

The Repercussions of the Assad Regime's Fall on Iran's Proxies in Yemen

Situation Assessment
Political Analysis Unit
December 2024

Introduction:

Over the course of a month, the world has witnessed rapid shifts in Iran's sphere of influence. The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime, which had been ruled by the family for nearly five decades, marked an abrupt turning point. This shift followed weeks of an observable decline of Hezbollah's power in Lebanon.

On December 8, Syrian opposition forces captured Damascus, forcing Assad to flee to Moscow. This event reshaped the geopolitical landscape of control and competition in the region, and perhaps globally. Assad's main allies, Russian and Iranian regimes, have shown themselves to be fragmented, exhausted, and incapable of mounting the swift intervention that saved their stronghold in 2015. The so-called "Axis of Resistance," led by Tehran for over two decades, now finds itself in its weakest state, struggling to adapt to the new regional dynamics.

These developments stem from the blows dealt by the Syrian revolution against Assad's authoritarian rule, which began in March 2011 as part of the Arab Spring. It later devolved into a proxy war, resulting in nearly one million deaths and over 12 million refugees. Iran and its allied Shiite militias supported Assad to stabilize the regime, even as he employed chemical weapons against his people. By 2020, Assad seemed to have secured his position with the signing of the Astana Agreement, brokered by Turkey, Russia, and Iran.

In recent years, Arab states have taken steps to reintegrate Assad into the Arab League, aiming to distance him from Iran's influence and the "Axis of Resistance." Despite these efforts, Damascus remains a key component of this axis, alongside Yemen's Houthi movement. Since October 7, 2023, the Houthis have bolstered their position by launching attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. These actions were framed as part of the broader support for Palestinian resistance against the brutal crimes of the Israeli occupation in Gaza.

These events carry profound implications for the balance of power in the region, particularly for the Axis of Resistance and the Houthi movement in Yemen. This paper aims to analyze these developments and evaluate their potential impact on Yemen and the broader regional landscape.

The Echo of the Assad Regime's Fall in Moscow and Tehran:

On Wednesday, November 27, 2024, Syrian armed factions launched a coordinated offensive targeting regime-held positions and militia sites in the western countryside of Aleppo, northern Syria. This marked the first joint military operation by the Syrian opposition forces since 2016, titled "Operation Deterrence of Aggression". According to the operation's statement, the attack was framed as a defensive necessity to counter recent regime actions that had endangered civilian areas, rather than a strategic choice.

The military operation achieved quick progress, culminating in the capture of Aleppo the following day, alongside other areas in Idlib. Syrian army units collapsed swiftly, triggering a dramatic chain reaction that enabled the opposition forces to advance into urban areas, pushing regime forces backward. This momentum eventually led to the capture of Damascus and forced Assad to flee. The scale and the speed of regime's collapse surprised both the operation's planners and the forces involved in the campaign.

The Syrian opposition forces consisted of multiple armed factions led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), previously known as Al-Nusra Front. HTS had officially severed its ties with al-Qaeda in 2017. The coalition of operation also include the Free National Army and smaller armed groups ^[1]. Abu Mohammad al-Julani (Ahmed al-Sharaa), the HTS leader, emerged as the figurehead of the military operations. He emphasized that their primary goal was to overthrow Assad's regime and establish a government that would align with the aspirations of the Syrian people.

The military operation exposed structural weaknesses within the Assad regime that were clear but underestimated in terms of their extent and depth. The army was unable to fight effectively, being in a precarious state with most forces comprised of conscripts. Over 100,000 soldiers were lost during the civil war, and Bashar al-Assad himself did not help in 14 years, refusing to step back from the arrogance derived from power and destruction. Economic sanctions and Israeli airstrikes devastated the economy and the military infrastructure of the regime, along with most Iranian facilities in the country. Assad also rejected responding to the demands of his people and the solutions presented to him from Syria, the region, and the world.

On the other hand, the armed factions demonstrated their ability to regroup and unite towards a collective goal of effecting a change in control, a first since 2016. The Syrian opposition had been confined behind solid frontlines, but their capacity for pre-emptive attacks was evident. Particularly, groups like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham had been planning this assault for a long period, well-informed about the weaknesses of the Assad regime.

Moreover, changing regional and international circumstances played a significant role. The attack occurred when Assad's allies were under increasing pressure, with Russia withdrawing most of its forces from Syria in the past three years due to the conflict in Ukraine. Israel systematically targeted Iranian assets in Syria, especially in the past year, as well as Hezbollah units that played a key role in enabling Assad not only to survive but essentially defeat most of the opposition forces. Iran began withdrawing its forces from Syria last year due to these daily attacks. Hezbollah also withdrew much of its power due to Israeli strikes, followed by the Israeli war in the south [2]. The Lebanese group was a major power among Iran's forces, which helped Assad gain and maintain control over territories from the opposition.

Adding to these complexity of the situation, the offensive coincided with the election of Donald Trump to a second term as U.S. president [3]. Trump was well-known for his “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran during his previous administration, which included high-profile actions such as airstrikes on Syrian government assets, the assassination of Qassem Soleimani—commander of the Quds Force. Soleimani was regarded as a key leader of the “Axis of Resistance”, alongside Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah and other allied groups. He played a central role in leading military operations against Syrian revolutionaries in Aleppo in 2015, supported by Shia militias from Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran.

Despite Moscow and Tehran's affirmations that they would continue to support Bashar al-Assad with military and diplomatic aid, as they have since 2011, there has been little evidence of actions backing these claims to halt the opposition's advance. Neither committed to sending ground forces to support Assad, whose troops rapidly retreated [4].

Russian warplanes provided limited support to the Syrian army in Hama, Aleppo, and Idlib, but it was insufficient to make a significant impact. Iran offered a lukewarm reassurance to consider requests for sending forces [5], but not the confirmed support Assad relied upon to halt the attack, despite the killing of the prominent Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander, General Kiumars Pour-Hashemi [6].

The regional circumstances worked against the Assad regime, which heavily relied on its allies: the Lebanese Hezbollah militia, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and the Iranian regime. These allies received strategic blows over the past year, making Syria a secondary concern at best. Meanwhile, Turkey, the main supporter of the opposition, appears to be the biggest beneficiary as it prepares to repatriate 3 million refugees and potentially establish a buffer zone along the border to prevent Kurdish attacks. To a lesser extent, Qatar, a Gulf state that has refused to recognize the Assad regime and handed its embassy to the opposition since 2011, stands to gain despite Gulf normalization efforts with the Assad regime.

Iran seems to be the biggest loser from Assad's fall, followed by Russia, but both facing significant strategic setbacks. For Moscow, the extent of the blow depends on whether it can maintain control over its long-standing Hmeimim Air Base and Tartus Port. Russia attempted to secure naval access to the port of Tobruk in Libya but has not yet developed the infrastructure it had in Syria. Like Iran, Russia has faced humiliation due to the collapse of their proxy, Bashar al-Assad, and both now face enemies among the Syrian people they helped suppress [7].

The loss of Assad has also dealt a severe blow to Moscow's regional and global influence. Many Russians believed that the highly successful war in Syria from 2015 to 2020 served as a testing ground for the ongoing war in Ukraine. They would have been better off hoping that this analogy was either more limited or less applicable than it seemed just a few days ago.

A Blow to Iran's Core Influence:

The fall of Assad's regime in Syria represents a fundamental shift in regional dynamics, with the potential to significantly impact Iranian-backed armed groups and Tehran's influence in the region, including the Houthis in Yemen. Despite the Axis of Resistance's projected strength and unity against Israel, its foundation has always been fragile. By arming and equipping allied groups, Iran expanded its predatory power at the expense of local populations in weak and divided states. Iran's exportation of instability across the region has been a point of weakness for the axis itself.

The scenes from Damascus on December 8—toppled statues, selfies in the dictator's palace, the exposure of the security state previously ruled by Assad, Iran's ally, the loss of Syrian soldiers' trust in their leadership, and the citizens standing confidently in the face of soldiers. Therefore, the impact of Assad's collapse on the Iran axis is significant. The repercussions of Syria slipping out of Iran's grip are palpable, as it exposes a despotic and brutal image to the Iranian people [8]. The comparison between the Assad regime's treatment of its citizens and the ruling style in Syria is evident [9].

However, unlike the hollow and authoritarian Assad dictatorship, Iran's Supreme Leader regime maintains a local electoral base and possesses forces willing and capable of using deadly force against protesters. Currently, there is no armed and organized rebel force tested in battle and supported from abroad like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham challenging Iran's regime [10].

The collapse of Assad has prompted Iranian political elites to re-evaluate the efficacy of their “forward defense” strategy, a policy that cost Tehran billions of dollars to prop up the Syrian regime, only to see it fall without a fight. Worse, the regime’s collapse has been marred by accusations of complicity in the assassinations of Iranian commanders, such as those targeted by Israel.

Iran’s Foreign Minister, Abbas Araghchi, acknowledged in an interview with state television that: “The resistance front has had a really hard year” [11] but denied that the end of the axis built over 40 years is near. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei echoed this sentiment, stating that the Resistance Axis is not “a structural thing that can be weaker or dismantled” [12].

Despite the Supreme Leader’s refusal to take responsibility for the failure of the strategy it built, in which Iran lost billions, the collapse of the Assad regime delivers a significant blow to Iran’s regional ambitions through:

□ **Declining Influence:**

The collapse of the Assad regime marks a severe setback for the Iran-led Axis of Resistance. Syria had long been the cornerstone of Iran’s strategy to expand its influence across the Middle East. Tehran is set to lose its only Arab ally regime and a crucial land corridor connecting the IRGC to Lebanon—despite alternative smuggling routes for arms to Hezbollah through Iraq. Moreover, Iran faces immense economic losses, including its substantial investments in Syria’s infrastructure and various economic sectors [13]. These setbacks could fuel growing public discontent within Iran.

Without Syria, Iran loses a vital base for regional expansion and a strategic support hub for its allies, including the Houthis and Iraqi militias. Assad’s fall also raises doubts among other Axis members about Iran’s ability to provide consistent backing. This was evident in Baghdad’s refusal to send Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) militias to support Assad [14].

□ **Shifting Power Dynamics:**

With Assad’s collapse, Iran is forced to reassess the strategy underpinning the Axis of Resistance. This shift also alters the balance of power, particularly in Iraq and Lebanon. Hezbollah, for instance, faces significant challenges due to the loss of a vital logistical and military support network. This weakens the Lebanese group’s operational capabilities and exacerbating its internal pressures, which were already heightened following the recent ceasefire with Israel.

□ **Doubts within the Axis Itself:**

The regional climate and the failure of its defensive strategy force Tehran to reposition and evaluate itself. Massive investments in human, economic, and political resources to support Hezbollah, Bashar al-Assad, and other militias in Iraq and Yemen are now under scrutiny. Iranian leaders are re-evaluating their defensive doctrine as the resistance axis struggles to provide Tehran with credible deterrence, sparking internal discussions on arming its nuclear program.

The aftermath of Assad's demise raises serious questions among axis parties: to what extent might the fate of Assad and the resistance forces reflect their future? Therefore, Iran-backed axis factions may need to rethink their strategies and tactics to confront the military and political changes.

□ **Ripple Effects:**

The collapse of Assad's regime follows Hezbollah's prior weakening due to successive Israeli strikes ^[15]. The assassination of Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and other top leaders accelerated Assad's downfall. Observers predict similar aftershocks in other Axis strongholds, particularly Iraq and Yemen. Analysts foresee the potential dismantling or weakening of Iraqi PMF militias and a possible collapse of Houthi power in Yemen.

Challenges Facing the Houthis in Yemen:

The Houthis historically maintained a close relationship with Assad's regime, bolstered by their shared ties with Iran. However, this relationship began to weaken after Assad's reintegration into the Arab League in 2023. A key turning point was the transfer of Yemen's embassy in Damascus from the Houthis to the internationally recognized Yemeni government. For the past decade, Damascus served as a critical transit hub for Houthi fighters traveling to Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Syrian intelligence facilitated this movement by holding their passports, enabling covert travel. This arrangement enhanced the Houthis' military capabilities through Iranian support.

Despite their strained relationship with the Bashar al-Assad regime, the Houthis have advocated for Assad to remain in power, citing the need to confront Israel. Concerns have been raised within the group that the Syrian revolution may have negative repercussions on the Houthis and their relationship with Iran ^[16]. Several considerations are highlighted here:

□ **Iranian Support:**

A weakened Iran could lead to reduced financial and military support for the Houthis, thereby diminishing their position in Yemen. However, this depends on Tehran's political decision-makers either stopping support for the “strategic depth and resistance front” or continuing to back it [17]. Statements by Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guard leaders indicate ongoing support for the axis. Iran would likely use its regional setbacks to reassess and reposition itself, seeking opportunities for reconstruction in Lebanon and developing new relationships within the evolving Syrian political landscape. Additionally, Iran would work to enhance its political and economic investments in Iraq and Yemen [18]. If Assad falls, Iran may shift its focus to Yemen as a new strategic point, potentially increasing funding and arms support for the Houthis to rebalance power dynamics in the region [19].

□ **Tactical Weakness:**

The fall of Assad, driven by internal and external pressures, bears similarities to the situation in Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen. This creates a psychological impact on Houthi leaders and their supporters, potentially leaving them feeling vulnerable and disoriented. They may fear that their adversaries and the populations under their control could draw inspiration from such movements and launch offensives against them with unlimited Western and regional support. This is particularly concerning given the Houthis' governance failures over the past decade, which have left them struggling to maintain popular support, even among their own supporters.

□ **Engagement in Peace:**

Over the past year, the Houthis have shown adaptability and resilience, using Israel's brutal war on Gaza to launch attacks in the Red Sea, bolster their regional and local image, and display power. However, the fall of Assad has shocked and unsettled the Houthis, especially as Iranian support wanes. These changes may compel the Houthis to reconsider their strategies and policies in response to the shifting balance of power in the Middle East.

The international community and regional powers may seize this opportunity to exert maximum pressure on the Houthis to halt their Red Sea attacks and distance themselves from Iran in exchange for a role in Yemen's future governance.

□ **Saudi Concerns:**

Saudi Arabia perceives the Syrian revolution as a reflection of the crimes of Iran's Islamic Revolution, giving it a different perspective compared to other Arab Spring revolutions. Riyadh may exploit this moment to strengthen its support for Yemen's internationally recognized government against the Houthis, instead of making further concessions to the armed group.

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states could capitalize on Iran's setbacks and expected pressure from the Trump administration on Tehran regime. This could lead to support for military strikes against the Houthis or leveraging the situation to foster goodwill and invest in regional relations, aiming to detach the Houthis from Tehran's influence. Meanwhile, the new U.S. administration seeks to negotiate a return to the nuclear agreement, a priority for Iran's new president, Masoud Bezshkian, who took office in mid-2023.

□ **A Rare Opportunity for Yemenis:**

The success of the Syrian revolution after 14 years marks a transformative shift in regional dynamics. Assad's fall signals the collapse of the foundations of the resistance axis led by Iran for decades. These transformations are not just passing events but indicators of reshaping regional relationships and power balances in the Middle East.

Under these circumstances, Iran will have to evaluate its defensive strategy, including its ties with the Axis of Resistance. The repercussions of this change will deeply impact the Houthi group in Yemen, which may find itself in a challenging position requiring a strategic reassessment. The group recognizes that the same conditions that led to Assad's downfall—widespread hunger, poverty, economic collapse, pervasive oppression, and rejection of peace initiatives over the past years—are also prevalent in Houthi-controlled areas.

This offers Yemen's internationally recognized government a chance to harness the momentum and societal inspiration from Assad's fall to achieve military gains, either by overthrowing the Houthis or pressuring them to change their behavior. Such efforts could pave the way for a settlement that grants the government a strategic advantage, leading to greater stability in Yemen. For their part, the Houthis, facing mounting regional and international pressures, may be forced to reconsider their future options, including pursuing political settlements or reshaping their alliances. This historic moment also provides a unique opportunity to reassess regional dynamics, potentially contributing to greater stability in Yemen and the broader Middle East.



Conclusion and Multiple Scenarios:

The assassination of Hezbollah's leadership in Lebanon and the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria have dealt a significant blow to the Iran-backed Axis of Resistance that Iran built to exert strategic influence in the Middle East. Observers now anticipate similar outcomes for Iran's proxies in Iraq and Yemen. What are the key scenarios awaiting the Houthi group in Yemen?

First Scenario: A Military Operation:

Following repeated attacks on shipping in international waterways, an international coalition might launch an operation to dislodge the Houthis from coastal areas. This could encourage Yemen's government to initiate a broad military campaign against the Houthis from all military regions. While this scenario is the most likely, its success depends on several factors: forming a mini-war government, establishing a unified operations room, securing advanced weaponry, acquiring substantial funding, and ensuring regional and international backing. Additionally, a strong field commander with broad support across Yemen's military and other armed formations would be crucial [20]. In this scenario, former Vice President Ali Mohsen Saleh al-Ahmar could re-emerge, leveraging his deep experience with military leaders and tribal elders, especially in Houthi-controlled areas. This could increase the possibility of an internal coup against the Houthis once the offensive begins.

Second Scenario: A Political Agreement:

Similar to how China mediated between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Tehran might seek a political settlement in Yemen to protect its Houthi allies under the guise of preserving the Beijing agreement. However, this necessitates significant concessions from the Houthi group to drive towards a political agreement, alongside the need for international support to encourage the political accord. This scenario is considered less probable, given the substantial incentives the Houthis would need to undertake, such as accepting participation in governance in exchange for disbanding the armed movement, transitioning into a political party, handing over the capital Sanaa to the internationally recognized legitimate government.

If this scenario materializes, the Houthis may push for the return of the former president's son, Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, to power to ensure no future purges occur. Saleh's son, who was assassinated by the Houthis after a failed alliance with them, has been elected as a deputy for the General People's Congress party in Sanaa, holding no hostilities towards the Houthis, not engaging in war against them, or even accusing them of his father's assassination. Additionally, the officers who solidified the Houthi rule mostly belong to the elite forces (Republican Guard) formerly led by Saleh's son.

Third Scenario: Time Manipulation:

While less likely, the Houthis could hope for regional and international shifts that reduce pressure on Iran's Axis of Resistance, of which they are a part. In the meantime, they might re-engage in peace talks with Saudi Arabia to stall for time, appearing willing to compromise on previous demands, such as war reparations and control over Yemen's governance.

The Houthis may also attempt to show flexibility in resolving disputes with the legitimate Yemeni government, such as releasing detainees, allowing oil exports, and agreeing to transfer revenues to the Central Bank for salary payments. Domestically, the Houthis could seek to pacify discontent by promising to reinstate dismissed employees, resume regular salary payments, halt excessive levies, dismantle illegal taxation checkpoints, and grant amnesty to many prisoners.



References:

- [1] Abu Mohammad al-Julani's Interview with CNN, December 16, 2024. Available at: <https://youtu.be/iCdWF9hFo-4>
- [2] "Israel Says Cease-Fire Takes Effect in Lebanon". https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/israel-says-cease-fire-takes-effect-in-lebanon-b27366c4?mod=article_inline
- [3] "Trump's Strategy in Yemen amid Shifting Dynamics in Middle Eastern". <https://abaad-studies.org/policy-analysis/topic/60136>
- [4] "Russia and Iran Pledge Support for Syria's al-Assad against Advancing Rebels", December 2, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/02/world/middleeast/syria-aleppo-assad.html>
- [5] "Iran Would Consider Any Call From Assad to Send Troops to Syria", December 4, 2024. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-12-04/iran-would-consider-any-call-from-assad-to-send-troops-to-syria>
- [6] "Iranian Commander's Killing, Aleppo Advance Shake Up Syria Conflict", November 29, 2024.
- [7] "Khamenei Loses Everything", December 10, 2024. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/12/khamenei-iran-syria/680920/>
- [8] Tweet by Abdolreza Davari, former advisor to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, on X. <https://x.com/DavariAbdolreza/status/1864988811945443365>
- [9] "16 Points on the Fall of Bashar al-Assad: Why Did the Dictator Collapse?" <https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/1019991>
- [10] "The Domestic and Regional Impact of the Political Earthquake in Syria", AGSIW, December 9, 2024. <https://agsiw.org/the-domestic-and-regional-impact-of-the-political-earthquake-in-syria/>
- [11] Araghchi's Account of Syrian Events and Assad's Fall. <https://aftabnews.ir/0040Rn>
- [12] "The Axis of Resistance is Not a Structure That Can Be Broken or Destroyed", Khamenei's statement. https://x.com/Khamenei_fa/status/1866940310196310505
- [13] "Remontada?! How will Syrian Armed Factions Redefine the Regional Landscape?", December 2, 2024.

<https://www.habtoorresearch.com/programmes/will-syrian-armed-factions-redefine-the-landscape/>

[14] "Fall of Assad in Syria Deals Serious Blow to Iran's Axis of Resistance", The Washington Post, December 8, 2024.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/12/08/iran-assad-syria-axis-resistance/>

[15] "Implications of Assassination of Hezbollah's Leader on Yemeni Landscape". <https://abaadstudies.org/policy-analysis/topic/60133>

[16] "Houthis React to Assad's Fall by Offering Concessions to External Actors", Yemen Monitor, December 12, 2024.

<https://www.yemenmonitor.com/Details/ArtMID/908/ArticleID/128509>

[17] "Khamenei's Reaction to Assad's Fall: 'A Great Fighter,' Without Mentioning His Name", Radio Farda.

<https://www.radiofarda.com/a/assad-fall-reaction-ali-khamenei/33236174.html>

Khamenei's Speech on Syria's Crisis: Some Iranians pitch Taliban-style engagement. <https://amwaj.media/media-monitor/some-iranians-pitch-taliban-style-engagement-as-khamenei-addresses-syria-crisis>

[18] "The Fall of Assad Has Exposed the Extent of the Damage to Iran's Axis of Resistance," Chatham House, December 12, 2024.

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/12/fall-assad-has-exposed-extent-damage-irans-axis-resistance>

[19] Araghchi's Account of Syrian Events and Assad's Fall.

<https://aftabnews.ir/0040Rn>

[20] Military Regions and Formations in Yemen:

- First and Second Regions (East): Hadhramaut and Al-Mahra
- Third Region (Central): Shabwa and Marib
- Fourth Region (South): Taiz and Aden
- Fifth Region (West): Midi (Hajjah) and the Coast
- Sixth and Seventh Regions (North): Al-Jawf and Sana'a
- **Other Military Formations:**
 - Republican Guards (West Coast/Al-Mocha)
 - Giants Brigades (South/Aden)
 - National Shield Forces (North and East/Borders).



مرکز أبعاد للدراسات والبحوث Abaad Studies & Research Center

-  0 0 9 6 7 7 3 7 8 8 7 7 7 8
 -  0 0 9 6 7 7 3 7 8 8 7 7 7 8
 -  a b a a d s t u d i e s
 -  a b a a d s t u d i e s
 -  Abaad Studies & Research Center
 -  مرکز أبعاد للدراسات والبحوث
- abaadstudies@gmail.com
info@abaadstudies.org
www.abaadstudies.org

Abaad Studies & Research Center (Abaad) is a non-profit organization that has a license from Yemen's Social Affairs Ministry No. (436) issued on October 18 2010.

focuses on politics, intellect, democracy, election, political parties, terrorism, freedoms as well as economic and social issues.