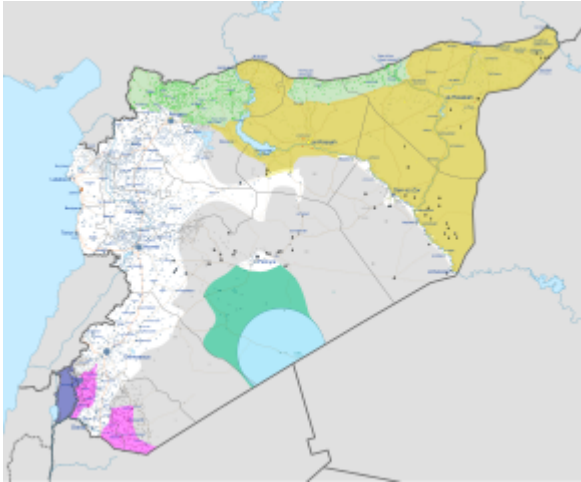


After the Fall: Hope Amid the Ruins of Post-Assad Syria

written by Kevin B. Anderson | January 29, 2025



A few weeks after the epochal fall of the Assad dictatorship, Syria remains in flux. It could not be otherwise after 53 years of the strangulation of civil and political life under one of the world's most murderous regimes. Nonetheless, some broad outlines of where Syria is going can be discerned.

But before entering into that, it is necessary to savor the moment. First, the fall of Bashar al-Assad (who ruled from 2000-2024, succeeding his father Hafez Assad, 1971-2000), constitutes a major historical turning point for the region and even the world. It shows above all that the spirit and reality of the Arab revolutions of 2011 have been smoldering underground all these years. This should give no comfort to local rulers who have snuffed out the 2011 revolutions in their societies, especially those in Egypt and Tunisia.

Second, the sudden collapse of the Syrian regime, within a matter of days, shows the fragile and brittle character of political class domination in general. Marxists have often repeated that, despite its unprecedented accumulation of wealth, capitalism is inherently unstable, a system where "all that is solid melts into air," as Marx and Engels once wrote (*Communist Manifesto*, MECW 6, p. 487). We saw this in the 2008 economic collapse. But this is equally true of the capitalist state, no matter how solid and impregnable it might appear in a particular context, even in our era of state-capitalism. We saw this in 2011 in the Arab world, when the Tunisian and Egyptian governments fell to revolutionary youth and workers in a matter of days, and we have seen it in Syria today. (In 2023, we saw how another "strong" state, Israel, was taken by surprise not by a mass uprising but by a determined attack across one of the world's most closely guarded borders.)

CLR James stressed, based upon a passage in Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*, that radical change is characterized by "leaps" and breaks rather than gradualness (*Notes on Dialectics: Hegel-Marx-Lenin*, Westport: Lawrence Hill, 1986 [1948], p. 99). The years 2023-25 in the Middle East certainly exemplify that. But this is only part of the truth, for both the state and capital have a deep, structural existence, and such moments of collapse or breaks are rare enough. For as Marx intoned after the old order reasserted itself with a vengeance once the 1848 revolutions had met their defeat: "The tradition of all the dead generations lays like a nightmare upon the brains of the living" (*Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 104).

The Unfolding of the New

Keeping all this in mind, let us look at what is new in post-Assad Syria. Few noticed a year-and-a-half ago when the Syrian people surged into the streets for the first time in years with anti-regime, pro-revolution slogans as they targeted economic catastrophe and corruption. Notably, the predominantly Druze town of Suweida joined in in August 2023, breaking with the regime tactic of pitting ethno-religious minorities against the Sunni Arab majority. Demonstrators chanted, “One, one, one, the Syrian people are one.” Across a number of towns and cities, “the flags of the Druze and Kurdish communities were raised alongside the [2011] revolution flag. And there were numerous displays of solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance” (Leila Al-Shami’s blog, “Syria: Revolution reborn,” Aug. 29, 2023).

As late as last summer, many EU countries, among them Italy, Denmark, Poland, and Austria, were seeking to end the boycott of the Assad regime, to reopen relations with it, and, above all, to force out the hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees who had streamed out of the country during the suppression of the revolution. These EU countries called for “a more realistic” policy, given that “Bashar al-Assad remains firmly in the saddle” (Jean-Baptiste Chastand, “Plusieurs pays de l’UE veulent renouer avec la Syrie,” *Le Monde*, July 25, 2024).

Jumping to December 2024, when the 53-year-old regime tumbled after a six-day offensive spearheaded by a small Islamist-led force from the northern opposition enclave of Idlib, many have noted the almost complete failure of the large, well-armed regime forces to fight back. According to Middle East scholar Stephen Zunes:

“While it was the advancing military forces of Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) who marched into Damascus as Assad and his family fled, there are indications that it was unarmed civil resistance led by the resurgent popular committees and local councils, which initially came to the fore in the early nonviolent phase of the revolution back in 2011, that actually wrested control of much of the local governance from the regime, particularly in Daraa and Suweida provinces in the south” (Daniel Falcone: interview with Stephen Zunes, “The Ousting of the Brutal Assad Regime Brings Euphoria and More Questions,” *Counterpunch*, Dec. 11, 2024).

In the town of Daraa, where the revolutionary uprising began in 2011, joy and sadness were mixed as crowds gathered to welcome home exiled revolutionaries. These included Sheikh Ahmad Al-Sayasnā, whose sermon had helped galvanize the March 18, 2011, “Friday of anger” after local youths were imprisoned, tortured, and murdered. Too old and frail to give a full speech, he declared in just a few words, “We are a great people who deserve freedom and who know not hatred.” A young woman in the crowd cried out, “Syria is retrieving all its colors.” Another young woman who also experienced exile stated: “The Westerners are worried, but they need to understand that this is the first time decisions are in the hands of the Syrian people” (Elliott Brachet, “À Daraa, l’étincelle ravivée de la révolution syrienne,” *Le Monde*, Jan. 9, 2025).

In early January, the people of Suweida remained on revolutionary alert, holding onto the weapons they had wielded in December as the regime began to fall. As the Assad regime suffered territorial losses under the blows of HTS-led forces from the north, Suweida also rose up. Its armed networks, which had survived underground, reopened contact with a coalition of rebels from southern Syria, the region where the 2011 uprising first spread widely. “It was coordinated in secret. Once Aleppo fell, we formed the Operations Network [Chambre] of the South. Then, on December 7, we liberated our region as our allies marched on the capital,” stated a commander of the Druze Mountain Brigade, which claimed a force of 7,000 under arms. Also in Suweida, Druze, Christians, and Muslims gathered around a Christmas tree amid revolutionary slogans, especially, “A free, united, civic, and democratic Syria” (Elliott Brachet, “En Syrie, la circonspection des Druzes,” *Le Monde*, Jan. 7, 2025).

In Damascus, there was a pervasive sense of picking up where things had left off in 2011. At a December 12 funeral procession for a young revolutionary murdered in prison during the last days of the regime, one participant declared, "It is very moving to march again all together with citizens of Syria from all four corners of the country, on the same route that we took at the beginning of the revolution" (Hélène Sallon, "A Damas, les poignantes obsèques de l'opposant Mazen Al-Hamada," *Le Monde*, Dec. 14, 2024).

In newly liberated Syria, as the poet Samar Yazbek has observed, the main slogan repeated incessantly by the joyous crowds was, "Syria is one and indivisible, it belongs to all Syrians, and everyone is entitled to the same rights." She saw this as a clear repudiation of the Assad regime's divide-and-conquer strategy and also of efforts by Israel, Türkiye, and other outside powers that are seeking to dominate the new Syria, even as others like Russia and Iran were exiting the scene ("Bashar al-Assad est tombé, mais la véritable révolution des Syriens ne fait que commencer," *Le Monde*, Dec. 24, 2024).

These revolutionary crowds also entered *en masse* the regime's notorious prisons, vile dungeons where tens of thousands met their deaths over the decades, this in addition to the 500,000 Assad and his allies killed in their repression of the 2011 revolution. In December 2024, the people freed those remaining and searched desperately for other survivors or evidence of what had happened to all those who disappeared into these houses of torture.

Summing up upon his return from exile, the noted Syrian intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh observed concerning the rapid collapse of the regime, "It's the best thing that could have happened and it took place in the best way possible, without destruction, without massacres, without a great deal of human suffering" (Hélène Sallon, "Le retour doux-amer de Yassin al-Haj Saleh en Syrie," *Le Monde*, Jan. 3, 2025).

Some Syrian Arab intellectuals have also begun to speak out more strongly in defense of the large Kurdish minority (10% of the population) than their earlier counterparts like Saleh. During the civil war the largely Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) established the progressive, pro-feminist autonomous zone of Rojava, now under threat from the Türkiye-funded Syrian National Army (SNA), which has been allied to HTS. As the young Marxist analyst Joseph Daher writes, "The uprising in 2011 allowed an unprecedented emergence of a deep Kurdish national dynamic in the history of Syria. The Kurdish question raises many other issues about the country's future, including the potential for a pluralist identity not solely based on Arabness or Islam, as well as the nature of the state and its social model. Ultimately, these are all challenges that are intrinsically connected to the desire for true emancipation of Syria's popular classes" ("The Kurdish Struggle Is Central to Syria's Future," *New Arab*, Dec. 29, 2024).

Internal Contradictions

Many in the Western media have noted the relative tolerance of minority religious communities on the part of the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), whose quite small armed forces – probably less than 20,000 in a country of some 25 million – drove down from Idlib in the north to Damascus amid only token opposition, as the Assad regime and its military forces simply collapsed. Given that HTS originated as part of the ultra-fundamentalist Al Qaeda network, although those ties were severed about eight years ago, there is much apprehension about its agenda as it has begun to take over the state. This is especially the case within more secular, leftwing, and feminist sectors of the Syrian population. As Al-Haj Saleh asked upon his return from exile, "Who will be oppressed? People like us, democrats, liberals, people on the left." He added that so far, there has been "a type of religious and cultural inclusivity but not a political one. I fear they may not accept political pluralism," noting that HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa has surrounded himself with like-minded people in his

administration (Sallon, "Le retour").

In the new Syria, the negative role of HTS and other radical Islamist groups during the 2011-13 civil war continues to be noted, even as they seem to have moderated their perspectives somewhat. As Shireen Akram-Boshar noted recently: "Syrians within Syria and in the diaspora are wary of HTS. Syrian activists have long described Nusra and other Islamist groups as a second pole in the counterrevolution, after the Assad regime. Syrian activists for years have lifted the stories of Razan Zeitouneh, Wael Hamada, Samira Khalil and Nazem Hammadi — four democratic activists who opposed the Assad regime as well as the Islamist groups, and were kidnapped and disappeared at the end of 2013, most likely by another, similar Islamist militia" ("As Assad Regime Falls, Syrians Celebrate — and Brace for an Uncertain Future, *Truthout*, Dec. 11, 2024). This connects to one of Raya Dunayevskaya's key dialectical insights, wherein "the discernment of the *counter*-revolution within the revolution became pivotal" (*Philosophy and Revolution: From Hegel to Sartre and from Marx to Mao*, p. 106).

HTS rule over the rebel enclave of Idlib over the past seven years, while not redolent of Taliban-style reactionary policies, is hardly reassuring. Funded to an extent by Türkiye, HTS developed an authoritarian system in which women's rights were restricted, open sale of alcohol prohibited, and dissidents imprisoned and tortured. After protests in 2021 against repression, HTS loosened controls somewhat.

Now in control of Damascus, HTS has appointed an old Assad regime bureaucrat as chief of the national police and has tried to confiscate arms from the people, especially the youth. HTS has moved decisively to take control of the legal system, dispatching eleven of its minions from Idlib to take charge of the central body of Syrian attorneys. In response, a petition signed by 400 Syrians, 130 of them lawyers, has demanded that the legitimate purges taking place of corrupt and repressive Assad legal officials does not result in their replacement "by others also lacking any electoral legitimacy" (Hélène Sallon, "En Syrie, des avocats s'inquiètent de la mainmise du pouvoir sur le barreau," *Le Monde*, Jan. 20, 2025).

Syrian women have also expressed grave concerns about the future. In Aleppo in December, a women's demonstration was called off after threatening messages were received by organizers. The HTS-led government has also sent out mixed signals. After an HTS spokesman said in late December that women's leadership roles would have to be limited to "functions that correspond to their nature and biology," protest demonstrations broke out in several cities. HTS leader al-Sharaa has expressed a somewhat different line publicly, naming human rights leader Aisha al-Dibs to a bureau of women's affairs, but the latter has denounced feminism and called for a society based upon Islamic law (Céline Pierce-Magnani, "En Syrie, la méfiance des femmes face au nouveau pouvoir," *Le Monde*, Dec. 30, 2024).

The strongest worries about the new Syria have been expressed by the Kurds, who have come under pressure from the Turkish-backed SNA as well as the Turkish military and air force. Kurds have already been forced out of some areas. The town of Kobane, where the SDF and its women's units held off ISIS in 2014 in a legendary battle that broke the back of those Islamist reactionaries, is again in danger from SNA and Turkish forces. Recently, Commander-in-Chief of the Kurdish SDF's People's Protection Forces (YPJ), Rohilat Afrin, expressed concern about the direction of the new Syria, in terms of both Kurdish autonomy and women's rights: "We believe that the war in Kobane was a war for humanity; a war to protect all women and land. We are confident that a state of public alert on a global scale will be raised and solidarity will be provided should Kobane be attacked again.... The mindset entrenched within the new government makes it clear that there is no place for women there — or only a place where women must accept to cover their heads and adopt a patriarchal mindset. Avoiding the above will require a great deal of organization and struggle. This

is a serious danger that we need to recognize” (Rojava Information Center, “Syria: ‘We cannot hand over our weapons while attacks on women and our territories continue’ — An interview with YPJ Commander-in-Chief Rohilat Afrin,” *Links: International Journal of Socialist Renewal*, Jan. 12, 2025).

Imperialist and Subimperialist Threats... and Syria’s Future

The fact that the Assad regime since the 2011 uprising has been propped up by Russia, Iran, and the Iran-aligned Hezbollah militias from Lebanon, was shown in how quickly this five-decade-old edifice collapsed once these outside powers began to withdraw in late 2024. Russia pulled out most of its forces by then and refused to do what it had done a decade earlier, conduct indiscriminate air attacks on Syrian rebels and civilians. Here the determined resistance of the Ukrainian people played no small role in weakening Russian imperialism, while Ukraine’s drones gave actual material support. Hezbollah, weakened by Israel’s attacks in the fall of 2024, which had caught its leadership off guard, assassinating them in one swoop, was in no position to aid the regime either. And Iran, reeling from Israeli air attacks and expecting more especially with Trump’s election in the US, also refused to do anything for Assad.

It should also be noted that Russia and Israel had a tacit understanding under Assad, allowing Israel to attack Syria at will. In addition, after the fall of Assad and the weakening of Hezbollah and Iran, some in the Israeli and US governments are under the dangerous illusion that they can now move on to re-order the region by toppling the Iran regime from without.

But even as various imperialist and subimperialist powers – Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah – were leaving the scene, new ones were appearing, or at least appearing with greater force. Türkiye, whose President Recep Tayyip Erdogan harbors neo-Ottomanist ambitions for the whole region, not only backed HTS and its “own” SNA, but has also exercised huge direct influence on the new government. Erdogan wants the new Syrian government to leave the Kurds to him and the SNA, but here he comes up against other forces, not least the Kurds themselves, but also their tacit backers in the US military, who have seen SDF as a bulwark against the resurgence of ISIS.

Israel has intervened in post-Assad Syria in several ways, sinking the small Syrian navy out of the water, destroying from the air many military bases, and taking over a considerably expanded territory around the Golan Heights, which it already occupies illegally. The Israelis have given their usual alibi for their war crimes: fighting “terrorism.”

All of these powers, and others, are seeking to take advantage of Syria’s economic weakness, born of years of civil war and the exploitation of the country by the Assad family amid epochal levels of corruption. These powers are seeking to dismember or divide Syria into regions and enclaves they hope to dominate. Hence, the constant call by Syrians today for the unity of the country.

Some on the left, especially campists, have gone so far as to say that the collapse of the regime was orchestrated by Israel and the US and that all this serves imperialism and reaction, with little or no liberatory content to be seen. This logic is extremely questionable. For as longtime Marxist analyst of the region Gilbert Achcar observed in the wake of Assad’s fall, “There are those who believe that any local actor is but the puppet of some external actor. Such people can’t acknowledge any agency for local actors. That’s, of course, a very poor way of perceiving the situation” (Stephen R. Shalom, “The Collapse of the Assad Regime: An Interview on Syria with Gilbert Achcar, *New Politics Online*, Dec. 13, 2024).

Such a logic also fails at the human level. Who can defend, excuse, or minimize the brutality of a regime that turned the whole country into a giant torture chamber and death camp? Who can forget the regime’s watchword during the uprising and civil war, “Bashar or we burn the country”? When

the time came, in December 2024, the long-suffering Syrian people shook off the regime, with the armed forces melting away as the leaders slinked off to Moscow.

The people of Syria now have an opening, of a type not seen since the early, heady days of 2011. Let us hope that they can make something positive out of this, not only for Syria, but also for the region and the world, which is in such great need of hope at a time when authoritarianism and fascism are descending on us in so many parts of the world. Let us also salute the persistence and the resilience of the Syrian people, who never gave up in the years since 2011, whether inside the country or in exile, and who continue on today amid myriad obstacles. Let that be a lesson for all of us, everywhere.