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Syrian rebels topple Assad who flees to Russia in Mideast shakeup

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December 9, 2024 7:02 AM GMT+8 · Updated 4 days ago



Summary

Lightning rebel advance ends Assad family rule
Rebels say they entered capital with no sign of army
Russia gives asylum to Assad and his family
Assad's fall deals major blow to allies Russia and Iran
Western states will have to deal with triumphant Islamists

DAMASCUS, Dec 8 (Reuters) - Syrian rebels seized the capital Damascus unopposed on Sunday after a lightning advance that sent [President Bashar al-Assad](#) fleeing to Russia after a 13-year civil war and six decades of his family's autocratic rule.

In one of the biggest turning points for the [Middle East](#) in generations, the fall of Assad's government wiped out a bastion from which Iran and Russia exercised influence across the Arab world. Moscow [gave asylum to Assad and his family](#), Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's ambassador to international organizations in Vienna, said on his Telegram channel.

His sudden overthrow, at the hands of a revolt partly backed by Turkey and with roots in jihadist Sunni Islam, limits Iran's ability to spread weapons to its allies and could cost Russia its Mediterranean naval base. It could allow millions of refugees scattered for more than a decade in camps across Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan to finally return home.

For Syrians, it brought a sudden unexpected end to a war in deep freeze for years, with hundreds of thousands dead, cities pounded to dust and an economy hollowed by global sanctions.

"How many people were displaced across the world? How many people lived in tents? How many drowned in the seas?" the top rebel commander, [Abu Mohammed al-Golani](#), told a huge crowd at the medieval Umayyad Mosque in central Damascus, referring to refugees who died trying to reach Europe.

"A new history, my brothers, is being written in the entire region after this great victory," he said, adding that with hard work Syria would be "a beacon for the Islamic nation."

The Assad police state - known since his father seized power in the 1960s as one of the harshest in the Middle East with hundreds of thousands of political prisoners - melted away overnight.

Bewildered and elated inmates [poured out of jails](#) after rebels blasted open their cells. Reunited families wept in joy. Newly freed prisoners were filmed at dawn running through the Damascus streets holding up the fingers of both hands to show how many years they had been in prison.

"We toppled the regime!" a voice shouted as one prisoner yelled and skipped with delight.

The White Helmets rescue organization said it had dispatched five emergency teams to the notorious Sedhaya prison to search for hidden underground cells believed to hold detainees.

DEFACED ASSAD IMAGES

As the sun set in Damascus without Assad for the first time, roads leading into the city were mostly empty, apart from motorcycles carrying armed men and rebel vehicles caked with mud as camouflage.

Some men could be seen looting a shopping centre on the road between the capital and the Lebanese border. The myriad checkpoints lining the road to Damascus were empty. Posters of Assad were torn at his eyes. A burning Syrian military truck was parked diagonally on the road out of the city.

A thick column of black smoke billowed from the Mazzeh neighbourhood, where Israeli strikes earlier had targeted Syrian state security branches, according to two security sources.

Intermittent gunfire rang out in apparent celebration.

Shops and restaurants closed early in line with a curfew imposed by the rebels. Just before it came into effect, people could be seen briskly walking home with stacks of bread.

Earlier, the rebels said they had entered the capital with no sign of army deployments. Thousands of people in cars and on foot congregated at a main square in Damascus waving and chanting "Freedom."

People were seen walking inside the Al-Rawda Presidential Palace, with some leaving carrying furniture. A motorcycle was parked on the intricately-laid parquet floor of a gilded hall.



[1/37] Top rebel commander Abu Mohammed al-Golani greets the crowd at Ummayyad Mosque in Damascus, after Syrian rebels announced that they have ousted President Bashar al-Assad. Syria December 8, 2024. Purchase Licensing Rights. Read more



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The Syrian rebel coalition said it was working to complete the transfer of power to a transitional governing body with executive powers.

"The great Syrian revolution has moved from the stage of struggle to overthrow the Assad regime to the struggle to build a Syria together that befits the sacrifices of its people," it added in a statement.

Mohammad Ghazi al-Jalali, prime minister under Assad, called for free elections and said he had been in contact with Golani to discuss the transitional period.

Golani, whose group was once Syria's branch of al Qaeda but has softened its image to reassure members of minority sects and foreign countries, said there was no room for turning back.

ARAB WORLD STUNNED

The pace of events stunned Arab capitals and raised concerns about more instability on top of the Gaza war.

U.S. President Joe Biden, in a televised address, cheered Assad's fall but acknowledged that it was also a moment of risk and uncertainty.

"As we all turn to the question of what comes next, the United States will work with our partners and the stakeholders in Syria to help them seize an opportunity to manage the risk," Biden said.

The U.S. Central Command said its forces conducted dozens of airstrikes targeting known Islamic State camps and operatives in central Syria on Sunday.

Later in the day Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said he spoke with Turkish Minister of National Defense Yasar Guler, emphasizing that the United States is watching closely.

Jubilant supporters of the revolt crowded Syrian embassies around the world, lowering red, white and black Assad-era flags and replacing them with the green, white and black flag flown by his opponents.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Assad's fall was thanks to blows Israel had dealt to Iran and its Lebanese ally Hezbollah, once the lynchpin of Assad's security forces.

"The barbaric state has fallen," French President Emmanuel Macron said.

When the celebrations fade, Syria's new leaders face the daunting task of trying to deliver stability to a diverse country that will need billions of dollars in aid.

During the civil war, which erupted in 2011 as an uprising against Assad, his forces and their Russian allies bombed cities to rubble. The refugee crisis across the Middle East was one of the biggest of modern times and caused a political reckoning in Europe when a million people arrived in 2015.

In recent years Turkey had backed some rebels in a small redoubt in the northwest and along its border. The United States, which still has 900 soldiers on the ground, backed a Kurdish-led alliance that fought Islamic State jihadists from 2014-2017.

The biggest strategic losers were Russia and Iran, which intervened in the war's early years to rescue Assad, helping him recapture most territory and all major cities. The front lines were frozen four years ago under a deal Russia and Iran reached with Turkey.

But Moscow's focus on its war in Ukraine and the blows to Iran's allies following the war in Gaza - particularly the decimation of Hezbollah by Israel over the past two months - left Assad with scant support.

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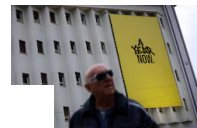
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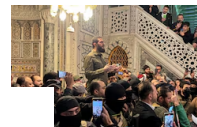
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