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**From Gaza to Damascus:
Reconfigurations in a New
Middle East**

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New Middle East*

Abstract:

The rapid collapse of the Syrian regime has surprised the international community. With Russian and Iranian assistance, al-Assad had managed to weather the effects of the Arab Spring and remain in power, controlling most of the country and containing opposition groups. The survival of the regime under Russian tutelage and Iranian interventionism was gradually accepted by its neighbours, who viewed it as the lesser evil. This could explain the normalization of relations with other Arab countries, the rapprochement with Turkey, or the deterrence exerted by Israel. This paper analyses the fall of al-Assad's regime in the context of a new reconfiguration of regional balances provoked by the Gaza War and outlines the potential implications this event may have for the future of the Middle East.

Keywords:

Syria – Assad – Israel – Hezbollah – axis of resistance

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Introduction

Until late November, Syria had remained relatively insulated from the geopolitical shockwaves triggered by Hamas' attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023. This was due to several factors: the military operations carried out by Israel in prior years with Russia's acquiescence had dissuaded Syria, and it lacked both the capacity and the will to open a new front on its southern border. Furthermore, the Syrian regime's actions toward Palestinians during the civil war had eroded its influence over the Palestinian cause¹ and caused internal strife within Hamas, dividing those aligned with the Tehran-Damascus axis from those favoring Riyadh or Qatar.

While both the Arab Spring in 2011 and the rise of Daesh two years later severely affected the country and weakened Bashar al-Assad's regime, the situation had stabilized by 2016 thanks to Russian intervention and the allied victory over Daesh. Despite severe internal challenges—a divided country, a devastated economy reliant on narcotics trafficking, a deteriorated military, endemic corruption, a state security apparatus controlled by organized crime, and brutal repression of opposition—the regime managed to survive. With Russian and Iranian military assistance, indirect Western approval and Turkish reluctant consent, the Syrian government regained control of most of its territory, normalized relations with several Arab countries, rejoined the Arab League, and improved ties with Turkey². However, 30% of the territory remained outside Damascus' control, divided between a vast northeast governed by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)³ and a small northwest dominated by various rebel groups, including Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

¹ Jonathan Stelee: "How Yarmouk refugee camp became the worst place in Syria", *The Guardian*, 5 March 2015, retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/mar/05/how-yarmouk-refugee-camp-became-worst-place-syria>

² Charles Lister: "Assad and Hezbollah hunker down in Syria", *Middle East Institute*, 15 November 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/assad-and-hezbollah-hunker-down-syria>

³ Established in 2015 around the People's Protection Units (YPG), this force was promoted by the United States to combat Daesh in northwestern Syria. Composed mainly of Kurds – although it also includes Arabs, Assyrians, Armenians, Turkmen, and Circassians – this militia was not only crucial in liberating Raqqa, the de facto capital of the Islamic State, but also in protecting the territories under Kurdish control from Syria and Turkey.

(HTS)⁴ and the Syrian National Army (SNA)⁵. These groups, with divergent political-ideological agendas, acted as Turkish proxies, armed and funded to advance Turkey's dual objectives of promoting an Islamist agenda and curbing Kurdish autonomy efforts in the northeast, where the Kurds sought to establish a secular, democratic, and federal Syria from Rojava.

This situation was partly due to the balance achieved between external powers and their proxies⁶ and Russia's strategy of isolating Syrian opposition in peripheral enclaves. Ironically, this approach empowered opposition groups by granting them quasi-state territorial autonomy. Additionally, with Obama's failed "red lines" in 2013 and Trump's strategic disengagement four years later, the United States left a vacuum quickly filled by Russia, which saw the Syrian war as an opportunity to restore its regional influence and oppose regime changes stemming from uprisings reminiscent of the "Colour Revolutions" which threatened its sway in Ukraine or Georgia. Putin's staunch support for al-Assad during the Syrian civil war secured Moscow's substantial political influence in the country, making it a stability guarantor and solidifying its physical presence in the Levant—crucial for counterbalancing Turkey's influence. Russia's presence materialized through Tartus and Khmeimim (Latakia) bases, pivotal for projecting power in the Mediterranean and Red Seas, establishing a foothold in the Middle East and Africa, and creating a potential Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) zone in the Eastern Mediterranean⁷.

⁴ Established in 2017 as a coalition of various Islamist rebel groups in Syria, HTS was led by Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, previously known as Jabhat al-Nusra. Due to its background, tactics, and nature, this actor continues to be regarded as a terrorist organization by the United States, Russia, and the European Union, among others. In this sense, while it is logical for Washington, Moscow, or Brussels to distrust Mohammed al Jawlan (the current leader of HTS and former emir of the Al Nusra Front) and be wary of the transitional government despite calls for calm from its leaders, it is important to emphasize that HTS not only contributed to eroding Daesh in Syria and prevented Al-Qaeda from establishing a new branch in the country, but also actively participated in the Syrian Salvation Government in Idlib. However, this pragmatism, whereby HTS discards transnational jihad while promoting Salafist values as a form of governance, may be the main leverage used by many countries to institutionalize these groups and recognize the interim Syrian government (Aaron Zelin: "The patient efforts behind Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham's success in Aleppo," *War on the Rocks*, 3 December 2024, retrieved from: <https://warontherocks.com/2024/12/the-patient-efforts-behind-hayat-tahrir-al-shams-success-in-aleppo/>

⁵ Established in 2017 under the auspices of Ankara, this force, whose ties to Turkey are evident, included various opposition factions to Assad's regime and primarily served as support for Turkish military operations in northern Syria to contain Kurdish militias and consolidate a security buffer between the two countries.

⁶ Indeed, to a greater or lesser extent, each power had its own proxy to project its power indirectly: Turkey could use the SNA and HTS (both with different levels of attribution); the United States the SDF; Iran the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and Hezbollah; and Russia the Syrian armed forces themselves.

⁷ Clara Rodríguez & Guillem Colom: "La geopolítica de las bases militares (V)", *Boletín del IEEE*, no. 8, 2017, pp. 1190-1209.

For its part, Tehran—the other pillar of al-Assad’s regime—kept Syria within the “axis of resistance,” ensuring territorial continuity from Tehran to Beirut. This continuity not only facilitated illicit trafficking from Lebanon and arms transfers from Iran and Russia to Hezbollah⁸ and Hamas but also maintained a de facto land border with Israel, essential for Iran’s deterrence strategy and regional power equilibrium. Turkey, in turn, had consolidated a buffer zone to contain the flow of Syrian refugees and combat Kurdish People’s Protection Units’ (YPG) advances, using HTS and SNA to further its politico-religious agenda and curb Kurdish expansion, respectively⁹. Amid this triangulation of forces, Israel played a crucial role in maintaining the old status quo, limiting Damascus’ capacity to unduly influence Lebanese politics or escalate through offensive capabilities supplied by Tehran¹⁰ via periodic airstrikes approved by Russia.

Turkey was dissatisfied with this status quo. In addition to being a staunch proponent of regime change in Damascus, it opposed Syria’s security situation, Russia’s excessive influence, and U.S. support for Kurdish militias. Ankara also believed Damascus avoided direct confrontation with the SDF, suggesting Syria might tolerate—or even militarily support—a Turkish offensive against the organization¹¹. This convergence of interests is rooted in Ankara’s view of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) as its principal national security threat, making the PKK’s presence and its military branch in northern Syria unacceptable to Ankara. Consequently, it seemed logical that both countries might align to achieve common objectives: for Damascus, increased control over its northern front, and for Ankara, degrading Kurdish opposition and facilitating the return of 3.5 million Syrian refugees currently in Turkey¹².

⁸ Marisa Sullivan: *Hezbollah in Syria*, Middle East Security Report 18, Washington DC: Institute for The Study of War, 2014.

⁹ To achieve this goal, Ankara not only used its proxies but also intervened directly with the Euphrates Shield operations (2016-17), Olive Branch (2018), or Spring Peace (2019)

¹⁰ Eden Kaduri: “The Campaign between the Wars in Syria: What Was, What Is, and What Lies Ahead”, *Institute for National Security Studies*, 6 March 2023, retrieved from: <https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/special-publication-060323.pdf>

¹¹ Samer al-Ahmed: “The impact of Turkish-Syrian normalization on the SDF”, *Middle East Institute*, 2 August 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/impact-turkish-syrian-normalization-sdf>

¹² Daniel Byman y Sloane Speakman. “The Syrian Refugee Crisis: Bad and Worse Options”, *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 39 no. 2, 2016, pp. 45-60.

The Echoes of the Gaza War and the Weakening of the Syrian Regime

In this geopolitical context, the events of October 7, 2023, triggered shockwaves that could reshape the balance of power across the Middle East. Syria has not been exempted from this upheaval. Despite being part of the “axis of resistance,” Syria distanced itself from any action against Israel during the Gaza War. Initially, this neutrality seemed attributable to Israel’s successful deterrence, as evidenced by statements from HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa, who recently affirmed he had no intention of initiating a conflict with Israel despite condemning the Israeli Defence Forces’ strikes intended to demilitarize Syria’s neighbour. However, the most significant explanatory factor appears to be al-Assad’s regime’s exhaustion—a regime weakened by civil war, sanctions, and corruption, standing on fragile ground. This fragility was evident in its failure to respond to the Israeli attack on Iranian diplomatic facilities in Damascus last April. This direct action, coupled with Israel’s October invasion of Lebanon, initiated a chain reaction that culminated two months later in al-Assad’s regime’s collapse¹³.

The successes of Israel’s external operations—such as the elimination of Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, attacks on Hezbollah’s pagers, and the assassination of Hassan Nasrallah—highlighted both the Israeli intelligence’s capability to penetrate axis regimes and its determination to carry out complex, direct operations. These actions restored Israel’s deterrent capacity while shredding the network woven by Iran and its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Iran’s lukewarm response to the degradation of Hezbollah’s entire command and control structure, its primary proxy, underscored both the alteration of the previous status quo and Israel’s dominance of escalation, marking the end of Tehran’s arena convergence strategy to undermine Israel and discredit the United States as the region’s chief security exporter.

Alongside the collapse of Syria and Iran’s proxy network, variables such as the breakdown of peace talks between Turkey and Syria; the November truce between Israel and Lebanon; Russia’s focus on Ukraine; the degradation of the Syrian army; and Trump’s imminent arrival form a constellation of factors shaping this offensive. Planned over a year ago with Ankara’s knowledge¹⁴, the Gaza War postponed it, and perhaps

¹³ Sonia Sánchez & Guillem Colom: “Irán e Israel y el complejo juego de la disuasión en zona gris”, *Documento de Opinión del IEEE*, no. 45, 2024, pp. 1-12.

¹⁴ Ragip Soylu: “Turkey’s Erdogan backs rebel offensive in Syria”, *Middle East Eye*, 6 December 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-erdogan-backs-rebel-offensive-syria>

Erdogan tacitly approved it, to increase his bargaining power with a Trump administration poised to withdraw forces from the country, thereby leaving Kurdish militias unprotected¹⁵.

Jointly executed by HTS (Operation “Repel the Aggression”) and the SNA (Operation “Dawn of Freedom”), the dual offensive began on November 29, two days after the Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire in Lebanon took effect. Initial estimates suggested this action focused on securing control of Aleppo to consolidate the Idlib enclave¹⁶—vital for creating a buffer zone between the Turkish border and Kurdish autonomy zones¹⁷.

However, the rapid fall of Aleppo and dramatic advances in Idlib and Hama against a crumbling army exposed the inherent fragility of the Syrian government and laid the groundwork for al-Assad’s regime’s subsequent collapse. It is not surprising that the Syrian Liberation Army (SFA) and Kurdish militias also joined the hostilities to maximize gains in anticipation of a regime change. This scenario likely surprised all belligerents, including the Syrian regime’s backers and the international community, which watched in astonishment as the country disintegrated. This unravelling began when rebel forces captured Homs, setting the stage for Damascus’ fall and al-Assad’s exile to Russia on Sunday, December 8th. On the same day, several strategically significant events occurred, including Moscow’s withdrawal of all its ships from Tartus¹⁸, Israel’s occupation of the “alpha line” dividing the Golan Heights and seizure of Mount Hermon to create a buffer zone, and the initiation of a selective strike campaign on Syrian arsenals to prevent their vast military stockpiles from falling into rebel hands.

Two days after al-Assad’s fall and exile, the opposition appointed a new transitional

¹⁵ Hassan Hassan & Michael Weiss: “The Backstory Behind the Fall of Aleppo”, *New Lines Magazine*, 2 December 2024, retrieved from: <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/the-backstory-behind-the-fall-of-aleppo/>. In this sense, we should remember that Trump ordered similar movements during his first term in office.

¹⁶ In this regard, it is necessary to consider the strategic relevance of these two enclaves and how the “Euphrates Shield” operation developed. (Yago Rodríguez: *Turquía contra el ISIS. La campaña por Al-Bab, 2016-2017*, Zaragoza: HRM ediciones, 2019).

¹⁷ Louisa Loveluck, Kareem Fahim & Susannah George: “Syrian rebels regrouped, seized on weakness of government’s key allies”, *The Washington Post*, 1 December 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/12/01/syria-rebels-assad-aleppo-russia-iran/>

¹⁸ Russia maintained five vessels (two Gorshkov-class frigates, one Grigorovich-class frigate, two auxiliary vessels, and one improved Kilo submarine) at this base. The auxiliary vessel Yelnya was the first to depart from Tartus on the 2nd. (Sam LaGrone: “Satellite Photos Show Russian Navy Exodus From Syria, Syrian Missile Boats Sunk at Pier”, *USNI News*, 10th December 2024, retrieved from: <https://news.usni.org/2024/12/10/satellite-photos-show-russian-navy-exodus-from-syria-syrian-missile-boats-sunk-at-pier>).

government. With a mandate extending until the 1st of March 2025, this Islamist-led administration, headed by Mohamed al-Bashir, faces numerous challenges, both internal and external. In this context, the actors accompanying this process will again find Syria a platform for projecting influence. Internally, the new government must address how to avoid the country's "Libyanization", combat corruption, revitalize an economy heavily reliant on narcotics trafficking, and build autonomous armed forces. Externally, it must confront the jihadist past of some members to achieve international acceptance and navigate the complex balance of regional and international powers seeking to exploit Syria's new scenario as an opportunity to project power and influence.

A Game of Winners and Losers

The fall of the Syrian regime represents another shock in the geopolitical earthquake reshaping the Middle East, which began with the tectonic shifts of October 7, 2023¹⁹. Iran is the biggest loser in this upheaval; with al-Assad's fall, it loses a key regional ally and witnesses the collapse of a strategy meticulously crafted over decades²⁰. Specifically, Tehran's corridor connecting Iran to its proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen disappears, depriving it of a vital lifeline for supporting Hezbollah, sustaining illicit Syrian and Lebanese flows, accessing the Mediterranean, or facilitating the transport of Russian and Iranian armaments²¹. With the loss of its two main arenas (Syria and Lebanon), Tehran's destabilizing influence remains confined to Iraq and Yemen, secondary arenas challenging to sustain without Syria. This marks the twilight of Iran's ideological, political, economic, strategic, and military power, encapsulated in its "axis of resistance," which has also been undermined by its failure to ensure allied regimes' survival. Iran's diminished deterrence capacity reduced Israeli military response thresholds, al-Assad's deposition, Hezbollah's weakening, and Trump's reemergence will reshape Iran's strategic calculations in the immediate future²². Iran now appears far less formidable than

¹⁹ Amanda Salcedo: "Las implicaciones de la caída de Al Assad", *Revista Ejércitos*, 10 December 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.revistaejercitos.com/opinion/las-implicaciones-de-la-caida-de-al-assad/>

²⁰ Hassan Ahmadian & Payam Mohseni: "Iran's Syria strategy: the evolution of deterrence", *International Affairs*, vol. 95 no. 2, 2019, pp. 341-364.

²¹ Garrett Nada y Mary Glantz: "Iran and Russia Are the Biggest Regional Losers of Assad's Fall", *United States Institute for Peace*, 12 December 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/12/iran-and-russia-are-biggest-regional-losers-assads-fall>

²² John Raine: "Iran's Strategic Limbo", *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 4 December 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/12/irans-strategic-limbo/>

at the war's outset, as its grey-zone strategy collapses under deliberate Israeli escalation. Consequently, the ayatollahs' regime faces a complex dilemma: accept the new status quo, abandoning regional ambitions and its capacity to counterbalance Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the U.S., refunding its asymmetric strategy or play its last card to preserve power—nuclear weapons²³. However, this move, driven by the regime's evident weakness, could provoke a pre-emptive strike by Jerusalem and Washington, potentially leading to its ultimate demise. Even if it doesn't, this perception of weakness increases Israel's and/or the U.S.'s temptation to forcibly promote regime change.

Russia is the other major loser in al-Assad's fall. With the bulk of its armed forces committed to Ukraine, Russia faces a significant geopolitical setback affecting its regional power projection, depending on Moscow's ability to regain access to the Tartus and Latakia bases. These bases are critical for maintaining its presence and influence in the Mediterranean, Red Sea, Middle East, and Africa, creating an A2/AD zone in the Eastern Mediterranean²⁴. Since the war in Ukraine began, these facilities have allowed Russia to smuggle grain and advance its destabilizing agenda. Although the bases' future remains uncertain, speculation has emerged about potential arrangements between the Syrian transitional government and Russia to maintain some military presence and counterbalance Turkey, the primary beneficiary of al-Assad's fall²⁵. However, most Russian military assets are being withdrawn from Syria²⁶, likely destined for Libya under Marshal Khalifa Haftar's control²⁷. In the absence of an agreement, Moscow may seek to

²³ Amos Harel: "As Syria Collapses, Will Iran Go for the Nuclear Bomb to Reclaim Regional Deterrence?", *Haaretz*, 8 December 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/2024-12-08/ty-article/.premium/as-syria-collapses-will-iran-go-for-the-nuclear-bomb-to-reclaim-regional-deterrence/>

²⁴ Mia Jankowicz & Thibaut Spirlet: "Russia's access to key military bases in Syria hangs in the balance, threatening its role in the region", *Business Insider*, 10 December 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-military-bases-syria-hangs-in-balance-threatening-regional-power-2024-12>

²⁵ Tuvan Gumrikcu, Suleiman Al-Khalidi & Guy Faulconbridge: "Exclusive: Russia pulling back but not out of Syria, sources say", *Reuters*, 15 December 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-pulling-back-not-out-syria-sources-say-2024-12-14/>

²⁶ Nonetheless, the last 23rd of December, one of the ships that sailed from the Baltic Sea to Tartus sunk in international waters close to Cartagena. Def Mon [@DefMon3]: "It's probably not Sparta, but Ursa Major which has been going 1-2 knots since yesterday morning. It's also not fleeing Syria, but going towards Syria, carrying two large cranes", *Twitter*, 23 December 2024, retrieved from: <https://x.com/DefMon3/status/1871213456290177242>

²⁷ Benoit Faucon and Lara Seligman: "Russia Withdraws Air-Defense Systems, Other Advanced Weaponry From Syria to Libya", *The Washington Post*, 18 December 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia-air-defense-bases-syria-libya-25810db0>. It is speculated that the S-300 and S-400 air defence systems were the first to leave the country by air, and by the end of December, more than 150 vehicles and 29 containers were still at the port of Tartus waiting to be picked up by Russian ships that were sailing to Syria (*Frontelligence Insight*: "Syria Withdrawal: Implications for

establish another base in Libya, Algeria, or Sudan or modify agreements for constructing the Russian industrial zone in Port Said (Egypt), suspended since the Ukraine War began, to preserve its Mediterranean presence and influence. However, such construction would take years, negatively impacting Russia's regional projection capacity and short-term soft power. Al-Assad's collapse without Moscow's intervention or ground forces' Turkish-supported withdrawal sends a message of weakness²⁸. This message, compounded by Russia's quagmire in Ukraine, will affect its allies and strategic partners.

While Iran and Russia are the primary losers of al-Assad's fall, Turkey emerges as the main winner. Despite being integrated into Western security architecture, Turkey pursues an autonomous foreign policy frequently at odds with its Western allies' interests, including those of the United States. While attention focuses on the erosion of the "axis of resistance," Iran's decline, or Israel's strengthened hegemony, a key consequence of this new status quo is Turkey's consolidated regional power and the shifting balance between Ankara, Tehran, and Moscow²⁹.

On the one hand, Turkey's sphere of influence in the Middle East and the Caucasus could expand at Iran's expense. Despite being Turkey's main gas supplier, Iran, after losing Syria, will struggle to prevent Azerbaijan—Turkey's ally in the Caucasus—from controlling the Zangezur corridor connecting the Nakhchivan region with the rest of Azerbaijan via Armenian territory. Should this occur, Tehran would lose its Caucasus projection and be encircled by a Turkey consolidating a commercial, strategic, energy, and political axis among Ankara, Yerevan, and Baku³⁰. On the other hand, Russia's departure from the Syrian equation could shift the Russo-Turkish relationship's centre of gravity to the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and Central Asia³¹, three regions increasingly

Ukraine and Russia", 19 December 2024, retrieved from: <https://frontelligence.substack.com/p/syria-withdrawal-implications-for>).

²⁸ *The Moscow Times*: "Russia Seeking Turkish Help Evacuating Soldiers From Syria", 9 December 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/12/09/russia-seeking-turkish-help-evacuating-soldiers-from-syria-reports-a87269>

²⁹ Dimitar Bechev: "What Does Regime Change in Syria Mean for Russian-Turkish Relations?", *Carnegie Politika*, 13th December 2024, retrieved from: <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/12/syria-russia-turkiye-relationships>

³⁰ Vali Nasr: "In Post-Assad Middle East, Iran's Loss Is Turkey's Gain", *Foreign Policy*, 10 December 2024, retrieved from: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/12/10/syria-assad-turkey-erdogan-iran-geopolitics-middle-east-rivalry/>

³¹ Vicken Cheterian: "Friend and Foe: Russia–Turkey relations before and after the war in Ukraine", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 34 no. 7, 2023, pp. 1271-1294.

influenced by Turkey. The Black Sea, once feared as “Russia’s lake”, no longer holds that status for Ankara as Ukraine has decimated Russia’s Black Sea fleet, forcing it to retreat to the Novorossiysk base. The Caucasus has witnessed Russia’s loss of its principal ally after the 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh war, with Armenia normalizing relations with Turkey, Azerbaijan’s traditional ally³². In this new landscape, Turkey competes with Israel, which also maintains strategic relations with Azerbaijan, grounded in a pragmatic triad of oil, arms, and intelligence³³. Israel buys half its oil from Baku, to which it has sold surface-to-surface missiles, Pegasus spyware, and Hermes and Harop drones—critical in its recent victory over Armenia. In return, Azerbaijan grants Israel access to territory and a sea bordering its main rival: Iran. Besides Azerbaijan, Israel also presents a significant adversary to Turkey’s interests in Cyprus, to which it recently sold its Barak-MX air defence system designed to intercept aircraft, drones, and cruise and ballistic missiles.

However, the most decisive counterbalance to Turkish neo-Ottoman hegemonic aspirations could come from the United States and its preference for a new Syria under the tutelage of its Gulf allies, particularly Saudi Arabia. Having learned from Iraq’s reconstruction lessons that opened the door to Iranian influence, Saudi Arabia might attempt to intervene in Syria’s reconstruction to curb Ankara. This would secure a political and economic influence space in the Levant while mitigating the domino effect HTS’ victory might have on other Islamist parties in the region, which, as during the Arab Spring, could be emboldened to launch a new wave of revolts against the reigning dynasties’ authoritarianism. Therefore, the coming months may witness manoeuvres between Turkey (aligned with Qatar) and Saudi Arabia (with the UAE) to enhance their influence and investments in Syria, using them as tools for containing instability and exerting political pressure.

If this scenario materializes, the Saudis may reconsider reviving the Abraham Accords, offering some form of resolution to the Palestinian issue—an opportunity to build legitimacy and gain soft power in the region, as demonstrated by Erdogan’s support for

³² Bechev, *op. cit.*

³³ Paradoxically, this same oil flows overland from Baku (Azerbaijan) to Ceyhan (Turkey), before being loaded onto tankers that head to the Israeli cities of Ashkelon and Haifa. Gur Megiddo, “How Strategic Relations With Azerbaijan Became the Business of the Lieberman Family”, *Haaretz*, 11 April 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-04-11/ty-article-magazine/.premium/how-strategic-relations-with-azerbaijan-became-the-business-of-the-lieberman-family/0000018e-c7d7-dd23-a3cf-e7d728a00000>

Hamas since October 7. In this new landscape, Israel must recalibrate the advantages of integration into this new Middle East against internal pressures to annex the West Bank and reoccupy Gaza, driven by its most extremist political forces.

The arrival of Trump to power on January 20 will test the capacity of the new U.S. administration to reconcile the competing interests at play in this complex arena. It will involve assessing the advisability of continuing the maximum-pressure policy towards Iran, seeking to contain Turkish aspirations, and reconciling its anti-interventionist narrative with its unwavering support for Israel and its security. The United States must not drop the ball. Challenging times lie ahead for the new Syria and for “Mr. Dealmaker.”

Conclusions

The swift collapse of the al-Assad regime and the failure of Iran’s strategy of arena’s convergence are both unforeseen consequences of the events of October 7, 2023. Turkey’s proxies, HTS and SNA, have exploited the opportunity opened by the degradation of Hezbollah by Israel, Iran’s erosion, or Trump’s election to go beyond the creation of a buffer zone in northern Syria, triggering the fall of the entire regime. Indeed, it is striking how incapable al-Assad’s principal backers—and the primary losers from his downfall—Iran and Russia—were in attempting to prevent or at least delay this outcome, thereby demonstrating themselves to be nothing more than paper tigers.

As outlined, Syria’s collapse can be attributed to a combination of external and internal factors. Externally, Syria’s role as a client state of Iran and a vehicle for Russian interests worked as long as both nations were willing to invest resources and deploy forces in the country. However, factors such as the war of attrition in Ukraine or the erosion of Hezbollah’s offensive capabilities led both regimes to prioritize force consolidation and reconfiguration over the toll of directly supporting a mafia-style, weakened regime with a narrow social base. Internally, the strategy of territorial control, which concentrated rebel enclaves in Syria’s borders, allowed these groups to centralize their power and increase their territorial autonomy as quasi-state actors. It also facilitated Turkish interventionism and support, largely driven by the empowerment of Kurdish forces in northeast Syria, which were instrumental in the fight against Daesh. Both rebel factions enjoy a broader social support base than al-Assad, who merely controlled state power resources and was heavily dependent on Russian-Iranian financial support or narcotics trafficking

revenues due to economic sanctions.

The collapse of the Syrian regime opens a new stage of competition for regional hegemony that will undoubtedly alter the previous status quo. In this hegemonic contest, actors such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel will attempt to assert their interests, with the United States—now free from Russian influence and facing a neutral China—acting as the region's main external stabilizer. However, while the outgoing U.S. president has celebrated al-Assad's fall and warned of the uncertainty facing the country due to some rebel groups' terrorist history, Trump has advocated for non-involvement in the matter, signalling the end of U.S. support for Kurdish movements. Governance and stability will be the two principal challenges shaping the immediate future of a post-al-Assad Syria, which, fuelled by the aspirations of external actors, could turn into another Libya.

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