

THE COLLAPSE OF THE SYRIAN ASSAD REGIME AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE RIVALRY BETWEEN ISRAEL AND IRAN

Robin Kural

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University. Faculty of Political Science and Journalism

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6914-5732>

robin.kural@mail.umcs.pl

Abstract: After fourteen years of the civil war, the quick fall of Assad's regime has marked the beginning of a new phase in the Middle East. Israel and Iran are two of the countries that have been affected the most in the region. Fall of the regime has ended centralized authority and has fragmented Syria into a mosaic of competing actors as well. Assad's removal has expanded Israel's sphere of influence across the northern theater and opened new avenues for regional strategic maneuvering. Likewise, Israel has gained greater operational freedom to shape events along its borders and disrupt adversarial entrenchment, whereas it has reduced the coherence of the Iran–Hezbollah–Syria axis that once posed a unified challenge to Israel. In this context, the article aims to answer the research question of how has the collapse of the Syrian Assad regime in Syria reshaped the strategic rivalry between Israel and Iran?

Keywords: collapse of Assad regime; Israel; Iran; Syria; Axis of Resistance

INTRODUCTION

The civil war that has been ongoing in Syria since 2011 ended with the fall of the Assad's regime by a rebel coalition headed by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) on December 8, 2024. The fall of the Assad regime, like the fall of Saddam's regime in 2003, is a development that creates significant changes in terms of alliance relations and power balances among actors in the region. This situation directly impacts one of the region's most important issues: The Iran-Israel rivalry.

Iran and Israel are two regional powers in the Middle East. According to Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, three well-known factors concerning regional powers are as follows: (1) these states are belonging to a certain geographical region; (2) they have a certain power capability in comparison to other

countries in the region; (3) they have a certain influence on the region (Buzan, Wæver, 2003). Hence, the term “regional power” is widely used for the features and the character of strong countries in their own region. Therefore, regional powers are evaluated as powerful states on their own regions and they represent the relationships of enmity or amity among the other states in the region. Besides that, Douglas Lemke describes the regional powers as those states who are dominant of local hierarchy (Lemke, 2004). In a similar way, Maxi Schoeman argues that the regional powers are those states who have a leading and stabilizing role, which is accepted by other countries in the region (Schoeman, 2003).

The article aims to answer the research question of how has the collapse of the Syrian Assad regime in Syria reshaped the strategic rivalry between Israel and Iran? To answer the research question, generated hypothesis is the downfall of Assad’s rule has eliminated Syria’s intermediary function in the Levant security structure, leading to a more direct and heightened rivalry between Israel and Iran. In order to answer the research question and verify the hypothesis, the research is grounded on the Buzan and Wæver’s sub-Regional Security Complex (S-RSC) which is progeny of Regional Security Complex (RSC) that explores more granular security settings across the Middle East and North Africa.

Regarding methodology, in order to answer the research question and verify the hypothesis, the article examines the impact of the collapse of Assad’s regime in Syria on the rivalry between Israel and Iran and their approaches at the regional level. The hypothesis is formulated on the basis of observations of strategies that two countries followed with regard to confrontation to each other. Therefore, within the framework of qualitative methodology, the article uses content analysis related to the use of discourse analysis. The content analysis made it possible to determine the features of the materials under examination, such as speeches. Both primary and secondary sources were used. Primary sources include speeches of both countries’ circle of decision-makers and their state medias. Secondary sources, on the other hand, include monographs, articles in magazines, articles in peer-reviewed journals.

Existing literature shows that there are valuable works on the rivalries among regional powers. Scholars have identified and classified regional powers in international relations with regard to South African case (Flemes, 2007), while some of the others take India, Brazil, Israel, South Africa, Malaysia, and Poland as a regional power and explain them through the global system by assessing them as a rising power which challenges the system or builds new norms (Destradi, 2010). Regarding the Middle East, much of the works focus separately on the “regional powers” and “rivalries.” Scholars have shared a common belief that three Arabic countries – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iraq (Wight, 1979) – and a Persian one (Iran) were regional powers in the Middle East who dominate the region. However, with the Second Gulf War in 2003, Iraq has lost its regional power status. In the same vein, Egypt lost its status of being a regional power after the wave of Arab uprisings that started in Tunisia in 2010, reached out to Egypt. Particularly, the studies on the rivalries in the Middle East occupy

a large place in terms of conceptual and empirical works. For example, Imad Mansour and William R. Thompson explicitly engage on rivalry as an empirical phenomenon from a theoretical perspective and they contribute to theory building in the field of rivalry analysis from the complexity and descriptive “thickness” of regional politics. What is more, they address the impact of political shocks on the rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa (Mansour, Thompson, 2020). Likewise, Karen Rasler explains the emergence of rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa. Comparing the Egyptian-Saudi (1955–1970) and Iranian-Saudi (1979–2018) rivalries, she underlines the common features of rivalries and their impact on the foreign policy (Rasler, 2020). Katarzyna Czornik, more specifically explains Bahrain as the area of Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the second decade of the 21st century (Czornik, 2017). Also some studies focus on the relationships between Israel and Gulf’s Arab states (Jones, 2025). However, the works focus on the rivalry between Israel and Iran is limited. Therefore, this article attempts to fill this gap particularly by explaining the strategic rivalry between them after the collapse of Assad’s regime in Syria.

The article is structured as follows: It starts with the conceptual and theoretical framework. After that, it briefly presents the background of the collapse of Assad’s regime in Syria. Following that, it consecutively explains implication for Iran and Israel. The article ends with the conclusion in which the research question is answered and hypothesis is verified.

SUB-REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY (S-RSCT)

In their book *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Buzan and Wæver provide a clear framework for understanding regional security, regionalism, and global security. They introduced scholars to the concept of the *regional security complex* (RSC), along with its extension, the *sub-regional security complex* (S-RSC), which examines more detailed security dynamics across the Middle East and North Africa (Buzan, Wæver, 2003). Although conceptual studies of regional security had long shaped international relations and the sub-field of regional security, Buzan and Wæver are the first to place regional security within a broader and more comprehensive framework. Their Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) argued that an RSC consists of a group of states linked by security interdependence, with relationships spanning friendship to hostility. Yet their geographic closeness makes interaction unavoidable, whether through cooperation, coercion, or even conflict (Buzan, Wæver, 2003, pp. 40–43). Across the Middle East and North Africa, Buzan and Wæver identified three RSCs: The Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia); the Levant (Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Israel); and the Gulf, consisting of the six monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates – along with Yemen and Iran. As they explain, an RSC is “a set of units whose main

processes of securitization and de-securitization are so closely connected that their security issues cannot be meaningfully examined or resolved separately from one another” (Buzan, Wæver, 2003, p. 44).

Within this context, this study employs Buzan and Wæver’s S-RSC which is progeny of the RSCT to examine the Israel–Iran rivalry within the wider security architecture of the Middle East. Although the analysis concentrates on two primary actors, their relationship is situated within a broader regional security framework and interconnected security concerns. In this regard, Syria serves as a crucial sub-regional hub through which patterns of cooperation and hostility are channelled, particularly via proxy forces and direct military engagement. Therefore, Israel–Iran relations are best understood as part of a sub-complex within the larger Levantine security system, rather than as an isolated bilateral confrontation.

CAUSES OF THE COLLAPSE OF ASSAD’S REGIME

Authoritarian rule, economic decline, and prolonged conflict are the primary causes of collapse of Assad’s regime in Syria. Under the rule of Assad family, which hold power since the 1970s, the state relied on a centralized and repressive political system that limited participation and suppressed opposition, generating long-term grievances and weakening institutional legitimacy (Hinnebusch, 2012). These political tensions were reinforced by economic problems such as unemployment, corruption, inflation, and unequal development, which increased inequality and public dissatisfaction before and during the 2011 uprising (Lesch, 2012). Resulted from the Arab uprisings in 2010, the civil war deepened these existing weaknesses and turned Syria into a battleground for al-Qaida and ISIS that severely drained military and state resources (Lister, 2016). As the conflict continued, the regime became increasingly dependent on support from Iran and Russia.

However, the situation of both Iran and Russia, which were supporters of Assad’s regime, were changed. Regarding Iran, from the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, Iran was instrumental in keeping the Assad regime in power. It entered the civil war in support of Assad regime and spent more than a decade developing a broad military network across Syria. This included strategically located bases, arms storage sites, factories supplying Hezbollah in Lebanon, and a web of both domestic and foreign militias. In parallel, Iran expanded its political influence within Syria’s military and security institutions. However, later on, Tehran had been steadily scaling back its military presence as Assad sought a rapprochement with Arab states that were calling for a decrease in Iranian influence (Adar, 2025).

Another reason for Iran reducing its military presence in Syria was the intensified Israeli air strikes on Iranian-aligned militias in Lebanon and Iranian facilities in Syria. In December 2023, Israeli air strikes in Damascus killed Seyed

Razi Mousavi, a senior adviser in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps who acted as a key link for Iranian interests in Syria. This was followed by an even more consequential strike on April 1, 2024, when Israeli F-35 jets hit the consular section of Iran's embassy in Damascus, killing General Mohammad Zahedi, a former commander of the IRGC Ground Forces. At the same time, Iran's so-called Axis of Resistance was coming under increasing strain. These setbacks, together with a serious weakening of Hezbollah's command structure in Lebanon – including its leadership under Hassan Nasrallah – significantly reduced Iran's regional leverage (Grajewski, 2024).

As a result, neither Hezbollah – weakened by a destructive war with Israel – nor Iraqi militias concerned about possible US and Israeli retaliation, appeared willing to intervene in Syria. At the same time, Tehran's room for manoeuvre was limited by fears of a direct confrontation with Israel. A major Israeli military operation in late October 2024 had significantly damaged Iran's air defence systems and heightened concerns over a possible second strike. Faced with these pressures, Tehran chose to prioritise its own national security over its regional ambitions, effectively abandoning Assad. By the end of 2024, Iran maintained only a limited contingency force in Syria to safeguard its bases and interests, leaving it unprepared for the rebels' swift advance (Adar, 2025).

When it comes to Russia, which had intervened in Syria from September 2015 onwards to ensure Assad remained in power, it changed its political priorities and reduced its military presence in Syria mostly because of the Russia's war in Ukraine and the little resistance of the Syrian army against rebel offensive. In February 2022, following the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, Russia was forced to shift forces from Syria to Ukraine. Since the Ukraine war drained Russia's resources, the Russian Air Force redeployed a squadron of Su-25 fighters from Syria shortly after the invasion began (Smagin, 2023). Likewise, having shipped a battery of S-300 anti-aircraft missiles from Syria to Crimea by Russia in August 2023 (Chen, 2026) left Assad's regime more vulnerable.

On the other hand, during the 2024 rebel offense Assad's troops rapidly collapsed, including the Fifth Corps of the Syrian army, which had received strong financial and military support from Moscow (Sosnowski, 2024). From that moment, Russia shifted its attention to limiting the fallout. Russian air strikes against rebel positions, which Moscow had previously conducted, were suspended on 8 December. Assad and his family were convinced to seek exile in Moscow – a step the Kremlin hoped would help maintain its reputation as a dependable backer of authoritarian partners. At the same time, Vladimir Putin was determined to remove Assad as a destabilising element, as his continued rule would have made it harder for Russia to recalibrate its Syria strategy in line with the new geopolitical realities (Adar, 2025).

IMPLICATIONS FOR ISRAEL

Israel primarily views Syria through a security prism that is more concerned with containing Iranian influence than with Syria as a state. The entrenchment of Iranian military and militias affiliated with Iran close to Israel's northern border is its top strategic concern. From this point of view, Syria has served as a forward operating environment for Hezbollah and Iran, posing possible military risks to Israeli territory, especially in the Golan Heights. Hence, Israel has always worked to keep Iranian military facilities from consolidating in Syria. This includes worries about militia placement, missile transfers, and the creation of reliable Iranian supply routes across Syrian territory. Therefore, rather than interfering with Syria's internal political order, Israel's operations in Syria are presented as part of a larger deterrent policy meant to impede Iranian growth (Hall, 2025).

In this context, the collapse of the Assad regime has further altered the regional balance of power to Israel's advantage, particularly because, as Masood Farivar pointed out, Iranian forces and allied Afghan militias, the Fatemiyoun Brigade, have withdrawn from Syria (Farivar, 2024). Immediately after the fall of Assad, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that the 1974 Disengagement Agreement with Syria regarding the Golan Heights had effectively ended after the collapse of President Bashar al-Assad's government. He also directed the Israeli military to take control of the demilitarized zone (Hespress, 2024). Consequently, on December 8, 2024, following the collapse of the Syrian regime, Israel launched Operation "Arrow of Bashan." Concerned that advanced Syrian weapons abandoned by Assad's forces could be seized by hostile actors, Israel carried out a coordinated air, naval, and ground campaign. The operation destroyed around 80% of the remaining military capabilities of the former Syrian army, including air defence and radar systems. Particularly, "as part of the operation, Flotilla 3 returned to Latakia, the site of its Yom Kippur War legacy, and sank 15 vessels carrying weaponry that could have posed a serious threat to Israeli national security" (Levi, 2025). Besides that, the Israeli military reportedly set up at least nine outposts inside Syria, securing full control of the buffer zone and surrounding strategic areas. It also created an extended security belt beyond the demilitarized zone, aimed at blocking Iranian arms transfers to Lebanon through Syrian territory and destroying remaining heavy weapons across the country. Furthermore, in March 2025, Israel carried out strikes on military facilities in Tadmur and at the T4 airbase in Homs province, stating that the targets were the "remaining military capabilities" at those sites (Bhardwaj, 2026).

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu broadened Israel's goals, calling for the full demilitarisation of southern Syria, including the provinces of Quneitra, Daraa, and Suwayda, as well as the withdrawal of Syrian forces from areas south of Damascus. Israel's defense minister, Israel Katz, further stated that Israeli forces would remain in southern Syria indefinitely to safeguard Israeli communities and counter potential threats (Bhardwaj, 2026). In this way, an obstacle to future Israeli air strikes against Iran's proxies was thereby removed.

More importantly, during an interview, Syria's interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa stated that he "would not allow Syria to be used as a base for attacks against Israel." At the same time, "he called on Israel to stop its attacks in Syria as, according to him, Israel's justification for its operations in Syria – the presence of Hezbollah and Iranian militias – is no longer valid" (Al Mayadeen, 2024).

IMPLICATIONS FOR IRAN

The Syria–Iran alliance, which originated during the Iran–Iraq War in 1980, has been sustained largely by strategic and geopolitical considerations. Iran's role in Syria was further entrenched during the civil war when it supported Assad regime by mobilizing Shiite militias (Fatemiyyun and Zaynabiyun brigades) to compensate for the regime's manpower shortages. As Assad's authority weakened, Iran emerged as a dominant actor on the ground by closing manpower deficit, particularly through Fatemiyyun and Zaynabiyun brigades and IRGC's military supervision. However, this influence – built over many years of sustained engagement – was rapidly dismantled during two weeks.

From the perspective of regional power competition, the most significant consequence of the new Syrian era is the substantial erosion of Iranian influence in the country. Because Syria has served as a key component of Tehran's regional security architecture, as Natasha Hall indicates, Iran is one of the actors most strategically impacted by the regime collapse. Syria is more than just an ally for Iran; it is an essential part of its Axis of Resistance and advance defense plan. Iran has maintained a land corridor that connects Iranian territory to Hezbollah in Lebanon through Syrian territory, allowing the movement of personnel, weapons, and logistical support. In this way, Iran has been able to maintain its deterrence stance against Israel by using this corridor to spread influence throughout the Levant (Hall, 2025).

Furthermore, the importance of Syria for Iran was reflected in the words of Ali Akbar Velayati, a key adviser to Iran's former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He called Assad and Syria as "the golden ring of the resistance chain in the region." He further stated that "without the Syrian government, this chain will break and the resistance against Israel and its supporters will be weakened" (Times of Israel, 2024). Therefore, collapse of the Assad regime marks a major blow to Iran's regional power and long-term strategic goals, while dealing a particularly severe setback to the Tehran-backed Axis of Resistance since, as aforementioned, Syria served as a vital link in the "land corridor" connecting Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Mediterranean through Iraq. This route was essential for transporting weapons and providing logistical assistance to Hezbollah, whose military strength has been significantly diminished by the conflicts with Israel after October 7, 2023 Israel's retaliation in Lebanon. In this context, this strategic geography has seriously been disrupted with the collapse of Assad's regime. Hence, it has increasingly been difficult for Iran to maintain and manage

its regional network in the absence of a stable Syrian state that is in line with Tehran, especially with regard to Hezbollah in Lebanon (Hall, 2025).

On the other hand, Assad's departure marks another significant setback for Tehran, highlighting the weaknesses of its "unity of the arenas" strategy, which sought to coordinate the actions of the axis's various members. Israeli military pressure has instead pushed Iran into a defensive position and undermined its deterrence (Vakil, 2024). Following the marked weakening of Iran's Axis of Resistance, Iran faced a significant decline in the ability to deter – or effectively defend against – direct Israeli military strikes (Salem, 2025). This shift has reshaped the balance of power in the Israel–Iran rivalry. For example, Israel has conducted direct military air strikes in Iran's territory. During the night of June 12–13, 2025, Israel launched a military strike against Iran aimed at destroying the country's nuclear programme. In the days that followed, several hundred targets were attacked, including nuclear facilities, military installations, and sites belonging to the IRGC. As a result of the operation, numerous members of Iran's security leadership were killed (Matusiak et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

In this article the impact of the collapse of Assad's regime in Syria on the rivalry between Israel and Iran has been argued within the framework of the *sub-regional security complex theory* (SRSCT). In this context, firstly, SRSCT has been discussed in order to comprehend security architecture of the region. Secondly, the causes of the collapse of Assad's regime has been examined. Lastly, implications for both Israel and Iran were explored. Although the analysis concentrates on two primary actors, their relationship is situated within a broader regional security framework and interconnected security concerns. In this regard, Syria serves as a crucial sub-regional hub through which patterns of cooperation and hostility are channelled, particularly via proxy forces and direct military engagement. The findings presented in this article have shown that the collapse of the Assad regime has led to further shifts in the balance of power in the region. Furthermore, the fall of the regime represents a significant geopolitical watershed in the Middle East, eroding Iran's regional alliance system while creating new strategic opportunities for Israel. The Israeli attacks are considered the most extensive military intervention Iran has faced on its own territory since the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq war. This situation reveals that Iran's long-standing "strategic depth" doctrine, which involves waging wars outside its own borders, particularly through proxy actors, has become unsustainable. This article argues that the downfall of Assad's rule has eliminated Syria's intermediary function in the Levant security structure, leading to a more direct and heightened rivalry between Israel and Iran. With regard to that, the impact of the collapse of Assad's regime on the rivalry between both states can be explained better through SRSCT.

UPADEK SYRYJSKIEGO REŻIMU ASSADA
I REKONFIGURACJA RYWALIZACJI IZRAEL–IRAN

Streszczenie: Po czternastu latach wojny domowej szybki upadek reżimu Assada zapoczątkował nową fazę na Bliskim Wschodzie. Izrael i Iran należą do państw, które zostały w regionie dotknięte tymi wydarzeniami w największym stopniu. Upadek reżimu zakończył scentralizowaną władzę, a także doprowadził do fragmentacji Syrii w mozaikę rywalizujących ze sobą aktorów. Usunięcie Assada poszerzyło strefę wpływów Izraela na północnym teatrze działań oraz otworzyło nowe możliwości regionalnego manewrowania strategicznego. Jednocześnie Izrael zyskał większą swobodę operacyjną w kształtowaniu wydarzeń wzdłuż swoich granic i zakłócaniu umacniania się sił przeciwnych, podczas gdy spójność osi Iran–Hezbollah–Syria, która niegdyś stanowiła jednolite wyzwanie dla Izraela, została osłabiona. W tym kontekście artykuł ma na celu odpowiedzieć na pytanie badawcze: w jaki sposób upadek syryjskiego reżimu Assada przekształcił strategiczną rywalizację między Izraelem a Iranem?

Słowa kluczowe: upadek reżimu Assada; Izrael; Iran; Syria; Oś Oporu

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