

Are Syrian developments threat or opportunity for Iran?



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INTERVIEW

HAM MIHAN: Given the recent developments in Syria, should Syria be considered a potential future source of threats to Iran, or is there a possibility that Iran can reach an understanding with the forces that will hold power in the future?

TAJIK: Since there are no shared borders or territorial disputes between Iran and Syria, under normal circumstances, neither Syria poses a threat to Iran nor does Iran pose a threat to Syria.

The current situation in Syria is highly ambiguous, and the final outcome remains uncertain. One scenario envisions relative stability in Syria, while another foresees a resurgence of civil wars with various factions. There is also the possibility of external aggression. Israel, for instance, has already acted aggressively, destroying 90% of Syria's military and armament infrastructure! So, we might even witness the fragmentation of Syria. On the whole, the situation in Syria is characterized by instability and unpredictability.

The current state of Syria is far worse than Iraq after Saddam Hussein's fall, Iraq in 2006 during the peak of internal conflicts, or even Libya post-Gaddafi. One of the most important reasons why I believe Syria's situation is extremely dire is the goals and desires of internal actors who may only be united in their opposition to Bashar al-Assad and nothing else. Furthermore, the conflicting and often contradictory territorial ambitions of multiple, opposing external powers in Syria create uncertainty about how actors such as Turkey and Israel will coexist, for example, regarding the Kurdish issue. Recently, Israel has demonstrated a strong territorial appetite in Syria, even now that Assad is out of the picture. We did not witness such conditions in Libya or Iraq.

Israel has shown that the issue of Syria is not merely a difference of political opinion to them; rather, they pursue geostrategic objectives in Syria that necessitate turning it into a scorched earth. However, regarding Iran, I believe that under any regime, Syria does not pose a direct threat to Iran. Nonetheless, the possibility of Iran

reaching an understanding with Syria's new rulers seems feasible to me. It is the country of Syria that holds strategic importance for Iran for various reasons, not the individual or group that eventually governs Syria.

During the Assad family's rule, Hafez al-Assad and later Bashar al-Assad maintained very close relations with Tehran due to the historical bilateral ties both before and after Iran's Islamic Revolution. Today, it is unclear how the future of Tehran-Damascus relations will unfold as it, above all, depends on who will govern Syria. Given the multitude of armed factions, as well as foreign interventions, the first step is to determine who will emerge victorious in Syria and gain the people's support. Whichever party gets to establish a legitimate and internationally recognized government in Syria, Iran can then forge reasonable relations with that government.

Could past investments and financial, monetary, and commercial relations between the two countries complicate future relations?

The only remaining issue is the past investments and financial, monetary, and commercial relations established between the two countries. These matters have legal solutions that international bodies and both countries can pursue. Once a stable and legitimate government is formed in



● HAPELINIUM/SHUTTERSTOCK

Syria, these issues can be resolved through legal mechanisms.

Iran has always maintained relations at various levels with the Kurds in Syria. Is there a possibility that if Iran's interests in Syria are threatened by Turkey, Tehran would use Kurdish levers against Ankara's interests?

Aside from the idea that Iran might use Kurds as leverage against Turkey, the issue of the Kurds is a fundamental and deeply rooted matter for Iran. Kurds reside in four countries in the Middle East — Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran.

Naturally, developments related to the Kurdish nation, whether in terms of relations among different Kurdish groups or the Kurds' relations with regional governments, are important to Tehran and are closely monitored by it.

Syrian Kurds have had ties with Iran for a long time. Particularly since 2011 and the ensuing developments in Syria, the Syrian Kurds and Iran have strengthened their relations. Given Turkey's role in recent Syrian developments and its military posture towards Kobani, Kurds believe they are on the brink of a military confrontation with Turkey. Naturally, Turkey's actions

could exacerbate some regional disputes. Although there are reports of an agreement between Kurdish groups and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to hand over the management of oil-rich areas in Deir ez-Zor to Syria's new rulers, my prediction is that this region will not achieve peace easily or quickly, and tensions will persist in eastern and northeastern Syria.

How do you view the prospects for understanding and agreement between Iran and the US regarding Syria if a dialogue between Tehran and Washington occurs in the future?

On the surface, the US claims it has not played a role in the recent developments in Syria, but I believe the US has been one of the parties orchestrating and supporting these developments and is now taking this stance to avoid any political repercussions. It is unlikely that Turkey alone can provide the level of training, logistical support, and weaponry to HTS. I doubt Turkey alone possesses this level of financial, support, and military capability.

My guess is that the US and Israel have played a direct or indirect role in this matter. However, I also doubt that Iran and the US are prepared to engage in dialogue regarding Syria. Beyond the desires of both parties, the circumstances do not necessitate such talks. There are more important priorities that Iran and the US have better groundwork for dialogue and even cooperation on. Issues like Gaza and Lebanon could have provided a basis for dialogue between Iran and the US, but regarding Syria, I still see no grounds for dialogue. This matter currently, and at least from a regional perspective, needs to be addressed through local mechanisms.

Can Iran rely on its connections with Sunni fundamentalist factions that currently hold power in Syria?

Essentially, this appears to be one of the few paths available for Iran to engage with the new ruling factions in Syria, and there are no obstacles preventing Iran from using this route. Iran maintains interactions with various Sunni factions across the Middle East.

While the country's official policy might be to advance future relations in Syria



Regardless of how much the new Syrian ruling council disagrees with the former government, Syria still needs an army and military equipment to defend its sovereignty. Israel is truly exploiting the current situation, and one could say that Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the president of Turkey, has paved the way for one of the largest Islamic countries to fall into a dire and defenseless state.



● GHAIETH ALSAYED/AP
A Syrian opposition fighter holds a rocket launcher in front of the provincial government office, where an image of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad is riddled with bullets on the facade, in the aftermath of the opposition's takeover of Hama, Syria, on December 6, 2024.