



Nevertheless, the reasons included: poor governance and economic inefficiency; underpaid armed forces and law enforcement agencies; lack of popular support in the domestic dimension; as well as crucial allies' concentration on other issues in the international domain, making the government so fragile in front of trained, well-equipped, and highly motivated rivals that it fell after 11 days.

Given the complexity of interests and prospects among domestic actors, including the conglomerate of armed opposition groups led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Kurdish militants, the Alawites, and various other sectarian groups, this analysis will not delve into their roles or the involvement of external actors such as Türkiye, Iran, the U.S., Israel, and others. Instead, the focus will be on examining the current risks Moscow faces in the region and exploring how these risks are perceived within the Russian expert community.

### **A Good Name is better than Wealth**

One should admit that the first loss Russia has suffered due to the fall of Bashar al-Assad government refers to its reputation. Therefore, there should be a certain risk of further decreasing prestige in the Middle East.

Since 2015, Moscow positioned itself as an exporter of security for its allies in the region. Defeating ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq & Syria) and other jihadist groups in Syria through air strikes and Russian Special Forces operations proved that Russia has enough military heft to support its friends and pursue its own strategic goals far from its borders.

Just the opposite, late 2024 allegedly demonstrated that Moscow had little capacity to change the situation on the ground when its assistance was of high need. Such a sequence of events got some experts (such as Melkonian<sup>4</sup> & Groves to name a few) to invoke analogies with Americans pulling out of Vietnam, not mentioning Afghanistan.

At first glance, these analogies seem to be bright and striking. However, this story has two distinct features: firstly, the Russian Air Force continued fighting until the last day of the offensive and,

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<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-rebels-celebrate-captured-homs-set-sights-damascus-2024-12-07/>

<sup>4</sup> Sergei Melkonian, "The Syria Fiasco As Seen From Moscow", Carnegie Endowment, published on December 24, 2024.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2024/12/the-syria-fiasco-as-seen-from-moscow>

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Grove, "Fall of Syrian Regime Exposes Limits of Russia's Global Ambitions", The Wall Street Journal, published on December 13, 2024.

<https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/russia-iran-assad-middle-east-b8b36167>

consequently, the fall of Bashar al-Assad; secondly, the outcome on the battlefield was determined by the Syrian Army's inoperability due to political, economic, financial, and managerial factors.

In effect, Moscow was able to assist the government in combat and to some extent in military build-up, but it could not take full responsibility for governing the country. One hardly could argue that the stability of any regime depends on coherence of domestic actors, not external ones. Thus, those actors who are eager to get a comprehensive analysis of the situation barely would make their conclusions relying on the headlines about either Vietnam or Afghanistan.

### **From Syria with Love?**

The second risk refers to the operability of Russian military facilities in Syria – Khmeimim Air Base and Tartus naval base. They are considered to be the most crucial focal points in Russian logistics on the way to Africa.

In the immediate aftermath of Bashar al-Assad's fall, many international experts confidently predicted that Russia would inevitably face significant losses. However, the perspective has shifted over time, with some analysts<sup>7</sup> now suggesting that Moscow might negotiate agreements with the emerging transitional government in Damascus, which comprises representatives from opposition groups, former regime officials, and other key stakeholders in the Syrian political landscape.

This scenario seemingly could work out, since so far Russian facilities and personnel (both military and diplomatic) have remained intact. In this context, both parties still could enjoy their space for dialogue and continue searching for common ground.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the situation does not seem to be as terrifying for Russia as some tried to depict it. Of course, it would be ridiculous to pretend that nothing special happened – Bashar al-Assad was a predictable ally with Moscow feeling absolutely safe and comfortable on the ground as long as he was in power. Nowadays the landscape has dramatically changed, and it is going to be much harder for Russia to remain as a significant actor in Syria and the Middle East.

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<sup>6</sup> “Syrian troops and Russian Aerospace Forces strike terrorist positions”, RIA Novosti, published on December 7, 2024.

<https://ria.ru/20241207/siriya-1987864159.html>

<sup>7</sup> “Turkey and Russia engage in delicate manoeuvres over Syria after Assad’s downfall”, AP News, published on December 20, 2024.

<https://apnews.com/article/russia-turkey-putin-erdogan-syria-assad-afbfc5a271438c0c61142f8cb9fcb6f4>

Moscow possesses exceptional military, diplomatic, intelligence, and academic expertise, enabling it to adeptly navigate the ever-evolving dynamics of the regional landscape. This expertise has been repeatedly demonstrated, including in recent developments, and is poised to be reaffirmed in the challenges that lie ahead.