

## **The Fall of Bashar al-Assad's Regime and the Rise of Islamic Fundamentalists in Syria: Causes and Consequences**

Bashar al-Assad's regime has collapsed, and "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham" (HTS), along with its allied Islamist groups, has taken control of large parts of Syria. The rapid disintegration of Assad's regime is reminiscent of the fall of Ashraf Ghani's puppet government in Afghanistan three years ago. Although Islamists have been significant players in the political arena and reactionary wars in the Middle East over the past three to four decades, HTS's rise in Syria marks the pinnacle of this trend. Syria remains a highly ambiguous and complex situation, becoming a hotspot of contradictions and a battleground for competition among imperialist powers and reactionary regional actors. Parts of the country are under the occupation of imperialist and reactionary forces, with chaos and a political vacuum being its prominent features. Displacement, poverty, and insecurity still plague the nation.

During the Arab Spring in 2011, Bashar al-Assad's regime brutally suppressed popular protests in Syria, which had emerged in response to repression, poverty, and corruption. These protests, initially aimed at overthrowing Assad's authoritarian regime, were met with unprecedented violence by the government. This crackdown was supported by Russian airpower, Iran's Quds Force militias, and resistance axis groups, including Hezbollah, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), and the Fatemiyoun Division.

This situation turned Syria into a proxy war battlefield, providing an opportunity for reactionary regional powers like Turkey, Qatar, and Israel, as well as U.S. imperialism, to support Islamist groups opposed to Assad's regime. This war, reactionary in nature, brought catastrophic consequences for Syria, including the widespread destruction of infrastructure, the massacre of over half a million people, the displacement of more than half the population, and the emergence of fundamentalist forces.

### **Factors Behind Assad's Fall**

The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime stemmed from multiple factors. For half a century, the regime survived through authoritarianism, repression, and external support, ultimately plunging Syria into proxy wars between imperialist powers and regional reactionaries. Islamist groups turned Syria into their playground with the backing of reactionary regional states. Additionally, severe Western sanctions—especially by U.S. imperialism—and over a decade of civil war completely destroyed Syria's economy.

Under the pressure of civil war and sanctions, Assad's regime and particularly the Syrian military crumbled from within. As Assad's main backers, Russia and Iran, became embroiled in their own crises—Russia in the Ukraine war and Iran in regional and domestic challenges—the groundwork for the regime's downfall was further set. This created an opportunity for HTS and its regional and global supporters, including Turkey, Qatar, the U.K., and the U.S., to dismantle Assad's regime entirely.

For 50 years of Assad family rule and 12 years of civil war, Syria became a proxy battleground between Russian imperialism and its regional allies on one side, and U.S. imperialism and its

allies on the other. With Russia preoccupied with the Ukraine war, the balance shifted in favor of the Western imperialist bloc, led by the U.S. This deprived the Iranian regime of Russian support, making it unable to sustain Assad's rule.

Additionally, other factors contributed to the inability of Iran to defend Assad. According to Khamenei himself, American and Israeli warplanes blocked routes on the eastern Syrian-Iraqi border, cutting off support from the Quds Force and its allied groups. Iran's proxy groups faced significant setbacks in Lebanon and Gaza, weakening its interventionist capacity. Moreover, Iran's internal crises, including widespread public dissatisfaction, deep internal divisions within the regime, and the aging Supreme Leader's succession issue, along with the potential return of Donald Trump, further hindered its support for Assad.

Russia, focusing on its interests in Ukraine, reportedly reached a covert agreement with Turkey regarding Syria's future to preserve its minimum interests in the region. On the other hand, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to maintain a balance of power and enhance his bargaining power against the U.S., still needs Russian forces in Syria. Consequently, Russian forces remain present at the Hmeimim Airbase in Latakia and the Tartus naval base.

### **Erdogan, Pan-Turkism, and Islamic Fundamentalism**

For nearly two decades, the Turkish regime under Erdogan's leadership has leaned increasingly toward regional expansionist policies. These policies now encompass North Africa, the Balkan Peninsula, and the South Caucasus. Erdogan's ambitions in Syria—referred to as the "conquest of Sham"—may not be the last chapter in his expansionist and externalized strategy. Historically, under Erdogan's leadership, Turkey's influence in Syria was less pronounced compared to Iran's. However, this situation was intolerable for Turkey's reactionary and expansionist regime.

One of Erdogan's tools for bargaining in Syria and the Middle East with imperial powers such as Russia and the United States has been the utilization of Islamic fundamentalist forces. Erdogan's policies in Syria were at odds with Russian imperialism due to its support for Bashar al-Assad's regime, and with American imperialism because of its backing of Syrian Kurdish groups. Turkey's use of extremist Islamic groups like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria stems from this volatile and high-stakes game amid the turbulent waves of the Middle East.

Nevertheless, history has shown that relying on extremist Islamist groups can have dangerous consequences for the countries involved. For instance, Pakistan's support for the Taliban has had severe repercussions for the country. The reality is that reactionary regimes like Turkey and Pakistan find themselves unable to avoid this high-risk game. Erdogan's expansionist policies and engagement in the Middle East's vortex could lead Turkey down a path similar to that of the Islamic Republic of Iran or Israel.

Currently, Turkey is playing a role in Syria akin to that of Iran during the Assad regime. Turkey not only possesses a proxy group called the "Syrian National Army," which fights for its interests against the Syrian Kurds, but Erdogan is also considered the closest ally of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. However, numerous reports highlight conflicts and clashes between the Syrian National Army and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

Over the past seven to eight years, Erdogan and the Turkish military have made significant efforts to normalize Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a group that has controlled Idlib province during this period. It seems that Turkey is not only a supporter of this group but also seeks to present

Erdogan's Turkish model as an example for Ahmad Shar'a, the current leader in Syria. Yet, individuals who once operated under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (leader of ISIS) and later pledged allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri find it challenging to implement Erdogan's Islamist model in Syria.

Although Ahmad Shar'a strives to solidify the central government and unite Syria by garnering the support of imperial powers, his submissive stance in the face of Israel's devastating airstrikes has sparked reactions both within his group and among other Islamic fundamentalist factions. ISIS has declared Hayat Tahrir al-Sham as apostates, accusing them of rising to power with the support of "infidels." Al-Qaeda, in a message to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, urged them to prioritize the fight against Israel and to focus on supporting the Palestinian people. It is reported that Al-Qaeda's message has influenced members of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, exacerbating internal dissatisfaction within the group.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham now finds itself in a situation similar to the Taliban's. They face significant challenges in balancing global appeasement with maintaining internal cohesion. This scenario reflects a deep leadership crisis and ideological divisions among the group's factions.

Many analysts, as well as leftist and communist parties, believe the rapid fall of the Assad regime and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's rise to power is a result of behind-the-scenes maneuvering by the U.S. and Israel. It is undeniable that U.S. imperialism has benefited from the fall of Assad's regime and Iran's diminished influence in Syria. It is also clear that U.S. and Israeli intelligence were aware of Erdogan and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's plans and provided support. However, reducing the issue to the simplistic claim that Ahmad Shar'a and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham are mere puppets of the U.S. and Israel risks fueling superficial thinking and conspiracy theories.

Extremist Islamic groups, like many other reactionary forces, are opportunistic, pragmatic, and exploitative. Furthermore, the collapse of ISIS's caliphate in Syria and Iraq, alongside the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, has influenced Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's outlook and methods.

The seven-year experience of governance under the "Salvation Government" in Idlib, supported and overseen by Turkey and Qatar, has served as a training ground for Ahmad Shar'a and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham to prepare for a bid for political power in Syria. Unlike the Taliban, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham does not claim to pursue global jihad. Moreover, the group has not rigorously enforced Sharia law thus far. Instead, it aims to establish a lawful state and hold elections.

During its administration of Idlib province, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham not only distanced itself from ISIS and Al-Qaeda but also occasionally coordinated actions with the U.S., such as targeting ISIS leaders in Idlib. Despite these efforts and the temporary displays by Ahmad Shar'a, the group has been unable to dispel lingering concerns and suspicions. Reports of reprisals and mistreatment of religious and ethnic minorities, including Christians, Alawites, and Druze, have continued to emerge.

### **American Imperialism, Israel, and Syria**

The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime has primarily benefited American imperialism. This advantage stems from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's victory in Syria, which curtailed the influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran and restricted the military presence and bases of Russia in the country. The United States, in addition to maintaining military bases in southern and eastern Syria, has recently replaced Russian forces in Kobani and several other locations in northern Syria.

However, America's most significant challenge in Syria today is the conflict of interests with its regional ally, Turkey. This conflict could intensify the ongoing disputes and tensions between Turkey and Israel over Syria, which are already evident. Such developments might push Turkey closer to Russian and Chinese imperialism. As mentioned earlier, the preservation of Russian bases in Latakia and Tartus, on Syria's western coast, has occurred with Turkey's approval and cooperation.

The complex and turbulent state of the Middle East reflects a shifting balance of power among regional imperialist and reactionary forces, which is likely to fuel further chaos in the region and globally. While Turkey's influence as a NATO member has strengthened the organization's presence in Syria and tilted the balance of power in favor of the Western imperialist bloc led by the United States, the primary issue for American imperialism now lies in Erdogan's expansionism and his demands as a major player in Syria.

Erdogan and the Turkish military remain unsatisfied with anything less than the destruction of the Syrian Kurdish forces—specifically, the People's Protection Units (YPG)—and the dismantling of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava).

To maintain its global hegemony, American imperialism needs to dominate the Middle East and manage conflicts among its regional allies and proxies. Consequently, the United States is likely to continue its occupation in Syria to control Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, curb Erdogan's expansionism, maintain the balance of power between Turkey and Israel, and prevent Iran's resurgence or the growing influence of China and Russia.

For Israel, the issue is somewhat different. Syria has always posed a threat to Israel, and this threat will persist until Syria is fully fragmented and weakened. The occupation of areas in Daraa province in southwestern Syria, the destruction of military installations and infrastructure, and support for Kurdish-majority regions in the east and Druze communities in Sweida province all align with Israel's goal of further dividing and weakening Syria.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is, in many ways, a half-sibling to Hamas. Just as the rise of Hamas and Islamic fundamentalism in Palestine poses a threat to Israel, the consolidation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's power—despite its role in toppling one of Israel's enemies (the Assad regime)—could become a future threat to Israel, much like Hamas.

### **Current Syria and Its Future Prospects**

The potential consequences of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's dominance over parts of Syrian territory could plunge the country into an endless civil war and devastating political chaos, further exacerbating the poverty and displacement of the Syrian people. The imposition of an Islamic fundamentalist regime on the people of Syria would create conditions similar to those experienced in Iran under the Islamic Republic over the past forty years and in Afghanistan under the Taliban in the last three years. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham represents a comprador bourgeois class aligned with global imperialism, whose interests fundamentally clash with those of the majority of the Syrian populace.

As of January 2025, Syria finds itself in an unprecedentedly ambiguous and complex situation. Large swathes of Syrian territory remain under the occupation of American imperialist forces, which continue to support Kurdish groups in eastern Syria. A significant portion of northern Syria is under Turkish control, with Turkey backing its proxy forces, known as the "Syrian National Army," against Kurdish militias.

While Russian imperialist forces have withdrawn from many Syrian regions and cities, some still maintain their occupation of the Hmeimim airbase in Latakia and the naval base in Tartus. Following the fall of the Assad regime and the rise of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Israel has occupied buffer zones between Syria and the Golan Heights, expanding its hold on Syrian territory. Among the foreign forces, only Iran's Quds Force and its allied groups, such as Hezbollah, have fully withdrawn from Syria.

The chaotic situation in the Middle East and Syria is a glaring example of the distorted and exploitative nature of capitalist-imperialist global systems. Bloodthirsty global imperialism and its reactionary lackeys have driven the Syrian people into the depths of poverty, misery, and displacement.

The people of Afghanistan, more than any other nation, share a sense of solidarity and empathy with the suffering masses of Syria. Like Syria, Afghanistan has been turned into ruins due to the invasions and occupations of Soviet and American imperialism and their local puppets. Similarly, Afghanistan is now ruled by an extremist Islamic group that deprives its people of their most basic rights.

The fall of a puppet regime in both Syria and Afghanistan could have been monumental if it had occurred at the hands of the people of these nations, leading to a genuine revolution—a New Democratic Revolution grounded in Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. Such a revolution, in its progression, would guide the masses toward a socialist and eventually communist society.