



# Preliminary Assessment on Syria

12 December 2024

**Dr. Wael Shadid**



## Dr. Wael Shadid

Head of the Center for Leadership and Diplomacy

All rights reserved to the Center for Leadership and Diplomacy 2024

[info@leadershipdiplomacy.com](mailto:info@leadershipdiplomacy.com)

Whatsap: +1613 519 5958

### **“Empowering leaders, transforming the world”**

The Center for Leadership and Diplomacy is an international organization registered in Canada, offering a range of practical executive diplomas aimed at spreading knowledge and expertise related to leaders, statesmen, and diplomats. These programs are designed for nations, institutions, official entities, and civil society organizations. Our goal is to contribute to human civilization by preparing future leaders to manage their countries and institutions professionally and from a modern, global perspective.

The Center for Leadership and Diplomacy is committed to equipping potential leaders with the knowledge and skills necessary to become effective global leaders and diplomats. Additionally, we support young leaders in acquiring the executive ability to lead and direct official and civil institutions and ministries across various fields and specialties. This requires providing them with specialized knowledge paired with practical skills and field experience.

We strive to achieve a transformative impact in developing national leaders and diplomats, enabling them to execute their responsibilities and tasks effectively. Our mission is rooted in excellence, integrity, and respect for diversity, driven by the belief that investing in leader development can help shape a more peaceful and prosperous world.

## Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>External Players Before the "Deterrence of Aggression" Operation.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Internal Dynamics .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Causes of Sudden Shift.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>At the external level .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>At the internal level.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Future expectations .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>First: The position of external players.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Second: Future expectations for the Syrian situation.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>13</b>

## Introduction

What we have witnessed in the past few days was and still is a historic event by all standards, as the Assad family regime in Syria has fallen after 54 years of oppression, injustice, torture and brutality against the Syrian people and oppositions. This regime was the only one in the Arab world-and indeed the region- that displaced half of its population (over 12 million Syrians) and prevented their return, marking the largest displacement in modern history.

Events in Syria are accelerating on a daily basis, which requires an analysis to assess the current situation and to anticipate the near-term future, given the complexity of the scene, the many internal and external players involved, and the ambiguity of unfolding events. This assessment will address the external players, the internal dynamics, the causes of this sudden shift, the relationship with the Palestinian issue, and short-term future expectations.

## External Players Before the "Deterrence of Aggression" Operation

Prior to the revolution under the "Deterrence of Aggression" operation, Syria was marked by extensive involvement from regional and international powers, with many maintaining military presences within its borders.

Iran entrenched itself deeply in Syria through the Revolutionary Guard and sectarian militias drawn from Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, alongside Hezbollah, which played a major role in fighting the Syrian revolution violently under the pretext of protecting the "Resistance Axis."

Turkey established (in northern Syria) observation points and an intensive forces to protect Turkish national security from the Kurdish militias while also directly supporting Syrian armed groups.

As for eastern Syria, the United States of America maintained military bases, supporting Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) militias, and covers in the east of the Euphrates, alongside allies such as the UK and France.

Meanwhile, in the south, US-backed Syrian opposition groups operated near the Al-Tanf area, with support from certain Arab countries.

Russia intervened with military and naval forces in northwestern Syria to support the Syrian regime, bombing cities and villages under the pretense of combating terrorism, and using Syria as a stage to project power amidst its broader geopolitical rivalry with the West, particularly in Ukraine.

Thus, Syria, from heartland to northern, western, southern and eastern regions, is dominated by external powers where each of them supports a military group or local militias as a pretext for its presence on Syrian territory. These actors justified their presence either through regime invitations (e.g., Iran and Russia) or by invoking counterterrorism mandates (e.g., the US and Turkey). The ongoing international and local conflicts left the Syrian people bearing the costs of foreign interference and military confrontations.

## Internal Dynamics

The external interventions capitalized on internal dynamics, particularly the initial vacuum within Syria's political landscape. Before the uprising, Syrians had no experience of political freedom, democracy, or competitive party systems. When the revolution began, it emerged from a grassroots movement, unaffiliated with existing political parties, as no such entities operated freely under the Assad regime. This led to the formation of various popular forces, especially after a significant number of the Syrian army defected and joined the popular revolution.

Because of this void, coupled with limited financial resources to sustain the revolution, created opportunities for foreign states to pursue their own agendas in Syria. When the political goals of these states conflicted, Syrian opposition divided into factions, with groups aligning themselves with external financiers and accommodating their interests, in addition to other internal reasons, as well.

These divisions extended beyond Syrian opposition forces to the broader Arab world, polarizing public opinion. As some found that the Syrian regime as a pillar of the "Resistance Axis" led by Iran, supporting the Palestinian factions to be present on Syrian territory. Therefore, they considered the Syrian revolution a stab at the resistance to Israel, which occupies the Syrian Golan.

On the other hand, others found that the Syrian revolution is a chance to get rid of the sectarian Iranian expansion in the region under the pretext of the "Resistance Axis" while killing and displacing Syrians.

In the midst of this internal conflict and polarization, Russia carried out a direct military intervention in 2015 under the pretext of a formal request from the Syrian state, followed by successive military interventions from Iran, the United States and its allies, Turkey and others, this exacerbated the complexity of the Syrian scene. For the first time in modern Arab history, the international competition in Syria became not over the Syrian state as a whole, but over geographical zones within it.

In the north, Turkey cooperates with Russia against Kurdish militias, while simultaneously competing to support different local factions in other zones.

In eastern zones, US is allied with the Kurds against the Turks, while US cooperates with Turkey against other Syrian groups. Russia and the US cooperate and disagree with each other in other geographical zones. Iran is allied with Russia in some zones and competes with it in other zones, all within the geography of the Syrian state.

This intricate patchwork of alliances and rivalries unfolded within the Syrian state's borders, exacerbating the crisis and deepening the suffering of the Syrian people.

The Syrian regime survived amid the complex and turbulent Syrian landscape that has provided space for the Assad regime to maintain its grip on power. Both Russia and Iran have preserved their military presence in Syria under the pretext of supporting the regime, which in turn leverages U.S. and Western intervention to bolster its narrative as part of the "Resistance Axis" against the "Great Satan" and its allies. Simultaneously, the regime exploits Iranian and Russian presence to shield itself from the Syrian revolution and armed opposition groups, while also leveraging Turkish intervention to align with Kurdish militias. Furthermore, it seeks to appease the U.S. and Israel by exacerbating Turkey's internal challenges caused by hosting over three million Syrian refugees, thereby sowing domestic discord.

Therefore, the regime continued to play on these external and internal contradictions to continue its survival at the expense of suppressing, destroying and displacing the Syrian people, who continued to pay a heavy price.

## Causes of Sudden Shift

In light of this turmoil and complexity in the Syrian scene, there were internal, regional and international cremental interactions and dynamics that were developing slowly over those long years, forming a current of influences that gathered together to explode in the face of the Syrian regime and bring it down, including:

### At the external level

1. Turkish domestic dynamics, especially President Erdogan declining popularity, rising nationalist sentiments, and public anger over hosting over three million Syrian refugees strained Turkey politically and economically.

The depreciation of the Turkish lira and domestic economic and political challenges pushed Turkey to pressure the Assad regime for a resolution to the refugee crisis. The regime's consistent refusal led Turkey to consider more radical measures to resolve the issue.

2. Interactions resulting from the confrontation between Israel and the Iranian regime on Syrian territory have reached its peak. Israel intensified its strikes on Iranian assets and militias in Syria, killing numerous Revolutionary Guard leaders and weakening Iran's position significantly.

The assassination of Qassem Suleiman, the former commander of the Revolutionary Guards, by the US also had disrupted the Revolutionary Guard's structure. However, Israel's 2024 military war on Hezbollah in Lebanon critically diminished its capabilities and supply lines from Syria, was the powerful blow that broke Iran's back. In addition to the ceasefire conditions that limited the Hezbollah's ability to continue with its previous strength.

Furthermore, The Israeli strike on Iran on October 26, 2024 also had a destructive effect on Iran's military capabilities, reportedly inflicted significant damage. These ongoing interactions and dynamics accumulated until they weakened the Iranian influence in Syria.

3. Israeli-Hezbollah clashes isolated Bashar al-Assad from the Resistance Axis as he distanced himself from Hezbollah, stripping him of the protective narrative that previously bolstered his position. This weakened his previous nationalist position and left him without a cover to hide behind.

4. The interactions of the continuation of the war in Ukraine and the Russians' inability to resolve the war in their favor. In addition to the Ukrainian attack deep inside Russia in the Kursk region on August 6, 2024, and the attack on the Russian depth with Storm Shadow missiles in November 2024, all put Russia in a critical position that left Moscow less capable of exerting influence in Syria as it was in the past.

### At the internal level

5. On the internal level, the interactions and dynamics were moving slowly but with continuous cumulative stability. At the forefront of this was the gradual development and growing of the military capabilities of the revolutionary armed groups, gaining confidence and territorial control, particularly in Idlib, bolstering their potential for expansion.

6. Emerging Alliances among Armed Groups: none of the armed group was able to decide the revolutionary hegemony in its favor. Therefore, they recognized the necessity of unity

to counter the regime, culminating in the formation of the "Deterrence of Aggression" alliance, which played a decisive role in recent developments.

7. The interactions of the deterioration of the economic situation of the Syrian state. The Syrian regime's inability to address economic crises, worsened by "Caesar Act" sanctions, led to public dissatisfaction and weakened loyalty within the regime's ranks, including the military. This prolonged economic decline created psychological preparation for collapse under any real pressure.

8. The interactions of the Syrian popular resentment, and the widespread popular disconnect due to persistent repression, detention, and torture fueled resentment among Syrians, both inside and outside the country, creating fertile ground for revolutionary movements. In fact, the popular opinion was ready to accept any serious revolutionary movement.

9. Allied Fatigue with Assad's Intransigence. One of the most critical interactions were due to the continuous regime's rejection of any regional or international proposals to end the Syrian crisis. Assad's unparalleled stubbornness and insistence on keeping more than 12 million Syrian citizens outside their homes and not allowing them to return. These interactions gradually developed until they reached the point of abandoning him by Iran and Russia who realized that there is no point in continuing supporting him when they faced mounting challenges.

All these dynamics and interactions set the popular, regional and international stages for any significant revolutionary move, culminating in the regime's fall during the events of December 7–8, 2024. Remarkably, after 13 years of conflict, Assad's regime collapsed within just 11 days.

According to complexity theory, all parties will eventually converge on a certain pattern that may be unfamiliar but attracts everyone toward it to stabilize the situation. This seems to have occurred in Syria, where external actors, internal factions, and geopolitical conditions aligned toward a model that involves the removal of the Assad regime and its replacement with a new structure, led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, even though it is classified as a terrorist organization. This is aimed at establishing a new pattern that pushes for at least relative stability in Syria.



## Future expectations

### First: The position of external players

Generally, In Middle east, It is almost agreed upon in strategic analysis that no real geopolitical change occurs in Arab countries unless international players have a hand in it; in one way or another. Regardless of the speculations about whether this was orchestrated by the U.S., Turkey, or both, everyone was surprised by what happened, as it exceeded the planned or agreed limits.

The rapid collapse, the cooperation of citizens in facilitating the process, the escape of regime army members, and the lack of resistance (except in specific locations) all came as a surprise to everyone, including the stakeholders in the Syrian situation themselves.

This rapid collapse has left everyone—whether the “Deterring Aggression Alliance,” other groups, or even external stakeholders—facing an unexpected situation. It appears that the maximum expectation of the Deterring Aggression Alliance and its allies, or those who remained silent, was the liberation of Aleppo Province and its rural areas. This surprise has forced all parties to reassess their strategies and interests.

**Turkey is expected** to support this change to alleviate the burden of millions of refugees within its borders and to replace the former regime with a non-hostile one at the very least. Turkey will likely provide aid, political support, and economic cooperation to the new regime. It will also aim to engage its private sector in reconstruction efforts and maximize trade exchanges.

**The U.S. is expected** to carefully evaluate and outline future scenarios, especially under President Trump, who has a different geostrategic perspective from the previous administration. His focus is on reducing involvement in foreign conflicts to concentrate on “making America great again,” from his point of view.

**It is anticipated that the U.S.** will come to an understanding with the leadership of "Deterrence of Aggression" on key principles, including ensuring minority rights, adopting a democratic approach, safeguarding Israel's security, fostering significant economic cooperation with American companies in oil, gas, and construction, eliminating extremist and terrorist groups, and dismantling chemical weapons—all to secure U.S. interests. To pave the way for this, the U.S. is expected to remove Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham from the terrorism list and provide some level of protection to the new regime. Of course, delisting Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham from the terrorism list will come at a price that guarantees U.S. interests in Syria.

**As for Israel**, it is the only external player that took immediate military action on the ground. It has targeted and destroyed hundreds of strategic military sites, military manufacturing facilities, and air and naval bases to prevent them from falling into the hands of the newcomers, thereby depriving them of any strategic or heavy weapons. They are left only with light and medium arms, which pose no significant threat in any potential confrontation with Israel.

More concerning, however, is Israel's cancellation of the 1974 agreement, its occupation of the buffer zone, and its advance three kilometers into Syrian territory, coming within just 40 kilometers of Damascus. This places the new entity in a significant popular and national dilemma and threatens Syria's national security.

These actions underscore that Israel often suffers from strategic blindness in such situations, due to several reasons. First, the obsession with security and survival dominates Israeli thinking, driving it toward short- and medium-term actions that may have severe long-term consequences. By reclassifying itself as an occupying state, it invites resistance, even if delayed, thereby perpetuating a state of war for Israel. Second, arrogance and a sense of superiority, fueled by its advanced military capabilities, often lead Israel to act from this perspective, resulting in aggression and the violation of internationally agreed borders, which ultimately lay the groundwork for a future strategic predicament.

**Regarding Russia and Iran**, the main allies of the fallen regime, it is expected that the Russia will remain watchful and try to reach an agreement with the new regime to keep part of its naval fleet in Syrian ports, and it is expected to reduce tensions and strive for new agreements that ensure its presence on the Mediterranean coast.

**As for Iran**, it exhibits a very high level of pragmatism, as it quickly abandoned the regime, and from the first moments began changing the tone of the discourse from terrorists to the Syrian opposition in order to guarantee a seat in the Syrian political landscape. However, there is no doubt that Iran is the biggest loser at this stage, as its brutal actions against the Syrian people, the spread of its militias wreaking havoc in Syria, and its attempts to entrench sectarianism make it unlikely to be accepted in the new Syrian geopolitical structure. This means a major Iranian loss in its penetration of the Arab world, and thus the possibility of a gradual decline in its influence in the Arab region.

## Second: Future expectations for the Syrian situation

Perhaps it is useful to compare the change that occurred in the Arab Spring countries whose leaders and regimes were overthrown by popular revolutions, such as Egypt, Libya and Yemen. It was clear how international external powers intervened and ignited the counter-revolution through a set of practices. They exploited the rapid popular momentum to achieve gains and address longstanding grievances, which had burdened people for decades. The counter-revolutionary forces leveraged this sentiment by highlighting the inability of the new leaders to quickly resolve these chronic injustices, thereby inciting public discontent.

Additionally, the abundant availability of external political funding played a significant role in mobilizing elements of the deep state against the new leaders. Early-stage vulnerabilities, where the new entity was not yet established, were exploited to create or support factions claiming revolutionary legitimacy. These factions then engaged in prolonged conflicts, as seen in Libya and Yemen. In some cases, fast track was taken by implementing to overthrow the newly established legitimacy.

However, the Syrian revolution is distinct in that it possesses an armed force offering it some degree of protection, unlike the previous Arab Spring revolutions.

The Kurds in Syria are expected to adopt a national perspective, focusing on the unity of Syria rather than ethnic Kurdish agendas. Their cooperation in unifying Syria rather than dividing it is particularly significant given that they control the resource-rich, Arab-majority region east of the Euphrates. Their active and genuine national engagement, while ensuring their rights, will be critical.

The new revolutionary legitimacy always has a great moral and ethical dimension. It came to shake off injustice from its people and restore their lost freedom, and lift oppression, subjugation and suffering from them. Therefore, it is characterized by a very high moral responsibility, particularly among Islamist factions. While this moral foundation is critical, counter-revolutionary forces exploit it in the worst ways to incite riots against the new legitimacy, undermine and impose oppression and tyranny again.

It is expected that the Syrian revolution will face very substantial challenges in stabilizing internal conditions, protecting against the instigators of the counter-revolution, facing deep state elements, and managing regional and international interventions aiming to ruin the revolution. These challenges are further compounded by Israel's direct intervention through bombings and the occupation of additional Syrian territories. This creates significant pressure

on the Syrian revolution regarding how to address this intervention while still in its infancy and before the state has been fully formed.

The economy, securing salaries, and stabilizing the local currency are critical challenges requiring patience from the Syrian people and adept leadership from the revolutionary leadership. Another priority is the swift establishment of a transitional government to manage internal affairs, prepare for the next phase, and shield the revolution from negative internal and external influences.

Dealing with various factions and minorities requires wisdom, something the leadership of “Deterring Aggression” has demonstrated thus far. This also includes transitional justice, accountability for those involved in acts of torture, repression, and abuse.

These and other challenges are very real in a country like Syria, with its significant geostrategic position in the region. Syria has been one of the principal frontline states and a critical component of the Arab geopolitical center. Developments in Syria are likely to have direct and indirect repercussions on other Arab countries.

It has long been recognized that any geopolitical changes in countries neighboring Palestine will significantly impact the trajectory of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Thus, the changes in Syria are expected to have at the best at medium-term consequences on the Palestinian cause and will influence Israeli reactions and its stance on the Syrian revolution. Israel is already working to destroy Syria’s military capabilities, including missile, naval, air, scientific facilities, and defense manufacturing assets, to leave the new revolution without tools of power that could pose a threat to Israel. This ensures that the new regime remains weak, at least in the near term.

It is not expected that the new leadership will adopt a policy of war with Israel for several reasons. These include its focus on state-building during its initial phase, Israel’s destruction of Syria’s key strategic and military capabilities, and the likelihood of direct U.S. intervention if the new leadership takes this path.

Accordingly, no dramatic changes regarding the Palestinian cause are expected in the short or medium term, except in one scenario: if Israel deeply penetrates Syrian territories, leaving confrontation as the only viable option.

## Conclusion

In general, the expectations of the path in Syria will be a combination resulting from external international interactions, especially the United States of America, and its balances with regional interactions, especially Turkey, as well as Arab ones, and the overlap of that with internal Syrian interactions. All this external geostrategic mix and its balances and interactions with the local geopolitical mix will most likely determine the political path and composition of the Syrian state, and its regional orientations, especially towards Israel, and its future and positioning in the regional structure.

The process will not be easy, and it requires internal Syrian consensus and strategic patience from all concerned Syrian parties, particularly the Syrian people, in order to overcome the transitional phase, which is the most difficult phase in such radical changes.

Wise and thoughtful figures within the Syrian society (of whom there are many) must give this transitional period their utmost care, protect it from counter-revolutionary actors, shield it from external interference, maintain continuous communication among all parties to swiftly resolve any disputes before they escalate, and reject any paths leading to the division of Syria. The unity of its territory is paramount.

The Syrian people, who have endured decades of suffering, now deserve the opportunity to build an exceptional state in the Arab world, leveraging their diverse human resources, love of work, and creativity.