

## Sub-Imperialisms in the Syrian Imbroglia

Written by Vassilis K. Fouskas and Bülent Gökay

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VASSILIS K. FOUSKAS AND BÜLENT GÖKAY, JAN 7 2025

A significant and swift transformation is occurring in Syria. Anti-regime forces have quickly taken control of the capital, capturing all major cities in under two weeks. The speed at which the regime forces in Syria fell has astonished everyone. Understandably, analysts have primarily concentrated on the agencies involved in this rapid transformation and the potential consequences of regime change in Syria. Iran and Russia are identified as significant losers, while Israel and Turkey are seen as major winners. Yet, the situation on the ground is considerably more complex for two primary reasons.

First, the conjunctural factors driving rapid transformation and the varying degrees of success among certain agencies do not play a decisive role in determining enduring political outcomes. Instead, the structural and long-term trends shape these conjunctural circumstances and provide the context for agency interactions. Second, the question of whether Iran and Russia will emerge as long-term losers hinges on the outcome of intense diplomatic and potentially military conflicts, making any predictions at this stage both precarious and short-sighted. However, it can be argued, based on historical evidence, that Israeli and Turkish sub-imperialisms have been active in Syria and beyond for quite some time. By leveraging their strategic relationships with the United States and capitalising on its global and regional hegemonic crises, both Israel and Turkey have begun to fill the geopolitical voids that were once managed by the superpower.

### Key agencies and the critical conjuncture

The leading rebel group involved in the events that transpired since early December 2024 is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Established initially as Jabhat al-Nusra at the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011 as an affiliate of al-Qaeda, HTS has emerged as one of the most formidable and lethal forces opposing President Assad under the leadership of Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. While the United Nations, the United States, Turkey, and various other nations have designated HTS as a terrorist organisation, Turkey has notably been its primary supporter in Idlib, deploying approximately 15,000 troops and providing shelter to the jihadists against Syrian government forces. In return, al-Jolani has publicly distanced himself from al-Qaeda, dissolved Jabhat al-Nusra, and formed HTS through a merger with several other groups sharing a similar anti-Assad stance. The jihadist struggle against Assad's regime has drawn radical Islamists from numerous countries, including Uyghurs from China, Albanians, Turks, Jordanians, Chechens, and others, all of whom have contributed their forces to the military efforts. Al-Jolani has promoted many of these individuals to high-ranking positions within his government and military hierarchy, asserting that he anticipates no free elections in the coming four years (Usher, 2024; Salame, 2024).

Among the groups that fought against the Assad regime in Syria is the Syrian National Army (SNA), which is openly supported and controlled by Turkey. Founded in 2017, the SNA consists of a diverse array of Arab and Turkmen factions and fighters. It serves as a key component of Turkish sub-imperialism in northern Syria, with its primary objective being the defeat of Kurdish groups. The strategic town of Manbij has fallen under the control of the SNA and Turkey, placing Rojava under serious threat, as the Kurds have appealed to the USA and Israel for a no-fly zone in the region.

Turkey's primary goal is to prevent Kurdish groups from establishing a regional government on the Syrian side of its southern border. Additionally, Turkey aims to manage the area to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees from nearby

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Turkish towns and Gaziantep. The country is also engaged in demographic engineering; for instance, in the north-western region of Afrin, jihadist militias, backed by the Turkish army, have expelled Kurds from their towns and villages, resettling Arabs and Turkmen in their place. Turkey plans to resettle its over four million refugees in southern and south-eastern Turkey, as well as in northern Syria. As we will explore further, Turkish sub-imperialism has gained a significant degree of autonomy in its strategic interactions with the USA—something that Turkish policymakers and President Erdogan call “strategic autonomy.”

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are a Kurdish-dominated alliance that controls a vast swathe of territory in north-east Syria and is backed by the United States and Israel. Importantly, they control Syria’s primary oil resources in Deir Ezzor, as well as most of the country’s arable land. There is also the Southern Operations Room, a newly formed coalition of rebel groups in southern and south-eastern Syria, primarily composed of Druze communities and opposition groups. Finally, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), despite being defeated by a coalition of forces earlier, has remained active, particularly in central Syria and is periodically targeted by American warplanes. Christian and other agencies, such as Syrian Alawites, lack military capabilities and cannot operate as organised entities opposing HTS and the SNA.

The surprising success of the anti-Assad forces and the nonchalant reactions of Russia and Iran are directly linked to Israel’s wars in Gaza and Lebanon, as well as the ongoing conflict in Ukraine between Russia and NATO. These wars have disrupted the fragile balance in the greater Middle East and have pulled at a thread that has begun to unravel the region’s geopolitical fabric. With Hezbollah significantly weakened, and given the Israeli attacks on Tehran, Iran became preoccupied with its defences against Israel rather than the fate of Assad’s regime and Hezbollah. Russia, too, opted to reallocate many of its forces from Syria to support its military operations in Ukraine, creating ample space for Turkey in Afrin to adopt its sub-imperial posture and undermine the unstable balance of compromises between the United States, Kurdish forces, and Russia. These key conjunctural factors offered the rebels a golden opportunity to break out of their enclave in Idlib and successfully advance towards Damascus.

### **Long-term imperial ambitions and the role of sub-imperialism**

The reconfiguration of the broader Middle East along pro-Western lines has been framed as an extension of trade and financial benefits to a broader Middle Eastern region, including programmes for technology transfer, WTO involvement, financial incentives and assistance, particularly for women, legal aid, and so forth. This initiative was integral to the New American Century strategy, the specifics of which were explained in a CRS Report for Congress (Sharp, 2005). However, the global financial crisis and the Eurozone crisis, combined with the economic-technological expansion of China, compelled the United States and European NATO countries to reassess their neo-liberal economic expansion in the greater Middle East. The military failures in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya further eroded the regional supremacy of the United States. Starting in the early 2000s, two sub-imperial actors associated with the declining imperial power of the United States emerged in the broader Middle East: Israel and Turkey. Since the early days of the USA-Iraq stand-off in February 2003, Shaul Mofaz, who was the Israeli Defence Minister at the time, stated, “After Iraq, the USA should exert political, economic, and diplomatic pressure on Iran.” He also remarked that “Israel views Iran and Syria as significant threats and hopes that once Saddam is removed, the dominoes will start to fall” (Fouskas, 2003).

Under the AKP of Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey recovered from its economic crisis, registering strong growth and industrial development rates even during the global financial crisis. With control over nearly 60% of its defence industry and reducing dependency on Western procurements, Turkey effectively addressed its Kurdish issue while successfully creating a puppet regime in northern Iraq. Turkish conglomerates have participated in the reconstruction of Iraq and across the greater Middle East, including Libya. While Israel’s special forces have been training American marines and rangers in urban and anti-terrorist warfare, Turkish forces have conducted similar training exercises with Islamic militias throughout the region and even in Africa. In Somalia and Qatar, Turkey has established military bases.

In Libya, the government in Tripoli mobilised deep historical ties to Turkey, calling upon Erdoğan for military aid. Ankara responded by signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on security assistance in November 2019.

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Turkey quickly deployed senior military personnel and trainers alongside combat drones, air defence systems, tactical missiles, electronic warfare capabilities, and a substantial force of mercenaries recruited from Syria. This Turkish intervention played a crucial role in repelling Haftar's forces and achieving a ceasefire in October 2020. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) grants Turkish forces considerable operational freedom in Libya. Article 12 allows Turkish personnel to carry both personal and duty weapons and to wear their official uniforms while on duty, signifying a high degree of autonomy in their operations. Additionally, Article 7 provides Turkish forces with unrestricted access to Libya's airspace and territorial waters, exempting them from seizure or local charges, which further underscores the operational latitude afforded to them (Kenez, 2024).

Turkey and Israel, as sub-imperial actors associated with the dominant imperial power, the USA, played a significant role in the downfall of Assad. During the Syrian Civil War, which erupted following the 2011 uprising against the Assad regime, the United States, Turkey, and the Gulf monarchies invested billions of dollars in various Islamist militias opposing Assad. This effort was supported by the CIA's \$1 billion Syria programme, launched in 2013 under the codename Timber Sycamore, marking one of the most expensive covert action initiatives in the agency's history, aimed at equipping and training thousands of Syrian rebels (Firmian, 2022; Weissman, 2020). This programme was matched only by the agency's earlier "dollar Jihad" in Afghanistan, where US support for the mujahideen laid the groundwork for the rise of the Taliban.

The swift capture of key towns in Syria reflects the diminished strength of the Assad regime, revealing a government that is fundamentally weakened and heavily reliant on external support from Iran and Russia. This dependency underscores the level of devastation Syria has experienced since 2011. Additionally, Israel's ongoing bombings of Syrian military installations and civilian infrastructure serve both as a form of deterrence and a warning against any potential policy shifts by HTS and jihadist groups regarding the state of Israel. Recent reports indicate that Israeli army outposts are now situated within approximately 25 kilometres of Damascus (Euractiv, 2024).

### **Are Iran and Russia net losers?**

The human toll of Syria's conflict is profoundly devastating. Over the past decade, an average of 84 civilians have been killed daily in direct connection to the war, as reported by the UN Human Rights Office. By 2022, it is estimated that 306,887 civilians have lost their lives, leaving an indelible mark on the nation's collective consciousness. Millions more have been displaced from their homes, compelled to flee in search of safety and stability (UN Human Rights, 2023). The social fabric of Syrian society has experienced irreparable damage, resulting in communities sharply divided along sectarian lines and fostering an environment of mistrust and animosity. Entire generations are growing up in a landscape overshadowed by the echoes of war, their childhoods marked by violence and loss. Should sectarianism continue to thrive and the new power dynamics in Damascus fail to encompass all social, ethnic, and religious groups, the disintegration of the country becomes increasingly likely. Moreover, sub-imperial Turkey may find itself unable to control the Syrian Kurds as effectively as it manages the Barzani regime in Northern Iraq. Additionally, sub-imperial Israel has a vested interest in cultivating a Kurdish issue within Syria, as it seeks to prevent future surprises from hostile Sunni jihadists and militias. The Kurds, both in Syria and beyond, represent the only regional force capable of counterbalancing jihadists. Viewed from this perspective, the sub-imperialisms of Israel and Turkey do not align with their geopolitical interests.

Syria has experienced catastrophic losses. Before the conflict, Syria's economy was one of the most diversified in the Middle East, relying on a mix of sectors, including energy, agriculture, trade, transport, and manufacturing. However, the civil war has devastated existing business and trade networks while significantly increasing illegal and informal activities. Since the conflict began in 2011, the country's economy has contracted by more than 50 per cent in real terms, according to a report released by Chatham House (Butter, 2015).

This economic collapse has led to staggering unemployment rates. The unemployment rate among adolescents is nearly 75 per cent and is significantly higher among women, leaving countless families struggling to survive (UNICEF, 2023). The infrastructure that once underpinned daily life—such as roads, schools, and hospitals—has been systematically destroyed, making essential services inaccessible. Over the years, Israel has focused on targeting Syria's infrastructure and military facilities, with this campaign intensifying to prevent critical resources from

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falling into the hands of unpredictable HTS anti-Zionist factions. The UN humanitarian chief has reported that the prolonged conflict in Syria has driven 90% of the population below the poverty line, forcing many to survive on less than £2 a day (Lederer, 2023). The grim reality is worsened by rampant hyperinflation, which is driven by strict Western sanctions and a banking crisis in neighbouring Lebanon—also a consequence of those same sanctions. As a result, millions are trapped in a cycle of poverty, with little hope for a better future.

Highlighting the profound level of decay, the production of Captagon—a highly addictive amphetamine-type stimulant that is mass-produced in Syria—has emerged as a primary source of hard currency for the Assad regime. Since 2011, the Gulf region has experienced a significant escalation in both the scale and sophistication of drug trafficking, particularly marked by an increased availability of Captagon. Under the leadership of Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian regime has leveraged Captagon trafficking as a means to apply pressure on Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia (Al Jazeera, 2023).

In this context, and considering the regime of Western sanctions, it is essential to note that Syria's entire economic import-export framework is closely aligned with Russia, including defence procurement. Over the past 13 years, Russia's steel exports and other metallurgical materials have sustained Syria's industrial base, while its wheat exports have provided food for impoverished families in Syria. Furthermore, there are no plans for the removal of Russia's military and naval bases in Latakia and Tartus, which reinforces Russia's role as a significant player in Syria and as an external anti-Western imperial force that cannot be overlooked. Regarding Iran, it is evident that its focus on its own defence and security in response to Israeli aggression has heavily influenced its considerations regarding Assad's future. However, a stable post-Assad Syria will necessitate Iran's involvement. Iran is well-positioned to organise and arm Alawite and Shia factions in Syria and beyond to counter the dominance of jihadist groups. Simultaneously, Iran could potentially negotiate a *modus vivendi* with Turkey on the Kurdish issue, given that it has significant Kurdish and Azeri minorities within its borders.

Turkey plays a unique and influential role in the ongoing conflict and reconstruction efforts in Syria. Its economic, diplomatic, and military resources provide substantial leverage in shaping Syria's future. The reconstruction bill for Syria is estimated at \$400 billion (Daily Sabah, 2024). Housing and large-scale investments aimed at rebuilding roads, power plants, and communication infrastructure play a crucial role in creating decent living conditions and economic opportunities for millions of Syrian refugees returning home. Syria requires both financial and technical support from international organisations and regional powers to facilitate this reconstruction. Turkish companies are well-positioned to actively engage in integrative economic efforts that connect Gaziantep, Tal Rifaat, and Aleppo. Moreover, Turkey's strong ties with a significant portion of the Syrian population further enhance its involvement in these essential processes. The overarching picture begins to emerge when considering Turkey's earlier demographic strategies. However, we say "almost" because the HTS regime under al-Jolani has yet to demonstrate its ability to protect various religious minorities in Syria, including Christians and Alawites, which risks creating new waves of refugees.

It remains uncertain whether the political landscape in Damascus will evolve peacefully and in a manner that genuinely shares power inclusively and fairly, involving all regional and global stakeholders, including Iran, Russia, and the United States. If not, disintegrative tendencies may prevail.

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