

Talks about end of Iran's role in Syria, 'sign of naivety'

The Islamic Republic of Iran pursued several goals in assisting Syria and aimed to prevent the collapse of governments in the region. Over the past decade, Syria has become the focal point of regional and international crises. The civil war in the country has not only been catastrophic from a humanitarian and social perspective but has also led to significant shifts and displacements in the political and military equations of the Middle East. One of the complex aspects of this crisis is the change in the power structure in Syria and the influence of foreign actors. While at the beginning of the war, Bashar al-Assad held power, but over time, with the increase in foreign interventions, the situation in the country became significantly more complicated. Sabah Zangeneh, an international affairs expert, had a discussion about the post-Assad developments in Syria. The full text of the interview follows below:

International Desk

INTERVIEW



AFP

Today, we are facing a post-Assad Syria. Do you think each of the actors in the new Syrian scene has carved out a specific role for themselves, and what changes have occurred in their positions?

SABAH ZANGANEH: Currently, multiple groups hold power in Syria. One of these groups is the Syrian Kurds, who are not unrelated to the Kurds of Turkey and Iraq. These groups have political and military organizations and have long sought a role in the Syrian government, aiming for a degree of autonomy in their regions. These Kurdish forces, who oppose the Turkish government but maintain ties with

the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, have established their own organizations and have occupied parts of Syria. These forces are currently under American control.

Another significant power is held by Daesh terrorists, who are present in eastern Syria and the oil-rich areas near the Iraqi border. These forces are also controlled by the Americans and are managed, often through the Kurdish Democratic Party or sometimes with the help of Arab tribes in the region, according to the plans the US deems appropriate.

A portion of the power in Syria is also held by the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which consists of about 30 varied groups.

These groups do not have a complete understanding of each other and each applies its own policies and methods. Some of the groups are still part of Al-Qaeda, while others are extreme religious organizations.

Another group that holds power in Syria is the Alawites, who are located in the west of the country, particularly in the regions of Latakia, Tartus, and Banyas. They have 60 years of experience in governing Syria and are unwilling to easily relinquish this position.

Another group is the Shia forces, who may make up about 8 to 10 percent of Syria's population. These forces are located in the Homs region and around

the Zainabiyeh area, with some also present in Aleppo, where they were effectively displaced by the arrival of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. The Shia groups are also seeking to secure their place in Syria's future.

The province of Idlib is another region that remains a source of tension. This area has been under Turkish control and continues to be so. The armed groups in this region have received military, social, and cultural training from Turkey and are at odds with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

Another region of significant importance is Quneitra and the Golan Heights. These areas were part of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights,

and after Assad's withdrawal and the entry of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham into Damascus, Israel had the opportunity to expand and occupy more territory in this region. This area is strategically important due to its water resources, fertile land, and high elevation. By controlling this region, Israel has gained dominance over other areas east and north of Mount Hermon, which stands at 2,800 meters, the highest elevation in Syria and the entire region.

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Sabah Zangeneh

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Given the diverse array of powerful forces and currents at play in Syria, the US will face numerous challenges in shaping the political structure of the country.



Syria's de facto leader Ahmed al-Sharaa attends a meeting with former rebel faction chiefs, as he reached an agreement with them to dissolve all groups and consolidate them under the Defence Ministry, according to a statement from the new administration, in Damascus, Syria, in this handout image released on December 24, 2024.

SANA/HANDOUT VIA REUTERS

The most critical aspect in the professional arena is the Iranian role in the Syrian conflict. What are your thoughts on the policies of Iran in Syria over the past decade?

The Islamic Republic of Iran pursued several goals in assisting Syria. Iran aimed to prevent the collapse of governments in the region. With foreign aggression or extremist groups, governments often fall apart and the region plunges into turmoil. Just as is happening now, with the entry of extremist forces, Israel has effectively invaded more territories of Syria and brought them under its occupation.

Iran emphasizes in its policies that there should be no foreign aggression in the region, similar to what the United States did during the presidencies of Barack Obama and Donald Trump. Iran has opposed and continues to oppose such external actions aimed at regime change. Iran was also against aggressions like those we are currently witnessing, such as

attacks by forces from Idlib or organizations like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

On the other hand, Iran was keen to keep religiously sacred areas in Syria safe from harm. Additionally, due to its strategic location and historical ties with ancient Syria or the Levant, access to the Mediterranean is considered one of Iran's long-term goals, just as Iran had a presence on the Mediterranean shores in the past. With all these considerations, the time had come to support a government that had backed Iran during crises such as Saddam's invasion [in 1980s] and had prevented the formation of an Arab alliance against Iran.

Lebanon is also one of the regions that has received support from Iran both before and after the [Islamic] Revolution (1979). Iranians have always felt a sense of kinship and friendship towards Lebanon and its people, and they have always been willing to help Lebanon, especially when it has been attacked by a racist

and occupying power like Israel. This set of goals was on Iran's agenda, but if we pay attention, the distance of Syria from Iran and the presence of another country in between made the realization of all these goals problematic in the medium term, and that is exactly what happened. Meanwhile, Turkey, which considers itself a rival of Iran and seeks to revive a form of Ottomanism, had better conditions for its presence in Syria, given that it shares a border with Syria and the entry of Turkish forces into this country occurs easily and rapidly.

The next important point is that Iran's attention to Syria has primarily focused on military support, while in the contemporary world, what holds more utility and impact, and possesses greater speed and depth, is the soft power of countries. In my opinion, there has been a lack of effort in this regard, and insufficient attention has been paid to developing soft power in line with military capabilities.