ISSUE BRIEF

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THE FALL OF THE ASSAD REGIME IN SYRIA: REGIONAL AND GLOBAL RESPONSES

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

In what began with the 'Arab spring' protests in 2011against the Assad regime, Syria embarked upon a journey of instability and conflict manifested in a prolonged civil war. This ushered in a sustained period of immense suffering for the Syrian people which continued for thirteen years. In a dramatic turn of events in December 2024, a coalition of opposition forces successfully took over Damascus, ending the decade's long regime of Bashar al Assad. The ruling government succumbed, owing to the well-organized resistance. The much-valued support for the Syrian government from foreign powers proved peripheral at this point. In developments that have taken many by surprise, the current situation in Syria has added further complexity to the already volatile Middle East.

The collapse of the Assad regime leaves many questions unanswered. The consequences of this transition may include internal instability as well as external challenges, in an increasingly fragile neighborhood. In the perilous period following the 'Arab spring', millions of Syrians were dislocated, with many being displaced within Syria and the rest having left the country to be refugees in foreign lands. Estimatedly, fourteen million people left Syria since the protracted civil war began, and those displaced internally continue to suffer in deplorable conditions.[1] For those who remain in Syria, the humanitarian crisis is overwhelming, with an estimated 16.7 million people in dire need of basic

1 Heba Gowayed, Imad K. Harb, Bahraa Hijazi, Khalil E. Jahshan, Patricia Karam, and Annelle Sheline, Implications of Assad's Fall for Syria and the Region, Arab Center Washington DC, December 10, 2024 https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/implications-of-assads-fall-for-syria-and-the-region/

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necessities and much of the infrastructure destroyed, including, roads, hospitals and schools.[2] The transition is likely to be a highly challenging process and building a new country will require deft and meticulous planning.

While the entire region is watching the transition take place, Israel has acted opportunistically to capture the demilitarized UN buffer zone that divided Israel from Syria since the signing of the 1974 Disengagement Agreement.[3] Israel refers to this as a pre-emptive move, aimed at preventing attacks. Meanwhile for the neighbouring Lebanon, the new government in Damascus promises the return of thousands of Syrian refugees, who have remained a burden on the Lebanese economy. Turkiye stands likely to benefit from the regime change in Syria as well and had also recently made attempts to normalise relations with the Assad regime, which remained inconclusive. A large number of Syrian refugees reside in Turkiye. Turkish Defence Minister Yasar Guler has stated that the new dispensation in Syria must be given a chance and that Turkiye can provide military training if needed.[4]

For Iran and Hezbollah, the fall of the Assad regime may mean some uncertainty. The Hezbollah leadership has, however, warned the new Syrian leaders against establishing ties with Israel.[5] Meanwhile, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are viewing the developments in Syria with caution, while reiterating the need for respecting the choices of the Syrian people. Iran has stressed the need for preserving the territorial integrity of Syria and respecting the will of the Syrian people.

Major powers have welcomed the fall of the Assad regime. However, the European Union (EU), the United States, and the United Kingdom, are looking at the transition in Syria with uncertainty. The need for the protection of civilians, minority rights, and the restoration of the constitution remain their key points of emphasis. The United Nations, UK, U.S. and EU have also underscored the need for political negotiations under the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 2254.[6] The emphasis has been on supporting an inclusive Syrian-owned, Syrian-led dispensation.

2 Philip Loft and Claire Mills, Syria after Assad 2024/25: Consequences and next steps, Research Briefing Middle East, December 13, 2024, https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10161/

3 Op.cit, Implications of Assad's Fall for Syria and the Region

4 Turkiye ready to offer military training to Syria if new administration requests, says defence minister, Dawn, December 15, 2024 https://www.dawn.com/news/1878901

5 Hezbollah warns new Syrian rulers against Israel ties, Dawn, December 15, 2024 https://www.dawn.com/news/1878823

6 Op.cit, Syria after Assad 2024/25: Consequences and next steps

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Since Russia has remained an important ally of the previous Syrian government, with the former having military bases in Syria, the fall of the Assad regime has definitely been a cause of concern. It is likely that Moscow will adopt a wait-and-see policy and closely watch the evolving situation.

China has called on pertinent parties in Syria to ensure the safety and security of the Chinese institutions and personnel and also stressed the need for being respectful of the Syrian people's will and vision for their country.[7] In its response to Assad's ouster, India's Ministry of External Affairs emphasized the need for a Syrian-led, inclusive political process that upholds Syria's unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity while addressing the aspirations of all its people.[8] Pakistan reaffirmed its support for Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty but refrained from commenting on the opposition led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).[9]

While it is too soon to say what the fall of the Assad regime will ultimately result in its collapse. it does offer an opportunity to address long-standing issues in Syria. However, if not carefully managed, the country could slide further into chaos. The Middle East is in an unprecedented flux and geopolitical developments in the region pose numerous challenges, including refugees, Israel's expansionary war, the genocide in Gaza, and the threat of terrorism, among others. It is necessary that the situation in Syria is handled prudently, lest further instability affect an already volatile region. A power vacuum could potentially lead to further instability, while making it easy for terrorist groups to take control. It is necessary that the regional countries as well as the major powers engage with Syria. This transition in Syria comes at a time when the region is embroiled in multiple crises and the way forward is unclear, and an uncertain future awaits the Syrian people.

Diplomatic engagement, inclusive dialogue, and a commitment to upholding Syria's territorial integrity are essential to prevent further fragmentation of the country. The international community must prioritize stabilization efforts while addressing the humanitarian and socio-political dimensions of the crisis. It is yet to be seen how this situation is navigated as it will not only shape Syria's trajectory but also significantly influence the broader stability of the Middle East.

7 Najla Alzarooni, How Will China Navigate the New Syria?, FUTURE, December 27, 2024, https://futureuae.com/en-US/Mainpage/Item/9902/the-aftermath-of-assads-fall-how-will-china-navigate-the-new-syria

8 Sudha Ramachandran, With Fall of Bashar al-Assad, India Loses a Friend, The Diplomat, December 10, 2024 https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/with-fall-of-bashar-al-assad-india-loses-a-friend/

9 Kamran Yousaf, Pakistan opts for caution on Syria situation, Express Tribune, December 16, 2024 https://tribune.com.pk/story/2516242/pakistan-opts-for-cautionon-syria-situation

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