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TODAY'S ANALYSIS

(10 December 2024)

TOPICS TO BE COVERED

- THE FALL OF BASHAR AL ASSAD REGIME IN SYRIA



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THE FALL OF BASHAR AL ASSAD REGIME IN SYRIA



- On 8th Dec 2024, opposition forces declared Syria liberated from the rule of President Bashar al-Assad.
- The regime, which had ruled Syria for over 53 years, collapsed as opposition fighters surged into the capital, Damascus.
- Reports suggest that **Bashar al-Assad fled the capital.**

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- This marks a **significant shift in Syria's long and bloody civil war, which began nearly 14 years ago.**

BACKGROUND OF THE CRISIS

- **Start of the Conflict:** The Syrian civil war began in 2011 when peaceful protests against Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian regime were met with violent crackdowns.
- This sparked widespread violence and eventually turned into a bloody civil war.
- **Assad's Rule:** Bashar al-Assad, the son of Hafez al-Assad, who had ruled Syria for 3 decades, continued the family's autocratic rule despite widespread dissatisfaction and mounting opposition.

THE AL ASSADS LEGACY OF RULE IN SYRIA

Hafez al-Assad's Rise to Power (1970s)

- In 1970, Hafez al-Assad (Bashar al-Assad's father) became the leader of Syria after a military coup.
- At the time, Syria was going through a period of instability, with frequent changes in leadership and political unrest.

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- **Hafez al-Assad was a member of the Alawite sect, a minority group within Shia Islam, while the majority of Syrians were Sunni Muslims.**
- **Despite being a minority, the Alawites gained significant political power, and Assad used this to his advantage.**
- **Hafez al-Assad ruled Syria with an authoritarian style, meaning he had complete control over the government and did not allow much political freedom.**
- **He focused on building a strong military, controlling the economy, and staying in power at all costs.**
- **He also created a powerful network of loyal supporters, including people in the military, government, and business.**
- **During his rule, Syria became a one-party state dominated by the Ba'ath Party, which Hafez was a member of.**
- **The Ba'ath Party believed in Arab nationalism and socialism.**

LIFE UNDER HAFEZ AL ASSAD

Hafez al-Assad's government was known for its **repression of opposition** groups and its **use of force to maintain control.**

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Some of the key events during his rule include:

- **The 1982 Hama Massacre:** In the city of **Hama**, there was an uprising by an Islamist group called the **Muslim Brotherhood**, which opposed Assad's rule.
- In response, **Hafez al-Assad ordered the military to attack the city, resulting in the deaths of thousands of people.** This event showed how far Assad was willing to go to crush any threats to his power.
- **Foreign Policy:** Hafez al-Assad was a key player in Middle Eastern politics.
- **He supported Palestinian groups and was involved in the ongoing conflict with Israel.** He also formed alliances with the **Soviet Union (which collapsed in 1991)** and later with **Iran.**
- **Economic and Social Life:** While Assad maintained tight control over the country, **Syria faced economic challenges, including poverty and corruption.**
- Despite this, Assad was able to maintain a strong grip on power through his **loyalty system** and his ability to balance various regional and international relationships.

Hafez al-Assad ruled until his death in 2000.

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THE BASHAR AL ASSAD'S REGIME

- After Hafez al-Assad died in **2000**, his son **Bashar al-Assad** became president of Syria.
- Bashar, unlike his father, was trained as an **eye doctor** and had lived abroad for many years.
- Many Syrians and the international community had hopes that he might bring **reforms** and improve relations with the West.
- Bashar promised change and modernity, **but soon after becoming president, he continued his father's policies of maintaining tight control over the country.**
- Bashar's government was still **authoritarian**, and he faced **political repression**.
- **Political opposition was not tolerated**, and many dissidents were arrested.

THE PROTESTS

Background of Protests 2011:

- Over time, many Syrians became unhappy with Assad's rule because of **corruption, unemployment, and poor economic conditions.**
- A drought in the early 2000s made life harder, especially for people living in rural areas.

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The Start of Protests (2011)

- In **2011**, protests started in Syria as part of a wave of protests in the Middle East called the **Arab Spring**, where people in several countries were demanding more freedom and better living conditions.
- In **Daraa**, a city in southern Syria, young people were arrested for writing anti-government graffiti.
- This led to protests, and soon people across the country were calling for **Assad to leave power**.
- Assad's government responded by using violence to stop the protests, which only made more people angry and led to bigger protests.
- **The situation quickly became a civil war, with different groups taking sides.**

THE CIVIL WAR

- By the middle of 2011, the peaceful protests had turned into an armed conflict. **Opposition groups** (those against Assad) began fighting back, and some defected from the army.
- The situation escalated into a full-blown civil war.

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- The opposition was split into many groups, ranging from those wanting **democracy** to those with **Islamist views**.
- The Assad government, supported by **Russia** and **Iran**, fought back with heavy force.
- They used airstrikes, bombed cities, and even used chemical weapons (like in the 2013 **Ghouta attack**) against their own people.
- The opposition was also fighting among themselves, with some groups becoming more radical over time.

THE GLOBAL INVOLVEMENT

Foreign Involvement and International Powers:

Russia:

- **Russia has been Assad's most significant international ally**, providing airstrikes, military advisers, and ground troops.
- Russia's support also included **naval and air bases** in Syria, **maintaining a strategic military presence in the Middle East**.
- However, Russia's ability to aid Assad has diminished due to its involvement in the **Ukraine war**, which has strained its military resources.

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- Russian airstrikes attempting to stop the rebel advance have been described as relatively sparse.

- **Iran and Hezbollah:**

- Syria is a core part of **Iran's "Axis of Resistance,"** which includes **Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthi movement in Yemen.**
 - These groups **oppose American influence** in the region and **aim to weaken Israel.**
- **Hezbollah**, based in Lebanon, sent thousands of fighters to support Assad, while **Iran** provided significant military resources.
- However, as of recent weeks, Iran has begun **evacuating its military commanders and personnel** from Syria, a sign of its reduced ability to support Assad's regime.

Turkey:

- Turkey has conducted several military interventions in northern Syria, **primarily targeting Kurdish forces**, which it sees as part of the **PKK** insurgency.
- Turkey supports various opposition factions, including the **Syrian National Army**, a coalition of rebel groups.

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- Turkish President **Recep Tayyip Erdogan** recently expressed support for the rebel advance, particularly in **Idlib, Hama, Homs, and Damascus**.

The United States:

- Initially, the **Obama administration** supported rebel groups and provided military assistance to fight Assad.
- This support shifted with the rise of **ISIS in 2014, as the U.S. focused on defeating the extremist group.**
- U.S. forces have **remained in northeastern Syria, especially around Kurdish-controlled oil fields.**
- Around **900 U.S. troops** are stationed in Syria, mainly to prevent a resurgence of ISIS.
- The U.S. has also conducted airstrikes in Syria, but its involvement has fluctuated based on the administration's priorities.

Israel:

- Israel has focused its military efforts on **airstrikes** against **Hezbollah** and **Iranian targets** in Syria.

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- Its primary concern is preventing the transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah and hindering Iranian military presence near its borders.
- **Israel has also targeted senior military personnel and weapons production facilities in Syria.**

THE RISE OF ISIS

- Around 2013, a new threat emerged: **ISIS** (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria).
- ISIS took control of large parts of Syria, including cities like **Raqqa** and **Palmyra**.
- They declared a **caliphate** (an Islamic state) and used extreme violence to control the territory.
- **The United States** and its allies, including Kurdish fighters, worked to fight and defeat ISIS.
- By 2019, ISIS lost most of its territory, but it still poses a threat in some parts of Syria.

THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

The war has had a huge impact on the people of Syria:

- **Over 500,000 people** have died due to the violence.

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- **Millions of people** have been forced to leave their homes. About **12 million** people have been displaced, **with many living in refugee camps in neighboring countries like Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan.**
- Cities like **Aleppo** and **Homs** have been destroyed. **Hospitals, schools, and infrastructure** have been damaged or completely wiped out.
- The use of **chemical weapons** by the Syrian government, especially in attacks like the one in **Ghouta**, led to global outrage.

EFFORTS FOR PEACE

There have been several attempts to end the war, including talks in **Geneva** and **Astana** (with Russia, Turkey, and Iran involved). However, the conflict is so complicated that no one can agree on a solution.

- **2012: The first peace talks**

The **United Nations** held the **first peace talks in 2012 in Geneva**. A transition period which **would result in Assad's removal** was discussed, but in **2015 Assad began consolidating his position with Russia and Iran's backing.**

- **2016: A second attempt in Astana**

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In 2016 there was a second attempt at peace talks in Astana, the capital of **Kazakhstan**. 'De-escalation zones' were agreed upon, which temporarily reduced the violence. Eventually, it failed when the Syrian regime continued airstrikes in the de-escalation areas.

- **2018: New talks in Sochi**

2 years later in January 2018, Russia sponsored new talks in Sochi. But the Syrian opposition refused to take part in the meeting because Assad's removal from power was not a precondition for the talks.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

The Sudden Fall of Assad's Regime:

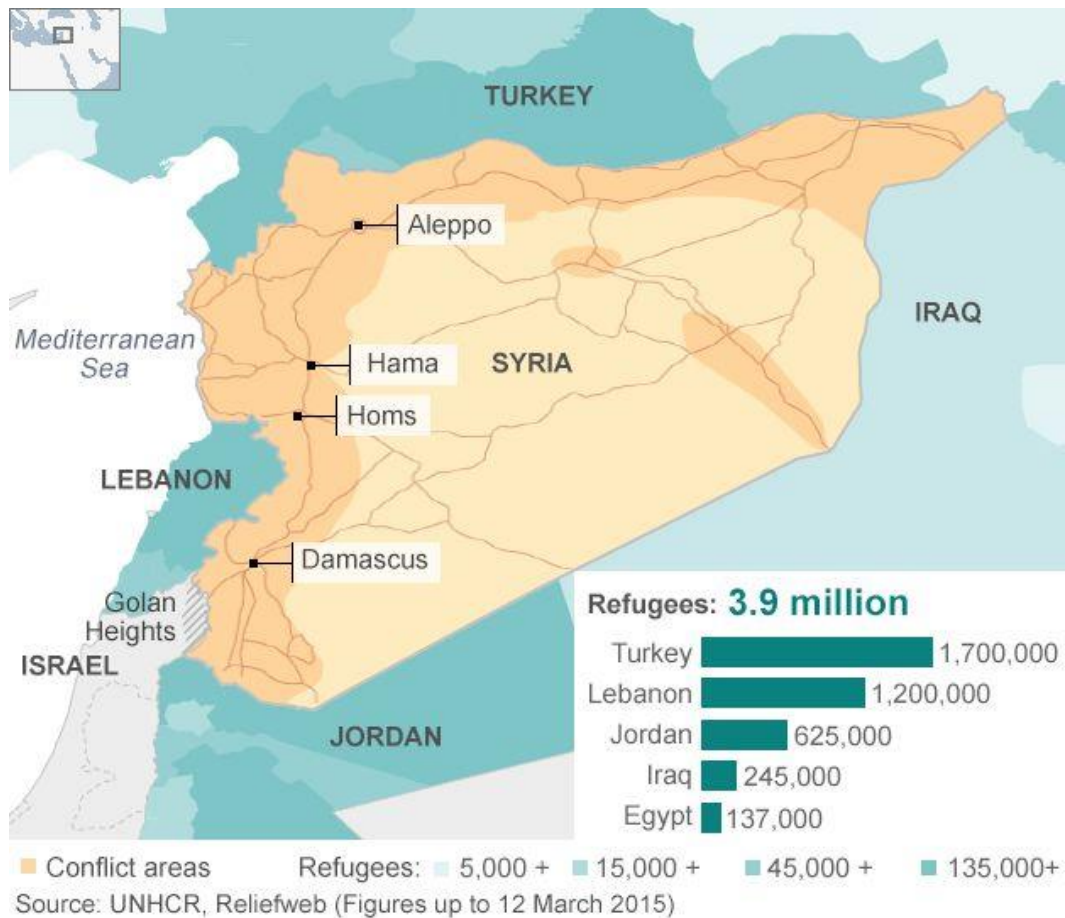
- **November 27 Offensive:** The rapid collapse of the Assad regime began on **November 27**, when a coalition of opposition forces launched a major offensive named "Operation Deterrence of Aggression".
- The offensive primarily targeted pro-government forces on the front lines between **Idlib and Aleppo**.

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- **Key Cities Taken by Opposition:** Within days, opposition forces made significant territorial gains, including the **capture of Syria's second-largest city, Aleppo**, on November 30.



OPPOSITION GROUPS INVOLVED

- **Opposition groups involved:**
 - **Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS):** Led by **Abu Mohammed al-Julani**, this group became the dominant force in Idlib and was the primary leader in the offensive.

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- **Turkish-backed Factions:** Several other groups, including the **National Front for Liberation**, **Ahrar al-Sham**, and **Jaish al-Izza**, joined the operation under the umbrella of the **Syrian National Army**, which is **supported by Turkey**.

FAST ADVANCEMENTS

- By early December, opposition fighters had taken control of **Hama** and **Homs** (once known as the "Capital of the Revolution").
- **Deraa**, the **birthplace of the 2011 protests**, also fell, symbolizing a significant defeat for the regime.
- **Syrian government forces began withdrawing**, and their positions around key areas, including **Quneitra** (near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights), were abandoned.

FACTORS BEHIND ASSAD'S QUICK COLLAPSE

- **Economic Struggles:** Syria's **economy had been in freefall for years**, severely **weakened by international sanctions**, a collapsing infrastructure, and rampant corruption. The economy was partly sustained by illicit drug trade, specifically **Captagon**, a psychoactive drug.

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- **Unpopular Leadership:** Assad's leadership became increasingly unpopular, particularly as ordinary Syrians struggled to survive amidst economic decline, rampant corruption, and daily violence.
- **Military Weakness:**
 - The Syrian military had been heavily dependent on external support from **Russia** and **Iran**, with Russian airstrikes playing a crucial role in keeping Assad's forces in power.
 - However, **Russia** is now bogged down by the war in Ukraine, and **Iran** has been weakened by Israeli strikes against its interests in Syria. Consequently, the Assad regime lacked the military strength to counter the opposition's offensive effectively.
 - **Desertion of Forces:** There were widespread reports of **soldiers and police officers abandoning their posts**, many surrendering weapons or fleeing ahead of the opposition. This left critical positions vulnerable to rapid takeover.

WHERE IS BASHAR AL ASSAD?

Uncertainty About Assad's Location: As of now, Bashar al-Assad's whereabouts remain unclear. Reports suggest that he fled via **Damascus International Airport**, which was taken over by opposition fighters soon after government forces abandoned it.

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CONCLUSION

The Syria crisis is a **civil war** that has caused immense suffering for the people of Syria. It is complicated because many countries are involved, and each has different goals. The war has killed hundreds of thousands of people, displaced millions, and destroyed much of the country. The future of Syria remains uncertain, and the situation may continue to be unstable for years to come.

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