

Bashar al Assad at crossroad

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Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and allied factions have launched a surprise attack against the Assad regime forces in Idlib province on November 27, 2024. The offensive began after rebels formed a new coalition called the "Military Operations Command." The new grouping is made up of a broad spectrum of opposition forces, from Islamist factions to moderates. The leader of the new coalition is Abu Mohammed al-Golani, the head of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a former al Qaeda affiliate in Syria that used to go by the name Al-Nusra Front.

The opposition's forces swiftly captured swathes of Aleppo without meeting significant resistance and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and allied factions claimed on November 30, 2024 that they control a majority of Aleppo city and the Idlib region.¹ The Syrian military said on November 30, 2024, that opposition forces had entered large parts of Aleppo city during an offensive in which hundreds of soldiers had been killed, forcing the army to redeploy. The Syrian army command's statement was the first public acknowledgement by the military that opposition forces had entered Aleppo, which had been under full state control since government forces backed by Russia and Iran drove out opposition forces eight years ago.²

Aleppo was one of the centers of commerce and culture in the Middle East. Aleppo was home to 2.3 million people before the war. Rebels seized the east side of the city in 2012, and it became the proudest symbol of the advance of armed opposition factions. In 2016, government forces backed by Russian airstrikes laid siege to the city. Russian shells, missiles

and crude barrel bombs leveled neighborhoods. Starving and under siege, rebels surrendered Aleppo that year.³

After the victory in Aleppo, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) on December 3, 2024, announced the “liberation” of three towns north of Hama and said their “forces continue to advance.” The Syrian government's forces reinforced defense line north of Hama in attempt to block the HTS advance. while Russia intensifies airstrikes against the militants.

The offensive was launched the same day that ceasefire took effect in neighboring Lebanon after a two-month intensive fighting between Israel and Iran backed Hezbollah which ended with significant blow to Hezbollah.⁴

Syrian opposition forces began preparations to seize Aleppo a year ago, but the operation was delayed by war in Gaza and Lebanon and was launched when a ceasefire took hold in Lebanon. Hadi al-Bahra, the president of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces⁵ told Reuters in his Istanbul office, in the first public comments on the opposition's forces preparations.

"A year ago, they started really training and mobilizing and taking it more seriously but the war on Gaza ... then the war in Lebanon delayed it. They felt it wouldn't look good having the war in Lebanon at the same time they were fighting in Syria. So, the moment there was a ceasefire in Lebanon, they found that opportunity ... to start." The Turkish military, which is allied with some of the opposition had heard of the armed groups' plans but made clear it would play no direct role, he added.⁶

Syria's President Bashar al Assad on December 2, 2024, branded the insurgent factions offensive that has captured swathes of northern Syria a bid to redraw the map of the region in line with US interests. "The terrorist escalation reflects the far-reaching goals of dividing the region and fragmenting the countries in it and redrawing the map in line with the objectives of the United States and the West," Assad said in a statement from his office.⁷

Syrian rebels say the campaign was in response to stepped-up strikes in recent weeks against civilians by the Russian and Syrian air force on areas in southern Idlib, and to preempt any attacks by the Syrian army,

which was building up troops near front lines with rebels. A Syrian opposition leader said on December 2, 2024, that the opposition would not stop fighting until the Syrian government committed to the United Nations process and a political transition.⁸

The Russian response

Moscow is Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad's most important backer. Russia intervened in Syria in 2015, turning the tide of the civil war which broke out four years earlier in favor of the government, whose forces at the time had lost control of most of country.⁹

Speaking on November 29, 2024, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Moscow regarded the opposition attack as a violation of Syria's sovereignty. "We are in favor of the Syrian authorities bringing order to the area and restoring constitutional order as soon as possible," he said.

Russian and Syrian warplanes targeted insurgents in an Aleppo suburb for the first time since 2016.¹⁰ The Russian military said on November 29, 2024, it was bombing "extremist" forces, while Turkey demanded a halt to the bombardment of the Idlib region. Russia has promised Damascus extra military aid that would start arriving in the next 72 hours.¹¹

Both Iranian and Turkish Foreign Ministers said that Turkey, Iran and Russia would convene a new three-way meeting to address the conflict in Syria.¹²

Russia, whose intervention in Syria's civil war on behalf of Assad was crucial in turning the conflict in his favor, has said it will continue to support him. "We continue our contacts at the appropriate level and analyze the situation," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters Monday. "A position will be formed regarding what is needed to stabilize the situation."¹³

Iran

On December 2, 2024, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian confirmed in a phone call to President Al-Assad that Tehran was ready to provide all the support needed to repress the insurgency and Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi met with al-Assad in Damascus on December 1, 2024, to show support for the Syrian president.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi also pledged "continued support for the government, nation and army of Syria," in a phone call with his Syrian counterpart Bassam al-Sabbagh, according to a statement.¹⁴

The foreign ministers of Iran and Russia voiced support for Syria and agreed on the need to intensify joint efforts aimed at stabilizing the situation in Syria. Iran's Abbas Araghchi told Russia's Sergei Lavrov in a phone call that the attacks in Syria were part of an Israeli-US plan to destabilize the region.¹⁵

Iran suffered losses in the current fighting in Aleppo and a general in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was killed on November 28, 2024, during fighting between Syrian government forces and opposition groups, an Iranian news agency reported. "General Kioumars Pourhashemi, one of Iran's senior advisors in Aleppo, was killed in an attack carried out by takfiri terrorist mercenaries," the state-linked Tasnim news agency reported.¹⁶

Foreign ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei said that: "We entered Syria many years ago at the official invitation of the Syrian government, when the Syrian people faced the threat of terrorism.... our military advisors were present in Syria, and they are still present and would remain in the country in accordance with the wishes of its government". Baghaei did not specify whether or not Iran would be increasing its forces in Syria in the wake of the lightning opposition offensive.¹⁷

Hezbollah

Hassan Nasrallah was a close ally of Assad and Hezbollah sent thousands of fighters to prop up the Syrian forces during the civil war in Syria. Syria is the main corridor of Iranian military supply to Hezbollah and the group has on Syrian soil logistic and military industrial facilities.

Hezbollah said that no requests had been made by Syria for intervention or help and the group does not currently intend to send fighters to northern Syria to support the Syrian army there. But the real explanation is that Hezbollah suffered major blows during more than two months of war with Israel in Lebanon, losing its entire leadership and thousands of fighters. Hezbollah signed a ceased fire with Israel last week.¹⁸

Iraq

On November 30, 2024, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani told Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that his country's security was crucial to the region's stability.

Iraq has placed all its military sectors on a state of emergency following the developments in Syria, accompanied by diplomatic efforts aimed at

"keeping the country away from what is happening in Syria." Iraq armed forces are on high alert to maintain security on its borders and prevent any repeat of the 2014 extremist threat to the country as insurgents battle against the Syrian government across the border between the two countries.¹⁹

Pro-Iranian Iraqi militias

Tehran has pledged to aid the Syrian government and on December 2, 2024, hundreds of fighters from Iran-backed Iraqi militias crossed into Syria to help fight the factions.²⁰

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based opposition war monitor, some 200 Iraqi militiamen riding on pickups crossed into Syria overnight through the strategic al-Boukamal crossing.²¹

According to a Reuters report, at least 300 fighters, primarily from the Badr and al-Nujaba groups, crossed late on December 2, 2024, using a dirt road to avoid the official border crossing. Harakat al-Nujaba is one of the largest factions within the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq. The faction, which has participated in battles against the Islamic State in the country, maintains close ties with Lebanon's Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). It also fought alongside the Syrian army and contributed to the capture of the eastern parts of Aleppo city in northern Syria in late 2016.²²

However, the Iraqi Ministry of Interior denied any movement of armed factions crossing the Syrian border, describing the circulated reports as "fabricated."²³

Turkey

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that he hoped the instability in Syria would be concluded with an agreement in line with the demands of the Syrian people. Erdogan also said Ankara was closely monitoring developments in neighboring Syria and taking the necessary measures to prevent harm to Türkiye's security.²⁴

A deal between Russia and Turkey had broadly stabilized the situation in the northwest Syria since 2020. But Turkey has expressed growing frustration with al-Assad's failure to reach a deal with the opposition to end the conflict.

Türkiye has been seeking to normalize ties with Syria to address security threats from groups affiliated with Kurdish militants along its southern

border and to help ensure the safe return of more than 3 million Syrian refugees. Assad has insisted that Türkiye's withdrawal of its forces from northern Syria be a condition for any normalization between the two countries.

Turkish minister of foreign affairs Fidan, at a joint news conference in Ankara with his Iranian counterpart, has said that Türkiye and Iran, which support opposing sides in Syria's civil war, have agreed to resume diplomatic efforts along with Russia to restore calm days after fighters launched a lightning offensive and captured almost all of the country's largest city, Aleppo.

Fidan, whose country has backed forces opposed to Assad, blamed the recent flare-up of the conflict on the Syrian government's refusal to enter a dialogue with the opposition that Türkiye supports. "Recent developments show once again that Damascus must reconcile with its own people and the legitimate opposition," the Turkish minister said. "Türkiye is ready to make all the necessary contribution toward this."²⁵

Turkish security officials have said while Ankara was working to stop opposition offensives, they were increasingly concerned about attacks by Syrian government forces on the opposition. Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said al-Assad and the opposition needed to compromise.²⁶

One of Turkey's main concerns in Syria is the power held by the Kurdish-led groups which are allied to Washington but deemed terrorists by Ankara. Fidan reiterated Türkiye's support for Syria's territorial integrity, but suggested that Türkiye would not hesitate to intervene against Syrian Kurdish militia groups that Ankara considers to be terrorists if they "exploit the environment of instability."²⁷

The Kurdish groups, including the PKK and YPG, had sought to take advantage of Syrian government forces withdrawing from parts of the country under the control of al-Assad's forces. The corridor would have linked the Kurdish-held northeastern regions to Tel Rifaat, a strategic area northwest of Aleppo.²⁸

Turkey's state-owned Anadolu news agency said the Syrian National Army, an opposition group, blocked an attempt by Kurdish groups to establish a corridor connecting Tel Rifaat to northeastern Syria and had taken the town of Tel Rifaat from the Kurdish YPG militia.²⁹

Syrian Kurds were fleeing the fighting in large numbers after Turkish-backed fighters seized Tel Rifaat. The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic

Forces largely withdrew and called for a humanitarian corridor to allow people to leave safely in convoys toward Aleppo and later to Kurdish-led northeast regions.³⁰

Meanwhile, on December 3, 2024, the Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-led group supported by the United States, claimed that it has captured seven villages from the government in the eastern countryside of Deir al-Zour. The group said it was “safeguarding” the populations in those villages from threats, including from Islamic State militants.

The United States

The United States maintains hundreds of troops in northeast Syria as part of an anti-ISIS coalition. The United States and its allies France, Germany and Britain called for "de-escalation" in Syria, and for the protection of civilians and infrastructure.

The United States blames al-Assad’s reliance on Russia, Iran for loss of Aleppo control Syria’s “reliance on Russia and Iran,” along with its refusal to move forward with a 2015 peace process outlined by the UN Security Council, “created the conditions now unfolding,” National Security Council spokesman Sean Savett said in a statement.

He added: “At the same time, the United States has nothing to do with this offensive, which is led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a designated terrorist organization.”³¹

Summary

Assad has been at war with opposition forces seeking his overthrow for 13 years, a conflict that's killed an estimated half-million people and some 6.8 million Syrians have fled the country. For years, Assad's forces had leaned on support from Russia and Iran-backed militias to grind down various rebel factions that had sprung up to oppose his rule. Until this past week, Assad maintained control over much of the country, albeit tenuously in some areas.³²

Over the past decade, Iran and Hezbollah have consolidated their military presence in Syria as part of their joint vision of creating Shiite territorial continuity in the region (The Shia 'a crescent) under Iranian hegemony. Syria is a critical component of the Iranian designed geostrategic

structure of the Middle East as a front against Israel and a strategic corridor to the Mediterranean and Lebanon.³³

It seems that the timing of the attack by the opposition forces in Syria was chosen by them in order to take advantage of a strategic weakness of the Assad regime and its allies. Hadi al-Bahra, the president of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces said that the factions were able to seize the city of Aleppo and neighboring Idlib province so quickly in part because Hezbollah and other Iran-backed fighters were distracted by their conflict with Israel. Hadi al Bahra added that "Due to the Lebanese war and decrease in Hezbollah forces, (Assad's) regime has less support and Iranian militias also have less resources while Russia is giving less air cover due to its Ukraine problem". The assault in northwestern Syria was launched on the day Israel and Hezbollah began a truce ending more than a year of fighting.³⁴

The current offensive in Idlib region, Aleppo and Hama is the biggest challenge to President Bashar al-Assad in years. The fighting in Aleppo, Idlib and Hama provinces would become more broadly destabilizing if it will promote a "domino effect" and opposition groups in other parts of Syria will open new fronts against the government forces. The coming days will be critical for shaping the future of Syria - will the campaign of the opposition forces expand and endanger Assad's survival, or will his allies, Russia and Iran, overcome the difficulties they are facing and come together to save him?

Notes:

¹ Syria war monitor says Jihadist rebels' control most of Aleppo city, Ahram online, November 30, 2024.

² Syrian army confirms opposition entered Aleppo, says dozens of soldiers killed, Al Arabiya, November 30, 2024.

³ What to know about sudden rebel gains in Syria's 13-year war and why it matters, Ahram online, November 30, 2024.

⁴ Syria war monitor says Jihadist rebels' control most of Aleppo city, Ahram online, November 30, 2024.

⁵ Bahra's coalition, which does not include HTS, represents anti-Assad groups including the Türkiye-backed Syrian National Army or Free Syrian Army. It holds regular diplomatic talks with the United Nations and several states.

⁶ Syrian Opposition Leader Says Lebanon Truce Opened Door to Aleppo Assault, Asharq Al Awsat, December 2, 2024.

⁷ Syria's Assad says insurgents advance a bid to 'redraw' regional map, Ahram online, December 2, 2024.

⁸ Syrian rebels launch attack against army in Aleppo province, Al Arabiya, November 28, 2024.

⁹ Russian military says bombing anti-government forces in Syria, Al Arabiya, November 30, 2024.

¹⁰ Syrian army confirms opposition entered Aleppo, says dozens of soldiers killed, Al Arabiya, November 30, 2024.

¹¹ The Syrian Civil Defense, a rescue service operating in opposition-held parts of Syria, said in a post on X.

¹² Türkiye's Erdogan Hopes Instability in Syria Will Be Solved with Agreement, Asharq Al Awsat, December 2, 2024.

¹³ Türkiye's Erdogan Hopes Instability in Syria Will Be Solved with Agreement, Asharq Al Awsat, December 2, 2024.

¹⁴ Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, allies enter Syria's second city of Aleppo in lightning assault, Al Arabiya, November 29, 2024.

¹⁵ Iran, Russia foreign ministers say they support Syria amid major opposition attack, Al Arabiya, November 30, 2024.

¹⁶ Iran commander killed in Syria amid clashes between government, opposition forces, AL Arabiya, November 28, 2024.

¹⁷ Iran says to keep military 'advisors' in Syria, Al Arabiya, December, 2024.

¹⁸ Hezbollah not ready to send fighters to help Syria's Assad 'at this stage': Report, Al Arabiya, December 2, 2024.

¹⁹ Yasmine Osama Farag, Iraqi army on high alert amid escalating conflict across its Syrian border, Ahram online, December 2, 2024.

²⁰ Syrian Opposition Leader Says Lebanon Truce Opened Door to Aleppo Assault, Asharq Al Awsat, December 2, 2024.

²¹ Türkiye's Erdogan Hopes Instability in Syria Will Be Solved with Agreement, Asharq Al Awsat, December 2, 2024.

²² Yasmine Osama Farag, Iraqi army on high alert amid escalating conflict across its Syrian border, Ahram online, December 2, 2024.

²³ Yasmine Osama Farag, Iraqi army on high alert amid escalating conflict across its Syrian border, Ahram online, December 2, 2024.

²⁴ Türkiye's Erdogan Hopes Instability in Syria Will Be Solved with Agreement, Asharq Al Awsat, December 2, 2024.

²⁵ Türkiye's Erdogan Hopes Instability in Syria Will Be Solved with Agreement, Asharq Al Awsat, December 2, 2024.

²⁶ Who is fighting in Syria and why? Al Arabiya, December 2, 2024.

²⁷ Türkiye's Erdogan Hopes Instability in Syria Will Be Solved with Agreement, Asharq Al Awsat, December 2, 2024.

²⁸ Turkish-backed Syrian opposition group blocked Kurdish plan, Turkish security sources say, Al Arabiya, December 1, 2024.

²⁹ Who is fighting in Syria and why? Al Arabiya, December 2, 2024.

³⁰ Türkiye's Erdogan Hopes Instability in Syria Will Be Solved with Agreement, Asharq Al Awsat, December 2, 2024.

³¹ US blames al-Assad's reliance on Russia, Iran for loss of Aleppo control, Al Arabiya, December 1, 2024.

³² Willen Marx, how a Syrian rebel group pulled off its stunning seizure of Aleppo, npr, November 30, 2024.

³³ Carmit Valenci and Mika Naftali, Assad and the Axis of Resistance: A Tense Partnership Put to the Test, INSS Insight No. 1922, November 28, 2024.

³⁴ Syrian Opposition Leader Says Lebanon Truce Opened Door to Aleppo Assault, Asharq Al Awsat, December 2, 2024.