Syria's Leadership Challenges: The Trials Ahead

By Nath Aldalala'a

SYNOPSIS

The rapid collapse of the al-Assad regime in the face of opposition forces led by Hay'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) came as a shock to the rest of the world. However, if it assumes governance, HTS faces an intricate and factionalised domestic landscape compounded by competing regional interests in the Syrian conflict. HTS' Islamist roots, along with its past ties to al-Qaeda, present significant obstacles to its ability to secure Arab and international legitimacy and sustainable long-term support.

COMMENTARY

The 2011 Arab Spring uprising in Syria and the civil war that followed [devastated](#) the country, [claiming](#) over 500,000 lives and displacing over 13 million, including 6.8 million internally and 6.5 million as refugees. President Bashar Assad's reliance on extreme violence to survive amid equally determined opposition across all factions eroded national cohesion and undermined the fragile prospects for a unified Syrian polity.

The Assad regime – just fallen – had relied on support from [Iran](#), [Russia](#), and [Hezbollah](#) for its military and economic survival, facilitating foreign influence and sacrificing Syria's sovereignty. This dependence on other countries was not unique to the regime; other groups, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), had also relied on foreign actors like Turkey, the US, and the Gulf states, entrenching external interests in Syria.

Factionalism in Syria's Future Governance

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, leadership transitions in affected countries – Egypt

being a partial exception – have firmly established factionalism as the dominant force shaping political dynamics. It will be no different for Syria.

In Yemen, the removal of Ali Abdullah Saleh deepened tribal and ideological divisions, perpetuating instability. Tunisia, often regarded as the Arab Spring's sole success, has struggled with what can be termed "disciplined political factionalism", which is characterised by escalating polarisation between secular and Islamist groups, undermining its democratic consolidation.

Factionalism also dominates Arab countries that are unaffected by the Arab Spring. Sudan has been plagued by conflicts among political factions, tribal groups, and military elites. Post-2003 Iraq has been shaped by sectarian power struggles among Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish factions. Lebanon operates under a confessional system, where political power is divided among religious sects (Sunni, Shia, Maronite Christians, Druze, etc.). However, this system has repeatedly caused political deadlocks and failures in forming governments, such as during the prolonged political crises of 2014-2016 and 2019-2021.

Libya's post-Gaddafi situation offers insights into Syria's potential future; however, Syria's situation is graver due to deeply entrenched militarised and sectarian factionalism. Both Bashar Assad and his father, Hafez Assad, relied on sectarian and ethnic divisions to consolidate power, thereby institutionalising factionalism.

In Syria, factionalism – deeply influenced by external forces – exacerbates instability and fragmentation. Porous borders facilitate the influx of foreign fighters, weapons, and resources, fuelling the proliferation of militant factions. Jihadist and Kurdish groups, entrenched within Syria's fractured landscape, form the structural core of its factionalised conflict. These overlapping divisions underscore the immense challenges to achieving political cohesion and sustainable stability in a post-Assad era.

One faction, the [Islamist Front](#), initially united in opposition to the Assad regime, exemplifies Syria's entrenched factionalism. Internal divisions persist despite its formation in November 2013 as a coalition of seven groups: Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, Jaysh al-Islam, Suqour al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Liwa al-Haqq, Ansar al-Sham, and the Kurdish Islamic Front.

Beyond the Islamic Front, independent Islamist factions such as the Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades, Asala wa al-Tanmiya Front, and Tajammu Ansar al-Islam (comprising seven Damascus-based Islamist groups in 2012) further underscore Syria's fragmented and volatile landscape.

The existence of these groups is not inherently alarming; rather, the critical concern lies in their competing ideologies and divergent sub-interests. As the unifying goal of removing the Assad regime disintegrates, these ideological rivalries are likely to crystallise, transforming them into adversarial entities.

HTS, the faction that spearheaded the victory over Assad's forces, has solidified its dominance among Syria's opposition factions since its formation in 2017 through the merger of jihadist groups, including Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, formerly linked to al-

Qaeda. Despite distancing itself from the latter, HTS retains ideological ties to Salafi-jihadism.

While the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) engages in sporadic insurgencies near Deir ez-Zor, Turkey's territorial control in the north bolsters HTS' position but risks alienating Kurdish factions, particularly the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which control the north-eastern region and focus on combating ISIS remnants.

Other Challenges

Besides this intricate interplay of ideological and geopolitical rivalries, other factors perpetuate Syria's instability and present challenges to its future leadership and governance.

A complete transition by HTS to civilian governance, severing its Islamist and jihadist ties, would likely alienate hardline elements within HTS ranks while provoking opposition from other factions, including Kurdish Islamist forces and remnants of ISIS. Such a shift risks internal fragmentation and external hostility, leaving HTS ideologically and militarily isolated.

Corruption, deeply embedded in Syrian society since the Hafez Assad era and further entrenched under Bashar Assad, particularly after 2011, remains a systemic issue. Its pervasive nature is likely to endure, obstructing any incoming government's efforts to establish a just and stable order and leaving the state structurally weakened from the get-go.

The exposure of the Assad regime's brutal prison system reveals a legacy of profound psychological trauma and systemic repression. By instilling fear, fracturing social trust, and destabilising communities, the regime has entrenched a dynamic of power and subjugation that will likely persist between any future government and the Syrian people. This enduring trauma threatens societal cohesion and fosters long-term resistance, undermining prospects for stable governance.

The "Islamist" Factor

Following 2011, the Bashar regime's survival – perpetuated by the rise of extremist factions like Jabhat al-Nusra (an al-Qaeda affiliate) and ISIS – alarmed Western and Arab states about their ability to dominate a post-Assad Syria. As the opposition became increasingly linked to jihadist ideologies, international priorities shifted to containing Islamist extremism, altering strategic calculations. This realignment of support had facilitated Syria's re-admittance to the Arab League in 2023.

The "Islamist" factor is the most critical driver of possible confusion, external intervention, and internal conflict in Syria. When the HTS eventually took control of Aleppo, some of the Arab States rallied behind the Assad regime, notably Jordan and the Gulf countries, over fears of Islamist dominance.

The UAE foreign minister expressed his country's support for Syria "in the face of extremism and terrorism". This could be justified by the region's grim experience with ISIS and its terrorist activities. Furthermore, Islamist groups in Syria, in addition to

being Islamist, are also militant, which further exacerbates anxiety among broader regional states.

The Muslim Brotherhood's tenure in Egypt from 2012 to 2013 highlights the challenges Islamist movements face in transitioning from opposition to governance. Their experience, which led it to be banned in several Arab countries, reinforced fears among regimes of the destabilising potential of Islamist groups in power.

This apprehension stemmed from concerns that such movements could embolden domestic Islamist factions, threatening regime survival. Additionally, Islamist groups often struggle to balance ideological commitments with the pragmatic demands of governance, limiting the feasibility of Islamist rule despite strong grassroots support.

Going Forward: The Circumscription of Syria's Geopolitical Freedom

Israel's actions to weaken Hezbollah played a critical role in bolstering the Syrian rebel forces and facilitating the Assad regime's downfall. However, Israel's occupation of strategic positions within Syria's borders complicates the political landscape for the incoming government, exacerbating an already complex political landscape. Were the incoming government to challenge Israel's aggression, amidst the latter's heightened security concerns, the likely result would be an immediate decline in the HTS' political and military viability.

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