

The Collapse of the Assad Regime: An Interview on Syria with Gilbert Achcar

written by Gilbert Achcar, Stephen R. Shalom | December 13, 2024

[Gilbert Achcar has been a major left commentator on international affairs for many years. He grew up in Lebanon and has lived and taught in Paris, Berlin, and London. He is just retiring as professor of Development Studies and International Relations at SOAS, University of London. His many books include *The Clash of Barbarisms* (2002, 2006); *Perilous Power: The Middle East and US Foreign Policy*, co-authored with Noam Chomsky (2007); *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives* (2010); *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism* (2013); *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (2013, 2022); *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising* (2016); and *The New Cold War: The United States, Russia and China from Kosovo to Ukraine* (2023). His new book on Gaza will be coming out from the University of California Press in the summer. He was interviewed Dec. 9 online by Stephen R. Shalom of the *New Politics* editorial board.]

Stephen R. Shalom: So, this has been quite an extraordinary week!

Gilbert Achcar: You could even say quite an extraordinary weekend.

SRS: Indeed.

Let me begin by asking about the role of Israel and the United States.

In the last few days, we've seen Israeli troops cross the border from the occupied Golan and seize further Syrian territory. This has led some analysts to say that this shows that Israel—and its main backer the United States—were the main driving forces in what's happened in Syria in the last two weeks.

GA: That's a very skewed interpretation of things, since if it shows anything, it is that Israel is very cautious about what is happening. If it is forcibly seizing the buffer zone which was created in 1974 as a result of the 1973 war, that's to prevent those new forces that are now coming to the fore in Syria from getting closer to the border of the annexed Syrian territory, the part of the Golan Heights that was occupied by Israel in 1967. This territory was formally annexed by Israel in 1981, an annexation that Donald Trump, during his first term in office, recognized officially for the first time of any US president. So that's what the Israelis are doing.

They're also bombing the military capabilities of the old regime, some apparently related to the production of chemical weapons, to prevent the rebels from seizing them. By behaving in this way, Israel is actually creating conditions that are not conducive to good relations with any future government in Syria, if ever that possibility existed.

And as for the United States, Washington has been observing and monitoring developments with caution. They, like Israel, are happy that Iran has been dealt a severe blow, with the downfall of the Assad regime. But, like everyone, they have a big, big question mark about what will come next. They have worries about how the main rebel force, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS) will behave if it manages to control this big swath of territory that fell into its hands. And they are even worried that ISIS could seize the opportunity to launch a new offensive in the Northeast of Syria.

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.

SRS: But surely the condition of Iran and Hezbollah and Russia—forces outside of Syria, external actors—did play a big role in the collapse of Assad.

GA: Of course. That's beyond any doubt. And it is a powerful rebuttal to all those who claimed for so many years that Assad was a real popular leader, that the Syrian population was very supportive of the Assad family's regime, and that that's why this regime managed to survive. Well, now we have proof that the Assad regime fully owed its survival first to Iran's intervention, which prevented its collapse in 2013—that was when Hezbollah entered Syria at the behest of Iran, sending thousands of fighters to prop up the regime. And even with Iran's support, the regime was again on the brink of collapse two years later, which led Moscow to intervene in September 2015. Russia dramatically added to a key superiority that the regime already had, namely, the monopoly of the skies. It benefitted from this monopoly courtesy of the U.S. government, which under Barack Obama vetoed any delivery of anti-aircraft weapons to the Syrian opposition. This is why you never heard even of helicopters being shut down, let alone fighter jets. The opposition was unable even to counter helicopters. The regime extensively used its fleet of helicopters to drop barrel bombs—these were very barbaric, indiscriminate attacks on urban zones killing a huge number of people. And the Syrian opposition fighters could do nothing. They didn't have any anti-aircraft weapons; they didn't have MANPADs, i.e. portable anti-aircraft weapons. The United States didn't provide any and none of the countries neighboring Syria that were allied to the United States were allowed to send that kind of weapon. That includes Turkey, which actually produces these weapons. Recall the famous Stinger missiles that the United States provided to the Afghanistan Mujahideen when they were fighting the Soviet occupation? These are produced in Turkey under US license, but Turkey didn't have the right to deliver a single one of them to the Syrian opposition.

So, Russia's intervention in 2015 was the second time the regime was rescued by a foreign actor—first Iran, then Russia. And it survived with the combined support of Russia and Iran. Russia's contribution was mainly its air force, with also a few troops there. And Iran's was mainly troops from Lebanon, from Iraq, from Iran itself even including Afghan troops based in Iran. And that's how the regime survived. For a long time, one could joke about Bashar Assad that the only territory upon which he had some sovereignty was his presidential palace. Beyond his palace, the Syrian regime's territory was either under Russian or Iranian dominance. What happened in the recent period is that Russia had to remove most of its air force from Syria. According to Israeli sources, there were only some 15 Russian planes left there.

So very little was available to support Assad, since Iran's main force in support of the Syrian regime, which was Hezbollah, was dealt a very heavy blow in Lebanon. It was no longer really in a position to rescue the regime. And that's when HTS decided to seize the opportunity. They were preparing for it. They saw a window of opportunity in light of the Russian withdrawal and the severe setback that Hezbollah was experiencing starting in September. They therefore began preparing themselves. And once the ceasefire was concluded in Lebanon, they attacked. Of course, they did not want to attack while the war was going on in Lebanon, because that would have appeared as if they were joining Israel in combat. So, they waited until it was over and then attacked. Having been deprived of foreign support, the regime collapsed just like the U.S. puppet regime in Afghanistan in 2021. It was exactly the same kind of collapse.

We are against both American imperialism and Russian imperialism as well as Iran's reactionary intervention abroad. And the result of foreign domination is always similar. Whether the puppet master is Russia or the United States, puppet regimes are puppet regimes. And the Assad regime had become one for a very long time, except that it was a puppet with two competing masters, giving

it a little bit of space. All this has collapsed and is over now.

SRS: Previously, it seemed like Israel and Russia had an understanding that despite Russia's backing of Syria, it would allow Israel to attack certain targets in Syria, without deploying its anti-aircraft systems against the attacking Israeli planes.

GA: Yes, that has been going on for several years. Israel has been quite frequently bombing Syrian territory—more specifically, Iranian concentrations or pro-Iran concentrations, like Hezbollah forces, within Syrian territory—without Russia, of course, intercepting any of these planes or firing any of the anti-aircraft missiles that it has deployed over Syrian territory. There was obviously an agreement between the two countries, Israel and Russia. This also explains why Israel did not take a position on the Ukraine war. It did not come out in support of the Ukrainians, like the Western bloc. Israel adopted a sort of neutral attitude towards the war because of this deal that existed between Israel and Russia. Now, of course, this is over because Russia's presence in Syria has been very much reduced. Moscow is no longer in a position to greenlight or not any action by Israel on Syrian territory. And I wouldn't bet on Russia being able to keep its two bases—air and naval—in Syria for long. Or else that would be almost like Guantanamo, where you maintain a base in a country with which you don't have any friendly relations. The Syrian opposition can't have friendly relations with Moscow, who's got a lot of Syrian blood on its hands. That would be quite awkward.

SRS: Does Russia still physically have anti-aircraft missiles in Syria?

GA: Yes, it has, of course, if only to protect its bases. Any of their forces that were deployed in other parts of the territory I presume have been redeployed or brought back to the bases that they have in the coastal area. I can't see them keeping isolated forces anywhere else. And likewise, the Iranians completely withdrew their troops into Iraq and from Iraq back into Iran. Hezbollah fighters that were still in Syria went back to Lebanon. And that's it. Lots of articles in the media have been explaining that this is a huge defeat for Iran and its so-called axis of resistance. Well, that's an accurate description of what happened. No possible question about that.

SRS: In terms of the victorious forces in Syria, aside from HTS, can you describe some of the significant players?

GA: Syria today is a patchwork, a full political-military patchwork. First, you have several foreign forces. Iran withdrew its forces, but you still have Russian forces there. Then you have Turkish forces on the northern border occupying bits of Syrian territory. You have U.S. forces, deployed in the northeast to back the Kurdish forces, which are dominant in a big part of the country. It's a quite sizable part—one quarter of the Syrian territory. You have an area in the south on the Jordanian border dominated by opposition forces that are linked to the United States. And you have a genuine popular uprising in the Druze area of the south, Suwayda—the province of Suwayda, around the city of Suwayda—that linked up with local forces in Daraa province.

And, of course, there was the region in the northwest that was under HTS control. HTS forces have now spread to other parts of the country where the regime collapsed. However, HTS's army is not large enough to control all the territory that fell into its hands. What happened is that the regime collapsed, exactly like you had in Afghanistan, except that HTS does not have the same force that the Taliban had. It's smaller, weaker than what the Taliban were. And it would be hard for them to impose themselves on the Kurds, just as it would be hard for them to really get rid of those Syrian opposition forces that are completely dominated by Turkey, which are in the north. Likewise, I can't see them managing to really exert full control over Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama and all these cities. Nor over the coastal area where you still have Russian forces. HTS has not really spread everywhere, although the state has collapsed everywhere.

There are areas where the state has collapsed and a vacuum was created. And this is related to the nature of the state. It's of a kind of state akin to that of Libya or that of Iraq under Saddam Hussein which are states that are really family ruled, family owned—I call them, along with the monarchies in the region, patrimonial states. They function like monarchies, actually. The state apparatus is so much linked organically to the ruling family that when the regime collapses, it's not only the regime, it's the whole state. What we have witnessed in recent days in Syria is not a regime collapse. It's a state collapse. The whole state collapsed, and any idea that there might be some smooth transition process is just an illusion.

It is just impossible, given the situation of the country and the number of occupation forces on its soil. The worst, of course, is the Israeli occupation. Israel is now in a very hegemonic position in the region after what they did starting from Gaza, then Lebanon, then Syria, and they are now planning to strike at Iran.

Let me be clear. I fully share the joy of the tens of thousands of people who got freed from jail, from the chains of the Assad regime. It is a huge relief that this carceral regime has ended, that so many people are able to go back to their cities, to their homes, that refugees can go back to their homeland. But this is not a revolution. This is the collapse of a regime that hasn't been replaced by any form of popular democratic organization. And therefore, from a left-wing perspective, we should also be worried about the future.

At the very least, we must be very cautious and not fall into the kind of euphoria that led some people to characterize the events as the resumption of the Syrian revolution. The Syrian revolution, the one that started in 2011, has been dead for a long time unfortunately. The only possibility for a resumption of that uprising, was seen in 2020 in Suwayda, in this regime-controlled Druze area that I mentioned, where you now have some kind of popular power. There you had repeated popular uprisings against the regime since 2020, renewing the slogans of the 2011 popular uprising. They briefly spread to other parts of Syria, but there was no form of organization able to generalize this popular uprising to the whole country—or at least the whole Arab-majority territory of Syria because the Kurdish-majority part belongs to a different political category. So, unfortunately the Suwayda uprising did not spread, and the regime repressed it, quite harshly as usual. But now, with the collapse of the regime, they have revived their movement. But it is limited to only one part, one province of Syria.

There are progressives in other parts of the country who are trying to organize something at the level of civil society, from below, to fight for rights, democracy, and social demands. How far they will manage to do something is hampered by the fact that the regime has been such a terrible tyranny that little potential is left. Most of the opposition-minded people left the country. There has been a huge exodus from Syria over the years. One quarter of the population has left the country, if not more. Not to mention those that were internally displaced who represent close to one third.

There is little ground for optimism, I'm afraid. But there is still some ground for hope.