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Explaining the Collapse of Syria's Assad Regime

By Huzeir Ezekiel Dzulhisham

SYNOPSIS

The fall of Damascus to rebel forces and the rapid collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime on 7 December 2024 surprised the international community. Why did it happen so quickly, despite having persevered through 13 years of a bloody civil war? Arguably, three key factors were responsible – fragility of the Syrian state, fragmentation of the Assad authority, and failure of responsive allied action to continue propping up the Assad rule.

COMMENTARY

The unexpected collapse of President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria has shocked the world. Within [11 days](#), Syrian rebels led by the group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its leader Abu Mohammed al-Julani, now going by his birth name Ahmed Hussein al-Shar'a, accomplished what 13 years of civil war could not. In the early hours of December 7, the rebels captured Damascus with little resistance, ending the rule of the decades-old Assad dynasty and forcing the once-feared Syrian President into exile in Russia. How can this be explained?

Three factors – Syrian state fragility, fragmentation of Assad's authority following the 2011 Arab Spring uprising, and his reliance on external allies such as Russia and Iran – progressively weakened the Assad regime and explained its rapid collapse.

Syria: The Fragile State

Since it came to power in a military coup in 1963, the regime under Hafez al-Assad had serious long-term weaknesses which detrimentally affected his son and successor, Bashar al-Assad's rule. A significant weakness of the regime was its authoritarian and sectarian minority rule.

The Assad family and its loyalist supporters were mainly from Syria's Alawite group, a minority sect of Shia Islam comprising roughly [10-13 per cent](#) of the country's population. Notably, Alawite loyalists and relatives of the Assad family were [appointed](#) to key military, economic and government positions and largely monopolised control over Syria's economy and armed forces.

Under the [Ba'athist principles](#) of Hafez, he proclaimed a secular state with centralised authoritarian leadership and militant characteristics. Combined, the Alawi-Ba'athist identity of the Assad regime politically disenfranchised and effectively alienated the majority of Syrians, who are Sunni Muslims constituting [75 per cent](#) of the population. Ba'ath supporters were [instrumental](#) in preventing the inclusion of Sunni elites in Syria's parliament.

Collectively, nepotism, sectarianism, and authoritarian leadership generated simmering militant religious-based opposition that continually plagued the regime.

During the 1980s, [Islamist uprisings](#) started by the Muslim Brotherhood led to the infamous 1982 Hama Massacre, in which an estimated 10,000 to 25,000 civilians were killed when the regime laid siege to the Syrian city of Hama. Nevertheless, militant opposition to the regime re-emerged during the Arab Spring in 2011, which led to the Syrian civil war.

In recent years, despite preferential treatment, many Alawites became disillusioned with Bashar Assad. In the 2011-2024 civil war, Alawites [disproportionately suffered](#) higher casualties due to their over-representation in the Syrian Armed Forces. In 2014, an estimated 110,000 men [were killed](#), with some Alawite communities losing an entire generation of young men.

This led to demoralisation, with nearly [100,000](#) active Syrian soldiers deserting in 2014, some to establish anti-regime rebel groups such as the [Free Syrian Army \(FSA\)](#). The hollowing out of the Syrian military destabilised Bashar's power, which he was unable to reclaim by force.

The fragility of the Syrian state was further exacerbated by the economic collapse caused by [international sanctions](#) against the Assad regime. [In 2023](#), the Syrian pound depreciated 141 per cent against the US dollar, while inflation rose to 93 per cent. In desperation, the Assad regime turned to the covert production and sale of highly addictive Captagon drugs to fund operations, becoming the first [narco-state](#) in the Middle East to do so. Deteriorating economic conditions made it difficult for the Assad regime to distribute largesse to supporters and to quell the restive population.

Fragmentation of Assad's Authority

From the beginning of the civil war in 2011, Syria had fractured into regions controlled by rebel warlords and anti-regime generals. Before the fall of the Assad regime on 7 December, the [three most influential](#) rebel groups were the Syrian National Army (SNA), a coalition developed out of the FSA and backed by Turkey; the Syrian Democratic Force (SDF), a group of predominantly Kurdish militants supported by the US; and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a Sunni-Islamist group that emerged out of Al Qaeda.

Although these groups were disunited and often clashed with each other, they represented alternative sources of authority, rivalling the Assad regime's governance over Syria. HTS formed a functioning government, the [Syrian Salvation Government](#), within its territory, Idlib, that provided education, public housing, and utilities.

Before 7 December, these rebel groups occupied [nearly half of Syria](#), especially in the North and Northeast. While the Assad rule held almost all of Southeast Syria, its resources were spread too thin. The rebel groups were also strengthened by [Turkish](#) and [American](#) support in the form of military training and weapons aid. Combined with regime weaknesses and mass military desertions, they weakened Bashar's territorial control, setting the stage for his rapid downfall.

The Assad regime also lost international legitimacy when the global community recognised the Syrian National Council (SNC) as the legitimate government of Syria. The SNC was an organisation in exile that aimed to [represent](#) the entirety of the Syrian opposition politically and to form the post-Assad government.

Reliance on Russia and Iran

The Assad regime's weakness made it precarious and reliant on its allies, Russia and Iran, to preserve its hold over Syria. Iranian military assistance began in 2013, while Russian support started in 2015 in the form of attacks on anti-Assad rebel groups. Both helped prop up the Assad rule.

This was most evident during the 2016 Battle of Aleppo, when the Russian military and Iranian-backed militias helped Bashar's army to push rebels out of the city into retreat, leaving Syria's Northeast and Idlib as the sole [territories](#) under rebel control. By 2018, Iranian and Russian military assistance had helped Damascus [regain control](#) of Southern Syria.

What these victories meant was that the Assad rule had become dangerously reliant on Russian and Iranian assistance to continue. This was to become apparent with geopolitical developments outside Syria.

The Russia-Ukraine War that began in February 2022 and the Israeli attacks on Iran's allies, Hezbollah and Hamas, in 2024 forced both Russia and Iran to divert military resources away from Syria, leaving the Assad regime vulnerable to concerted actions by rebel forces.

Russia and Iran also pursued objectives in Syria that gave Bashar a false sense of security. Russia used Syria to project influence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, gaining a [warm water port](#) in Tartus for Russian military vessels and an [airbase](#) in Hmeimim. Iran used Syria to expand regional influence, creating [a Shia bridge](#) from Tehran to the Mediterranean and funnelling weapons to allied militias such as Hamas and Hezbollah.

Leading up to the fall of Damascus on 7 December, Iranians on social media [even criticised](#) Assad for his military failures and inability to stave off rebel advances independently. The day before Damascus fell, Iranian militias rapidly retreated from

Syria, prompting [one prominent analyst](#) to argue that Iran “cannot fight as an advisory and support force if Syria’s army itself does not want to fight”.

Conclusion

Based on the ground situation prior to December 2024, it becomes clear that Bashar Assad and his supporters had little chance of survival if their foreign backers did not physically intervene to stall the advance of a concerted rebel offensive to overthrow their common Alawite nemesis. The Sunni-based HTS was able to stay at the head of the rebel offensive given its identification with the Sunni Muslim majority in the Syrian population and its quick manoeuvres through the country’s devastated urban infrastructure. Meanwhile, the international and regional media had been preoccupied with Israel’s actions in Gaza and Lebanon, and the related diplomacy of major and regional powers.

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