

SYRIA AND THE FALL OF ASSAD: IMPLICATIONS FOR IRAN AND RUSSIA

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Introduction

After being in power for more than twenty years, Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad fled Damascus for Moscow on 8 December 2024.¹ Multiple coalitions, involving both moderate and radical militias, led by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), took over most of western Syria in a surprise rebel campaign that lasted thirteen days.² The end of the Assad dynasty, the end of pseudo-Baathist rule in Syria, and the establishment of a new government in Damascus came after nearly thirteen years of civil war. Within this tenuous environment, there are growing concerns about the position of two actors with long-standing stakes in the politics of Syria, Iran and Russia.

Tehran and Moscow appear to share a common vision of geopolitics in West Asia and over the last two decades, have worked in concert to develop a complementary position in the region. In fact, the two signed a 20-year comprehensive strategic

partnership pact in 2025, only a month after the HTS rebellion. This pact covers many areas of cooperation and marks their desire for greater levels of coordination.³ The two powers, and their involvement in the 'business' of Syria, have been motivated by both ideological and geopolitical imperatives. With the fall of al-Assad, however, these imperatives are now in peril.

This Issue Brief outlines Tehran and Moscow's investments in Damascus over the past decade and their recent losses. It offers a background on Russia's and Iran's historical relations with Syria; an outline of the implications of HTS' emergence; and finally, an evaluation of these developments on Russia's and Iran's geopolitical ambitions in the region and their relations with regional actors like Türkiye and Israel.

State of play

Iran and Russia have had significant interests and investments in Syria. Russia's involvement in the

¹ Gebeily, M. and T. Azahri. 2024. "[Syrian rebels topple Assad who flees to Russia in Mideast shakeup](#)", *Reuters*, 9 December.

² Usher, Sebastian. 2024. "[Who are the rebels in Syria?](#)" *BBC*, 8 December.

³ "[Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran](#)", *Kremlin*, 17 January 2025 (entered into force 17 February 2025).

region dates back to the Soviet era in the early 1960s and Iran's interests in Syria grew following the Islamic Revolution in 1979.⁴ These ties deepened following the Arab Spring fourteen years ago. In Syria, the torture and murder of a fifteen-year-old boy in Daraa in the south led to nationwide protests that were brutally suppressed.⁵ This ignited the Syrian civil war—spawning hundreds of ethnic armed groups and inviting the participation of an untold number of extremists (most notably, Daesh or the Islamic State) and concerned militaries and intelligence agencies from the world over.

By 2020, more than 325,000 people had been killed, and over 14 million were displaced.⁶ Iran was initially in support of the Arab Spring movement taking hold of the West Asia–North Africa (WANA) region and saw it as a popular, inclusive, democratic, and Islamic reformist revolt.⁷ As the protests evolved, however, Tehran began to realise that the movement was actually directed against its own allies and partners in the region including Syria. Russia, on the other hand, was cautious from the start and changed its position depending on the

nature of protests in different parts of the region.⁸ This did not mean that Moscow's resolve to support Damascus no matter what had diminished. Gradually, Tehran and Moscow began to coordinate more closely on West Asian geopolitical affairs, with both unwilling to lose their decades-long investments in al-Assad and Syria.

Iranian and Russian intelligence agencies were the first to respond to the crisis in Damascus, deploying military advisors, surveillance equipment, and riot control gear, among other forms of material support to the Assad regime.⁹ Eventually, Tehran mobilised its proxy forces, key among them Hezbollah, to northwest Syria while also maintaining the presence of a substantial number of regular Iranian soldiers and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) troops. However, Tehran sought to reduce its formal involvement, and began to replace the latter with Shiite militias from across the West Asian region, enabling the creation of an inter-state proxy network known as the 'Axis of Resistance'. By 2015, the Syrian government controlled only a quarter of the country, with other parts under the Kurd-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Türkiye-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), and the Islamic State (ISIS).¹⁰

⁴ Ginat, Rami. 2000. "[The Soviet Union and the Syrian Ba'th Regime: From Hesitation to Rapprochement](#)", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 36(2), April, Taylor and Francis, pp.150-171; Mason, Robert. 2021. "[Strategic Depth Through Enclaves: Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah](#)", *Middle East Policy*, 28(2), September, *Middle East Policy Council*, pp. 96-108.

⁵ NBC News. 2011. "[The protests in Daraa that sparked Syria's 10-year civil war](#)", NBC [Archive], 19 March.

⁶ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. 2022. "[UN Human Rights Office estimates more than 306,000 civilians were killed over 10 years in Syria conflict](#)", *United Nations Human Rights*, 28 June.

⁷ Ahmadi, Hamid. 2013. "[Iran and the Arab Spring: Why Haven't Iranians Followed the Arabs in Waging Revolution?](#)" *Asian Politics and Policy*, 5(3), July, Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 407-420, July.

⁸ Blanga, Udi. 2020. "[Syria-Russia and the "Arab Spring": A Reassessment](#)", *Middle East Policy*, 37(4), Winter, Middle East Policy Council, pp. 62-82, 16 February

⁹ News. 2012. "[Iran 'sending arms to Syria despite ban'](#)", *Al Jazeera*, 17 May.

¹⁰ Shaheen, Kareem. 2015. "[Syria approaching de facto partition amid Assad military setbacks](#)", *The Guardian*, 4 August.

After some hesitation, Moscow, which had previously been cautious about direct military involvement, intervened with troops from the Russian armed forces and those from the Wagner mercenary group. A high-level meeting between the Kremlin and the Beit-e-Rahbari set things in motion—the final decision was reportedly made after the now-deceased Iranian Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani convinced Russian elites to take the plunge.¹¹ Russian military forces entered the war to prevent the collapse of a loyalist regime, stymie potential terror threats, and limit US strategic influence in the war. The initial campaign was not productive and two years later, government-controlled territory shrunk to its lowest levels.¹² That same year though, a surge of Russian air power and Iranian ground forces turned the tide, retaking large swathes and setting the stage for a negotiated settlement to the conflict.

By this stage, Iran and Russia successfully staved off any serious challenges to the Assad regime, having taken back major cities such as Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, and Daraa. At the same time, Türkiye invaded portions of northern Syria, Israel conducted airstrikes against Iran-backed forces in the southwest, and the US gradually withdrew its troops from the country. Through the Astana Process, supported by Tehran, Ankara, and Moscow, and endorsed by the UN, the three sides were able to establish four de-escalation zones.¹³

¹¹ Bassam, L and T. Perry. 2015. “[How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow](#)”, *Reuters*, 6 October.

¹² Rosenberg, Steven. 2017. “[Syria War: Putin's Russian mission accomplished](#)”, *BBC*, 13 December.

¹³ “[Joint Statement by the Representatives of Iran, Russia and Türkiye on the 20th International Meeting on Syria in the Astana Format, Astana](#)”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 21 June 2023

The three countries, by and large, aligned on terminating the civil war, combating terrorism, maintaining a humanitarian corridor, and allowing the return of displaced Syrians. That said, the three sets of goals were in conflict on the ground, with each side looking out for their own geopolitical ambitions.¹⁴

Russia and Iran's investments in the region took another turn in 2022, when Russian forces invaded Ukraine and then in 2023 as the Hamas attack on Israel exploded into a regional conflict. Russian military platforms in Syria were redeployed back to the eastern European theatre of war and Iranian assets saw a similar but smaller draw-down as Tehran was pulled into confrontations with Tel Aviv.¹⁵ Because of these tactical re-prioritisations, among other factors, in November 2024, the coalition led by HTS consisting of the Military Operations Command (MOC) in the north and the Southern Operations Room (SOR), were seemingly emboldened to coordinate and launch a rebel offensive.¹⁶ By 8 December, the MOC and SOR linked up in Damascus, toppled the Assad regime, and established a de facto transitional government.

Strategic implications

The fall of Assad's dynastic regime and the HTS takeover has posed a significant strategic challenge to Iran and Russia. The presence of Iranian and Russian forces in Syria had provided

¹⁴ Bowen, Jeremy. 2020. “[Syria war: Russia and Türkiye agree Idlib ceasefire](#)”, *BBC*, 6 March.

¹⁵ Kingsley, P and R. Bergman. 2022. “[Russia Shrinks Forces in Syria, Factor in Israeli Strategy There](#)”, *The New York Times*, October; Soltani, Amin, Et. al. 2023. “[Iran Update, October 4, 2023](#)”, *Institute for the Study of War*, 4 October.

¹⁶ Sharawi, Ahmad. 2024. “[Analysis: Who liberated Damascus? Unpacking the Southern Operations Room's emergence](#)”, *Long War Journal*, 9 December.

the two countries with a power that extended far beyond Syria's borders. But the manner in which the rebel campaign succeeded and the dictator abdicated has raised several doubts about Iran and Russia's long-term geopolitical credibility and capabilities.

Russia and Iran have suffered key strategic setbacks: lost influence in West Asian geopolitics, inability to constrain US forces in the region, and the loss of Syria as a checkpoint and corridor to move men and material across and through the Levant. On top of these, they are also facing the challenge of other regional actors such as Türkiye and Israel entering the fray.

Loss of influence in West Asian geopolitics

For both Iran and Russia, Syria provided an opportunity to project trans-regional political and military power. Since the 1970s, especially following the Six Day War and the Islamic Revolution, the three actors have worked to develop a symbiotic relationship. The ideological core of these ties was built on a mix of Islamism, Arabism, and socialism, manifest in the Ba'athist movement. President Hafez al-Assad was the first Arab head-of-state to recognise Ayatollah Khomeini as Iran's legitimate leader. Increased isolation from other West Asian states forced the two to get closer. President Hashim al-Atassi (before Hafez) committed Syria to the communist fight against reactionary forces in the region and was among the first non-eastern bloc heads-of-

state to recognise the German Democratic Republic.¹⁷

These ties deepened even further at the end of the Cold War, with the ascendancy of Bashar al-Assad. Shared antagonisms over Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and his downfall pulled Tehran and Damascus into an 'alliance of convenience' and the two sides expanded their engagement to include mutual defence, joint energy ventures, financial mechanisms, and even nuclear programmes.¹⁸ Iran also pursued cultural investments (in the form of Twelver Shia Islam) in Syria, which involved constructing shrines, religious schools, resettlement programmes, and so on.¹⁹ Around the same time, Moscow remained a steadfast arms supplier to Damascus and sought to reset bilateral economic and energy ties following the collapse of the USSR. Nearly 80 per cent of Syria's Soviet-era debt was cancelled and the transfer of advanced Russian weapons, advisers, and infrastructure projects was initiated.²⁰

All of these interactions and exchanges set the foundation for Iran and Russia to expand their influence across West Asia. Syria was a lynchpin for Tehran's so-called 'Shia Crescent'.²¹ This 'Crescent' offered Iran the ability to take charge as the unifier of the Islamic world, which indirectly

¹⁷ Ulbricht, Walter. 1967. "[Letter, Walter Ulbricht to Leonid Brezhnev](#)", *Wilson Centre Digital Archive*, 1 August.

¹⁸ Wastnidge, Edward. 2017. "[Iran and Syria: An Enduring Axis](#)", *Middle East Policy*, 24(2), June, Middle East Policy Council, pp. 148-159.

¹⁹ Hancock, George. 2024. "[Religion as a Soft Power Tool: Iran's Export of Twelver Shia Islam to Syria](#)", *RUSI*, 16 April.

²⁰ TASS. 2005. "[Russia, Syria Agree to Boost Cooperation](#)", *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, 25 January.

²¹ Barzegar, Kayhan. 2008. "[Iran and the Shiite Crescent: Myths and Realities](#)", *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Fall/Winter.

contributed to the credibility of its military capabilities and the legitimacy of its political ambitions. Threats to the Syrian regime meant the waning of Russian geopolitical influence in the Mediterranean and required intense protection. This is why in 2013, the IRGC was tasked with developing a National Defence Force of Syrian loyalists and Iranian proxies to support Syrian Arab army troops.²² In Russia's case, Syria offered a launchpad to re-live its Cold War glory and rebuild its erstwhile sphere of influence. Investing in Damascus allowed them to maintain a constant presence in North and Central Africa, whether it was for potential kinetic or immediate economic purposes. Even though Moscow was unsure about a full-fledged intervention in the civil war in 2015, these calculations forced it to do so.

HTS' emergence as the new steward of Syria complicates Russia and Iran's past gains—and their future successes. HTS is ideologically anti-Shia and its leader has made clear that Tehran will no longer hold sway over the politics of Damascus.²³ The coalition's military actions have also disrupted the Shia Crescent with attacks on Iranian proxy strongholds in the country. On the other hand, HTS hasn't yet announced a hardline position on Moscow's influence, maintaining that they don't want Russia to leave Syria.²⁴ Nonetheless, civilian calls for Russia to bear

responsibility for its actions during the war and its protection of al-Assad and his stolen riches, may pressure the coalition to change its tune.

Blocked corridor and checkpoint in the Levant

Iran and Russia's regionwide political influence was also bolstered by their ability to move men and material through Syria to the Mediterranean and North Africa. In this case, Tehran has suffered the most losses. The Quds Force had established a land and air corridor through Syria that fuelled its 'Axis of Resistance'—a network of proxy Shiite militias that stretches from Lebanon to Yemen. In fact, without Syria, Hezbollah, the powerful Lebanese Shia paramilitary organisation, wouldn't exist. In 1983 a unit of the IRGC travelled to Beirut via Syria to establish the outfit.²⁵ This Axis operates as a force multiplier for Iran's regular armed forces and offers them a strategic depth they wouldn't conventionally be able to achieve. It also allows Iran to extend its intelligence, contraband, and revolutionary network.²⁶

With the loss of this corridor, Tehran is no longer able to project its power through its proxy forces and support aligned militias in Lebanon and Palestine. The HTS takeover has forced Iran to reverse its military footprint in the Syrian countryside, particularly in Deir al-Zor, a governorate and border crossing at Bukamal.²⁷ In the weeks following the rebel campaign, HTS security forces also disrupted and confiscated

²² Kajjo, Sirwan. 2020. "[Who Are Syria's National Defense Forces?](#)", *Voice of America*, 26 August.

²³ Myre, Greg and Rizkallah, Jawad. 2025. "[Syria's new leader denounces Iran, calling its proxies a regional threat](#)", npr, 4 February.

²⁴ RFE/RL. 2024. "[Syria's De Facto Leader Wants to Maintain 'Respectful' Ties with Iran, Russia](#)", *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, 29 December.

²⁵ Badran, Tony. 2013. "[The Secret History of Hezbollah](#)", *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, 18 November.

²⁶ Behraves, Maysam. 2020. "[Iran's Unconventional Alliance Network in the Middle East and Beyond](#)", Policy Paper-8, *Middle East Institute*, April.

²⁷ Qereman, Orhan. 2024. "[US-backed Syrian Kurds seize eastern city of Deir el-Zor, sources say](#)", Reuters, 6 December.

Iranian arms supplies on their way to Tartus. They have also begun to dismantle the US\$5.6 billion Captagon smuggling and border criminal network with the destruction of stockpiles and the shutdown of classic routes through Syria.²⁸ This is not simply a tactical loss that could be recovered in the near future, but a major erosion of Iran's geostrategic plans and capabilities.

For Moscow, now caught in a conflict in Europe, the fall of al-Assad means the loss of an air and naval checkpoint in the eastern Mediterranean. Russian military presence in the region was formally established in 1971 with the development of a port in Tartus. This was followed by an airbase in Latakia and later in Khmeimim.²⁹ While symbolic, given the limited capabilities of the deployed naval and air forces, these bases provided Moscow a way to circumvent NATO's expanding presence in the region and the closed space of the Black Sea. Syria was also the first of many 'lily pads'—a network of logistics and forward bases—developed by the Wagner group, to move mercenaries to and traffic diamonds, gold, uranium, oil, and more from Mali, Mozambique, Madagascar, and other countries in the region.³⁰

As with Tehran, for Moscow, the loss of a naval checkpoint in western Syria has forced Russian forces to retreat, though not to the same degree. Over February 2024, assets and hardware were on the move to other bases either in the Caucasus or

in North Africa as the HTS announced (after certain negotiations) the cancellation of their 49-year lease with Russia.³¹ This means a loss of access to nuclear submarines, surveillance ships, sealift capabilities, and the projection of air power for Russia. It not only reduces Russia's traditional frontier battlespace but also raises costs in projecting power in countries that it is now getting closer to, such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Libya, and so on and supporting the Africa Corps that has taken over responsibilities that were previously the Wagner Group's.

Inability to constrain US forces in West Asia

The final implication is a combination of the first two, i.e. the loss of political influence and military mobility. Syria was a theatre of war in which Tehran and Moscow were able to contain and deny the entry of US forces. This was done with lethality, in both regular and irregular ways. For instance, Iran-backed militants such as the Kata'ib Hezbollah and the Popular Mobilisation Forces attacked US bases and diplomatic offices in Jordan and Iraq through rocket barrages, and the drone strike at the Al-Tanf garrison in Syria was directly attributed to the IRGC.³² At the same time, others in the Axis of Resistance like the Houthis have continued to harass US Navy carriers and cutter groups in the maritime domain of the Red Sea in what is considered the world's first naval ballistic engagement.³³

²⁸ Nader, Emir. 2024. "What now for Syria's £4.5bn illegal drug empire", *BBC*, 22 December.

²⁹ Reuters Staff. 2009. "Russia plans navy bases in Libya, Syria, Yemen: report", *Reuters*, 16 January.

³⁰ Blostein, Denise; Et.al. 2023. "Inside Progozhin's Wagner, Russia's Secret War Company", *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 June.

³¹ Eardley, N. and M. Murphy. 2025. "Russian ships return to Syrian base ahead of expected withdrawal", *BBC*, January.

³² AJ Staff. 2024. "US base attacked in Iraq hours after Iran vows revenge for Damascus attack", *Al Jazeera*, 23 January.

³³ Mongilio, H. 2024. "Houthi Attack Two U.S. Destroyers Leaving the Red Sea", *Pentagon Says, USNI News*, 12 November.

Russian forces in Syria had successfully evicted US troops from their areas of operation in the north and east, with a number of confrontations between the two making headlines.³⁴ Russian military aircrafts conducted a number of unsafe interdictions with US fighter aircrafts and surveillance drones in Syrian airspace and several times over the eastern Mediterranean. In the maritime dimension, Russian forces based out of Tatus were constantly arrayed to deny and complicate US and US-aligned operations at the mouth of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.³⁵ The most fatal encounter between the two sides was the Battle of Khasam over control of a gas refinery between US commandos backing SDF fighters and Wagner mercenaries backing the SAA.³⁶ The loss of a kinetic foothold in Syria implies a reduction in their ability to project power against and to deny US forces in the wider WANA region.

Tehran had invested quite heavily in developing key infrastructure in Syria, such as training facilities and logistic hubs which helped its proxies in Syria and deter long-range strikes from Israel.³⁷ Moscow's own investments, going beyond its military bases in northwest Syria, have now come to naught. This marks not just a loss of prestige but also geostrategic insulation (as it has lost the ability to leapfrog over NATO allies like Türkiye and others in the Mediterranean), especially as it

continues its war in Ukraine and needs to counter NATO actions in the Black Sea.³⁸ Between the two, however, Iran appears to have suffered the greater cost given that the Levant is its natural sphere of influence. Tehran has lost a space in which it can freely move its regular troops and proxy forces, support them logistically, and deter other non-friendly actors (Israel prime among them), and raise operational and manpower costs on continued US military engagements in West Asia.

Complicated regional dynamics

Iranian and Russian presence in Syria had, until now, given both actors influence that extended far beyond the Syrian frontier. Al-Assad's downfall and HTS' ascent as the new Damascus government has altered regional politics, adding new complexities to interactions with Türkiye and Israel. By 2015, Türkiye had already occupied parts of northern Syria,³⁹ while Israel was carrying out airstrikes against Iran-backed troops in the southwest.⁴⁰ Shared interests in terminating the war and fighting terrorism through the Astana Process have never been actively pursued by Türkiye and Israel, who have divergent objectives on the ground.

Türkiye, though officially advocating for Syria's territorial integrity, has been instrumental in strengthening the HTS in secret.⁴¹ Its mediatory efforts between HTS and other rebel groups,

³⁴ Seligman, L. and B.W. Swan. 2020. "[Russians squeeze U.S. troops in Syria amid uproar over Trump's dealings with Moscow](#)", *Politico*, 30 May.

³⁵ Lagrone, S. 2022. "[UPDATED: Russian Navy Cruisers Positioned to Counter U.S., French and Italian Carrier Groups in the Mediterranean](#)", USNI News, 22 February.

³⁶ Maurer, K. 2023. "[Special Forces Soldiers Reveal First Details of Battle with Russian Mercenaries in Syria](#)", *The War House*, 11 May.

³⁷ Yingst, T. 2019. "[Iran building new classified military base in Syria: intelligence sources](#)", *Fox News*, 3 September.

³⁸ Poroskoun, G. 2025. "[Despite Efforts to Remain in Syria, Russia is Losing its Status as an Important Security Actors in the Middle East](#)", INSS Insight, No.1940, *Institute for National Security Studies*, 27 January.

³⁹ Humphrey, Bill. 2025. "[Mapping the projected Turkish occupation zone in Syria](#)", Arsenal for Democracy, July.

⁴⁰ Congressional Research Service. 2019. "[Iran and Israel: Tension Over Syria](#)", 5 June.

⁴¹ FDD. 2025. "[10 Things to Know About Türkiye's Interventions and Influence in Syria](#)", 24 February.

coupled with its clandestine support, has enabled HTS' seizure of Damascus. Türkiye has allegedly secured security deals with the HTS-held government, which grants Ankara pivotal security and administrative leverage in return for economic and military support.⁴² This developing connection ensures that Ankara continues to play a part in determining Syria's post-Assad future while protecting its interests along the border. At the same time, Turkish troops retain control of northern buffer zones and carry out cross-border operations against Kurdish forces, strengthening Ankara's influence within Syria. Ahmed al-Sharaa's recent meeting with Recep Tayyip Erdogan further highlights Ankara's increasing influence in Syria's post-war transformation.⁴³ With almost three million Syrian refugees remaining in Türkiye, Ankara would like to smooth their return as well as use its economic weight to influence the rebuilding of Syria.⁴⁴

Israel, meanwhile, has redirected its military attention in the wake of Assad's fall. With Iranian proxies having abandoned Syria after HTS took over, Israel's airstrikes have increasingly moved beyond targeting Tehran's influence and gone after more wide-ranging geopolitical aims.⁴⁵ After capturing the buffer zone, Tel Aviv has been trying to destabilise HTS's rule by taking advantage of sectarian fault lines. It is solidifying connections

with local Druze forces in southern Syria by allowing them to cross the border and work in Israel and constantly warning Damascus to stay away from Druze settlements.⁴⁶ These efforts work to protect the Golan Heights from turmoil while making Israel a central force in determining the future of Syria's southern borders. But the same efforts also have the risk of coming into direct conflict with HTS, which desires total control of Syria and considers Israeli-supported militias a threat to its authority.

Türkiye and Israel's growing roles in Syria place them against each other, as well as against Iran and Russia. Türkiye's close relationship with the HTS-led government, coupled with its security deals and reconstruction efforts, has tightened its grip on Syria, directly going against Israel's interests. Israel's military push into Mt. Hermon and attempts to take advantage of sectarian divides in southern Syria, however, challenge Türkiye's agenda. These conflicting agendas may test their already strained relations, with each vying to define Syria's future in a manner most conducive to its own strategic interests.

Apart from their rivalry, Ankara and Tel Aviv's expanding roles in Syria further complicate their calculus with Tehran and Moscow. With Assad's fall, Iran's presence has considerably dwindled as its proxies fell back after taking hits from both Israel's intensified raids and from the Türkiye-backed HTS that effectively cut Tehran off in Syria. This has put a strain on Turkish-Iranian relations, as Ankara's role has thrown more than one

⁴² Michaelson, Ruth. 2024. "[Ankara is getting what it wants': how Erdoğan's balancing act in Syria paid off](#)", The Guardian, 17 December.

⁴³ Al Jazeera. 2025. "[Syria's al-Sharaa, Türkiye's Erdogan talk Kurdish fighters, defence pacts](#)", 4 February.

⁴⁴ NDTV World. 2025. "[Over 300,000 Refugees Return To Syria Since President Assad's Ouster: UN](#)", 12 March.

⁴⁵ Siddiqui, Huma. 2024. "[Israel's military strikes in Syria: A response to strategic Threats](#)", Financial Express, 12 December.

⁴⁶ Sharaf, Wesam. 2024. "[Israel is up to its old 'divide and rule' tricks. Syria's Druze must resist them](#)", Middle East Eye, 20 December.

challenge to Tehran's regional ambitions.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, Russia, which had depended on al-Assad to secure its presence in Syria, now suffers a strategic blow as Ankara's close cooperation with HTS erodes Moscow's influence. While Russia had initially accepted Türkiye's role through the long-drawn Syrian peace process, Ankara's increasing involvement in Damascus has disrupted Moscow's already weakened presence; in fact, Russia-Türkiye collaboration on diplomatic issues in the region has often fluctuated between synergy and conflict.⁴⁸ Türkiye consolidating its military gains in the north and Israel increasing its military presence in the south have further sidelined Moscow and Tehran, raising tensions and leading to a tumultuous post-Assad Syria.

Türkiye's tacit alignment with HTS and Israel's manoeuvring are exacerbating the already dangerous environment where alignments shift, and rivalries intensify. As Türkiye solidifies its security arrangements with the new regime in Syria and Israel consolidates its presence in the south, the post-Assad Syrian framework is being formed by rather new players at the cost of old and entrenched ones.

Conclusion

The rapid collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime and the rise of HTS in Syria are major strategic blows to both Moscow and Tehran. In addition to

the immediate loss of a trusted ally, the end of Assad's rule in Syria will have serious implications for their wider geopolitical goals, by undermining their ability to project power, shape regional affairs, and contain US forces in West Asia. The loss of Syria as a corridor of movement for personnel and material, especially for Iran's 'Axis of Resistance', and as a maritime and air control point for Russia, reduces Tehran and Moscow's strategic depth and makes it difficult for them to support regional surrogates and extend military capabilities.

Although there is uncertainty concerning HTS' future, its early attitude indicates a reappraisal of relationships which will potentially weaken the pillars of the Iran-Syria-Russia axis. While Tehran and Moscow struggle to accept these strategic defeats, the dynamics of power in Syria will certainly change as Türkiye and Israel position themselves to have their own interests realised within the new dispensation. Türkiye's de facto alignment with HTS, premised on border security interests and an interest in determining Syria's destiny, gives Ankara a strong, albeit controversial, presence in the country. At the same time, Israel's stepped-up attempts to destabilise HTS and tighten its grip on southern Syria indicate an eagerness to confront the new regime directly, at the risk of escalation and additional instability.

The sustainability of al-Sharaa's control will determine whether Syria plummets deeper into disintegration and war, or if a fresh, though tense, balance of power can be forged. The region is in the throes of a decisive, high stakes situation and Syria's ultimate fate will be decided by a mix of

⁴⁷ APNews. 2025. "[Türkiye and Iran summon each other's diplomats after Ankara criticizes Iranian support to militias](#)", 4 March.

⁴⁸ Meinardus, Ronald. 2024. "[Türkiye, Russia and the new phase of the war in Syria](#)", Ekathimerini.com, 6 December.

these rival interests and what the HTS government will do. While the toppling of Assad was an important turning point, it is by no means the end.

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