

The Syrian Great Game

By Prof. Manlio Graziano

In a letter to Engels in April 1863, Marx wrote: “Twenty years counts as a day in major historical developments, though there may be days into which twenty years are compressed.” The turbulent dynamics of international politics suggest that we are entering one of those intense periods where decades of change unfold in mere days.

The fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria followed this pattern almost precisely. In a matter of days, insurgents toppled a government that had clung to power for thirteen years while brutally suppressing the pro-democracy uprising of 2011. The Assad dynasty — led first by Hafez and then by his son Bashar — collapsed after fifty-three years in power. Everything flows, but today, everything is flowing very quickly, and global disorder is growing increasingly chaotic.

Experts are now grappling with what happened and what might follow. The simultaneous weakening of Russia, Iraq, and Hezbollah has created a remarkable opening for forces that had long struggled against Assad. These include not only internal factions — Islamists, Kurds, and the secular Syrian National Army — but also external players, particularly Turkey. Turkey has historically backed Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the main opposition force, a group of former cut-throats linked to al-Qaeda until 2016.

Historically, Turkey has an eye on Syria, its province from the early 16th century until 1918. After the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1922, this interest waned, as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk focused on building a cohesive Turkish nation clearly distinct from its Persian neighbors and especially its despised Arab neighbors. However, Syria under the Assads never ceased provoking Turkey — partly to bolster its image as a champion of Arab nationalism and partly to reclaim Alexandretta (now İskenderun), a province ceded to Turkey by France in 1939 when France occupied Syria, in hopes of securing Turkish neutrality as World War II loomed.



To pursue its goals, Damascus has made its Kurdish minority the background of Turkey’s Kurdish guerrilla movements against Ankara. Amid ups and downs – including the Turkish threat to “shut off the taps” of the Euphrates River through a network of dams – the “Kurdish card” remained central to the rivalry between the two countries.

At the beginning of the 2011 Syrian uprising, Turkey served as a model for the insurgents: a Muslim, democratic, and economically dynamic country. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan would settle for that role, and his government was negotiating with Turkish Kurds for a political resolution to their long-running conflict. However, the outbreak of Syria’s civil war and the 2013 coup in Egypt, which marked the end of the Arab Spring, undermined Erdoğan’s regional strategy. The other, and far more important, pillar of his policy, integration into the European Union, had already collapsed due to the French veto.

The Kurdish issue then resurfaced as a central concern. Since then, to prevent direct contact between Turkish Kurds and Syrian Kurds, Turkey has persistently sought control of a stretch of Syrian territory along its border, occupied by U.S.-backed Kurdish militias during the fight against ISIS. In 2019, wary of alienating Ankara, the United States allowed Turkey to seize part of the Kurdish-held territory despite earlier assurances of protection.

As shown in the following map, drawn last July, the Syrian regime’s survival depended heavily on military support from Russia and Iran (marked in orange), while Turkey maintained control over parts of northern Syria through its Islamist and secular allies. This included the Idlib region, the launch point of the recent offensive.



Map of foreign military presence in Syria (July 2024). <https://jusoor.co/en/details/map-of-foreign-forces-in-syria-mid-2024>.

Iran has maintained a long-standing presence in Syria, driven by its ambition to expand the so-called “Shiite crescent,” a strategic corridor stretching from Iran to the Mediterranean through northern Iraq. In a flexible theological maneuver, Iran’s supreme leader recognized Alawism — an extravagant self-styled Muslim sect comprising just over 10% of Syria’s population and to which the Assad family belongs — as a branch of Shia Islam. To bolster its influence, Tehran deployed Shiite militias from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, alongside its loyal proxy, Hezbollah.

Russia, on the other hand, intervened militarily in 2015, essentially to protect the last two Mediterranean military bases it maintained after the breakup of the USSR, Latakia and Tartus, from ISIS’s territorial advances.

In order to better understand what is happening today, it is necessary to dispose of certain facile claims seen in the media that Russia and Iran, supporting the same regime, were allies. Historical parallels illustrate how countries can collaborate on one front while competing on another. For example, the U.S. and the USSR were allies in Europe but rivals in the Pacific during World War II; and they can support the same cause precisely because they are hostile to each other, like Britain and Russia, which supported Greek independence in the 1820s in a competition to become Athen’s major ally.

Beyond the diplomatic signaling, Russia and Iran were in competition with each other in Syria. The proof comes from Israel: Before October 7, Benjamin Netanyahu boasted of good relations with Vladimir Putin, precisely because the Russian leader allowed Israel to make occasional strikes on Iranian or pro-Iranian targets in Syria.

Another country that bears some responsibility for the current situation is Israel itself. Though Syria was part of the so-called “axis of resistance” set up by Tehran, it largely avoided direct confrontation. Since 1971, the Assad regime has maintained a dual approach: loudly denouncing the “Zionist entity” while quietly avoiding military action. It continued to demand the return of the Golan Heights but never attempted to take it back. Hezbollah served Assad not to “resist” Israel but to act as his fifth column in Lebanon, occupied by Syria from 1992 to 2005, and then, from 2011 onward, to ensure his survival during the civil war.

For Israel, the Assad regime was a convenient neighbor: hostile in rhetoric but predictable in practice. It preserved the status quo – that is, control of the Golan – and allowed Israeli strikes on Iranian and pro-Iranian targets in Syria. Following Assad’s fall, Israeli forces have crossed the Golan border and are now stationed inside Syrian territory, in cautious anticipation of learning who the new masters of Syria will be and what their intentions will be.

The new situation that arose on December 8 is the missing link between the war in Ukraine and the war in Gaza. A shrewd analyst might have advised Assad to seek more solid partners as early as the evening of February 24, 2022, when Russian forces invaded Ukraine. In fact, that senseless attack has strained Russia’s limited resources, forcing Moscow to scale back its commitments on other fronts. Perhaps, it is precisely because he realized this vulnerability that Assad sought reconciliation with Turkey and the Arab League, long-time backers of his domestic opponents. But these efforts ultimately proved insufficient.

With the Gaza war, Israel devoted itself to the destruction of two other poles of the “axis of resistance”: Hezbollah and Hamas (which, by the way, supported militias opposed to Hezbollah in Syria). While Israel may not achieve this goal in the long run, Hezbollah is currently weakened and compelled to concentrate its forces in southern Lebanon, leaving Syria vulnerable. It is possible that the timing of the anti-Assad offensive was tied to the fragile ceasefire in Lebanon — launched before Hezbollah could regroup and shift its fighters back into Syria.

Compounding this crisis is the growing instability of Iran’s regime, increasingly fragile and insecure, perhaps now also terrified at the idea that the ayatollahs may, at best, soon also end up on a plane heading for Moscow. Iran appears to be the greatest loser in this geopolitical realignment. However, its survival could paradoxically depend on its adversaries: Israel needs Iran as a permanent threat to maintain internal political cohesion; Saudi Arabia could keep Iran as a card up its sleeve while anticipating U.S. policy shifts, while waiting for the unpredictable Donald Trump; the United States, along with Syria’s Alawite minority and the Kurds, might find Iran useful if Turkey pushes on the accelerator and if, who knows?, a Sunni theocratic regime is established in Damascus, the historic capital of the Umayyad caliphate.

If Tehran has surely lost, if Moscow has surely lost, has Ankara won? There is no doubt that Turkey has won a battle; but what about the war? Syria is entering a new phase where all factions — divided by mutual hostilities and backed by external powers with equally conflicting agendas — are once again in motion. The Kurds currently hold 56,000 former ISIS fighters in 29 camps they run in northeastern Syria, including 11,500 men and 14,500 women, abused, tortured and killed, according to an Amnesty International report in April this year. These prisoners are life insurance for the Kurds, especially as they await U.S. policy shifts after Trump takes office on January 20. Any large-scale release could dramatically alter the region’s balance and provoke global repercussions.

In short, like the sorcerer’s apprentice, Ankara has unleashed dark forces it may struggle to control. Russia has suffered another strategic setback and must now reconsider how to maintain its hold on its Syrian bases in Tartus and Latakia; Iran is increasingly isolated, and the future U.S. president says his country must stay out of the region.

Many years of history have been concentrated in a few days, and many more will be concentrated in the days to come.

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