**Syria: The Rapid fall of the Assad Regime may be the last Attempt that Can Force Tehran to Reform**

**Turkiye is One of the Biggest Beneficiaries of the Current Situation in Syria.**

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**Editor's note: In 2024, the situation in the Middle East has undergone profound changes. From the regional strategic confrontation between Iran and Israel, to Israel's large-scale ground military operation against Hezbollah in Lebanon, which was led by a pager assassination, to the major changes in the Syrian political situation that led to the reorganization of the regional power structure, the situation in the Middle East has continued to attract global attention over the past year.** In the new year 2025, China’s Observer.com media outlet talked with Professor Fan Hongda, and asked him to summarize and analyze the current chaos in the Middle East and look forward to development trends in 2025.

**Observer: This year, wars have continued in the Middle East, from Palestine to Lebanon and Syria, and the situation is becoming increasingly unclear. So let's start with the flashpoints of this round of war, Palestine and Israel, and first discuss about Hamas. This round of war has destroyed a lot of the power that Hamas has accumulated over the years. Even former Hamas leaders Sinwar and Haniyeh died at the hands of Israel. With the situation in Syria changing and Iran having no time to pay attention to Hamas, where will Hamas go in the future? Will it abandon the resistance axis and seek to re-start cooperation with the Muslim Brotherhood?**

**Fan Hongda:** The October 7, 2023 incident was a huge blow to Hamas. I judged at the time that Hamas would be completely destroyed. In the past year or so, Hamas's military force has been almost completely wiped out. Under such circumstances, its political influence has also declined significantly, and it will be difficult to revive. Israel's goal is obviously to completely destroy Hamas. It will not allow Hamas to continue to wage guerrilla warfare in Gaza City. Israel is very eager to eliminate both the military threat and political influence of Hamas. I think Israel will try to build a Gaza Strip without Hamas.

In addition, other political factions within Palestine, especially Fatah, are also worried that the revival of Hamas will threaten its dominant position in Palestine. Therefore, other Palestinian political forces are unlikely to support the revival of Hamas, and may even be inclined to support Israel's actions to completely weaken or even destroy Hamas. In terms of cooperation with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Sisi regime in Egypt strongly opposes the Muslim Brotherhood and sees it as a threat. Considering the Egyptian government's tough stance and its negative attitude towards Hamas, although Hamas once had contact with the Muslim Brotherhood, it is almost impossible to restore relations in the current political context.

As a political and military organization, Hamas is facing extremely severe challenges. Unless the situation changes drastically, its future prospects are not optimistic.

**Observer: With this series of changes, will the Israeli-Palestinian conflict come to an end? In addition to building a separation wall in Gaza, Israel continues to occupy the West Bank. How will Israel treat these two areas after this round of truce?**

**Fan Hongda:** In fact, Israel's policies towards Gaza and the West Bank have become increasingly consistent. Before October 7 last year, Gaza was under the control of Hamas and still had a certain degree of autonomy, basically free from direct control by Israel. However, after more than a year of development, the situation has completely changed. At the same time, Israel has always had very tight control over the West Bank. More than a decade ago, I did a month-long research in the West Bank, when Israel's control over the region was already very tight. Although Palestine is widely recognized internationally, in reality, it lacks sovereignty and other basic elements of a state. The West Bank is controlled by the Israel Defense Forces and settlements as a whole, and Israel has become the de facto master of the region's destiny. It is foreseeable that Israel will adopt similar policies in the Gaza Strip.

Although we all don't want to see such a situation, the international community hopes that Palestine can achieve independence as soon as possible, and the Palestinian people have paid a huge price for this. In the past year alone, more than 45,000 people died in the Gaza Strip. **But unfortunately, I think the possibility of realizing the two-state solution is very slim**. The most intense conflict phase seems to have passed. Hamas, the biggest force in violent resistance, has basically lost its combat capability, and other Palestinian political factions are either unable to continue the struggle or lack the will. Therefore, the situation will gradually cool down. When Trump takes office, the situation between Palestine and Israel may be relatively eased.

**Observer: Back in Israel, Netanyahu's case is being reopened. What impact do you think this will have on Israel's political situation? Will it trigger another domestic turmoil after the judicial reform case? What impact will it have on the war situation?**

**Fan Hongda:** In Israel, it is not uncommon for high-ranking officials to be investigated or even go to court. Netanyahu's case is not a sudden incident, but has been going on for many years. Therefore, the Israeli people do not react strongly to the court trial that Netanyahu is facing now. The impact of Netanyahu's trial cannot be compared with the previous judicial reform storm. Although the judicial reform storm that broke out in the first half of last year did cause great turmoil in Israeli society, this storm itself was only a trigger. Before the judicial reform, there were many profound contradictions in Israel, including contradictions between Jews and non-Jews, and contradictions between Orthodox Jews and non-Orthodox Jews.

Therefore, I pointed out a few years ago that the biggest threat facing Israel is not only external conflicts, but also the growing divisions within the country. If these divisions are not properly resolved, political turmoil in Israel will be inevitable in the future.

As for the reasons why Netanyahu is pushing for war, on the one hand, domestic radical forces are trying to build a so-called national security concept; on the other hand, when the country is at war, domestic judicial investigations into Netanyahu are often shelved. Today, Israel is in a clear advantage on the battlefield and the threat of war has decreased, so the impact of Netanyahu's critique and investigation for the war situation is very limited.

**Observer: Trump is about to take office. Some people believe that his conservative stance and his relationship with Netanyahu may halt or even end the current round of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. What do you think of the impact of the US on the Israeli-Palestinian situation?**

**Fan Hongda:** Trump's second term may promote a ceasefire between Palestine and Israel. The specific details can refer to the solution to the Palestinian issue proposed in his first term. From the general trend, the geopolitical position of the United States in the Middle East is gradually declining, and Trump's attention to the two-state solution is far less than that of the Biden administration. Therefore, I do not have high expectations for the realization of the two-state solution. The key to realizing the two-state solution is Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories, but this is almost impossible to achieve in Israel's domestic political environment. Without Israel's cooperation, any two-state solution cannot succeed.

Therefore, I think the solution to the Palestinian-Israeli issue is more likely to be achieved at the cost of weakening the Palestinian state. In other words, Palestine may be able to improve its economic situation, but it is almost impossible to achieve full sovereign statehood. And Washington will not be very willing to support the establishment of a fully sovereign Palestinian state.

In recent years, the United States has shifted its focus to great power competition and hopes to reduce direct intervention in the Middle East, especially to avoid getting involved in large-scale conflicts there. **The Trump team has not paid much attention to the situation in Syria.** **In the future, the United States may lead the development of the situation in the region through countries like France, rather than directly leading changes in the local situation as it did in the past few decades.**

**Observer: Turning our attention to Syria, Israel has occupied Mount Hermon and is expanding its buffer zone underground in the Golan Heights. Where do you think Israel's advance will stop in the future? Will it set up a pseudo-government there, as it did in southern Lebanon? If the Lebanese-Israeli war resumes, is it possible that Israel will further try to expand its buffer zone to the north and attack Hezbollah from the east?**

**Fan Hongda:** The buffer zone established by Israel is roughly along the 1974 demarcation line. This arrangement makes Israel one of the biggest beneficiaries of the current changes in the situation in Syria. **However, I do not think Israel has a strong desire to control Syrian territory. On the contrary, Israel hopes to see a relatively decentralized but weak Syria without violent conflicts.** Syria no longer poses a direct threat to Israel. In addition, the buffer zone has expanded compared to the area previously controlled by Israel, which provides Israel with a stronger guarantee for the security of the water source of the Sea of ​​Galilee. Therefore, I believe that Israel will not conduct large-scale land-taking oriented breakthrough military operations in Syria, but will only strike when facing potential threats, especially against ammunition depots and military facilities that pose a greater threat, to ensure that Syria cannot pose a military threat to Israel in the future.

Likewise, Israel will not establish a pseudo-regime in Syria similar to that in southern Lebanon. If Israel takes such action, it will inevitably cause conflicts with countries including Turkey, and may also intensify the conflict with the HTŞ Julani faction, which has changed its name to Şarah. If the situation escalates again in the future, Israel can use its buffer zone and homeland in Syria to attack Hezbollah in southern Lebanon from the east and south to form a more favorable military situation. Considering the Lebanese-Israeli war and the changes in the situation in Syria, Hezbollah is unlikely to have the will to start another war with Israel. Although Iran has not completely stopped supporting Hezbollah, the sustainability of Iran’s support is uncertain as controversy over external intervention into Iran intensifies. Therefore, Hezbollah is likely to take the initiative to avoid high-intensity confrontation with Israel.

It is unlikely that Israel will take the initiative to attack Hezbollah. Israel has two main ways to disarm Hezbollah: one is to destroy Hezbollah through military means, and the other is to force the Lebanese government army to take over Hezbollah's armed forces so that Hezbollah loses its ability to independently arm itself. If Hezbollah refuses to give up its arms, it will inevitably make enemies with other factions in Lebanon.

Therefore, how Hezbollah will cooperate with the Lebanese government and local political factions in the future will be an issue that deserves close attention.

**Observer: The changes in Syria have brought Turkey a lot of benefits, but at the same time it has also shouldered the survival burden of nearly 20 million Syrians. What do you think Turkey, the Syrian National Army and the Sham Liberation Front will do next? Will they launch a full-scale attack on the Kurdish region to seize oil and grain fields?**

**Fan Hongda:** Turkey is undoubtedly one of the biggest beneficiaries of the current situation in Syria. Whether through social media, communication with people related to the Turkish and Syrian transitional governments, or private conversations with Turkish friends, I can clearly feel the pride and pride in the hearts of the Turkish people. I received several pieces of relevant information before. For example, a Turkish friend mentioned that the foreign minister of the Syrian transitional government just obtained a master's degree in sociology from a private university in Turkey in 2022 and is also a doctoral student at the university. Another person in charge of women's affairs has dual Syrian and Turkish citizenship. All this information shows that the Turks believe that they are the biggest beneficiaries of the current changes in the situation.

However, as you said, Turkey is now facing certain risks. On the one hand, Syria is already in a state of division in the late period of Assad's rule. In addition to the forces of Russia and Iran, the Syrian Democratic Forces (the Kurdish forces supported by the United States) also play an important role in Syrian territory.

To date, the leaders of the Syrian transitional government still claim that they hope that all factions will disarm and form a unified national army, but the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces have not expressed their views and can even be said to have rejected the policies of the "Syrian Liberation Front". As a result, the Turkish-backed "Syrian National Army" and "Syrian Liberation Front" and the Kurdish "Syrian Democratic Forces" still have small-scale ongoing conflicts and frictions. Whether Syria can achieve unity is a huge challenge for Turkey.

On the other hand, after Assad was ousted, Turkey became the first external party responsible for the livelihood of Syria. However, Turkey's own economic situation is not ideal and it lacks sufficient funds to rebuild Syria. To complete post-war reconstruction, Turkey must rely on the cooperation of the international community, but this is also a big challenge. If Turkey hopes to promote the unification of Syria, build a new Syria, and re-obtain the oil and grain fields in the Kurdish region to restore the local Syrian economy, it will inevitably conflict directly with the interests of the United States in Syria.

At present, Turkey has shown great confidence in the development of the situation in Syria. The Turkish Foreign Minister's recent speech even carried a certain mocking tone towards Iran and Russia. This is not a good sign. Although Russia is busy with the Ukrainian war and Iran's resistance axis has been frustrated, the influence of the two countries in Syria has been relatively weakened, but we cannot ignore the far-reaching influence of these two countries in Syria. If Turkey ignores the role of these two countries, it may face serious consequences in the future. It will take time to see how the situation in Syria develops in the future. I personally believe that Türkiye and the "Sham Liberation Front" it supports and the transitional government will continue to face challenges.

**Nevertheless, I also think that a full-scale conflict between Turkey and the Kurds is unlikely to break out at present.** Since the Syrian Democratic Forces cannot militarily compete with Turkey and its supported Syrian National Army and the Levantine Front, they are likely to suffer a complete military defeat. The Syrian transitional government has shown a strong desire for unity politically, so the Kurds may accept the formal unification of the country under certain conditions.

However, it remains to be seen whether this negotiation can satisfy the Kurds’ demands and meet Turkey’s psychological expectations. If the two sides can reach a compromise, Syria’s unification may be achieved in a relatively peaceful way; if no compromise can be reached, the Kurds may be forced to pay a price and be forcibly unified by Turkey and its supported armed forces.

**Observer: The rapid change in Syria has undoubtedly interrupted the geographical connection of the "resistance axis" supported by Iran. How will Iran assist Hezbollah in the future? Previously, Iraqi Shiite faction Grand Ayatollah Sistani withstood the pressure from the United States and refused to disband the Shiite militia. In this context, what adjustments will Iran make in its future strategy? Will it devote all its efforts to operating the Iran-Iraq region? Will Israel choose to continue its military strikes against Iran, especially against Iran's nuclear facilities? At the same time, what impact will it have on the situation in Yemen?**

**Fan Hongda:** Obviously, as members of the resistance axis have been hit one after another, Iran is facing increasing pressure and negative impacts. For example, due to the collapse of the Assad government in Syria, Iran's aid to Hezbollah has been cut off. If it continues to provide aid in the future, it will have to take a detour, which is obviously not as convenient as in the past. **In addition, the discussion within Tehran on whether to continue to adhere to the strategy of the resistance axis has become increasingly intense. In fact, this discussion is not new and has existed in the past few years. However, due to the heavy losses suffered by members of the resistance axis in the past year or so, this debate has attracted more attention.**

I believe that support for the resistance axis is gradually weakening within Iran. This trend is not only reflected in the government system, but also clearly felt among the people. Every time I go to Iran, I hear people complain that the country is still investing precious foreign exchange in supporting the resistance axis in the context of international sanctions and foreign exchange shortages. Many people question the actual value of this practice and even doubt whether it is worth continuing.

Therefore, even if Iraq's Şhiite Grand Ayatollah Sistani refuses to disband the militias, I believe Iran's support and willingness for the resistance axis will weaken in the future. Moreover, if Iran hopes to maintain and enhance its regional status, it must change its current foreign strategy, otherwise its prospects will become increasingly worrying. The changes in the situation of the resistance axis, especially the sudden fall of the Bashar regime, may become the last attempt and last straw that forces Tehran to reform. If Iran chooses to continue to confront the United States and continues to refuse to recognize Israel, it will face extremely severe internal and external pressure. I think there are some forces within Iran that are testing public opinion, and some have even raised the issue of Khamenei's son taking over as supreme leader. I think this is an attempt to pave the way for future political changes. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ali\_Khamenei

In the past few years, Israel has been trying to persuade the United States to join forces to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities, but the United States has not responded yet. If the United States cooperates, Israel and Iran will inevitably go into a full-scale war, not just the current show-like strikes. Both sides have enough strength to cause fatal damage, so once this war breaks out, the scope of the conflict may no longer be limited to a few countries in the Middle East, but will trigger a wider conflict. This is also the reason why the United States has been reluctant to cooperate with Israel to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities.

The Yemen Houthis are still maintaining their offensive posture against Israel, but the Middle East resistance axis needs to unite to put more pressure on Israel. As the battlefield between Hezbollah and Hamas gradually calms down, the various forces in the resistance axis are fighting on their own, and the challenge of the Houthis to Israel will gradually decrease. If the Houthis continue to maintain their offensive posture, it may trigger joint actions by the United States, Britain, Israel and other countries, or even suffer a devastating blow.

**Observer: Finally, could you please summarize, is the situation in the Middle East experiencing an escalation or de-escalation? In the long run, will there be another round of regional power struggles following the "Arab Spring"?**

**Fan Hongda:** I believe that after more than a year of high-intensity military confrontation, the current situation in the Middle East is showing a cooling trend and is approaching a turning point. Based on the current information from all sources, the possibility of major powers such as Iran, Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia launching a new round of war in the Middle East is very low. At the same time, considering that local resistance organizations such as Hamas have suffered heavy blows and major powers outside the region are also facing challenges, the possibility of a large-scale conflict in the Middle East is small, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is unlikely to become a flashpoint in the short term. Overall, the situation in the Middle East may ease in the future.