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Turkish-backed Islamists attack Kurdish forces after Syria regime's collapse

The 13-year imperialist-backed regime-change war against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who was supported by Russia and Iran, ended with the collapse of his regime in a matter of days. Now the imperialist states and regional powers, led by the US and its proxies in the country, are calculating how to carve up Syria.



A US-backed opposition fighter steps on a broken bust of the late Syrian President Hafez Assad in Damascus, Syria, Sunday December 8, 2024. [AP Photo/Hussein Malla]

Turkey, which controls several provinces in northwestern Syria, has intervened both by directly supporting the Syrian National Army (SNA), the successor to the former Free Syrian Army (FSA), and by backing the al-Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), despite recognising it as a terrorist organisation.

On Saturday, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did not hide his delight as HTS advanced towards Damascus, saying, “Idlib, Hama, Homs, the target is of course Damascus. This

march of the opposition continues. We are following it both through intelligence and through the media. Of course we hope that this march in Syria will continue without any accidents.”

In the same speech, Erdoğan said, “We had made an appeal to Assad: ‘Let’s meet and determine the future of Syria together.’ Unfortunately, we could not get a positive response from Assad.” He added, “These troubled marches going on in the region as a whole are not what we desire, our hearts do not want this. Unfortunately, the region is in trouble.”

These words come from the main regional player in NATO’s war for regime-change in Syria. Erdoğan’s concern is that US-backed Kurdish nationalist forces are one of the main forces in Syria and that the conflict could be revived against the interests of the Turkish ruling class. The jihadist takeover of Damascus and the Israeli offensive in Syria, in the midst of the Zionist regime’s genocide against the Palestinians and its aggression against Iran, have increased this possibility.

Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said Monday: “A new era has begun in Syria. We must now focus on the future. We want to see a Syria where different ethnic and religious groups live in peace with an inclusive understanding of governance. We want to see a new Syria that has good relations with its neighbours and brings peace and stability to its region.”

Özgür Özel, leader of the Republican People’s Party (CHP), who on Saturday called for dialogue with Assad, later joined the chorus: “We call on all friends of Syria to support the establishment of a transitional government representative of all Syrians, followed by a democratic regime based on human rights and the rule of law, in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of Iraq and Libya,” Özel wrote on X.

These statements are full of hypocrisy. The Turkish government and ruling class, together with its imperialist allies in NATO, are among the leading perpetrators of the war for regime-change in Syria, which has led to the death of hundreds of thousands, the displacement of millions and the destruction of the country’s infrastructure.

The main determinant of Turkey’s recent Syria policy has been to prevent the creation of a Kurdish state on its southern border and the encouragement of separatist sentiment among the large Kurdish population inside Turkey itself. However, regime-change and expansionist ambitions have never been abandoned.

Since 2016, Turkey has carried out several military operations against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), led by the US-backed People’s Protection Units (YPG), to prevent the emergence of a unified Kurdish-controlled region, and together with the SNA has occupied territory, including Jarabulus, Afrin, Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abyad.

On November 27, following the start of the HTS operation, the SNA captured the SDF-held town of Tal Rifaat. As the Assad regime falls in Damascus, the SNA continues its operations against the SDF. On Monday, the Anadolu Agency reported that Manbij was also captured by the SNA.

The SDF, which lost the west of the Euphrates, took control of cities such as Qamishli, Hasakah and the oil-rich Deir ez-Zor with the fall of the regime.

SDF Commander Mazlum Abdi stated the following on his X account: “In Syria, we are living through historic moments as we witness the fall of the authoritarian regime in Damascus. This change presents an opportunity to build a new Syria based on democracy and justice that guarantees the rights of all Syrians.”

In an interview published Friday, Abdi said he was open to a “political solution” with HTS. “We have no decision to fight HTS. They are not in a position to fight us... The international powers, the UN, should try to find a political solution this time. The administration of northern and eastern Syria should also be part of the solution,” Abdi said, adding, “We are open to everyone to solve the problems. This includes the HTS.”

Although the interests of the Kurdish and other elites in the region are pushing the SDF towards a compromise with HTS, the imperialist spiral of violence in the Middle East and the struggle for control of resources point to a deepening of the conflict. The SDF, backed by some 900 US troops in the region and a heavily armed militia, controls important oil, natural gas and grain resources that will be of great concern to the new regime in Damascus.

Turkey, the only NATO country in the region, is as strongly opposed to Kurdish nationalist forces seeking status in Syria as it is at home. Asked about Ankara’s reaction to the possibility of a new state in Syria, Fidan said Ankara was being “careful to make sure that ISIS and the PKK do not abuse this process” and was in contact with the US. According to the Anadolu Agency, an unnamed senior US official confirmed this, saying, “Turkey and the US are fully engaged in this process.”

Fidan said there were “perfectly legitimate Kurdish sides” in northern Syria, but that “any extension of the PKK cannot be considered a legitimate side.” PKK elements from outside the country “are running the SDF, we cannot see them as legitimate unless they make a change about themselves,” he added. He did not specify what kind of change he was referring to.

The Kurdish nationalist Peoples’ Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party) in Turkey said in a statement: “The way to normalisation in Syria should be paved with a transitional administration formed by the legitimate representatives of Kurds, Sunni Arabs, Arab

Alawites, Christians, Druze communities and all other minorities. In this delicate process, we call on all parties to be sensitive to the risk that external intervention by regional powers could deal a blow to Syria's democratic future."

While the Turkish and Kurdish ruling elites quickly adapted to the seizure of power in Damascus by al-Qaeda-linked forces, which they denounced as terrorist organisations, the pro-imperialist pseudo-left forces are going so far as to declare the events in Syria a "people's revolution."

The Morenoite Workers' Democracy Party (İDP) welcomed the success of the imperialist war of regime-change led by the jihadists. The İDP shared the statement of the International Workers' Unity - Fourth International (UIT-CI), of which it is a member. "We support and stand in solidarity with the Syrian people and with this first revolutionary triumph," the statement proclaims.

The wars of regime-change that began in 2011 in Libya and then Syria were not a continuation of the revolutionary uprisings that year in Egypt and Tunisia, as some pseudo-left forces claim, but the violent response of the imperialist powers to it. Particularly horrified by the 2011 Egyptian revolution, the US and its allies used Islamist proxies to suppress and divert the mass struggles of the working class against the reactionary Arab regimes and to advance their own geopolitical interests.

Regime-change in Syria is just one front in US imperialism's global war against Russia, China, Iran and their allies. The US and its NATO allies are on the brink of direct war with Russia over Ukraine and see it as vital to undermine Russian and Iranian influence throughout the Middle East, including Syria.

The collapse of the Syrian regime, amid the Gaza genocide and escalating Israeli aggression, are part of the US effort to dominate the oil-rich Middle East and reshape the region under its control. It will deepen the conflict both in Syria and throughout the region. The recent history of Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan, which collapsed into regional and ethnic conflicts after their governments were destroyed by US-led wars, is a warning on the conflicts now being unleashed in Syria.

The end of the escalating war and genocide in the Middle East and the arrival of peace, prosperity and democracy depends on uniting and mobilising the international working class on an anti-war, socialist programme to take power against the imperialist powers and their bourgeois proxies.