

## INTERVIEW

In less than a month, the West Asia region has seen major developments. First, there was the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah after the former started massacring the Lebanese civilians and destroying their homes and infrastructure. Then, an Al-Qaeda affiliate led the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) militant group in capturing city after city in Syria. Syrian president Bashar al-Assad soon left Damascus for Moscow, hanging a huge question mark over the future of his country. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi sat with the Lebanese newspaper Al-Nahar to discuss these events and more in an interview, parts of which are translated from Arabic below.

# Rapid fall of Assad 'not unexpected': FM

## Iran been in direct contact with Syrian opposition since Astana

**AL-NAHAR:** The Middle East has witnessed rapid and highly complex transformations since October 7, 2023, with the recent collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria being a significant turning point. How did this rapid collapse of one of Iran's most important regional allies happen?

**ARAGHCHI:** Contrary to popular belief in the media, the rapid collapse of the Syrian regime was not unexpected for me. Understanding why the collapse happened so quickly, however, requires a study of three elements: the ground, the timing, and the context. These transformations, which appeared to be very rapid and surprising on the surface, had real underlying causes with a long history of at least 10-12 years. The continuous attacks by the Zionist regime on Syria's defensive infrastructure over the past 14 months were carried out with the aim of weakening the Syrian government. The presence of multiple external actors with overlapping and sometimes opposing objectives, all of whom shared the common goal of toppling the regime, ultimately led to the rapid events we witnessed.

We had been assessing the regional dynamics, especially after October 7, and concluded that conditions for the Syrian government would become difficult and that governing Syria would become a fundamental challenge. We frankly conveyed these views to the Syrian prime minister in September this year. The issue was that plans were drawn outside the region. We had substantial and numerous intelligence about the movements and outgoing calls in the capitals of neighboring countries aimed at seeking support from Syria's neighbors. The US policy of threatening and enticing regional countries to get involved in a major conflict to save Israel is no secret, even to the media.

It was expected that the decision-making authorities in the Syrian government would show flexibility in adopting diplomatic initiatives and proposals to bring the opposition into power, but this was not the case. The Islamic Republic of Iran, from the start of the Astana process, had direct communications with the Syrian opposition, conducting hours of talks with them, in addition to engaging in trilateral negotiations with Turkey and Russia as part of the process. We also presented the opposition's proposals alongside our consultations at the highest levels during the Astana process in Damascus.

**Iran's support was a key factor in the Syrian regime's survival in the face of the uprising against it in 2011. Why did Tehran not support the regime in repelling the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)?**

Our support for Syria was support for a country at the formal request of its established government and to prevent the spread of the brutal and horrific terrorism of ISIS. This intervention was also to preserve an important regional country from crimes, genocide, and ultimately falling into the chaos of a failed state, as well as to maintain regional security, which we consider integral to

our national security. Remember that at the time, Syria was facing a threat to its existence and territorial integrity from the surge of the terrorist group ISIS. Iran's red line, as I stated before my last trip to Syria, has always been the preservation of the political borders and national sovereignty of regional countries. We followed the same policy in the difficult conditions that our neighbor Turkey faced on July 15, 2016, when we stood against the coup that could have threatened Turkey's national sovereignty. I was the deputy foreign minister at the time and witnessed the lengthy phone calls between the officials of the two nations and numerous coordinative efforts between their military counterparts in the crisis room that was set up. Therefore, while we do not have the obligation to fight another country's war, we will stand by our neighbors in the face of national security threats from terrorist and separatist movements, upon our neighbors' request. This is a recognized principle under international law. Unlike the US, which has occupied a significant part of Syria without any authorization or legal basis, we have never gone there without the request and permission of the Syrian government.

country to advise another, but the level of our consultations with Syria had risen to a high level over the past years of economic, industrial, cultural, and political cooperation, so we spoke sincerely and compassionately but frankly as in all our consultations.

In that last meeting, my conversation had both public and private parts. In both parts, I was very clear and precise, explaining the situation and emphasizing that for Iran, the territorial integrity of Syria, the well-being of its people, and the stability of its government are a set of principles in regulating bilateral relations, and we will strongly support these three principles. We have always highlighted for the Syrian government, in all our consultations since 2011, the necessity of initiating political talks with those groups of the opposition that do not have terrorist affiliations.

**For talks with the ruling faction that holds power in Syria, which path do you prefer?**

We prefer the official and diplomatic channels, and this is contingent upon the necessary coordination and guarantees according to the Vienna Convention for the presence of a technical delegation from the Ministry of Foreign



People pick up metal and unexploded ordnance from the site of the previous evening's Israeli airstrike in Qamishli, in mainly Kurdish northeastern Syria, on December 10, 2024.

DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP

Our view of Syria is the same, although I must admit that there has been a significant misrepresentation of Iran's regional policy in the media, which is partly due to our own shortcomings and partly due to the wave of misinformation by global media that began with Iran's Islamic Revolution. The construction of an incorrect image of Iran has become a business that now affects the entire Islamic world, and many are exploited daily from a place of Islamophobia.

**A lot has been written about what happened during your last meeting with the Syrian president in Damascus a few days before the collapse. Can you tell us specifically what happened? Did you advise the Syrian President not to resist?**

Diplomatic decorum does not allow one

Affairs, along with accredited diplomats. The assessment of damages to our embassy and reporting to Syrian authorities, the preparation of the embassy in Damascus and the consulate in Aleppo by the technical team, and simultaneously, the initiation of political talks and evaluations by diplomats with officials in charge according to their usual duties will be carried out.

**What do you expect the new government in Syria to be like?**

Like any country, a government that is in line with the will of its people and encompasses all virtuous individuals and groups, capable of representing Syrian society. It should pave the way for national dialogue and provide a path for building a united and cohesive Syria within its political borders. I



Abbas Araghchi, then-nominee for Iran's Foreign Ministry, attends a parliament session in the capital Tehran, on August 17, 2024, as Iran's President defends his cabinet selection.

AFP

believe a government that can protect borders and enforce sovereignty with social consent over Syrian territory has two essential internal components, and a government that creates good neighborliness while maintaining independence in managing international relations has two necessary external indicators that can save Syria.

**What is your recommendation for a successful path out of the crisis, the return of peace and stability to Syria, and the establishment of a national government?**

Several steps should be considered. First, at the domestic level, a national Syrian-Syrian dialogue should be initiated so that all diverse and different segments of the Syrian people feel involved. Alongside this, efforts to help refugees return should be prioritized. Second, at the international level, a conference should be held with the presence of all contributing countries to reconstruct Syria and repay its debt so that all countries that have claims on this country also contribute to its future. In this conference, installments for repaying debts should be determined, and aid should be committed and pledged. It is very important that the economic stabilization of Syria is given special and immediate attention. Another step necessary for the success of these two measures is to have the ac-

tive participation of the United Nations and the Security Council in creating an obligation for the liberation of the occupied Syrian territories and their return to the people of this country. The integrity of Syria must be respected.

**The Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei blamed an unnamed country for the change in the Assad regime. Was he referring to Turkey, and have there been any contacts between Tehran and Ankara regarding Syria's future?**

Consultations between the two neighboring countries, Iran and Turkey, on regional issues have been ongoing throughout the long history of relations. My trip from Damascus to Ankara also showed a clear approach, indicating a high level of continuous cooperation and consultation, even in times of differing views and interests. These consultations have been ongoing in recent years, especially as the Syrian crisis escalated, through the Astana process in trilateral or bilateral contacts between the two countries' officials.

We have shared our concerns about the impact of the Syrian transformations with our Turkish counterparts in numerous meetings, and we believe that no country in the region is independent of its neighbors; The security of the two neighbors is interdependent. Regarding the statement of the Leader, I draw your attention, not to a paraphrase of his words, but rather to his words, which emphasized that what is happening in Syria is an American-Israeli plan in which another country also has a clear role. The crucial point he explicitly stated was that "the main conspirator, the main planner, and the main command center are in America and the Zionist regime."

In my view, considering the context, your reference should be to the entire statement to understand its meaning. Otherwise, you risk misinterpreting the strategic view of Iran. It is important to note that the leader emphasized the word "main" three times. Therefore, from my perspective, the implication of your question is not based on the explicit content of his statement.

**I want to ask you a question about Lebanon that was repeatedly asked during the past war. Does Iran really see Hezbollah as something to negotiate over?**

I was a bit surprised by your question because you know Hezbollah better than I do. Hezbollah has always been an integral