

MIDDLE EAST

Syria: Assad's fall is Turkey's triumph

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If the militias of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), who entered Damascus in the early hours of 8 December at the same time as President Bashar Assad fled, are the "liberators" of Syria, then it is not wrong to define what has happened in these days in the Arab nation was more than the overthrow of the regime, it was a controlled transition of power. Yesterday morning it was impossible to find a single 'Baathist' (member of Assad's Baath

party) in Damascus, even among the government ministers.

Mohammed Ghazi al-Jalali, who had a long ministerial career at Bashar Assad's side and was appointed prime minister last September, said yesterday that he had agreed with the leader of HTS, the jihadist Salafist Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, and that he agreed with him on the importance of maintaining state institutions. Al-Jolani said that Prime Minister al-Jalali would remain in office to ensure the transition of power in Syria. Tourism Minister Mohammad Rami Martini, who has held government posts since 2014 and was affected by EU sanctions against the regime, also urged employees to return to work and protect public facilities, hailing a 'new day' for the Syrian people. Martini said: "This is the will of the people and the will of the people must prevail.

Considering that the Syrian armed forces hardly ever resisted the rebels, preferring to retreat, that even state television immediately interviewed a rebel leader, and that the editorial staff of the regime's al-Watan newspaper apologised to its readers for the lies it had been forced to tell.

While the rebels broke into the recently reopened Italian embassy in Damascus (where they apparently took only three cars) and ransacked the Iranian embassy, tearing down the posters of Qassem Soleimani, the former commander of the Quds Force, and Hassan Nasrallah, it was impossible to find men still loyal to President Assad in the Syrian government apparatus. Rebels and members of the Syrian security apparatus met to avoid further clashes and casualties and to ensure a peaceful transfer of power by avoiding bloodshed.

The Syrian change of regime has seen many former Baathists recycle themselves, or at least try to do so, in the new regime, whose contours are not yet defined, but which it is not difficult to imagine will be influenced by Turkey, which, having co-opted many Syrian leaders, could now offer sufficient guarantees to all the protagonists involved in the crisis.

As is now clear, Turkey prepared the ground for the rebel offensive by progressively infiltrating the nerve centres of Syrian government and military power, as demonstrated by the absence of resistance after the first days of the war (despite Bashar Assad's decree increasing the salaries of active soldiers by 50%) and the adherence of many officials and entire state apparatuses to the "new course".

While there is still insufficient evidence to make an exhaustive analysis, what happened in Syria between 27 November and 8 December is reminiscent of what happened in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, when Taliban militias suddenly

advanced across the country while army units and regional governors surrendered to the insurgents. Only later did it emerge that, after the Doha agreements and the beginning of the withdrawal of the US and other Western allies, Taliban emissaries, well supported, including financially, by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), had secured the support of all the civilian and military authorities.

After days of keeping his cards close to his chest, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on 6 December that Turkey hoped that "the march" of opposition forces towards the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria "will continue without any problems or incidents, with the aim of reaching Damascus, of course, after Idlib, Hama and Homs. We have sent an appeal to Assad, inviting him to join us in determining the future of Syria, but unfortunately we have not received a positive response'.

On Sunday, after the rebels' statements, it was the Turkish foreign minister who announced the fall of the Assad regime. Minister Hakan was, in all likelihood, the real architect of the whole operation that led to Assad's escape, avoiding the bloodbath that many had expected. Fidan, who headed Ankara's intelligence service, the Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı, from 2010 to 2023, said yesterday that "the Syrian government has collapsed and control of the country has changed hands", explaining that Ankara is "in contact with the rebels to ensure security" inside Syria.

From the beginning of the rebel offensive on 27 November, it was clear that only direct Turkish support could make this offensive possible from Idlib province, which only borders Turkey. Ankara has every interest in extending its penetration into the Arab lands of the Ottoman Empire by expelling the Kurds from its borders and repatriating 3 million Syrian refugees, but to do so it must undermine Shiite and Iranian influence in Syria. A goal that sees the convergence of interests on the part of Israel, certainly no ally of Turkey today, but which sees the Iranian Pasdaran leaving Syria, used to supply arms and train Hezbollah militias.

To guard against jihadist rebels, Israeli troops yesterday took control of the demilitarised border strip east of the Golan and the Syrian side of Mount Hermon.

In devising its plan to overthrow Assad, Turkey has most likely had the broad support of the US: the Biden administration is interested not only in carrying out any form of destabilisation that might complicate Donald Trump's life, but also in liquidating a great ally of Moscow and Tehran such as Bashar Assad. It is no coincidence that the rebels appear to be in possession of several Western weapons from stocks supplied to Ukraine, including several drones used in the rare clashes with Assad's forces. But there is no shortage of unknowns. The rebels are jihadists who claim to be ex-

Qaeda, but within them are all the Chechen, Arab, Uzbek and Uighur militias that made up the international Islamic legion of al-Qaeda and then the Islamic State.

In recent days, the Biden administration has authorised air strikes against Shia militias and Syrian government forces in the Deir Ezzor area, but it may be difficult for Washington to maintain its bases in Syria and the thousand or so troops they house with a government led by HTS, which the US and the European Union regard as a terrorist movement. After all, Donald Trump expressed his willingness to withdraw troops from Syria during his first presidential term, a decision now also favoured by the withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq by September 2025, imposed by Baghdad.

The withdrawal of the United States, which is effectively an occupying force whose presence violates international law, would further expose the Kurds to the offensives of Ankara and the militias loyal to it that have been advancing in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan) in recent days. Turkey has once again warned the US to cut military ties with the Syrian Kurds, who Ankara considers terrorists in the same way as the Iraqi PKK.

It would not be surprising, therefore, if the Kurds once again paid the price for the geopolitical upheavals in the Middle East. In the north-eastern Syrian province of Hasakah, from Qamishli to Abu Rasin, the Turks are shelling the border posts that the retreating Syrian troops have handed over to the Kurdish forces. There are also Russian forces in this area, based in Al-Mabaqir, who have been patrolling the area and helping the retreating Syrian forces.

Also on the basis of this information and the close relations between Russia and Turkey, it seems difficult to believe that Moscow was taken by surprise by the events in Syria and opens the door to the hypothesis that the future arrangement of Syria envisaged by Erdogan does not include the withdrawal of the Russian bases in Tartous and Latakya.

If Turkey emerges as the real winner of the long and bloody Syrian war, there is no doubt that Ankara will have to reckon with the unknown factor of the drift that HTS and the whole galaxy of jihadist militias that overthrew Assad and that many in Europe and the United States are quick to call, not without ridicule, 'former terrorists' or 'moderate jihadists' might take.

As has been the case in the past, those who foment jihadist insurgencies are likely to find it very difficult to control them, and only time will tell whether Syria's new apparent masters will be able to ensure its unity and stability. While Europe is, as usual, conspicuous by its absence, Italy, the only Western nation to have reopened its embassy in Damascus, now sees even more justification for fearing new waves of migration from

Syria.