

# WEEKLY ANALYSIS

Issue Number – 457  
(December 21-26, 2024)

## POST-BASHAR AL-ASSAD SYRIA: POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

---



Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.



In this issue:

- Post-Bashar al-Assad Syria: Possible Scenarios .....3
- Factors behind the Syrian Crisis .....3
- Internal Forces Involved .....3
- Foreign Forces Involved .....4
- The fall of Assad and possible scenarios.....5
- Conclusion .....8
- References: .....8

Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)



---

## POST-BASHAR AL-ASSAD SYRIA: POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

### Introduction

Syria, a country that has been engulfed in a devastating and destructive war for more than a decade, recently found a way out of the conflict in about ten days. The coalition led by Ahmed al-Shara, known as Abu Muhammad al-Joulani, from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, launched attacks from northwestern Syria in Idlib province. Within a week, they captured Damascus, the capital city, and drove away the ousted President Bashar al-Assad. This significant change in a country burning in an all-out war for over a decade is considered a very fortunate event. However, it also raises an important question about the future of Syria. What will happen to Syria in the future? Because both internal and external forces were heavily involved in the country. Therefore, this paper will examine the possible scenarios for Syria after this recent transformation. But before that, it is better to briefly examine the start of the Syrian crisis, the involved factors, and the forces engaged in it.

### FACTORS BEHIND THE SYRIAN CRISIS

In the early 21st century, a wave of protests known as the Arab Spring swept across several Arab countries. These were grassroots movements, reportedly sparked by the self-immolation of a Tunisian man protesting against poverty and unemployment. This wave led to the downfall of long-standing authoritarian regimes in several Arab countries.

The impact of the Arab Spring was felt in two main ways. In some countries, like Egypt and Tunisia, the protests were managed well, resulting in significant changes in government without much violence. However, in other countries, the protests led to government resistance, resulting in uprisings, civil wars, and foreign interventions. The worst case was in Libya, where the government of Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown, plunging the country into a prolonged and unresolved civil war.

In Syria, the central government led by Bashar al-Assad remained in power, but numerous groups took up arms against the regime, leading to foreign intervention as well. Initially, the protests in Syria were peaceful, but the government's harsh response turned them into an armed rebellion. Soon, Syria became a battlefield between the government and a wide array of opposition groups.

### INTERNAL FORCES INVOLVED

As mentioned earlier, the protests in Syria initially began as peaceful and civil demonstrations. However, the government's oppressive actions, such as the killing of protesters in the southern city of Daraa, led to the formation of armed anti-government

---



groups. The first group to gain significant control over large areas of Syria, including the cities of Idlib, Homs, and Raqqa, was the al-Qaeda-affiliated group known as Jabhat al-Nusra, led by Ahmed al-Shara, also known as Muhammad al-Joulani.

Soon after, another group called the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (ISIS) emerged. This new force, unprecedented in the region's history, quickly took over all of Jabhat al-Nusra's territories and additional areas, occupying about 40% of Syria. They declared Raqqa in northern Syria as their capital and claimed to revive the Islamic Caliphate, not only in the Levant and Iraq but across all Islamic countries and the world. Due to ISIS's declared goals and unconventional behavior, the entire international community mobilized against them. By 2017, ISIS had lost almost all its territories in Iraq and Syria, except for some scattered areas.

With the fall of ISIS, most of its territory was reclaimed by the Syrian government. The northern regions, including Raqqa, came under the control of Kurdish forces (Syrian Democratic Forces) supported by the United States. Meanwhile, Jabhat al-Nusra, after separating from al-Qaeda in 2017 and rebranding as "Tahrir al-Sham," continued its activities in Idlib province. They later allied with several other groups, adopting the name "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham."

In addition to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Kurdish forces, which control almost all Kurdish-majority areas, other forces such as the "Free Syrian Army" are present in northern Syria, mainly along the Syrian-Turkish border, with support from Turkey.

## FOREIGN FORCES INVOLVED

Syria is located in one of the most strategic regions of the world, connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa. Additionally, it neighbors Israel, a country it has had a long-standing enmity with, and it is a traditional ally of Russia and is aligned with Iran. The start of the civil war in Syria provided a perfect opportunity for Western powers to intervene and disrupt the existing dynamics in the country.

A coalition of Western, Arab, and Turkish countries opposed the Assad regime and sought its downfall. However, despite their common goal of toppling the Assad government, each had its own objectives. The Americans supported the seemingly democratic fronts and the Kurds, while Turkey-backed groups that wanted to create a unified Syria aligned with Turkish interests. Meanwhile, Arab countries like Saudi Arabia, which had long-standing issues with Assad's Ba'athist regime, supported Sunni groups with Salafist leanings.

On the other side, Iran and Russia gave full support to the Assad regime. Russia stood by Assad because Syria was a traditional ally dating back to Soviet times and the only country where Russia had permanent military bases. Iran supported Assad because the ruling group in Syria



(the Alawites) is a branch of Shia Islam, which is crucial to the "Shia Crescent." Additionally, Syria serves as Iran's only land route to Lebanon for supporting Hezbollah.

The involvement of major foreign powers in Syria, with conflicting interests and objectives, made the Syrian crisis extremely complex and multi-faceted.

### **THE FALL OF ASSAD AND POSSIBLE SCENARIOS**

Assad's regime, which resisted internal opposition for over a decade with strong support from Russia and Iran, was eventually overthrown by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in just over a week.

Currently, despite some encouraging developments, Syria faces multiple challenges. Several groups are actively operating in the country, some with direct or indirect foreign support. The United States has military bases in Syria, and it's unclear whether Russia will withdraw or what approach Iran will take in the future.

Given these uncertainties, various scenarios for Syria's future can be imagined, each of which is explained below.

#### **Formation of an Inclusive Central Government**

In the best-case scenario for Syria's future, an inclusive central government that is acceptable to all internal parties is established. Although Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has a history of being close to al-Qaeda and is recognized as a terrorist group by many countries, the group has taken steps after overthrowing Bashar al-Assad and capturing Damascus which suggests a promising future for Syria.

One significant change that has greatly influenced internal and external perceptions is the transformation of Ahmed al-Shara, the leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. He dropped his alias, Abu Muhammad al-Joulani, and started using his real name. He also appeared in different attire, signaling a shift from a wartime to a civilian and political stance. Over the past few years, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has already demonstrated good governance in Idlib province under the "Salvation Government." After capturing Damascus, they retained the previous prime minister to prevent chaos until a temporary government was formed.

The interim government, led by Prime Minister Muhammad al-Bashir, who was also the prime minister of the Salvation Government in Idlib, includes many educated and capable individuals. The presence of strong figures in the interim government indicates a firm commitment to rebuilding Syria with competent leadership.

Another indication that Syria will not become another Afghanistan is Ahmed al-Shara's recent interview, where he highlighted the differences between Afghan and Syrian societies. He noted



that Afghanistan is a tribal society, while Syrians have a different mindset and believe in women's education. Recently, Aisha al-Dibs was appointed as the first female minister in the new cabinet, showing that Ahmed al-Shara's team has a different view on women's participation in political and social structures compared to the Islamic Emirate.

Domestically, their approach is based on inclusivity and creating a government that accommodates the interests of all internal groups, both religious and ethnic. In foreign policy, as indicated by Ahmed al-Shara's actions and statements, the government aims to create a Syria free from regional conflicts. He even stated that Syria does not seek enmity or conflict with Israel or any other country.

In response to these peaceful and inclusive policies, other countries have reacted positively. The United States immediately lifted the \$10 million bounty on Ahmed al-Shara and established communication channels with the Syrian government. Some European and Arab countries reopened their embassies in Damascus. Recently, the Turkish foreign minister visited Damascus and met with Ahmed al-Shara.

Overall, given the current trends, Syria has a promising future, and the political wisdom of the new leaders in Damascus can guide the country from its current state to a more favorable one.

Despite this optimistic scenario and the practical steps taken by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in both domestic and foreign policies, the presence of conflicting internal forces and the expectations of regional and global powers present potential challenges. These factors could lead to more pessimistic scenarios for Syria's future, which will be discussed next.

### **Emergence of Conflicts among Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Forces**

One of the potential issues that could lead to internal conflict is the emergence of disagreements among the forces that make up Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. This group is an alliance of several factions like Jaish al-Ahrar, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, Jaish al-Sunna, Liwa al-Haq, and the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement. These groups were united against a common enemy. While it is possible that their alliance will continue if their goals are met, disagreements over power-sharing or governance are also possible.

Additionally, two other forces helped Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in liberating Syria from Bashar al-Assad. One is the "Syrian National Army" supported by Turkey, which controls large areas in the north, and the other is the "Southern Front Operations Room." It is unclear how these two forces will interact with the new government in Damascus. Will they remain independent, or will they be integrated under the leadership of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in the new Syrian government?



## Disputes between the Central Government and the Kurds

The second issue is the Kurds. The ability of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham to work with the Kurdish forces, who have been operating independently with U.S. support for several years, is uncertain. On one hand, these groups were previously in conflict, and it is unclear how they will reconcile and what compromises they will make. On the other hand, Turkey, a key ally of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, supported the quick overthrow of Assad and is opposed to giving the Kurds any form of federal autonomy.

Turkey is unlikely to allow the future Syrian government to grant the Kurds significant autonomy. Therefore, the central government might have to use force to bring the Kurds under its control, which would not only antagonize the Americans but could also lead to another conflict in Syria. Additionally, we should consider the potential deals between Turkey and the U.S. One possibility is that the two countries could manage the situation through negotiations, where the U.S. might secure some concessions for the Kurds it supports, preventing conflict with the new government in Damascus. Alternatively, Turkey might agree to limit Iran's influence in Syria in exchange for a reduced stance on Kurdish support from the U.S.

## Possible Re-Intervention by Russia and Iran

A missing piece in the current Syrian situation is Russia's inaction. Over the past fifteen years, Bashar al-Assad's regime survived largely due to the support from Russia and Iran. It's unclear why Russia allowed Assad's government to fall. Despite being able to prevent the opposition forces from advancing to Damascus, Russia did nothing. Recently, there was even a report suggesting that Assad, who fled to Moscow, wanted to resist, but Russia didn't allow it. The reasons behind Russia's withdrawal of support for Assad are still mysterious and can't be definitively explained at this point.

The possibility of Russia re-entering the Syrian conflict depends on the reactivation of ISIS in Syria. Russia might use the excuse of fighting ISIS, which still has a scattered presence in Syria, to maintain its military presence in coordination with the new rulers in Damascus. Apart from Russia, Iran is another country likely to re-enter the Syrian scene.

Iran is the biggest loser in Syria. With Assad's escape, Iran lost its key ally in the Middle East. If the new rulers in Damascus decide to antagonize Iran, Iran might strengthen its proxy groups in Syria and intervene through Iraq. Although Iran lacks the resources to start a full-scale civil war in Syria, the Iraq route could enable it to cause trouble for Damascus. Iran's reaction will depend on the actions of the new Syrian leaders.

## Resurgence of ISIS and al-Qaeda





Another potential issue is the reactivation of ISIS in Syria. ISIS, which has been a major enemy of the former Jabhat al-Nusra (now Hayat Tahrir al-Sham), might see an opportunity to resume its activities due to the new Damascus government's military weakness. This scenario could gain momentum if external powers prevent Hayat Tahrir al-Sham from establishing a strong central government.

Additionally, al-Qaeda is also lurking and may increase its operations in Syria to seek revenge against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. The resurgence of ISIS and al-Qaeda could provide a convenient excuse for military intervention in Syria. It is not far-fetched to think that Western powers, particularly the United States, might use this as a reason to intervene.

## CONCLUSION

Perhaps if Bashar al-Assad had shown political wisdom and responded positively to the demands of the Arab Spring protesters early on, the conflict would not have escalated into a civil war with half a million deaths, millions of displaced people, and widespread destruction. Assad's resistance to his people's legitimate demands and reliance on foreign support led to the devastation of the country, and ultimately, he was disgracefully exiled.

Now that one of the factions in Syria has managed to remove Assad's regime, the country has entered a new era. Based on our analysis, Syria's future will not be without challenges. While it is possible to overcome these challenges and invalidate all pessimistic scenarios, it will depend on the wisdom of the new leaders in Damascus.

So far, the new leaders, led by Ahmed al-Shara, have performed well. Their statements and actions indicate that they are pursuing policies that paint a promising picture of Syria's future. However, given Syria's strategic location, the presence of various conflicting groups, and the interests of regional and global powers, the possibility of negative scenarios cannot be ruled out.

Nonetheless, the fact that Assad's tyrannical regime is now history is a hopeful development for the Syrian people. It will require careful governance to maintain the achievements of Syria's freedom and establish an Islamic system that not only brings prosperity to the Syrian people but also serves as a model for other countries.

Thus far, the new leaders in Damascus, led by Ahmed al-Shara, have earned the trust of the Syrian people and the international community. If they continue this path, the optimistic scenario seems more likely for Syria's future.

## REFERENCES:

1. **New Syrian Ruler Says His Country Won't Resemble Afghanistan**





Published: 30/9/1403

[Link: New Syrian ruler assures his country won't turn into Afghanistan.](#)

2. **A Woman Appointed to a Cabinet Role in Jolani's Government**

Published: 2/10/1403

[Link: Woman assumes a position in Jolani's cabinet.](#)

3. **Jolani: No Intention to Fight Israel or Any Other Country**

Published: 26/9/1403

[Link: Jolani states no plans for war with Israel or other nations.](#)

4. **US Withdraws \$10 Million Reward for Information on Jolani**

Published: 30/9/1403

[Link: US cancels \\$10M bounty on Jolani.](#)

5. **Resumption of Foreign Diplomatic Missions in Damascus**

Published: 22/9/1403

[Link: Foreign diplomatic missions resume in Damascus.](#)

6. **Turkish Foreign Minister Meets with Jolani in Damascus**

Published: 2/10/1403

[Link: Turkish foreign minister meets Jolani in Damascus.](#)

---

The Centre for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS) is an independent, non-profit, and non-governmental research organization established in July 2009 in Kabul. CSRS is committed to promoting policy-oriented research through conducting authentic and unbiased research concerning Afghanistan and the region.

**Contact Us:**

Email: [info@csrsaf.org](mailto:info@csrsaf.org)

Website: [www.csrsaf.org](http://www.csrsaf.org)

Phone & WhatsApp: +93780618000

---



[www.csrsaf.org](http://www.csrsaf.org)



[info@csrsaf.org](mailto:info@csrsaf.org)