

Comparative Insurgencies: Strategic Lessons for Myanmar's Resistance from Syria's Regime Collapse

Description

Editor's Note: this article is being republished with the permission of [Small Wars Journal](#) as part of a republishing arrangement between IWI and SWJ. The original article was published on 05.23.2025 and is available [here](#).

SWJ Logo Tall

On the morning of December 8, 2024, the world was stunned by the [news](#) that Syrian rebel groups, led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), had captured Damascus and overthrown President Bashar al-Assad's government after 13 years of civil war. This unexpected turn in one of the Middle East's most protracted conflicts holds vital lessons for other movements seeking to overthrow entrenched dictatorships. Answering a set of questions helps bring those lessons forward: (1) How did Syrian rebel groups topple the Assad regime quickly this time? (2) What stance has Syria's interim government taken toward ethnic and religious minorities for national reconciliation? (3) How is HTS navigating international legitimacy, given its designation by many Western governments as a terrorist group, while positioning itself as the de facto authority in Damascus?

This article explores these lessons through the lens of the [Myanmar Revolution](#), offering insights that the [Myanmar National Unity Government](#) (NUG) and other rebel groups can draw from the Syrian Revolution. The involvement of external powers in the Syrian conflict is far more pronounced and significant than that of Myanmar, where direct interventions have been limited, with the notable exception of [China's](#) involvement. While the situations in Syria and Myanmar differ significantly, certain parallels can be drawn between the two conflicts. These [include](#) (1) the shared aspiration of civilians in both nations to be liberated from oppressive regimes, (2) the presence of diverse ethnic and religious communities within both countries, (3) ongoing [international legal proceedings](#) against both [regimes](#) at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for alleged crimes against its civilians; (4) the involvement of numerous [militia groups](#) with divergent agendas in both conflicts; (5) [repeated vetoes](#) of UN Security Council resolutions targeting these regimes by permanent members such as [Russia and China](#); (6) the strategic interests of regional powers — such as Iran & Turkey in Syria, and China & India in Myanmar — that shape the dynamics of both conflicts; and (7) the inefficient roles of regional

blocs like the Arab League in Syria and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Myanmar.

How Could Syrian Rebel Groups Topple the Assad Regime So Swiftly?

The Syrian conflict has seen profound international involvement, especially from [Russia](#), [Iran](#), [Turkey](#), and the [U.S.](#) Russia and Iran are the Assad regime's key backers and struggle to [maintain](#) their support amid other crises, due to the war and economic instability in Ukraine and Lebanon. Seizing this moment, HTS launched a well-coordinated offensive, supported by [Turkey](#), that [overwhelmed](#) regime forces. The [rebels'](#) success, especially HTS, demonstrates how the balance of power can shift unexpectedly.

One of the key lessons from this shift is the importance of military preparation, strategic timing, and cohesive leadership. HTS, initially a fragmented group, consolidated its forces and refined its military strategy. This consolidation is an essential point for the NUG to consider. In an interview with [The Guardian](#), HTS's military leader, Abu Hassan al-Hamwi, reflected on how HTS transformed from a loose coalition of jihadist factions into a unified and disciplined fighting force. HTS merged with other rebel groups under its banner, even subduing radical elements like al-Qaeda-affiliated factions. When their mission for Damascus started, HTS also established a southern operations room by bringing together commanders from around 25 rebel groups. The aim was for HTS and its allies to advance from the north while southern forces would launch a parallel offensive, with both ultimately converging on Damascus. Al-Hamwi also elaborated on how HTS gathered experts, including engineers, mechanics, and chemists, to develop drones for reconnaissance, attack, and suicide drone missions, with a focus on improving range and endurance.

For the NUG and its allies, this shift in Syrian rebel strategy offers five critical lessons:

1. **Leadership Diversification:** The NUG should strive for inclusive leadership that reflects Myanmar's diverse ethnic groups and the situation in the battleground, including the [Kachin Independence Organization](#) (KIO), [Karen National Union](#) (KNU), and even the Rohingya and other minorities. A more representative leadership could help unify the opposition and prevent internal divisions.
2. **Military Cohesion:** By creating disciplined military structures through partnerships with ethnic armed groups under an interim constitution that guarantees federal democracy and a federal army, NUG can form strong, cooperative alliances with ethnic armed wings such as [KIA](#), [KNLA](#), ensuring they operate under the NUG's diversified leadership command to enhance military effectiveness.

3. **Indigenous Military Capability:** The NUG could encourage Myanmar's engineers and technicians from liberation areas to collaborate and develop Indigenous military technologies, such as drones and advanced communication equipment. This would reduce dependence on external support and give the NUG more autonomy.
4. **Strategic Coordination:** Effective coordination between rebel groups is [crucial](#). The NUG should focus on fostering strategic alliances and organizing joint operations across Myanmar's diverse regions to challenge the military junta's control.
5. **Territorial Control:** Establishing strong governance structures in liberated areas is essential for the NUG to gain legitimacy. This includes providing critical services, ensuring security, and promoting economic development.

By learning from Syria's experience, the NUG can build a more organized and capable military force ready to challenge Nay Pyi Taw effectively.

Inclusive Leadership as a Path to Unity

HTS's ability to unite disparate factions was not limited to military coordination. A key challenge for the Syrian interim government, particularly under HTS's [leadership](#), has been managing the country's diverse ethnic and religious communities, including Alawites, Christians, and Druze. HTS has tried to maintain inclusivity, especially in areas under its control, such as the northwestern region of [Idlib](#). In these areas, minority groups can [celebrate](#) religious holidays like Easter and Christmas without fear of persecution.

HTS's leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, has [distanced](#) himself from his jihadist roots and emphasized the need for religious tolerance and coexistence. HTS has [assured](#) minorities the right to practice religion, access education, and receive services equally. A recent [meeting](#) between HTS officials, Church leaders, and representatives of ecclesial communities also reflected a sense of cautious optimism. After the meeting, Chaldean Jesuit Bishop Antoine Audo of Aleppo [highlighted](#) the potential for reconciliation and expressed hope for more tremendous respect for religious freedoms under the new leadership.

For the NUG, addressing Myanmar's deep-seated ethnic and religious grievances is essential to building unity, especially for the Rohingya, who endured [genocide](#) by the military under the previous democratically elected National League for Democracy (NLD) government. To rebuild international trust and foster unity in a post-junta Myanmar, the NUG must distance itself from the stand taken by the NLD, which [denied](#) the Rohingya genocide in the face of international justice. A critical step in this

rebranding effort is the repeal of the 1982 Citizenship Law, which continues to disenfranchise and [marginalize](#) the Rohingya. Furthermore, the NUG must prioritize accountability for the atrocities committed against the Rohingya during the [2017 genocide](#), including full cooperation with the International Criminal Court (ICC). This commitment remains essential even if the ICC applies additional arrest warrants targeting civilian leaders from the former NLD government.

Militant groups, such as the [Arakan Army](#) (AA), which [controls](#) much of Rakhine State, must support and work toward creating temporary [safe zones](#) and conditions for the safe and dignified return of Rohingya refugees currently in refuge in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the AA should allow and facilitate an independent UN investigation into areas of [mass graves](#) from the 2017 Rohingya genocide, as well as address recent [allegations](#) of war crimes involving the AA in Rohingya-majority areas.

International Legitimacy: A Crucial Battlefield

HTS faces a significant challenge in navigating international [legitimacy](#). Despite being designated as a terrorist organization by the West, HTS has sought to [rebrand](#) itself as a legitimate political entity. The group formed the Syrian Salvation Government, which [oversees](#) essential services like education, health, and reconstruction in its controlled [areas](#). By prioritizing governance and stability, HTS has attempted to shift its image and establish itself as a viable and legitimate alternative to Assad's regime. HTS's efforts to improve its international standing have had some success. Within one month of HTS consolidating its power in Damascus, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [acknowledged](#) HTS's progress. Several Western countries, including the [U.S.](#) and [European](#) ministers, have started engaging more directly with HTS leadership. The U.S. [lifted](#) a \$10m bounty on the HTS leader, indicating a potential reconsideration of sanctions and removing the HTS from the terrorist groups if HTS continues its governance and inclusive efforts. The [UK](#) has removed asset restrictions on the Syrian government, including its defense ministry, as part of the most recent move to relax sanctions on the nation. After the French and German Foreign Ministers' trip to Syria, the EU also [considered](#) lifting targeted sanctions in the oil, gas, banking, and transport areas.

The NUG faces a different but equally significant legitimacy [challenge](#). Although the NUG has [appointed](#) leaders from ethnic minorities, including a Rohingya deputy minister, it remains more symbolic and mainly in exile. Many Western capitals still view it as a government-in-waiting rather than an active governing force. To overcome this perception, the NUG must demonstrate its ability to govern the territories it controls, ensuring the provision of essential services, maintaining security, and fostering inclusivity.

One critical lesson from Syria is the importance of territorial control for diplomatic recognition. The NUG must focus on establishing robust governance structures in the areas it controls, showing both

military strength and political stability. Recent [diplomatic setbacks](#), such as South Korea's decision to stop accepting NUG-issued passports due to pressure from Myanmar's military government, underscore the need for the NUG to solidify its territorial control and increase its international legitimacy.

The Road Ahead

The fall of Assad's regime in Syria illustrates how strategic coordination, inclusive governance, and innovative military tactics can reshape the trajectory of a revolution. For Myanmar's NUG, these lessons are not merely academic but essential for survival. By uniting its diverse factions, addressing historical grievances, and demonstrating its ability to govern effectively, the NUG can build a credible path toward a democratic future.

The struggle for freedom in Myanmar is far from over. Still, as Syria's experience shows, even the most entrenched regimes can fall when revolutionary forces act with unity, strategy, and vision. For the NUG, the challenge is clear: to seize this moment, learn from the successes and failures of others, and forge a new path toward liberation.

About the Author: Tin Shine Aung is the Consulting Director at the Shwetaungthagathu Reform Initiative Centre (SRIC). In addition to his professional roles, Tin Shine Aung is pursuing a PhD in Sustainability Science at the University of Lisbon, Portugal. He can be reached on X at https://x.com/shine_tin. He is also an Alumni Mentor and former Professional Fellow of the U.S. State Department's Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) Professional Fellowship Program in Sustainable Development. He has authored numerous academic and analytical articles featured in scholarly publications and international outlets, including The Diplomat, East Asia Forum, Small War Journal, New Mandala, FairPlanet, The Sabai Times, and think tanks and academic forums such as the Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS) and the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE Blog). His work primarily focuses on sustainability, sustainable governance, sustainability diplomacy, foreign policy, and the advancement of human rights, particularly in Myanmar.

This article was originally published by [Small Wars Journal](#)

Date Created

2025/06/25