

## Another fall



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OPINION  
EXCLUSIVE

In the spring of 2011, about 13 years ago, a group of young Syrians in the city of Daraa, southwestern Syria, drew graffiti criticizing the Assad regime on the walls of schools, which led to a significant government crackdown. Afterward, protesters took to the streets, and the "Arab Spring" expanded in Syria as well. However, the society and government of Syria were very different from those in Tunisia and even Egypt. The Syrian people paid a heavy price for their democratic aspirations. Millions fled their cities and country during the war that came after, and thousands of them drowned in the Mediterranean Sea, never achieving their dream of freedom.

The ruling minority in Syria, against the will of the majority of the country's population, maintained an ineffective and dependent regime. Ironically, however, the Assad government considered itself independent of popular support and thus suppressed its opponents.

The demographic composition of the country provided a suitable ground for regional and extra-regional powers to compete. The power equations among these actors, after October 7 and the expansion of Israeli military operations in West Asia, were transformed with Turkey's active planning in such a way that the fundamentalist Islamic forces, backed by all-out support from Assad's opponents, set the stage for his fall.

The unlimited power of Assad and the widespread suppression of his opponents kept him from recognizing the signs of change in the power dynamics in the region and the shift in the approach of countries like Russia, his traditional ally. Russia, facing more serious conditions in the conflict with Ukraine and needing to negotiate with its powerful rivals, has withdrawn its support for Assad to focus on more important arenas.

No doubt, the rapid transformations in Syria have made it clearer that governments relying on external equations and assessments are vulnerable. Today, the governments of West Asia are more than ever in need of the approval of their country's people, a factor that ensures their national security, progress, and development.



A man raises his hand as he stands on the spot where the fallen statue of Syrian deposed president Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, used to be in Raqqqa Province, eastern Syria.

● HAMID KHATIB/REUTERS

# Iran 'lost faith' in Assad before his ouster: Experts

By Najmeh Bozorgmehr, Andrew England & Mehul Srivastava  
Journalists

OPINION

Iran had lost faith in now-deposed Syrian president Bashar al-Assad before his fall from power, according to analysts and insiders, and its foreign minister told him that Tehran could no longer send more forces to support his regime.

When Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi visited Damascus last week, days after Syria's second-largest city of Aleppo fell to the rebels, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad claimed that "his retreat from Aleppo was tactical and that he remained in control," said an insider in Tehran's government.

"Araghchi responded that Iran was no longer in a position to send forces to support him anyway. But we did not expect the collapse to come so quickly or expose such hollowness in his regime. This came as a shock to us, too."

Saeed Laylaz, an analyst close to the reformist government of Masoud Pezeshkian, said: "Assad had become more of a liability than an ally, which means his time had run out. Defending him was no longer justifiable, even if it marked a major setback for Iran." "Continuing to support him simply didn't make sense and would have had unaffordable costs."

Iranian officials viewed Assad as increasingly unreliable, if not outright treacherous, while analysts and insiders accused him of failing to prevent Israeli strikes on Iranian targets in his country. The insider said there had been long-standing frustration with Assad in Tehran. "For more than a year, it was clear his time had passed. He had become an obstacle, a liability — some even called him a betrayer. His inaction cost us dearly, and he aligned himself with regional actors who promised him a future that never materialised."

Some within Iran's government believed Assad had begun courting Arab states such as the United Arab Emirates, lured by promises of post-war reconstruction aid in exchange for distancing himself from Iran, said analysts and politicians. In the aftermath of Assad's fall to insurgents led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a Sunni rebel group, recriminations have mounted within Tehran's leadership. "People within his regime were leaking information about the whereabouts of Iranian commanders," the insider claimed. "Assad turned his back on us when we needed him most."

A foreign diplomat said that Iranians and some Syrian loyalists "seem to have moved towards Iraq". They said that members of Iran's elite Revolutionary

Guards, who have been present in Syria for more than a decade, have been leaving, along with diplomats and families, "in large numbers over the past several days".

The speed of the offensive shocked observers, achieving in less than two weeks what opposition forces had failed to accomplish in 13 years of devastating war. Tehran had long derided HTS as "terrorists" aligned with US and Israeli interests.

Assad's two main backers — Russia and Iran — did little to help him as the endgame approached. Russia has been preoccupied with its war in Ukraine, and Iran with its conflict with Israel that shifted from shadow operations to open confrontation. That conflict added to more than a decade of debilitating US sanctions to badly deplete Iran's financial and military resources.

For now, Tehran is taking a cautious approach, waiting to assess the intentions of Syria's new rulers. Iran's Foreign Ministry has called for Syria's "territorial integrity" to be respected and has signalled a willingness to work with the UN to address the crisis.

Restoring influence in Syria and Leba-

non will be an immense task for Tehran. In Syria, Israeli air strikes over the past year killed at least 19 Iranian commanders and targeted facilities critical to Tehran's regional operations. In Lebanon, Hezbollah — its most powerful backed regional group — has been hard hit by Israel's campaign, which assassinated senior leaders and targeted its infrastructure, weaponry, and civilian affiliates ahead of a cease-fire agreed last month.

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi insisted on Sunday that Hezbollah would remain resilient. He told state TV that the group had sufficient weapons to sustain itself "for one or two years" while exploring alternative supply routes.

Tehran is equally concerned about potential spillover into Iraq, its western neighbour, where Shia armed groups remain a linchpin of its regional policy. Asghar Zarei, an analyst close to the regime, said that Assad had "misbehaved" since the Hamas-Israel war in October 2023, without giving details.

"Unfortunately, everything we built over 40 years fell apart overnight," he said on state television. "Rebuilding our position will be extremely difficult. We must ensure this does not happen in

Iraq or Yemen. It's time to tighten our belts elsewhere."

Some Iranian analysts argue that cooperation with HTS, despite the group's Sunni Islamist orientation, could help Iran maintain some influence. Ali Motahhari, a former parliamentarian, called for pragmatic engagement.

"We should negotiate with HTS," he said, noting that the militant group, while opposed to Shias, also shared Iran's opposition to Israel.

Israel does not expect Iranian influence in its back yard to melt away. "To say that Iran is retreating in Syria, or Hezbollah is running away, is premature," said a senior Israeli official. "There are plausible scenarios where we still have to deal with Iran on our Syrian border for another decade."

Hardliners in Iran have pushed for an aggressive response. Ahmad Naderi, a hardline MP, suggested that Tehran must simultaneously "revive the injured resistance front" and conduct a nuclear weapons test to reassert its regional position.

Others urge caution. "Iran cannot do much in the region for now," said Laylaz. "Rebuilding Hezbollah and assessing the new Middle Eastern order will take time. Until then, Iran must tread carefully."

The full article first appeared on The Financial Times.



Rebel fighters are seen near a defaced portrait of Syrian deposed president Bashar al-Assad in Daraa, Syria, on December 7, 2024.

● SAM HARIRI/AFP