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Syria at a Crossroads: Between Hope and Uncertainty

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Analysis paper

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Introduction

An armed alliance of the Haya't Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the mainstream Syrian opposition forces have launched a new military operation against the Assad regime and Iranian-backed militias in Western Aleppo, dubbed the "Deterrence of Aggression." This marks the first large-scale ground offensive in Northern Syria since March 2020⁽¹⁾. Although the stated objective of the operation was to counter further escalation by the regime and Russia, following intensified airstrikes and bombardment on Northern Syria, the poor performance of regime forces allowed the HTS and the opposition to achieve significant and unexpected advances. By the end of Thursday December 5th, Syria's opposition forces had regained control of the Aleppo province, eight years after being forced to withdraw from the city in 2016 due to the strong support provided to the Assad regime by Iranian-backed militias and Russia. Alongside the capture of Aleppo, the armed alliance has taken control of the southern countryside of Idlib and the city of Hama, where the regime had reorganized its groups and brought reinforcement to stop the collapse of its defense lines, yet to no avail.

This article gives insight into the operation's background and how Syria's conflict reignited, the current situation on the ground explaining the reasons of the fast advancement, the military institution building of the HTS and the Syrian National Army (SNA), and the armed alliance and what does it tell the world. Lastly, it addresses the potential scenarios awaiting Syria and highlights the relevant policy implications.

The Road to the Operation

Syria is back under international spotlight and likely to remain so. Many analysts have warned that the "frozen" Syrian conflict might blow up at any moment. This article⁽²⁾ explained the significant changes that were unfolding within each zone of influence, alongside the escalating violence across the country, and argued that the increasing fragility and uncertainty in Syria indicated that the status quo was unsustainable. Nevertheless, Syria has attracted far too little attention from the international community, in which the worsening humanitarian crisis was largely overlooked and less than 30% of the required funding in 2024 was provided for the humanitarian response⁽³⁾.

The 'frozen' conflict in Syria has never been frozen. Neither the regime nor its allies have stopped the bombardment and shelling against Northern Syria, nor the HTS and opposition armed groups have ceased to launch 'raids' against the regime forces in response. Since March 2020, Northern Syria has been on the brink of open war multiple times, the most astonishing incident was the drone attack on the military academy of Homs, which killed over 100 regime soldiers, followed by a massive Russian escalation against Northern Syria⁽⁴⁾.

⁽¹⁾ Charles Lister, Syria's conflict is heating up once more, 30 November 2024, <https://cutt.us/JXdbA>

⁽²⁾ Fadil Hanci, Syria Has Adapted to the Gaza War's Repercussions While its Conflict Dynamics Remain Dominant, in "Regional Impact of the War on Gaza", <https://bit.ly/4cGWKIH>

⁽³⁾ Syria Arab Republic, Humanitarian Response Plan, <https://cutt.us/FNgge>

⁽⁴⁾ Briefing on the Events of the Syrian Scene - October 2023, Omran for Strategic Studies, 9 November 2023, <https://cutt.us/wQGmi>

Making Sense of the Shocking Operation

A few months ago, the rebel forces signaled their intentions to launch an operation toward Aleppo, releasing a video that quickly went viral within local communities. On the ground, Russia and the regime have intensified their bombardment against the local population and infrastructure in Northwestern Syria, leading to the displacement of thousands of civilians. Consequently, the sense of safety was lost due to the continuous bombardment of the regime and Russia, and the resentment and grievances among locals, particularly IDPs living in makeshift camps, was reinforced. UNHCR estimates the numbers of the internally displaced persons in Northwestern Syria to be close to 3.6 million out of 5 million, 1.9 million of whom have been living in camps and self-settled sites ⁽⁵⁾. For years, many displaced young men, and even elderly men, have been balancing work with intermittent military training. This reality illustrates why the HTS and the armed opposition set the objective of the operation as facilitating the return of displaced people to their original cities and towns ⁽⁶⁾.

The objective of the operation was set to be limited, yet the collapse of the regime's defenses has allowed the armed alliance to advance unexpectedly fast, shocking Syrians as well as the experts who have been analyzing the Syrian conflict for more than a decade. While the institution-building efforts of the armed groups have had a considerable impact, the severe blows dealt to Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed militias by Israel since mid-September have been a decisive factor in the collapse of the regime forces on strategic fronts. Moreover, Moscow's diverted attention in Ukraine, including the partial withdrawal of warplanes and air defense systems to reinforce its forces there, has left the regime without the robust aerial cover it previously relied on.

Other reasons also explain the impressive success achieved by the 'Deterrence of Aggression' campaign. For instance, many armed groups have extensive combat experience across various regions in Syria, including Aleppo and Hama, giving them a deep familiarity with the geography. This experience is further complemented by their history of numerous assaults on regime bases, as well as their involvement in laying sieges. Additionally, sleeper cells played a critical role in supporting the oppositions' advance, providing intelligence and logistical aid during the operation. Also, the use of drones proved to be a game-changer, giving the opposition a significant advantage by enabling precise strikes on regime troops, tanks, aircraft, helicopters, bases, and even high-ranking commanders.

The operation has been carefully planned and executed on multiple levels. Armed groups have applied lessons learned from the numerous operation rooms established throughout the Syrian conflict. The planning demonstrates high tactical and operational coordination, a structured communication strategy, and a focus on service provision. This suggests significant preparation and an evolving institutional capacity.

⁽⁵⁾ North-west Syria, The UN Refugee Agency, <https://cutt.us/WK8Zi>

⁽⁶⁾ Informal conversations with residents in Northern Aleppo between January-May 2024.

Institution Building of the Armed Groups

Despite the Russian and regime bombardment, the relative calm since March 2020 has allowed the armed groups to reorganize and achieve a certain level of institutionalization. Much of the focus has been on the development of the HTS-backed Syrian Salvation Government ⁽⁷⁾ in Idlib and to a less extent the military capacity-building efforts of HTS. In contrast, the institutional growth and capacity-building efforts of the Syrian National Army have received far less attention. The clandestine nature of the military institutions and the suspicion that much of the online materials might be mere propaganda had contributed to keeping them under the radar. Nevertheless, the reality on the ground appeared to indicate considerable changes ⁽⁸⁾, yet it was impossible to assess the extent and influence of these changes on the battlefield.

HTS has been transforming itself into a hybrid actor by modifying insurgent tactics and claiming conventional army principles simultaneously. First, HTS has transformed its insurgent tactics, most importantly, developing its drone capabilities, which seem indispensable for the current battle. Before the current use of drones, HTS's drone attacks have reportedly reached the Russian Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia ⁽⁹⁾ and the regime's stronghold al-Qardaha⁽¹⁰⁾ among dozens of other locations in 2023.

Second, HTS began adopting functions traditionally reserved for conventional armies, including the establishment of a military academy, a military training department, a conscription office, and a center for military studies and planning. The group has benefited from former Syrian military commanders who defected from the regime during the war; their expertise was invaluable for HTS in restructuring its armed wing and building institutions. The head of HTS, al-Jawlani, even expressed intentions to establish a defense ministry and “get out of the factionalism situation ⁽¹¹⁾”.

Last year, HTS faced a challenging test of the coherence of its armed wing when it purged hundreds of its military officers, including prominent figures such as Abu Maria al-Qahtani, under accusations of espionage. Neither the killing of al-Qahtani nor the defection of another prominent figure, Abu Ahmad Zakkour, have disrupted the group's chain of command. However, these events triggered a wave of popular protests that posed serious challenge to its local acceptance⁽¹²⁾.

⁽⁷⁾ For on the institutional capacity of the Syrian Salvation Government see: Aaron Y. Zelin, The Patient Efforts Behind Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's Success in Aleppo, War On The Rocks, 3 December 2024, <https://cutt.us/AuSwg>

⁽⁸⁾ Ömer Özkızılcık, “Güvenli Bölgede Askerî ve Sivil Kolluk Güçleri” [Military and Civil Law Enforcement Forces in the Safe Zone], Omran for Strategic Studies, 15 October 2024, <https://cutt.us/6b65H>

⁽⁹⁾ “Al-Ladhiqiya: Tayarat Musayyara tuhajim Qaidat Hmeimim al-Russiya”, [Latakia: Drones attack the Russian Hmeimim base], Almodon, 19 July 2023, <https://cutt.us/Zn14p>

⁽¹⁰⁾ “Al-Musalaha al-Rusi yattahim 'Tahrir al-Sham wa al-Turkistani' bi-istihdaf al-Ladhiqiya wa Hama bil-musayarat”

[The Russian Reconciliation Center accuses 'Tahrir al-Sham and the Turkistani Party' of targeting Latakia and Hama with drones], Sham Network, 25 June 2023, <https://cutt.us/ePM5u>

⁽¹¹⁾ “Mu'ayadat al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' li-Ahali wa Wujaha' Mintaqat Idlib” [Leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani's Greetings to the People and Notables of the Idlib Region], Amjad Media, 21:45-23:09, 12 July 2022, (Access: 28 April 2024).

⁽¹²⁾ Maintaining Mass Obedience: HTS's Response to the Protests in Idlib, Omran for Strategic Studies, 9 September 2024, <https://bit.ly/3ZvWKBv>

The Syrian National Army (SNA) has also been occupied with following up on institution building. Aiming at reorganizing the opposition factions under one command, the Defense Ministry of the Syrian Interim Government established a military academy, initiated a process of reorganizing the economic resources of the factions under a centralized mechanism, allocating significant resources to the military police, and established a central border guard units to counter human and illegal goods trafficking. Moreover, subgroups have been undergoing professional military training, including using drones. In addition, members of the SNA started to receive education on international humanitarian law after signing an action plan with the United Nations to end and prevent the recruitment use and killing and maiming of children. Hasan Alhamada signed the action plan for the SNA, Mohammed Walid Dowara for the Jaysh al-Islam, and Amer al-Sheikh for the Ahrar al-Sham. Al-Sheikh is one of the newly established 'Administration of Military Operation Room' leaders⁽¹³⁾.

On the other hand, the regime's institutions were grappling with severe challenges. Anonymous attacks have targeted highly securitized areas in Damascus, its outskirts, Homs, and Quneitra undermining the regime's control in these regions⁽¹⁴⁾. Additionally, the continuous targeting of regime locations by the IDF has also played a significant role in weakening its forces. The regime's involvement in the Captagon industry and trafficking has also affected its military structure, occasionally resulting in infighting among various official and auxiliary forces⁽¹⁵⁾.

The armed opposition groups have always perceived the regime to be weak and incapable of fighting a battle without the support of Russia and Iran. A high-ranking commander (military defector) expressed that "the regime is divided vertically between Russia and Iran" and that this has deeply influenced its "military structure"⁽¹⁶⁾. The leader of HTS, al-Jawlani, has always propagated that the regime is weak and defeatable. Moreover, he revealed his intentions to launch an operation on various occasions. In early 2023, for instance, he said that "we are ready for battle at any time, God willing, whether in attack or defense... there will be an attack [on the regime]. We will not wait for the regime to attack us... The decision is made, but we await the appropriate time⁽¹⁷⁾."

The Armed Alliance: What Do They Tell the World?

There has been misinformation about the armed alliance, and various international media outlets have labelled them as 'jihadists'. Much of this misinformation stems from two simple facts: First, everyone stopped paying attention to Syria, assuming that everything, including the ideological tendency of armed groups such as HTS, has remained the same. Second, the

⁽¹³⁾ The opposition Syrian National Army, including Ahrar al-Sham and Army of Islam, and their aligned legions and factions, Sign Action Plan to End and Prevent the Recruitment and Use and Killing and Maiming of Children, The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSG-CAAC), 3 June 2024, <https://cutt.us/eTijR>

⁽¹⁴⁾ Briefing on the Events of the Syrian Scene - August 2023, Omran for Strategic Studies, 7 September 2023, <https://cutt.us/lnRZ5>

⁽¹⁵⁾ Briefing on the Events of the Syrian Scene - September 2023, Omran for Strategic Studies, 6 October 2023, <https://cutt.us/Mg9kF>

⁽¹⁶⁾ Focus group conducted by Omran for Strategic Studies in November 2023.

⁽¹⁷⁾ "Liqaa al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' wa Riasat Hukumat al-Inqadh ma'a Wujaha' al-Manatiq al-Muharrara" [Meeting of Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' and the Presidency of the Salvation Government with the Notables of the Freed Areas], Amjad Media, 26:20-27:07, 12 January 2023 (Access: 30 April 2024).

mainstream opposition armed groups have been largely overlooked because HTS has proved itself to be the dominant actor.

To tackle these points, one should first look at the profiles of the leaders of the newly established ‘Administration of the Military Operations Room’, Jamil al-Saleh, Amer al-Sheikh, and most importantly, Abu Muhammed al-Jawlani. Jamil al-Saleh is the leader of Jayish al-Izza, a former commander (major) in the Syrian Army who defected from the regime in 2012. He established his group in 2012. His motivation to fight against the regime is not merely political but also personal since he lost more than 30 members of his family member in a massacre that claimed the lives of over 70 people in al-Latamna in Hama – which made him principled in fighting against the regime and pragmatic in allying with the hardliner HTS⁽¹⁸⁾. Amer al-Sheikh, the leader of Ahrar al-Sham, is from Damascus countryside. He served as the commander of Ahrar al-Sham in Daraa province before moving to Northern Syria after refusing to reconcile with the regime in 2018. In addition, he is one of the opposition commanders who signed the UN’s action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use and killing and maiming of children⁽¹⁹⁾.

Lastly, and most controversially, is Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani. A veteran jihadist who once served in al-Qaeda’s ranks in Iraq, al-Jawlani later shifted his approach by purging jihadist elements in Northwestern Syria. Pragmatic in nature, he received support from ISIS to establish al-Nusra Front, the predecessor of HTS, in 2012 before pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda to avoid being ISIS’s branch in Syria and counted on al-Qaeda’s support in his fight against ISIS. In July 2016, he rebranded his group as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, breaking up ties with al-Qaeda under the external pressure of the airstrikes of the US-led coalition to defeat ISIS and the internal pressure of opposition armed groups. Finally, he established Haya’t Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) as a broader armed coalition in January 2017⁽²⁰⁾. Driven by survival and appetite for power, al-Jawlani led HTS’s mission of cracking down on all rivalries, revolutionaries and Jihadists, in which HTS became the dominant force in Idlib with other secondary groups operating under the ‘al-Fateh al-Mubin’ operations room, which HTS leads. While doing so, al-Jawlani modified his narrative, claiming to represent the Syrian revolution and justifying his moves under the pretext of achieving unity and building a model for Syria. In Short, he recognized that the Islamist radical agenda wouldn’t grant his survival, let alone expand HTS’s influence to be a dominant force in Northern Syria.

The group’s transformation warrants attention indeed, but it is essential to consider its history including human rights violations, authoritarian tendencies, and practices that triggered widespread resentment and protests before⁽²¹⁾. Nevertheless, it is also crucial to consider that this transformation has shaped the narrative and behavior of the rebels in this battle thus far. In contrast to the first wave of the conflict in Syria, the revenge narrative is primarily absent.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Jamil al-Saleh, Syria Memory, <https://cutt.us/4eOTk>

⁽¹⁹⁾ The opposition Syrian National Army, including Ahrar al-Sham and Army of Islam, and their aligned legions and factions, Sign Action Plan to End and Prevent the Recruitment and Use and Killing and Maiming of Children, *Ibid*.

⁽²⁰⁾ For more on the group’s transformation see: Aaron Y.Zelin, The Age of Political Jihadism: A Study of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, 9 May 2022, <https://cutt.us/zdy0h>

⁽²¹⁾ Orwa Ajjoub, Crossroads in Idlib: HTS navigating internal divisions amid popular discontent, Middle East Institute 13 May 2024, <https://cutt.us/6CDIx>

Moreover, Today's rebels are more politically mature than 2015 – the painful Syrian tragedy seems to have taught them a lesson.

The HTS-backed Salvation Government's 'Department of Political Affairs' has been issuing statements reflecting this political maturity's nature. Notably, the department has issued a statement communicating rebels' commitment to protect consulates, historical and cultural sites, churches, and different (international) schools and grant the "rights of civilians from all sects and Syrian components"⁽²²⁾. Moreover, they went far as to call on Russia not to associate its interests with the regime, considering Moscow as a "potential partner in building a bright future for free Syria"⁽²³⁾ in another statement – among other statements and speeches. It seems like the rebels have come to realize that war is an extension of politics. The next few weeks will tell whether rebels will stand the test of time and prove that change has taken root.

Peacebuilding: The Mission is Not Impossible

There is no doubt that the regime is responsible for the prolonging of the conflict and the current escalation because it has continued to target civilians in recent years and refrained from engaging in a meaningful political process to open a new chapter for Syria. Assad has not been willing to compromise; he overestimated his ability to stand the test of time with his regime intact, and his strategic patience has been leading Syria into a strategic disaster.

On the other hand, the HTS, a terrorist-designated organization, will remain a debatable issue for policy analysts and policymakers – as it has always been. In 2015, Lina Khatib argued that "instead of putting Nusra [the predecessor of HTS] and the Islamic State in the same basket, the West should look beyond the Nusra Front's ideological affiliation and encourage its pragmatism"⁽²⁴⁾. Nine years have passed, and it seems that this policy has contributed to the efforts of countering terrorism, particularly al-Qaeda and ISIS⁽²⁵⁾. Later, in 2021, Jerome Drevon and Patrick Haenni argued in favor of a conditional engagement with the group on two central matters: "HTS's human rights track record and a clarification of its long-term vision for a political solution in Syria"⁽²⁶⁾.

Syria is indeed at a critical crossroads, with the current developments shaping its future. Several scenarios lies ahead: (1) a military victory, either in the short or long term; (2) the escalation of a regional war on Syrian soil if Assad's Iranian or Iraqi allies take a risky gamble by backing Assad militarily, undermining any near-term prospects for peace; (3) another round of a fragile frozen conflict if a ceasefire is reached without political solution; or (4) in the most hopeful scenario, a political transition that prevents further destruction and pave the way for a new chapter for Syria.

⁽²²⁾ "The Protection of Consulates in Aleppo", Department of Political Affairs, 1 December 2024.

⁽²³⁾ "On the Russian Bombardment and a message to Russia", Department of Political Affairs, 29 November 2024.

⁽²⁴⁾ Lina Khatib, "The Nusra Front's Game-Changing Rise in Syria", Carnegie Middle East Center, 24 March 2015,

⁽²⁵⁾ Containing Transnational Jihadists in Syria's North West, Crisis Group, 7 March 2023, <https://cutt.us/VdWjT>

⁽²⁶⁾ Drevon, Jerome and Haenni Patrick. "How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads: The Case of HTS, the Former AQ Franchise in Syria", European University Institute, January 2021, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/69795>

Assad must be forced to accept a political solution based on the 2254 resolution. Until then, crippling Assad's ability to target civilians and displacing them is essential to prevent a humanitarian disaster as well as maintaining the deradicalization tendency among armed groups. In other words, the indiscriminate targeting of civilians, which has been a characteristic of Assad's way of war, will trigger past traumas and potentially revive the narrative of revenge, causing a never-ending cycle of violence.

HTS must be pressured more to compromise its authoritarian tendency. The most effective way to achieve that is by granting a good and inclusive governance in Aleppo and Hama by supporting the Syrian civil society – the most crucial factor for driving democratic change in the long term. Finally, the international community has failed Syrians multiple times; it should not fail them once again. The historic city of Aleppo, the heart of ancient civilizations, and the city of Hama, which suffered under the regime for decades, should not be left behind.

