

Fall of Syria's Assad Regime Signals Hope for the Region

From Conrad Black

Syria suffered for more than 50 years under the brutal despotism of the Assad family in what was the oppression of the country by an 11 percent ethnic minority, the Alawites. It was in this respect similar to Iraq, which under Saddam Hussein was despotically governed by the 20 percent Sunni majority. The Sunni helped themselves to the revenue of the oil industry that was almost entirely in the region of the Kurds, who were also about 20 percent of the population, and the 60 percent of Iraqis who were Shiites and were largely led by the Shiite ayatollah, who was resident in Iran and heavily influenced by the Iranian government.



People gather in Al-Madan Square to call for accountability of war crimes committed by the Syrian Armed Forces under the Assad regime, in Madaya, Syria, on Dec. 11, 2024. Chris McGrath/Getty Images

While Syria was long an identifiable entity in ancient times, and Damascus has some claim to being the oldest continuous

city in the world, it was overrun by the Babylonians, Assyrians (hence its name), and Persians in biblical times and then the Macedonians (Alexander the Great), Selueucids, Aramaics, Armenians, Romans, Byzantines, Islamic Arabs, and Turks. Throughout those 25 centuries, tribal and ethnic differences were comparatively inconsequential. At the end of World War I, when the Ottoman Empire collapsed along with the empires of the Habsburgs in Vienna, the Hohenzollerns in Berlin, and the Romanovs in St. Petersburg, there was already in place an agreement by which France would govern Syria and Lebanon and the United Kingdom would govern what are now Jordan, Israel, and Palestine.

In carving up territory in this way, the victorious Allied powers in World War I, particularly Georges Clemenceau of France and David Lloyd George of the UK, demonstrated that they had not learned much from the mistakes of their predecessors in the latter 19th century. They carved up practically all of sub-Saharan and western coastal Africa between them, demarcating spheres of occupation and colonization on globes and atlases in the chancelleries of Europe and without regard to ethnic and tribal borders on the ground.

The result of this is with us still and very tragically evident in the endless internecine conflicts in Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Congo, Angola, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Rwanda, Gabon, and Chad, to mention only the most conspicuous of the recent internal disputes. Most of the existing borders of these countries are nonsense—arbitrary lines drawn by European statesmen, especially the British and French ministers in charge of foreign affairs.

Although Britain and France almost came to war when two columns intersected with each other [in 1898 at Fashoda](#) on the White Nile, in what is now Sudan, over what the frontiers of their empires would be in that part of Africa, the Europeans paid no attention to the ethnic and tribal differences in the

territories they governed, including when they granted them independence. The same principles were at play in most of the Middle East, the most egregious example being the [Balfour Declaration of 1917](#), a year before the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, when Britain took it upon itself to promise that what is now Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank would be a homeland for the Jews without compromising the rights of the Palestinian Arabs. The consequences of this flimflam are too well known to need recounting here.

By the nature of the ethnic and cultural composition of many of these countries, including Syria, if they were to be retained as unitary states, one of the resident ethnic or sectarian groups would have to dominate the others. The spirit of this sort of political system was well illustrated when a local revolt was briefly successful in a corner of Ethiopia in the early 1950s, and the resident tribal chief announced: "This ends 3,000 years of misrule." (In that case, it did not end for long.)

The now well-established states in the Middle East are Iran, Turkey, Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. The sacking of the Iranian Embassy in Damascus and the expulsion of the Iranians from Syria—added to the destruction of almost the entire Hamas terrorist operation and much of the paramilitary strength of Hezbollah by the Israeli Defense Forces—has been another severe tactical defeat for Iran.

Both returning U.S. President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have promised to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear military power. There can be little doubt that they intend to do that and that such action will be supported, even if tacitly, by practically every nation in the world. This sequence of defeats could conceivably bring about the end of the hideously corrupt and oppressive pseudo-theocracy that has governed Iran for 45 years.

It is obvious from the frenzied demonstrations of relief in

most parts of Syria that the fall of the Assad regime is being greeted with wild enthusiasm by the whole population. It is unlikely that there is any faction head who could successfully gain the adherence of the whole country without a re-enactment of familiar military suppression of Syria, especially those parts of the population not ethnically and culturally represented by the group that has just occupied Damascus.

An encouraging effort is already underway by the leader of that faction, Abu Mohammad al Jolani, to present himself as someone who has long since ceased to be a terrorist. Even if he only abandoned that occupation last week, it would probably be wise to accept his professed career change. It may be that Syria will develop a form of almost cantonal or tribal confederation with a relatively decentralized government. The Arab powers have not shown a great gift for original political science or power-sharing. But it is clear that a great many of these formerly colonial states that received their independence since World War II would probably be best served by some such confederation of efforts.

It should now be obvious to everybody that the State of Israel, firmly established where the Jews have lived for more than 4,000 years, is immutable and permanent. For much of its history, Syria and Iraq were among Israel's most strenuous opponents. Those states have disintegrated, while Israel has settled its differences with Egypt, and a broad agreement with Saudi Arabia appears to be imminent. The significant damage that Israel has been provoked to inflict upon Hamas and Hezbollah and the humiliation of Iran—the chief terrorism sponsor of the world—can all be seen as very positive steps in bringing comparative peace to this region, which has known so little of it for so long.

If it proves impossible for the Syrian factions to reach some agreement on a government and avoid a prolonged bloodbath, the Turks, Egyptians, Jordanians, and Saudis should work together to avoid Syria descending into a nursery for terrorists or an

open-ended humanitarian disaster.

No matter what the future may hold, the hasty departure of Assad cannot be seen as anything other than a step forward.

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