

Why Al-Assad Fell

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The dictator's rigidity at the negotiating table and within Syrian society left him with scant support when he needed it most, giving Washington a window for pushing a Syrian-led transition and cutting Iran's axis for good.

The extraordinary collapse of the Assad regime over the weekend is a historic victory for the Syrian people, who for over a half-century have suffered under the Assad family's brutal authoritarian rule. It will undoubtedly pose challenges and create opportunities for the United States and its allies in the Middle East and beyond.

Understanding what led to the regime's collapse will be key to putting the country back together and achieving the elusive goals of successive U.S. administrations: cutting off Iran's ability to project power across Syria to Lebanon and Israel, and bringing American forces home from their long deployments in Syria.

At the heart of President Bashar al-Assad's fall was his government's rigidity and unwillingness to keep up with a rapidly changing Syrian society. After he came to power in 2000 following the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad, Mr. al-Assad promised to change one of the world's most brutal dictatorships. He urged Syrians to respect one another's views and pledged domestic reforms to accommodate large waves of young Syrians. Encouraged by these pledges, presidents, kings and queens courted Mr. al-Assad and his glamorous wife, Asma, with the goal of achieving Arab-Israeli peace and breaking Syria's longstanding alliance with Iran.

Meanwhile, in Syria, not much changed. While the regime tolerated some dissent in the first year of Mr. al-Assad's rule, what came after was an ambiguous authoritarian Potemkin reform process to pave the way for trade and other activities in Syria, but which had no legal foundation. Syrians were forced to pay bribes to regime officials, making it one of the most corrupt business environments in the world. The police state continued to arrest opponents, and repression and torture continued for the remainder of Mr. al-Assad's chaotic rule, while the economy plummeted,

sending a vast majority of the population into poverty.

For those of us who engaged with the al-Assads, it was a puzzling experience. In meetings they would promise reforms in Syria's domestic and international policies while asking for patience to carry out changes. It was a seemingly reasonable request, given the daunting task of transforming a centrally planned former Soviet satellite state.

But shortly thereafter, something contradictory would occur that would call the al-Assads' promises into question. In the spring of 2010, American negotiators thought they had achieved Mr. al-Assad's buy-in on a peace agreement with Israel that would return the Golan Heights to Syria's control in return for Mr. al-Assad distancing Syria from Iran and cutting its supply lines to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Instead, satellite images taken around that time emerged showing that the Syrian Army was possibly training Hezbollah activists on how to use Scud missiles—strategic weapons that can carry conventional and chemical payloads with the potential to destroy large parts of Israeli cities—at a Syrian base.

Israel's weakening of Iranian military capabilities in Syria and Lebanon following the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack was another critical factor. Over the past year, Israeli bombing of Iranian weapons depots in Syrian territory intensified, and then over the past two months intensified further, as Israel struck far and wide against Iranian targets in Syria.

Next door in Lebanon, Israel has destroyed much of Hezbollah's military capabilities and its leadership, including killing its leader, Hassan Nasrallah. Unlike in 2012, when Hezbollah came to Mr. al-Assad's rescue against rapidly gaining insurgents, Hezbollah had few shock troops available to help fend off the surprise offensive led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Sunni based Islamist opposition group that helped overthrow Mr. al-Assad over the weekend.

Perhaps the least publicly understood factor in Mr. al-Assad's quick demise was Moscow's quiet exasperation. In public, Russia backed the Syrian leader to the hilt and blocked repeated Western resolutions at the United Nations dealing with humanitarian aid and investigations into his regime's **suspected continued chemical weapons** (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/russia-uses-veto-end-un-investigation-chemical-attacks>) use. Over the years, Russian aircraft based in Syria not only bombed armed opposition forces but also civilian areas under the guise of fighting Islamic terrorism.

Behind the scenes, however, Russian representatives were frustrated by Mr. al-Assad's unwillingness to make concessions at the negotiating table that would politically shore up what Russia and Iran had helped him claw back on the battlefield. When countries in the region re-initiated engagement with Mr. al-Assad over a settlement in Syria, he demanded full capitulation up front in the form of a withdrawal of Turkish forces and, over the past few months, a commitment from countries including the United Arab Emirates and Israel to lobby the United States to allow sanctions to expire. When Aleppo fell to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham 10 days ago, Moscow, which had diverted resources to the war in Ukraine and was fed up with Mr. al-Assad, elected not to bomb H.T.S. and its supporters back into Idlib, as it had in the past.

With H.T.S. and other Syrian opposition forces now in control of the Syrian capital, and regional countries vying for influence, the United States and its Arab partners must work to ensure the international community recommits to the implementation of **U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254** (<https://press.un.org/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm>) from 2015, which outlines the terms of a cease-fire, transitional government and national elections. It is the only path that has the potential to produce a democratic and representative form of government in Syria for the first time in decades—no small feat in a country that has seen instability and dictatorship since its founding.

Achieving this Syrian-led solution has the potential to cut Iran's axis of resistance once and for all. The Syrian people will never forget the role of Tehran and its proxies in helping the al-Assads suppress the Syrian uprising and turn a revolution into nearly 14 years of national horror. And it could allow the United States to withdraw forces from Syria

and bring its servicemen and women back home.

This article was originally published [on the New York Times website](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/10/opinion/syria-assad-regime-collapse.html).

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