dependency on the part of Syrian officials, who came to rely on Iran's backing for their continued survival.

Nevertheless, the alignment between the two countries was not without its tensions. Despite its heavy reliance on

Diana Rahima is an independent Syrian journalist and researcher specializing in conflict, governance, and Middle Eastern geopolitics. She has over a decade of experience reporting on the Syrian civil war, transitional justice, and authoritarian regimes.

Iran's backing, the Assad regime grew wary of falling entirely under Tehran's sway. However, fear of retaliation from Tehran tempered Assad's actions, and prevented his government from resolutely seeking distance from the Islamic Republic. Nevertheless, there were signs in recent years that the regime was cautiously seeking to balance its strategic alliances in order to better protect its interests.

That shift first became evident in the aftermath of Hamas' October 7, 2023 attack, when Assad's government adopted a neutral stance toward Israel's ensuing military response. Despite Israeli strikes targeting Iranian and allied forces within Syrian territory and extending into Lebanon, Damascus refrained from any direct involvement.[3] This unexpected neutrality became a source of frustration in Tehran. In May 2024, the pan-Arab newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat* reported that Iranian officials were dissatisfied with Syria's refusal to engage in the so-called "Unity of Fronts" strategy against Israel, or to open the Golan Heights as a battlefield against the Jewish state.[4] Iranian sources argued that Tehran had paid a heavy price to secure Assad's survival, and was therefore entitled to his loyalty. Meanwhile, Assad's regime appeared to be pursuing Western overtures as a reward for its restraint.[5]

Thus, on the eve of Assad's overthrow, tensions had begun to creep into the longstanding strategic alliance between the two countries. Nevertheless, cooperation – rather than competition – remained the dominant frame for Iranian-Syrian relations. Now, Assad's ouster has led to a significant realignment in Damascus, and a resulting recalibration of Iranian policy.

NEW HURDLES FOR TEHRAN

In the aftermath of the Assad regime's collapse, the Islamic Republic has found itself on new – and inhospitable – terrain. Shortly after assuming power, the new government in Damascus imposed a temporary ban on Iranian flights using its airspace.[6] The decision was seen as a significant shift in Syria's alliances, signaling a move away from the country's previous role in Iran's "Axis of Resistance" and toward a new government reportedly backed by Turkey. Notably, it also had practical effects, complicating Iran's capacity to transport weapons, ammunition, and Revolutionary Guard forces across the Middle East. Security sources likewise emphasized that the ban would greatly impede Hezbollah's ability to rebuild its military strength.[7] The development, moreover, coincided with ongoing Israeli Air Force operations aimed at disrupting weapons smuggling to Hezbollah through routes along the Syrian-Lebanese border.[8]

The collapse of the Assad regime has also diminished Iran's energy leverage over Damascus. Before Assad's fall, his government had become deeply dependent on Iranian oil supplies to compensate for declining domestic energy production. The volume was significant; when tallied by energy consultancy Argus last Fall, Iran was estimated to have provided crude shipments of 70,000 barrels per day or more in 2024, and "around 10,000-20,000 b/d of refined products to Syria in recent years."[9] By so doing, Tehran became a critical lifeline for Assad's regime, providing it with some 90 percent of its oil and thereby breeding a deep dependency on the part of Damascus. But with Assad's departure, these flows have ceased as the Islamic Republic adopts a "wait and see" approach to the orientation of the country's new government.[10]

Religious interaction has also dwindled. In November of 2021, Iran and the Syrian government had reached an agreement to facilitate the annual pil-

grimage of 100,000 Iranian citizens to Syria.[11] Under the terms of the deal, the Syrian government committed to safeguarding the health and security of Iranian pilgrims, who primarily traveled from Tehran's Imam Khomeini International Airport, with provisions for additional flights from other Iranian cities. The initiative built on earlier collaborations, such as a 2015 agreement focused on encouraging religious tourism and visitor exchanges between the two nations. Indeed, religious tourism had, in recent years, become a significant feature of Syria's landscape, particularly with an influx of Shi'ite visitors from Iran and Iraq. But no longer. Even before Assad's removal, Iran had suspended pilgrimages to religious shrines in Syria, citing "security reasons."[12] And now, given the current political landscape and security concerns, the resumption of Iranian religious pilgrimages to Syria remains uncertain. The new Syrian government's stance and regional dynamics will likely influence any future developments regarding religious tourism between the two nations.

Syria's demographics have also begun to change – erasing gains orchestrated by the Islamic Republic in recent years. During its years in power, the Assad regime had granted Syrian citizenship to hundreds of thousands of people from various countries as part of an effort to help maintain the regime's hold on power. In the case of Iran, this was bolstered by a concerted governmental policy to shift the demographic composition of Syria. As early as 2017, Western media sources were noting how Tehran was, as part of its involvement in the Syrian civil war, "repopulating" the country with Shi'a Muslims to help strengthen the control of the Assad government.[13] That process has proceeded apace, and in 2022 the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights outlined what it termed "ongoing demographic change" driven by Iran in various corners of the country.[14] The aggregate result was significant; by the time the Assad regime fell in December of 2024, the country's combined community of Alawite and Shi'a (which prior to the war had made up roughly 10% of the national population), had grown to 13% as part of a process of Iranian-driven "Shiification."[15]

With Assad's ouster, however, this trendline has begun to reverse. In the immediate aftermath of Assad's fall, tens of thousands of Syrians, primarily Shi'ite Muslims, fled to Lebanon fearing persecution despite assurances of safety from the new authorities in Damascus[16].

Iran's military presence in the country has also dwindled, as Tehran has been forced to withdraw its forces to avoid open clashes with the new Syrian government. Thus, Russian authorities have disclosed that Moscow assisted with the evacuation of thousands of Iranian fighters from Syria at the request of the Iranian government. "Our Iranian friends had previously requested our assistance in deploying their units to Syria. Now, they've sought our help in withdrawing them," Russian President Vladimir Putin himself has confirmed. "We successfully evacuated 4,000 Iranian fighters from Hmeimim to Tehran."[17]

This retreat marked a substantial reduction in Tehran's influence in the region. Iranian troops, who had been stationed in Syria to support Assad, largely fled or were ordered to retreat following the rebel takeover. Abandoned military equipment near the Lebanese border indicated a hasty withdrawal.

These developments foreshadow a new era of diminished influence for Tehran in Syria. Unlike the preceding dozen years, when Iran and the Assad regime are estimated to have signed at least 126 agreements stretching across various sectors, from energy to trade to telecommunications,[18] Syria's new rulers seem to

be seeking alternatives for cooperation with the Iranian regime.

A POST-ASSAD INFLUENCE STRATEGY

The collapse of the Assad regime has not ended Iran's investment in Syria, however. Rather, it has forced Tehran to examine new avenues by which to work with and in the country. These strategies are still in formation, but certain potential scenarios are already clear.

The first involves a sectarian approach. In an echo of its efforts in Iraq in recent years, Iran could pursue stronger connections with Shi'ite and Alawite minorities in western Syria, who harbor shared fears of marginalization and oppression by the Sunni factions now in political control of Damascus. Indeed, recent sectarian clashes in various cities and towns throughout the country point to the continued potential of religiously-based violence.[19] By fostering alliances with Shi'ite and Alawite factions that now feel threatened by the country's new Sunni-dominated order, Iran may be able to cultivate a network of loyalist forces and proxies, and thereby to maintain its influence in Syria even in the absence of a cooperative ruling government.

Indeed, there are signs that this is already taking shape. A new militant group called the Islamic Resistance Front in Syria, or "Uli al-Baas," has emerged publicly in recent months.[20] While little is publicly known about its origins, analysts have noted that the group's logo, which includes an arm holding a rifle, bears a striking similarity to the iconography of Lebanon's Hezbollah, the Afghan Fatimiyoun brigades, and Iraqi militias loyal to Iran. "Uli al-Baas certainly looks and feels like an Iran-supported militia info-ops platform, designed to give the impression (possibly accurate) that a pantheon of armed groups are activating to fight Israel and the new Syrian government," experts with the Washington Institute have concluded.[21]

The group's digital footprint only confirms this connection. Since late January, Uli al-Baas' messaging has been consistently amplified by social media channels connected with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, particularly Farsi-language ones.[22]

Another dimension of Iran's post-Assad strategy is military reconstitution. Tehran appears to be laying the groundwork for a counter-revolutionary insurgency by reorganizing remnants of Assad's military. Here, Iran might reorganize the hundreds of former regime soldiers who fled to Iraq into a counter-revolutionary force.

Indeed, in a development that largely escaped international notice, more than 2,000 Syrian troops fled to Iraq with their arms and equipment during the fall of Damascus. Initially disarmed and housed in a temporary camp in Rutba, western Anbar, these soldiers are now being returned to Syria in a quiet, coordinated process.[23] Harnessing these actors would potentially enable Iran to reestablish a presence in Syria – and thereby to exert a modicum of political influence over the country's direction.

Yet the extent of any such campaign will ultimately hinge upon Tehran. Will the Islamic Republic double down on its Syrian investments, or recalibrate its strategic calculus in light of Assad's fall? Much depends on whether the Iranian leadership still views Syria as a key part of its ideological and geopolitical project to encircle Israel and counter U.S. influence, even without a compliant ally in Damascus.

AN ENDURING STRATEGIC PRESENCE

The fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, then, did not signal the end of Iranian influence in Syria. Far from it. Despite the dramatic regime change that recently took place in Damascus, the Islamic Republic retains a deeply entrenched political, military, and ideological footprint in the country — one that is unlikely to be dislodged anytime soon. Tehran's investment in the Syrian theater to date has been immense, and includes thousands of IRGC and Quds Force personnel killed, billions of dollars funneled into regime stabilization, and an extensive network of proxy and ideological assets cultivated over more than a decade of conflict. The result is a durable presence that transcends any single regime.

In the wake of Assad's ouster, however, Syria has entered a new phase of instability. The interim Sunni-led government, despite growing backing from Gulf sponsors, is still struggling to establish authority. Alawite-majority regions like Latakia — once bastions of loyalist support for the Assad regime — have erupted in violence, in the process showing the fragility of the new regime's grip on power, as well as simmering sectarian tensions that will prove difficult to eliminate.

As a Shi'a power, Iran has long cultivated ties with Syria's Alawite minority. That relationship is grounded in shared survival interests and has been reinforced through decades of military collaboration. Those ties now form the basis of Tehran's strategy to retain influence. In a Syria fractured along ethnic and sectarian lines, Iran's support for vulnerable minorities — particularly the country's Alawites — provides it with both ideological leverage and operational cover to continue shaping events on the ground.

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