

# ISSUE BRIEF

## Executive Summary

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## The Fall of Syria's Hereditary Dictatorship and the Launch of an Islamist Transitional Government: Analysis and Implications

**Jang Ji-Hyang**

Principal Fellow  
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In December 2024, the Islamist rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, also known as the Syrian Liberation Organization) seized the capital city of Damascus. As a result, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad fled into exile in Russia, his regime's chief patron, leading to the dramatic collapse of Syria's hereditary dictatorship. The Assad regime, which had indiscriminately used chemical weapons against its own people in the civil war that began in 2011, managed to survive due to the protection of Russia, Iran, and China; by 2023, even the Arab League had re-admitted the so-called "massacre regime" of Syria as a member.

However, Syria, which was trying to return to the international community, collapsed almost overnight due to the limited military support from its backers, Iran and Russia, and the inherent vulnerabilities of its authoritarian system despite the regime's tight control. After the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023, Israel launched massive military operations against Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and proxy forces of the so-called "Axis of Resistance," leaving Iran's capabilities severely diminished and unable to continue supporting the Assad regime. Likewise, Russia, mired in a prolonged war in Ukraine, could no longer provide meaningful military support to Syrian government forces. Internal factors—such as the unpredictability of a rule that was iron-fisted yet deeply fragile, and structural weaknesses exacerbated by years of civil war—also played a significant role. Under the Assad regime's corruption and climate of distrust, the military had long hidden its discontent behind a façade of loyalty, but when faced with the advance of a small rebel force, it surrendered with little resistance.

The newly established Syrian transitional government now faces critical challenges both at home and abroad. In March 2025, Ahmed al-Shara, former leader of HTS, announced the

formation of a transitional government, vowing to build a democratic system that guarantees minority rights, to embrace the diverse armed groups including the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and to pursue “transitional justice” by breaking with the legacy of the Assad regime. At the same time, he declared his intention to rebuild Syria’s war-ravaged economy. Beyond these daunting domestic tasks, the transitional government must also contend with the intense power struggle among major external actors vying for influence inside Syria. Russia and Iran are clinging to the strategic footholds they established during the Assad era. Turkey, meanwhile, is intent on curbing the Kurdish militias backed by the United States and Europe while signaling its desire to repatriate Syrian refugees currently living within its borders. Israel is working to block the expansion of Iran’s Shiite Crescent network, while Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar are all seeking to project Arab political influence through the transitional government. The United States and European countries, for their part, are looking to stabilize Syria in order to reduce regional uncertainty, stem the flow of Muslim refugees, and prevent the resurgence of ISIS.

This web of overlapping and often conflicting strategic interests has made Syria’s future extraordinarily complex. To make matters worse, the outbreak of direct military conflict between Israel and Iran in June 2025 has ratcheted up tensions inside Syria. Israel has been intercepting Iranian drones over Syrian airspace and ramping up its military operations, prompting the transitional government to heighten its alert amid concerns that Iran could arm and incite its remaining loyalist militias in Syria.

Meanwhile, South Korea has expressed a strong intention to actively participate in Syria’s reconstruction following the establishment of diplomatic relations with the new government. The Syrian transitional authorities, in turn, have shown keen interest in South Korea’s economic development model and reportedly requested to dispatch a working-level delegation to learn from Korea’s experience. The South Korean government has proposed cooperation in three main areas: sharing development know-how, providing humanitarian aid, and contributing to economic reconstruction. In May, following the decision by the European Union and the United States to lift sanctions on Syria, Seoul announced that it, too, would actively support the reconstruction process and facilitate Korean business entry into Syria. However, rather than focusing narrowly on corporate profit, it would be more prudent for Korea to emphasize sharing its development experience, designing administrative systems, and offering postwar humanitarian support—areas already identified by both the Syrian transitional government and the South Korean authorities as priorities.

Given that, since the 2011 Arab Spring, there have been almost no successful cases of safe and democratic state-building in the Middle East, the trajectory of Syria’s transition is drawing significant international attention. Recent opinion polls suggest that most Syrians support President al-Shara and feel improvements in freedom and security, though more than half remain anxious about the economic situation. In a transitional Syria, where political stabilization has outpaced economic recovery, effective and responsible Korean engagement in reconstruction could both meet the expectations of the Syrian people and contribute to

regional stability, creating a strategic opportunity for Seoul to raise its international profile. Finally, the fact that Assad's hereditary dictatorship collapsed due to unforeseen external factors carries important implications for the Korean Peninsula, particularly in anticipating the possibility of sudden regime change in North Korea. South Korea should take the Syrian case as a crucial lesson and develop a comprehensive, multifaceted strategy to prepare for contingencies in the peninsula's security landscape.

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(‘시리아 세습 독재의 몰락과 이슬람주의 과도정부의 출범: 분석과 함의’)