

# افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد  
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

Mohamed Nader Al-Omari

14.10.2024



Mohamed Nader Al-Omari

## US tees up Ukrainian and Syrian extremist proxies in fight against Russia

In a familiar strategy of backing proxy forces, the US has orchestrated a toxic alliance between Ukrainian forces and Syrian extremists to counter Russia's influence — continuing Washington's decades-long pattern of leveraging terror groups to pursue its geopolitical goals.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

Decades after the end of the Cold War, the US continues to employ proxy warfare as a central strategy in its confrontations with major global rivals, particularly Russia and China. This approach enables the US to extend its influence and pursue its geopolitical objectives without direct military engagement, instead relying on third-party actors to do the heavy lifting.

This has played out in various global crises, despite the potential for blowback and undermining international peace and security. A recent and striking example of this strategy can be observed in the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, where the US has provided significant support to the latter in its fight against Moscow.

### **The Kiev-Idlib axis**

One notable instance of this proxy war occurred in mid-September, when Ukrainian forces, in coordination with militant groups in Syria, including Al-Qaeda offshoot Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS - formerly known as Al-Nusra Front), launched a series of drone attacks on Russian military facilities in Syria.

The group has since denied the claims, dismissing them as a “Russian disinformation campaign aimed at justifying further military action in Syria’s liberated areas.”

The operation involved Ukrainian private mercenaries called "Khimek," affiliated with the Main Directorate of Ukrainian Intelligence, working alongside Idlib-based militants to target a drone production and testing site in the southeastern suburbs of Aleppo, according to a *Kiev Post* report on 18 September.

The following day, further drone attacks were carried out on ten Syrian military positions in Aleppo, the southern Idlib countryside, and in northeastern Latakia. In early October, two major Russian military sites - the Hmeimim Base and a weapons depot near the coastal city of Jableh — were repeatedly targeted.

But these operations were not the first initiative aided by Ukrainian military and intelligence agents in Syria. On 26 July, in what militant forces described as a “devastating” and “complex” strike, they targeted Kuweires military airport in Aleppo's east, used as an airbase by Russian troops, one day after Russian President Vladimir Putin met with his Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Assad in Moscow.

The alliance between Ukrainian intelligence and Syrian militant groups, with support from NATO, is a relatively new but significant development. It began earlier this year, when a Ukrainian delegation visited Idlib to negotiate with the HTS leadership for the release of several Chechen, Georgian, and Uighur militants being held in HTS prisons — estimated at between 750 and 900 prisoners — to enlist as mercenaries for the Ukrainians.

The concluded agreement involved the release of militants detained by HTS in exchange for 250 Ukrainian military experts providing training, particularly in the use of drones. The trainees include Turkmen Salafists tasked to manufacture drones and photograph potential Russian and allied Syrian military targets, particularly the 25th Division special forces and National Defense Forces in Hama, Aleppo, and Latakia.

But reports indicate that the seeds of this arrangement were being tested as early as October 2023, when Turkish intelligence operatives transported aircraft parts across the border to HTS, for use in a huge attack on the Syrian Military College in Homs city.

### **What is behind this proxy partnership?**

This cooperation raises important questions about the nature and extent of the relationship between Kiev and these militant groups. Has this collaboration emerged recently, or are there deeper historical ties? More crucially, what are the shared objectives of the US, Ukraine, and the extremist organizations involved in this proxy partnership?

The roots of this cooperation between Kiev and the HTS militants go back to the start of the Russian Special Military Operation in February 2022. On 8 March, 2022, Russian media Outlet Sputnik, citing Russian defense officials, reported that around 450 Idlib militants belonging to Al-Turkistani, Hurras al-Dein, and Ansar al-Tawhid were transported to Ukraine to fight Russian forces - which they did, only three days after passing through NATO-member Turkiye.

In late October 2022, the Chechen leader of the Idlib-based “Ajnad al Kavkaz” (Anjad of the Caucasus) group, Rustam Azayev - also known as Abdul Hakim al-Shishani - arrived with a group of militants to Ukraine. He appears in a video to confirm his actual presence on an eastern Ukrainian battlefield as part of the Chechen “Sheikh Mansour” battalion, which was fighting Russians alongside Ukrainian forces. This coincided with the arrival of a new group of militants to Ukraine, according to US-based *Al-Monitor*, who had defected from the “Albanian Group” battalion, affiliated with HTS' extremist wing.

Furthermore, on 9 September, the Turkish newspaper *Aydinlik* confirmed that there was daily contact between the head of Ukrainian intelligence, Kirill Budanov, and the leader of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, in order to complete the sending of fighters to Ukraine.

US military forces occupying northeastern Syria play a connection and transportation role in this setup. It is the main actor in managing these various conflict zones and coordinating the positions and cooperation of its proxies.

In early August 2024, the US facilitated the arrival of Ukrainian experts in areas near Jabal al-Zawiya in Idlib and helped transfer aircraft parts - in exchange for transporting extremist fighters, via US bases in Syria, to areas north of Donetsk Oblast.

The agreement between Ukrainian forces and Syrian militant groups, brokered with US and NATO involvement, includes several critical components.

Ukrainian military personnel have been tasked with training militants in drone warfare, enhancing their capabilities to strike Russian targets in Syria. In return, these militant groups, with assistance from US forces operating in the region, have facilitated the transfer of fighters from Syria to Ukraine to bolster Ukrainian forces in their war with Russia.

The goals of the US, Ukraine, and Syrian extremist groups, while seemingly divergent on the surface, converge in important ways. For Washington, the use of proxy forces in Syria fits within a broader strategy of weakening Russia through a policy of attrition by spreading its military resources across multiple conflict zones.

This tactic is reminiscent of the Cold War strategy of draining adversaries' resources by involving them in costly and protracted conflicts.

#### **What does each side stand to gain?**

For Ukraine, the alliance with HTS militants provides several strategic advantages. By undermining Russian influence in Syria, Ukraine aims to pressure Russia on multiple fronts, forcing it to divert resources and attention away from the conflict in Ukraine.

Moreover, the influx of battle-hardened fighters from Syria and other regions provides Ukraine with additional manpower at a time when its forces are stretched thin, and the US is preoccupied with supporting Israel in what is now a regional war. This cooperation also serves as a way for Ukraine to retaliate against Damascus, and by extension, Iran, for their support of Russia in the current conflict.

The militant groups themselves benefit from this alliance in several key ways. With Turkiye edging toward reconciliation with Syria, and Russian-Iranian military cooperation advancing, these groups are left increasingly vulnerable. Aligning with Ukraine and NATO provides them with new resources and support, ensuring their continued survival in the face of changing regional dynamics.

The cooperation also offers Syrian extremists access to advanced technology, particularly in drone warfare, which has become a crucial element in their ongoing fight against Syrian and Russian forces.

The US plays a pivotal role in facilitating this cooperation, not only by providing logistical support but also by supplying advanced weaponry and coordinating efforts between Ukrainian forces and Syrian militants.

### **Opportunity amid war in West Asia**

As this conflict evolves, the alliance could deepen further, with more fighters and resources flowing between Syria and Ukraine, especially while Syria's ally Hezbollah in Lebanon is now engaged in fighting an existential battle with Israel.

It is also possible, however, that this cooperation may be short-lived, depending on shifts in US foreign policy or the outcome of negotiations between Russia, Turkiye, and Syria.

The continued use of proxy warfare by the US, particularly through the use of militant groups and transnational terrorism, is likely to have lasting and far-reaching consequences. In the Syrian context, the inability or unwillingness of major powers to engage in direct military confrontation has led to a protracted conflict that shows no signs of resolution.

The involvement of Ukrainian forces in Syria, under the pretext of countering Russian influence, serves to prolong this conflict and deepen divisions. This strategy ensures that the US remains a key stakeholder in destabilizing conflicts like the one in Syria.

The evolving cooperation between Ukrainian forces, extremist groups in Syria, and US interests represents a broader trend in Washington's proxy warfare strategy. One potential scenario is that this partnership will continue to expand, with Ukrainian intelligence fostering deeper ties with extremist factions in Idlib that oppose any reconciliation between Ankara and Damascus.

This could also extend to Kurdish-controlled areas in northeastern Syria, creating a shared benefit for all parties involved. The militant groups may receive advanced weaponry, such as drones, without Washington being directly implicated, in exchange for providing additional fighters, including ISIS elements currently held in Kurdish-run prisons, to support Ukraine against Russia.

**OCT 13, 2024**