

Policy Analysis: Turkey's Role and the Future of Syria after Bashar al-Assad's fall and Israeli Actions in Syrian Territory

The conflict in Syria, which began in 2011, has transformed the political landscape of the Middle East, influencing not only the future of the country itself but also the geopolitics of the broader region. The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime could mark a turning point, with significant implications for regional powers such as Turkey, Israel, Iran, and Russia. This analysis focuses on the role of Turkey in the post-Assad era and explores the potential impact of Israeli actions in Syria, as well as the broader regional dynamics, including the involvement of Iran and Russia. To understand the future of Syria, it is essential to examine the evolving relationship between Turkey and Syria, the interests of key international and regional actors, and the potential risks of regional instability.

Turkey's Relations with Syria before the Fall of Bashar al-Assad

Before the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, Turkey and Syria shared a relatively stable relationship. Despite some historical tensions, particularly over territorial disputes like the status of the Hatay Province (which Syria claims as its own), Turkey sought to establish better ties with Syria in the early 2000s. Turkey's motivation was largely driven by regional security concerns, economic opportunities, and a desire to maintain stability along its southern border.

The relationship began to improve as Turkey and Syria signed several agreements, including those related to trade, border security, and water management. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government even worked towards fostering stronger political relations with Syria, largely focusing on the shared goal of maintaining peace and stability in the region. However, these ties were strained by the rising tensions between the Assad regime and its opposition. Despite efforts to improve relations, the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011 pushed Turkey to reevaluate its stance, especially as the Assad regime's violent crackdown on protests escalated into a full-scale civil war.

Turkey's reaction to the outbreak of the conflict was swift. Turkey became a vocal critic of Bashar al-Assad's government, supporting the Syrian opposition and hosting thousands of Syrian refugees. As the war intensified, Turkey's involvement deepened, with Ankara providing financial, logistical, and military support to various opposition groups, particularly those that opposed Kurdish autonomy movements. In the process, Turkey's relationship with the Assad regime deteriorated rapidly.

Turkey's primary concerns regarding Syria revolved around the security of its southern border, the threat posed by Kurdish separatist movements, and the growing influence of Islamist groups within the opposition. Turkey feared that the rise of Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria could spill over into its own Kurdish-populated regions, thus escalating the Kurdish insurgency within Turkey. This concern led Turkey to take a more active role in the Syrian conflict, both by intervening militarily in northern Syria and by supporting opposition factions that would undermine Kurdish forces like the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which was backed by the United States.

The Potential Fall of Bashar al-Assad and Turkey's Strategic Interests

With the ongoing military and political challenges facing Bashar al-Assad's regime, many analysts speculate about the potential for his downfall and what it could mean for Syria's future. Turkey has several strategic interests in Syria that could shape its actions in a post-Assad environment. The most immediate concern for Turkey would be to ensure the security of its borders and to prevent the spread of Kurdish autonomy along the Syrian-Turkish border. The Turkish government has been vocal in its opposition to the creation of a Kurdish state or autonomous regions in northern Syria, as it fears that such a development would embolden Kurdish separatists in Turkey.

Turkey also sees an opportunity to strengthen its influence in the region by supporting opposition groups and helping shape a post-Assad Syria. Given that many Syrian opposition groups operate from Turkish soil, Ankara might seek to leverage its position to influence the political process in Syria. Turkey's involvement in shaping Syria's future could take several forms, including military interventions, humanitarian aid, and political support for opposition groups that align with its interests. Turkey's role could evolve depending on how the post-Assad political landscape unfolds and the level of involvement from other regional and global powers.

However, Turkey's involvement in post-Assad Syria will not occur in isolation. The presence of competing regional actors like Israel, Iran, and Russia will complicate Turkey's ability to dominate the political process. While Turkey may be able to leverage its support of opposition groups and its military presence in northern Syria, it will likely have to contend with the interests of these other powers, all of whom have strategic goals in Syria that may not align with Turkey's.

The Israeli Factor: Golan Heights and Security Concerns

One of the key regional players with significant stakes in Syria's future is Israel. Israel's concerns over Syria are primarily driven by its proximity to the Golan Heights, a region that was captured by Israel during the 1967 Six-Day War and has remained a point of contention between the two countries. Syria's attempts to regain control of the Golan Heights have long been a source of tension, and Israel is deeply concerned about the potential for further instability in Syria to jeopardize its control over the area.

As the conflict in Syria has escalated, Israel has taken a proactive approach to safeguarding its interests. Israel has carried out numerous airstrikes against Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria, with the goal of preventing the entrenchment of Iranian military forces in the country and disrupting Hezbollah's activities in the region. Israeli forces have also been deployed along the Golan Heights to bolster security in the event that the conflict in Syria spills over into Israeli territory.

Israel's actions in Syria highlight the broader security dilemma that regional powers face. The instability in Syria presents both opportunities and risks for Israel. While the downfall of Bashar al-Assad could weaken Iran's influence in Syria, it could also open the door for new challenges,

such as the rise of Islamist militias or a shift in the balance of power that threatens Israel's security.

Iran and Russia: Competing Interests in Syria

Iran and Russia are two other major actors in Syria whose involvement in the conflict has been critical to the survival of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Both countries have extensive interests in Syria, and their involvement in the conflict has made them key players in shaping the future of the country.

Iran's involvement in Syria is primarily motivated by its desire to maintain a foothold in the Levant and to support its allies, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and various Shiite militias in Iraq. Iran's military presence in Syria is seen as a strategic asset in its broader regional ambitions, particularly in its competition with Saudi Arabia and other Sunni powers. Iran has invested heavily in supporting the Assad regime, providing both military and financial assistance to ensure its survival. In a post-Assad Syria, Iran will likely seek to preserve its influence, either through direct control over key areas or through its proxy networks, including Hezbollah.

Russia's involvement in Syria is also driven by geopolitical interests. Russia has long sought to maintain a strategic presence in the Middle East, and Syria represents its only remaining ally in the region. Russia has used its military and diplomatic power to support Assad, ensuring that the regime retains control over key areas of Syria. In addition to its military presence, Russia has sought to broker peace negotiations and position itself as a key player in the post-conflict political order. However, Russia's influence in Syria could be challenged by other regional powers, including Turkey, and the potential for a power struggle over Syria's future could complicate its position.

The Regional Spillover Effect: Lebanon and Beyond

The aftermath of Bashar al-Assad's fall will have significant implications for Syria's neighbors, particularly Lebanon. Lebanon has long been affected by the conflict in Syria, with Hezbollah playing a prominent role in supporting the Assad regime. The rise of new Islamist factions, or groups operating under different ideological banners, could further destabilize Lebanon and lead to renewed conflict between Hezbollah and other factions.

In addition to Lebanon, other countries in the region, including Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey, could also be affected by the power vacuum created by Assad's downfall. The proliferation of armed groups, the rise of extremist militias, and the continuing struggle for regional dominance will all contribute to the broader instability in the region.

Conclusion: The Future of Syria and Regional Stability

The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime would mark a significant turning point in Syria's history, but it would also introduce new challenges for the region. While Turkey is likely to take a more proactive role in shaping post-Assad Syria, it will face competition from other regional powers, including Israel, Iran, and Russia, all of whom have strategic interests in the country. The

resulting power struggle could lead to prolonged instability, not only in Syria but throughout the Middle East.

In addition to the internal challenges, Syria's neighbors, particularly Lebanon, could be drawn into new conflicts as various armed groups vie for control. The risk of a broader regional war, involving multiple countries and factions, is a real possibility. Ultimately, the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime would not mark the end of Syria's troubles but rather the beginning of a new phase in the country's tumultuous history. As regional powers jockey for influence, the future of Syria will remain uncertain, and the risks of further conflict will persist.