

The Syrian Arab Army's Victorious Liberation of Aleppo. Historical Comparisons

Is Assad 'Pulling a Saakashvili' in Northwestern Syria?

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While there are certainly some structural similarities between the Syrian Arab Army's ongoing liberation offensive in Northwestern Syria and Saakashvili's previous desire to restore Georgia's full sovereignty over Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, the international legal and situational differences between the two are much too important to ignore and thus make these two cases morally incomparable, though some significant strategic insight can nevertheless be gained by studying both of them together.

Assad = Saakashvili?

The Syrian Arab Army's (SAA) [victorious liberation of the entirety of Aleppo](#) last weekend was a milestone achievement in the country's nine-year-long conflict, powerfully showing that the Syrian people are gradually becoming ever more successful in freeing their homeland from foreign occupation. It is the sovereign and internationally enshrined legal right of the Syrian Arab Republic to secure its indisputably recognized borders as well as to respond to foreign-backed terrorism emanating from the northwestern corner of the country, but the recent campaign has raised serious concerns that the SAA might enter into a large-scale conventional clash with the Turkish Armed Forces that are present in that region as part of their responsibilities under the Astana peace process that Damascus itself consistently supported since its initiation over three years ago. There are fears among some that Russia could even get dragged into a crisis with Turkey because of Syria's latest moves, the same as former Georgian President Saakashvili attempted to drag the US into a crisis with Russia during his failed 2008 offensive against Abkhazia and South Ossetia to restore Tbilisi's full sovereignty over its internationally recognized territory at the time.

Superficial Similarities

There are certainly some structural similarities between what Syria is currently doing and what Georgia had previously tried to achieve, but the international legal differences between them are much too important to ignore and thus make these two cases morally incomparable. Addressing the similarities first, both countries are backed by powerful patrons, Russia and the US respectively, and both governments were also recognized as the legitimate rulers of the entirety of their territories by the international community at the onset of their offensives against the regions that they earlier lost control over. Furthermore, their neighbors also had their military forces in those said territories prior to the commencement of large-scale hostilities as a result of international legal agreements supported by both Damascus and Tbilisi. These small states, however, might have believed

that they could successfully drag their much larger patrons into a conventional conflict with their neighboring state through their respective offensives so as to compel the latter to withdraw in order to avoid a larger war that could have been sparked as a result of this possible brinkmanship. In this sense, there doesn't seem to be much of a difference between what Syria is presently doing and what Georgia earlier attempted.

Details Are Everything

The similarities end there, however, and it'll now be seen how the substantive differences between these two cases make their similarities superficial in hindsight. Abkhazia and South Ossetia had previously proclaimed independence following local referendums and thus enjoyed de-facto sovereignty prior to the agreement to formalize Russia's military presence in each (then-)self-declared republic, while Idlib never experienced such political developments. In addition, each formerly Georgian region had their own authorities that were de-facto recognized by Tbilisi as legitimate participants in the peace process, unlike Idlib which has nothing at all resembling a centralized authority democratically speaking on behalf of the locals there. Another difference is that Turkey has legally binding responsibilities to thwart the terrorism emanating from the regions under its control, which it's failed to do, unlike Russian forces in the former regions of Georgia which didn't have these tasks, nor were there ever any credible instances of terrorism originating from Abkhazia or South Ossetia. Finally, the SAA began its ongoing offensive in response to Turkey's failure to stem these aforesaid terrorist threats, whereas Georgia directly attacked Russian peacekeepers without provocation.

No Turkophobic War-Mongering Neocons In Moscow

That last point is especially pertinent because it explains why Russia openly supports Syria's liberation campaign up to a certain point while the US never fully threw its backing behind Georgia's failed attack. Russian forces have also been victimized by the terrorism emanating from the Turkish-controlled region of Northwestern Syria, but no American servicemen were ever threatened by the Abkhaz and South Ossetian forces under Russia's control in those two former Georgian regions. In addition, the US reportedly urged Saakashvili to carry out his infamous rocket attack against Russian peacekeepers in Tskhinval, while Russia never gave anything that could even remotely be interpreted as a signal for President Assad to attack the Turkish Armed Forces. In fact, the argument can be made that some of the most rabidly Russophobic and war-mongering neoconservatives of the Bush-era "deep state" clamored for a crisis with Russia at the time but that comparatively more "rational" minds prevailed in averting that dire scenario. Nobody in any position of responsibility in Russia, however, harbors any intentions of entering into a similar sort of crisis scenario with Turkey no matter how badly some in the [Alt-Media Community](#) salivate at the thought of that happening.

The Russian-Turkish Strategic Partnership Remains Strong

As proof of this, it's enough to recall the words of Foreign Minister Lavrov over the weekend when he [said](#) that "We have very good relations with Turkey, (but) that does not mean we have to agree on everything. Full agreement on all issues cannot be possible between any two countries." Russian Ambassador to Turkey Alexei Yershov [said](#) a few days later that "our countries and peoples have complex ties that have been laboriously built in the recent year through scrupulous and painstaking efforts of tens of thousands of people, beginning from our presidents, Vladimir Putin and Tayyip Erdogan, who have made a serious personal

contribution to the development of bilateral relations. Our countries need each other, our countries are interested in each other, and it is our duty to preserve and augment this potential.” Lavrov later [noted](#), however, that “attacks on Syrian and Russian forces from Idlib are continuing”, but presidential spokesman Pushkov [reiterated](#) his country’s position that a possible clash between the Turkish and Syrian militaries over these regrettable events would represent the “worst-case scenario” from Russia’s perspective, clearly signaling that Moscow will do all that it can do prevent that from happening.

Concluding Thoughts

Considering that Syria’s latest liberation offensive was in response to Turkey’s failure to thwart terrorist attacks emanating from the region under its control in violation of the Astana peace process, it’s insincere for anyone to compare this development with Saakashvili’s failed attempt to take over Abkhazia and South Ossetia after attacking Russian peacekeepers there without provocation despite both countries sharing the same goal of restoring authority over their internationally recognized borders (only partially in the case with Georgia nowadays after Russia and a few other countries recognized the latter two regions as independent states).

Should President Assad seek to follow in Saakhasvili’s footsteps by trying to drag his Russian patron into a conventional clash with Turkey just as the the former Georgian leader tried to do the same with the US vis-a-vis Russia, however, then he’ll certainly fail and might very well befall a similar political fate as his one-time counterpart. The same, however, also goes for President Erdogan too, since it would be an ironic twist of fate if he was the one who pulled a Saakashvili-like provocation instead. As such, both the Syrian and Turkish leaders should refrain from any action that could trigger that “worst-case scenario” and avoid dragging Russia into war.

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