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Unraveling of the Assad Regime in Syria and its implications

On 27 November, as a US-brokered ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah ceasefire came into effect, Sunni Islamist Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), a former Al-Qaeda affiliate, and allied factions launched a major offensive to seize control of Syria's second-largest city Aleppo. On 30 November, Russia carried out a series of airstrikes targeting rural parts of Idlib and Hama, regions where HTS had recently taken control. As the Syrian army faltered in the face of the blitz, the militants established control over Aleppo by 1 December. The same day, Israeli media reported that the Israeli military had intercepted an Iranian cargo plane en route to Syria and forced it to turn back, suspecting it of carrying weapons meant for Hezbollah. Hezbollah sent a small number of "supervising forces" to help prevent anti-government fighters from seizing the strategic city of Homs, which is located along the M5 highway connecting Damascus with Hama and Aleppo. After Hezbollah's deployment turned out to be far smaller, the commanders



decided to evacuate the country through Al-Qusayr town in Homs which they had entered into in the spring of 2013 and recaptured from rebels. Al-Qusayr is located along the border with Lebanon and on the key southern route from Damascus through Homs province to the Alawites' coastal heartland. The evacuating Hezbollah convoy of several dozen armoured vehicles was bombed by Israel.

On 7 December, at a high-level meeting in Doha, Foreign Ministers of several Arab countries including Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Qatar together with their counterparts from countries participating in the

Astana Process, namely Russia, Iran and Turkey, issued a joint statement on the Syrian crisis. The statement called for an immediate cessation of military operations, a political process based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254, and measures to preserve the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria. These discussions coincided with a dramatic shift in Syria's political landscape, as HTS-led militias seized control of Damascus and Homs, forcing President Bashar al-Assad to flee to an undisclosed location. Subsequently, Mohammed al-Jalali, who served as Prime Minister in the Bashar al-Assad government agreed to transfer power to HTS's Syrian Salvation Government.

By 9 December, HTS had full control of the Latakia province where the Russian bases are located. Tartus is Russia's only repair and replenishment hub in the Mediterranean, while Khmeimim airbase functions as a staging post to fly its

military contractors in and out of Africa. On 11 December, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters that the Russian authorities were in contact with the new Syrian leadership over the fate of Russia's military bases in the country.

In the wake of the HTS's blitz into Aleppo, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi visited Damascus followed by Ankara. In his meeting with Assad, he noted that Iran makes no distinction between the Israeli regime and the Takfiri terrorists and is prepared to consider sending military forces to Syria if an official request is made by the Syrian government. However, Iran faced operational constraints in extending this help due to the weakening of Hezbollah and repeated Israeli bombings of runways in both Aleppo and Damascus as well as threats against Iranian flights in recent weeks. Further, Assad's pivot to Gulf Arab allies of the US and passive role since the beginning of the Israel-Hamas war in October last year when Iran-backed 'resistance axis' opened supporting fronts, may have led Tehran to question the strategic value of Assad-led Syria. Assad's passivity in the wake of Israel's killing of Razi Mousavi, senior IRGC Commander responsible for coordinating Syria's military alliance with Iran, in air strikes in Damascus in December 2023 and the bombing of the Iranian consulate in April 2024, contributed to Tehran's growing distrust of Assad. The fall of the Assad government is a serious geostrategic setback for Russia and Iran. Having withdrawn their forces and military assets from the country, they may seek a comeback by supporting Syrian forces as opposed to the ascendant Sunni Jihadist forces in Syria.

Assad's intransigence towards Ankara, insisting on the withdrawal of Turkish forces from its territory and refusal to engage with the Turkish-backed opposition, led Ankara to throw its support behind the strategically timed rebel offensive which succeeded in overthrowing the 50-year rule of the Assad family. Turkey, despite the apparent strategic gains, will find it difficult to deal with the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces in control of territories in eastern Syria. Israel, emboldened by the collapse of government has carried out a massive air campaign targeting military sites across Syria. Israeli deployments across the demilitarized zone in Golan Heights have invited strong reactions from Arab countries.

South Korea's Martial Law imbroglio and its broader geopolitical implication

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law in the country on the late night of December 3, 2024. This move came as a surprise for the people of South Korea who had not expected this kind of action by the President. The imposition of martial law reminded people of the past authoritarian regimes in the country. Since the democratic system was restored in South Korea in 1988, South Koreans have been proud of the "democratic consolidation" in their country. The stated reasons for imposing martial law by President Yoon were the "anti-state activities" by the "pro-North Korea" factions within the country. Notably, South Korean politics is largely divided between the "conservative" and

“progressive” ideological groups in the country, and the rivalry between them is quite intense. Also, South Korea follows a presidential system of democracy. The present South Korean President Yoon belongs to the People Power Party, which has conservative ideological views. However, currently, the unicameral legislative body, the National Assembly of South Korea has the majority of members from progressive ideology. As a result, the Democratic Party of Korea has been dominating the National Assembly and was also creating hurdles for the leadership of President Yoon. Also, due to the allegations of scandals on the First Lady of South Korea, President Yoon’s popularity drastically dwindled since 2022 when he came to power.

The sudden application of presidential powers to silence the critics and opposition was probably a desperate move by President Yoon to assert himself in the milieu of rising concerns against his leadership in the country. As soon as martial law was declared in South Korea, the soldiers and police entered the National Assembly and tried to prevent the lawmakers from entering its compound. However, the members of the National Assembly met in the early hours of December 4 and unanimously passed a resolution denouncing the martial law, making it null and void. The South Korean citizens also came out in large numbers on the streets and celebrated the passing of the resolution by the National Assembly against the imposition of martial law by the President. After six hours of drama, the martial law was lifted in South Korea. It was also reported that the failed imposition of martial law would make Yoon’s continuation as President of South Korea questionable. However, President Yoon defended his decision to impose martial law and refused to resign from his post. But on December 7, President Yoon made an apology for the imposition of martial law. Finally, the impeachment motion against President Yoon was passed in the National Assembly on December 14, 2024, with the support of some of his party members.

The actions of President Yoon would help the North Korean regime in its criticisms of the South Korean political system. During the tenure of Yoon as the president of South Korea, the relationship



between Seoul and Pyongyang was significantly damaged. Since the beginning of 2024, Pyongyang has also been regarding Seoul as an “enemy”, and has been demolishing all signs of inter-Korean engagement. The state media and institutions in North Korea have been extremely critical of the leadership of Yoon Suk Yeol in South Korea. Since May 2024, the Kim dynasty regime in North Korea has flown thousands of balloons carrying trash to South Korea and has also

significantly increased military provocations along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Therefore, the current political turmoil in South Korea would benefit the North Korean regime to consolidate its domestic population against South Korea.

In recent years, President Yoon has played a key role in strengthening security cooperation between South Korea and Japan. Also, Seoul under Yoon has tried to settle historical issues with Tokyo. However, the opposition Democratic Party had alleged President Yoon for collaborating with Japan on colonial history and appointing “pro-Japan” individuals in important positions of his administration. Therefore, the recent martial law issue would impact the relationship between Seoul and Tokyo. The United States has also been concerned about the recent moves of President Yoon Suk Yeol in South Korea. The stability of South Korea’s alliance with the United States is important in the backdrop of growing Chinese hegemony in the Indo-Pacific, and the ongoing military collaboration between North Korea and Russia in the Ukraine war. China has also urged Chinese citizens in South Korea to remain careful and has been closely monitoring the political development taking place in this Northeast Asian country.

Sudan’s forever civil war

In 2019, Sudan’s former military President Omar al-Bashir, who ruled with an iron fist for almost three decades, was dethroned following a massive people-power revolution. Subsequently, the nation embarked on a fragile transition to civilian rule. Any hopes of that quickly dissipated in October 2021, when a coup d’etat was orchestrated by two protagonists who are presently at loggerheads with each other. The antics and insatiable desire to control Sudan’s resources, particularly gold, of Army General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and his deputy and the leader of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, commonly known as Hemedti, has descended the nation into a full-blown humanitarian crisis.

For most of Sudan’s independent history, the country has been governed by an autocratic Arab elite based in Khartoum. The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) were essentially formed from the Janjaweed militias, an Arab-majority group that previously received support from former President Bashir. The revenues generated from the gold mines controlled by the RSF, particularly in Darfur, helped to finance thousands of troops under the command of Hemedti. At the centre of the disagreement between the two leaders is the proposal to integrate the RSF into the official Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), which was a key demand of Sudan’s transitional government and civilian organizations.

From Hemedti's perspective, the proposal to integrate the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) into the army threatens his independent economic base. Furthermore, Hemedti's demand for a minimum integration period of ten years contrasts sharply with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF)’s position, which calls for a two-

year timeline—matching the duration of the transitional period that was previously established.

While the SAF may not be highly mobile on the ground, it is a more conventional African army equipped with tanks, armored personnel carriers, and even an air force. In contrast, the RSF operates more like a mobile guerrilla and counterinsurgency force. This lightweight force relies on light armored vehicles and lacks formal military training, which complicates their ability to defend positions or sustain attacks effectively.

The unfortunate reality is Sudan's warring factions continue to lack the political will and appetite to find a real resolution to resolve the devastating conflict which has ravaged the country since April 2023.

In May 2023, peace negotiations brokered by the United States and Saudi Arabia, known as the "Jeddah platform" collapsed after the SAF abandoned the talks. Although both SAF and RSF agreed to resume negotiations in late 2023 amid pressure from foreign governments and rights groups, neither side agreed to cease fighting. As fighting persisted in Khartoum, incidents of violence across the country continue to be on the rise in addition to reports of a new surge in ethnically driven killings targeting the Masalit ethnic group in West Darfur. On March 8, 2024, the UNSC too passed a resolution calling for an immediate cessation of violence. But this too was rejected by the SAF over the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

China and Russia's response to these UNSC resolutions are interesting to note. China abstained from voting and reminded council members to not forget the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. Russia accused the United States of "double standards" and vetoed the latest UNSC resolution in November 2024 calling for an immediate ceasefire in Sudan. With no sign of any national ceasefire in sight, Sudan continues to be embroiled in its forever civil war, thereby accentuating a chronic cycle of violence and instability for the greater Horn of Africa region. This could potentially result in an exodus of refugees to Europe and exacerbate the crisis in the Red Sea, where attacks by Iranian-backed Houthis have already contorted global commercial shipping.

In September and October 2024, North Darfur and its state capital El Fasher, which is under the control of the SAF, were the site of heavy clashes. In response, the SAF is manoeuvring to outflank the RSF by launching a two-front offensive – advancing from Sennar city in the east and Jabal Dud in the west towards Jabal Moya, a strategic mountain range whose higher elevated position gives its holder a strategic advantage and flexibility to move troops. This has resulted in the RSF being on the back foot in defensive postures across Khartoum's cities.

Going forward, if any form of last and meaningful settlement to the conflict is to take place, the two leaders must reach an agreement over the long-promised handing of power to civilians and the question of integrating the RSF into the national army.