

Syria Is the First Major Aftershock of October 7—With More to Come?

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Brief Analysis

From stability in Jordan to the future of Kurdish autonomy, Lebanese sovereignty, and Iranian nuclear proliferation, officials must prepare quickly to prevent or manage—and in some cases even encourage—further shocks in the Middle East.

This week’s capture of Damascus with little resistance from Bashar al-Assad or his foreign backers has astonished observers. Indeed, the regime’s fall is the first major aftershock of the seismic conflict that engulfed Israel, Gaza, and Lebanon after October 7. It is unlikely to be the last, however.

Assad’s Fall as Another Hamas “Achievement”

The latest development in Syria is one of many broader ramifications stemming from Hamas’s 2023 assault on Israel. Yahya al-Sinwar, the late Hamas commander who envisioned the destruction of Israel, inadvertently triggered a powerful counterreaction whose results are evident throughout the region:

- Israel decimated most of his group’s capabilities, leadership, and infrastructure
- Hezbollah suffered heavy losses in Lebanon, including the elimination of its leadership and the destruction of an estimated 70-80 percent of its missile arsenal
- Israel carried out airstrikes on Iranian soil for the first time, disabling key defense systems and leaving the regime exposed to further attacks

Assad’s collapse marks a severe blow to this Iranian “axis of resistance,” which has been a pillar of Middle East geopolitics for two decades but now faces strategic disintegration.

The Fate of Damascus

The rebel victory in Syria was due in large part to Russian inaction—with the bulk of its forces entangled in Ukraine, Moscow was either unwilling or unable to save Assad again, leaving the regime and its depleted army exposed. Hezbollah and Iran were likewise in no position to help after being weakened by a year of fighting with Israel.

Although the rebels control Damascus and other parts of western Syria, the question is whether they will try to seize the rest of the country and, if so, whether they can hold it in the long term. Past Islamist and jihadist experiences in the region—from the collapse of the Islamic State’s “caliphate” to the failure of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood—suggest that consolidating control might prove challenging.

Alternatively, the rebels may opt to stabilize their rule in Damascus and wait for developments on the international stage, including Donald Trump’s return to office. Among other possibilities, the Trump administration might try to foster a broader deal with Russia, preserving Moscow’s control over the Mediterranean coast in exchange for concessions elsewhere (e.g., Ukraine).

Preparing for Other Aftershocks

As events in Syria unfold, the United States, Israel, and their partners will need to make strategic decisions on several fronts if they hope to prevent or roll with other potential aftershocks from October 7:

Syria-Jordan border threats. Israel has already completed a large-scale military exercise simulating security deterioration in the Golan Heights area, reinforced its deployments there, and secured strategic points along the border. As it did a decade ago, Israel may provide humanitarian aid (primarily medical) to civilians and rebels in the area, but it will not tolerate any challenge to its military dominance on this frontier.

Further east, control of Deraa could be critical to stability in Jordan and the wider region, especially if extremist elements come to the fore in Syria and try to challenge King Abdullah’s rule next door. Jordan’s stability is crucial to both Israel’s security and U.S. interests (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/partnership-worth-preserving>), so the two allies are prepared to take military action along the Jordan-Syria border if necessary.

Lebanon. Assad’s fall and Hezbollah’s weakened position give Lebanon a historic opportunity to redefine its political landscape (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-post-october-7-beaten-still-dangerous>). With these malign influences diluted, officials in Beirut no longer have an excuse to skirt their duties to the Lebanese people and the international community—namely, appointing a new president after a two-year vacancy, forming a government independent of Hezbollah, and deploying the army to the southern border with Israel as mandated under the new ceasefire agreement (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanon-ceasefire-managing-israeli-public-expectations-and-us-coordination>). With sufficient determination, the government could even aspire to dismantle Hezbollah’s military capabilities (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/back-future-lebanon-ceasefire-lessons-2006>), potentially leading to domestic stability after years of turmoil.

Iran. Amid all of the above setbacks to Tehran’s foreign proxies, regime leaders may face growing pressures at home, where the public has mounted successive waves of uprisings in recent years. If outside actors signal their support, the Iranian people might see the current turmoil as a golden opportunity to once again demand real reform. Of course, domestic unrest could also prompt Tehran to make reckless foreign policy decisions, such as further accelerating the nuclear program. This necessitates greater vigilance and readiness in Israel and the United States, with officials preparing and coordinating contingency plans (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/if-iran-gets-bomb-weapons-force-posture-strategy>) for any such scenario.

The Kurds. The semiautonomous Kurdish enclaves in Iraq and Syria now find themselves at a crossroads. Their

prospects for unifying have previously been stifled by a lack of political vision, but such efforts could now become a reality. In theory, Assad's collapse could even enable them to establish a land corridor to the Mediterranean for oil exports and other trade, stretching from the Kurdistan Region in northern Iraq, across the Kurdish-controlled zone in northeast Syria, and through Kurdish areas in western Syria (e.g., Afrin). Yet this idea stands zero chance of succeeding if Turkey, its Syrian militia proxies, and other local rebel factions oppose it (not to mention potential outcry from the Iraqi central government and its Iran-backed militia elements over control of oil revenue).

In any case, support from France, Germany, and the United States will be crucial to determining the future of the Syrian Kurds—NATO nations must discuss this issue candidly with their alliance partners in Ankara, which views the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as an offshoot of its main domestic enemy, the terrorist-designated Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). On December 10, U.S. Central Command chief Gen. Michael Kurilla visited with SDF officials in Syria and stated that America remains committed to helping it carry on the fight against the Islamic State. Such statements—backed by the continued deployment of U.S. forces in Syria—will be instrumental to riding out the aftershocks of October 7 and the fall of Assad.

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