



PERSPECTIVES

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Turkey's Syria Intervention Serves Israeli Strategic Interests

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkey's invasion of Syria to protect Idlib will bog it down in a war it cannot win. At the same time, it severely weakens the Assad regime and could help oust Iran from Syria.

Turkey's war with the Assad regime in Syria brings to mind the words of the late PM Menachem Begin during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War: "We wish both sides the best of success."

Turkey's recent [invasion of Syria](#) was aimed not at the Kurds, for a change, but at the Assad regime as well as its supporters from the "Axis of Resistance." The ceasefire announced between Ankara and Moscow is unlikely to last. Previous Russian attempts at finding a diplomatic solution in Syria have all ended in failure. Furthermore, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan needs to achieve a complete victory on behalf of the rebellion in Idlib if he wishes to remain in power.

Turkey's airstrikes in Syria killed [nine members of Hezbollah](#), several Shiite militiamen supported by Iran, and dozens of Syrian troops. In response, Iran [warned Ankara](#) against targeting its people, noting that Turkish bases are in Tehran's "range of fire." It also sent more militiamen to aid the regime in recapturing Idlib.

Turkey's attacks were viewed as justified by much of the international community. They came after Syrian-Russian airstrikes on Idlib massacred hundreds of innocent civilians and killed [dozens of Turkish soldiers](#).

Turkey has NATO's second-biggest army, and it is well-positioned to deal severe damage to the Syrian regime. Given that both Assad and Vladimir

Putin are widely despised, it is unlikely that Turkey's venture into Syria—which [has damaged](#) Damascus's tanks, air defenses, jets, and military bases—will come under censure.

At the same time, it is unlikely that Ankara will go so far as to provoke Russia by killing Assad or directly engaging Russian troops. Turkey, while a formidable military power in its own right, cannot challenge Russia. Nor would its more influential or stronger NATO partners allow it to take such steps. Nobody wants a third world war, particularly over the likes of Syria. It is, however, possible that the West and Israel would provide diplomatic support and perhaps arms or intelligence to Ankara, as they all share common goals: to degrade Assad's regime, prove that Russia is still relatively powerless in the region, and evict Iran from Syria.

Iran and its proxies are in an unenviable position. President Donald Trump's sanctions campaign has left its economy in a terrible recession. Unless the coronavirus crisis upends his prospects, Trump is unlikely to be removed from office in November, meaning that in all likelihood, the sanctions will stay and even intensify. Iran's top general, Qassem Soleimani, was killed by a US drone strike in January, along with its leading commander of the Iraqi Shiite militias, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. The shooting down of a Ukrainian airliner, widespread protests within the country, and the coronavirus outbreak have worsened Iran's isolation, further crippled the economy, and sapped the regime's internal legitimacy.

The Islamic Republic does not have the funds to continue waging war in Syria. In its "near-abroad," its forces are being targeted in the south by the Israelis (Syria), in the north by the Turks (Syria), in the west by the Americans (Iraq), and perhaps soon from the east by the Taliban.

The American deal with the Taliban is likely to see the group refocus its attention on its historic enemy—Shiite Iran. The Iranian government may soon have to redeploy its Shiite Afghan mercenaries from Syria to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban and other Sunni jihadists there, further undermining its ability to fulfill its goals in Syria.

No matter how many personnel Iran transfers from Iraq or Lebanon, they will continually be targeted by enemy forces. The regime has neither the money nor the manpower to sustain this kind of indefinite upkeep, especially with anti-Iranian sentiment continuing to simmer in Beirut and Baghdad.

With the spread of coronavirus in both Iraq and Lebanon, the economic paralysis in Lebanon, and the Iran-related sanctions weakening Hezbollah, the Iranian regime will have limited capability to enter into a war with Israel

anytime soon—giving the Jewish state more time to improve its capabilities and prepare for such a war in the future.

A combination of economic, diplomatic, and health threats—as well as the Turkish invasion of Syria—is distracting the attention of the Iranians, Russians, and others, which is giving Israel cover to continue attacking Iran-related sites in Syria and Iraq. This aligns with Israeli defense minister Naftali Bennett's [stated goal of extirpating](#) the Iranians from Syria by the beginning of 2021.

While the Turks are busy pursuing Assad and his Shiite allies, they will have less latitude to pursue their goals in Libya or Kurdistan. The Kurds, like Turkey and Israel, are interested in seeing a weakening of the Iranian presence in Syria and Iraq. If the Turkish army is otherwise engaged, it's possible that the Kurds will be able to claw back some of their territory that was occupied by Ankara. With Russia and Assad weaker and more distracted, the Kurds might be able to either demand more from them in a deal in which they join a new Syria, or assist the Syrian army against the Turks. Theoretically, this could lead to Kurdish autonomy or a promise of equal rights in a united Syria, though this is unlikely unless extremist Shiite forces are completely expunged from the region or unequivocally defeated.

Given that Ankara is facing the entire Axis of Resistance and must prepare for the possibility of a widening of the conflict to include Russia, it cannot expand its plans for Libya or the Kurds. General Khalifa Haftar is likely to take advantage of this situation and seize as much territory as he can from the Turkish-backed forces from Syria and Libya with whom he is battling. The fact that Turkey is backing jihadist elements loyal to ISIS and al-Qaeda means it is not likely to receive any concrete Western military aid in that operation—indeed, it is more likely to face greater international scrutiny as the operation drags on and human suffering increases.

Turkey's expulsion of Syrian refugees from its territory into Europe—which has so far been blocked by the Greek military and police—is unlikely to gain it much sympathy in Brussels. It is more likely to turn Europeans against Ankara and promote the advancement of the kinds of far-right governments Erdoğan rails against.

In the end, it is possible that a combination of Israeli and Turkish military force, as well as external factors, will severely weaken the Assad regime, degrade and destroy Hezbollah and Shiite mercenaries in Syria, and force the Iranians out of the country. However, the Turks will probably be forced out as well. The world will not tolerate Ankara's backing of extremist elements, nor allow it to drag Russia and NATO into a world war.

It is likely that Turkey will leave Assad in power for fear of provoking Russia too much and then leave, having failing to redesign Syria and Kurdistan in line with its neo-Ottoman aspirations. More Turkish troops will come home in coffins on behalf of a regime that is shunned by its own people as well as in the UN. The country's ailing economy won't allow for victory in Libya either. Russia will have done its job of keeping Assad alive, probably to retake Idlib from jihadists in the future and allow for the repatriation of refugees.

True, Assad will be loathed by the world after having committed terrible atrocities. His economy will be destitute and he will have little real power, leaving him reliant on Moscow for protection. Russia, too, will be seen as a country that could not use diplomacy to achieve its aims and had to resort to violence and war crimes. This will most likely propel the Arab Gulf countries back toward the US and Europe.

Whatever the international community might think about it, Moscow will likely end up with sole dominion over Syria, having evicted Turkey and Iran—its two historic imperial rivals—from the country. This should prevent a Syrian-Israeli war and could even, in theory, lead to peace between the two countries. It could also lead to more rights for the Kurdish people in Syria—including autonomy—unless they become united enough to push for independence once again.

The Turkish intervention has the potential to bring down both neo-Ottomanism and the radical Shiite revolution that Iran has been trying to spread. Again—let's wish both sides the best of success.

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