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Viktor Mikhin

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The situation in Syria remains extremely tense

The future of Syria remains uncertain and unclear. Many experts and diplomats doubt the sincerity of the intentions of the leadership of the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) group, which previously had links with the terrorist organizations ISIL* and Al-Qaeda* banned in Russia.



HTS's* statements about the desire to build a bright future for Syria after the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad are disbelieving. Sam Heller, an analyst and employee of Century International, expressed his opinion on the Foreign Affairs website. He suggested that there is reason to believe that HTS's* statements about the transition to moderate values are not true. Many in the Western media and political circles assume that HTS* will become the new government in Syria. However, according to Sam Heller, the situation is much more complicated.

The fall of the Assad regime

It is unlikely that HTS* alone is capable of curbing the vengeance and chaos currently reigning across all of Syria

In 2015, when the militants were close to overthrowing Assad, US officials believed that a complete victory for the terrorist groups and the collapse of the regime would be a “catastrophic success”. However, between 2015 and 2020, Assad managed to retake most of the country that was under the control of armed groups. After that, the war entered a protracted stalemate.

Turkey has retained control over several militant groups in northern Syria. At the same time, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) seized the east of the country, including the most valuable agricultural lands and oil fields.

Due to the harsh US sanctions and the economic crisis in neighboring Lebanon, the whole of Syria, especially the government-controlled territories, found itself in a deep economic crisis. The Syrian state institutions and armed forces were gradually weakening, and the government lacked the resources to stabilize and rebuild the territories recaptured from the terrorists.

This year, the remaining armed militants have taken advantage of the difficult situation of the Assad regime. On November 27, the **Hay’at** Tahrir al-Sham* group and others heavily armed US formations, which had been in a Turkish-protected stronghold in the northwestern province of Idlib for years, launched an offensive on the northern city of Aleppo. When they broke through the defenses of the Syrian army and captured the city, it led to the defeat and collapse of the Syrian army throughout the country.

The HTS-led forces were advancing south from Aleppo towards the capital Damascus. At the same time, Syrians in the center and south of the country, including areas previously controlled by these groups, also rebelled. On December 8, while Damascus was under siege from both the north and the south, the regime of Bashar al-Assad came to its end.

Some aspects of the activities of HTS* and al-Jolani

Now, many Western media and political circles probably expect HTS* to take over Syria. However, there is reason to believe that this will not be an easy task. Just a few weeks ago, HTS* controlled only two-thirds of the province on its rural outskirts. Now it faces a much more difficult and ambitious task: to manage the whole of Syria.

Unfortunately, the experience of HTS* at the local level does not give grounds to hope for the creation of a national government that would take into account the religious, ethnic and political diversity of Syria. During its administration of Idlib, the group has not demonstrated

any real commitment to political pluralism. HTS* organized several events to establish its “Salvation Government” in Idlib, including an allegedly inclusive constitutional conference. However, these are not open democratic processes where all stakeholders can participate.

Abu Mohammed al-Jolani has always been in power, despite the fact that he did not hold official government positions. Just a few months ago, the HTS* security service brutally suppressed protests in Idlib, whose participants demanded the release of HTS* detainees and an end to al-Jolani’s rule.

Although HTS* publicly severed ties with Al-Qaeda* and transnational jihadism in 2016, there are still veteran jihadist fighters and foreign fighters in its ranks. The organization has been designated a terrorist organization by the United Nations Security Council, the United States, and other national governments.

However, in recent years, HTS* has been actively working to restore its image and seek exclusion from international lists of terrorist organizations.

When the opposition forces launched an offensive on Damascus, HTS* leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani tried to create an impression of seriousness and moderation. In particular, he published statements in which he assured various ethnic and religious groups in Syria, as well as (так можно написать, но именно в этом предложении получается тавтология) several international organizations of his tolerance. Moreover, he even gave a number of interviews to Western media, confirming his commitment to institutional governance.

HTS’s ability to manage Syria effectively

The **Hay’at** Tahrir al-Sham* group has indeed achieved some success in maintaining order and relative stability in Idlib. However, it is unlikely that its influence will spread beyond this region to the whole of Syria.

The strengthening of HTS* positions in Idlib has been taking place over the years and has been accompanied by some brutal methods. The group was able to suppress rival armed groups and eliminate internal opponents and defectors.

After the capture of Aleppo, HTS* may have expanded its administrative and security apparatus from Idlib to this nearby city. However, it is difficult to apply this management model throughout the country.

Syria is much larger than Idlib and has about ten times its population. It is more diverse and currently full of armed groups that are beyond the effective control of the HTS*. Although HTS* may have managed to create strong internal discipline, according to the latest data, the

group's strength is only 30,000 people. This is clearly not enough to govern Syria or control the numerous armed groups that could join the HTS*.

It is important to emphasize that HTS does not cover the entire armed opposition in Syria. Even in Idlib, where it managed to attract allied forces that became its auxiliary units, HTS* was unable to unite all opposition groups.

HTS* is not able to control all armed groups operating in different parts of the country. Moreover, in recent weeks, new units have appeared in the center and in the south that do not obey al-Jolani.

When Syrian armed groups previously captured other areas of the country, such as southern Syria, the countryside around Damascus, and northern areas captured by Turkish-backed groups, it usually led to chaos and fratricidal fighting. Attempts to unite local groups and create unifying institutions have repeatedly failed. It was only through long-term work, perseverance, and the use of force that HTS* was able to succeed in Idlib.

Many expect Turkey to use its influence on the **Hay'at** Tahrir al-Sham* group and other armed groups to help Syria during the transition period. However, despite the fact that Turkey does have influence on HTS*, it apparently cannot fully control this organization.

For example, HTS* previously angered the Turkish government by seizing territory held by other Turkish-backed groups in Aleppo.

Among the military groups in northern Syria, which are largely controlled by Turkey, Ankara has failed to demonstrate its ability to maintain discipline and prevent abuse. These formations were mainly used to attack the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which Turkey considers to be an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, a banned militant group. Even after the fall of the Assad regime, Turkish-backed groups continued to attack the SDF in northern Syria.

There is reason to doubt the sincerity of HTS*, which has declared its commitment to moderation. However, the greatest threat to Syria is not Islamist extremism, but the chaos that may ensue because of the victory of various armed groups.

After Assad's departure, the situation in the country may spiral out of control. The country risks plunging not only into open conflict between armed groups, but also into a series of acts of revenge and massacres. It is unlikely that HTS* alone will be able to stop this revenge and chaos, which has already engulfed a significant part of the Syrian territory.

**organisation banned in the Russian Federation*

Viktor Mikhin, December 24, 2024

*Viktor Mikhin, Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences,
expert on the countries of the Arab world*