

The Rebel Offensive in Syria: Strategic Shift or Fleeting Incident?

Carmit Valensi, Raz Zimmt, Gallia Lindenstrauss, and Arkady Mil-Man | No. 1924
| December 4, 2024

The surprise attack by rebel forces against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is currently shaking the already fragile Syrian arena. Within just a few days, the rebel organizations managed to take control of Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city, while engaging in widespread attacks on regime forces and their supporters—without effective resistance from the regime, as was the case during the Syrian civil war. Turkey, which supports the rebels, apparently gave them the green light to launch the offensive and is hoping to use it to exert pressure on Syria to move ahead with the conditions for formalizing relations between the two countries. However, the rebels' rapid progress creates a conflict of interests for Turkey with Russia and Iran, which are once again determined to save Assad's regime, as well as with the United States, which has troops in Syria and Iraq as part of its campaign against ISIS. Although Israel is not directly involved in the latest developments in Syria, it is clear that the major blow it inflicted on the "Axis of Resistance" in Lebanon and Syria, along with the direct threat to Assad if he were to allow Iran to maintain its military presence in his territory, served as an incentive for the rebel forces. This article seeks to examine the significance of the events, the interests guiding the players involved, and the potential ramifications for Israel.

On November 27, several rebel organizations belonging to the military operations command of al-Fateh al-Mubin in the Idlib region of northwestern Syria launched a broad offensive against the Syrian regime. The Hayat Tahrir al-Sham organization, the former branch of al-Qaeda in Syria, is spearheading the offensive. The Syrian National Army, which is backed by Turkey, has also joined the rebels. According to statements issued by the rebels, the goal of the operations was to thwart the Syrian regime and the Russian forces assisting it from launching attacks, which had intensified in recent months; they also seek to reimplement the ceasefire that was announced in March 2020 as part of an agreement between Turkey and Russia. It appears that the rebels planned only a limited operation, but the weakness of the regime's forces and those of its

supporters (there were even claims that some had fled their positions) encouraged the rebels to expand the campaign.

For the first time in many years, the rebels captured large areas of land from the Syrian army. The first stage was taking control of the town of Khan al-Assal, which is located on the strategic Damascus—Aleppo highway, or the M5; from there, they advanced on to Aleppo—the second-largest city in Syria, which Assad had recaptured in December 2016, hastening his path to victory in the Syrian civil war. Since then, the rebel factions have started to advance southward and take control of territory near the city of Hama. For now, however, it seems that the Syrian army's forces have managed to prevent them from taking full control of the city.

Although Israel is not directly involved in these events, the timing of the rebel offensive is clearly not coincidental and is linked to the developments that have unfolded since the current erupted war on October 7, 2023. It appears that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham had been planning this offensive for months by deploying forces along the borders of Idlib province, where they made their final military preparations. Still, the element of surprise was key to this offensive, which was launched when the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance” was at a critically low point. Hezbollah and the other Shiite militias had been severely damaged by the prolonged fighting against Israel, especially after September 2024, when Israel launched Operation Northern Arrows, and its troops entered southern Lebanon to fight Hezbollah. The presence of forces from the Axis in Aleppo and other regions of Syria was significantly reduced when some were deployed in Lebanon, as well as due to the series of targeted killings that Israel carried out in the arena. The rebels, who kept close tabs on the state of this axis, identified the optimal time to strike.

Iran: Following the severe blows that its proxies have suffered over the past year, and due to the attacks that Israel carried out on Iranian soil, Tehran is currently preoccupied with efforts to address the damage that Hezbollah sustained in Lebanon and has few resources or soldiers to send to Syria. It is evident that the Iranians were surprised by the rebels' offensive and their achievements thus far; as expected, they claim that Israel and the United States are responsible, as part of a “conspiracy” designed to weaken the pro-Iranian axis in the Middle East even further. At least one senior Iranian officer from the Revolutionary Guards has been killed in the offensive, and Iran was even forced to evacuate its consulate in Aleppo. Moreover, anti-Iranian rhetoric has emerged in the areas captured by the rebels, where residents have defaced posters of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Qasem Soleimani, the Quds Force commander who was

assassinated in 2020. At this stage, Iran is focusing on political and diplomatic efforts: Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi has been conducting talks with his Syrian, Russian, and Lebanese counterparts and traveled to Damascus last week to discuss the situation and reaffirm his country's support for President Assad. At the end of his visit, Araghchi flew to Ankara for consultations. While there, he stressed that Iran fully supports Syria and its battle against the "terrorist factions," reiterating the Assad regime's messaging that the developments are the result of "an American-Zionist plan."

Over the next few days, Iran will have to formulate a series of measures to ensure the stability of the Assad regime. Tehran, which has played a key role over the past decade in ensuring that the regime survives, could once again increase its military involvement in Syria. Assad's decision not to join the war against Israel after the conflict erupted in the Gaza Strip created tension within the pro-Iranian axis, with some members, including Iran, criticizing Damascus. At the same time, Tehran still views Syria as a key component in its efforts to maintain its regional influence, especially pinning its hopes on Syria being able to assist in rebuilding Hezbollah's military capabilities, which were severely damaged during the conflict with Israel. However, the intensifying crisis within Syria finds Iran facing its own challenges and increased pressure, given the significant weakening of Hezbollah; difficulties in reestablishing the military coalition in Syria with the participation of the Revolutionary Guards, Russia, Hezbollah, and Shiite militias from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan; increased pressure on Iran in the international arena, especially following the election of Donald Trump as US president; and the exacerbation of the direct confrontation with Israel, which has left Iran more vulnerable to further military actions by Israel.

Russia: The surprise rebel offensive has embarrassed Russia. The Russian military command in Syria, which was taken aback by the speed with which Aleppo fell, responded for the first time since 2016 by launching airstrikes against the rebels in the city in an effort to assist forces loyal to Assad. The Kremlin tried to downplay the scale of the incident, and official statements from Moscow merely expressed deep concern over the escalation. Russian propagandists immediately attempted to place the blame on the United States and Ukraine, whom they accused of being behind the offensive, while stressing that Turkey's conduct violated the understanding reached at the Astana Conference in 2017. Moscow was also embarrassed by the weakness of the Syrian army, including its abandonment of Aleppo and the loss of significant Russian military equipment to the rebels, as well as the Russian forces' decision to abandon the Kuweires Military Airport in the city. Dissatisfaction with the performance of the Russian commanders in Syria was so

great that the commander of the Russian military contingent in Syria was dismissed.

Russia's main interest is in keeping the Assad regime in power, and its support for him remains steady. Russia is reportedly expected to send emergency military aid to the Syrian army, including bombers and heavy bombs, and Moscow may also decide to reinforce the Russian military presence in Syria. However, the challenges currently facing Russia on the Ukrainian front will make it difficult for Moscow to provide massive amounts of assistance to the Syrian regime, as it did during the Syrian civil war. Moreover, Assad's defeat in Aleppo undermines Russia's standing on the regional front and its image as a superpower capable of ensuring the stability of its allies.

Turkey: Turkey apparently gave the rebel forces the green light to launch their current offensive. Throughout almost the entire Syrian civil war, the Syrian opposition forces enjoyed military, economic, and logistical support from Turkey. The Turks have two main interests regarding Syria: the first is to curb the strength of the Syrian branch of the Kurdish underground movement and limit Kurdish autonomy in northeastern Syria; the second is to create the conditions for the return of a significant proportion of the 3.5 million refugees who fled to Turkey during the Syrian civil war. To achieve this, Turkey aims to establish a security zone in northern Syria to address Ankara's concerns and facilitate the return of refugees to an area under Turkish security control.

It is important to understand Turkey's support for the Syrian rebels—including the jihadi forces among them—as an effort to pressure Assad to return the refugees, limit Kurdish autonomy, and urge the incoming US administration of Trump to withdraw the American forces—who have supported the Kurds—from Syria. At the same time, Turkey is also disappointed that the renewed effort to normalize relations with Assad over the past six months has not borne fruit. It is possible that Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is using the current offensive to pressure Assad into agreeing to the terms of the arrangement Ankara is proposing, while simultaneously putting an end to the joint Russian-Syrian attacks on rebel strongholds, which could lead to another wave of refugees.

Moreover, domestic considerations also explain Turkey's policy: there is dissatisfaction with the way the Turkish government has handled the refugee problem, while support for Erdoğan's party, the Justice and Development Party, has dropped—leading to the need for a correction in this context. Similarly, since October, the government has been engaged in efforts to renew the internal peace

process with the Kurds in Turkey, in part to gain support for changes to the Turkish constitution that would also allow Erdoğan to run for office again in 2028.

Ankara's thought process is that by weakening the Kurds in Syria, the Kurdish underground in Turkey will be more flexible in the peace talks. At the same time, this represents a significant gamble from Erdoğan's perspective: undermining stability in Syria, rather than contributing to the resolution of the refugee problem, could actually lead to a new influx of refugees. The rise to power in Syria of jihadi forces could also mean the prolonged presence of American forces in Syria, rather than hastening their departure. In the long term, the jihadi forces in Syria could also pose a threat to Turkey's national security. In addition, threats against the Syrian branch of the Kurdish underground could cause the Kurds to take a tougher line in peace negotiations with Turkey if they assume that Ankara is not genuine in its pursuit of reconciliation. Finally, the Turkish policy of supporting the rebels' surprise offensive directly clashes with Russian and Iranian interests and could lead to a marked cooling in Ankara's relations with both countries, which could endanger Turkey's interests in the Caucasus region, for example, and perhaps even a clash between the forces of these countries stationed in Syria.

Risks and Implications

From an Israeli perspective, the still-evolving events in Syria have both negative and positive elements. On the positive side, the Assad regime has been hit hard, and its overthrow would be a significant blow to Iran and its proxies, as well as to Russia. Iran would be compelled to withdraw its forces from Syria, while the direct route for rebuilding Hezbollah's strength, by smuggling weapons from Iran and Syria to Lebanon, would be blocked. An anti-Iranian regime in Damascus would also pose a direct threat to the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq and, most importantly, would force Tehran to focus on its own direct security, necessarily at the expense of attacking Israel.

Indeed, the greater the threat to the Assad regime becomes, the more Iranian troops are likely to be deployed to save it—despite Tehran's apparent lack of enthusiasm. The collapse of Assad's regime could lead to a prolonged period of chaos and instability in the region. Even more concerning is the possibility that jihadist factions—even those that are slightly more moderate—could take control of large swathes of Syria as well as potentially massive stockpiles of weapons, including chemical weapons, thereby posing a serious threat to Israeli interests.

More than a decade after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Israel faces a similar dilemma: Would the fall of the Assad regime and the removal of Iran and Hezbollah's influence from Syria improve security on the Israel-Syria border, or

would it be preferable to continue with the current regime—“the devil we know”—which Israel has successfully deterred from joining the multi-front war that began on October 7 last year?

If an effective military force—capable of coordinating its operations against the regime and its supporters—emerges under a leadership with a more moderate image than Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, such as the Free Syrian Army that operated during the civil war, then it could provide a better alternative to the brutal regime of Bashar Assad and offer hope for a brighter future for the citizens of Syria.

The coming days will be critical in shaping Syria’s future. Will the campaign expand to pose a real threat to the survival of the Assad regime, or will his familiar saviors—Russia and Iran—overcome their challenges and step in to save him once again? For now, and until the picture becomes clearer, Israel would be wise to avoid getting involved in Syria—unless, of course, its security interests are directly threatened.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen