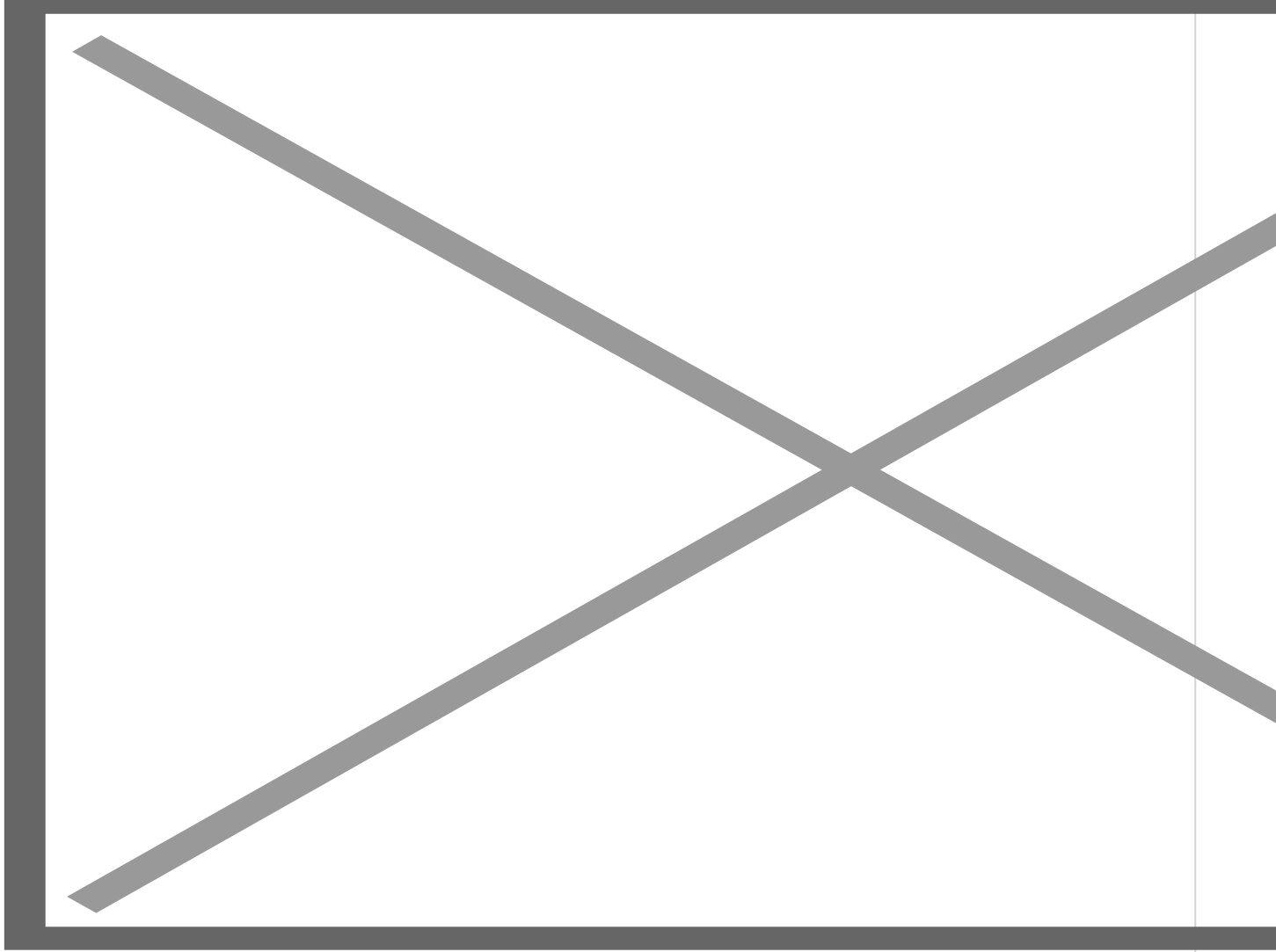


*Iranian foreign minister says
Syrian army's inability to respond
and unexpected pace of
developments was surprising*

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Tehran, December 9 (RHC)-- Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi says the Islamic Republic had alerted the Syrian government to an impending offensive by militants before it was launched. Still, the Syrian army was "surprisingly" incapable of countering the lightning onslaught.

Araghchi made the remarks on Sunday following the fall of the Syrian government after militant groups led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) stormed the capital Damascus.

The Iranian foreign minister said that the main responsibility to protect the country was of the Syrian army, and Iran did not consider itself a duty in this regard. "The Syrian government did not expect this from us either, because this issue was related to the internal matters of Syria, the government's relationship with the opposition groups and the people of the country," Araghchi said. "In this regard, Iran could only provide guidance and advice," he said.

"I remember that one of our serious recommendations to the Syrian government has always been to have dialogue and interaction with opposition groups and try to resolve issues peacefully without harming the people," the top Iranian diplomat stated.

"The formation of the Astana process has largely been in this direction. As you know, Iran, Russia and Turkey created an 'Astana' negotiation process," he added. "The purpose of this process was to provide a basis for these three countries, which are somehow involved in the internal developments of Syria, to help reforms and achieve political solutions," he said.

"The last meeting of this process was held yesterday, which was the continuation of the same path and goals," Araghchi said on Sunday.

"The Astana process was trying to help reduce tensions and promote internal reforms in Syria through the cooperation of these three countries," he noted.

On Saturday, Araghchi met with the foreign ministers of Russia and Turkey in the Qatari capital of Doha. The top diplomats of the three guarantor states of the Astana peace process discussed the developments in Syria following the resurgence of militancy in the Arab country.

Araghchi called for a "political dialogue" between the Syrian government and militant groups. He said the "most important" issue agreed by the parties was that "political dialogue between the Syrian government and the legitimate opposition groups" should begin.

However, on Sunday, militants seized control of the capital Damascus. President Assad resigned and issued instructions for a peaceful transition of power.

Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, the HTS commander, said Sunday that Syrian state institutions would be supervised by Jalali until a transition of power takes place. The HTS said it would work with the prime minister and called on Syrian armed forces in Damascus to stay away from public institutions.

In a statement earlier, Russia's Foreign Ministry said President Assad had resigned and left Syria, but it did not provide details on where he had gone. However, later in the day, Russian media reported that Assad arrived in Moscow along with his family.

Citing a source in the Kremlin, several Russian media outlets reported that the Russian government has granted Assad and his family asylum.

Assad's departure came after armed militants swept through the country in an offensive that saw them first capture Aleppo in the northwest and then advance south towards the key cities of Hama and Homs before storming into Damascus.

Assad's exit raises concerns about who will lead Syria, a country that has grappled with years of foreign-backed militancy with rival factions vying for control over different areas of the country.

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