



What's Behind the Collapse of the Syrian Army in Aleppo?

During the past week, opposition forces in Syria carried out a military offensive that garnered substantial and rapid territorial gains, including the capture of most of the country's second-largest city of Aleppo. Analysts have pointed to how the Assad regime had been warned of the plan by Russia and yet still suffered a major collapse which prompted a hasty retreat from Aleppo and other areas. Moscow also reminded Assad that the regional situation had changed and thus urged him to reach a political solution, however he refused this, as well as Turkey's efforts at reconciliation. As experts have sought to highlight, there are several key factors that have contributed to what has taken place. Firstly, with the Assad regime being politically and militarily backed by the governments of Russia and Iran, the leaders of the opposition forces in Syria clearly viewed Moscow and Tehran's entanglements in other conflicts as an opening for a successful offensive against the Syrian Army. Putin has been deeply involved in the Ukraine War, and Iran and Hezbollah have been preoccupied with the situations in Gaza and Lebanon. Additionally, the recent election of Trump to another term as U.S. president may have caused pressure on Syrian opposition leaders who became worried about a potential settlement to keep Assad in power. Furthermore, opposition forces likely felt propelled to act given that they were uneasy about the Arab League's attempt to bring Syria back into the fold and, in doing so, normalize the Assad regime diplomatically.

As previously mentioned, other notable elements have also spurred the recent developments in Syria. Observers have outlined Assad's continued rejection of Russia's advice for him to hold reconciliation talks with opposition groups and with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – whose calls to meet face-to-face had been turned down by Assad as well. In line with this, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan cited Assad's refusal to engage in political dialogue with the Syrian opposition as the driving force behind what has transpired over the preceding week. Iran and Russia, the Syrian regime's two most significant allies, are urging Turkey to persuade opposition forces to end the offensive. Turkey could stand to benefit from the Syrian opposition's advancements, as these groups provide Turkey with substantial influence in any potential future political settlement in Syria. Some have contended that Turkey is likely moving fast to consolidate its power in Syria as a bargaining chip with the incoming Trump administration. Hence, if Trump were to propose a deal to end the renewed fighting, Turkey's concerns could not be ignored given the influence that they hold.

Regarding Russia, since February of 2022, Moscow has been primarily focused militarily on its offensive in Ukraine. The invasion, which many predicted to be quick and easy, has now dragged out for close to 3 years. Back in June, President Vladimir Putin claimed that [700,000](#) Russian personnel were involved in the conflict. Throughout the Syrian civil war, Russia has been one of Bashar al-Assad's main backers, with Russian airpower being key in Assad regaining control of the majority of the country. Besides Ukraine, Georgia, another former Soviet Republic that also borders Russia, has seen the emergence of large-scale anti-Russian protests over a disputed recent election. Thus, Russia is likely keeping a close eye on Georgia out of fear of another color revolution. For Moscow, Syria is essential to its influence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Russia hosts a significant naval base in Tartus and an air base in Latakia, both in the northwest of the country, not too far from opposition strongholds. However, Putin will likely focus more of Russia's limited resources on its war and in its own neighborhood. Putin has carried out massive air strikes against Syrian opposition forces since the fall of Aleppo, but he is unlikely to return to the

conflict with the same intensity he provided from 2015 to 2020 as long as the Ukraine War rages on. Therefore, Russia may very well encourage a diplomatic solution where it maintains its influence.

The reignition of the Syrian conflict could also serve as a benefit to Israel, while it spreads Iran too thin. Iran previously supplied the Assad regime with Hezbollah forces that are currently recuperating in Lebanon following intense fighting there in recent months and the initiation of a ceasefire deal with Israel. This created a vital opening in the Assad regime's defenses, and Israel is expected to use this opportunity to attempt to cut off supply lines from Iran to Hezbollah via Syria. Some suspect that this may also provide Israel with additional incentive to mount another large-scale military operation against Hezbollah as it seeks to weaken Iran and its proxies within the region.

Two important factors likely influencing the decision of Syrian opposition forces to initiate an offensive now are the re-election of Trump in the United States and the recent normalization among Arab states with Assad's government. Following the Arab Spring and Assad's brutal crackdown on protests, the Syrian regime was suspended from the Arab League, but its re-admission of Assad's government this past May was seen as accepting that Assad would stay in power and that it was in the best interest of other Arab states to engage with him. In Washington, Trump's return to power is predicted to shake up American foreign policy. Trump has, on numerous occasions, promised to halt "endless wars." During his first term, he negotiated with the Taliban to pull American troops out of Afghanistan, and also sought to reduce the United States' armed presence overseas when he withdrew some U.S. troops from northern Syria in October of 2019. This paved the way for Turkey to carry out a large military operation to create a partial buffer zone on its border with Syria. Today, there are about 900 U.S. soldiers in Syria with the stated goal of preventing ISIS from resurging.

Turkish-backed rebel groups compose a portion of the Syrian opposition, which Turkey has supported discretely throughout the war. Turkey has generally been interested in combating ISIL and Kurdish forces in Syria, who have posed a threat to Turkey's national security. Analysts also believe that Turkish President Erdoğan has increased support for opposition groups after Assad refused an offer of reconciliation from him. According to experts, the Aleppo offensive was initially planned for mid-October, and was then delayed after Turkish intervention. It is expected that Erdoğan wishes to put pressure on the Assad regime, but is not looking to overthrow the government, preferring his Turkish-backed forces to avoid pushing any further. This is because Erdoğan wishes to pressure the Assad regime into a normalization of relations to repatriate 4.7 million Syrian refugees residing in Turkey, and to curtail Kurdish groups along the border. The Turkish-sponsored Syrian National Army's most recent effort led to the seizure of the Kurdish stronghold of Tell Rifaat, along with other towns and villages east of Aleppo.

The incoming Trump administration could cause even more changes to the development of the revived Syrian conflict. President-elect Trump is remembered for having reversed a longstanding bipartisan commitment to Kurdish groups in the region. Erdoğan may use this lack of strong pro-Kurdish sentiment to broker a deal with the Trump administration for reduced U.S. support of Kurdish forces in the region. Should this happen, it would be worth keeping an eye on which groups satisfy the vacuum for the Trump administration. Whether the Trump administration tends towards a more isolationist policy or one that is more hawkish on Iran remains to be seen as well.

The ongoing situation in Syria is highly fluid as Assad is facing the most serious threat to his regime in years, with the city of Hama recently falling to opposition forces as their advance continues. This is an extraordinary blow to the Assad regime, given that Hama is the fourth-largest city in Syria and its capture allows the opposition to push towards the capital of Damascus. They are now seeking to take Homs, a city that is only around 100 miles north of Damascus, and whose fall would cut the Assad regime from the country's coastline via the M5 Motorway. Opposition groups in the south have also risen to take over territory, leaving Damascus susceptible to advances against it from multiple fronts. If Homs is captured, there would be no significant town or city before Damascus for Assad to use as cover.