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Middle East

# What is happening in Syria?

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**In just a few days, after having remained relatively static for a few years, Syria has turned anew into a theatre of war of movement, in what looks like a resumption of the last major displacement of the battlefronts that took place in 2016, when the Assad regime regained control of Aleppo with Iranian and Russian support and Turkish complicity. Here we are now, facing a surprise attack accompanied by a sudden expansion of the forces of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Organization for the Liberation of al-Sham, i.e. Syria, commonly referred to by its Arabic acronym HTS), the Salafi jihadist group that has controlled the Idlib region in northwestern Syria since 2017.**

As is well known, the origin of the group goes back to Jabhat al-Nusra, which was founded in 2012 as a branch of Al-Qaeda in Syria, then announced its defection from the organization under the name Jabhat Fath al-Sham in 2016, before absorbing other groups and becoming Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham the following year. The HTS invasion of Aleppo in recent days was carried out at the expense of the Syrian regime's army, backed by Iranian and Russian forces. As for the Turkish role, it was again one of complicity, but in the opposite direction this time, as HTS has become dependent on Turkey, which is its only outlet.

Let us take a closer look at this mayhem, starting with the Turkish role. At the beginning of the popular uprising in Syria in 2011, Ankara aspired to impose its tutelage over the Syrian opposition and through it over the country in the event of its victory. It then soon cooperated with some Arab Gulf states in supporting armed groups raising Islamic banners, when the situation got militarized and transformed from a popular uprising against a sectarian, despotic family rule into a clash between two reactionary camps, exploited by a third camp formed by the Kurdish movement. These developments paved the way for the Syrian territories to become subjected to four occupations, in addition to the Zionist occupation of the Golan Heights that began in 1967: Iranian occupation (accompanied by regional forces affiliated with Tehran, most notably Lebanon's Hezbollah) and Russian occupation backing the Assad regime; Turkish occupation in two areas on Syria's northern border; and US deployment in the northeast, in support for the Kurdish forces confronting ISIS or its remnants.

So, what happened in recent days? The first thing to stand out was the rapidity with which the Assad regime forces collapsed in the face of the attack, recalling the collapse of the Iraqi regular forces in the face of ISIS when it crossed the border from Syria in the summer of 2014. The reason for these two collapses lies mainly in the sectarian factor, their common feature being that the Alawite majority in the Syrian forces and the Shiite majority in the Iraqi forces had no incentive to risk their lives defending the Sunni majority areas under their control targeted by the attack. Add to this the resentment created by the existing regime's failure to create incentivizing living conditions, especially in Syria, which has been undergoing an economic collapse and a major increase in poverty for several years. Last Saturday, the Financial Times quoted an Alawite saying: "We are prepared to protect our villages and towns, but I don't know that Alawites will fight for Aleppo city ... The regime has stopped giving us reasons to keep supporting it."

What is clear is that HTS, along with other factions under Turkish tutelage, have decided to seize the opportunity created by the weakening of Iranian support for the Assad regime that resulted from the great losses suffered by the Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran's main armed wing in Syria, due to Israel's onslaught on Lebanon. This weakening, combined with the weakening of Russian support due to the involvement of the Russian armed forces in the invasion of Ukraine, created an exceptional opportunity that HTS did seize. It is also clear that Turkey blessed this attack. Since 2015, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's shift towards playing on the Turkish nationalist chord, along with his alliance with the Turkish nationalist far right, meant that his primary concern has become the fight against the Kurdish movement. In 2016, Ankara stabbed the Syrian opposition forces in the back by allowing the Syrian regime to retake Aleppo with Iranian and Russian support, in exchange for Russia allowing it to launch Operation Euphrates Shield

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and seize the Jarabulus area and its surroundings, north of the Aleppo Governorate, from the Kurdish forces that were dominant there.

This time too, Ankara took advantage of the attack by HTS on Aleppo to unleash its Syrian suppletive forces against the Kurdish forces. Erdogan had previously tried to reconcile with Bashar al-Assad, offering him support in extending his regime's control over the vast area where the Kurdish movement is dominant in the northeast. However, the latter's insistence that Turkey hand over to him the areas it controls on the northern border thwarted the effort. Erdogan then turned against the Assads again and gave his green light to HTS's attack, angering the backers of the Syrian regime. The "difference of viewpoints" that Iran's foreign minister alluded to during his visit to Ankara after the start of the attack, consists in the fact that Tehran sees the greater threat in HTS, while Ankara sees it in the Kurdish forces. Despite a common hostility towards the Kurdish movement, Tehran, Moscow and Damascus had concluded a long-term truce with it, waiting for the circumstances to change to allow them to resume the offensive for the control of the whole Syrian territory, while Ankara's relationship with that movement has remained extremely hostile, in contrast with its cooperation with HTS which controls the Idlib region.

As for Israel and the United States, they are cautiously monitoring what is happening on the ground, as the two parties – the Assad regime and HTS – are almost equally bad in their eyes (despite the UAE's efforts to whitewash the regime and Ankara's efforts to whitewash HTS). The Zionist state's main concern is to prevent Iran from seizing the opportunity of this new battle to strengthen its military presence on Syrian territory and find new ways to supply Hezbollah with weapons through it.

Finally, by stirring up sectarian animosities, these developments are pushing away the only hopeful perspective that arose in recent years in Syria, constituted by the massive popular protests against the deterioration of living conditions that have been taking place in the country since 2020. These protests began in the Suwayda region (inhabited by a Druze majority) in the territories controlled by the regime, and quickly turned into demanding Bashar al-Assad's departure and the fall of the regime, thus reviving the spirit of the popular, democratic, non-sectarian uprising that Syria witnessed amid the Arab Spring, thirteen years ago. Let us hope that the unity of the people's interests in livelihood and emancipation will, in a not-too-distant future, lead to the renewal of the original Syrian revolution and allow the country to be reunited on the democratic basis that the pioneers of the 2011 uprising dreamed of.

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