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A New Chance for Syria

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Summary

People in Syria are celebrating a free country. The new transitional government promises to protect women and minorities, dissolve security forces, and the new Prime Minister, Mohamad Bashir, is calling for refugees from all over the world to return to their homeland. However, given the Islamist roots of the current government, a favourable scenario seems less likely. Last month, the country experienced a literal lightning offensive by rebel groups, leading to the fall of President Bashar al-Assad's regime. Not even assistance from Iran and Russia helped, as they are focusing more on Israel and Ukraine. The whole world is closely watching the ongoing developments.

Main Points

- In Syria, a new transitional government is set to operate, with Mohamad Bashir as its Prime Minister. The government's priorities include ensuring security, resettling refugees, and establishing functional state services.
- Syria remains fragmented among various rebel groups, necessitating its unification.
- Foreign allies such as the United States, the European Union, and of course Turkey, which presumably supported the offensive against Bashar al-Assad's regime, will play a critical role in shaping the country's future development.

Many Syrians can barely remember anything other than the harsh policies of Bashar al-Assad and his father, who ruled the country for more than fifty years. It was a time of authoritarian rule marked with all its elements, from suppressing the opposition to controlling the media. Initially, the pursuit of a reformist government after the civil war in 2011 quickly devolved into the opposite: a militarized economy, suppression of protests, and finally accusations of using chemical weapons against its own population. This was all facilitated by Syria's alliances with Iran and Russia, both of which established several strategically important bases in the country. While this was the situation in most of the territory (western Syria), the northeast was predominantly Kurdish, and the north was controlled by Turkey. Armed rebels entered this situation, quickly capturing important cities and establishing an interim government. "Syria faces reconstruction. There were concerns about the regime. This country is now moving towards development and recovery, towards stability. People are exhausted from the war, so this country is not ready for another (war) and will not get into the next," stated leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani (X, Sky News, 2024).

Who is Involved and Why

Is this a new chance for Syrians, or will the country ultimately continue the autocracy it has known for more than fifty years? The political future is now more uncertain than ever, and while various declarations suggest a move toward democratisation, the reality may turn out to be quite different. Power and influence are being sought by opposition factions, terrorist groups, and of course, global powers.

The New Syrian Government

The capital Damascus was captured by rebels from the Islamist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Leader Mohamed Ghazi Jalali – now known by his civilian name Ahmad Shara – agreed to hand over power to the rebels from the Syrian Salvation Government in Idlib. Mohamed Bashir (a Sunni Muslim) was appointed Prime Minister. The transitional cabinet is expected to lead the country until March 2025. Bashir has some experience, having served as Prime Minister of the aforementioned Syrian Salvation Government in Idlib (i.e. in the territory controlled by the Islamist group HTS) throughout 2024. His cabinet is expected to work until the constitutional process has been initiated and a proper new government is formed. The United States has already announced that it will support the new cabinet if it rejects terrorism, destroys chemical weapons stockpiles and protects the rights of women and minorities.

The Prime Minister defined the new government's priorities: (1) security and stability of the country: "People are exhausted by injustice and tyranny. The authority of the state must be restored so that people can return to work and resume normal life,"; (2) the return of refugees to their homeland: "My call goes out to all Syrians abroad: Syria is now a free country that has regained its pride and dignity. Come back. We need to rebuild, get our country back on its feet, and we need everyone's help,"; (3) functioning public administration: "Syrians cannot live with the uncertainty of basic services such as electricity, food and water. We are a transitional government, but we must start addressing these issues," Bashir said in an interview with the Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera (Andrea & Nicastro, 2024). Bashir also confirmed the issuance of arrest warrants for approximately 160 individuals connected to Assad's regime, who are accused of human rights violations and war crimes (some of whom have already been imprisoned). HTS leader Shara then announced the dissolution of the former Syrian government's security forces. Lastly, he promised cooperation with international organisations to secure warehouses, that could contain chemical weapons. According to him, dramatic changes should be visible to the country's inhabitants within a year, the constitution should be fully

rewritten within three years, and new elections should be held within four years (Maher, H., AlaaEIDin, M., 2024).

Turkish Influence

A crucial role is also played by Syria's neighbour – Turkey. It officially denies having agreed to such a large-scale offensive to overthrow the Assad regime. However, it supported HTS to exert pressure on the authoritarian leader and his allies. Ankara itself, however, was reportedly surprised by how fast the offensive was and is astonished by the outcome. This is one version. The other, however, according to the website Middle East Eye, states that Ankara had significant (diplomatic) problems with Damascus and considered the fall of Assad's regime inevitable. "It is a very sterile revolution, so to speak. From the start of the operation to the local procedures, Turkey's influence is evident at every step," told former chairman of the National Coalition of the Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces Khaled Khoja to the website (MiddleEastEye.net, 2024). Ankara reportedly has two main priorities in Syria, namely to reconcile the various armed and opposition groups operating in the region around Idlib, and also assist in the creation of an interim government that will represent all factions in the country. Therefore, it can be expected that Turkish institutions will play a key role in the near future in shaping the new political model.

Kurds

Last but not least, there are the Kurds, who will likely want to maintain their positions in the northeast of the country. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alliance brings together Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian, Armenian, and Turkmen militias, which were formed during the civil war in 2011. They control roughly one-third of the territory, and according to Turkey, there is no place for them in the new Syria. Ankara considers the SDF as an ally of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which we can undoubtedly describe as Turkey's arch-enemy. The PKK has been fighting for an autonomous Kurdistan and the rights of Kurds in Turkey and other regions for nearly forty years.

Islamic State

It is quite possible that the chaotic and fragmented situation will be exploited by the terrorist organization, the Islamic State (IS). Although it was defeated in 2019 and lost its conquered territories in eastern and northern Syria, its insurgent cells remain active, mainly in remote areas outside the major cities. Fearing that IS could regain strength, the United States has launched airstrikes against its bases and fighters. They aimed at 75 targets. "All organisations in Syria should know that we will hold them accountable if they cooperate with or support IS in any way," said General Michael Erik Kurilla (Ryšánek, 2024), adding that the attacks may continue in the future.

The European Union shares similar concerns about the possible strengthening of the Islamic State's positions: "We must avoid repeating the terrible scenarios from Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan. It is necessary to protect the rights of all Syrians, including minority groups, and it is also essential to preserve the territorial integrity of Syria," said the head of EU diplomacy Kaja Kallasová (ČT24, 2024).

United States

The United States cannot be left out. They have their own interests in the region, have supported the Kurds in the north until now and are still militarily present in the country, with approximately 900 soldiers operating in the territory (and another 2,500 in Iraq). Additionally, the opinion of the USA will matter in further developments. The statements of the current administration of President Joe

Biden are such that the new Syrian government will receive support if it pursues the path of democratisation and anti-terrorism. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has stated that America will cooperate with Syrian groups and partners in the Middle Eastern region to ensure the smoothest possible transfer of power.

However, the time is approaching when current President Joe Biden will hand over power to Donald Trump, and it will be he and his ministers who will jointly decide on developments in the Middle East. Referring to the new president, Shara expressed hope that he would lift the anti-Syrian sanctions. Diplomats who visited Damascus at the turn of the year described the country's leader as a pragmatic politician, and Washington subsequently cancelled the ten-million-dollar bounty on his head.

Are They Terrorists or Not?

The world must now resolve the question of whether terrorists will rule in Syria or not, and how to deal with them—what stance to take, what strategy to adopt, how and with whom to negotiate, etc. According to Petr Hladík, director of the Middle East and North Africa department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it is necessary to wait and see what the governing body will look like, who will sit in it, and what its declaratory policy will be. It is a simple fact that HTS is on the list of terrorist organisations of many countries and organisations, such as the European Union. The United States considers the Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham a terrorist organisation and in 2018 placed a ten-million-dollar bounty on its leader. The United Nations does not classify HTS itself as a terrorist group but considers its main component to be connected to al-Qaeda. Turkey's stance is complicated because, on the one hand, it has officially listed them as terrorists, but on the other hand, it cooperated with them in some areas as opposition to Assad.

Now more than ever, caution is in order. According to some countries, Damascus deserves a chance, and the right negotiating tactics could help the country toward cautious democratic processes. For example, the United Kingdom is considering a change in its stance, and France wants to send negotiators to the country. "The next step, that it will be necessary to start negotiating with the reformed Islamists, is on the way, but it should be, as they say – to have a branch in one hand and a stick in the other," says security expert Milan Mikulecký (ČT24, 2024). The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced at the beginning of the year that it has resumed operations at its diplomatic mission, with the embassy in Damascus being led by chargé d'affaires Vítězslav Pivoňka. Cautious discussions are also taking place in the United States, which is also considering direct negotiations. Diplomacy there is said to review the label "terrorists".

The Biggest Loser is Russia

Russia will do everything it can to retain its military bases in the region or at least withdraw its soldiers and all its equipment. Otherwise, it will truly become the biggest loser. Moscow has several strongholds in the region that it uses to support military operations and other strategic interests in the broader region – the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and Africa. This includes the Hmeimim base: the main centre of Russian air operations in Syria, built in 2015 and significantly modernised since then at the cost of billions of dollars, including the expansion of runways to accommodate the operation of heavy military aircraft. Moscow used the base, among other things, to bomb enemies of the Assad regime. The Tartus base: which is the only Russian port in the Mediterranean. It was built during the Soviet era and reopened in 2012. It is primarily an important logistical and supply centre for the Russian navy. Russia had agreements with the Assad regime for the operation of the bases until 2066.

Russia has long been helping Bashar al-Assad and supporting him, among other things, militarily. It got involved in the Syrian civil war in 2015 and attacked the positions of the terrorist organization Islamic State with its plans, the rebel groups of the Free Syrian Army and, last but not least, civilian targets such as hospitals and marketplaces, simply to support the president's legitimacy. Now, Moscow's position is de facto unsustainable. The fall of Assad's regime was undoubtedly a defeat for Russia, and now it will depend on how much it will hurt Moscow. The Kremlin will now try to save whatever it can.

It is not yet clear how HTS will react to the presence of Russian soldiers, of whom thousands are reported to still remain in Syria. According to Czech Radio reporter Ondřej Soukup, the bases are currently undefendable from a military standpoint. If the rebels decide to attack, the damage will be immense. That is why the Russians are now trying to agree on an extension of their stay or at least some form of coordinated departure. The Kremlin is currently holding talks with all the interested parties. "These bases are very important for the Russians because they had the opportunity to influence, for example, the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits from both the north and the south (...) and also plan and carry out operations, particularly in the area of North Africa," said the former Chief of General Staff of the Czech Army, Jiří Šedivý (ČT24, 2024).

Conclusion

Is this a new chance for Syria? There is no better chance. The rebels quickly and relatively bloodlessly overthrew the regime of Bashar al-Assad, who had terrorised the country throughout the 21st century. They got rid of the unwanted. But what now? The country is fragmented among various groups with different intentions and ideologies. Moreover, there are global powers that want to seize the opportunity and "help enforce their own correct ideas." But now, it is solely up to the Syrians themselves how they will approach the situation and what they will impose. If they are dancing in the streets now, celebrating their liberation, that is only good. If the new government promises an end to terrorism and calls on refugees to return, offering the country a chance for economic recovery, justice, and democratization thanks to them, that is even better.

The world is watching. Cautiously, but with hope, eyes are turned towards Damascus. Now, diplomats should replace soldiers. Support from the West could give the citizens new hope. However, security forces should remain on standby for now.

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