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A surprise assault on Syria, but can it last?

The wave of enemy destabilization ploys jumped from Lebanon to Syria this week, with a swarm of foreign-backed extremists breaking into Aleppo. Israel warned that Syria was next, but can the militants do today what they couldn't achieve for almost a decade?



Photo Credit: The Cradle

In his speech announcing Israel's agreement to a ceasefire with Lebanon, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made a direct threat to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, warning him of "playing with fire." Those words came mere hours before armed terrorist factions from Idlib launched a shock offensive on Syrian army positions in the de-escalation zone in the western countryside of Aleppo. The operation is being led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the rebranded incarnation of Al-Nusra Front - or Syria's Al-Qaeda franchise - led by Abu Muhammad al-Julani, with the participation of other international terror organizations such as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP).

The army is preparing to deter aggression

On the morning of 27 November, armed extremist groups launched violent attacks on Syrian army positions in the vicinity of the 46th Regiment and toward the villages of Orem al-Kubra, Orem al-Sughra, Basratun, Anjara, and the surrounding areas, located a short distance from the M5 Aleppo-Hama-Damascus highway.

In their first surprise attack, as part of an operation called “Deterrence of Aggression,” the militants were able to enter a number of villages that Syrian army forces had evacuated in preparation for containing the breach, which constitutes a flagrant violation of the 2019 de-escalation agreements between Turkey, Russia, and Iran.

The scope of the battles quickly expanded on the international road and into the city of Aleppo. A Turkish security source quoted by Qatari-funded *Middle East Eye* said that the goal of the military operation launched by HTS and its allies is the recovery of the positions gained by the Syrian forces with the support of Russia during the battles of 2017 - 2020.

The militants claim that the Syrian and Russian army’s “violations” of the de-escalation agreements - and their intensification of strikes on Idlib - prompted these military operations in order to regain their control of these areas. They say that the Syrian army’s retreat in Aleppo’s western countryside provided impetus for the militants to launch further attacks toward rural eastern Idlib.

Within three days, armed extremist groups were able to reach the heart of Aleppo and declare a curfew for 24 hours. As the confrontations intensified, Syrian and Russian warplanes launched a series of violent raids on HTS and Turkestani sites and supply lines in Darat Azza, Al-Atareb, Sarmin, and other areas. These airstrikes are still ongoing, with video footage revealing heavy losses in the ranks of the extremist factions and several media sources confirming fatalities of more than 200 members of HTS and other militant groups in the Aleppo and Idlib regions.

The expansion of air attacks by the Syrian and Russian forces led, on Thursday morning, to a lull in HTS’ field momentum as the group suffered both human and material losses. Sources on the frontline also reveal the arrival of huge military reinforcements to the main confrontation zone, which extends over an area of more than 26 kilometers in western Aleppo – Syrian troops and supplies that are planning a counterattack to restore the status quo. Military expert Haitham Hassoun explains to *The Cradle* that the Syrian army has regrouped in the rear lines of defense at a depth of 7 to 8 kilometers in preparation for carrying out the counterattack.

How did the preparations go?

In reality, the HTS operation was by no means a spur-of-the-moment offensive but rather a result of years-long preparations spearheaded by US and Turkish intelligence to unify the ranks of various extremist factions in Syria's north. This project took place under the direct supervision of the Turkish army, which aimed to converge the militant groups in Idlib and the Aleppo countryside and place decision-making in the hands of mainly two parties: the so-called Syrian National Army (SNA), which is loyal to Ankara, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria.

In this mash-up of terror outfits are the Turkestan and Uyghur "jihadist" groups, used primarily as strike forces in specific military operations, largely fulfilling the interests of their US and Turkish funders.

Military expert, Brigadier General Haitham Hassoun, confirms that preparations to launch this operation began "a long time ago," and that the participating groups established a joint ops room about a month and a half ago. He believes that the militants benefited from "misdirection" and electronic warfare media operations carried out by Turkish intelligence to camouflage their intentions and movements and by Turkish occupation forces inside Syria during the days preceding the shock offensive. The militants further benefited from sophisticated intel that helped them exploit existing loopholes on the ground and were aware of vacuums in the Syrian army's positions, which then led to this breach and confusion in the defense lines.

Who made the decision, and what is the goal?

Today's scenes in Idlib and Aleppo remind Syrians of a period they thought they had put behind them after the 2016 liberation of Aleppo and the 2019 de-escalation understandings. But those hard-fought understandings had always remained fragile, given that Turkiye evaded its commitments to purge the M5 area of terrorist groups. The militancy in Syria's north served Ankara's interest in maintaining pressure on Damascus. It also explains this week's armed operation – an action the Turks believe will force the Syrian government to enter negotiations under fire, especially if armed extremists re-enter Aleppo or sever the critical international route.

On the other hand, one objective of the operation may be the US decision to maintain a state of conflict in the region and redirect pressure toward Russia and its regional allies ahead of President-elect Donald Trump's return to the White House.

As many commentators have pointed out, the military operation was launched in the direct aftermath of Netanyahu's explicit threats in his speech this week and is likely connected to Israel's regional war and Tel Aviv's determination to sever the Syrian route for members of

the Resistance Axis. The offensive appears to have been coordinated with the NATO-member Turkiye, under the direction of Turkish occupation authorities and intelligence services, which have for years managed and supported the various extremist groups in northern Syria.

In a preliminary estimate, what is happening is a return to the situation before 2019, a re-invasion that effectively seeks to derail all the achievements of the Astana peace process. In turn, this deserves nothing less than an equally brash and unexpected response: a Syrian military counter-offensive that not only reclaims the positions held by Syrian army forces a few days ago but one that decisively pushes all the way to Darat Izza and beyond up to the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkiye, cutting off communications routes between the militants in the Aleppo and Idlib regions, and restoring the entire governorates under Syrian government control.

What began as a shock assault may have created an opportunity to end the state of limbo in the country's north at the end of the Syrian war, provide Damascus and its allies a way to sidestep unproductive de-escalation understandings, and hand the Syrian state a legitimate, legal and moral justification to liberate all territories from terror organizations.

Until or unless this happens, western Aleppo and eastern Idlib will remain active battlefields. However, according to informed sources, the militants are unlikely to remain in an advantageous position for long for several key reasons.

First is the imminent arrival of large Syrian military reinforcements to the area, which will not allow Aleppo to fall into the hands of foreign-backed extremists. Second, these US and Turkish-backed militant groups are less likely to achieve their goals today than in the early years of the war because of seismic political and economic shifts in Europe, which fears the revival of the Syrian conflict and another flood of refugees to its borders.

Third, Damascus has returned to the Arab fold by rejoining the Arab League and being welcomed by several Persian Gulf states. Those capitals are no longer interested in backing jihadists, resuscitating the war, or destabilizing Lebanon and Iraq, Syria's direct and connected neighbors, at this moment. Nor are they interested in opening up the Syrian military arena to Iranian advisors or forces again.

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