

Syria: From Secular Dictatorships to Islamist Populism

written by Saeed Rahnema | February 7, 2025



The incredible and thunderous fall of the Assad regime marks a new phase in the life of this war-torn country. Syria has never experienced a moment of peace since its inception. Various nationalities and ethnic groups, with diverse religious affiliations, have lived in this ancient land, either under the control of colonial or imperialist powers or subjected to military dictatorships. Understanding the complexities of the present moment is impossible without a brief look at the country's tragic history.

The Ottoman Empire controlled Syria and its environs since the early sixteenth century. In 1918, in the midst of World War I, Sharif Hussein of Mecca, with the backing of the British Empire, launched a rebellion against the Ottomans. After the war, Hussein's son Faisal took over rule of Syria with the support of the emerging Arab nationalist movement. But this coincided with the occupation of French forces. Anti-French sentiment was growing and, for a time, the "Arab Kingdom of Syria" was created. But it did not last. Eventually, with agreements between the British and French imperialists, the area was ceded as a League of Nations mandate to France. In 1920, the French military deposed Faisal—whom the British made King of Iraq—and many Syrian intellectuals went into exile. Syria remained under the harsh rule of French imperialism until "independence" in 1946.

A better understanding of the political situation in Syria requires an appreciation of multiple and interrelated dimensions, namely, imperialism, Arab nationalism, Islamic fundamentalism, military dictatorship, Arab neoliberalism, and involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Below, we will briefly touch on aspects of each of these.

Imperialism and Arab Nationalism

During the French Mandate in Syria, France secured its dominance by exploiting ethnic and religious differences, including regionalization of the country according to the areas in which each of the religious minorities was concentrated. Accordingly, they formed separate state governments for the Alawites—an offshoot of Shia Islam (about 12 percent of the population) and Druze (about 3 percent). The Sunni majority (about 74 percent) and Christians (about 10 percent) wanted to preserve the territorial integrity of Syria, but the Alawites, who at the time were largely rural and among the poorest people, many of whom worked for Sunni landowners, cooperated with the French despite the initial and sporadic conflicts. France incorporated many of them into the army and administrative apparatus, thinking that a Syrian government made up of this minority would need French support forever.

When France withdrew from Syria in 1946, the majority of army officers and government cadres were Alawites, Druze, and Sunni Kurds. Successive governments since Syria's independence have been drawn mainly from the Alawite minority, the most notable of these being the Assad family. This provided the basis for the anger and resentment of the Sunni majority, which was the forerunner of

Arab nationalism, and the anger of Syrian Christians, who, unlike Lebanese Christians, were not inclined towards the French.

In 1928, parliamentary elections were held, and a draft constitution was created, which was rejected by France, leading to uprisings against French rule. In 1936, France agreed to recognize Syria's independence but retained its military control over Syria.

Another significant issue was France's decision in 1939 to cede (for its own interests) the Alexandretta (Iskenderun) region—a critical coastal area in the Mediterranean, part of the Aleppo province—to Turkey. The Turkish population of this area was a minority, with the majority being Syrians of different ethnic groups. The loss of this important area sparked nationalist sentiment in Syria. Previously, the ground for nationalism had already been laid during the Ottoman era, especially after the rise of the Young Turks in 1908 and the imposition of the Turkish language, and was intensified by the fall of Faisal. It was after the Alexandretta issue that Syrian nationalist youth began to form organizations that led to the formation of the Arab Ba'ath Party, officially founded in 1946. In 1952, it merged with the Arab Socialist Party and created the Arab Baath Socialist Party. It was in this context that the Syrian Arab Republic was formed—despite having a sizable non-Arab population.

Military Dictatorships and Religious Fundamentalism

After independence, Syria witnessed the formation of unstable governments and successive coups. In 1958, Syria joined with Gamal Abdel Nasser, the most prominent figure in the Arab world after he nationalized the Suez Canal, in forming the United Arab Republic. This alliance brought no benefit to Syria, effectively turning it into a kind of colony of Egypt governed by a dictatorial regime. Syrian nationalists, including the Ba'ath Party, which had initially supported this unity, began to pursue alternative solutions. In 1961, a group of Syrian officers seized political power and dissolved the United Arab Republic. In 1963, officers affiliated with the Ba'ath Party organized another coup. Internal Ba'athist conflicts led to yet another coup in 1966. The defeat of Syria in the 1967 war with Israel, discussed below, further fueled internal divisions, and in 1970, Hafez al-Assad, who was then the minister of defense, took power in an internal coup.

Assad's rise to power marked the end of the regime's instability and the beginning of an unchallenged dictatorship. Although, like many other Syrian post-independence leaders, he was from the Alawite sect, he established a secular regime. The first constitution of 1930, which had been revised several times, required the president to be Muslim, but in 1973, Assad removed this constitutional requirement, marking the beginning of Islamists' more intensive opposition to his rule. Violent confrontations between these factions and the regime, along with ongoing political assassinations, deepened the violent atmosphere in Syrian society and triggered a form of civil war. The Muslim Brotherhood, which had long gained influence among Syria's Sunni majority, increased its activities in predominantly Sunni cities. The Iranian Revolution of 1979, which had brought a fundamentalist Islamist—though Shia—regime to power, had encouraged the Syrian Sunni fundamentalists to challenge Assad's power. Following a ban on the group and the flight of its leaders, repression escalated. The Muslim Brotherhood's uprising in the city of Hama in 1982 led to a widespread massacre by the Syrian military. That same year, Israel invaded Lebanon, and Israeli military confrontations with Syrian forces, which still had a presence in Lebanon, further exacerbated the situation inside Syria.

"Infitah": Arab Neoliberalism

The economic policies of Syria's early post-independence governments, in the absence of a capitalist class—aside from merchants and a few industrial owners—were characterized by state capitalism

with some social welfare programs under the guise of “socialist” policies. Starting in the 1970s, under Hafez al-Assad’s rule, a gradual shift towards open-door policies, known as “Infitah”—similar to the post-Nasser programs in Egypt launched by Anwar Sadat—was adopted, and a capitalist class began to emerge around the regime.

With the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War and Syria’s support for Iran, the Arab states distanced themselves from Syria. Iran’s aid, including cheap oil and other financial supports, could not sustain the necessary investments for economic development. The Assad regime therefore resorted to other means of supporting the country’s economy, including the production and trafficking of drugs. In 1991, the government adopted a new Infitah policy, which was essentially a form of Arab neoliberalism. This was largely in response to the demands of the emerging capitalist class, primarily made up of the children and cronies of military and government officials. By this time, private investment had overtaken state investment. Like in other countries, the rapid growth of a new middle class changed the class structure of Syrian society, further deepening the class divide between capitalists, the new middle class, and workers and peasants.

When Hafez al-Assad died in 2000, he was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad, who had neither the interest nor the ability to lead politically. The same neoliberal policies continued, and the limited reforms that had been promised failed to materialize. Attempts to improve relations with the United States, especially during the “War on Terror,” and Syria’s cooperation in the U.S. outsourcing of the interrogation and torture of detained Islamists did not lead to any substantial change. With the onset of the “Arab Spring” in 2011 and the brutal suppression of the peaceful uprisings, Syria’s political and economic problems reached a peak. Over a decade of civil war, coupled with U.S. sanctions, destroyed Syria’s economy, exacerbated poverty and misery, and intensified the anger and dissatisfaction of the Syrian people.

Involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

From the very beginning, Syria has been more involved in the Israeli-Palestinian issue than any of its Arab neighbors. During the first Arab-Israeli war (1947–1949), Syria lost the hugely important UN-declared “demilitarized zones” near Lake Tiberias and the Jordan River.¹ In the 1967 war, Syria also lost the Golan Heights. The loss of the Golan, which Israel annexed in 1981 despite UN Security Council resolutions, was a significant blow to Syria, both strategically—with its 1,000-meter-high elevation—and economically. The area is rich in agriculture, livestock, and, more importantly, water resources, with discharges reaching about 3,000 liters per second. After occupying the Golan Heights, Israel expelled more than 170,000 Syrian villagers and allowed about 15,000 Druze to remain. It confiscated fertile lands and established Jewish settlements. During the Yom Kippur War of 1973, Syria was able to regain part of the region, now called the “buffer zone,” where United Nations peacekeepers (UNDOF) are stationed, the same area that Israel has once again occupied after the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime.

Under the Assad regime, Syria, like many other Arab countries dealing with Israel, used the Palestinian issue as a pretext for advancing its political agenda rather than truly seeking Palestinian liberation. For instance, when King Hussein of Jordan carried out a massacre of Palestinians in 1970, Salah Jadid, leader of the left-wing faction of the Ba’ath Party and effectively the country’s number-one figure, asked Hafez al-Assad, who controlled the air force, to provide cover for Palestinians fleeing to Syria, but Assad refused. (Following ideological disagreements, Assad later orchestrated a coup and removed and imprisoned Jadid, who died after twenty-three years in jail.) Hafez al-Assad even created the pro-Syrian Palestinian group As-Sa’iqa to rival and weaken Yasser Arafat and Fatah. Moreover, when he intervened in Lebanon’s civil war,² he fought on the side of the right-wing Christian forces against the leftist and Palestinian coalitions, partly hoping that the United States would pressure Israel to return the Golan Heights to Syria. Throughout the reign of both Assads,

Syria provided no real assistance to the Palestinians. However, Syria's involvement in ongoing wars with Israel and its rising defense costs have only limited the possibility of improving the conditions of the Syrian people.

The Rapid Collapse

The series of factors mentioned above increasingly distanced the Assad regime from the Syrian people and further and further delegitimized it. The more the regime's distance from the people grew, the more it became dependent especially after 2015 on its two sole foreign allies—Russia and Iran. These allies, in turn, used Syria to advance their own policies.

Russia has had a close relationship with Syria since the Soviet era. Syria has been strategically important to Russia, especially since the Soviet Union's naval bases in Egypt were dismantled, and Syria has been the only possibility for the presence of the Soviet/later Russian naval fleet in the Mediterranean.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been close to Syria both religiously and strategically from the beginning, particularly concerning Lebanon and Hezbollah and the regime's anti-Israel policy, and provided substantial military and financial assistance to maintain Assad's rule.

However, a series of unpredictable events in the region and beyond began to trouble these two main allies of Syria. Russia's war with Ukraine and NATO's counteraction, coupled with broad sanctions, severely limited Russia's economic and military capacity, forcing a reduction in its support and military presence in Syria. Iran, too, faced more difficulties after the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack and Israel's genocidal and destructive response, which included renewed conflict with Hezbollah and severe damage to it, as well as the Iran-Israel missile war related to Israeli assassinations of Hamas and Hezbollah leaders. The continuing sanctions and the confluence of several internal crises further constrained Iran's ability to offer large-scale assistance to Syria. With the reduction in foreign support, the Assad regime could no longer maintain power on its own.

Opposition forces, which already controlled significant parts of the country, began to advance, sensing the weakness of the Assad regime. A careful review of reports and credible writings reveals the sequence of events. On November 27, 2024, the group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a splinter faction of al-Qaeda, merging with other Islamists, began its advance. It was joined by the Syrian National Army (SNA), a faction armed, trained, and funded by the Turkish government, which includes jihadist elements and has been deployed in the past against Syrian Kurds. Aside from historical rows with Syria, Turkey faced two significant issues: the presence of nearly three million Syrian refugees in the country and the existence of a semi-autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria near the Turkish border. Taking advantage of new developments, Turkey supported both HTS and the SNA. A third group, distinct from the other two, is the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), primarily consisting of Kurdish forces that govern the region of Rojava autonomously and cooperatively. Their military branches, including the women's units, fought heroically against ISIS. The support of the United States and the presence of American troops in the area prevented Syrian and Turkish forces from attacking them. This group also initially occupied areas in the southern part of its region (Deir ez-Zor) and to the west (across the Euphrates River).

In the initial reaction to the rebel offensive, the Assad regime sent forces to confront the opposition. The Russians immediately entered the scene and bombarded many rebel positions. As the fighting continued, in the south of Syria, in the Daraa region near the Jordanian border (which was the starting point of the 2011 uprising and civil war), independent opposition forces, not connected to the extremist factions, clashed with the Syrian army and liberated the area. As the fighting progressed, Syrian soldiers, dissatisfied with their situation, showed little interest in fighting. The

regime's hasty decision to raise their salaries did little to help. One Syrian battalion, along with all its equipment, even fled to Iraq and surrendered. From this moment on, the opposition's advance continued without resistance, and major cities, including Damascus, were eventually occupied.

This process of rapid regime collapse shows that, contrary to many claims, the fall of Assad's regime in eleven days was not a pre-designed foreign conspiracy, although when the regime started crumbling, foreign actors got involved. When Assad "heard the voice of the people" (the famous line used by the Shah of Iran just before the fall of his regime in 1979) and realized that his army was not fighting and his allies could no longer keep him in power, he signaled that he was willing to step down. The Russians reached the same conclusion. It is unclear who contacted the leadership of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham to inform them that Assad would leave and that there would be no need to attack and destroy the capital and government institutions. The Russians evacuated Assad and his family, and Assad's prime minister remained behind to negotiate a peaceful transfer of power to the opposition. The terrifying experience of Iraq and the "de-Ba'athification" policy implemented by the U.S. occupiers, which played a major role in the creation of ISIS and the power vacuum that resulted from the dismantling of government ministries and institutions, encouraged both sides to reach this compromise.

The opposition leader, Ahmad al-Sharaa (also known as Abu Mohammed al-Julani), craftily appeared with a democratic façade and promises of unity, claiming to respect the rights of all ethnic and religious minorities, the right of women to choose their attire, and guaranteeing property rights, all while assuring that there would be no threat to the United States and Europe. He also declared that Russia could retain its airbase in Hmeimim and its naval base in Tartus.

The people of the Middle East are well acquainted with such promises during political transitions. There is no doubt that the fall of Assad's regime marks a significant turning point in the history of Syria and the Middle East. The joy of the majority of Syrians at being freed from a brutal dictatorship and the absence of political freedoms and democracy is entirely understandable. The important and complicated issue, however, is the nature of the political system that will, in practice and not just in words, replace the old regime. The sad reality is that the main force of this regime is the Islamist extremists. Once they stabilize their rule, they will implement policies based on their fundamentalist religious beliefs. We have seen this in Iran and Afghanistan. Secular and progressive forces in Syria, weakened by decades of suppression, killings, and exile, are scattered and frail. Syrian society faces numerous internal and external challenges. There are deep ethnic and sectarian divisions, a bankrupt economy, and the return of millions of refugees will only add to the problems.

External pressures and threats will be intensified. Israel, as the biggest winner of current events, is already exploiting the situation, reoccupying "temporarily" [*sic*] the demilitarized buffer zone in the Golan Heights. (More inexplicable is the inaction of the 1,100 UNDOF peacekeepers stationed in the area.) We may soon witness the expulsion of Syrians of different ethnicities living in this strip. Simultaneously, Israel has conducted extensive bombing campaigns, destroying Syrian military and naval bases and facilities, thereby obliterating the country's capabilities to resist future Israeli attacks.

Turkey is another major winner, expanding its influence in Syria through its proxies and preparing to end the semi-autonomous region under the Kurds as soon as the 900 remaining American forces leave the area. Already, the SNA has taken over some areas under Kurdish control. Interestingly, when the Kurdish SDF moved west of the Euphrates to repel Turkey's proxy attacks and took control of that area, the U.S. commander ordered them to vacate the area immediately, threatening to withdraw support for the Kurds if they didn't comply.

Washington is in a most farcical situation, waiting to see whether the new leader, who has a \$10

million U.S. bounty on his head, would behave, and has already started negotiations with him. If so, Syria will ideally be expected to join the “Abraham Accord” and, with the influx of Saudi, Emirati, and Qatari funds, follow a new round of neoliberal “infitah” and unite with the other Arab friends of the U.S.-Israel. But if, in a less likely situation, this demand is not fulfilled, and depending on the extent to which Syria stays away from the United States, the country will be dragged to the ground with crippling sanctions and, if necessary, with a military attack.

Russia is one of the major losers of these transformations. It is less likely that it could fully maintain its air and naval bases, but it will try its best to have a limited presence and continue selling arms regardless of the new regime’s shape or political nature. China, also indifferent to the new Syrian regime’s intentions, will try to develop its relations and enter into long-term economic cooperation.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is undoubtedly the main loser in these events. The two regimes of the Islamic Republic and Syria had the closest relationship. The Islamic Republic spent billions of dollars to maintain its presence in Syria. It resorted to all sorts of actions, including sending Afghan refugees in Iran to fight against Assad’s opponents. A large and unspecified number of members of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and dozens of its “generals” were killed in efforts to maintain Assad’s power. Syria was a crucial part of the “Axis of Resistance” and a route for the passage of military and financial aid to Hezbollah, as well as for exerting influence in Lebanon to further the regime’s anti-Israeli policies. With the loss of Syria, the possibility of assisting Hezbollah, which successive Israeli strikes had already debilitated, has been lost as well.

The bitter reality of the current political moment is that despite the end of over half a century of Assad family dictatorship, Syria still faces deeply complex issues. The religious sectarianism of the newly empowered Sunni majority against the Alawites, Greek Orthodox, Armenians, Shiites, Ismailis, and Druze, and the ethnic sectarianism of the Arab majority against the Kurds, Turkmens, Assyrians, and Circassians, will remain significant obstacles to democracy in Syria. Another troubling reality is the presence of religious fundamentalists in the government. The return of the Golan Heights, which is not only politically but also economically vital for Syria, will not be easy, and constant tension with Israel, especially with the rise of more extreme right-wing religious forces in that country, will complicate matters further. Turkey’s interventions and its efforts to weaken and strike at the Kurds will also be a major barrier to establishing democracy in Syria. The Islamic Republic of Iran will try its best to continue its intervention in Syria in various forms.

Like other countries in the Middle East, Syria needs a secular, democratic, federal, and progressive government. However, despite all the pessimism expressed in this article, if the secular forces opposing Assad act in unity at this moment, before the new regime is firmly established, they may be able to force the current ruling power to adhere to some of the promises made by its leader in recent days.

notes

1. Saeed Rahnema, “Obstacles to Palestinian-Israeli Peace,” *New Politics* (Dec. 9, 2023).
2. Saeed Rahnema, “How Different Is the Fourth Israeli Invasion of Lebanon?” *New Politics* (Nov. 27, 2024).