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IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY IN SYRIA BEFORE AND AFTER LIBERATION FROM THE ASSAD REGIME

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of Iran's foreign policy in Syria from the onset of its intervention in 2011 through the collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024 and the subsequent emergence of a new Syrian leadership under President Ahmad al-Sharaa. Framed within the theoretical lenses of realism, strategic depth, and ideological statecraft, the study explores Iran's evolving motivations, methods, and objectives throughout the Syrian conflict and its aftermath. Initially, Iran's support for the Assad regime was driven by a blend of geostrategic imperatives—securing a land corridor to Lebanon and Israel's borders—and ideological commitments to the Axis of Resistance. Tehran deployed IRGC advisors, mobilized transnational Shia militias, and provided billions of dollars in aid to preserve Assad's rule, all while embedding itself in Syria's economic and religious infrastructure. However, the unexpected collapse of Assad's government in a swift 2024 rebel offensive marked a strategic catastrophe for Iran, eliminating a cornerstone of its regional influence. The study details Iran's immediate withdrawal, the loss of military and diplomatic footholds, and the internal political fallout in Tehran. In the post-Assad period, Iran adopted a pragmatic, damage-control approach—seeking limited engagement with Syria's new leadership, reframing its rhetoric, and attempting to salvage its influence through indirect means. The article further examines the regional realignments triggered by Iran's exit from Syria, including shifts in Turkish, Israeli, and Gulf policies, and assesses how Iran's strategic calculus may evolve in response. Ultimately, the research concludes that Iran's foreign policy in Syria illustrates the limits of ideological interventionism when confronted with popular resistance, shifting power dynamics, and overextension. The case offers critical insights into the constraints of regional hegemony and the adaptability of Iranian statecraft in the face of geopolitical upheaval.

Keywords: *Iran's Foreign Policy, Assad Regime*

Introduction

The ouster of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in late 2024 and the rise of a new government under President Ahmad al-Sharaa marked a watershed moment in Middle Eastern geopolitics. This development not only ended over five decades of Assad family rule, but also forced a dramatic reconfiguration of Iran's role and strategy in Syria. For years, Iran had been one of Assad's staunchest allies – investing billions of dollars, deploying military advisers and allied militias, and entrenching itself in Syria's political and economic landscape. The Assad regime's collapse, achieved after a swift rebel offensive, effectively dismantled the fruits of Iran's decade-long intervention. Iran suddenly found itself losing a key pillar of its regional "Axis of Resistance" and land corridor to the Mediterranean.

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of Iran's foreign policy in Syria from the onset of its involvement in the Syrian conflict through the aftermath of Syria's liberation from Assad's rule. It examines Tehran's strategic objectives and methods in Syria, how these evolved over the course of the civil war, and how Iran's policy recalibrated once its ally fell. In doing so, the analysis draws on international relations (IR) theories and foreign policy frameworks to understand Iran's motivations and actions both **before** and **after** the Assad regime's downfall.

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1) Historical Alliance: Iran and Syria Before the Uprising

Iran's deep involvement in Syria's fate is rooted in a decades-long alliance that significantly predates the 2011 uprising. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the newly formed Islamic Republic found an important partner in Syria, then led by Hafez al-Assad. In the 1980s, Syria was the only Arab country to side with Iran during the Iran–Iraq War, driven by both regimes' mutual hostility toward Saddam Hussein's Iraq. This forged an enduring strategic bond between Tehran and Damascus. Over subsequent decades, Iran and Syria cemented their partnership through a shared stance against Western influence and opposition to Israel. By the 2000s, analysts commonly described Syria as Iran's most important Arab ally and a linchpin of the so-called "Shia Crescent" or "Axis of Resistance" stretching from Iran to Lebanon. Syria's geographic position made it a vital conduit for Iran to project power into the Levant: notably, it provided the land bridge for Iranian arms shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon, which Tehran viewed as a forward deterrent against Israel. In essence, long before the Syrian conflict erupted, Iran's interest in Syria was anchored in realpolitik (maintaining a corridor to the Mediterranean and a ally against common foes) as well as ideological solidarity (resistance to Israel and the West).

This alignment of interests only grew stronger after Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father in 2000. Throughout the 2000s, Iran and Syria coordinated closely on regional issues. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq further pushed Tehran and Damascus together, as both feared encirclement by U.S. influence and cooperated to undermine American efforts in Iraq. By the eve of the Arab Spring, Syria had become indispensable to Iran's regional strategy. From Tehran's perspective, losing Syria as an ally would fracture the regional alliance network it had built (encompassing Hezbollah in Lebanon and friendly Shia militias in Iraq), sever Iran's direct access to the Levant, and bolster the position of rival Sunni powers and the West. This calculus helps explain why, when popular protests broke out in Syria in 2011, Iran reacted with alarm and swift action to shore up the Assad regime.

2) Iran's Intervention in the Syrian Civil War: Objectives and Strategies

Iran's Motives – Security and Ideology

When the Syrian uprising began in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring, Iran viewed the threat to Assad's rule as a threat to its own regional influence. Iranian leaders portrayed the Syrian revolt not as a legitimate domestic movement but as a foreign-orchestrated plot aimed at weakening the "Axis of Resistance".

Tehran feared that if Assad fell and was replaced by a Sunni Islamist or pro-Western government, Iran would be strategically isolated – losing its overland supply line to Hezbollah and facing empowered regional rivals (such as Turkey and the Gulf Arab states) in Syria's place. From the standpoint of defensive realism in IR theory, Iran's subsequent intervention can be seen as a security-driven move to preserve a buffer and prevent encirclement by hostile powers. At the same time, Iran's theocratic leadership framed its support for Assad in ideological terms: defending a fellow anti-Israel, anti-Western government and protecting Shia holy sites in Syria. This blend of pragmatic and ideological motives is a hallmark of Iran's foreign policy, often described as pursuing "forward defense" – pushing its security perimeter outward by supporting allied regimes and non-state actors abroad.

Military Support and Proxies

Iran's involvement in Syria escalated rapidly as the conflict turned into a war. Early in the uprising, Tehran dispatched military advisers from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), notably the Quds Force led (at the time) by General Qassem Soleimani, to assist Assad. Iranian advisors helped reorganize the Syrian security forces and built up pro-regime militia forces. By 2012–2013,

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Iran was facilitating an influx of Shia militia fighters from across the region to bolster Assad's army. Hezbollah, Iran's Lebanese ally, sent thousands of its fighters to Syria, playing a pivotal role in battles such as the 2013 Qusayr offensive. Iran also mobilized Iraqi Shia militias (e.g. Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq) and even recruited fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan (the Fatemiyoun and Zaynabiyoun brigades) to fight under IRGC direction in Syria. These transnational militias became critical shock troops for the Assad regime. The IRGC's coordination ensured that these diverse forces operated effectively, essentially acting as Iran's expeditionary arm. Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei depicted these efforts as defending Syria from "terrorists," often conflating all Syrian opposition with extremist groups to legitimize Iran's intervention.

Financial Lifeline

In addition to manpower, Iran provided massive financial aid to Damascus. Estimates vary, but by the 2010s Iran extended billions of dollars in credit lines, oil shipments, and direct loans to keep Syria's economy afloat and fund the war effort. One study by Iranian lawmakers later suggested Syria's debt to Iran had grown to more than $30 billion. Tehran essentially bankrolled the Syrian state when it was cut off from many international markets.

This heavy investment underscored Iran's commitment to Assad's survival. Iranian officials often justified these expenditures as necessary for regional security, though domestically it was controversial given Iran's own economic struggles. The opportunity costs were significant: resources that could have been used for Iran's domestic development were funneled into a destructive war abroad.

Forward Defense Doctrine in Action

Strategically, Iran treated the fight in Syria as an extension of its own defense. Iranian generals openly described Syria as Iran's "front line" against Israel and the West – echoing the concept of forward defense. By keeping Assad in power, Iran maintained a forward operating base near Israel's border (through presence in Syria and via Hezbollah in Lebanon). This deterrence was seen as crucial after experiences like the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war. Moreover, sustaining Syria as a friendly regime helped Iran to project influence into the Levant and even to the Palestinian arena. Indeed, prior to the war, Damascus had been a hub for Iranian support to Palestinian militant groups (though relations between Assad and groups like Hamas became complicated during the war). In sum, Iran's Syria policy during the conflict years was guided by an understanding that losing Syria meant a drastic rollback of Iranian power in the region – a risk Tehran was willing to go to great lengths to prevent.

Coordination with Russia

By mid-2015, however, the Assad regime was militarily beleaguered despite Iran's support. Syrian government forces had lost significant territory to various rebel factions and jihadist groups. Sensing the regime's potential collapse, Iran took an unprecedented step: it solicited the direct military intervention of Russia, another Assad ally. Iranian Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani reportedly flew to Moscow in mid-2015 to help persuade Russia to intervene with airpower. The result was Russia's launch of an air campaign in September 2015, which, combined with Iran's on-the-ground militia coordination, ultimately turned the tide of the war in the regime's favor. This Iran-Russia coordination in Syria exemplified Tehran's pragmatic streak – despite a historical wariness of great-power involvement in the Middle East, Iran welcomed Russian help as indispensable for saving Assad. The partnership also highlighted a significant point in IR terms: Iran alone lacked the full capability to secure its interests in Syria and had to align with Russia's broader power projection. For the next several years (2016–2020), Iran and Russia worked in

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parallel – if not always perfectly in sync – to defeat Syrian rebel forces and reassert regime control over most of the country.

Economic and Soft-Power Initiatives

Alongside its military intervention, Iran pursued longer-term influence in Syria through economic deals and cultural outreach. Iranian companies sought lucrative reconstruction contracts, especially after 2017 when the war's active fronts shrank.

Documents later revealed that Iran had envisioned a "Marshall Plan" for Syria – an ambitious program to rebuild Syria's infrastructure (power plants, oil facilities, transportation, etc.) with Iranian financing and expertise, thereby securing long-term economic and political leverage. One leaked 33-page Iranian study from 2022 envisioned Syria as a "$400 billion opportunity" and outlined how post-war reconstruction could make Damascus reliant on Tehran, just as post-WWII Europe became tied to the U.S. via the Marshall Plan. By investing in Syria's recovery, Iran aimed to entrench its presence in everything from energy projects (e.g. an Iranian-built power plant in Latakia) to telecommunication networks and religious shrines.

Iran also spread its ideological influence by building schools, funding Shia religious centers (notably around the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus), and indoctrinating militia fighters – effectively exporting its revolutionary ethos. However, these soft-power efforts were limited by Syria's precarious security situation and corruption within the regime. Many Iranian projects stalled or were disrupted by ongoing conflict and international sanctions. Still, until late 2024, Tehran remained committed to making Syria a cornerstone of its regional "axis," even as it faced pushback from Syrian nationalists wary of Iran's outsized role.

Cost and Controversy

Iran's heavy intervention in Syria was not without controversy and cost for Tehran itself. Internationally, Iran's alignment with Assad – who was widely condemned for brutal repression and war crimes – damaged Iran's image, especially among Sunni Arab populations. Iranian support to a regime that besieged and bombed Sunni-majority cities fed into a sectarian narrative that Iran was waging war on Sunnis, exacerbating regional Sunni-Shia tensions. Countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which supported Syrian opposition groups, accused Iran of fueling sectarian conflict for hegemonic ambitions. Even within Iranian policy circles, some voiced misgivings about the "Syria gamble" as casualties mounted and economic burdens grew. Multiple senior IRGC commanders were killed on Syrian battlefields, including generals closely associated with the Supreme Leader. By one account, dozens of Iranian officers lost their lives in Syria, and thousands of Iran-backed militiamen perished. The financial toll – often cited in the $20–$30 billion range – became a point of contention, especially amid Iran's own economic woes. In 2018, an Iranian parliamentarian even remarked that if Iran had not intervened in Syria, it could have built hundreds of hospitals and schools at home with the money spent. Nonetheless, the Iranian leadership under Khamenei consistently defended the intervention as a matter of national security and revolutionary duty. As long as Assad remained in power, Iran could justify these sacrifices as having preserved a friendly government and strategic depth. By early 2024, Tehran likely felt some vindication: Assad had weathered the storm with Iran's help, many Arab states were moving to normalize ties with Damascus, and Iran's position in Syria, though costly, seemed secure.

3) Triumphs to Shock: The Tide Turns Against Iran's Ally

By 2024, the Syrian civil war had largely frozen along lines favorable to the Assad regime. With Russian and Iranian backing, Assad controlled most major cities and the coast, while remnants of the opposition were confined to parts of the northwest (chiefly Idlib province under the Islamist faction Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, HTS) and parts of the northeast under Kurdish-led forces. Iran

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maintained significant influence through its advisors and proxy militias embedded with Syrian forces, and it continued to reap the benefits of its alliance, such as using Syrian territory to host military sites and transfer advanced weapons to Hezbollah. Regionally, trends appeared to be breaking in Assad's (and thus Iran's) favor: several Arab governments (including in the Gulf) had reopened diplomatic channels with Damascus, and Syria was readmitted to the Arab League in 2023. Iran's strategic bet on Assad seemed to have paid off in preserving the status quo.

The Unexpected Offensive

This status quo was dramatically upended in late 2024. In November, HTS and allied rebel groups launched a sudden, massive offensive – dubbed the "Deterrence of Aggression" operation – against regime forces. Their attack, reportedly encouraged or green-lit by Turkey, achieved rapid success beyond most observers' expectations. Within roughly 12 days of fierce fighting, opposition fighters swept into Damascus and toppled the regime. The speed of the Syrian army's collapse stunned external backers. Assad's once-formidable military, demoralized and stretched thin, offered only patchy resistance as rebel forces advanced. By December 8, 2024, Bashar al-Assad fled the country – ultimately seeking asylum in Russia. The 13-year civil war had reached a sudden endgame: Assad's rule was over, and rebel factions seized control of the capital to declare a new transitional government.

For Iran, this turn of events was nothing short of a strategic nightmare. Tehran was caught off guard by the rapid unraveling of the regime it had sustained for so long. Iranian and Russian officials, meeting in emergency sessions (including a much-noted gathering on the sidelines of the Doha Forum on December 7, 2024), quickly conceded the battlefield to Turkey's proxy forces. Both Iran and Russia evidently decided against any last-minute military intervention to save Damascus. Analysts have debated why: Iran's non-response in Assad's final hour may indicate that Tehran recognized the futility of propping up a collapsing regime, or it may reflect Iran's constrained bandwidth (at that time Iran and its proxies were also grappling with escalations against Israel). Indeed, a commentary from Chatham House noted that Iran's decision not to send additional forces as Damascus fell likely stemmed from a combination of pragmatism and weakness: Tehran saw "it would gain nothing from an intervention" given Assad's irredeemable situation, and Iran's own military bandwidth was limited after suffering losses in its concurrent conflict with Israel (in late 2023). There is evidence that Iran's leadership, observing the Syrian army's crumbling morale and the population's boiling anger at Assad's corruption, decided that no amount of Iranian support could reverse the tide. IRGC officers on the ground reportedly concluded that the regime was collapsing "from the inside" and that the Syrian army simply would not fight, rendering external help debatable.

The Collapse and Iranian Withdrawal

As the Assad regime imploded, Iran scrambled to evacuate its personnel and assets from Syria. The Iranian embassy in Damascus became a scene of chaos: it was hastily abandoned by Iranian diplomats and then ransacked by Syrians celebrating Assad's downfall. Images from mid-December 2024 showed pieces of shredded documents strewn across a large poster of Ayatollah Khamenei on the embassy floor – a potent symbol of how thoroughly Iran's position had been routed. IRGC operatives and Iranian military advisors who had long kept a low profile now either fled the country or went to ground. Tehran also reportedly instructed its proxy militias to either retreat toward bases in western Syria (and eventually across the Lebanese border) or lay down arms. In effect, Iran's extensive military footprint in Syria vanished almost overnight. As one analysis summarized, "In Syria, it's all gone — everything Iran worked for and dedicated so much

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blood and treasure to protect for the past dozen years is gone. The Assad regime is gone. Iran's ability to operate directly (and through proxies) on the Israeli border is gone, too".

The shock in Tehran was palpable. The sudden loss of Syria represented "the collapse of over a decade of Iranian investment in Syria", unraveling a complex web of influence that Iran had painstakingly built. Iranian officials initially reacted with denial and face-saving rhetoric. Supreme Leader Khamenei, in a speech on December 11, 2024, tried to shift blame to Assad's own failures – criticizing the Syrian army for "weakness and lack of determination" and claiming Iran had warned Assad of the looming threat. Other Iranian figures echoed the narrative that Assad fell essentially by his own mistakes: Iran's parliamentary speaker stated that Tehran had forewarned Damascus but "the developments in Syria were more inevitable than surprising". Some even suggested Iran had not been deeply involved – for instance, Iran's foreign minister asserted that "the Syrian government did not expect this [intervention] from us either," implying Iran's role was only advisory. These statements sought to downplay the notion that Iran had been decisively defeated alongside Assad.

Internal Backlash in Tehran

Behind closed doors, however, the mood in Tehran was one of crisis and recrimination. Leaked reports indicated "significant rifts" had opened among Iranian officials, with factions blaming each other for a "strategic disaster" in Syria. Members of the IRGC lamented that "Iran lost everything in just 11 days" and described the leadership as "disoriented" and scrambling to formulate a new strategy. The commander of the IRGC's Quds Force, General Esmail Ghaani (who had succeeded Qassem Soleimani), came under heavy scrutiny for the failure to save Assad's regime. Some insiders even speculated that Khamenei might demote Ghaani, as many in the security apparatus "held him accountable" for the debacle. The IRGC – which had enjoyed a mythos of invincibility after previous successes (in Lebanon, Iraq, etc.) – had to contend with the humiliation of a major defeat. Iranian lawmakers, meanwhile, fretted openly about the billions of dollars in loans and investments that Iran had sunk into Syria; much of this money was now considered irrecoverable, with Assad gone and a hostile regime in his place. By some estimates, Syria's unpaid debt to Iran for war support and projects was over $30 billion.

The prospect of writing off this sum – amid Iran's own financial struggles – fueled criticism of the policy choices that led to such losses. Iran's loss of Syria also laid bare fractures in the ideological facade of the Axis of Resistance. Notably, Sunni Islamist groups that Iran had supported turned out to be ambivalent or even pleased with Assad's fall. Hamas, the Palestinian militant group long backed by Iran, congratulated the Syrian people on "achieving their aspirations for freedom and justice" after Assad's removal. The head of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, another Iran-aligned faction, similarly hailed the overthrow of "oppression and injustice" in Syria. These reactions underscored that Iran's alliance system – which tried to bridge Shia and Sunni Islamist actors under an anti-Israel umbrella – was never entirely coherent. Many Sunni Islamists had despised Assad (a secular ruler who brutally suppressed Sunni opposition), and his ouster by an Islamist-led rebellion was ideologically gratifying to them despite Iran's stance. This put Tehran in the awkward position of seeing some of its partners cheer a development that was a strategic blow to Iran. The sectarian undertones of the Syrian conflict had alienated segments of the Sunni world from Iran's cause, and now Iran's partners were recalibrating their own positions.

Geopolitical Sea Change

On the international stage, the fall of Assad was widely recognized as a major setback for Iran (and Russia). "With the fall of the Assad regime, Iran has lost a key pillar of its 'Shia Crescent'," one analysis observed bluntly, noting that the land corridor Tehran used to arm Hezbollah had

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been severed. Suddenly, Israel found that Iranian or IRGC-led forces were no longer entrenched next door in Syria. Western governments, which had long criticized Iranian interference in Syria, greeted the outcome as a positive realignment. European officials, for example, quietly hoped that a stabilized post-Assad Syria might allow millions of Syrian refugees – many of whom fled Assad's violence – to eventually return home, thus easing Europe's refugee pressures. For the United States and its allies, Assad's removal was seen as dealing a blow to both Iranian and Russian regional designs. U.S. officials under the Trump administration (which returned to office in this scenario) openly celebrated the turn of events: President Trump himself lauded the "historic and courageous" change in Syria and quickly moved to lift U.S. sanctions on Syria as a reward for the new government's promises of reform. The new authorities in Damascus were being courted by regional players – Turkey, the Gulf states, the West – none of whom wanted Iran to regain a foothold. Turkey, having backed the rebels, emerged as a key powerbroker in Syria's transition and the chief foreign influencer over the new regime. In sum, Iran's regional rivals were filling the vacuum left by Iran's departure. The balance of power in the Middle East was visibly altered: Tehran's prestige took a hit, while Ankara's rose, and Israel found a strategic adversary (Iran in Syria) suddenly neutralized – albeit replaced by a new uncertain challenge in the form of an Islamist-led Syrian government.

One telling indication of Iran's loss of influence was the posture of Syria's new president, Ahmad al-Sharaa (widely known previously by his nom de guerre, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani). Al-Sharaa, despite his jihadist past, moved swiftly to gain legitimacy internationally – including engaging with the United States and Gulf Arab monarchies. In his public statements, President al-Sharaa emphasized that "Syria would no longer serve as an arena for foreign struggles".

This was a clear signal aimed in part at Iran: the new Syrian leadership sought to assure the world (and its Syrian constituents) that the era of Syria being a battleground for Iran vs. Israel or Sunni vs. Shia proxy wars was over. Instead, Damascus under al-Sharaa leaned toward a pragmatic stance of aligning with Turkey (its immediate benefactor) and avoiding provocations with Israel or the West. In fact, one of the conditions the U.S. and others placed for fully accepting the new Syrian government was that it expel foreign militias and sever support for groups like Hamas or Hezbollah. Al-Sharaa's administration showed signs of compliance – reports emerged of the new government ordering all foreign fighters to leave Syria. This would include Iran's proxy forces. For Tehran, the strategic picture by early 2025 was grim: after years of war, it had not only failed to save Assad but now faced a Syria governed by forces historically hostile to Iran's presence, backed by Iran's regional competitors, and inclined to keep Iran at arm's length.

4) Post-Assad Reality: Iran's Foreign Policy After "Liberation"

The "liberation" of Syria from the Assad regime – while a cause for celebration in much of Syria – was a rude awakening for Iran's foreign policy establishment. Stripped of its dominant influence in Damascus, Tehran had to rapidly recalibrate its Syria policy and broader regional strategy. In the immediate aftermath of Assad's fall, Iran adopted a notably pragmatic (some might say expedient) approach. Rather than refusing to recognize the new order, Iranian officials signaled an unexpected willingness to engage with Syria's new leadership – despite the fact that this leadership had emerged from HTS, a group Iran had long condemned as a terrorist organization. Iran's rhetoric towards the Syrian rebels shifted almost overnight: before Assad's collapse, Iranian state media routinely labeled HTS and similar factions as Takfiri terrorists bent on destroying Syria. After Damascus fell, pro-government outlets in Iran began referring to HTS in more neutral terms like "the armed opposition". This semantic change was mirrored by diplomatic feelers. By December 9, 2024 (just a day or two after Assad's flight), Reuters reported that Tehran had opened

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communication channels with the rebel leadership. The New York Times corroborated that Iranian leaders were effectively resigned to the new reality and were seeking whatever diplomatic presence the new authorities might allow.

Goals of Tehran's New Approach

Iran's begrudging outreach to Syria's post-revolution government was driven by cold strategic logic: "Iran is committed to friendly relations with whoever is in charge of Syria, because they need the country for future anti-Israel and U.S. operations". In other words, even if the Syrian leadership had radically changed, Syria's geography and strategic value to Iran remained the same. Iranian planners have long viewed Syria as an essential node in their "Axis of Resistance." Without at least some access to Syria, Iran's influence network becomes far less effective – "without a link across Syria, Iran's 'axis of resistance' becomes more of an archipelago", as one analysis vividly put it. Thus, Iran's immediate post-Assad foreign policy aimed to salvage whatever it could of its interests in Syria.

This included: maintaining a diplomatic mission if possible, protecting Shi'ite religious sites and communities in Syria, and ensuring that Israel could not exploit Syria completely unchecked. Iranian officials likely also hoped to prevent Syria under al-Sharaa from becoming an outright client of Iran's rivals (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or the U.S.). In essence, Tehran shifted to damage control – trying to transform itself from Assad's patron to a potential interlocutor of the new regime.

Public Overtures vs. Private Reality

Publicly, Iran took a conciliatory tone. Ayatollah Khamenei struck an oddly optimistic note in a speech, suggesting that "the courageous Syrian youth will liberate Syria" and perhaps implying that Iran trusted the Syrian people to eventually make the "right" choices aligned with resistance. This could be read as Khamenei attempting to frame the situation not as an Iranian loss but as a continuation of Islamic resistance in another form – a stretch, given HTS's past clashes with Iranian interests, but reflecting Tehran's need to save face. Iranian diplomats called for a "national dialogue" in Syria to form an inclusive government, offering to help ensure stability in the country. This was a notable pivot: Iran positioned itself as a supporter of a political solution and broad-based government in Syria, a stance it had often rejected when it could simply back Assad's autocracy. Tehran also emphasized respect for Syria's sovereignty, implicitly asking the new government not to completely shut Iran out.

Privately, however, mutual distrust between Tehran and Damascus's new rulers remained high. The incoming Syrian leadership harbored deep resentment toward Iran for its role in the past war. A telling report indicated that Syria's new administration was preparing a massive compensation claim against Iran – demanding as much as $300 billion in reparations for the destruction wrought by Iran's intervention in support of Assad. Syrian officials accused Tehran of "criminal and arbitrary" policies that devastated Syria's people and infrastructure. Such moves signaled that the new government saw Iran not as a friend, but as an aggressor responsible for Syrian suffering. At the same time, Iranian politicians were grappling with the opposite concern: how to recoup the billions Iran had spent in Syria. Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesperson even insisted that any financial agreements made with Assad's regime should carry over to the new government by principles of state succession, rejecting the notion that Iran's investments were lost. This disconnect – Syria demanding money for damages, Iran demanding repayment of debts – illustrates the gulf between the two sides in the aftermath.

In practical terms, Iran's presence in Syria was reduced to almost nil immediately after the war. The new President al-Sharaa's administration made it clear it was not keen on hosting Iranian

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forces or proxies on Syrian soil. A source in the new Syrian administration bluntly stated in late December 2024: "Communication between the new administration and Iran is completely cut off… The new administration has no current plans to engage with Iran, whether regarding an embassy in Damascus or a consulate in Aleppo." Yet Iranian officials claimed they were in talks to reopen their embassy in Damascus suggesting that Tehran was desperately looking for channels to establish formal ties.

This dichotomy likely reflects early post-liberation jockeying: Iran, not wanting to be frozen out, might have been using backchannels (possibly via Russia or elements of the opposition it had relations with) to propose normalizing diplomatic relations, even as the Syrian side publicly distanced itself.

Parallel with Taliban Strategy

Some analysts have drawn parallels between Iran's approach to post-Assad Syria and its approach to another recent regional shift: the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021. In Afghanistan, Iran had long fought the Taliban (even nearly going to war with them in 1998), yet after the U.S. withdrawal, Tehran pragmatically engaged the new Taliban government, hosting Taliban delegations and seeking to protect Iran's interests under the new order. Similarly, with a Sunni Islamist regime now in Damascus, Iran might adopt a "if you can't beat them, deal with them" policy. Tehran could try to leverage common ground where it exists – notably, anti-Israel sentiment. Public opinion in Syria after years of war and Israeli airstrikes (Israel frequently bombed Iranian targets in Syria during the conflict) is still largely hostile to Israel. Iran might attempt to appeal to Syrians (and to HTS elements) on the basis of resistance against Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights or championing the Palestinian cause. Indeed, one possibility is that Iran will quietly encourage the new Syrian authorities not to make too many concessions to Israel or the West. However, this is delicate: President al-Sharaa has so far been careful to avoid open confrontation with Israel, focusing on consolidating internal power and gaining international acceptance. Any overtures by Iran framed around the "resistance" narrative might find little traction if the new Syrian leadership prioritizes rebuilding and ending Syria's international isolation over ideological battles.

Maintaining Influence via Proxies and Allies

With its formal influence greatly diminished, Iran might resort to more indirect means to maintain a foothold in Syrian affairs. Prior to Assad's fall, Iran had cultivated ties not just with the government, but also with certain communities and militias. For instance, Iran had strong relations with Syria's Alawite minority (Assad's sect); many Alawites, who suddenly lost political dominance, fear for their future under a mainly Sunni Islamist government. Iran could present itself as a protector or benefactor to Alawites if they face retribution or marginalization, perhaps by helping some relocate or by advocating for their inclusion in any power-sharing. Similarly, Iran has historically had contacts with Syrian Kurdish factions. While Turkey (a foe of Kurdish autonomy) now wields influence in Damascus, Iran might quietly support Kurdish interests as a way to counterbalance Turkish power – a classic divide and influence tactic. Tehran could, for example, leverage its relationship with certain Iraqi Kurdish or Iraqi Shia leaders to mediate between Syrian Kurds and Damascus in a way that preserves some Iranian influence.

Additionally, though most Iran-backed militias withdrew, some residual elements might remain in Syria in covert or dormant forms. Groups like Hezbollah, which had entrenched positions in southwest Syria, may have pulled back to Lebanon but could re-infiltrate if opportunities arise (for instance, if the new Syrian government fractures or if conflict with Israel flares up again). Iran might also find sympathizers among Syria's remaining Shi'ite communities (there are small

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Twelver Shia communities and many shrine pilgrims) or even among segments of Sunnis who oppose Turkish influence. It is noteworthy that Iran's state media began highlighting any internal divisions or controversies in the new Syrian government, perhaps to exploit them. For example, Iranian outlets pointed out human rights abuses by certain rebel factions and hinted at disagreements among Syrian rebel leaders. This suggests Iran could pursue a subtle media and propaganda strategy to undermine the new government's legitimacy or stoke public skepticism about it, thereby creating openings for Iran to reassert influence down the line.

Confrontation or Accommodation?

The big question for Iran's post-Assad foreign policy is whether Tehran will accept the loss of Syria quietly or attempt to actively undermine the new order. Thus far, Iran's approach has been cautiously accommodative – signaling acceptance and trying to avoid direct confrontation with the new authorities. There are likely two constraints guiding this approach:

- Iran's Regional Weakness in 2025: Iran's position regionally at the start of 2025 is significantly weakened. In addition to losing Syria, Iran's proxy network was dealt severe blows in late 2023. Israel's large-scale military response to the Hamas October 2023 attack not only devastated Hamas in Gaza but also severely weakened Hezbollah – Israel struck Hezbollah's infrastructure and reportedly killed or injured many of its commanders. The Houthis in Yemen, another Iranian ally, entered a truce under heavy international pressure. Iran itself faced renewed U.S. sanctions and the threat of military action over its nuclear program. In short, Iran in early 2025 was in no position to start a new proxy war in Syria against the entrenched presence of Turkey (a NATO member) and the tacit support the new Syrian government had from the West and Gulf states. Any Iranian attempt to foster an insurgency or destabilize the new Syrian government would likely be met with forceful pushback and isolate Tehran further. Recognizing this, Iran's leadership has probably calculated that it must bide its time and avoid burning bridges with Syria's new rulers.
- Long-Term Opportunism: From a longer-term perspective, Iran might bet that today's enemy could be tomorrow's ally. If the al-Sharaa government in Syria struggles with internal divisions or if its relationship with Turkey sours (for instance, over Syrian sovereignty or the presence of jihadist hardliners), Iran could find an opportunity to insert itself as an alternative partner. Iranian strategists recall how Iran managed to build relations with factions that were once foes (e.g. some Taliban elements, or even Hamas which had distanced itself from Assad/Iran early in the Syrian war but later restored ties with Tehran). Iran could be wagering that HTS and its Islamist coalition may moderate over time or fragment, and that at least a part of Syria's new power structure might eventually seek a rapprochement with Tehran – especially if doing so provides leverage against Turkey or Israel. In line with this thinking, Iran's Supreme Leader said in a post-fall speech that although Syria's government had changed, Iran "hopes the new Syrian government will not forget the support Iran gave to the Syrian people" (paraphrasing the implied message). In other words, Tehran is subtly reminding Damascus that Iran stood by Syria for years and that Iran could still be a valuable partner in areas like reconstruction, counterterrorism, or balancing Turkey's influence, should Damascus be interested.

However, in the near term, Syria's new leadership remains wary of Iran. President al-Sharaa, in speeches and interviews, has stressed Syria's sovereignty and that it "will not allow the resurgence of the old regime narrative that divided the country"– a thinly veiled reference to sectarian and proxy conflicts. He and his backers portray the new government as one born from a Syrian revolution free of foreign tutelage. This narrative leaves little room for acknowledging Iran's past

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support, which is instead viewed as an occupation. The new government has also been aligning economically with Gulf states and Turkey, securing aid and investment commitments, which reduces the incentive to deal with Iran. Indeed, Gulf Arab countries that previously competed with Iran in Syria are now likely to use economic carrots to keep Tehran out. For example, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have offered reconstruction funds and diplomatic support to the new Syrian administration on the condition that Iranian influence is curtailed – essentially trying to lock in Syria's realignment.

Given these headwinds, Iran's influence in Syria after Assad's liberation is at best marginal. An illustrative metric is diplomatic presence: as of mid-2025, Iran has not been invited to reestablish its once-robust embassy in Damascus, whereas other countries have quickly recognized the new government. If Iran is allowed any official presence, it might be limited to a small liaison office. Military influence is even more curtailed; Iran no longer controls any Syrian territory or military units. Israeli officials, observing the change, noted with satisfaction that Iran's ability to threaten Israel from Syria had been nullified. Indeed, Israel moved to capitalize on Iran's eviction: in the weeks following Assad's fall, Israel struck remaining weapons depots and infrastructure in Syria that had ties to Iran, and made clear it would not tolerate any return of Iranian-allied forces. The new Syrian leadership, for its part, had little objection to these Israeli actions since they were directed at remnants of the old regime's capabilities (and possibly at hardcore Islamist factions that the new president also needed to keep in check).

In summary, Iran's post-Assad foreign policy in Syria is characterized by reluctant acceptance and cautious outreach, constrained by a vastly diminished capacity to assert influence. Tehran's immediate priority is to maintain at least a diplomatic toehold in Syria and keep lines open to the new power brokers, in hopes of regaining some influence over time. In parallel, Iran will likely channel its regional ambitions elsewhere while it regroups – for instance, placing greater emphasis on bolstering its position in Iraq and Lebanon to compensate for the loss of Syria. There are already indications that Iran is accelerating its nuclear program and missile development, perhaps to strengthen its strategic deterrent now that its conventional forward presence (like bases in Syria) has been reduced. This could be interpreted through an IR lens as Iran shifting from external balancing (using allies/proxies abroad) more towards internal balancing (enhancing its own military power, e.g., nuclear capability), to safeguard its security interests after the setback in Syria.

5) Regional Implications and Iran's Evolving Strategy

The transformation in Syria has wide-reaching implications for the Middle East, fundamentally altering Iran's foreign policy landscape. One immediate effect is on the so-called "Axis of Resistance" – the network of state and non-state allies through which Iran confronts Israel and challenges U.S./Sunni Arab influence. Syria was a core pillar of this axis; with that pillar removed, the axis is fragmented and its effectiveness is in question. Iran must now find ways to adapt:

- Lebanon and Hezbollah: Hezbollah has long been the jewel in Iran's network, and Syria was the bridge connecting Iran to Hezbollah. With the Syrian route disrupted, Iran will have to rely on alternative channels (potentially maritime or via Iraq) to support Hezbollah – complicating logistics. Hezbollah itself, which had tied its fate to Assad's, faces new uncertainty. The group may need to recalibrate its stance as the new Syrian government is unlikely to be as accommodating to Hezbollah's military transit and supply needs as Assad was. In fact, as noted, Israel is currently occupying a buffer zone in southern Syria and is determined to prevent Hezbollah or any Iran-backed forces from re-entering the area. The loss of secure Syrian rear bases makes Hezbollah more isolated in Lebanon. In strategic terms, the deterrence equation between Iran/Hezbollah and Israel has shifted: Israel no

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longer worries about an Iranian conventional presence in Syria and can concentrate on Lebanon and Gaza. Iran may respond by redoubling efforts to equip Hezbollah with advanced weaponry (like precision-guided missiles) to maintain a credible threat against Israel, even if doing so becomes harder without Syrian transit.

- Iraq and the "Shia Crescent": Iran's influence in Iraq remains significant, and Iraq could become even more important as a contiguous ally. Iran might seek to develop a more direct land route from Iran through Iraq into parts of Syria or Lebanon, although with new authorities in Damascus, any such route would have to either be clandestine or negotiated. Interestingly, one of Iran's loyal Iraqi militias or political figures might attempt to mediate between Tehran and Damascus, given their connections to some Sunni Islamist groups (for example, there were past instances of Hamás and HTS communication via Turkey and Qatar; Iran might explore indirect contacts through those channels). Nonetheless, the narrative of a continuous "Shia Crescent" – stretching from Tehran to Beirut – is weakened. Observers noted that "the fall of Assad marks the loss of [Iran's] land bridge to the eastern Mediterranean". To compensate, Iran might invest more in maritime capabilities for projection (e.g., using the Persian Gulf-Mediterranean sea lanes) or fortify its position in Iraq, ensuring that at least in Baghdad and southern Iraq, Iranian leverage remains robust to prevent any further rollback.
- Turkey's Ascendancy: The rise of a Turkey-aligned government in Damascus is a new strategic challenge for Iran. Iranian and Turkish interests have historically diverged in Syria – Iran backed Assad, while Turkey supported Sunni rebels. Now Turkey is arguably the external power with the most sway in Syria. This realignment might push Iran and Russia even closer, as both lost out to Turkey in Syria and share concerns about Turkey's growing influence.

  Iran might coordinate with Russia in forums like the Astana Process (if that continues) to ensure, for instance, that Turkish and Western presence in Syria remains limited or temporary. However, Iran must tread carefully; it cannot afford to directly antagonize Ankara when it has few cards to play. Diplomatically, Iran has maintained working relations with Turkey (recall that Iran did not break ties over Syria even when they backed opposite sides). We might see Tehran quietly lobbying Ankara to guarantee the safety of Shia holy sites and communities in Syria, or to restrain more hardline Sunni factions from anti-Shia actions, in exchange for Iran not opposing Turkey's role. At the same time, Iran might try to leverage any regional opposition to Turkey's "neo-Ottoman" reach. Arab states like the UAE or Egypt, which are suspicious of Turkey's intentions, could find common ground with Iran in ensuring Syria's new rulers don't become puppets of Ankara. This could create an unusual convergence of Iranian-Arab interests against excessive Turkish influence.
- Israel's Calculations: While Israel is content to see Iran gone from its doorstep in Syria, a jihadist-led regime next door introduces new uncertainties. Israel has already taken a very hard line, conducting preventive strikes across Syria to eliminate weapons stockpiles and even warning the new Damascus leadership not to allow forces near the Golan Heights. Israel's policy appears to be to prevent Iran's return at all costs, while also deterring any jihadist elements from turning their guns toward Israel. Iran, from its perspective, will want to prove that it is still relevant to the Palestinian issue and the confrontation with Israel. With Syria no longer a frontline base, Iran may put more emphasis on Gaza (with Hamas) and the West Bank, or even attempt to cultivate influence in Jordan or within Palestinian

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refugee populations, to keep pressure on Israel. In a broader IR context, Israel's success in pushing back Iran (in Syria and via strikes on proxies) might embolden a more aggressive stance against Iran's nuclear program as well. Some speculate that with Iran weakened regionally, Israel (perhaps with U.S. backing) could increase covert or military efforts to curtail Iran's nuclear advances. This in turn could influence Iran's foreign policy – making it more hardline on preserving a deterrent and less willing to compromise in negotiations, fearing that concessions would invite more pressure.

- Persian Gulf States: The Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are among those quietly pleased by Iran's loss in Syria. Saudi-Iran relations had seen a thaw in 2023 (with Chinese-brokered normalization), but Saudi Arabia's leadership viewed Iran's regional aggression with mistrust. The end of the Assad regime can be seen as vindication for Saudi's long-held stance (Riyadh had armed Syrian rebels early in the war, though it later pulled back). Now, the Saudis and Emiratis have an opportunity to pull Syria into their orbit through reconstruction aid – something Iran can no longer effectively counter. Iran's foreign policy might respond by trying not to antagonize the Gulf states unnecessarily; indeed, Tehran might double down on the diplomatic rapprochement with Riyadh to avoid being completely encircled by a hostile Sunni bloc. This aligns with a neorealist strategy of balancing: if Iran has lost on one front (Syria), it may seek to stabilize another (Gulf relations) to prevent further isolation.

- Domestic Impact in Iran: It is worth noting the domestic Iranian angle. The Syrian adventure, once propagandized as a glorious defense of the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab and a front against ISIS, has in hindsight become a tale of costly failure. Iranian public opinion, at least in private discourses, has been critical of the regime's expenditure in Syria. Now, with the outcome laid bare, those criticisms may amplify. Opposition voices within Iran can point to Syria's liberation as evidence of the futility of Iran's expansionist policies, arguing that resources should be spent at home, not on foreign wars. The Iranian regime will counter this by blaming foreign conspiracies (indeed, Iranian media heavily blamed "Western and Zionist interference" for Assad's fall) and by insisting Iran never aimed to dominate Syria. Still, the loss of face is significant. How Iran's leadership handles this narrative internally could affect its future foreign policy – it might become more cautious about overt entanglements, or conversely, it might seek a victory elsewhere to compensate. Some have speculated that Iran could accelerate its nuclear program partly out of a desire to have a strong bargaining chip and showcase of strength after losing Syria. In any case, the lessons of Syria will likely be studied intensely in Tehran's corridors of power, possibly leading to shifts such as investing in more self-reliant military technology (drones, missiles) versus reliance on allies, or improving intelligence to avoid strategic surprises.

Iran's Foreign Policy Outlook

In the final analysis, Iran's foreign policy in Syria before and after Assad's fall can be seen as a dramatic case study in the marriage of ideology and pragmatism in Iranian strategy. Before liberation, Iran pursued an ambitious, interventionist agenda in Syria, justified by a mix of revolutionary ideology (supporting an anti-Israel ally and fellow anti-imperialist regime) and realist power calculus (maintaining regional hegemony and strategic depth). It employed all instruments of power – military, economic, sectarian, and diplomatic – to secure its interests, and for a time appeared to succeed at considerable cost. After Syria's liberation from Assad, Iran's grand strategy was abruptly humbled by unforeseen events (a rapid rebel victory), illustrating the

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limits of Iran's reach when confronted by broad-based local opposition and determined regional rivals. In the post-Assad phase, Iran has had to pivot to a far more restrained foreign policy: largely defensive, seeking to preserve influence through soft power and behind-the-scenes engagement rather than open intervention. This shift underscores a core principle in IR theory: even revisionist powers like Iran must eventually bow to the realities of balance of power and local legitimacy. When the balance shifted – Turkey's intervention tipping the scales, and the Syrian populace rejecting Assad and his foreign backers – Iran's project unraveled.

Yet, it would be premature to write off Iran completely in Syria. As some observers caution, Iran's regime has shown resilience and adaptability in the face of adversity. Tehran may be down in Syria, but it will look for ways (subtle or covert) to reassert itself if opportunities arise. Much depends on how the situation in Syria evolves: a stable, inclusive new government that meets the needs of its people is unlikely to leave much room for Iranian meddling. Conversely, if the new order falters – say, due to economic woes or infighting – Iran could find openings, perhaps by backing certain factions or offering economic aid with strings attached.

Iran will also watch the actions of Turkey and Israel carefully; any overreach by those actors could rekindle Syrian nationalist resentment that Iran might quietly fuel. In an interesting twist, Iran and the new Syrian leadership do share one interest: opposition to any long-term U.S. military presence in Syria. If, for instance, the United States keeps troops in eastern Syria (ostensibly to fight ISIS or guard oil fields), both Iran and Islamist factions in Syria would object. Conceivably, Iran could support Syrian calls for American withdrawal, aligning with Damascus on that nationalist issue even while being at odds elsewhere.

Conclusion

The saga of Iran's engagement in Syria – from its deep involvement under Assad to its loss of influence after Assad's ouster – illustrates the dynamic interplay of strategy, ideology, and unexpected change in foreign policy. Before Syria's liberation, Iran's policy was marked by determination to preserve a friendly regime that served as the linchpin of Iran's regional strategy. Through military might, financial investment, and ideological zeal, Tehran became deeply enmeshed in the Syrian conflict, seeing it as an existential front to safeguard Iran's own interests. This phase, spanning roughly 2011–2024, demonstrated how Iran's revolutionary statecraft can yield short-term gains but also entangle the country in costly quagmires. Iran helped Assad cling to power against the odds and, in doing so, extended its arc of influence to the doorstep of Israel – but at enormous material and reputational expense, and at the cost of aligning with a regime widely viewed as tyrannical.

After Syria's liberation, Iran's foreign policy had to confront failure. The end of Assad's rule was strategically calamitous for Tehran, eliminating its chief Arab ally and expelling Iran from a pivotal arena. In response, Iran's behavior shifted notably: the ideological grandstanding gave way to pragmatism and a degree of humility. Iran signaled willingness to work with a former foe, moderated its propaganda, and retrenched to focus on preserving core interests. This adaptability highlights a often under-appreciated facet of Iranian foreign policy – beneath the revolutionary rhetoric, Iran's leaders can be highly pragmatic survivors. They prefer to fight for every inch of influence, but when defeated, they will negotiate and recalibrate rather than simply surrender their regional role.

From an IR perspective, the Iranian case in Syria underscores several key points. Firstly, regional hegemons like Iran often rely on proxy wars and alliances to extend their power, but these can be double-edged swords – they entangle the would-be hegemon in local conflicts that may not always be controllable. Secondly, the importance of local legitimacy and popular sentiment cannot be

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ignored: Iran, a predominantly Shia Persian power, ultimately could not indefinitely sustain rule over a largely Sunni Arab populace in Syria through force alone. When that populace's will was galvanized (with external help), Iran's hard power was checked. Thirdly, the Syrian outcome demonstrates how external balance-of-power shifts (Turkey's decisive intervention and a momentarily distracted Russia/Iran) can rapidly alter the calculus, serving as a reminder that even entrenched foreign policies must expect the unexpected.

For Iran, the loss in Syria is a sobering moment that may prompt a broader strategic reconsideration. It may double-down on securing what it still has (Iraq, partnerships with groups elsewhere) and hedging against further losses. It may also accelerate efforts to achieve a powerful deterrent (like a nuclear threshold status) to compensate for losing conventional ground. Internally, voices advocating for focusing resources at home may gain strength, questioning adventures like Syria. Whether Iran's leadership truly learns a lesson in restraint remains to be seen. History shows that the Islamic Republic often steps back after a setback, only to push forward again when circumstances allow.

In conclusion, Iran's foreign policy in Syria has come full circle: from forging an alliance with the Assad dynasty in the late 20th century, to fighting a bitter war to preserve it in the 2010s, to now confronting a Syria "liberated" from that alliance – and from Iran's own influence. The liberation of Syria from Assad's rule has, in a sense, also liberated Iran from the burdens of propping up a client regime – but at the cost of a strategic defeat. How Iran adapts to this new reality will shape the next chapter of Middle Eastern geopolitics. The region will be watching closely whether Tehran seeks reconciliation and a lower profile, or whether it nurses its wounds and waits for the right moment to reassert its vision of regional order. For now, Iran's long intervention in Syria stands as a cautionary tale of foreign policy overreach, and Syria's post-Assad trajectory will test the limits of Iran's influence when ideology collides with changing power realities.

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