



EXPLAINING THE FALL OF ASSAD FROM IRAN'S STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE

by

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On November 21, 2017, the Iranian media published a note by Qassem Soleimani, the late commander of Iran's Quds Force, to Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The note, following the successful joint operation of Iranian and Syrian forces to liberate the city of Al-Bukamal in Deir Ezzor province, officially declared the definitive end of ISIS rule in Syria and Iraq. Ironically, seven years subsequent to Soleimani's statement, the forces of the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, a jihadist group situated in Idlib, were able to conquer Damascus during an 11-day battle, and the end of Assad's rule was announced on official Syrian television. Simultaneously, the Israeli Air Force bombed all key Syrian military installations, and then the Israeli army expanded its advance into southern Syria.

In stark contrast to past precedents, Iran refrained from intervening. The lightning fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime and the dominance of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham over Damascus have far-reaching consequences. [Some have compared](#) this to the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Key questions emerge: Did Tehran leave Assad alone? Why could Iran not keep Assad? What consequences will Assad's fall have for Tehran? What are the possible options for Iran?

Did Iran leave Assad alone?

There is ample evidence of Tehran's determination to support Assad after the Tahrir al-Sham advance began. Despite Tehran reducing its advisory presence subsequent to Assad's consolidation of power, particularly after [Damascus became insecure](#) due to the escalation of tensions between Tehran and Tel Aviv, the Aleppo and Damascus Headquarters have never been devoid of high-ranking Iranian military personnel. The killing of General Senior

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Commander [Kiomars Pourhashemi](#) after the rebels' assault on Aleppo stands as a testament to this commitment. Even then, Tehran remained firm in its support for Assad, as exemplified by the dispatch of [Seyyed Javad Ghaffari](#) as its highest-ranking senior advisor. The [deployment](#) of the Fatemiyoun division was another strategic measure by Tehran to support Assad. According to [some reports](#), Iran intended to send additional military resources to Syria to support the Assad government after the advance of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham towards Hama.

Why couldn't Tehran keep Assad?

At the micro level, three important political, military, and logistical factors played a significant role in Iran's failure to save its strategic ally. Politically, Assad's reluctance to have Iran intervene officially has been one of the important factors. [Abbas Araqchi](#) and [Ali Larijani](#) met with Assad in the last days and tried to convince him to resist the rebels. [Some reports](#) indicate that Assad's reluctance stemmed from assurances made by some Arab countries, such as the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, proposing economic development of Damascus in exchange for distancing from the Iranian axis. The report introduced Asma Assad as encouraging her husband to distance himself from Iran.

Militarily, the [Syrian army's unwillingness](#) to engage in combat and the [reduction in the role of the National Defence Forces in Syria's defense structure](#) contributed to Iran's failure. Given these circumstances, according to IRGC Commander [Hossein Salami](#), it was not logical for Iranian forces to engage in combat in another country while that host nation's army was a spectator. Furthermore, the [blockade of communication lines](#) was a logistical factor that reduced Iran's operational efficacy in Syria. However, as highlighted by [Mohammad Kowsari](#), Iran did not withdraw its advisory presence from Syria until the last day.

At the strategic level, while developments in the Middle East in recent years underscored the [emergence of three non-Arab regional powers](#), the imbalance of Iran's attention to Israel and Turkey as



two regional rivals played an undeniable role in the fall of Assad.

On the one hand, Iran's preoccupation with fighting Israel post the October 7 attack eroded the operational readiness of the members of the Axis of Resistance and eliminated its chain of command in Syria and Lebanon. The assassination of Razi Mousavi, Sadeq Omidzadeh, Mohammad Reza Zahedi, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, and the commanders of the Lebanese Hizballah led to the elimination of key individuals effective in the land corridor of the Syria-Lebanon axis. [According to General Behrouz Esbati](#), a high-ranking commander of IRGC, Russia played an undeniable role in accompanying Israel in the assassination of three senior Iranian commanders in Syria by turning off its radars in Syria.

On the other hand, following heightened tensions between Lebanese Hizballah and Israel and the inactivation of the Golan Front, Israel's most vulnerable point after Lebanon and Gaza, a significant portion of the capabilities of the Axis of Resistance were transferred to the Lebanese Front. Consequently, after the successive fall of key Syrian cities and the retreat of the country's army, forces of the Axis of Resistance were unable to stop the rebels' advance.

The unbalanced focus on Israel in recent years has caused Iran to neglect two strategic projects of [neo-Ottomanism](#) and [Turkey's Turani Corridor](#). Utilizing pan-Islamist groups and transferring them to the geography of battle is part of Ankara's strategy to realize its two projects.

While the success of the Tehran-Moscow axis in protecting Assad after the Arab Spring thwarted Ankara's neo-Ottomanism policy, Erdogan tried to pursue the Turani Corridor project by participating in the Second Karabakh War in the South Caucasus in 2020. Despite the [increasing influence](#) of Iranian-backed forces in Syria after the start of the Ukrainian war, this event had two detrimental outcomes for the Axis of Resistance: First, the greater vulnerability of the Assad regime and Iranian forces in Syria due to dwindling Russian support; and second, a

convergence of interests between Turkey and Israel to contain Iran in the Levant.

Consequences of Assad's fall for Iran

According to the [Iranian leader's statements](#), the perception of Iran's vulnerability after the weakening of Lebanon's Hizballah and the fall of Assad has led to the U.S., Israel, and Turkey pursuing a policy of containing Iran by imposing a regional retreat strategy and attempting to destabilize the country internally.

Since the Houthis are the sole active entity left in the Axis of Resistance, it seems that Yemen will be the first focus of the regional crisis. The Houthis have tried to pressure Tel Aviv and Washington to end the war in Gaza through missile strikes on Israel and making the Red Sea unsafe for Israeli ships and their allies. Given Tel Aviv's alignment with Washington and London in confronting the Houthis, it is likely that Ankara will also join this coalition. Especially since Turkey's motivations for a greater presence in the Red Sea have increased after the [recent attack by the Houthis on the Anatolian ship](#). This event could even bring implicit Saudi Arabian consent.

Iraq is another focal point that will not be immune to the consequences of Assad's fall. As [revealed](#) after a meeting between U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al Sudani, Washington has put the Iraqi government under intense pressure to disarm the militia groups and sever Iraq's ties with the Axis of Resistance. However, two additional scenarios loom. First, a [potential resurgence in ISIS activities](#) in Iraq and Syria, which is feasible given the proximity of Iraq's Al-Anbar province and Syria's Deir Ezzor. Second, the exacerbation of political instability by strengthening Sunni and Shiite nationalism.

Beyond the Middle East, the rekindling of the Karabakh crisis will be another consequence of Turkey's increased influence after the fall of Assad. The Ankara-Baku-Tel Aviv axis will try to tighten Iran's geopolitical encirclement by occupying Armenia's Syunik province and cutting off Iran's access to Europe. Relocating certain Syrian armed rebel factions to the South Caucasus will be among



Turkey's options to advance the vision of the Zangezur corridor.

In addition, support for opposition groups and ethnic separatist movements are poised to serve as key components of Iran's destabilization strategy.

[Israel's support for civil disobedience in Iran](#) and the [launch of the Persian language section of Turkey's TRT network](#) are evaluated in this regard.

Tehran's Options

Increasing cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia could be one of Tehran's options for addressing pressing regional challenges. Given the importance of the Yemen crisis for Saudi Arabia, Tehran can use this card to encourage Riyadh to engage in greater regional cooperation.

[Bin Salman's concern about the threat of the Ankara-Doha Brotherhood axis](#) serves as an additional catalyst that could encourage Riyadh to cooperate with Iran. A concerted Tehran-Riyadh effort to break Lebanon out of the political deadlock by persuading the two important March 8 and March 14 coalitions could effectively prevent Ankara's influence in Beirut. Similarly, in Syria, cooperation between the two countries could challenge Turkey's influence. However, these potentials for cooperation should not be viewed with excessive optimism. Because the interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran, especially in Syria, have always been at odds. As [some Saudi officials have long believed](#), nothing would weaken Iran more than the fall of Assad, and this would be in the kingdom's interest. [Riyadh's recent welcome of the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham leaders](#) is understandable in this context.

Moreover, given Ayatollah Khamenei's statements regarding the [emergence of a strong resistance movement in Syria](#), a policy of supporting the Syrian Alawite, Shiite, and Kurdish minorities is likely to be on Tehran's agenda. A scenario that was also experienced in Iraq after the 2003 invasion.

In the context of Iraq, helping the Shiite bloc to converge by reducing the differences in the coordination framework with the influential Sadrist movement could be one of Tehran's serious

options. Tehran's efforts to have all Shiite political movements participate in the 2025 parliamentary elections, mediating to bridge the divide between the State of Law Coalition and the Sadrist movement, persuading Muqtada al-Sadr to participate in the future government, and ultimately brokering a consensus on a mutually beneficial option for the future prime minister could ease the Iraqi crisis.

In the South Caucasus, intensifying Tehran-Moscow cooperation and dialogue with Ankara—despite the existing conflict of interests—could be effective in mitigating the threats this region poses to Iran. Simultaneously, using the card of the [Islamic Resistance Movement of Azerbaijan \(Hoseyniyyun\)](#) to exert pressure on Baku, deploying Fatemiyun militias to the South Caucasus, and limited military intervention could be other cards Iran could use to counter the launch of the Zangezur Corridor.

On the international level, Iran is expected to [strengthen partnerships with external allies beyond the Middle East](#). Iran is more likely to concentrate on its Eastern partners in the coming months, especially China (for strategic and economic cooperation), Russia and North Korea (for military cooperation).

Additionally, Iran's holding of multi-layered and continuous military exercises in two key areas, the Strait of Hormuz and near the Natanz nuclear facility, will be among the measures that, [according to General Naeini](#), the IRGC spokesman, will be taken in order to change the mistaken perception of Tehran's enemies regarding Iran's vulnerability in recent months.

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