

Could Erdogan leverage Syria's rebel victory to threaten Israel?

written by Noa Lazimi | 10.12.2024

In light of the rebels' success and the fall of Assad's regime, is Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan poised to make good on his threat to invade Israel?

Since October 7, Turkey has hardened its stance toward Israel, including severing trade relations with Israel in solidarity with Hamas. In July, Erdogan escalated further, threatening, "Just as we entered Nagorno-Karabakh and Libya, we will do the same to Israel."

What initially seemed like an empty threat is now becoming a more plausible scenario following the rebels' astonishing victory in Syria, where many factions supported by Ankara toppled the Assad regime in just 11 days.

Turkey's role in these developments is significant, though attributing the coup solely to Ankara would be premature. While Turkey trains and arms some rebel groups, it remains unclear if it directly commands Tahrir al-Sham, the organization spearheading the surprise attack. It is also doubtful that Erdogan himself anticipated such swift and decisive rebel gains.

Surely, Erdogan stands to benefit greatly from dismantling a Shiite regime supported by Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah and replacing it with a Sunni-led government. His key interests in Syria include weakening Kurdish autonomy and facilitating the return of millions of Syrian refugees who have fled to Turkey since the civil war.

The rebels' victory can help Ankara achieve its goals on both fronts.

Erdogan to exacerbate the situation?

However, this achievement does not shield Turkey from the potential spillover of war into its own territory. The rebel factions are a fragmented mixture of militias, often in conflict with one another. Erdogan likely understands that the path to a pro-Turkish government in Syria is fraught with challenges and could take years, if it materializes at all.

Meanwhile, the extensive operational freedom granted to rebel groups could backfire, entangling Turkey in Syria's internal strife. It may also reignite tensions at home should the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) launch retaliatory attacks against Turkish forces targeting Kurds in Syria.

And what of Israel? Could Erdogan leverage a friendly regime in Syria to position troops and weaponry on Israel's border? Turkey's growing influence in Syria aligns with Erdogan's neo-Ottoman vision for the Middle East, as part of which Syria could transform into a Sunni Islamist stronghold under Ankara's auspices.

This would intensify Turkey's adversarial stance toward Israel, particularly as there is no end to the "Swords of Iron" war in sight.

Thus, it is plausible that Erdogan either directly orders jihadist groups operating on the Israeli border to attack Israel or, at the very least, supports them in doing so.

That said, Turkey must weigh the consequences of opening such a front against Israel. Any escalation would risk straining its relationships with the United States and NATO, especially under a new US administration unlikely to tolerate such aggression.

Considering these dynamics, Erdogan would be well advised to play his cards cautiously and avoid exacerbating the Syrian conflict, particularly with regard to Israel.

Regardless of Erdogan's calculations, Israel was wise to mobilize tanks and infantry across the border for the first time in 50 years. Israel must continue leveraging this momentum to strike targets in Syria to diminish Iran's and Hezbollah's capabilities.

Moreover, it is crucial for Israel to insist on a robust and expanded American military presence in the Syria-Iraq-Jordan triangle.

This strategy will not only curb the influence of pro-Turkish Islamists but also preempt other hostile forces from gaining a foothold in neighboring Jordan—a country already under threat from Iran's ambitions to destabilize its regime and launch attacks on Israel from the east.

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