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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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09.12.2024

Türkiye escalates in Syria

The Arab-Israeli crisis includes the Syrian conflict, where normalisation between Damascus and Ankara could be beneficial for shared peace and security goals. Türkiye, however, is once again coordinating an escalation in relations with Syria in the Aleppo and Idlib provinces.

What is the reason for the latest military escalation in Syria?

As is known, on November 27, four years after the signing of the Turkish-Russian ceasefire agreement in 2020, radical pro-Turkish Syrian rebel forces resumed hostilities in the provinces of Aleppo and Idlib in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra, this organisation is banned in Russia) has declared the 'containment of the government army' of Bashar al-Assad and its allied Shi'a militants (Hezbollah) as its goal. At the same time, HTS is supported by another structure loyal to Ankara and in opposition to Damascus, namely the Syria National Army (SNA, this organisation is banned in Russia).

Moscow described the actions of the militants as an encroachment on the sovereignty of Syria. Strangely enough, the military activity of the militants coincided with the truce between Israel and Lebanon. Moreover, this escalation is taking place against the background of the stagnation of the Turkish-Syrian talks on normalising relations, where Ankara does not accept the position of Damascus on the withdrawal of Turkish troops from the occupied territories in the north-west of the country. In this regard, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan noted that "Syria does not intend to discuss certain issues in too much detail".

Part of the territory on which clashes are ongoing belongs to the Turkish area of responsibility in accordance with the Astana negotiation process. However, the terrorists have launched large-scale attacks on a wide front and are well equipped with the latest weapons (including drones). There is also a large number of militants in their ranks. From this, it can indirectly be concluded that HTS and SNA have external support, both in terms of military-technical equipment and combat training and in terms of operational coordination of offensive actions and receiving fire (and other) support from Türkiye.

In the early days of the offensive, Turkish proxy forces seized a number of critical facilities. The Russian Aerospace Forces are in support of the Syrian government, helping the Assad army to suppress the offensive. An increase in Russian military assistance to friendly Syria is expected. Moscow described the actions of the militants as an encroachment on the sovereignty of Syria. Russia's position was mirrored by Iran.

The Middle East Eye notes that Ankara allegedly tried to prevent a military operation so as to avoid another escalation of tension in the Middle East and exclude another flow of refugees into neighbouring Türkiye.

In order to control security, the Turkish Ministry of Defence, denying the fact of their involvement in these events, is limited to monitoring the situation. The Turkish Foreign Ministry adheres to the same position of official non-involvement in the fighting in Syria. According to the Turkish newspaper En Son Haber, Fidan stressed that Türkiye does not support the fighting between the Syrian army and the rebels in Aleppo and Idlib and that Ankara “will never allow a terrorist structure in Syria to become a state”. According to the chief Turkish diplomat, terrorist groups enjoy the support of the United States (obviously, Kurdish military structures are meant), otherwise “*they would not even have lasted three days*”.

The fact is that the well-equipped Kurdish forces of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) also oppose the pro-Turkish forces in Aleppo and Idlib. In fact, HTS and SNA are conducting an offensive on the Manbij-Tel Rifaat line, i.e. in Kurdish-populated settlements.

Involvement of the Kiev regime in the escalation in Syria is tied to US plans

There is evidence that there are Ukrainian militants in the ranks of the terrorists. The Kiev regime's involvement in the Syrian escalation is most likely related to US plans to create an additional zone to threaten the interests of Russia and Iran (e.g. to reduce the operational, combat and military-technical capabilities of Russia in Ukraine).

At the same time, Türkiye's involvement in these events is officially denied by Ankara and there is also a contradiction in Fidan's statements. If the Turks, as they themselves admit, had

information about the planned military operation of HTS and SNA and allegedly tried to dissuade them from escalation in the region through their communications, then:

Firstly: how could these proxy forces end up in Ankara if they “could not even last three days” without their help?

Secondly: Türkiye is dissatisfied with Bashar al-Assad’s unchanging position vis-à-vis the withdrawal of Turkish occupation forces from the so-called security zone in the northern provinces. Therefore, a successful military operation against Damascus will allow Ankara to gain the upper hand in dictating its terms during future negotiations;

Thirdly: al-Assad’s firm position on the restoration of Syria’s sovereignty without acknowledging the Turkish reality on the ground was obviously based on the Syrian Arab Army’s plans to launch a spring offensive in the north-west with the aim of restoring its rights de jure and de facto. This is what led Ankara to a pre-emptive strike;

Fourthly: if Türkiye will not allow a terrorist structure to become a state in Syria – meaning only the Kurds – then why is Fidan ‘forgetting’ about the fact that HTS and SNA are radical terrorist opposition organisations to Syria (in other words, Türkiye is not objective in this matter)?

Fifthly: from where did HTS and SNA acquire drones and other modern military equipment if not from Türkiye, which constantly boasts of its UAVs?

The United States and Israel are clearly interested in another escalation of military tensions in Syria and the Middle East as a whole, as both of these countries rely on the Kurds and also aim to further weaken Iran (IRGC, Hezbollah) in Syria and to weaken Russia in Syria and Ukraine.

In which consequences could the latest round of escalations in Syria result?

Aleppo was the main economic subject of Syria. Depending on who controls it, he will be able to influence the outcome of the Syrian conflict. It is no coincidence that after the capture of part of Aleppo by HTS militants, Ankara started to talk about how this development would allow a considerable part of the Syrian refugees to return from Türkiye (in reality, the Turks would resettle Turkoman Turks in Aleppo to influence the ethnic map).

Türkiye sees a threat to its interests in Syria in the Kurdish forces and excludes any form of Kurdish autonomy in Rojava similar to Iraqi Kurdistan with its centre in Erbil. The Kurds, however, are supported by the United States, Britain and Israel. Therefore, the Turks actively accuse the United States and declare their non-involvement.

In any case, if Türkiye officially participates in the Syrian escalation against government forces, then the negotiation process on normalising relations with Syria can be postponed, if

not altogether forgotten. In such a case, Ankara's participation in the Astana platform may be problematic, as Russia and Iran will have no arguments in favour of peace initiatives together with Türkiye.

At the same time, a military escalation in Syria involving Türkiye will create additional contradictions in Ankara's relations with Washington and Tel Aviv if the latter two support the Kurdish forces in Rojava. Türkiye may then be left alone against key global and regional players. But we know from history that Türkiye often has the ability to stop a step away from the abyss – the inevitable failure of its diplomacy.

Alexandr Svaranc, December 04, 2024

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