

'Syrian Spring' ends 50 years of Assad's brutal rule

The world's oldest city of Damascus has fallen to rebel forces. More than 50 years of rule through fear and repression by the Assad regime — led first by Hafez al-Assad, and then by his son Bashar — ended on Dec. 8.

In the seventh century, Muslim armies, advancing north from the Arabian Peninsula, were able to easily enter Damascus from its east gate, which was manned by only one or two guards, and fight their way toward the center of the fortified city. After repelling fierce resistance by the troops of the Byzantine Empire, the Muslim forces reached a peace agreement with their Christian adversaries, according to "The Book of the Conquest of the Lands," written by ninth-century historian Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Baladhuri.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, the group that captured Damascus, and other anti-Assad forces have established an interim government without encountering any resistance from President Assad, who fled in fear to Russia, or from the troops of his regime.

Ahmad al-Sharaa, the leader of HTS, which has been designated a terrorist group by the United States and European countries, has traded his combat uniform for civilian clothes, pledging that the provisional government will transition to a democratic government, respecting the rule of law and religious and cultural diversity, within three months. However, there is no denying that HTS grew out of the al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaida affiliate in Syria.

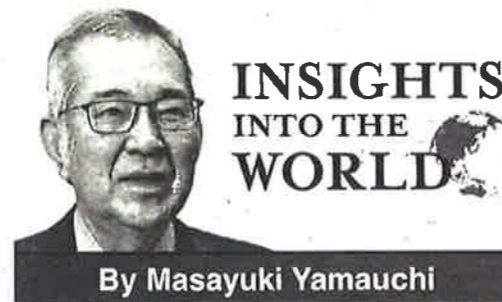
Above all, it should be noted that part of the group's name is the word "Sham." Sham, or "Bilad al-Sham," is a medieval Muslim term that refers to an area larger than the modern state of Syria. In other words, it refers to "Historic Syria" or "Greater Syria," which was divided into Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Syria by Britain and France in post-war settlements after World War I.

This means that the goal of HTS is "the liberation of Historic Syria," which implies an inevitable confrontation with Israel. To prove that HTS is the standard-bearer of the "Syrian Spring," and that it is true to the identity of the new Syrian nation state, the group should use the word

"Syria" in its name and transform itself.

First, the new leadership should have its administrative organs instill discipline in civil servants and create a regular army with shared uniforms and weapons. It should also protect ethnic, religious and sect minorities and women by clearly stating that it is fundamentally different from extremist forces such as Islamic State, which justifies exclusion and discrimination.

HTS should demonstrate its role as a "liberat-



By Masayuki Yamauchi

Yamauchi is a special adviser to the Fujitsu Future Studies Center Ltd., where he specializes in Middle Eastern and Islamic area studies and the history of international relations. He is also a professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo, where he previously headed the school's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, and a special visiting professor at the Mohammed V University of Rabat in Morocco. He was a professor at Musashino University in Tokyo from 2018 to 2023.

ing force" by expelling foreigners who have supported the Assad dictatorship and the oppression of the Syrian people. Specifically, it should close Russian bases and garrisons in Syria as well as force the withdrawal of Iran's Revolutionary Guards and expel Lebanon's Hezbollah from Syrian soil.

That said, rebuilding Syria as a unified and indivisible state will for the time being be a pipe dream for HTS.

Syria is unique in the Middle East in how multi-layered it is. Since the 15th century B.C., it has adopted more and more languages and religions brought in from the outside by power-

ful foreign countries without abandoning those that came before.

Historically, Syria was unified under Alexander the Great and the Roman Empire. It inherited Greco-Roman civilization and gave birth to Christianity. It was the Middle Eastern core from which Arab-Muslim empires developed. As Hirofumi Wakabayashi remarked in his book "Syria no Hitan" (Syria's grief), it is no wonder that the Roman Emperor Julian called Damascus "the eye of the whole East."

Syria could now divide into mini-states along the lines of the territory held by the different anti-Assad forces. Those forces include the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, led by Sunni Kurds and active on the east bank of the Euphrates River; the Syrian National Army based in northwestern Syria, which is composed of Sunni Arabs backed by Turkey; and HTS, which captured Damascus after advancing from Aleppo, also in northwestern Syria.

Islamic State also still maintains strongholds in various parts of Syria. Then there are the Alawi Arabs, from which the Assad family emerged, as well as former Assad regime loyalists and Christian communities that have existed since the time of Jesus.

It is unlikely, for now, that Syria will have any politician who, in the words of British traveler Gertrude Bell in her book "Syria: The Desert and the Sown," is "anxious to reconcile interests that are as easy to combine as oil with vinegar." It would be foolish to hope for a brilliant democratic politician to appear. Nor can one expect the return of religious leaders with great personal appeal. There may be dictatorial politicians like Hafez al-Assad who cunningly manage to deflect outside interference. But people of many sects and regions are sick of politics that keep the nation unified through an iron fist and fear.

With any luck, Syria could maintain its integrity in something like a loose coalition or federation through agreements or treaties among all its factions. If not, the regions could confront one another with the involvement of Turkey and the United States, and Syria could continue to break down, with de facto mini-states being established across the country.

According to Amir Taheri, an Iranian analyst

Syria could continue to break down, with de facto mini-states being established across the country.

of Middle Eastern affairs, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is interested in seeing Syria remade as "a galaxy of mini-states." Turkey's greatest security priority is removing the threat of U.S.-backed Kurdish forces.

Turkey's biggest nightmare is a mini-state of Syrian Kurds absorbing members of the ethnic group from Turkey to grow into a Kurdish "parent state" in the Middle East. Turkey, which has already accepted about 3 million refugees from Syria, will likely be the country with the most say in the new Syria, which will face the major issue of refugee repatriation.

Meanwhile, like President Erdogan, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, which views Iran, located close to Syria, as its greatest adversary, has emerged as a "winner" benefiting from Syria's sudden regime change.

Seeing opportunity in Syria's weakened air defenses, which had been propped up by Russia, and in decreased support from Iran-backed Hezbollah, Israel has carried out airstrikes against targets in Syria at key locations, such as Aleppo, day after day. The air raids reflect Israel's strategic decision to reduce to almost nothing the major arsenals Syria's restructured armed forces will take over, rather than a precautionary measure against possible terrorist attacks. Israel has also been pressing ahead with its operations

to establish "defense zones" in Syrian territory beyond the buffer zone in the Golan Heights. It is hardly surprising that Israel's military activities are criticized as coming from a desire to expand its territory.

Now that the "Axis of Resistance" against Israel has collapsed, the Hamas militant group in the Palestinian territory of Gaza is about to become isolated and unsupported in its opposition. With the regime change in Syria, the conflict in Gaza should come to an end before long.

The Syrian Spring has become a significant example of how contemporary political events can be explained by historical cause and effect.

Russian President Vladimir Putin dramatically restored Moscow's interests in the Middle East by intervening in Syria's civil war in 2015, after those interests had been lost with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But Russia's war against Ukraine, which started in 2022, was not going well, so Russia had relocated many of its missile defense systems and fighter jets that had been deployed to Syria to front lines in Ukraine. Putin prioritized winning a vital battle against a neighboring country.

Israel's killing of leaders of Hezbollah and Iran's Revolutionary Guard in Syria and its devastating attacks on Hamas in Gaza triggered a rapid weakening of the Assad regime, which also debilitated Iran, which supports Hamas. One could argue that Turkey and Israel contributed significantly to the demise of the Assad regime.

Historical cause and effect, which could easily be overlooked when the outcome of each war depended on the conqueror's skill, has grown more obvious now that wars are a "marvel of science" and affect much larger areas. In some cases, facing a complex paradox of history can be unpleasant.

(Special to The Yomiuri Shimbun)

(The original article in Japanese appeared in the Dec. 22 issue of The Yomiuri Shimbun.)

For past installments of "Insights into the World," visit the link below or use the QR code on the right.

<https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/editorial/insights-world>

