


Fall of the Syrian regime: What are the regional consequences?

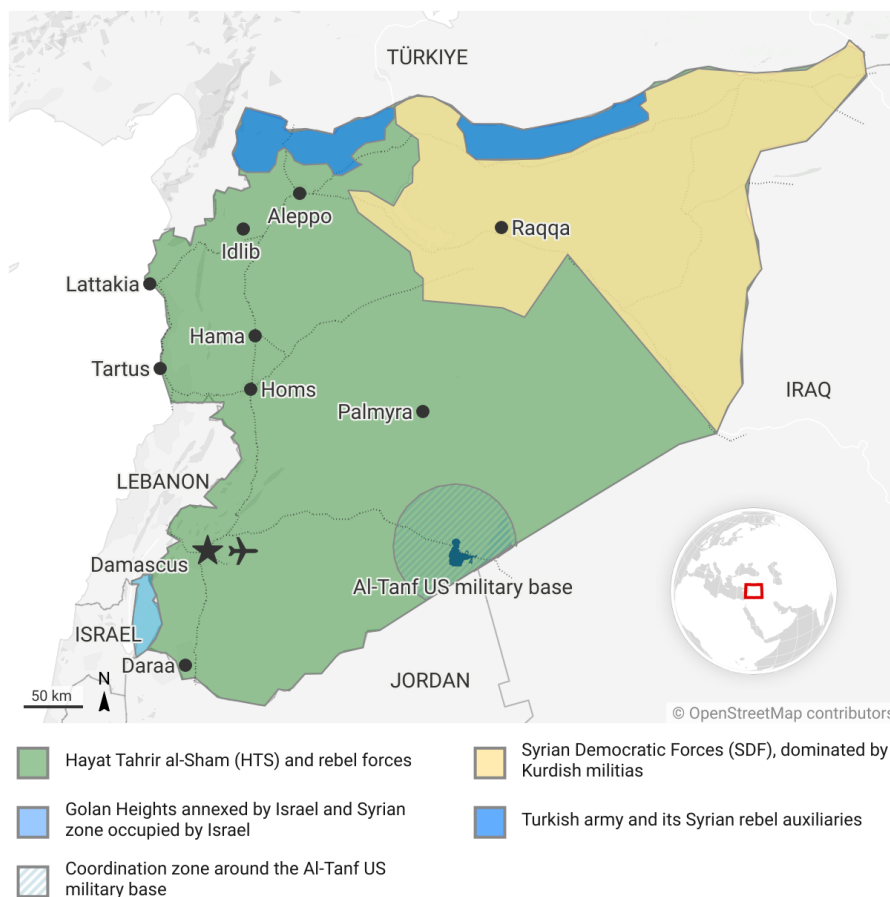
Situation Update 13 December 2024

 **Bashar al-Assad's regime was overthrown** in a rebel advance on Damascus led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) from Idlib Province 8 December. The offensive, launched by the rebel groups 27 November and approved by Türkiye, toppled the regime in large cities of "Useful Syria": Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Damascus. Although Bashar al-Assad's regime had been severely weakened by years of war, the capture of Damascus appears to have been made possible above all because of the regime having been abandoned by its main allies, namely Russia and Iran, who had however chosen to save it in 2015.

The collapse of the regime has brought hope to the Syrian people, who have been deprived of their political rights under the yoke of the regime, but it also heralds a **period of great uncertainty in a country that is still subject to a great deal of foreign interference** (from Türkiye, Israel, the United States, Russia, Iran, etc.). Although the arrival of the rebels in Damascus did not give rise to any major incidents, the breakdown of the Syrian army, accelerated by the Israeli bombardments, has created a **vast security vacuum in a number of regions**, especially in the south, east and centre of the country, where various armed groups could take advantage of the open ground. The new setup is expected to have **major regional repercussions**, reaching beyond Syria.

Syria

Map dated 13 December 2024



Carte: Scutum Security First (SSF) • Créé avec Datawrapper

Fall of the Syrian regime: What are the regional consequences?

Situation Update 13 December 2024



Lebanon

In view of its political history and its geographical borders, as well as its cultural and societal links with the Levant, **Lebanon is the country in the region the most affected by the fall of the Assad regime.** Although it represents a **historic opportunity** for the future of the country, which has virtually never recovered from the Civil War (1975-1990) partly because of **continued Syrian interference** (military occupation, targeted assassinations, growing strength of Hezbollah), there are many obstacles that could prevent such an opportunity from becoming a reality. The Assad regime was the **central link between Iran and Hezbollah.** Without this connection, which has been undermined **by a decade of Israeli bombardments** and their escalation in recent months rather than by the lightning advance of the anti-Assad rebels on Damascus, Hezbollah finds itself in a **position of unprecedented isolation** in Lebanon since its creation in 1982.

Such isolation, combined with the **targeting of its financial resources** and the **elimination of its historic warlords** during the latest **Israeli offensive in Lebanon** (23 September to 27 November 2024), could force the Shiite militia to implement the provisions of the Taif Agreement (1989) and UN resolutions providing for its **demilitarisation.** In Lebanon, the army high command, a large part of civil society and important political players, mainly within the sovereigntist bloc, are calling for this solution, particularly in the run-up to the **presidential election scheduled for 9 January 2025.** A potential compromise in the short term could be to **save Hezbollah politically as a party,** as it remains intrinsically linked to many of the country's leading figures and institutions and cannot therefore bear sole responsibility for the collapse of the Lebanese state.

Although supported by the West and Gulf monarchies, the implementation of such a compromise could, however, be hindered by **internal reluctance on the part of Hezbollah and its allies** (in particular the SSNP), whose most radical supporters have reportedly allowed **hundreds of Assad regime army officers, in particular military intelligence officers, to escape to Lebanon** in recent days during the fall of Hama, Homs and Damascus, according to several Lebanese media sources. Therefore, the possibility that **Israel could renew the 60-day ceasefire** with Hezbollah (until 27 January 2025, when Donald Trump will officially enter office) is all the more **uncertain.** The plan to demilitarise Hezbollah will also require the creation of an incorruptible Lebanese state, supported by an army and spared from hegemonic foreign interference, a situation that the country has never experienced since its independence.



Iran

With the fall of the Assad dynasty, **the Iranian regime loses its most solid and loyal alliance of circumstance in the region,** born of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), and sees its existential crisis increase. In view of this further weakening of the Axis of Resistance, **Supreme Leader of the Revolution Ali Khamenei's succession has once again become a central issue,** with the branch of the regime under the influence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) seeing its strategy undermined.

The reformist wing, which has returned to the presidency, advocates for the resumption of international negotiations on nuclear issues and sanctions but has lost credibility with some of the

Fall of the Syrian regime: What are the regional consequences?

Situation Update 13 December 2024



supreme leader's advisers following the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), signed by Donald Trump in 2018.

What is more, when faced with the long-lasting popular protests within Iranian society, the regime could be gambling with its survival. It could potentially be for this reason that in recent weeks the regime has renewed the **nuclear threat** in the hope that it will not find itself at a disadvantage in the event of talks with the new Trump administration. The latter may want to be the instigator of an **agreement with Iran that fully satisfies Israel and the Gulf monarchies**.

Therefore, the **scenario of an open conflict with Iran is unlikely**, given that Israel has finally managed to strike the Iranian regime through its bombing campaign in Syria, which precipitated the fall of Bashar al-Assad, as promised in Benjamin Netanyahu's speech announcing the ceasefire in Lebanon. As for the Gulf countries, they will be intransigent in the face of any Israeli military campaign that risks damaging their security environment, even if it means **accepting geopolitical compromises**, particularly on the situation in the Middle East, **that do not obstruct the financial implementation of their withdrawal from hydrocarbons**.



Gulf Countries

The fall of the Bashar al-Assad's regime indirectly poses a major challenge for the monarchies in the Gulf, forcing them to reassess their strategies with regards to Syria. Although differences exist between them, notably with regards to Qatar and its Saudi and Emirati neighbours, the current situation provides both **opportunities for cooperation** and **issues of concern**. **Qatar**, which had broken its relations with Damascus in 2011, has warned that Syria must not fall into complete chaos, and it could try to strengthen its influences by playing a **central role in Syria's reconstruction**. The **United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia**, engaged in normalisation efforts with Damascus for several months, have adopted a more cautious approach. Saudi Arabia has announced that it is in contact with all Syrian parties and Türkiye in order to safeguard Syria's sovereignty and avoid instability, while a senior Emirati official has urged the Syrian people to strive to avoid chaos.

Meanwhile, **Kuwait and Oman** are yet to issue official statements on the upheaval, choosing a more wait-and-see approach in line with their usual **cautious diplomatic stance**. As for the **King of Bahrain**, he has said that he is ready to cooperate with the new authorities. Nevertheless, the different states do have shared concerns related to the growing influence of Islamist groups such as HTS and the risks of regional instability. However, such regional developments could provide the monarchies with an opportunity to **strengthen their cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council in contrast to what they did at the start of the Syrian crisis in 2011**, while continuing to **distance themselves from Iranian influence in the Middle East and, in the longer term, Iraq**.



Irak

Contrary to the other members of the Axis of Resistance, the **pro-Iran Iraqi militias could eventually take advantage of the instability in Syria to boost their legitimacy** in protecting the Iraq-Syria border. Although they face regular criticism within the Irasi political arena for their affiliation with the IRGC,

Fall of the Syrian regime: What are the regional consequences?

Situation Update 13 December 2024



between 2014 and 2018 the militias, assembled within the Hashd al-Shaabi, enabled the territories seized by the Islamic State (IS) group, whose potential resurgence amidst the Syrian chaos is today Baghdad's main fear, to be recaptured. On the other hand, the pro-Iran militias will most certainly have to act without provoking an Israeli reaction, as the **Jewish state no longer hesitates to target Iraqi territory**, even less so under the Trump administration. It is worth noting that the first known Israeli strike on Iraqi territory since the one against the Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981 dates back to 2019.



Türkiye

Türkiye has naturally benefited from the fall of the Syrian regime, especially with regards to domestic politics, given that it endorsed the HTS offensive on Aleppo. The introductions of **conditions for the return of the 3 million Syrian refugees to Syria** now represents both a **political and popular consensus in Türkiye**, after having divided Turkish society and the main political parties, including the AKP and CHP, for several years.

The Kurdish territories in the northeast of Syria are at threat from the advance of Turkish army auxiliaries, which could however be slowed by **the necessity of maintaining a degree of stability in the Iraq-Syria border area, demanded by Baghdad and the United States in particular**. In the wake of its different military operations in Syria (2016-2017, 2018, 2019) and in accordance with the Adana Agreement signed with Hafez al-Assad in 1998, Türkiye had imposed a de facto **buffer zone at the Syrian border**, which allowed it to **significantly weaken the armed wing of the PKK present in the southeast of Turkey**. In fact, with the current territorial reorganisation underway in Syria, Türkiye has the opportunity to expand the buffer zone, but although President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is seeking to permanently undermine "Rojava", he will still have to **deal with Western strategic interests in the region**, particularly in the light of an unstable Syria, which is likely to encourage the reconstruction efforts of the Islamic State (EI) group.



Jordan

Finally, Jordan is probably the most concerned of Syria's neighbours following the capture of Damascus by the Islamists. In the last legislative elections in September 2024, **the country's leading Islamist opposition party made significant progress**, winning 31 seats out of 41 in parliament reserved for political parties. The **Islamic Action Front (IAF, linked to the Muslim Brotherhood)** managed to capitalise on **public anger at Israel's war against Hamas** to achieve its best score to date. Jordan's central authorities remain stable thanks to the **political power of tribes**, but the developments underway in Syria could **upset some regional tribal balances**.

In addition to the **many uncertainties surrounding the ability and willingness of HTS to govern Syria**, which remains territorially fragmented, the post-Assad era will very probably herald a **new strategic balance in the Middle East**. This could come at the expense of resolving the fundamental conflicts of regional geopolitics, first and foremost the **Israel-Palestine conflict**.