

## The Fallout from Assad's Fall: Gulf States Grapple with Strategic Challenges

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The sudden fall of Bashar al-Assad has forced Gulf Arab states to **confront a power vacuum** and reassess their strategic priorities. This unexpected development has raised questions about the future of Syria and **the Gulf's role in shaping its trajectory**.

### The Legacy of Intervention in Syria

The toppling of the Assad regime marked the failure of the Gulf states' normalization strategy with the regime. It is also a reminder that the Gulf Arab countries' involvement in the Syrian civil war has left a mixed legacy, marked by strategic missteps, costly consequences, and a tarnished record of intervention. At the onset of the conflict, states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE funneled substantial financial and military resources to opposition groups, aiming to undermine the Assad regime and counter Iran's growing influence in Syria. However, these efforts often **lacked coordination and coherence**, leading to unintended outcomes that exacerbated the chaos.

Yet, as much as this intervention exposed rivalries and misalignments, it also reflected a shared fear of losing strategic leverage in Syria to Iran. Rivalries among Gulf states, particularly between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, fueled factionalism within the opposition forces. Competing support for different rebel groups not only diluted the effectiveness of the anti-Assad effort but also empowered extremist factions, complicating the broader geopolitical landscape.

Moreover, the intervention drained resources and diverted attention from pressing domestic and regional challenges. Saudi Arabia and the UAE faced criticism for prioritizing foreign adventures over addressing economic diversification and societal reforms at home.

In the end, the Gulf Arab states failed to achieve their primary objective of toppling Assad or curbing Iranian influence. Instead, the war entrenched Tehran's role in Syria, solidified Russia's military foothold in the Middle East, and necessitated costly rebuilding of diplomatic bridges with Damascus — without any guarantees of concessions. The normalization of ties with Assad in recent years underscores the futility of earlier interventionist policies, which yielded little but reputational damage and strategic setbacks.

The UAE was first in line to acknowledge these missteps, playing a pivotal role in facilitating the Assad regime's reintegration into the regional fold. Its decision to normalize ties with Damascus — at least partly motivated by and mirroring Saudi Arabia's efforts to reduce Syria's reliance on Tehran — marked a sharp departure from its early stance of severing relations with Assad and backing the Free Syrian Army during the conflict's initial stages. But unlike Qatar and Turkey, the UAE exhibited a more cautious approach toward the Syrian opposition, particularly as Islamist and jihadist factions became dominant within anti-Assad forces.

Assad's return to the Arab fold was notable not only for its symbolism but for its role in the consolidation of a framework for managing regional rivalries. This development came amid a series of steps that helped narrow divides across the region — whether between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Qatar and its GCC neighbors, Turkey and its Arab adversaries, or Israel and its regional neighbors like Lebanon, the UAE, and Bahrain. Syria's normalization thus added another layer to the ongoing effort to de-escalate entrenched regional tensions. In embracing constructive engagement, the Gulf monarchies prioritized pragmatism and realism over entrenched geopolitical and sectarian divides.

### **Shared Concerns and Fragile Unity**

There are some unifying factors. At the heart of the Gulf Arab states' common concerns is a commitment to stability and sovereignty in Syria. Amid the chaos, Gulf leaders have found some alignment, particularly in their shared goal of preventing Syria from descending into a failed state akin to Libya or Yemen. This consensus, however tenuous, underscores their recognition of the broader regional stakes.

This shared stance was evident in the foreign ministers' meeting on December 14 in Aqaba, Jordan, where a [joint communiqué](#) emphasized Syria's territorial integrity and called for an inclusive Syrian-led transition through a comprehensive national dialogue. The Gulf states' initial reactions reflected a degree of harmony, particularly regarding their condemnation of external interference, their collective wariness of extremist factions, and their broader opposition to Iranian influence in Syria.

The emphasis on preserving national institutions and on inclusivity — both in terms of regional actors engaging in Syria and integrating various segments of Syrian society — has been central to the Gulf states' early strategies. Accordingly, Gulf leaders have called for Arab-led solutions to the Syrian crisis, emphasizing non-sectarian governance and Syria's sovereignty. *The Aqaba summit highlighted this consensus, urging a framework that countered foreign interference while ensuring Syria's territorial integrity.*

***Gulf leaders share the concern that Syria could descend into chaos.*** These concerns are reflected in a [joint statement](#) by Arab foreign ministers during a meeting hosted by Qatar on December 7, the very day before the Assad regime fell, which warned that the continuation of the Syrian crisis poses a danger to both Syria's security and regional stability, and called for a political solution that ends military operations and protects civilians.

There is also concern about ***Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)***, an Islamist group involved in the Syrian conflict. Anwar Gargash, a presidential adviser in the UAE, voiced skepticism about the group's affiliation with the ***Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Qaeda***, highlighting the potential risks posed by such alliances. In remarks at the World Policy Conference in Abu Dhabi, Gargash [stated](#), “the nature of the new forces, the affiliation with the (Muslim) Brotherhood, the affiliation with Al-Qaeda, I think these are all indicators that are quite worrying.” Yet, despite such reservations, Gulf Arab governments have little choice but to engage with HTS, considering the situation on the ground in Syria.

Israel's ambitions, particularly its plan to strengthen its hold on the Golan Heights, have further heightened concerns in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia [condemned](#) Israel's plans to double the population of the occupied Golan Heights, calling it “sabotage” of Syria. The Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Doha [considers](#) the Israeli incursion “a dangerous development and a blatant attack on Syria's sovereignty and unity as well as a flagrant violation of international law.”

The stakes extend beyond Syria, potentially destabilizing the delicate balance of Gulf cooperation and undermining years of regional de-escalation efforts. With normalization having failed and the Assad regime toppled, can the fragile regional de-escalation strategies painstakingly established in recent years — already destabilized by the Israel-Hamas war and Israel's expansive military operations — be sustained, or will competing priorities and mistrust lead to their unraveling? Managing the fallout of Assad's sudden demise and navigating Syria's precarious transition will require not only pragmatic diplomacy but also a cohesive and unified Gulf response — a feat that has often eluded the region in the past.

## The Shadow of Past Regime Changes

The Gulf states' apprehensions are not unfounded. The examples of regime collapse in **Libya** and **Iraq** loom large underscore the potential for post-Assad Syria to spiral into chaos. Libya's descent into prolonged civil war and Iraq's fragmentation following Saddam Hussein's removal have become cautionary tales. ***Both cases highlight how power vacuums can enable the rise of extremist groups, fuel sectarian rivalries, and provoke proxy conflicts.***

In Libya, the NATO-led intervention that ousted Muammar Gaddafi unleashed a torrent of instability that reverberated across *the Sahel and North Africa*. Similarly, *Iraq's instability post-2003 catalyzed the rise of ISIS* and exacerbated regional tensions. For Gulf leaders, these lessons underscore the dangers of a destabilized Syria, ***where chaos could spill over into neighboring regions***, amplifying humanitarian crises and fueling the rise of groups like HTS.

*Both Libya and Iraq have become cautionary tales for Gulf Arab states, which are keenly aware that instability in one country can quickly spill over, creating ripple effects that can destabilize entire regions.* These lessons weigh heavily on the Gulf's approach to Syria, where similar fears of chaos and the rise of extremist groups, along with the potential for a proxy conflict involving regional and global powers, persist. Gulf leaders fear that failing to maintain Syria's stability could exacerbate regional instability, fuel extremism, and create a humanitarian crisis with far-reaching consequences.

## Seeking Pragmatic Solutions

With the collapse of Saudi Arabia and the UAE's strategy to rehabilitate Assad, the Gulf states are left with limited options, forcing them to engage with HTS and ***navigate Turkey's expanding influence*** — an approach that some of the Gulf states, most notably UAE, adopt with evident reluctance. These policy recalibrations reflect not only the urgency of the current situation but also the fractured unity among Gulf actors, whose divergent strategies threaten to unravel years of painstakingly built cooperation.

Despite the shared misgivings that have given rise to apparent harmony, deep differences remain. Saudi Arabia and the UAE's decisions to reengage with Assad's regime stand in stark contrast to Qatar's unyielding opposition to normalization. These contrasting approaches reflect broader strategic priorities, with ***Qatar aligning itself more closely with Turkey and Islamist movements, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE focus on countering Iranian and Turkish influence through pragmatic engagement.***

For Saudi Arabia, the Syrian conflict is intertwined with its Vision 2030 reform agenda, which seeks to diversify the Kingdom's economy and reduce its dependence on oil. Accordingly, Riyadh favors a balanced approach to Syria, advocating for governance that includes moderate opposition voices while excluding extremist factions. The UAE's approach reflects its vision of secular stability and Arab unity, with engagement in Syria seen as a strategic effort to counter Iranian influence and mitigate the chaos of regime change.

Qatar, however, occupies a unique position. It never normalized relations with Assad and continued to support Syrian rebels, including HTS. Qatar's backing of Islamist factions and its close ties with Turkey deepened divisions within the GCC, particularly during the Saudi-led blockade (2017-2021). ***The power vacuum left by Assad's ouster has elevated Qatar and Turkey as key brokers, challenging the traditional dominance of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.*** Concerns over Islamist governance continue to drive differences. Qatar and Turkey advocate for the inclusion of Islamist factions in post-Assad governance, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE remain deeply skeptical, fearing that Islamist-led governments could embolden similar movements within their borders.

The situation in Syria now presents a challenge for these regional powers. Policy divergences — most notably the UAE's firm opposition to Islamist movements like HTS, Saudi Arabia's cautious push for dialogue and an inclusive political solution, and Qatar's proactive engagement with HTS and backchannel efforts — do more than complicate Syria's political transition. They risk unraveling the hard-won gains in repairing intra-Gulf relations and deepening ties between the Gulf states and Turkey, *jeopardizing the broader framework of regional cooperation and stability that has emerged in recent years.*

## Conclusion

Although Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar share a commitment to Syria's political transition and regional stability, their divergent strategies underscore the intricate dynamics of Gulf geopolitics. The stakes could not be higher. With the failure of normalization, will the regional de-escalation strategies painstakingly built over years collapse as well? Responding to the Assad regime's sudden demise and managing the fragile political transition ahead will demand not only a high degree of pragmatism but also an unprecedented level of unity and coordination. ***Failure to act collectively risks not only repeating the missteps of past interventions but also plunging Syria into deeper instability, with far-reaching implications for the Gulf's security and influence.***