

# Washington celebrates Al-Qaeda's victory in Syria



By Kyle Anzalone  
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OPINION

Washington finally completed its dirty war in Syria. What started as a CIA covert operation to smuggle weapons and jihadists from Libya to Syria has resulted in Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad being deposed and replaced by Abu Mohammad al-Julani. Julani found his way to Damascus by rising through the ranks of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Inspired by the 9/11 attack, he joined AQI to fight against the US during the Iraq war. Julani was a close associate of both AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and founded the Al-Qaeda affiliate group in Syria in coordination with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. As more Americans became aware of the CIA's covert operation in Syria to back jihadists, Julani changed his organization's name from Al Nusra to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, then Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) to obscure his group's Al-Qaeda links. However, HTS was no moderate group and focused on bringing ISIS forces under Julani's control following the collapse of Baghdadi's caliphate.



This undated photo released in 2016 shows Abu Mohammad al-Julani (R), leader of Syria's Al-Qaeda affiliate, discussing battlefield details with commanders in Aleppo, Syria. AP

Even the US State Department was not fooled by Julani's rebrands. In 2017, the State Department issued a \$10 million reward for the capture of Julani. For most of the past decade, Julani has ruled over northwestern Syria under the protection of Washington's NATO ally, Turkey. Had Turkish troops not set up outposts surrounding Julani's territory, Syria, and its Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah allies may have eliminated the lingering jihadist threat. During this period, Julani's Idlib province was the largest safe haven for jihadists on the planet. Since the ISIS caliphate was defeated, the frontlines in the Syrian War largely froze. Still, Washington and its allies engaged in a relentless assault on Damascus. Turkey protected jihadists on Syria's northern border, allowing them to terrorize the Kurds that lived there. Israel engaged in weekly strikes on Assad and his allied forces. Over the past year, those strikes have escalated to hit civilian and diplomatic targets in downtown Damascus. Tel Aviv even bombed the Aleppo Airport following a major earthquake, preventing aid from reaching the desperate citizens. The US illegally occupied the eastern quarter of Syria, exploiting and stealing some of Damascus's most valuable resources. In this region, the US allowed the Kurds to lord power over the local Arabs. The Kurdish SDF runs a massive torture prison known as the al-Hol

camp, and local citizens protest the Kurds conscripting their children as young as 15. Washington waged an economic war on Syria, deliberately meant to prevent Damascus from rebuilding its war-damaged infrastructure. The US also bombed Assad's allied forces near the Iraq-Syria border. Additionally, Turkey and Ukraine used this period to bolster the HTS forces. The long-frozen conflict thawed rapidly over the past two weeks. Seemingly in coordination with the announcement of a truce in Lebanon, Julani's forces went on the march, first seizing Aleppo. Reported to be aided by advanced drones, HTS made quick work of any Syria forces that resisted, and on Sunday, Julani arrived in Damascus and declared the "mujahideen" won the war. And Washington celebrated. "Syria is free. The rebels won. The people liberated themselves from tyranny. Freedom won," the Washington Post's Josh Rogin wrote on X. "Russia, Iran, Hezbollah & Assad lost. Historic. The road ahead for Syria won't be easy. But it will be better than in the past. The world should celebrate Syria's liberation & help it succeed." Post columnist Max Boot wrote, "Assad — after a quarter-century of ruthless rule — had fled the country. Syria was free at last." "The fall of Assad. On some days, one can believe that while the arc of the moral universe is long, it bends toward justice,"

neocon Bill Krystal wrote on X. Of course, what happened to Syria is not about the Syrians. The real goal of Washington was to weaken Damascus because they believed it would weaken Moscow, Tehran, and Hezbollah. What happens next in Syria is unlikely to be good for many of the minority groups that enjoyed some level of protection under Assad. However, Washington and its allies are swooping in like hungry vultures to feast on the remains of Syria. Shortly after Assad left Damascus, in Tel Aviv, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced Israel would be seizing a "buffer zone" in southwestern Syria. Turkey also launched air strikes on a Kurdish-held city in northern Syria. No doubt, in the coming days, we will hear crowing from the hawks in Washington about their triumph in Syria by severing Tehran's land connection to



Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon. In the White House, Biden's staff is no doubt discussing how to exploit Assad's downfall as far as possible; this includes attempts to remove Russia from its military bases along Syria's Mediterranean coast. The biggest losers in Syria are the Syrian people, who, for nearly a decade and a half, have been subject to a brutal and complex war that shows no signs of ending. They have been bombed by a seemingly unending number of countries, all with their unique geopolitical interests. The Syrian people have been intentionally starved and impoverished by the US to bring about Assad's downfall. No doubt Julani will come with his own likely oppressive tyranny. Among the other losers are the American people. More American lives and treasure were wasted on a project to dispose of Assad. In Iraq and Libya, this policy caused unimaginable suffering for the locals. The top threat is that our government has empowered the only true enemies of the American people. Iran, Russia, North Korea, Venezuela, Cuba, Assad's Syria, etc. all present no threat to the American homeland. However, now an Al-Qaeda terrorist sits on the throne in Damascus, and Washington's support for Tel Aviv's genocide in Gaza has given him an endless supply of anti-American hatred.

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## Turkey, fall of Assad: Today, tomorrow



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OPINION EXCLUSIVE

Regardless of the ongoing crisis in Syria and the nature of the Syrian regime's structure, the demographic fabric of this country had made the fall of Bashar al-Assad's government an inevitable matter, one that was bound to happen sooner or later. With Hezbollah, the most crucial factor in the stability of the Damascus government, stepping back, Bashar al-Assad lost his main support. Within less than a month, Turkey found itself an opportunity to step in as the key state that facilitated the logistics of the fall of Bashar al-Assad. This was done through both overt and covert support for Mohammed al-Julani, effectively dismantling the Ba'athist government.

Today, besides Julani, Erdogan is also pleased with the fall of Assad, and the Turkish government considers itself victorious against Iran. While this perspective largely aligns with the realities on the ground, one must wait and see what tomorrow brings and not be overly satisfied with today's outcomes. If the fall of Assad does not lead to the unity and cooperation of various ethnic and religious groups in Syria, it could, in the long term, inflict the greatest damage on Turkey, given that it shares the longest border with Syria. Turkey has faced the most serious Kurdish crisis in the region over the past four decades. At times, the conflict between the government and the Kurds has resembled more of a civil war than a conflict with a single group. The Kurdish crisis, which has been the most significant security issue for Turkey, both in the time of Ataturk and now under Erdogan, remains the country's primary security concern. Turkey, as a supporter of Julani, will certainly demand from the post-Assad Damascus to confront the Kurds and put an end to their autonomy. This could be a catalyst for a widespread and extensive conflict, not only in Syria but also with potential spillover into Iraq and beyond. The Kurds in Syria are a trump card for the United States. They are one of the key players in the Middle East game. Washington, by playing the Kurdish card, can make the return of Assad's days into a wish for Erdogan. We must wait and see.



A poster of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is held aloft as the fall of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad is celebrated in Istanbul, Turkey, on December 8, 2024. KEMAL ASLAN/AFP

## Drawbacks of playing role in Syria for Turkey, Qatar



By Jafar Haghpanah  
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OPINION EXCLUSIVE

Without a doubt, the current instantaneous winners of the developments in Syria are Turkey and Qatar. However, the US should be considered the long-term winner as it has achieved the greatest gains with the least cost and can still function as a playmaker and regulator of relations among all powers, whether allies or rivals. Accordingly, the role played by Turkey and Qatar will also, to some extent, be assessed under the general criterion that waits to see how alliances and coalitions at the level of the international system would shape new security arrangements in West Asia.

For Turkey, which is currently a regional power and indeed playing the role of an emerging power, future developments in Syria will be a mix of threats and opportunities. Although, for now, it has the upper hand compared to its rivals including Iran, Egypt, and other powers, the important issue is to consolidate these gains and have them recog-

nized. This has been a problem that Iran has also faced over the past years. In other words, despite having the upper hand, Iran has struggled with consolidating these gains and having them recognized in the eyes of other players. This would also be largely true for Qatar. However, Turkey will face greater challenges compared to Qatar. This

is because, from a security perspective, the internal issues of Syria are intricately linked with Turkey's internal and territorial security. Issues such as the presence of Kurds, the activities of terrorist and extremist groups, the fragile state of the Syrian government, and Syrian refugees complicate the situation, causing Turkey to face serious

challenges. It should be noted that Turkey cannot bear the exorbitant economic costs of a long-term presence in Syria. Syria is not a country with abundant natural resources and is not as tempting as Iraq. Instead, it would require investment. In this regard, it is left to be seen to what extent Turkey can negotiate and share these costs with other players, including Qatar, so that they can collectively advance this project. Otherwise, in the long term, the serious problems of a war-torn and devastated Syria could unravel all of Turkey's machinations. Therefore, in the long run, the current situation, which is somewhat of a honeymoon for Turkey and Qatar, will not continue.



A militant from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a jihadist organization affiliated with Al-Qaeda, raises the Turkish flag on the Aleppo Citadel after the militants took over the city of Aleppo, Syria. The image was welcomed by the daughter of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on X (formerly, Twitter). X