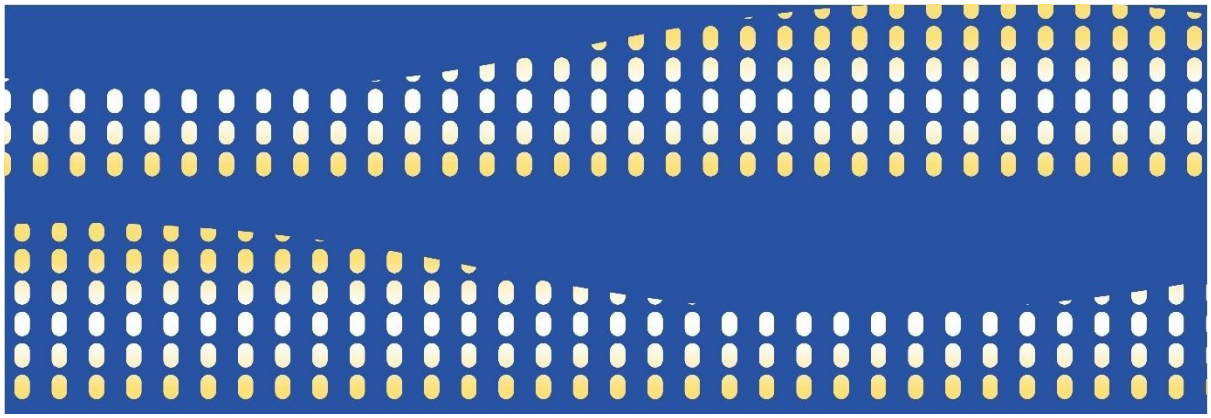

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The Current

"What's next for Syria and the region after Assad's fall?"

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DEWS: You're listening to *The Current*, part of the Brookings Podcast Network, found online with our other public policy shows at Brookings dot edu slash podcasts. I'm Fred Dews.

On Sunday, December 8th, after more than a week of rapid gains, Syrian rebels took control of Damascus, the nation's capital. Deposed dictator Bashar al-Assad fled to Russia, marking the end of a long civil war and his 24-year-long brutal reign, which followed his father's nearly 30-year rule. Syrians are rightfully celebrating, even as they're freeing people from notorious regime prisons and looking to transition away from decades of repression.

Here to talk about what's happening and the implications of Assad's fall for the region and the world is Steven Heydemann, a nonresident senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy here at Brookings and the Ketcham Chair of Middle East studies at Smith College. Among his many occupations focused on Middle East policy, Dr. Heydemann directed the U.S. Institute of Peace's Syria-related activities from 2011 to 2015.

Steven, welcome to *The Current*.

HEYDEMANN: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

DEWS: So, it's Monday, December 9th here in Washington, D.C. did the events over the last few days take you by surprise, Steven?

[1:19]

HEYDEMANN: They did take me by surprise. And frankly, anyone who tells you that they weren't surprised by these events is probably not being completely honest. My sense, in fact, is that even the rebels themselves were surprised by the speed of their advance. I think they probably intended a much more limited operation when they began on November 27th to take on regime forces south of Idlib. But when they saw how quickly the regime's forces were collapsing, they just decided to keep going as far as they could, and they made it all the way to Damascus.

DEWS: So, what do you think explains the sudden and rapid collapse of Assad's forces and his regime?

[2:00]

HEYDEMANN: Well, there are a number of factors at play, I think. Very important in enabling this advance is the weakening of the regime's key allies, the actors that had been central to keeping the Assad regime in power throughout the course of the conflict that began in 2011. Hezbollah, which provided large numbers of ground troops that reinforced the regime, has been decimated by Israel in its conflict with Israel over the past year. Iran has been substantially weakened as a result of Hezbollah's losses. And Russia as well, preoccupied in Ukraine and, frankly, somewhat tired of Assad looking to Russia as a pillar of support, decided not to use its military capabilities in the country to keep Assad in power. So, when Assad lost the support of the external actors who had been really crucial to his survival, he had very little to fall back on.

In addition, though, there has been a steady process of improvement in the capabilities of the armed rebel groups that were based in Idlib and in the south prior to this operation. They spent much of the last two years training, improving their command and control, improving their equipment. And that showed in this operation. They've acted with discipline; they've moved with a great deal of coordination. And that's a striking contrast to how the opposition conducted itself in earlier phases of the uprising.

And then the last piece is simply the hollowing out of the regime's military itself. It has spent much of the period since 2016 involved in illicit criminal activities, smuggling, narcotics trade, extorting from Syrian citizens in one way or another. And when it came time to pick up their weapons and fight, they really had no appetite for it. So, I think all three of those factors played a role in explaining the speed of this advance.

DEWS: And did those insurgent forces have outside help the way that the Syrian regime did?

[4:10]

HEYDEMANN: The groups that led the offensive beginning November 27th have certainly maintained relations with Turkey over time. They have relations with some of the states in the Arab Gulf, especially Qatar, but also the United Arab Emirates.

But it's questionable the extent to which any of these outside actors played a meaningful role in this operation. We know, for instance, that Turkey had basically halted an earlier operation by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, HTS, the group that was in the lead this time around. Turkey had put the brakes on an incursion that HTS hoped to undertake a few months ago. And I suspect that Turkey was willing to go along with a much more limited operation by HTS this time, just to give Assad a bloody nose and exact a price from the Assad regime for refusing Turkey's overtures toward normalizing its relationship with Syria.

So, I have to say, we need to look at this, I think, as a legitimately homegrown operation, one that originated with and was carried out by Syrians, probably with relatively little external support.

DEWS: So, I think it was just a few years ago that the U.S. government and other governments around the world designated HTS, the lead rebel group, as a foreign terrorist organization. So, can you explain what that means and how it might complicate their transition to governing? And actually, in the bigger scheme of things, what has to happen next in Syria to form a new government?

[4:47]

HEYDEMANN: Yeah. HTS is an outgrowth of rebel groups that in the past were affiliated with al-Qaida, one of the leading terrorist organizations in the world, and morphed after a break between al-Qaida and that Syrian component into a second organization called Jabhat al-Nusra, which was also very extreme in its jihadist views.

In the last few years, especially since HTS has become the governing authority in Idlib, its perspective has moderated quite a bit. There's no question that both HTS and its leader, Jolani, remain quite fundamentalist in their Islamist worldview. But I question whether they have held on to the more extremist jihadist worldview of groups like al-Qaida. It seems to me that they've come some way from the views that that they expressed in their earlier incarnations.

But nonetheless, Jolani himself participated in the uprising against American troops in Iraq. He was detained by the U.S. He spent some time in prison under U.S. forces in Iraq. So, the U.S. has for understandable reasons perceived Jolani as a terrorist.

I think right now there is a process of reevaluation underway. *The Washington Post* reported recently that the Biden administration is evaluating whether it's appropriate to delist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. I don't think that will happen quickly, but it's a reflection of how the group has conducted itself, both during the operation and since it took control in Damascus. I gather that the government of the U.K. is also considering whether it should delist HTS.

But as for what happens here, I don't think there's much question that HTS will play a central role in negotiating whatever form of interim governing authority emerges in Syria. I can't say for sure that it will lead that governing authority. I think there are lots of groups with an interest in playing a role in Syria's transition that will want a seat at the table. But I think we have to anticipate that over the coming days, we will see HTS, along with others, engage in conversations. And of course, we have to

hope that it's only conversations and not gunfights to determine what the composition of an interim governing authority will look like.

DEWS: What implications do you see for the region for these developments, specifically thinking about Turkey, Lebanon, Iran, Israel and all of the other issues that are happening on the ground in the Middle East?

[8:37]

HEYDEMANN: My sense is that we are on the cusp of what could be the biggest shift in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East since the Iranian revolution of 1979. And I think the events in Syria will have a dramatic impact on all of its neighbors. From the perspective of Turkey and Lebanon and Jordan, perhaps the most immediate impact will be the possibility that Assad's overthrow opens up for the return of refugees. All three of those countries host very large refugee populations and have chafed a bit at the cost and the social strains that have accompanied the presence of those refugees in their countries, and Turkey and Lebanon in particular, much less so Jordan, have been actively involved in programs to try to compel Syrians to return to Syria. Now that Assad is gone, I think that will happen voluntarily and that will be a huge shift.

Turkey, I think, clearly wants to play a central role in shaping whatever kind of government emerges in Syria. Statements from President Erdoğan in Ankara have laid down markers that that Turkey sees itself as a principal broker in shaping Syria's future.

[9:52]

But perhaps the biggest consequence is the weakening of Iran's role as a regional actor as a result of Assad's overthrow. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran really burst out of its constraints and emerged as a major regional power. It developed very strong, close ties in Iraq. It had a tight, longstanding partnership with Hezbollah in Lebanon. And it benefited from its longstanding alliance with the Assad regime in Syria. Now, Hezbollah has been severely weakened by Israel; Assad is gone; and Iran has now been pushed out of one of the arenas that provided it with extraordinary leverage. Without Syria, it can no longer resupply Hezbollah. Without Syria, its ability to deter a potential Israeli attack has been diminished.

And so, what we're witnessing really is the reshaping of a strategic landscape in which Iran's role is going to change significantly. And what that might look like it's too soon to tell, but one consequence of this could be that Iran's leaders will feel that in order to preserve a deterrence, they now need to move forward and actually put the pieces for a nuclear bomb together, which is a development that I think many would view as very, very troubling.

DEWS: Well, I want to come back to that in just a minute, but I want to circle back to Russia for a minute. You said earlier that Russia decided to not support the Assad regime as it was falling. But I know that Russia has some military bases in Syria. So, what happens now moving forward with Russia's involvement in the region and its ability to project power into the region through those bases?

[11:48]

HEYDEMANN: Russia has one major airbase that it's concerned about in the west of Syria, west of central Syria, near the coast, and a major naval facility at the port of Tartus in Syria. And as I understand it, there are discussions underway between the rebel coalition that took Damascus and the Russians, because Russia would like very much to hold on to those assets even in the aftermath of Assad's overthrow. It isn't at all clear whether Russia will succeed in that effort.

Certainly, Assad's opposition views Russia as an adversary or has seen Russia as an adversary, as one of the principal partners in the repression of the Assad regime. So, attitudes toward Russia are not likely to be terribly hospitable.

But the rebel leadership thus far has shown itself to be pretty pragmatic. And it wouldn't surprise me if at the end of the day it was willing to make some kind of accommodation with Russia in exchange for perhaps Russian recognition of an emerging interim authority or something else more tangible from Russia. But right now, I think the principal Russian concern is to do what it can to try to hold on to those two assets.

DEWS: So, looking ahead and also thinking about U.S. foreign policy, the United States' role in the region, and also thinking about your comment about Iran perhaps accelerating its nuclear weapons program, how do you see the fall of the Assad regime playing out in terms of U.S. interests in the region, especially as the new Trump administration forms and takes power in January?

[13:30]

HEYDEMANN: Well, throughout the campaign, candidate Trump was very clear that it was his intent to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria. There are only about 900 U.S. troops still on the ground in eastern Syria. And he has said repeatedly that the U.S. has no business in the Syrian conflict and that it was his intent to withdraw U.S. forces. Now, over the weekend in an interview that President-elect Trump gave, he seemed to be open to the possibility that in order to continue operations against ISIS, there might be a future for U.S. forces in Syria, which would be a significant shift from his position during the campaign.

But even if it remains the view of President Trump once he takes office that Syria is not a priority for U.S. foreign policy, there are a number of steps the U.S. could take that would have a positive influence on the transition that's underway right now. One of them is to lift some of the economic sanctions that were put in place on the Assad regime, both to punish it for its conduct during the conflict and to isolate it from global markets. If some of those sanctions were lifted, it would be a huge boost for the Syrian economy. And that's really important in these critical early phases of the transition.

The U.S. could also play a role in assisting Syrians in asset recovery, recovering some of the billions of dollars that were illegally stolen, illegally seized by Bashar al-Assad and his cronies over their years in rule. In fact, we are hearing that right before Assad boarded the plane for Moscow, a couple of big trucks went to the

Syrian Central Bank and emptied it of its hard currency reserves. So, if the U.S. could support a process of asset recovery, that would be meaningful.

The U.S. could also support Syrian efforts for accountability for those who engaged in war crimes during the conflict, whether on the regime side or the opposition side, frankly.

And then finally, I think the U.S. could also serve its own interests quite well by a willingness to invest in reconstruction, which has not been a consideration for the U.S. as long as Assad was in power. But I think now should be discussed as one way the U.S. could contribute to a smooth transition in Syria.

DEWS: Last question for you, Steven. You've been a longtime observer of and expert on Syria and the Middle East. What thoughts come to your mind as you see the images of people both celebrating in the streets about the fall of the Assad regime, but also freeing prisoners in those horrible prisons that we've seen?

[16:15]

HEYDEMANN: You know, it's an astonishing sight to watch Syrians begin to process what it means to come out from under a brutal dictatorship of more than 50 years. This is a society in which people were taught from their earliest days in school not to trust one another, to view their neighbors, even their members of their family, as potential enemies of the state. Syrian parents always told their children to be careful about what they said when they went out of the house. They warned them that "the walls have ears." And it's going to take a long time, a very long time, for the collective trauma of life under this kind of dictatorship to wane and for Syrians to really discover what it means to live in a free society. And I think we're seeing some reflection of that both in the joy and the celebration that we're witnessing in these videos.

But that's also accompanied, I think, by a very keen awareness of just how many ways this transition could go wrong. And so, alongside that excitement and anticipation for what the future might hold, we're also seeing Syrians exhibit a degree of caution and a recognition that there are lots of bumps in the road ahead that they have to get over.

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DEWS: We'll leave it there for now. Steven Heydemann, thanks for sharing your time and expertise today on this very important question.

HEYDEMANN: Thank you for the opportunity.