



Syria: A burning maze.

The fall of Assad and the rise and rise of Ahmad Al Sharaa

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In international politics, the Syrian civil war has been an enigma of sorts. This sanguinary bloodbath which began in the year 2011 during the much hallowed “Arab spring”, as a protest movement against the Syrian Ba’athist regime led by President Bashar al Assad, transmogrified into a brutal civil war claiming the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians and plunging the nation into a conflict which engulfed the country and its diverse populace.

Syria, an integral part of the Ottoman Empire, emerged as a French protectorate after the latter’s disintegration, alongside Lebanon which was in itself carved out of the former in the year 1920 at the famed San Remo conference. While the Syrian National Congress made efforts to establish a secular constitutional monarchy under Hashemite King Faisal bin Hussein, such initiatives went in vain.^[1]

Syrian independence [1946] did not mean an end to the instability plaguing the nascent polity. Syria participated in the 1st Arab Israeli war of 1948-49. In 1958, a new nation was formed by merging the 2 independent states of Egypt and Syria. The experiment failed spectacularly and Syria split from the so-called United Arab Republic in 1961. While the Arab socialist Ba’ath party founded by Michel Aflaq came to power in 1963, the nation still continued to flounder in political instability.^{[2][34]} Finally, a power grab by Mr. Hafez al Assad in 1970 put an end to the feeble nature of the Syrian state and strengthened its nature by establishing the Baath party as the only powerful entity in the nation along with the foundation of a regime staffed almost exclusively by Alawites, members of the sect to which Assad belonged.

The Assad regime was a vociferously secular government with a pet peeve for Islamists particularly the Muslim brotherhood as seen in the infamous Hama massacre of 1982, headed by none other than the late President's own brother Rifaat al Assad.^[32] This dirigiste, rigidly secular and socialist state is believed to have died with the passing of Hafez al Assad in 2000. Though not the first choice as heir, Bashar al Assad was elected President owing to the untimely death of his elder brother Basel in 1994.

While Bashar was a breath of fresh air in the eyes of many, his economic policies caused significant distress amongst the masses. The straw on the camel’s back came with the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, a fruit-seller in Tunisia, as also the mistreatment of about 15 children in a school in Deraa kick starting a series of protest.^[3]

The protests primarily led by civilians assumed a more serious tone after the crackdown by regime forces. It's also well-established that the protestors included radical Salafi jihadists of Al Qaeda as well. The defectors from the army of the Syrian Arab Republic formed a group

called the Free Syrian Army at the very start of the civil war. This wasn't a cohesive grouping, consisting of organisations with internally conflicting interests. The Syrian National Council formed shortly after posed as its civilian counterpart. For years, regime forces and the opposition backed by foreign powers were involved in grinding battles over cities like Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Latakia, Daraa etc. It has also been alleged by a UN investigative team that chemical weapons were used in the war in Syria though the government believes that there's little documentary evidence to support such claims, a fact validated by former American secretary of defence Jim Mattis.^[7]

However, it's not only the self-proclaimed “Democrats” who stepped up their opposition to Assad’s forces. Here one comes across the central role played by the current head of the Syrian state - Abu Mohammed Al Jolani aka Ahmed Al Sharaa.

Sharaa, born in Saudi Arabia, cut his teeth in Iraq during the US invasion of Iraq of 2003.^[4] It is believed that the Islamist bent of his mosque in Damascus allegedly due to the influence of former Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal, led him onto this path. His misadventures in Iraq landed him into some of the most dreaded prisons in the nation- most notably Abu Ghraib and Camp Bucca infamous for housing jihadists the likes of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.

Upon his release, Jolani founded a branch of the AQI in Syria called Jabhat al-Nusra which Baghdadi wished to merge with his own though this plan was foiled when Jolani declared allegiance to Zawahiri’s al Qaeda.^[4] Jolani’s government in Idlib, a north-western province of Syria was testimony to the deep-seated conservatism and Salafism which form the core of Jolani's ideology despite him remodelling and renaming his outfit multiple times from Al Nusra to Jabhat Fateh Al Sham to finally its current iteration the Hayat Tahrir al Sham. The perception that Jolani is essentially a Turkish proxy given his closeness to the government of President Erdogan and the cooperation extended to the HTS by the Syrian National Army, a front for the Turkish state in Syria remains.

The Kurdish question:

The Kurds are one of the largest ethnic groups without a state of their own. They have long established a state within a state in Syria known as the AANES or Rojava. Its military wing led by the Syrian Democratic Forces [SDF] and the People's Protection Units (YPG) has approached the new government with caution given that HTS is a designated foreign terrorist organization according to the USA. The oil rich region occupied by the Kurds presents a significant challenge to the political unification of Syria as dreamt of by the HTS. While SDF commander Abdi has been circumspectly optimistic about a possible merger of systems, the Kurds must remain aware of how indebted Jolani is to Ankara and how a Turkey driven by vengeance might wreak havoc on the Kurds after a potential American withdrawal from Syria.^{[8][9][10]}

Impact on foreign players:

With hundreds of thousands of refugees pouring into the nation, Turkey has great stakes in Syria. It didn't enjoy the best of ties with Assad and had invaded Syria in 2019. With a favourable government in Damascus, and a West especially Europe more dependent on him than ever, Erdogan will finally be free to handle the Kurdish issue and extend the Turkish sphere of influence in the Levant.

While Israel has not had much love lost for Assad, it has remained wary of Jolani. It has launched over 70 ground incursions and dozens of airstrikes in a bid to establish a buffer zone.^[11] It has also supported calls for protection of Druze minorities in Syria. Balancing

Turkish influence while keeping Iran at bay would constitute the key priorities of the Israeli government. A possible *modus vivendi* with the Kurds may also serve the interests of both parties by providing an effective counterweight to Turkish influence in the region and also strengthening the Kurdish hand in negotiations with the Jolani regime.

While Saudi Arabia had a working relationship with Hafez al Assad, relations soured under President Bashar over alleged Syrian involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafic Hariri.^[32] Riyadh has been courting Jolani, playing host to him on a recent foreign trip as well. How the kingdom handles a resurgent Turkey, remains to be seen.

The Lebanese militia Hezbollah played a key role in helping the Assad regime cling to power in Syria which had been a key link for facilitating transit of Iranian assistance to Hezbollah. With the fall of Assad, and the assassinations of key Hezbollah leaders like Nasrallah, Aqil, Shukr, Karaki, Kaouk, Srur, etc, Hezbollah is the weakest it's been in decades.^[12]

A resurgent Russia had also played a significant role in the Syrian civil war intervening on behalf of the regime and its partner Iran in 2015, providing crucial air support to government forces in a bid to retake control of major cities. It also blocked over 17 UNSC resolutions to further the interests of the Assad regime.^[13] Russia had acquired on lease the Khmeimim air base and Tartus naval facility for 49 years from 2017 in an agreement with the Assad regime and the HTS has guaranteed their security.^[14] Securing these crucial logistical assets to project power in the West Asian and eastern Mediterranean regions will be of paramount importance to the Russian federation in its dealings with the new HTS government.

A tenacious and resurgent Russia had also played a significant role in the Syrian civil war intervening on behalf of the regime of President Bashar al Assad and its partner the Islamic republic of Iran. The Russians intervened in 2015 in Syria providing crucial air support to government forces in a bid to retake control of major cities. That Russia "had its own plans" was made amply clear by President Putin himself in numerous interviews. This intervention achieved a number of strategic objectives. Primarily, it re-established Russia as a major power on the world stage; a power which wouldn't hesitate to involve itself in matters that it saw fit. Another key aspect of this intervention was how clinically it had been carried out with clear and definite objectives unlike the Afghan fiasco of the erstwhile USSR. Through its deft use of contracted forces like the Wagner mercenaries, limited use of air force, naval support and just a few elite ground force units, Russia played a small yet immensely critical role in the Syrian civil war while accomplishing many strategic victories. The first was sending a message to the US led Western world that Russia wouldn't be reluctant to step in and assist its partners when the need arises. The second one was the central role that Russia could then play in the eventual downfall of ISIS, a menace which threatened the whole world including the Russians. Thirdly, it afforded Russia an opportunity to go toe to toe with its systemic rival the United States of America and attempt to defy it and its partners in the country whenever possible. Fourthly, it served Russian interests, to ensure Assad's survival for he was a key cog in "the Axis" of the Islamic republic of Iran, a partner of paramount importance for Russia as also a bulwark against US backed opposition forces in the region. Ultimately, Russia also found great value in establishing a foothold in this strategically invaluable region. Russia had leased the Khmeimim air base and Tartus naval facility for 49 years from 2017 in an agreement with the Assad regime. These facilities allowed it to project power in the West Asian region. The Tartus naval facility in particular served its interests as an opening into the Mediterranean and a possible check against increasing Turkish influence in the region and as payback for the latter's posturing in the Black sea, a historical Russian sphere of influence.

Russia has attempted to mend ties with the new regime by toning down rhetoric through its state media. This has been quite effective with the officials of HTS guaranteeing the safety of Russian military bases and diplomatic missions in the country. Securing the above mentioned

crucial logistical assets will be of paramount importance to the Russian federation in its dealings with the new HTS government.

The United States of America has long found itself embroiled in the thick of Syrian politics. From its alleged role in the first ever Syrian coup d'etat in 1949, to subsequent attempts at coups in the 1950s, the country has often involved itself in deciding the fate of the former French colony.^[17] While the USA never had the best of ties with the Hafez al Assad regime, there was a sliver of hope of improvement of ties during the tenure of President Bill Clinton at the summit in 1994.^{[18][19]} The opposition of Assad to the war in Iraq, his increasingly close ties with Iran and crackdown on protests, only served to deteriorate ties further. Both Trump and Obama had imposed crippling sanctions on the Assad regime in response to its alleged use of chemical agent Sarin against the civilian populace.^{[20] [21]} While the initial goal of the Americans in Syria was the defeat of ISIS, its aims often oscillated to attacks against the Assad regime.^[22]

How the US's support to the Syrian opposition has played out:

The US backed civil defence groups have been called "our hidden soldiers" by HTS leader Abu Jaber Shaykh.^[16]

An indictment against a Syrian national by the name of Mahmoud al-Hafyan, the former head of the Catholic Relief Services' regional office in Idlib between 2014 and 2018 showed his praise for Jabhat al-Nusra, and diversion of \$9 million to \$10.1 million in humanitarian aid to the terror group.^[16] The US government continues to encourage donations to this institution.^[24]

A December 13, 2006 cable, authored by William Roebuck, chargé d'affaires at the US embassy in Damascus at the time focused on means to destabilize the Syrian government.^[26]

James Jeffery, former US ambassador to Iraq admitted to PBS news that the USA was indeed assisting the HTS albeit covertly.^[16]

Operation Timber Sycamore is the codename of a covert operation officially authorized by Obama in June 2013 to train and equip the anti-Assad rebellion, but which actually started in October 2011.^[27]

Former secretary of state Hillary Clinton was informed by Jake Sullivan, then diplomat in Ms. Clinton's state department that "AQ is on our side in Syria." as reported by Wikileaks.^[5]

Reports by organisations funded by the EU and the German government also highlight how ISIS managed to get hold of US made weapons.^[28]

British programs to train opposition fighters have also come to light in this regard.^[33]

Conclusion:

While the Assad era is shown to be one of tragedy and despair alone, multiple WHO reports of the time lauded the progressive healthcare system in the country while the UN noted with appreciation the significant progress made with respect to education and literacy with the latter estimated at around 90%.^[15] Western media has engaged in wilful doublespeak declaring Jolani's men to be 'diversity- friendly jihadists.'^[6]

While Assad was no saint, depicting him as a Mephistophelean figure defeated by the "Good Samaritan" Jolani would be a misrepresentation of Orwellian proportions. With the fall of the secular Baathist regime, and a takeover by radical Salafists, Syria looks towards a future which is bleak at best. The Kurds in the North East, the Americans in al Tanf, Turks in the North,

Israelis in the south west and offshoots of AQ and ISIS all over the place present a dangerous mosaic for Jolani to traverse. While the West seems more open to sanctions relief and with Jolani having met the French and German foreign ministers and reports swirling of a potential summit with President Trump, the task is cut out for him.^{[29] [30] [31]} Whether he and his band of ragtag terrorists are up to it, remains to be seen.

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