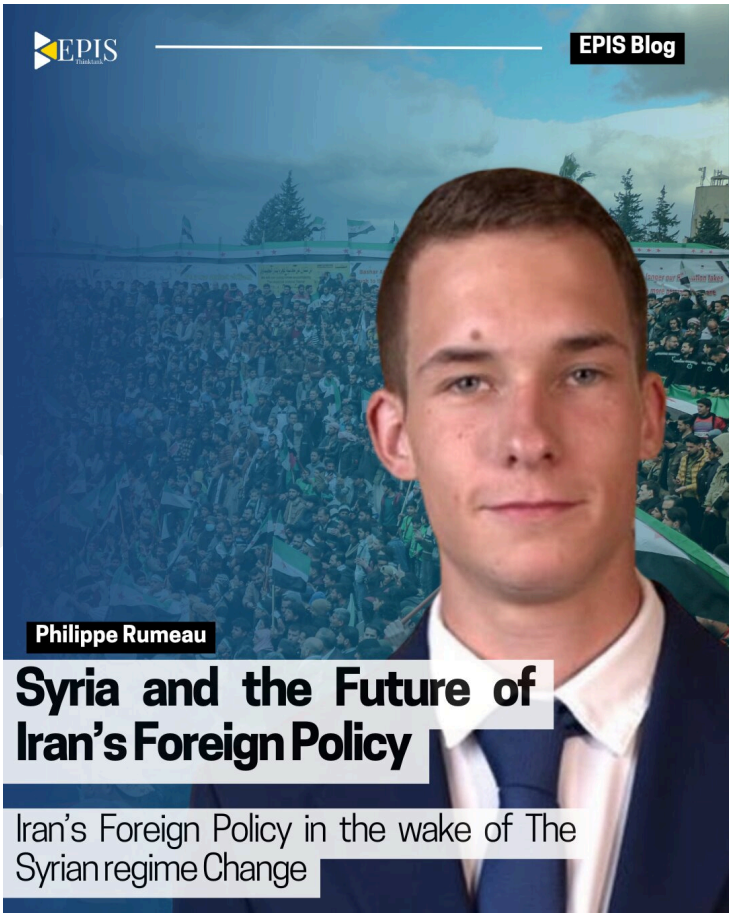
Syria and the Future of Iran's Foreign Policy

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Philippe Rumeau



The Assad regime and Tehran

While Syria and Iran have shared a close diplomatic relationship since the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the engagement of Iran throughout the Syrian crisis is predominantly explained by strategic interests and security concerns rather than diplomatic reciprocity. These concerns, which prompted Iran to incorporate Syria into its foreign policies, can be synthesised into four main aspects:

Sectarian Influence in play

Syria, the second line of defence

From an Iranian perspective, Syria offers a second line of defence – after Iraq – against the Islamic State, Sunni and Israeli forces. The outbreak of the Syrian war, which endangered this line of defence, has compelled Iran to intervene and incorporate it within its own foreign policies.

The isolation of Iran within the Middle East

While Saudi Arabia possesses multiple state allies across the Middle East (UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Egypt), conversely, Iran remains mostly isolated on the international level with a scarce number of state allies (Syria and Iraq) throughout the region. Furthermore, Iran primarily retains non-state allies (Hezbollah, Hamas, Houthis, and Palestinian groups); hence, the importance of maintaining the Assad regime.

Syria as a strategic roadway

As previously mentioned, Iran has a very scarce number of allies within the Middle East, which are primarily located on the eastern side of the region (Palestinian groups and Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon). While these groups rely on Iranian funding, Iran has used Syria as a strategic corridor to deliver supplies through Iraq. Nonetheless, the ongoing civil war in Syria has endangered this roadway. Subsequently, since the outset of the conflict, Syria became an imperative for Iranian interests and foreign policy.

Iran's foreign policy and the transitional government

The offensive actions prompted by opposition forces – predominantly HTS – in December 2024, which led to the departure of former president Bashar Al-Assad, marked a turning point for Iranian foreign policy. The new transitional government, led by former HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa, has several implications for Iranian foreign policy. Firstly, the departure of former president Bashar Al-Assad meant the loss of a close ally. This loss ultimately meant further isolation for Iran within the Middle East, as the number of state allies Iran holds is now considerably reduced. Secondly, the route connecting Iran and its eastern allies including Hamas, Hezbollah and smaller Palestinian groups has been disrupted. This disruption entails that Iran must find alternatives to support these entities.

Lastly and most importantly, Iran has lost a significant sectarian influence throughout the region. Whereas Ahmed al-Sharaa formed an independent party in 2025, he identifies himself as a Sunni Muslim. This is further evidenced by his rapport with HTS, a Sunni Islamist anti-Assad group. This suggests that he may be more aligned toward Saudi Arabia rather than Iran, which funded Assadist groups and Bashar Al-Assad. In essence, Iran is currently without a second line of defence, a connection route toward its allies and is almost in complete isolation within the region. This isolation is further amplified by the war in Gaza, where the allies of Iran (Hamas, Hezbollah and smaller Palestinian groups) are significantly jeopardised.

The 2024 Lebanon electronic device attacks organised by Israel have significantly weakened Hezbollah, whereas the current battles within the Gaza Strip have forced Hamas into a compromised position.

This compromised status quo may lead Iran to:

Focus on its nuclear programme to ensure external security.

The pursuit of the nuclear program despite international sanctions can increase the influence, presence and external security of Iran within the Middle East. Whereas this action can entail international pressure, sanctions and potential threats, it can also alter the status and position of Iran throughout the region.

Deštabilise the Syrian government to topple Ahmed al-Sharaa

By backing Assadist or Shia groups, Iran may reverse the current status quo, allowing the return of former president Bashar al-Assad or the establishment of a new government in favour of Shia interests. This would entail the restoration of the connection route between Iran and its eastern allies, along with the second line of defence. For this initiative, Iran may provide military or financial support to Ba'athist resistance groups such as the Syrian Popular Resistance or the Military Council for the Liberation of Syria.

Extensively support entities fighting against Israel within the current war in Gaza

While Iran has to find new possibilities to support Hamas and Hezbollah, by backing these groups or additional forces fighting against Israel, Iran may ensure the protection of its allies and influence throughout the region. While Israel remains a hostile entity from the Iranian perspective, by supporting Hamas and Hezbollah and other actors throughout the war, this action may be seen as a beneficial option for Iranian foreign policy.

What is the Future of Iran's foreign policy?

The departure of former president Bashar al-Assad generated significant impact on Iranian foreign policy, isolating Iran, disrupting its connection route and decreasing its sectarian influence throughout the region. Whereas Iran and Saudi Arabia have initiated diplomatic discussions since 2023, the arrival of Ahmed al-Sharaa will inevitably challenge the discussion, potentially ending the diplomatic reconciliation. Ultimately, Iran may seek to increase its regional power by pursuing its nuclear programme or financing destabilisation efforts within Syria or Gaza.