

European imperialists demand Russian withdrawal from Syria as great-power conflicts simmer following Assad's downfall

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The first visit by top diplomats of the European imperialist powers to Damascus Friday, following last month's toppling of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, was dominated by the demand from German Foreign Minister Analena Baerbock that Russia abandon its military bases in the country. The call, combined with various promises of economic and constitutional support to the new Islamist regime led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a former al-Qaida affiliate, demonstrates how the imperialist powers intend to use Syria's regime change to step up their war on Russia and prepare an all-out conflict with Iran.

"It is time for Russia to leave its military bases in Syria," Baerbock arrogantly lectured in a statement released prior to her arrival in the Syrian capital for a joint visit alongside French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot. "The Syrian people will not forget the large-scale bombardments and human rights violations. It was (Russian President Vladimir) Putin who stood by Assad for so long, who supported and covered for the crimes of the regime."

Speaking less than 200 miles from Gaza, where Germany has supplied hundreds of millions of euros in weaponry for Israel's genocide against the Palestinians, Baerbock blustered in a media appearance about the need to respect women's rights and hold those from the Assad regime guilty of war crimes to account. Behind this hypocritical rhetoric, the joint visit was aimed at advancing the imperialist powers' agenda of using the al-Qaida-linked regime in Damascus as a subcontractor to plunder Syria and consolidate their dominance over the Middle East.

Baerbock and Barrot's Damascus trip came two weeks after Washington lifted the \$10 million bounty on the head of HTS leader Ahmed al-Shara'a, also known by his nom de guerre Abu Mohammad al-Jolani. In a visit by a delegation of senior State Department officials on 20 December, Barbara Leaf, the top diplomat for Middle East affairs in the US State Department, declared al-Shara'a to be a "pragmatic" politician with whom Washington could work, provided conditions are met. In reality, he leads a movement that viciously clamped down on all critics during its years of control over Idlib province, including through the use of public executions and stonings. Since HTS assumed power, house searches and sectarian attacks against Syria's minorities have risen.

In the most direct sense, American and European imperialism are determined to get their hands on the spoils in Syria. With estimates of up to \$400 billion to reconstruct the country, which has been torn apart and thrown back decades by a 13-year US-instigated civil war that saw the imperialist powers fund and train Islamist militias against Assad's dictatorship, there is much money to be made for the banks, investors, and companies who secure the lion's share of contracts under the new regime's watch. Washington hopes that by providing much of this funding, or directing its Gulf allies Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to do so, it can further push back an already weakened

Iran and consolidate Damascus as a puppet regime for Western imperialist interests.

Syria under a pro-Western regime will be a key stepping stone for US imperialism and its allies to further their drive to consolidate their geostrategic and economic preeminence in the energy-rich Middle East. As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in its New Year's statement,

Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza, backed by the US and NATO powers and aided and abetted by the bourgeois-nationalist regimes in the Middle East, has exposed the depths of imperialist barbarism.

The genocide, marked by the destruction of entire cities, the targeting of hospitals and schools and the displacement of hundreds of thousands, is part of a broader regional strategy. The aim is to reorganize the Middle East in line with imperialist interests, including the toppling of the Assad government in Syria, the decapitation of Hezbollah's leadership and escalating provocations against Iran.

HTS's rapid advance to Damascus was made possible by support from Turkey, but above all by Israel's US-backed war to reorder the Middle East. Having decimated Hamas in its genocide in Gaza, Israel launched an onslaught on Hezbollah in Lebanon from September 2024 that decapitated its leadership and massively degraded its capabilities. With US approval, Israel carried out the targeted assassination of leading Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps generals in Damascus in April 2024; Ismail Haniyeh, the political leader of Hamas, in Tehran as an official guest of the Iranian regime in July, and Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, in September. One month later, Israel launched a major missile strike on military targets in Iran, with the extent of the damage it caused and the targets hit still remaining unclear.

This multi-front war, made possible by the unlimited supply of weapons from the US, Germany and other imperialist powers, weakened Assad's main sources of support. Hezbollah was no longer in a position to send fighters from Lebanon, where the US is now pushing aggressively to restructure political relations, and the bourgeois-clerical regime in Tehran found it impossible to strengthen its presence in Syria due to Israel's air superiority. On top of this, the Assad regime had lost its social support due to the disastrous social and economic conditions in Syria. Under these conditions, both Iran and Russia decided to cut their losses, with the former evacuating its fighters into Iraq, and the latter extricating Assad to asylum in Moscow and opening up talks with the new regime so as to maintain a Russian presence in the country.

Russia has two military bases on Syria's Mediterranean coast, a naval base at Tartus and an air base at Hmeimim. Baerbock's demand that Russia withdraw is aimed at eliminating Moscow's military presence in the Levant, and complicating the transfer of resources to its North African allies in Libya and Niger.

Al-Shara'a indicated in comments last month that the HTS regime would not be opposed to a continued Russian presence, which was codified in a 2017 agreement with the Assad regime permitting Moscow to lease the bases for 49 years. At the same time, the new rulers in Damascus have, doubtless at the initiative of American imperialism, reactivated diplomatic ties with Ukraine, which were on ice since 2022, after the Assad regime recognised the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics following Russia's US-provoked invasion of the country. It remains unclear how these conflicting positions will play out, but the prospect for explosive clashes in Syria and throughout the region involving Russia and its imperialist opponents is all but assured.

Turkey's growing influence in Syria

Beyond US imperialism and its European allies, Turkey has arguably gained the most influence in Syria due to Assad's ouster. Ankara provided the bulk of its support to the Syrian National Army (SNA), a coalition of Sunni Islamist militias operating separately from HTS in northern Syria against the Kurds. But after HTS was confined to Idlib province in the northwest of the country, as Assad's regime was stabilised with Russian support, HTS's ability to operate depended upon the tacit approval of Turkish authorities allowing the flow of weaponry and other supplies across the Turkish-Syrian border. The final HTS offensive, launched just hours after the US-imposed ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, was backed by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

After a visit by Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan to Damascus late last month, an official from the Turkish Defence Ministry announced on 2 January that Ankara is preparing to establish strategic defence and military ties with the new HTS regime: "In line with the directives of our president, we are engaging with our counterparts to establish strategic relations and foster cooperation across various fields," the source said, according to Middle East Eye. "Based on the needs identified during these meetings, the necessary support will be provided." Other areas of possible cooperation include assistance with rebuilding Syria's energy grid and other reconstruction projects.

A condition for Ankara's military assistance will be that the new regime in Damascus takes a hard line towards the Kurds organised in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which holds territory in parts of northern and eastern Syria. Turkish forces and aligned militias have attacked SDF positions repeatedly since Assad's ouster, most notably resulting in the December capture of the town of Manbij from the SDF.

Washington reportedly intervened to negotiate a ceasefire between the two that forbade Ankara from conducting further military operations east of the Euphrates River. Washington has funded the SDF for the past decade, using its fighters as cannon fodder in operations to defeat the Islamic State terrorist group. Up to 2,000 US troops remain present at key strategic bases in eastern Syria, giving the US and its Kurdish allies significant control over the country's oil reserves. Reports Sunday spoke of over 100 deaths among Turkish-aligned and Kurdish militias amid renewed clashes in the north over the previous two days.

Turkish ambitions in Syria may not only collide with those of its nominal NATO ally, the United States, but also with Washington's attack dog in the Middle East, Israel. The Israel Defence Forces continues to

occupy the demilitarised zone in southern Syria agreed under a 1974 peace deal with Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father, which the far-right Netanyahu government now considers annulled. Israel has also persisted with numerous air strikes on Syrian military and civilian facilities. While Israel's most immediate concern is to neutralise Iranian influence and any of Tehran's allied forces in Syria, the Zionist regime would also be hostile to a strengthened Sunni Islamist regime in Damascus closely aligned with Turkey.

The bankruptcy of the Arab and Iranian bourgeois-nationalist regimes

The aftermath of the imperialist-backed toppling of Assad has underlined once more the utter bankruptcy of the Arab and Iranian bourgeois nationalist regimes throughout the Middle East. The Assad regime itself was left isolated by its erstwhile allies not least because its base of social support within Syria had disintegrated due to Syria's devastating social and economic decline over the past 13 years. The response of the autocratic Gulf states is to attempt to extend their influence over Syria's new Islamist rulers in alliance with imperialism, while Iran's bourgeois-clerical regime seeks desperately to find a means to reach an accommodation with Washington and its European allies.

Asaad al-Shibani, Syria's new Foreign Minister, conducted his first foreign visit to Riyadh on 31 December and 1 January. This was quickly followed by visits over the weekend to Qatar, the UAE and Jordan. In Doha, al-Shibani directed an appeal to Washington to lift sanctions on Syria, stating, "These sanctions constitute a barrier and an obstacle to the rapid recovery and development of the Syrian people who await services and partnerships from other countries." Emphasising that his government intends to oversee a shift away from Iran towards closer ties with the Gulf states, above all with US imperialism, al-Shibani added that the government plans to "rebuild our country" and "restore its Arab and foreign relations."

The interests of the Gulf states are by no means uniform, complicating matters for US imperialism as it seeks to use them to consolidate its control in Damascus. Qatar was the most consistent backer of HTS and its predecessor, the Al-Nusra Front, throughout the Syrian civil war. It was the only Gulf state to demonstrably rebuff tentative attempts during 2023, led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to normalise relations with Damascus and reintegrate Assad into the Arab League so as to restrain Iran's influence. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have remained hostile in the recent period to backing Islamist forces for fear that their own despotic regimes could be destabilised by them. But they will not pass up the opportunity to assist in the exclusion of Iran from a post-Assad Syria in alliance with American imperialism. With Trump's imminent return to the White House, the reinvigoration of his US-led Israeli-Gulf alliance—based on the so-called Abraham Accords that aimed to improve relations between the Gulf monarchies and the Zionist regime—to combat Iran appears ever more likely.

With its "Axis of Resistance" allies Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza decimated by Israel's imperialist-funded war on multiple fronts, and the Houthis in Yemen facing ongoing bombardment by the US and Britain, Iran has sought publicly to conciliate following Assad's removal. In a speech on 26 December, President Masoud Pezeshkian appealed to regional powers and the imperialists to reach an accommodation with the Islamic Republic. "We desire friendly relations with the countries of the region and the world," he said, "and we are striving to establish peace and security both inside and outside the country."

Iran's bourgeois-clerical regime is riven by factional differences, with

the reform wing associated with Pezeshkian calling for a rapprochement with the West to secure relief from the devastating sanctions reimposed after the first Trump administration scrapped the Nuclear Accords with Tehran. The hardline faction, to which Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has repeatedly appealed, favours a more confrontational stance towards the US and its Gulf clients, possibly through a deepening of the already substantial economic ties Tehran enjoys with China and an expansion of military cooperation with Russia.

Underscoring the potential for explosive conflicts as Washington, and its imperialist and regional allies exploit the toppling of Assad to ramp up pressure on Tehran, the US-based Atlantic Council remarked on the increased likelihood of Iran resorting to developing nuclear weapons. Referring to the Doha forum, a diplomatic meeting in early December where Turkish, Russian and Iranian officials reportedly negotiated Assad's final departure from Damascus, the Council's briefing noted, "Perhaps at next year's Doha Forum, we will witness the Iranian foreign minister engage in frantic meetings for a much different reason: because Iran is sprinting for a nuclear bomb, viewing it as the only way to enhance deterrence and ensure regime survival in its current weakened state and feeling compelled to take riskier actions to survive. Or perhaps it will be the US secretary of defense defending a decision by the United States to join Israel in striking Iran's nuclear program to prevent it from obtaining that outcome."

The only force capable of averting these scenarios is the international working class. The development of a global movement against imperialist war and genocide must unify the struggles of the working class in the imperialist centres with their class brothers and sisters throughout the Middle East on the basis of the programme of permanent revolution to oppose the imperialist warmongers and all of the bourgeois-nationalist regimes. The strategy of world socialist revolution offers the only way to end imperialist barbarism and the crisis-ridden capitalist system that gives rise to it.



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