

*Aleksandar Gajić**

Institute of European Studies, Belgrade, Republic of Serbia

GEOPOLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF BASHAR AL-ASSAD'S FALL IN SYRIA**

(Translation in *Extenso*)

Abstract

Adhering to the theoretical framework of classical geopolitical analysis, the paper provides a geopolitical overview of the change of government in Syria at the end of the prolonged civil war, as well as the course of military operations and a description of the immediately established new situation on the ground. The introductory part of the paper explains the basic weaknesses of the Bashar al-Assad regime, as well as its main flaws that caused its collapse in a period of only eleven days. The second segment of the paper explains the geopolitical importance of Syria in a historical perspective by pointing out its constants within the Levant as an intermediate space in the Middle East located between the areas occupied by regional geopolitical powers in different historical eras. In this way, the similarity between former and the current circumstances is pointed out. The middle part of the paper observes geopolitical dimensions of the newly established state, the ideological and political background of HTS, the ruling military faction in the new, Sunni government in Damascus, as well as its relationship

* E-mail address: sasa95gajic@gmail.com; ORCID: 0000-0002-3873-0231.

** The paper was created within the framework of the scientific and research activities of the Institute of European Studies in Belgrade, funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of Republic of Serbia.

with other factions and their strongholds in the certain areas within Syria. The third part of the paper analyses the influence of external great and regional powers on the situation in contemporary Syria and their interest projections which conflict each other in many ways. The final part of the paper deals with a prognostic assessment of the further geopolitical prospects of post-Assad Syria, taking into account the existing antagonisms and different interests of both Syrian military and ethnic formations and external powers.

Keywords: fall of Bashar al-Assad, Syrian civil war, Levant, geopolitics, interests of great powers in the Middle East.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE FALL OF THE REGIME AND ITS CAUSES

The Syrian civil war represents one of the focal points of the global geopolitical competition in the 21st century. After a five year (2019–2024) stalemate, the conflict has entered a new, turbulent phase that has changed the nature of the government in Syria and the regional situation, as well as the broader geopolitical environment (Lopez de Miguel 2025, 148–149). By using the model of classical geopolitical analysis, in this paper we will attempt to identify the possible consequences of the new situation in Syria both in the regional geopolitical dynamics and in the surrounding regions. Only then, we can be able to shed some light on the strategic positions of the most important international actors and on overall global security.

Within just eleven days, the regime of Bashar al-Assad (who controlled about 70% of Syrian territory) collapsed; the area it had previously controlled fell into the hands of Sunni rebels led by militants from the HTS group (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham), radical Islamists from the former Al-Nusra Front who had severed their ties with Al-Qaeda and shifted more towards Arab nationalism. The upheaval began on November 27, 2024: then HTS, together with rebels from the SNA (Syrian National Army), who had until then held a smaller part of Syrian territory (mainly in the province of Idlib), began their offensive towards Aleppo. The lightning operation, backed by Turkey, aimed to exploit the declining strength of government troops and their weak

defensive positions in northern Syria. The rebels quickly captured the remaining part of Idlib province and a significant area around Aleppo. The Syrian army – stretched across the area it controlled and divided by internal divisions – was unable to provide any effective resistance. As early as November 29, the rebels began their advance into Aleppo, a city that government forces had recaptured in 2016 after a long and arduous battle. The fall of this large city the next day signaled the unstoppable collapse of the Syrian regime's military power. At the same time, the rebels from the southern part of the country began their own offensive and captured the cities of Daraa and Suwadah.

The Assad regime launched a counteroffensive on December 1. Its goal was to regain lost territory, but it was reduced to limited airstrikes and redeployment of troops towards newly captured rebel positions. It was clear that the Syrian army lacked both the manpower and equipment to once again turn the situation in its favor. Its main allies, Russia and Iran, hesitated and assessed the new opportunities: Russian air force was engaged in very limited combat action, while the Iranians, instead of military assistance, offered only diplomatic services. Hezbollah, Assad's Shiite Lebanese ally, was preoccupied with its own troubles due to months of clashes with Israeli troops in southern Lebanon. In such circumstances, the Sunni rebels continued their offensive.

Between 2 and 4 December 2024, HTS and its allies further exploited all the weaknesses of the Syrian army continuing their advance in the south, toward the strategically important Hama, the place where the civil war began in 2011. Hama fell to the rebels on December 5. The rebels' advance was then directed towards Homs, an even more strategically important city that represents a crossroads between the coastal, Alawite part of Syria with Damascus and its desert hinterland. By December 6, Homs was completely surrounded and the garrison in the city surrendered a day later. This was a key moment in the offensive: instead of defending the capital, the Syrian army retreated and began to disintegrate; Bashar al-Assad fled the country by plane on December 7, and rebel columns marched into the capital on December 8 and declared victory. It ended half a century of Assad's family rule over Syria.

What were the causes of such a sudden collapse of the regime that had stubbornly held on power for more than 13 previous years? First of all, they can be found in the exhaustion of the Syrian state due to the more than decade-long war, but also in the Western sanctions that weakened the regime in economic, political and military terms (Borgoñoz Moya 2025). Namely, even before the civil war, Syria had huge problems with systematic corruption, chronic unemployment and the collapse of the functioning of public services. In conditions of civil war, all of this significantly worsened. Regime repression became the only approach to solve the accumulated problems, the biggest of which were those related to poor economic management and the inability to stimulate economic growth due to, among other things, the strong entrenchment of the network of privileged classes in contrast to the impoverished masses. During the civil war, Syria's GDP (Gross Domestic Product) fell by a whopping 87%, with no signs of reversing the trend (Dzulhisham 2024, 2). Another important cause of the regime's weakness was in its heavy reliance on external allies such as Russia and Iran, but, above all, in its inflexibility and inability to reach compromises with the warring factions during the peace talks in Astana, maintaining its maximalist, unrealistic positions that its allies were unwilling to support. All this was compounded by the rivals strengthening supported by neo-Ottoman Turkey, as well as the damage inflicted on Shiite allies in Lebanon by Israel. Although, in essence, mutually opposed, the strategies of the rebels' external sponsors led to a synergistic effect towards Assad's enemies strengthening; all of this, in sum, led to an unexpected turn of the tide in the war.

In order to understand the geopolitical prospects of Syria after the war and its broader consequences, it is necessary to first understand Syria's classical geopolitical position within the Levant. With this in mind, we will be able to see the interest projections of contemporary regional and global actors in the newly emerging circumstances, as well as to notice existing contradictions. Only then, will we be able to see the possible broader consequences of the change in geopolitical situation in Syria.

GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SYRIA IN THE LEVANTE: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY TRENDS

The Levant area forms the contact part of the Middle Eastern Rimland (Mackinder 2009) with the Mediterranean Sea, through which Asia is connected to Europe. In addition to Syria as the state that encompasses the largest part of the Levant, this area also includes Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan. The Levant is surrounded by four clearly visible geographical units that represent historical regional geopolitical centers: Asia Minor in the north, Mesopotamia in the east (and beyond it – Persia), Egypt in the south, and the Arabian Peninsula in its southeast. The Levant is, in fact, on a continental scale a small (inter)space that represents a theater for geopolitical competition between regional powers in the central part of the Rimland. At different historical moments, it becomes either the “prey” of one of the prevailing regional powers or, in the case of an established balance of power between them, a kind of “buffer zone” that delimits their influences (Tzarias 2019).

The history of the Levant is a history of great powers competition for control of this area. Most often, two or three powers fought for geostrategic dominance over Levant: the New Egyptian Empire with the Hittite Empire, the Assyrians with the Asia Minor powers of the early Iron Age, the Seleucids with the Ptolemies, the Romans with the Parthians, Byzantium with Persia (under the rule of the last Sassanids) and, later, with the Arab Caliphate, the Mamluks with the Catholic Crusaders and the Seljuk Turks. From the 16th century, the whole Levant fell under the imperial rule of the Ottoman Turks who conquered much of the Middle East and North Africa, absorbing the regional powers there and creating a kind of “Pax Osmanica” in the form of a renewed universal Caliphate. The imperial pacification of this area lasted until the end of World War I, when the victorious Entente powers, on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, drew a new map of the entire Middle East, including the Levant (the Sykes-Picot Plan). The borders of the states that were drawn then remain largely unchanged to this day.

Modern Syria does not represent a homogeneous geopolitical entity. It is composed of several smaller geographical entities within the Levant. While in the case of the territorial positioning of surrounding regional powers, such as Egypt or Turkey, there is a clear geographical connecting element (in the first case – the Nile Valley, in the second – the Anatolian Plateau), Syria – both in a geographical and geopolitical sense – lacks a homogeneous physical-geographic connecting element around which it would be possible to prevail over internal micro-fragmentations and resist external influences. On the contrary, individual Syrian geographical micro-entities are closer (or even represent a single entity) with the spaces in surrounding, neighboring states, than they have any mutual connections. The Syrian coast in the northwest of the country, with a chain of mountains and plateaus inhabited by enclaves of Alawites, Druze and Maronites, is a complete area only with its extension – in Lebanon, while it has very few points of contact with the interior of the Syrian deserts. To the east of this area is a plateau along the Orontos River and the Beka Valley, behind which there is a new chain of mountains and plateaus (Anti-Lebanon, Jabal al-Druze and Hawran), and, then, the oasis in which Damascus is situated. “Damascus is located on the road corridor that runs from Mesopotamia, from the east, through the desert to the Lebanese coast (formerly ancient Phoenicia). It strategically controls this direction as well as the direction to the northeast, through the semi-desert and steppe via Homs and Hama to Aleppo, the northernmost extremity of the ‘fertile crescent’, the Mesopotamian curved arc” (Gajić 2015, 170). The northern part of the country, located on the upper part of the Mesopotamian arc with its center of gravity in Aleppo, is actually closer to Anatolia than to other parts of Syria. Both Aleppo and the province of Idlib form an area connecting the Levant with Asia Minor in the north and with Mesopotamia in the east, or – through Homs as a kind of corridor – with the Mediterranean. In other words, the coast of Syria is connected to Lebanon; the region around Aleppo represents the vestibule of Anatolia, while the largest, inner part of the Syrian Desert is much closer to Mesopotamia than to other parts of its country. Therefore, the space of Syria constantly turns towards its external centers of gravity (primarily in Anatolia and Mesopotamia). The only historically confirmed counterbalance to

them is Damascus as a kind of “fortified oasis”. Since ancient times, Damascus has repeatedly asserted itself as an independent core that is, often, able to form alliances and rely on other available external centers of power, thus exerting its influence on peripheral areas so that they do not merge with the surrounding, much more homogeneous and larger geographical and geopolitical areas (Wakim 2012).

Although the modern Syrian state was created by the leading powers of the Entente (France and England) after World War I, the core of its existence and maintenance was the association of the Alawites of the Levantine coast with the merchant classes in Damascus. This alliance was only confirmed for the last fifty years under the firm hand of the Assad family, father Hafez and son Bashar. Namely, as in Lebanon with the Maronites, “the French encouraged a group known as the Nizaris who lived along the harsh Syrian coast, renaming them Alawites, in order to give them religious credibility and to induct them into the Syrian army during the French mandate” (Bhalla 2014), and, then, shaped the territories within their sphere of influence according to their own colonial interests. In 1920, French created the states of Damascus, Aleppo and the Alawite State, and, a year later, the state of Jabal (ruled by the Druze) and the Sanjak of Alexandretta, which was later ceded to Turkey (where it became the modern province of Hatay). The elites in Damascus were the leaders of resistance to French colonial rule. When the French colonial mandate ended in 1943, the gradual unification of Damascus, Aleppo, and the Alawite and Druze states resulted in the formation of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Despite the unifying role of Damascus, many parts of the country remained subject to the influence of neighboring regional powers: “The northeastern part of the country (Al-Hasakah, Al-Qamishli and as far as the Euphrates in the east) is under the influence of Iraq; the Aleppo region has strong millennial ties with Turkish Anatolia. The Alawites on the coast and the inhabitants of the capital Damascus have strongly developed relations with the merchant elite in Beirut, the Druze with Jordan and, through it, further, with the Arab desert tribes” (Gajić 2015, 171). This situation lasted during the reign of the Assad family, until – in drastically changed circumstances due to the “Arab Spring” throughout the Middle East – a rebellion broke out in Syria. Aided by external interference from all historically present

geopolitical actors in the Levant, it grew into a protracted civil war. The conciliatory tone of neighboring Sunni states, with the outbreak of the conflict in Syria soon turned into open siding with the rebels. They were led by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. Seeing in their emergence a “Sunni conspiracy” that needed to be thwarted, Tehran immediately aligned itself with the Assad regime as its key strategic ally. The remaining neighbors (such as Lebanon and Iraq) which had similar structural (mostly ethnic-sectarian) problems, were indirectly and only to a certain extent drawn into the growing conflict against their will (Nerguizian 2014). The interest of directly involved external powers, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, was obvious: the overthrow of Assad’s government and its takeover by Sunni groups would collapse the Shiite-Maronite alliance and suppress the emerging Iranian hegemony in the Middle East (the so-called “Shiite arc” from Lebanon to Iraq).

The neighboring Sunni states “played” on different factions among the Syrian Sunnis: Qatar helped radical Islamist groups under the ideological influence of the “Muslim Brotherhood”; Riyadh supported both more moderate rebel groups and those close to the Salafists; Turkey initially supported more moderate, non-Islamist rebels such as the Free Syrian Army, especially wary of the autonomist aspirations of the Syrian Kurds (Chiriatti 2012). Later, this country also resorted to instrumentalizing Sunni militias such as HTS and SNA in order to achieve its vital goals and consolidate its influence in both the Islamist and secular camps.

On the other side stood the Assad regime in Damascus in a firm alliance with Tehran, and, in the background, with Russia and China, with their own strategic interests and plans. Russia sided with Assad (it has been directly militarily engaged in civil war since 2015) primarily because of the protection of Russia’s Cold War-era military bases at Syria’s that were its only access to the Mediterranean (the port of Tartus) (Trujillo 2025, 2–3), and China because of its continental plans to build a “New Silk Road” in which relations with Iran play an important segment. In Russia’s perspective, the fall of Syria could eventually lead Iran into a semi-encirclement and open the way for Western powers to influence events in the Caucasus and Central

Asia through Sunni states and their radical “proxies”, which Moscow resolutely opposes (4–5). China, which sees Iran as a long-term ally and the US and its allies as a potential threat also stood in similar strategic positions, but with a less pronounced degree of apprehension.

On the other hand, Israel and the US have identified Iran as the biggest regional threat. That is why the Syrian civil war has been welcomed by them in order to permanently eliminate Iranian threat and improve their strategic positions in this part of the world. From the very beginning of the conflict, both powers (especially the US) have supported rebel groups such as the Free Syrian Army and the Kurds from the Syrian Democratic Forces. All this was done with the aim to help power change in Syria by as moderate forces as possible and not by radical Islamist forces with an anti-Western (including anti-Israel) orientation, because, in this way, one dangerous opponent would only be replaced by another, potentially even more dangerous one. Precisely for these reasons, with intelligence support to the rebel advance towards Damascus, the Israeli Armed Forces (IDF) simultaneously intensified their military operations in Syria. The Israeli Air Force carried out over 480 combat missions that practically wiped out Assad’s remaining arsenal of weapons and warplanes deployed at airports and depots throughout Syrian territory, all with the aim of disabling all military potential before it fell into the hands of the new masters of the situation on the ground. Also, on the day of the fall of the Assad regime, Israeli troops began an invasion of the southern part of Syria which rests on the Golan Heights, creating a new occupied “buffer zone” on the slopes of Mount Hebron, within easy reach of Damascus (Al Jazeera 2024). During the advance into southern Syria, the Israelis further destroyed all local military facilities, turning the dominant Druze minority community into their local “proxies” to whom they granted the construction of the newly proclaimed autonomy. This action by Israel has drawn condemnation for violating international law and Syria’s sovereignty from both the new authorities in Damascus and the UN. The authorities in Tel Aviv have largely ignored this, justifying the incursion into the territory of a neighboring state as a necessary act aimed at protecting their own security.

GEOPOLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE NEWLY ESTABLISHED SITUATION

The key role in filling the Syrian “power vacuum” created by the fall of Assad was played by HTS, which, with the help of the SNA, carried out a military offensive that turned the tide of the civil war. These are only partially reformed Islamist military formations¹ that emerged in 2017 from former members of the Al Nusra Front, a local offshoot of Al Qaeda. After the outbreak of the war in Syria, the Al Nusra Front ruled most of the Idlib province with a strictly Islamist policy, completely in line with its like-minded people such as Al Zawahiri and Bin Laden. “The leaders of the ultra-radical organization saw an opportunity to exploit Sunni Muslims to continue their global jihadist revolution that had fallen into a dead end. The outbreak of the “Arab Spring” in 2011 would give Al Qaeda a new opportunity. Al Nusra established itself as one of the most organized and effective opposition groups to the government of Bashar al-Assad. Al Nusra soldiers were disciplined and skilled, and they captured important cities and villages. Al Nusra operated from its earliest days under the leadership of the current leader of HTS, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani. He built a reputation as a charismatic leader with military and ideological authority. Although the connection with Al Qaeda was initially an advantage, over the years it turned out to be the main problem why the organization could not progress” (Šerić 2025). Because of all this, in the summer of 2016, Jolani announced the severance of relations with Al Qaeda and renamed Al Nusra Front first to Jabhat Fatah Al Sham, and later, after a number of other Islamist groups joined, to Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS). The reasons for the change were primarily pragmatic, with the aim of eliminating the negative consequences of the connection with Al Qaeda that repelled wider classes of Syrian Sunnis and prevented the improvement of the international reputation of this armed formation. Also, the change of name signaled the adaptation of Sunni radicalism to the local Syrian context, i.e. its nationalization and distancing from global Islamism. The strategic goal was to create a broader Sunni military movement that

¹ On the relationship between Islam and Islamism, see more (Lišanin 2014).

would effectively control first the entire province of Idlib, and, then, the wider Syrian territories. “However, the technical break with Al Qaeda did not mean a real break with the ideology of radical Islamism. In secret, the newly branded Al Nusra would continue to maintain secret ties with Al Qaeda as well as strategic and operational cooperation. Many key leaders and operatives retained their extremist views, which they cosmetically adjusted to the reality on the ground. These were tactical, not strategic changes” (Šerić 2025). It was precisely on the basis of this knowledge that the Americans put HTS on the list of terrorist organizations in 2018 (followed by the governments of most Western countries), from which, opportunely, it was removed after the events in December 2024, after HTS had taken control of most of Syria.²

In ideological terms, HTS in addition to its tactically motivated inclusiveness for Sunnis who are not familiar with Islamism – covertly but undoubtedly remained loyal to its Salafist ideology of returning to “pure Islam” and armed struggle as a legitimate path to overthrowing non-Islamic social orders and establishing orthodox authority. In political terms, HTS was loyal to the alternative government of the Syrian opposition, the so-called “Syrian Salvation Government” on whose behalf it acted, in addition to the province of Idlib, in the provinces of Aleppo, Hama, Daraa and Damascus. During its rule in the province of Idlib, HTS adhered to the application of a rigidly interpreted Sharia law in all segments of society, especially with regard to the rights of women and religious minorities. Repression of the civilian population, confiscation of property and executions of militants of rival armed forces characterize the rule of the HTS (Šerić 2025). This was particularly pronounced after the uprising of a part of the population in the province of Idlib in early 2024, largely due to the previous high level of repression and misrule (Borgoñoz Moya 2025). Despite a high degree of internal rigidity, the HTS is externally characterized by a pronounced pragmatism, both in its proclaimed efforts to resist external influences to interfere in the Syrian civil war and in its simultaneous rapprochement with Turkey (Borgoñoz Moya

² HTS was officially removed from the list of terrorist organizations in the USA on July 7, 2025, and in the UK on October 21, 2025. The UN Security Council did the same on November 6, which was followed by EU member states at the end of 2025 (Zelina 2025).

2025) and the armed groups that are under Turkey's direct control or predominant influence.

The leading military formation of this type is the SNA. It is a coalition of opposition fighters, defectors from the Assad camp and local warlords, armed and financed by Turkey and with extensive assistance from regular Turkish troops in the Turkish-Syrian border areas. The SNA has been the main armed force in the fighting in northern Syria against both Assad loyalists and Kurdish guerrillas, Turkey's main opponents. Despite its fragmented structure and lack of ideological unity, the SNA has provided the rebels with essential support in terms of manpower and logistics.

Then, there is the Druze militia, a regional paramilitary formation that has sporadically fought against the regular Syrian army on the southern operational front. Largely neutral during most of the civil war, Druze militia protected its own ethnic areas, prevented the recruitment of its own tribesmen into Assad's troops and provided supplies to its opponents. In the crucial days of early December 2024, it made a breakthrough towards Suwadah (Reuters 2024a).

In addition to them, there are, of course, the Kurdish armed forces, better known as the SDF. They represent a coalition of Kurdish and Arab militias in the northeast of the country that not only successfully resisted Assad's reintegration of this part of Syria into a single political space, but also, simultaneously, waged fierce clashes with Turkish regular troops and the SNA. The Kurdish forces were the main ally of the US in the fight against ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) during the second decade of the 21st century. The main goal of the Kurds in Syria is to maintain autonomous rule over the areas they control in the style of the "Erbil autonomy" that has existed in Iraqi Kurdistan for a long time, and which would be recognized by the central government in Damascus. Since the Kurdish forces are strongly influenced by the PKK (Kurdish Workers' Party) as a separatist force in neighboring Turkey (where they are considered a terrorist group), Ankara and the SNA see the SDF as their main opponent in Syria.

During the opposition's final offensive on Damascus, the Kurds coordinated their war effort against Assad with HTS and its leader, Jolani al-Sharaa, they agreed to mutual tolerance, recognizing HTS authority over all of Syria, but not giving up the degree of self-

government they had achieved. On March 10, 2025, the SDF signed an agreement with the new interim government in Damascus to participate in joint state institutions. This was preceded by a series of clashes with pro-Turkish armed factions. Namely, the SNA, shortly after the fall of Assad, organized an offensive against Kurdish territories that led to the capture of Manbij (Reuters 2024b) on December 11. Through the mediation of the transitional and then the interim government led by Muhammad Al-Bashir and the new President of Syria, Jolani al-Sharaa (elected on this position on January 25, 2025), the conflicts in the northeast Syria were frozen (Reuters 2025) during 2025, only to flare up again at the turn of 2026. An offensive by government forces supported by the SNA and special units of the Turkish army followed. It ended in a heavy defeat of the Kurdish forces and the loss of a large part of the territory they had previously controlled.

Other clashes took place between the remaining players of Syria's protracted conflict: first, in late February and early April 2025, Druze militias clashed with regular Syrian military troops around the Suwada governorate. It all ended with a negotiated ceasefire between Damascus and the Druze (Campa et al. 2025). The Druze fighting with the Bedouins, however, served as a pretext for a new intervention by government troops in the Suwada area in July 2025. This resulted in the deaths of a large number of Druze civilians. Israeli troops took new "proxy" under their protection and carried out airstrikes on Syrian tanks in this area. Finally, in retaliation, the IDF bombed government buildings in Damascus itself, until the latter gave up trying anything in the Druze-controlled areas (Holmes 2025).

In the coastal belt of Syria, near Latakia and along the Syrian-Lebanese border, frequent clashes began to break out during the spring between the remnants of Assad loyalists (the Syrian Popular Resistance) and government troops. Repression against Alawites by the Sunni majority, including mass atrocities, has dramatically increased. Since the beginning of the year, the reorganisation of once elite Syrian units such as the "Tiger Forces" under the command of al-Hassan (*Suheil Salman al-Hassan*), a hardened Special Forces commander once loyal to Bashar al-Assad has been increasingly visible in the areas inhabited by Alawites. These troops, after the fall of the regime, went underground and regrouped (like the Republican Guard after the fall of

Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003). They maintain ties with their foreign war allies, Russia and Iran, waiting for favorable circumstances to intensify their actions (Lopez de Miguel 2025, 157–158).

Overall, the situation for the new authorities in Syria – although armed conflicts have become less frequent – is far from stable. Three possible directions of a new escalation of the war remain open: 1) escalation between the Sunni central government and the remaining Assad loyalists in the areas inhabited by Alawites and Christians (the coast of Syria); 2) escalation between the Sunni central government and the Druze (supported by the Israelis) in the south of the country; and 3) a new continuation of the conflict between the Sunni central government and its pro-Turkish allies and Turkey with the Kurds in the northeast of the country (ACAPS 2025).

GEOPOLITICAL POSITIONS OF EXTERNAL ACTORS IN NEWLY EMERGING CIRCUMSTANCES

The December regime change in Damascus directly caused a change in the balance of power at the Syrian geopolitical crossroads. A temporary “power vacuum” was created in which, for the time being, the opposition forces supported by external actors with different interest projections gained the upper hand. All of this will cause a whole series of consequences for the geopolitical situation in the entire Levant and the Middle East as well as in other regions of the world. What is important to note is that the situation in Syria remains very volatile and unstable, and that the competition between external and internal actors continues.

Assad’s downfall hit Iran hardest: it was a strategic defeat and the push of Iranian influence from the Levant back towards Mesopotamia (Borgoñoz Moya 2025). The “Shiite arc” connecting Lebanon (and Iran’s ally Hezbollah) with Iran via Iraq and Syria was, for the time being, severed. Hezbollah suffered significant losses in a clash with the Israeli army in 2024; Iran’s minority allies in Syria were driven from power, hidden, illegal, and subjected to repression. Iraq, with its Shiite majority, is now the last area of Iran’s external defense against a hostile coalition of Westerners, Israelis and Sunni monarchies. Although Tehran’s relations with Assad have deteriorated in recent years due

to his attempts to reach out to the Sunni Gulf states, Iran certainly did not need to lose an increasingly unreliable ally. His downfall in Syria allowed the country's airspace to serve as a staging ground for Israeli airstrikes in the short-lived Iran-Israel conflict of the Twelve-Day War (June 13–24, 2025). As a result, Iran will be forced to increasingly rely on non-state actors throughout the Middle East. This will further complicate the already bad relations between countries throughout the region.

Russia is another major power that, although to a much lesser extent than Iran, is at a loss due to the change of government in Syria. Russia has recently been dissatisfied with Assad's cooperation after the Russians prevented his fall in 2015 with its direct military influence, helped him defeat ISIS and regain control over most of the country (Trujillo 2025). However, for Russia, Syria (especially after the start of the war in Ukraine) is of lesser importance: estimates that Russia's reputation in this part of the world will not drastically decline due to the fall of Assad are not unfounded, just as the threat of Islamist spillover to Russia is significantly lower than a decade ago, especially in the context that relations between Moscow and Ankara have improved drastically in the meantime.

Russia is primarily interested in preserving its Mediterranean military bases in Tartus and Hmeimim, so it is trying to come to an agreement with the new masters of the situation in Damascus on this issue (Borgoñoz Moya 2025). For now, they are showing good will not to spoil relations with Russia because, in the long term, their prospects are uncertain enough that they do not need to have another great power against them that could, otherwise, be on good terms with Damascus. In the event that they are pushed off the Syrian coast, the Russians have an alternative in Libya (with their ally general Haftar) from where they can project their influence throughout the Mediterranean, the Middle East and, most importantly, the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa. However, the current situation in Syria weakens Russian plans related to supporting Iran in the face of threats from the West.

The most striking geopolitical winner from the change of power in Syria is Turkey (Borgoñoz Moya 2025). It has systematically supported the opposition military groups that took power in Damascus and overthrew Assad who was deeply hated by Ankara. However,

the Syrian situation for Turkey is far from desirable: HTS, the main faction of the current government, is not under direct Turkish control but only a tactical ally ideologically distant from Turkey and closer to Qatar and the Saudis. Turkey's real "proxies" are those from the SNA. However, members of SNA are rooted only in the north of the country and marginal among the majority Sunni population. Problems with the Kurds from the SDF in the northeast of the country, although the military operations after the thawing of the conflict bore fruit, remain because the USA and Israel are, to some extent, behind the Kurds. The fall of the Assad regime left Syria unstable and fragmented in the long term, with *de facto* Kurdish autonomy established, which the authorities in Damascus initially tolerated but which Turkey fiercely opposes.

The Gulf states, primarily Qatar and Saudi Arabia, supported the opposition forces in overthrowing Assad in order to reduce Iranian influence in the region. The power-grabbing of HTS led by Al-Sharaa Jolani as the new president of Syria was seen in these countries as a great success that opens up new opportunities for cooperation and rapprochement between Arab Sunnis (Hassan 2025, 17–18). However, the extremist traits of both the new authorities and their opponents create fears of further developments. If the newly established order collapses and the Syrian state again breaks up into several regions with many militant factions, including various Islamist groups, the Gulf States could find themselves in a situation where they lose all influence in this area. In such a development of events, these states would be forced to change their geostrategic position and foreign policy goals, probably trying to build new relationships with their main regional rivals – Turkey and Iran.

Israel is also strategic winner because of the regime change in Damascus. "The Shiite arc" has been cut; the military capabilities of the Syrian army have been crippled for many years by precision bombing; by occupying southern Syria, as far as Hebron, and especially by turning the Druze into its "proxies" (Borgoñoz Moya 2025), Damascus has been in Israeli's sight. However, the long-term prospects for Israel are not bright at all: Bashar's regime, Alawite-Shiite, was non-extremist; the new regime is made up of Islamist radicals dressed in secular clothes with Turkey behind them. In the long term, one

major hostile power, Iran, may be replaced by another, Turkey, equally hostile to Israel and sympathetic to Hamas and the Palestinians. All of this is driving Israel to work to further destabilize the situation and foster territorial fragmentation in the country, primarily by supporting minorities such as the Kurds and Druze. This, however, is increasingly turning Israelis against the Sunni majority and its Turkish patrons.

Throughout the civil war, the USA sided with opposition groups in their attempt to overthrow Bashar al-Assad, primarily with the Kurds from the SDF who were key US allies in the fight against various Islamist radicals, especially those from ISIS. Although Washington sees the fall of Assad as its success, there is also a clear awareness that the new circumstances complicate the achievement of further strategic goals in the region (Borgoñoz Moya 2025). Only rhetorically cooperative, “skillful” radicals with whom US had been at war until recently are in power; the Turkish ally from NATO is waiting for an opportunity to deal with the Kurds and is not afraid of a new, ultimate confrontation (directly or through “proxies”) with the Americans on Syrian soil; the US main ally, Israel, is pursuing an excessively belligerent policy that could easily backfire on the Americans throughout the Middle East; the problems with the “Iranian arch” cut off in Syria are far from resolved.

There is also a whole range of non-state, mostly paramilitary actors: ISIS (Bajagić 2014), although it has suffered a heavy defeat, is slowly rearing its head again in the Levant and Mesopotamia (Al Jazeera 2025). With two-three thousand active fighters and around nine thousand of them detained, ISIS re-established its cells in the newly emerging political fragmentation and began a series of activities in the areas where it was once strongest, in the regions around Raqqa, Dar al-Zor and Hasakah. During the year before the fall of the Assad regime, the terrorist attacks (around 700 of them) of this group tripled compared to the previous period. Although ISIS’s insurgent activities are still “low-intensity”, they are deadly and pose a serious threat to the new regime in Damascus, especially if they manage to free their comrades from the prison camps in Al-Hol and Roy, thereby strengthening the number of their fighting formations (Sthuni 2025).

HTS, enthroned in power in Damascus, still maintains barely concealed ties with Al Qaeda and, despite its inclusive rhetoric, has

in its leadership people who dream of restoring an Islamist Caliphate. Their main opponents until yesterday, the Kurdish militias from the SDF do not give up their ambitions to legalize the autonomy created on the ground, for which they encounter bitter resistance from both the new authorities in Damascus and Turkey itself. However, the patronage of the US and Israel has limited the continuation of hostilities and conflicts. The possibility of legalizing territorial autonomy into a kind of Kurdish “state within a state” is also of concern to neighboring Iraq, where the Kurds already have a won autonomous status, the so-called “Kurdish Regional Government” that could move towards deepening autonomy towards the creation of a Kurdish independent state with the prospect of joining Syrian and Turkish Kurds, the largest ethnic minorities in those states.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION: WHAT ARE THE LONG-TERM GEOPOLITICAL TRENDS IN POST-ASAD SYRIA?

The change of power in Syria occurred primarily due to the weakening of the former regime because of a whole series of causes such as: a stalemate on the battlefield, fatigue and deep disillusionment of the population with the regime, economic collapse and corruption, Bashar al-Assad’s inflexibility in finding a compromise solution with most of the other warring factions, turning his back and betraying his key allies, and the Alawites’ unwillingness – after disproportionately high casualties – to continue dying so that the regime could conquer areas that they did not care about at all. The strengthening of the war antagonists and their alliance, on the other hand, was a consequence of the coincidence of interests of external players (Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the USA). This created a synergy effect only in their plans to overthrow the regime in Damascus: after Assad’s fall their interests, to a greater or lesser extent, directly contradict each other. To a certain extent, the fall of Assad is due to a change in the balance of power between external forces, that is the reduction in the power of his allies (Hezbollah in Lebanon) or a reduction of interests (of Russia, which turned its priority to Ukraine and neglected the Middle East) or both

interest and power (of Iran, which had less and less desire to decisively defend a regime that had proven unreliable and treacherous).

Therefore, the current circumstances and their prospects can hardly lead to any further significant change in the balance of power in the region, especially outside of the Levant. Although Iran has lost the most among regional powers and Turkey and Israel have gained the most, neither side has achieved such an advantage nor are the others so harmed that it would fundamentally change the regional balance of power (the conflict between Israel and Iran in June 2025 confirms that). The leading great powers – the USA, Russia and China – although they have their interests in the Levant and the Middle East, in the coming period see their main priorities in other world regions; they, at least until the end of 2025, don't want to get deeply involved in direct competition in order to bring the advantage to any of the "middle" powers in the region.

By surrendering power to "adapted" Islamists from HTS in coalition with their "proxies" does not promise that their regime will be loyal to anyone in the long run, nor more stable and long-lasting. Turkey can count only on the SNA as its real allies and not on Jolani (*Abu Mohammed al-Jolani*) and HTS. The Americans can only partially count on the Kurds, and the Israelis on the Druze. The Alawites are on the defensive, regrouping and looking at how and with whose help to preserve those areas of Syria which are important to them. Russia is ready, with extreme pragmatism, to improve relations with any actor that allows it to have a presence in the bases in the Mediterranean. Russia does not care much about its regional reputation, because, in its global scale, it is mostly gained and lost in Ukraine, and the minor decline in its prestige in the region due to a downfall of unreliable ally is, from the Kremlin's point of view, bearable and repairable.

Seen from a broader perspective, Jolani and HTS represent only a fragile coalition of radicals who made a new deal with the Damascus elite at a time when the latter, realizing Assad's exhaustion, reached out for a replacement. However, the new government's reach is even more limited than Assad's: it is unable to fully reintegrate the Kurdish part of the Syrian territories (as Turkey and its "proxy" players would like); it has completely lost control of the south of the country

occupied by the Israelis (granting its Druze “proxies” on the ground *de facto* independence while keeping Damascus in its sight); apart from reprisals, they are unable to permanently pacify the Alawite coastal areas of Syria.

In the medium term, after the situation is reconciled while maintaining the *status quo*, further destabilization of Syria is possible with the outbreak of new conflicts on the Sunni-Alawite, Sunni-Druze and Sunni-Kurdish lines. This would further drag all the previous winners of the Syrian geopolitical upheaval, with the exception of Israel (which strives for a permanent weakening and instability of the situation in Syria, according to the principle of “the worse – the better”) into a new round of violence in the territory of this country – with no prospect of anyone becoming the final winner that can significantly change the situation on the ground. Syria is now turned into country divided into more or less autonomous Kurdish region (under American patronage), a *de facto* independent Druze region (under direct Israeli occupation) and a largest but confusing, factionally divided area inhabited by Arab Sunnis. If, in such a situation, the Alawites along the coast were to find allies strong enough to raise their heads once again – Syria would *de facto* break up into its constituent micro-geographical parts: the coastal Alawite region, the Kurdish region, the Druze region, the region around Aleppo and the region around Damascus.

The regional strengthening of neo-Ottoman Turkey is only partial and is more a consequence of a combination of circumstances than a solid reality: Turkey is already deeply involved in a long-term sectarian war in the Levant from which it is difficult to get out. In the long term, it could easily lead to a conflict with the USA and Israel. Such a development would permanently weaken Turkish power and make it incapable of becoming more significantly militarily and politically involved in other geopolitical regions that are also important to Ankara (the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Balkans). This does not mean that Turkey carried away by the strengthening of its positions in the Levant cannot set off to realize its plans in other areas; but this will be possible mostly through diplomatic and economic-political activities, because its military center of gravity will be anchored along its southern borders, linked to the Kurdish issue, for a long time.

As for Iran, its regional weakening is evident, but not irreparable in the long term. In its desire to reconnect the “Shiite arc”, at least in part, Tehran will have to play a patient game, rely on non-state actors and assess whether it is better for it to support the Alawites in creating their own independent state than to try to influence the central government in Damascus which has proven to be fragile and prone to collapse. The Gulf monarchies, the weakest of the external players, can only count on the growth of their prestige among the Sunnis in the Levant and little more than that; instead of exalting themselves, they would be better off preparing for the disappointment that they will experience from their only superficially “washed” offspring who is gaining its first serious experience in international relations real-politics.

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Александар Гајић*

Институт за европске студије, Београд, Република Србија

ГЕОПОЛИТИЧКЕ ПОСЛЕДИЦЕ БАШАР АЛ АСАДОВОГ ПАДА У СИРИЈИ**

Резиме

Следећи теоријски оквир класичне геополитичке анализе, рад пружа геополитички преглед промене власти у Сирији у завршници тамошњег дугогодишњег грађанског рата, као и ток војних операције те приказ непосредно успостављеног новог стања на терену. У уводном делу рада објашњавају се основне слабости режима Башара Ал Асада, као и главни погрешни потези који су проузроковали његов крах у периоду од само једанаест дана. Други сегмент рада објашњава геополитички значај Сирије у историјској перспективи указујући на његове константе у оквиру Леванта као међупростора на Блиском истоку смештеног између области које, у различитим историјским епохама, заузимају регионалне геополитичке силе. На овај начин се указује на сличност некадашњих са садашњим приликама. Средњи део рада бави се геополитичким димензијама новоуспостављеног стања, идеолошко-политичком позадином ХТС, владајуће војне фракције у новој, сунитској влади у Дамаску, као и њеним односом са другим фракцијама и њиховим упориштима на просторима појединих регија унутар Сирије. Трећи део рада бави се утицајем спољних великих и регионалних сила на прилике у савременој Сирији и њиховим интересним пројекцијама које се међусобно у многе сукобљавају. Завршни део рада бави се прогностичком проценом даљих геополитичких преспектива пос-асадовске Сирије узимајући у обзир постојеће антагонизме и различите интересе како сиријских војних и ентитичких формација тако и спољних сила.

* Имејл адреса: sasa95gajic@gmail.com; ORCID: 0000-0002-3873-0231.

** Рад је настао у оквиру научно-истраживачке делатности Института за европске студије у Београду, коју финансира Министарство за науку и иновације.

Кључне речи: пад Башар Ал Асада, сиријски грађански рат, Левант, геополитика, интереси великих сила на Блиском истоку.

* This paper was received on January 29, 2026, and accepted for publication at the Editorial Board meeting on February 27, 2026.