Trump, Israel must realize that Assad's fall will change the reality in Iran

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 09.12.2024

Incoming US president Donald Trump's statement that he does not intend to intervene in the war in Syria because "it's not our war" reflects a narrow perspective; a broader regional vision is necessary.

The rebel factions in Syria eventually conquered Damascus and ousted Bashar al-Assad's regime. The dramatic changes in Syria harm Iran's strategic assets in the region, including the Al-Bukamal border crossing between Iraq and Syria, a central choke point in Iran's land corridor to Hezbollah.

Only a few days ago, the Axis of Resistance signaled its high motivation to save Assad's regime, as senior officials in Iran's proxy network have declared their commitment to fight fiercely for the former president.

Hezbollah Secretary-General Naim Qassem stated in a speech on Thursday that Hezbollah would stand with Assad as much as it can, alongside the Syrian army.

Similarly, Qais al-Khazali, leader of the Iraqi Shi'ite militia Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, announced last Wednesday that his forces would not allow the Shrine of Zaynab in Damascus to fall into Sunni rebel hands.

Afghan fighters from the Fatemiyoun militia, supported by Iran's IRGC Quds Force, have also been seen on the ground, attempting unsuccessfully to halt the rebels' progress.

Despite these efforts, Assad's regime quickly collapsed without any assistance by Moscow or Tehran to prevent it. In these dramatic hours, eyes turn to Iran, which views Syria as the "main link" in a chain stretching from Tehran to Beirut.

Even in earlier stages of the Syrian civil war, in February 2013, Mehdi Khazali, a member of a think tank advising Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, stated that Tehran could afford to lose its oil-rich southern Khuzestan province, but not Syria. He argued that Syria's fall would eventually lead to Tehran's downfall.

Since then, Iranian officials have repeatedly described the war in Syria as part of an “American-Israeli plot” aimed at Iran. The astonishment gripping Tehran is therefore evident.

At this critical juncture, the Islamic Republic lacked Qasem Soleimani, who, as commander of the Quds Force, orchestrated Iran’s proxy forces with strategic skill and efficiency. Recent dissatisfaction with his successor, Esmail Qaani, has surfaced in Tehran, accompanied by nostalgia for Soleimani and too-late calls for urgent action in Syria.

Criticism of Iran

Criticism is also mounting regarding the delayed retaliation against Israel, with Iranians mocking the Khamenei-led regime on social media.

Hezbollah’s difficulties in supporting Assad are evident, given the severe blow it suffered at the hands of Israel. The specific reasons for Iran’s inability to assist Assad effectively remain unclear but are expected to become clearer in the coming days.

In any case, Trump will soon realize that Assad’s fall will resonate throughout the region, primarily impacting Tehran. Amid the rapid regional changes driven by the Israel-Hamas War and the renewal of the Syrian conflict, voices within Iran have been becoming increasingly urgent in their demands for Khamenei to adapt the country’s security doctrine to unfolding events.

Prominent figures, regime mouthpieces, and propagandists are calling for a shift in Iran’s nuclear doctrine, advocating for nuclear weapons development to restore its deterrence capabilities, which have been severely weakened by recent events, including the unprecedented Israeli attacks in October 2024.

Israel and the incoming US administration must urgently formulate a strategic plan addressing the security needs of both nations, given the swiftly and historic changing reality in Syria and its regional repercussions.

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