



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 4 Decembre 2024

# Rebel Takeover as Syrian Regime Forces Retreat

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: [Situation Assessment](#)

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### Unit for Political Studies

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On 27 November 2024, a coalition of Syrian opposition factions, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS – formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) and factions of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA – formerly Free Syrian Army), launched a major military operation they dubbed "Deterring the Aggression". The attack came as a response to the continued shelling of opposition-controlled areas, mostly in the Idlib countryside, by regime forces and their allies, and marks an attempt to retake control of the de-escalation zones that Syrian regime forces had seized in violation of the Astana agreements. However, the rapid retreat of regime forces in the western Aleppo countryside prompted the opposition factions to expand the scope of their operation to ultimately gain control of the city of Aleppo, with the exception of the Kurdish neighbourhoods (Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah) and the entire Idlib governorate, reaching the outskirts of Hama. In total they have seized a strip of land measuring about 7,400 square kilometres within four days.<sup>1</sup> There are indications that the opposition coalition forces have been preparing for this operation for some time, beyond a response to the shelling of opposition areas.

## I. Preparations and Military Goals

Since the end of summer, opposition forces have been preparing for a military operation that had intended to be limited to retaking the areas seized by the regime in the last de-escalation zone in Idlib, designated after the Astana talks between Russia and Turkey in early 2017. The regime and its allies violated the Astana agreement on Idlib by launching a major attack in late 2019 and early 2020, during which they were able to seize large parts of the de-escalation zone, including control over the cities of Khan Sheikhoun, Maarat al-Numan and Saraqib. This ended with a ceasefire agreement between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on 5 March 2020.<sup>2</sup> The operation was planned to take advantage of the regional and international circumstances that have weakened the regime and its allies as a result of the Ukraine war, the confrontation between Hezbollah and Israel in Lebanon, and the weakening of Iran and its militias in Syria in light of the recent escalations with Israel. It was no coincidence that the operation began at the same time that Hezbollah and Israel entered into a ceasefire agreement that ended over a year of conflict.

The participation of Turkish backed SNA factions close to Ankara indicates implicit Turkish support for the operation. While the opposition factions' goal is to push back regime forces and stop the bombing of areas under their control, Turkey also seeks to take advantage of the weakness of its opponents in Syria (Russia and Iran) and the US preoccupation with the presidential transition to change the balance of power on the ground. Turkey is pursuing several of goals; it seeks to strengthen its negotiating power and force the Syrian regime and its allies back to the negotiating table to reach an understanding on a number of security and political issues, most notably the return

<sup>1</sup> "Syrian Militants Reach Central Aleppo as Government Forces Appear to Retreat," *The Guardian*, 1/12/2024, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQys>

<sup>2</sup> "Moscow Summit: Will the Ceasefire Hold in Idlib?" Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 3/10/2020, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQVP>



of refugees, weakening the People's Defence Units (YPG – the Syrian wing of the Kurdistan Workers' Party), thwarting any attempt to establish Kurdish self-rule in northern Syria, and reaching an understanding on the fate of the Euphrates River in the event of a US withdrawal under the second Trump administration.

Over the past two years, Turkey has been trying unsuccessfully to enter into negotiations with the regime to resolve the refugee problem, with more than 3 million Syrians estimated to be residing on its territory, which has turned into a political and social crisis inside Turkey. Furthermore, Turkey is keen to reach understandings with the Syrian regime regarding the Kurdish problem before Trump arrives at the White House potentially withdraws its forces from Syria. But the regime has consistently rejected these calls, with Iranian support, citing a prior Turkish commitment to withdraw from Syrian territory before starting any negotiations.

## II. Timing of the Operation and Retreat of Regime Forces

The "Deterring the Aggression" offensive was scheduled to begin at the end of last summer, to take advantage of the weakness of the regime forces and its allies. The alliance that emerged around the regime between 2015 and 2020, which included regular and irregular Russian forces (the Wagner Group in particular), in addition to formations from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and a group of Shi'i militias (Iraqi, Afghan and Pakistani), in addition to units from Hezbollah helped to change the balance of power on the ground dramatically in favour of the Syrian regime. With the aid of this alliance, the regime retook vast swathes of Syrian territory, including the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo, which were under opposition control until December 2016.

This alliance has been weakened by a series of regional and international developments, starting with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This prompted Moscow to withdraw a large portion of its forces from Syria, especially the air force, which played a decisive role in driving the opposition out of the rural surroundings of Damascus, Daraa, Quneitra, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Idlib, and Deir ez-Zor. The number of Russian owned aircraft currently at the Hmeimim base is estimated at just 5-7, which explains the lacklustre Russian response to the rapid advances made by the opposition factions and the rapid collapse of the regime forces in the absence of Russian air cover.<sup>3</sup> The Wagner Group, which was restructured by Russian President Vladimir Putin after a rebellion led by its leader Yevgeny Prigozhin in June 2023, has also disappeared from the scene. Since then, Putin has rebranded its presence in Africa as the Africa Corps.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the Hezbollah Israel conflict that stemmed from Hezbollah opening the Gaza support front from Lebanon after Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, prompted Hezbollah to withdraw many of its

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<sup>3</sup> "Syria: Russia Fails to Halt Aleppo Offensive with War Planes Diverted to Ukraine," *Middle East Eye*, 29/11/2024, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQw9>

<sup>4</sup> "'Africa Corps': Russia's West African Presence Rebranded," *Le monde*, 17/12/2023, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQNb>

forces deployed in the Aleppo and Idlib countryside towards Lebanon or southern Syria near the Golan, or redeploy them in Qalamoun along the Syria Lebanon border. The heavy blows to Hezbollah in Lebanon eliminated the majority of the first-tier political and military leadership, and a large part of its military capabilities were destroyed.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the groups fighters became disillusioned with their presence in their positions in Syria, at a time when their villages and areas were being violated by Israel in various parts of Lebanon. All of this created a huge vacuum that the regime was unable to fill. Over the past decade, Hezbollah, supported by Russian air cover, has represented the backbone and striking force of the regime's camp.

Added to these weaknesses is the presence of the Iranian military and its affiliated militias. Israel has launched 155 strikes in Syria since the beginning of 2024 (86 strikes in October and November alone), in addition to targeting Hezbollah sites and bases of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and its allied Shi'i militias. The most recent and violent of these attacks was the Israeli air raid on Palmyra, on 20 November, killing up to 100, at a gathering of Iraqi militias.<sup>6</sup>

Coming up to 14 years of conflict have led to a state of absolute exhaustion among the regime's forces, including its human resources, which have greatly diminished due to losses and defections. The human resources crisis has worsened in the past year, after the regime, for various economic and social reasons, dismissed large groups of its staff and officers whom it had kept in service for many years. The difficult economic conditions it faced, due to the war and economic sanctions, and recently exacerbated by the Lebanon war and the economic sanctions imposed on its allies (Iran and Russia), have been reflected in the regime military personnel. When the opposition launched its operation, it found itself facing a completely worn-out army that had lost the will to fight. Morale had collapsed, especially with the absence of allies on the ground and the Russian Air Force in the sky; they retreated quickly.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, the opposition's performance has improved significantly in recent years, gaining extensive combat experience and becoming better organized and more disciplined, especially HTS, which was established with a structure as close as possible to a regular army, and now enjoys a central command and control system. As such, the opposition has become better equipped and armed as a result of local manufacturing, seizing weapons from the regime's positions and its allies, or obtaining them from external parties. Numerous reports indicate a possible Ukrainian role in arming the opposition and training it in the use of certain types of weapons.<sup>8</sup> Drones, which the opposition has become adept at using, have also played an important role in storming many of the

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5 "Israel Signals Escalation with Attacks on Hezbollah Communications Devices" Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 22/9/2024, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zP8A>; "Israel Hezbollah Ceasefire: Drivers and Challenges", Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 3/12/2024, accessed on 3/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQF1>

6 "Death toll update | Nearly 100 people killed and injured in a bloody Israeli attack on Palmyra", Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 20/22/2024, accessed on 2/12/2024 at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRbv>

7 "Syria's Second City Slips from Government Control: Monitor," *Economic Times*, 1/12/2024, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQjg>

8 "Ukrainian Trained, Turkish Sponsored Syrian Rebels Lead Assault on Aleppo". *Kyiv Post*, 1/12/2024, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRky>



regime's fronts.<sup>9</sup> Successful coordination between the various opposition factions has also been essential to achieving significant results on the ground.<sup>10</sup>

Hence, as the regime's allies were losing influence due to regional and international circumstances (the war in Ukraine, the confrontation with Israel), Turkey's positions were strengthening. At a time when the regime's forces and its allies were in decline, the opposition forces were growing in strength and experience.

### III. Impact of the Opposition Advances on the Political Process

Since the regime regained control over large parts of Aleppo with Russian-Iranian support in late 2016, then large areas of the country in 2018, especially around Damascus and the south and centre of the country (the three de-escalation zones), finally nibbling away at large parts of the last de-escalation zone in Idlib in 2019 and 2020, it has been acting like a victor. The regime refused to make any concessions or even engage in any serious political endeavour to resolve the crisis, whether through the United Nations sponsored Geneva process, or the Astana process and the Constitutional Committee proposal created by Russia as an alternative to Geneva that guides a political transition.

The regime's self-confidence and conviction that it did not need to make concessions increased after Arab states began to reopen to it from late 2018, first the UAE and Bahrain, and then through the "Step by Step" initiative proposed by Jordan in 2021, which culminated in Saudi Arabia normalizing relations with the regime, reinstating it in the Arab League, and inviting it to attend the Arab Summit in Riyadh in May 2023, thus ending 12 years of its Arab isolation. All of this convinced the regime that it could regain its membership and legitimacy in the community of nations and obtain economic aid for reconstruction without having to make any concessions, neither to the Arab countries nor to the political opposition.

Recent developments on the ground have upturned these conditions and shattered the illusions of victory that the regime and its allies have cradled in recent years. The opposition factions' control over the strategic city of Aleppo, the entire Idlib province, and parts of Hama province represents a major shift in the balance of power on the ground. This also means that the opposition now controls all of northern Syria, including Aleppo, which is inhabited by about a fifth of the population. Thus, the number of people living in the opposition areas is now almost equal to that under the regime's control. Moreover, Aleppo, with its economic, industrial, human, and political weight, represents an important pivot for the Syrian opposition factions and will strengthen their positions in any potential negotiations. There is a widespread belief that recent developments may constitute an important opportunity to start a serious negotiation process, which many hope can lead to an end almost 14 years of conflict in Syria.

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<sup>9</sup> Shelly Kittleson "Syria's rebel offensive: Why now and what could happen next?", *The New Arab*, 2/12/2024, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQxV>

<sup>10</sup> "Who are Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Syrian groups that took Aleppo?", *Al Jazeera*, 2/12/2024, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQY7>



## IV. Arab and International Positions

Since 2012, the Syrian revolution has been manipulated into a regional and international proxy war, so the reactions of the countries involved are an important indicator of how they might respond. As usual, the responses to the developments in Syria have varied. While Turkey sought to distance itself from the military operation to avoid potential regional and international pressures, especially from its "partners" in the Astana process (Russia and Iran) and its allies as well (especially the United States), Ankara placed the operation within the framework of a response to regime violations of the de-escalation agreement, whereby recent military operations by regime forces are in breach of its obligations under the Astana agreement.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi considered the offensive an "American-Zionist plan after the defeat of the Zionist regime in Lebanon and Palestine", announcing his intention to visit Damascus and Ankara,<sup>12</sup> where he carried a message to Bashar al-Assad affirming "firm support for the army and government in Syria".<sup>13</sup> In a phone call with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, Araghchi discussed the developments in Syria, in addition to regional and international developments. A statement by the Iranian Foreign Ministry stated that the two parties stressed during the talks the "need to coordinate on Syria as much as possible."<sup>14</sup>

The US denied any involvement in the attack, noting that HTS is classified as a terrorist organization by Washington, and urged for "de-escalation, protection of civilians and minority groups", while re-emphasizing the need to launch a "serious and credible political process that can end this civil war once and for all". The White House statement pointed out that "The Assad regime's ongoing refusal to engage in the political process outlined in UNSCR 2254, and its reliance on Russia and Iran, created the conditions now unfolding, including the collapse of Assad regime lines in northwest Syria." It affirmed the US commitment to "fully defend and protect" its personnel and military positions, "which remain essential to ensuring that ISIS can never again resurge in Syria."<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, Egypt's Foreign Minister, Badr Abdel Aaty, confirmed its support for "the Syrian state and its national institutions", stressing "the importance of their role in achieving stability, combating terrorism, and extending the state's sovereignty, stability, independence and territorial integrity". This was during a phone call between Abdel Aaty and his Syrian counterpart, during which they discussed the latest developments in northern Syria, especially in Idlib and Aleppo.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in

<sup>11</sup> "Türkiye: We Are Carefully Monitoring the Increase in Terrorist Attacks in Tal Rifaat and Manbij," *Anadolu Agency*, 30/11/2024, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zR2T>

<sup>12</sup> "Message of Araghchi's Visit to Syria: Iranian People Will Not Forget Friends of Difficult Days," *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, 1/12/2024, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRdD>

<sup>13</sup> "Araghchi: We Strongly Support the Government and Army in Syria against Terrorists," *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, 1/12/2024, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zReN>

<sup>14</sup> "Iranian, Russian Foreign Ministers Discuss Developments in Syria in Phone Call, Iranian Foreign Ministry Says," *Anadolu Agency*, 30/11/2024, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQJw>

<sup>15</sup> "Statement by NSC Spokesperson Sean Savett on Syria," The White House, 30/11/2024, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQSL>

<sup>16</sup> "Foreign Minister affirms Egypt's position in support of the Syrian state and its institutions," General Information Service – Egypt, 30/11/2024, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQHq>





Jordan, King Abdullah II affirmed his support for Syria and its territorial integrity and stability, in a phone call with the Iraqi Prime Minister, according to an official statement issued by the Jordanian Royal Court.<sup>17</sup>

The Syrian regime president, immediately after receiving news that Aleppo and other areas in the north had fallen, rushed to mobilize support. His first contact was with the President of the UAE, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, who pledged to continue defending Syria's stability "and territorial integrity in the face of all terrorists and their supporters". Sheikh bin Zayed added that Syria "is capable, with the help of its allies and friends, of defeating and eliminating them, no matter how intense their attacks are".<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Assad discussed developments in Syria with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al Sudani, who stressed, according to the media office of the Iraqi Prime Minister, that "Syria's security and stability are linked to Iraq's national security, and affect regional security in general, and efforts to establish stability in the Middle East." Soon after armed factions in Iraq, supported by Tehran, are reported to have crossed into Syria to fight alongside the regime forces.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the regime's pledge to regain control of the newly lost territories and defeat the opposition, this does not seem likely, given the circumstances in which the regime and its allies find themselves; the regime's military capabilities are severely weakened, and unlike in 2016 when they retook Aleppo, its allies are unable to provide meaningful assistance this time. It does not seem that things will improve much for the regime and its allies with the inauguration of the Trump administration, which takes a hardline position towards Iran. Although the regime is persistent in its rejection of any settlement, there is a possibility that these recent ground developments could open a more serious political process, should it abandon its illusions of victory and adopt a more realistic approach.

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<sup>17</sup> "The King Affirms Jordan's Support for Syria and Its Territorial Integrity, Sovereignty and Stability," *Al-Mamlaka TV*, 1/12/2024, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQxO>

<sup>18</sup> "Head of State and Syrian President Discuss Developments in the Syrian Arena by Phone," *Emirates News Agency-WAM*, 1/12/2024, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRgA>

<sup>19</sup> Suleiman Al-Khalidi and Maya Gebeily, "Iraqi fighters head to Syria to battle rebels but Lebanon's Hezbollah stays out, sources say", *Reuters*, 3/12/2024, accessed on 3/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQAf>