



By: *Sharmila Devi*

# Rebel retaking of Aleppo forces world to recalculate strains on geopolitical order



A stunning offensive by Syrian rebels who **overran** Syria's second-largest city Aleppo on 29 November has reminded the world of the law of unintended consequences.

The rebels who include Sunni militants were emboldened by the lack of attention paid to Syria by powers such as Russia and Iran who prop up Bashar Al-Assad.

Furthermore, Israel's war against Hezbollah has weakened the Shia group and it is less able to offer fighters to the Syrian president, even if it were so inclined given it was angered by Assad's silence on the conflicts in Lebanon and Gaza.

Countries with interests in Syria ranging from the US and Russia to Israel, Turkey, China and the Gulf kingdoms are left scrambling to respond at a time when the course of the Gaza and Ukraine wars are ever more unpredictable and Donald Trump will assume the US presidency in January.

The complicated and shifting actors in Syria's long war never sustained widespread public attention beyond the refugee issue, which roiled European politics and cemented the rise of anti-immigration and far-right parties in Europe and even arguably boosted the cause of Brexit.

But Syria has now re-emerged as a further complicating factor for policy-makers who had thought a stalemate since 2020 might last longer among the country's warring parties that unofficially control different swathes of Syrian territory.

## The competing interests

The competing interests of outside powers contributed to the grinding Syrian war, which started as a civil war in 2011, killed more than 300,000 civilians, displaced more than half of the pre-war population of 21 million people, and involved horrific violence.

Chemical weapons, for example, were used by the regime, breaching the "red lines" of former

President Barack Obama but who alongside the rest of the western world failed to stop their use.

As diplomats become reacquainted with a string of acronyms referring to the shifting militia groups that operate in Syria, leaders are having to calculate how it will affect already high geopolitical tensions.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish militia backed by the US in the continuing fight to prevent Islamic State (IS) regaining momentum, runs north-east Syria.

Factions including the so-called, Turkish-backed and anti-Kurd Syrian National Army (SNA), previously known as the Free Syrian Army, control the north-west. Assad, who is severely weakened by war, sanctions and the weariness of the Syrian army, runs a rump state in the rest of the country.

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Assad has now been humiliated in Aleppo by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which emerged from Al-Nusra Front that operated as Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria early in the war.

HTS and its group of disparate partners also control an enclave in Idlib. They had been planning the Aleppo offensive since last year and it was supposed to take place in mid-October until Turkey intervened to delay it, according to the Soufan Center research group.

"Elements of the rebel coalition are backed by Turkey, which provides funding and equips the rebels to keep pressure on the Assad regime," **said** the Soufan Center. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was reportedly angered by Assad's refusal to reconcile and to help repatriate around 4 million Syrian refugees from Turkey.

As of early December, the rebels had reached south of Aleppo to the outskirts of the city of Hama, made notorious in 1982 when Assad's father Hafez ordered the crushing of a Sunni rebellion in which around 20,000 people were killed.

Even further south, Assad's forces have started establishing defensive lines in the city of Homs, which is vital to allow Iranian transport of military supplies from Iran and Iraq to Hezbollah, the Institute for the Study of War reported. In the past few days, dozens of Iranian and Iraqi Shia militia members have already crossed into Syria from Iraq to support Assad.

## Iran and Russia

Iran and Russia have pledged support for Assad and carried out air strikes on Idlib, Hama and Aleppo. But Iran faces challenges in bolstering its proxy Hezbollah and Russia is overstretched in Ukraine so it is unclear how far they can go in reinforcing Assad with men and materiel.

Russia has significant interests in Syria but during the Ukraine war it was forced to redeploy some of its equipment to Ukraine, including a squadron of Su-25 fighter jets and an S-300 long-range missile system, The Guardian reported.

### Russia recently evacuated the smaller Kuweires airbase near Aleppo

Russia has two large military bases, the Khmeimim airbase and the nearby Latakia naval base, but it recently evacuated the smaller Kuweires airbase near Aleppo.

The US, meanwhile, carried out a strike in eastern Syria on 4 December after a rocket attack on one of its bases. The US has about 900 troops in Syria but its appetite for expanded military operations may be muted in the absence of any imminent threat to western

interests, such as an emboldened IS.

## Three-way negotiation

Amid all this, Israel has for months been **conducting** strikes in Syria aimed at weakening Assad's alliances with Iran and Hezbollah.

Recent diplomatic overtures towards Assad could well be derailed by expanded conflict in Syria. The Arab League **readmitted** Syria last year partly because Gulf and other Arab states had hoped Assad would crack down on drug smuggling, particularly the amphetamine Captagon that is destabilising neighbouring countries.



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European countries will also have to weigh up their next steps after Italy reopened its embassy in Damascus in July while some small European states have also restored diplomatic relations.

China, which calls itself a "friend" of Syria, is likely to be concerned not least because the Uyghur-led Turkestan Islamic Party has said it was involved in the Aleppo offensive.

All eyes will be on the outcome of a three-way **negotiation** on Syria between the foreign ministers of Iran, Russia and Turkey to take place this weekend in Qatar. "We have decided to hold closer consultations and dialogue and, with God's permission, we will co-operate to further improve the situation toward peace and stability in our region," said Abbas

Araghchi, Iranian foreign minister.

God's permission to improve the situation is sorely needed.