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country report

Country Office Jordan



Regional Implications of the Fall of Assad – How do Jordan and Iraq React?

After the fall of Assad in Damascus, Jordan and Iraq are looking for a way to deal with the new regime. An optimistic pragmatism dominates in Amman, a skeptical one in Baghdad. A joint regional approach holds the greatest potential.

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The capture of Damascus by rebel groups led by the Islamist HTS militia ended more than five decades of the Assad regime's rule. Amman and Baghdad view the new rulers with scepticism, fearing Syria's destabilization and fragmentation. However, Jordan also sees an opportunity to foster constructive neighbourly relations. In Iraq, mistrust of Syrian interim president Ahmad Sharaa runs deep. Nevertheless, a pragmatic approach toward the new leadership is emerging - one that should ideally be embedded regionally and internationally.

Jordan and Syria - Close but Difficult Neighbors

The Hashemite Kingdom's relationship with its large northern neighbour has always been ambivalent, shaped by close cultural and historical ties but also periods of intense political tension. When Bashar al-Assad and King Abdullah II assumed power in Damascus and Amman at the turn of the millennium, relations improved. This ended abruptly with the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011. Although Jordan officially refrained from rhetoric about overthrowing the regime, it supported opposition groups - under American leadership - particularly in southern Syria. Diplomatic relations were reduced to a minimum.

In the wake of the Syrian crisis, Jordan not only lost a sales market, but also a vital trade route that led through Syria to the Mediterranean and Turkey. Instead, along the Syrian-Jordanian border, non-state power networks - some with ties to the Assad regime - have emerged, profiting from drug and arms smuggling.. Since 2015, especially Captagon trafficking has become a significant security threat to Jordan. During the recent Gaza war, pro-Iranian forces also attempted to supply weapons to Palestinian militias in the West Bank via Syria and

Jordan. Criminal, economic, and political motives merged across borders and increasingly challenged Jordan's state authority.

In addition to the economic and security repercussions of the Syrian civil war, Jordan has shouldered a significant refugee burden. Of the more than six million Syrians who have fled since 2011, an estimated 1.4 million have sought refuge in Jordan, though only 563,000 are officially registered. While the international community has provided substantial support, the arrival of Syrian refugees - equivalent to over ten percent of Jordan's population - has placed immense pressure on the country's already limited resources, particularly concerning affordable housing and water.

Pioneer of Normalization with Assad - Without Success

Against the backdrop of these interests and after the Assad regime was able to assert itself with the support of Russia and Iran in particular, the conviction had emerged in Amman in recent years that contact with Damascus should be re-

established. In 2021, after a decade of radio silence, King Abdullah and the Syrian president held their first telephone conversation. In May 2023, Syria was finally readmitted to the Arab League and the long-reviled Assad traveled to Riyadh for the summit.

For Jordan, however, efforts of rapprochement hardly paid off. While some communities in northern Jordan benefited economically from eased border traffic, refugees did not return, and security along the Syrian-Jordanian border remained precarious. The Assad regime turned out to be unwilling or unable to combat drug smuggling. Its uncompromising approach, both domestically and internationally, led Jordan's "step-for-step" approach to a dead-end. Moreover, the withdrawal of Russian troops since 2022 due to the war in Ukraine strengthened the position of Iran-affiliated militias in southern Syria - to the dismay of the Jordanians, who distrusted Tehran's intentions and feared being drawn into the escalation spiral of the Middle East conflict.

Jordanian Pragmatism - Offer of Cooperation to Damascus

The HTS militia, which launched its lightning offensive in November 2024, had signaled early interest in Jordanian support. However, Amman was ultimately caught off guard by the rapid and largely unopposed collapse of the Assad regime. This development triggered mixed feelings in Jordan. On the one hand, people rejoiced with the Syrians, who celebrated the fall of their dictator. The release of prisoners from Assad's torture prisons, for instance, was met with widespread empathy.

On the other hand, significant reservations remain - particularly within the state apparatus and security services - regarding HTS, given its roots in Islamist terrorism. Some of HTS leader Ahmad Sharaa's closest advisors are Jordanian and have been on wanted lists due to their past affiliation with Al-Qaeda. Additionally, Jordanian Christians are worried about their fellow believers in Syria. In nationalist circles, Israel's military incursions in Syria - so far unchallenged by the new rulers - and Sharaa's close relations with Turkey are also being

used to portray the new Syrian interim president as an agent of foreign powers.

However, among the political elites and in Jordanian diplomacy, pragmatism and efforts to maintain good relations with neighboring states remain dominant. Given the Assad regime's inflexibility in important bilateral dossiers, hopes are now pinned on more effective cooperation with the new leadership. Accordingly, Amman has been on the forefront of those who try to reach out and build ties with the emerging regime in Damascus.

This willingness manifested itself clearly with the visit of Jordan's foreign minister Ayman Safadi to Damascus on December 23, 2024, making him the first Arab foreign minister to visit Syria since the fall of Assad. King Abdullah had already assured his respect for the will of the Syrian people in a written message on December 8, 2024. Less than a week later, Jordan hosted a summit in Aqaba to coordinate the regional and international response to the new dynamics in Syria. On February 26, 2025, Syria's interim president Sharaa arrived in Amman, and was personally received at the airport by King Abdullah. After Turkey and Saudi Arabia, Jordan became the third country that Sharaa visited.

Jordan's primary concern remains the situation in southern Syria, where HTS has only limited control. Amman is pursuing a two-pronged approach: on the one hand, it is emphasizing Syria's territorial integrity and actively establishing contact with the new HTS regime in Damascus. On the other hand, Jordan is seeking to consolidate its influence with local forces in southern Syria, including through leveraging cross-border tribal structures.

Jordan has already agreed with the HTS regime on joint action against the jihadist terrorist organization Islamic State (ISIS). There is also optimism about reviving water cooperation, which had come to a standstill under the Assad regime. The construction of dams and wells in Syria had exacerbated water shortages in recent years.

Finally, Jordan hopes to benefit from potential reconstruction efforts in Syria. As a stable and

internationally engaged actor amid Middle Eastern turmoil, the Hashemite Kingdom could serve as a gateway for implementing projects in Syria. In contrast, neighboring Iraq remains far more cautious, viewing Syria's complex situation and uncertain future with skepticism.

Iraq and Syria - Fragmented Actors, Interwoven Fronts

Relations between Iraq and Syria have mostly been confrontational and characterized by competition for regional influence. The Syrian civil war in 2011 further complicated ties, as Iran-backed factions within Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) fought alongside Assad's regime, while Sunni groups in Iraq aligned with the Syrian opposition.

The change of power in Damascus comes at a time when Iraq is grappling with internal cohesion and defining its regional role. Iraq's fragmented politics and the presence of numerous militias have so far hindered the formation of a unified Iraqi strategy toward the new Syria. While Sunnis generally view the new rulers in Damascus more favorably than Shiites, the Kurds remain primarily focused on the future of their Syrian counterparts.

The Iraqi central government has adopted a non-interventionist stance towards the change of power and the transition in Syria. It did not want to be drawn into regional wars and become a mere instrument of Iranian interests. Accordingly, during the HTS advance against the Assad regime, these forces exerted pressure on the radical Iran-affiliated militias, such as *Kata'ib Hezbollah* and *Harakat al-Nujaba*, to stay out of the fighting. Since then, these groups have sought to consolidate their power in Iraq, which has led to tensions with nationalist elements and Iraqi politicians seeking greater independence from Iran. However, it remains possible that they may act against official Iraqi government policy in the future - potentially even opposing HTS - though this will also depend on Tehran's positioning.

Protecting the Border - Iraqi Security Concerns

The fall of the Assad regime has created a security vacuum along Iraq's approximately 600-kilometer border with Syria. This reinforces long-standing concerns in Iraq about infiltration by extremist groups, arms smuggling and organized crime. Iraq's porous border with Syria has exposed it to significant threats in the past, including the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014, when militants infiltrated Iraq and conquered large parts of the country. The collapse of centralized state power in Syria has reignited similar fears, especially as remnants of ISIS remain active in both countries.

A pressing issue in this context is the US decision to cut aid funding to northeastern Syria, particularly to the Al-Hol and Roj refugee camps, which house tens of thousands of suspected ISIS members and their families. Camp officials, including Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) members, have expressed concern that instability in the camps could trigger riots, breakouts, and renewed ISIS activity. With approximately 30,000 detainees - 16,000 of whom are Iraqi nationals - still held in Al-Hol camp, Baghdad is bracing for an influx of returnees, some of whom could pose a significant security risk.

Iraq has responded to border security concerns in two ways: reinforcement of the military at key border crossings and regional diplomacy, including outreach to the HTS regime in Damascus. However, the situation remains complicated due to internal political divisions. Armed groups linked to Iran have taken advantage of the situation to maintain their presence on the border and operate there partly independently of the Iraqi government.

Ahmad Sharaa: A Stumbling Block in Iraqi-Syrian Relations?

In developing a coherent strategy to secure the Syrian border, Iraq is inevitably faced with the question of how to engage with the new Syrian leadership. Ahmad Sharaa, the self-proclaimed interim president of Syria, remains a highly controversial figure in Iraq. His complex militant past, having been affiliated with ISIS and Al-Qaeda before leading HTS, raises deep concerns. His involvement in militant activities in Iraq during the

post-2003 insurgency is one of the main motives for Baghdad's reticence towards the new rulers.

In the eyes of many Iraqis, Sharaa has Iraqi blood on his hands. The negative public sentiment, especially among Shiites, is putting pressure on the government to carefully calibrate its relations with the new Syrian leadership. In response to the regime change, Iraq has adopted a cautious approach, prioritizing security concerns over immediate political recognition.

Nevertheless, the trend in Iraq is leaning towards cooperation: Sharaa was recently invited to attend the Arab League summit in Baghdad in May 2025. Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein emphasized that Iraq considers direct engagement with Syria necessary to tackle common security concerns, particularly in relation to cross-border terrorism and the remnants of ISIS.

Between Iran and the USA - Iraq's Struggle for Sovereignty

Beyond its direct relationship with Syria, the fall of the Assad regime has compelled Iraq to reassess its foreign policy, navigating between a weakened Iran and shifting U.S. priorities. While Iran continues to exercise control over certain factions of the PMF, many Iraqi armed groups have become more autonomous and prioritize their own political and economic interests over a strict alignment with Tehran.

At the same time, security relations between Iraq and the US are being put to the test. While the September 2024 security agreement envisaged a gradual withdrawal of US troops by 2026, instability in Syria, the risk of an ISIS resurgence and the uncertain fate of the SDF have led to discussions about delaying the timeline.

Baghdad is increasingly emphasizing its own sovereignty, striving to balance competing pressures from Washington and Tehran while maintaining pragmatic ties with both. However, as Iran looks to Iraq to offset its regional losses the new Trump administration expected to continue its campaign of maximum pressure, Iraq's ability to maintain this delicate balancing act will be put to the test in the coming months.

Giving Syria a Chance - Towards a Regional Approach with International Support

The new Syrian government's charm offensive - both domestically and on the international stage - cannot mask the deep uncertainties that accompany the fall of the Assad regime. Internal frictions and shifting dynamics within Syria, coupled with the potentially destructive role of external actors, pose significant challenges ahead.

The fragility of Syria's new power structures is evident when comparing the manpower of the 30,000 HTS militia to the Assad regime's former security forces, which numbered 400,000 - only a minority of whom have undergone reconciliation by surrendering their weapons. Battle-hardened Kurdish forces in the northwest, along with armed tribal groups in the south, have so far also refused to submit to HTS authority. Meanwhile, American, Turkish, Russian and Israeli troops continue to operate on Syrian territory - with Damascus being unable to exert much influence over them.

It is therefore crucial that regional and international players with a shared interest in a stable Syria strive to create conditions that increase the likelihood of a successful transition. If, however, Syria becomes a pawn in regional geopolitical power struggles - with external actors instrumentalizing Syria's sub-state groups for their own agendas - the consequences could be devastating. A failed transition or Syria's fragmentation would likely trigger destabilizing dynamics that would probably spill over into neighboring countries, particularly in Iraq, which is already grappling with a resurgence of sectarian and ethnic tensions.

Amman and Baghdad have a key role to play in shaping and implementing a regionally anchored, internationally coordinated approach to the new Syria. Conditions should be formulated that push the HTS regime towards a transition process that is as inclusive and peaceful as possible. But this also includes an outstretched hand for cooperation, especially on economic and security policy issues. Europe and the US would need to

support these efforts, primarily by further adapting or lifting their current sanctions policy.

positive development of the Middle East as a whole.

Syria not only shares a border with Jordan and Iraq, but also - despite all the political tensions in their modern history - a deep cultural and historical bond. Together, the three countries could form the core of an integrated Levant, contributing to the sustainable stabilization and

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