

The fall of Assad's regime in Syria: implications for Russia

Witold Rodkiewicz, Katarzyna Chawryło

The overthrow of Bashar Assad has significantly diminished Russia's influence in the Middle East and dealt a blow to its image. Alongside Iran, Russia was the principal sponsor of the Alawite regime in Syria, which depended heavily on Russian military, financial, and political support. In return, Assad allowed Russia to maintain military bases on Syrian territory, including the naval facility in Tartus and the airbase in Khmeimim. Russia's successful military intervention to save Assad from collapse, conducted jointly with Iran between 2015 and 2017, had greatly enhanced its reputation as a key power in the Middle East to be reckoned with.

Beyond Russia's loss of influence within Syria, the fall of the Assad regime will weaken its position relative to major Middle Eastern players such as Turkey, Israel and Iran. Turkey and Israel will no longer need to coordinate their military actions in Syria with Russia when targeting Kurdish groups (Turkey) or Iranian forces (Israel). As for Iran, shared support for Assad had been one of the most significant factors fostering closer ties between the two countries.

Russia's initial reaction to the overthrow of the Syrian regime has been muted, reflecting both its surprise and complete inability to influence the situation on the ground. Consequently, Russian propaganda has been working to downplay the developments in Syria and reassure the public regarding the rebellion's consequences. Simultaneously, it has sought to justify the Kremlin's stance by attributing blame to Assad's regime and military while emphasising that Russia's current priority is the war in Ukraine, thus explaining its lack of involvement in Syria.

Commentary

- **Assad's demise signals major shifts in the balance of power in the Middle East.** Russia's apparent powerlessness and surprise in the face of the revolt, as well as its inability to defend its key ally, represent a severe blow to its policies. The developments in Syria have undermined Russia's image as a power both capable and willing to employ military force to safeguard its own interests and those of its partners (such as Iran) and clients (like Assad). This reputation, established thanks to its successful intervention in the Syrian civil war between 2015 and 2017, had been the foundation of Russia's growing influence in the Middle East since 2015. It also facilitated the development of political and economic relations with countries in this region, thereby weakening the effectiveness of Western efforts to isolate Russia internationally and enabling Moscow to secure partners willing to cooperate in circumventing or mitigating the impact of economic sanctions.

- **The Kremlin's response reflects its loss of influence over the situation in Syria** and its inability to organise a coordinated effort among regional actors interested in keeping the regime intact. On 8 December, the Russian foreign ministry issued a brief statement expressing that Russia is "following the dramatic developments in Syria with extreme concern", "maintains contact with all Syrian opposition groups" and calling for a political resolution to the conflict in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. The statement also mentioned that Russian military bases in Syria are on high alert but currently face no significant security threats. On 9 December, the Kremlin's spokesperson announced that Vladimir Putin had decided to grant asylum to Assad and his family.
- **The future of Russia's military bases in Syria, which facilitated its military operations in the Mediterranean basin, remains uncertain.** The base in Tartus served as a key hub for supplying military materiel to Assad's regime and the Russian contingent conducting combat operations from the Khmeimim airbase. These facilities also provided logistical support for Russia's operations in Africa, including in Libya, the Sahel states and Sudan. Russia's primary objective in a post-Assad Syria is likely to be retaining control of these assets and negotiating an agreement with the new government, potentially in exchange for assistance in securing international recognition.
- **Covering the developments in Syria poses a challenge for Russian propaganda.** Numerous reports on the fast-moving events have attempted to downplay the significance of the regime's collapse – an embarrassing setback for Moscow – and to minimise reputational damage. These reports have focused on factual coverage and adopted a neutral tone, carefully avoiding references to Russia's ties with the regime or addressing broader political consequences. Responsibility for the collapse of the state apparatus has been attributed to Assad's government and military. Russia's lack of involvement has been justified by citing other priorities, particularly the war in Ukraine. The geopolitical implications of the rebellion have been downplayed, with assertions that Russia remains an important player in the Middle East and is capable of negotiating agreements with the new rulers on key issues. Notably, the term 'terrorists' is no longer used to describe the rebels; instead, emphasis has been placed on the relatively 'peaceful' transfer of power. Reports of Assad fleeing to Russia have also been understated.