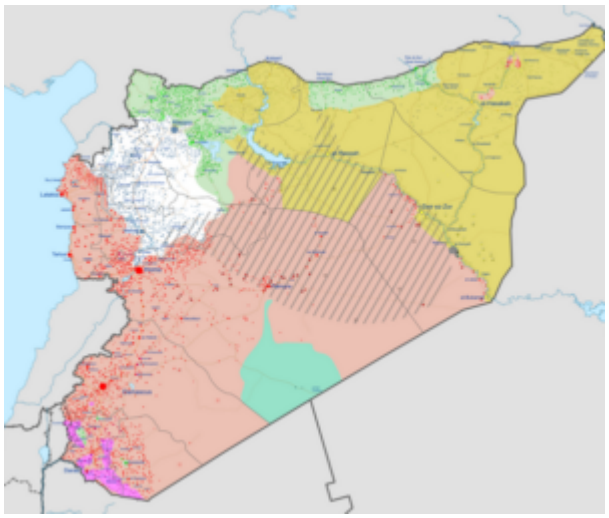
The Syrian revolution returns with a bang

written by Michael Karadjis | December 9, 2024



Regions of control as of December 6, 2024: red – Assad regime; yellow – Kurdish/SDF-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria; light green in north – Turkish-backed SNA-led Syrian Interim Government; white – now greatly expanded HTS-led Syrian Salvation Government; green in south – ex-rebel forces working for US against ISIS; grey stripes – areas of sporadic ISIS activity; grey in southwest – Israeli occupied Golan. Author: RowanJ LP under Creative Commons license.

The lightning victories of the Syrian rebel coalition over the Assad regime forces in northwest Syria over a vast area – despite this not being their initial aim – demonstrates the complete hollowness of the regime, based as it is on little more than naked military superiority. Currently down to the mid-Syrian city of Hama, regime defenses simply collapsed everywhere, the rebels facing neither popular nor military resistance.

Within a day or so of the offensive launched on November 27, the rebels had not only taken vast areas of rural eastern and southern Idlib and western and southern Aleppo, but most of Aleppo city as well; even in the 2012-2016 period, the rebels only ever controlled half the city. By contrast, it had taken large-scale regime, Russian and Iranian offensives, with airpower, missiles and overwhelming military power, *several years* to conquer the half-city from the rebels. They then advanced south into northern Hama province, where it is now contesting the regime for Hama city.

Syrian social media accounts are full of scenes of joy as political prisoners are released, as people return to their towns and homes they were expelled from. As former mayor of East Aleppo Hagi Hassan writes, stressing the humanitarian aspects of the liberation, “The city’s liberation is allowing tens of thousands of families to return home after years of forced exile. These families, who lived in camps without essential needs, can now find a more stable and dignified life. … Hundreds of

thousands of Syrians are still trapped in the regime's jails, suffering unimaginable atrocities. The release of Aleppo has allowed the release of hundreds of prisoners, including women and children, marking an important step towards justice." Fadel Abdul Ghany, of the Syrian Network of Human Rights, claimed that among the detainees and forcibly disappeared people who have been released were some who have been detained for 13 years, "and in one case a detainee that had spent 33 years in prison."

Lebanese man Ali Hassan Ali, who was arrested when he was 16 years old, in 1985, was released from the Hama prison after 39 years!

According to Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss, "events so far suggest HTS [the leading rebel faction] is behaving pragmatically. Its militants were dispatched right away to safeguard banks from looting. On the first night of its occupation, HTS turned off the electricity for factories, thereby affording civilian residences 16 hours of uninterrupted power, something they haven't enjoyed since 2012. Similarly, Kareem Shaheen writes of "fascinating messages from Christian family/friends in Aleppo about the restoration of electricity and water, garbage collection (apparently the rebels are paying garbage collectors a 1.5 million SYP wage), bread everywhere, active market."

Hagi Hassan also claims that "for the first time in years, the city knows some security. Infrastructure has been preserved, public institutions are functioning, and no civil rights violations have been reported since liberation," stressing that "the military forces that have entered Aleppo have not committed any violations against civilians," but rather, "they ensured their safety." Another Syrian reporting from Aleppo, Marcelle Shehwaro, claims there have been violations, though "despite extensive networking around this issue, I've only been able to document three violations," one an infamous Christmas tree incident, though she reports more serious violations between another rebel coalition, the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

More seriously, Shehwaro noted that, apart from fear of regime and Russian airstrikes, the main fear at present is gun-related chaos, caused by the release of criminal prisoners in the rush to open jails to release political prisoners. However, she reports that "a complaints hotline was activated, and it appears the operations management room is taking this seriously so far. But this is far from a utopia."

Importantly, she stresses regarding the head-scarf, given the radical Islamist ideology of some of the groups involved, "there are incidents happening related to being told, "Put a scarf on your head." However, the scale is still very limited (compared to what might be expected). Wearing a hijab hasn't yet become customary (and may God strengthen the women of Aleppo so it doesn't become the norm). For now, women are still walking in the streets without hijabs—not as isolated acts of courage or rebellion, but simply because that's how they dress." However, she also stresses there should be no complacency on this.

She emphasizes that both "alarmist narratives" and "reassuring narratives" should be avoided. This is sensible nuance for any such situation. Revolutions are typically depicted as unmitigated bloodbaths, or as heroic, romanticized utopias. No revolution in history has been one or the other. And from all the above, and more below, what I want to stress here is precisely that this is a revolution, a revival of the Syrian revolution which many considered crushed, warts and all, not simply a "military conquest by Islamists" as some have depicted.

Hagi Hassan notes that "Yes, Hayat Tahrir al-Cham [HTS] is present, *but the true liberators of the city are its inhabitants*, its youth who, exiled children, returned today as adults to liberate their city

from the yoke of oppression." Shehwaro also stresses the role of ordinary people:

"The grassroots Syrian effort is remarkable. Aleppo is boiling, inside and out. From bread to communications, burial initiatives, pressing the military to take responsibility for every issue that impacts civilians, supporting organizations, bolstering the Civil Defense's presence in Aleppo, and tracking the conditions of children—there is extraordinary grassroots effort."

On December 1, an example of such a popular initiative was the Initiative "People of Aleppo for the sake of the Homeland," which congratulated the Syrian people for being freed from the regime, but made a list of people's requests including advising "the brothers in military factions to fully discipline the instructions" of their leaders "not to engage in any violation," recommending "the brothers in military factions to adhere to military fronts, cord holes, military barracks, and complete ban of any armed appearance among civilians," while calling for "forming a civil administration from Aleppo's competencies as a transition stage in preparation for the elections."

As if on cue, on December 4 HTS commander Abu Mohammed al-Jolani stated that "the city will be administered by a transitional body. All armed fighters, including HTS members, will be directed to leave civilian areas in the coming weeks, and government employees will be invited to resume their work."

Jolani even suggested that that HTS may dissolve itself "in order to enable the full consolidation of civilian and military structures in new institutions that reflect the breadth of Syrian society."

The rebel operations room also announced a total amnesty for Syrian regime troops, police and security forces in Aleppo, calling on them to submit their paperwork to receive their official clemency and identification cards.

And the surprise is that, after years of brutal suppression of the revolution, after the regime's genocidal bloodbath of hundreds of thousands of people and its destruction of its own country with its airforce, after the degree of cooption of the popular uprising – either by the Turkish regime or by the hard-Islamist HTS now leading this operation – that such repression inevitably led to, we might have expected the results of a new offensive to be more retrograde, with more violations, more bloody, more divisive, than in the past. Yet so far, we can say that there were far, far more violations by rebel groups in Aleppo in the past compared to what is ensuing at present.

An aside: The question of return

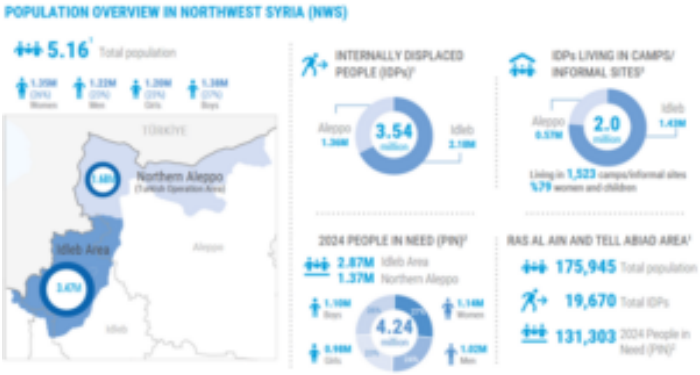
Before going on to look at the rebel forces involved, and then the wider geopolitical framework, it is worth looking at the question of "return" of thousands, and perhaps soon hundreds of thousands, to their homes, which was touched on above.

The population in the opposition-controlled northwest consists of 5.1 million people, of whom 3.6 million have been displaced from other parts of Syria, including 2 million living in camps This is in addition to at least 6.5 million Syrian refugees in exile – almost one third of Syria's pre-war population – of whom 3.7 million are just across the border in Turkey. Without being solved, this massive Syrian refugee population promises to become an ongoing geopolitical issue as surely as its Palestinian refugee counterpart is.

If we just consider the 7 million plus displaced Syrians in northwest Syria or Turkey (and not even the millions in Lebanon and Jordan), they come from all parts of Syria, including from a string of Sunni-majority towns around Damascus in the south that were ethnically cleansed via starvation sieges in 2015-17, but also from these very regions now being liberated in Idlib and Aleppo provinces, especially after the regime and Russia reconquered about half of these provinces from the

opposition in 2018-2020, leading the population to flee. Now, as a result of this current offensive, all the historic revolutionary towns of the region – Saraqib, Maraat Al-Nouman, Khan Sheikun, KafrNabl – which were captured by the regime in this final stage, have been liberated.

Even for those most cynical of the current HTS leadership of the offensive, what we need to recognize is that this has the potential to be a Gigantic March of Return!



United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Factsheet, Nov. 6, 2024

Who is involved

The offensive beginning on November 27 is being carried out by a wide coalition of rebel groups under the Military Operations Command, which arose from the Fath al-Mubeen Operations Room in Idlib. The leading force is the hard-line Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), while the other two major components are the National Front for Liberation (NFL) and Jaish al-Izzeh, both of which are independent 'secular-nationalist' Free Syrian Army (FSA) brigades, while the Islamist factions Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Shamiya also joined the offensive.

According to the *New Arab*, "participation of fighters from the secular nationalist Syrian National Army (SNA) factions, which is closely aligned with Turkey," has been confirmed, but "while the SNA has supported the operation rhetorically, it has not officially confirmed its participation, which is likely due to the influence of Turkey." That was written before the SNA did step in on November 30 with its own 'Dawn of Freedom' operations room (of which, more below), which at the outset was aimed more at the Kurdish-led SDF forces in northern Aleppo than at the regime.

Very broadly, we may divide the rebel groups in this region into three broad categories: HTS itself, which has become the dominant force in Idlib, and which dominates the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG); the factions of the SNA closest to Turkey, including both secular-nationalist and Islamist factions, which is dominant in parts of northern Aleppo province near the Turkish border, and which dominates the Syrian Interim Government (SIG); and organizations like Jaysh al-Izza which are independent, while the NFL, Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Shamiya have operated both as allies to the HTS-led command and as loose members or allies of the SNA, while maintaining operational independence.

Overwhelmingly, people join these groups not due to some ideological affiliation, which is more an obsession of western leftists, but to defend their liberated towns and regions from encroachment by the genocidal dictatorship. Who they join depends more on who is dominant in a certain region and thus can better effectively defend that region, who has money to pay wages and for better weaponry and so on. These people are mostly fighting in support of the original aims of the revolution, i.e. the overthrow of the dictatorship and the institution of a democratic Syria for all. What this means in practice is that, while the politics of the leaderships are not irrelevant, they are also not set in stone; to an extent they reflect the ideals and pressures of their fighting base.

And in a revolutionary situation such as this, many of these divisions break down again, are reconstituted along different lines; leaderships will try to dominate, but their need to keep leadership in a revolutionary struggle also means they will be carried by it. As seen above, popular initiatives play a big role. Even the question of government may end up having little to do with the two 'governments' discussed above which have ruled so long in their besieged de-facto statelets.

For example, one resident returning to the northern Aleppo town Tel Rifaat after "a forced absence of around 3205 days" was asked whether the town now will be run by the SSG or the SIG, after being liberated by "many of the Free Army's factions." He responded that "the people of the town of Tel Refaat have prior administrative experience, and they elect their council through a general commission composed of all the town's families. This council administers the town's affairs, whatever its affiliation."

On the nature of HTS

Many observers are understandably nervous about both HTS, an authoritarian Islamist group which many years ago was affiliated with al-Qaida, and the SNA, given its control by Turkey and Turkey's anti-Kurdish policy. There is no question that as a result of being bombed for years, driven into a corner, overwhelmed with displaced from all over Syria, and with virtually no support from anywhere in the world, the civil and military formations of the Syrian revolution have been heavily co-opted for years now, especially since the heavy defeats from 2018 onwards. In fact, all the famous revolution-held towns run by popular councils that continually resisted encroachment by HTS, such as Maraat al-Nuuman, Saraqeb, Karanbel, Atareb and others, were overrun by Assad in the final 2019-2020 offensives, removing important strength from the more independent sectors of the revolution.

People need to survive; and they need protection from the regime. Fighters need wages to feed their families. Western leftists often discuss these issues as if it were a market for different socialist and anarchist ideas on a western campus; it couldn't be more different. In fact, there is much evidence that many of the fighters in HTS's ranks today were previously fighters in FSA brigades that its predecessor, Jabhat al-Nusra, crushed at various times – they may not like it, but they still need to fight to regime. Nusra's forces never constituted any more than 10 percent of the rebels' armed forces; yet now HTS is overwhelmingly dominant, meaning the bulk of HTS fighters had no past in Nusra or al-Qaida.

HTS's own rule in Idlib has been mixed to say the least. The leading cadre of HTS are mostly derived from the former Jabhat al-Nusra, which in 2012-2016 was affiliated to al-Qaida, a relationship it severed that year, before moving on to form HTS as a coalition with a number of other Islamist groups. On the whole, its rule is seen as repressive, if effective, but in practice this has gone back and forth. It has adopted a number of pragmatic positions, both in theory and in practice (e.g. in relation to social restrictions) since leaving the jihadist cloak behind. Part of this is simply due to the needs to running technocratic government effectively. On the whole HTS has tended not to use repression against popular protest, but it has been quite repressive against political opposition, probably more so than any other rebel group.

According to a recent report on Syria by the UN Human Rights Council:

"Starting in February [2024], unprecedentedly large protests, led by civilian activists and supported by military and religious figures, spread across HTS areas. Protestors called for the release of political and security detainees, for governance and socioeconomic reforms and for the removal of HTS leader Abu Mohammad Al-Julani. Demonstrations were triggered by reports of torture and ill-treatment of detainees by the HTS general security service, following months of arrest campaigns by

HTS targeting their own members, as well as members of other armed groups and political parties, such as Hizb al-Tahrir."

It notes that Jolani acknowledged the use of "prohibited and severe means of pressure on the detainees" and "pledged to investigate and to hold those responsible accountable." It also noted that while demonstrations mostly proceeded without HTS state violence used against them, later HTS did begin using force against them.

Despite repressive rule and co-optation by both governments, the populations have engaged in mass popular demonstrations both against Turkey and against HTS at different times, suggesting that, while militarily defeated, the revolutionary masses still believe they have something to fight for and remain committed to the ideals which they rose up for in 2011. Indeed, while some of the demonstrations against HTS were simply against its attempt to impose its rule over areas it does not control, or against its repressive actions, others were against HTS attempting to open a trade connection with the regime; and similarly, the demonstrations against Turkey were against the growing convergence between Erdogan and Assad as they move to 'bury the hatchet'. And now, just as repression and siege can lead to such co-optation, new revolutionary advances can again liberate popular energies.

It may well be that one of the secondary reasons for the offensive was indeed for HTS to attempt to break out of this increasing unpopularity. If so, there can be no doubt that the offensive has been massively popular, above all by allowing hundreds of thousands to return to their homes.

HTS overtures to Christians, Druze, Shiites, Alawites and Kurds

With this hardline past, it might therefore come as a surprise that HTS has actually come out with some very positive overtures towards the populations in the regions it is advancing into, and towards minority groups in particular, towards religious minorities – Christians, Druze, Shiites and even Alawites – and the ethnic Kurdish minority, despite previously bad relations with all five.

As the rebels advanced towards Aleppo, Jolani addressed his troops:

"We urge you to show mercy, kindness and gentleness towards the people in the city of Aleppo. Let your top priority be the preservation of their properties and lives, as well as ensuring the security of the city. Do not cut down trees, frighten children, or instill fear in *our people of all sects* [emphasis added]. Aleppo has always been – and continues to be – *a crossroads of civilizations and cultures, with a long history of cultural and religious diversity*. It is the heritage and present of all Syrians. Today is a day of compassion; whoever enters their home, closes their door, and refrains from hostility is safe. Whoever declares their defection from the criminal regime, lays down their weapon, and surrenders to the revolutionaries is also safe."

This sounds nothing like the old Nusra, or like any kind of 'Sunni jihadist' organization. Neither does the following declaration from Bashir Ali, Head of the Directorate of Minority Affairs, Department of Political Affairs, of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), made as the rebels advanced:

"As many regions are liberated from the criminal regime, I want to assure all minorities, including Christians, that their lives, property, places of worship and freedoms will be protected. … This is your city too, and you are free to stay and live here in freedom and dignity, knowing that your safety and rights are a priority to us just as all other Syrians."

The Department issued another statement aimed specifically at two Shiite villages of Nubl and al-Zahara, to the north of Aleppo city:

“Out of faith on our part in the principles of the Syrian revolution that are based on justice and dignity, we affirm the necessity of protecting civilians and guarding their property and lives. In this context, we emphasize that the people of the localities of Nubl and al-Zahara’, like other Syrian civilians, must not be targeted or threatened in any way on the basis of sect or ethnic affiliation. We also call on the people of Nubl and al-Zahara’, and all the Syrian regions, not to stand alongside the criminal regime and aid it in killing the Syrian people and deepening its humanitarian suffering.”

Traditionally, Sunni jihadists like Nusra saw other Muslim sects like Shiites and Alawites as worse than Christians and Jews, as they were considered apostates in Islam; this statement was therefore very significant. Given the extreme divisions from the past (caused by both sides) however, it appears that many of the Shia in these two towns decided to leave, but those that have stayed are reporting that there has been no looting or revenge attacks by the rebels.

Perhaps even more stunning for a formation arising from a Sunni jihadist background, on December 5 HTS issued a statement proclaiming the Alawites to be an indispensable part of Syrian society, calling on them to abandon the Assad regime which it claims “hijacked” the Alawites to conduct a sectarian battle against the opposition:

So far, reports from the ground suggest there have been very few violations, though of course some are inevitable in any war. Aleppo’s churches have continued their services and celebrations as normal this past week. Here is the first Sunday mass in Aleppo under Syrian rebels/HTS rule, for example:

However, as Syrian Christian Fadi Hallisso returning to Aleppo notes regarding the fears of many Christians, the assurances that the Islamic dress code will not be imposed on them and that there is no threat to their churches are “not helping at all,” because he claims, these are not the main concerns of Christians, but rather the fear of becoming second-class citizens in a new “Ottoman millet” system. Interestingly, Hallisso states that “the only way to reassure Christians in these circumstances is for Aleppo to be run by a civilian administration of the city’s notables after all armed groups retreat from the city” – i.e., precisely what has just been announced by the rebel leadership.

The Arab-Kurdish issue in the current conflict

Marcelle Shehwaro claims that “the Arab-Kurdish situation is catastrophic” and that “the polarization is costing lives, displacement, and a lack of any civil structure with even a minimal level of mutual trust.” She blames both “sniper fire from the SDF that claims civilian lives daily,” and “displacement, abuse, and violations [of Kurds] by the National Army [SNA].” It is very important here to distinguish the SNA from HTS.

As the HTS-led coalition approached Aleppo, Turkiye initially ordered the SNA not to take part. This is likely because if Turkiye gave any green light to the offensive (see below), the aim was for a limited operation in the Idlib/Aleppo countryside to pressure Assad; by all accounts, Turkiye was as blindsided as everyone by the speed of the fall of the city. But when the city did fall to the rebels, the SDF moved into some eastern and northern parts of Aleppo that the regime had fled from, which then linked up Aleppo to the SDF-controlled Rojava statelet in northeast Syria, obviously not Turkiye's plan.

Therefore, Turkiye the next day sent in the SNA with its own 'Dawn of Freedom' operation, which began seizing territory from the SDF – it is important to underline that *this was an SNA, not an HTS, action*, and should not be confused with the main rebel operation. This demonstrated Turkiye's anti-Kurdish priorities (though the SNA has also since taken former Assadist territory).

However, even with the SNA's anti-Kurdish policy, it is not as simple as "Turkey-SNA attacking the Kurds," as much media, and the SDF, suggest, although there clearly have been violations. The problem is that the main areas of northern Aleppo province that the SNA first seized from the SDF – around the Tel Rifaat region – were *not Kurdish regions at all*, but Arab-majority regions which the SDF had dishonorably conquered from the rebels in early 2016 with Russian airforce backing, uprooting 100,000 people who have been living in tents in Azaz to the north ever since! For the tens of thousands of expelled residents, this is now a homecoming. However again, even this reality is altered by the fact that two years later, in 2018, Turkiye conquered Kurdish Afrin, northwest of Aleppo, so much of the Kurdish population there fled to these now empty homes in Tel Rifaat, and it is now these people having to flee again.

It is striking that HTS – a former jihadist group which, when its core was Nusra, tended to engage in conflict with the SDF more than any other rebel group – is now engaged in "back-channel dialogue and negotiations with the SDF" which are "far more constructive and effective than with the SNA itself."

According to a *Syria Weekly* special edition, "reports continue to emerge that HTS personnel are *intervening against SNA abuses* — detaining SNA fighters and taking over local security, at the request of community notables." Then on December 3, the SNA condemned HTS for their "aggressive behavior" against SNA members, while HTS has accused SNA fighters of looting.

On December 1, HTS issued a statement telling the SDF that HTS' fight was against the Syrian regime, not the SDF, promising to ensure the safety of Aleppo's Kurds, and describing the Kurds as "an integral part of the diverse Syrian identity" who "have full rights to live in dignity and freedom," calling on them to remain in Aleppo; notably also is HTS's condemnation of "the barbaric practices committed by ISIS against the Kurds:"

HTS then called on the SDF to withdraw from Aleppo, promising to take care of civilians in the Kurdish-held neighborhoods, and offering safe passage to the SDF fighters, possibly to avert an SNA-SDF clash; and the SDF quietly withdrew from the parts of Aleppo it had taken, while remaining in the actual Kurdish-populated regions it had long controlled in Aleppo city, Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh, where they have the support of the population. Any attempt to drive them from here would be a massive violation. At the time of writing, the SDF still controls these two neighborhoods, and much of the population has also remained.

Background: the evolution of HTS on minority issues

I don't include all these quotes in order to suggest HTS will necessarily live up to all this, the future simply cannot be known; and the concerns that many Syrians have, including many who are ecstatic about the fall of the regime, are absolutely justified [indeed, some point precisely to what happened after the Iranian revolution of 1979]. Rather, the fact that HTS found it necessary to issue these statements is evidence at least of understanding what a revolutionary situation requires of it. The fact that so far it has been living up to this in practice is a very encouraging sign. Rather than declare in advance either that HTS will throw off all this "re-badging" once it has power and return to its dark past, or that it will surely lead a democratic utopia, it is better to cautiously watch and hope that the spread of the revolution continues to dilute HTS power and older HTS ideology; the broader it is, the more difficult it would be for a militia to put popular power back into a box.

However, the discourse stating that HTS is only saying all these things now to "re-badge" for western consumption to be taken off western "terrorism" lists and so on has the problem that very significant changes in relation to minorities have been taking place for a number of years now in Idlib. The oppression of the Druze minority under Nusra rule for example was particularly appalling; they were basically subjected a program of forced Sunnification, one of the ugliest features of Nusra rule.

However, as well-informed Syria-watcher Gregory Waters explains:

" … the SSG has spent more than six years engaging with both the Christian and Druze communities in Idlib. An independent, region-wide administrative body was created to serve as a focal point for all communities, including those of minorities. Gradually, this body worked to address complaints and *return the homes and farmland that had been seized by a variety of opposition groups in past years*. This author has met with some of these community leaders, who told him that, while slow,

significant progress has been made for their community in relation to security, property rights, economy, and religious discourse."

This stepped up in 2022, when Jolani visited the Druze center, Jabal al-Summaq, after which HTS began returning homes and land earlier seized; and visited Christian residents of Quniya, Yaqoubiya, and Jadida, which was followed by the reopening of the St. Anne Church in Yaqoubiya village, for the first time since the rebels entered Idlib in 2015, attended by dozens of people, and then another large mass at the Armenian Apostolic Church, a decade after it was closed.

Just as surprising has been HTS's outreach to the Kurdish community. After taking over the Kurdish region of Afrin in 2022 from the SNA, HTS declared that it "confirms that the Arab and Kurdish people… or the displaced are the subject of our attention and appreciation, and we warn them against listening to the factional interests… We specifically mention the Kurdish brothers; they are the people of those areas and it is our duty to protect them and provide services to them."

While this may sound like rhetoric, in March 2023, HTS confronted the SNA after five Kurdish civilians were killed by members of a Turkish-backed faction during a Nowruz celebration in the town of Jenderes. Jolani met with the residents and HTS forces deployed in the town and seized control of headquarters of the military police and the SNA's Eastern Army, which was accused of the killings.

This outreach has even proceeded to discussions with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), HTS hosting several delegations from Hassakeh in 2023. An agreement for the SDF to supply oil to HTS-controlled refineries was reached (the SDF already has a large-scale agreement of this kind with the regime). Intriguingly, HTS also proposed participating in the SDF's anti-ISIS fight, and for the establishment of a joint civilian administration between HTS and the SDF if HTS could gain control of areas currently held by the SNA!

Apart from the needs of technocratic government getting the better of ideology, the evolution of HTS's Kurdish policy was also partly driven by its rivalry and clash of perspectives with the Turkish-backed SNA. As Turkey's priorities turned more to confronting the SDF in Syria, it held back the rebels it controlled from confronting the Assad regime, and continually made overtures to the regime for a joint war against the SDF as a basis for restoring relations. HTS however, whatever its past clashes with the SDF, and also the more independent FSA militia groups, continued to see the conflict with the regime as having priority, and were furious with Turkiye's attempts to reconcile with the regime. This created a cautious, low-level convergence between HTS and SDF priorities.

Why now? 'Deterring' regime's year-long 'aggression' waited for Lebanon ceasefire

This offensive did not come out of the blue; by all accounts, the rebels have been planning this for up to a year. However, there was little expectation their offensive would be so successful; the name of the offensive – Operation Deter the Aggression – instead informs us of the original aim: to push back against over a year of renewed aggression, mostly by regime and Russian bombing, against the opposition-controlled regions of Idlib and Aleppo provinces in the northwest.

However, surprised by the rapidity of regime collapse, the aims then widened, to liberating as much territory from the regime as possible.

From the onset of Israel's genocidal war in Gaza, the Assad regime, while maintaining complete quiet on its southern frontier with the Israeli-occupied Golan, used the cover of Gaza to step up the slaughter of opposition-controlled Idlib right from the start, a stunning example of this part of the 'Axis of Resistance' lacking a compass. According to the Syria Response Coordinators, "266

educational facilities in northwestern Syria have been put out of service over the past three years," with attacks on schools sharply increasing over the last year, with 43 attacks between September 2023 and November 2024.

All this time, people in opposition-controlled Idlib and Aleppo have continually demonstrated in support of Gaza, with ongoing protests, seminars, donation drives etc. Gaza (while the Assad regime bans pro-Palestine demonstrations). Assadist "resistance" to the Zionist onslaught was apparently carried out against this extremely pro-Palestine population of the northwest, demonstrating one of numerous examples of the use of phony "resistance" language by repressive and reactionary regimes who in reality have no interest whatsoever in "resisting" Israel's genocidal campaign.

This Assad-Putin war against the northwest actually escalated at precisely the time Israel turned northwards and began smashing up Hezbollah and Lebanon. In early October, Russian airstrikes on Idlib killed ten people. Then on October 11, "regime forces targeted the town of Afes, east of Idlib, with heavy artillery, following a similar barrage on Darat Izzah in the western Aleppo countryside," with 122 attacks recorded only between October 14 and October 17, including with the use of vacuum missiles, which is the most intense military escalation in over three months.

These attacks continued on a daily basis, systematically targeting villages, civilian infrastructure and agricultural zones, impacting some 55,000 families. This has led to new waves of displacement as people fled their homes to escape the bombardment; in late October, the Syrian Response Coordinators "recorded the forced displacement of over 1,843 people from 37 towns and villages in just 48 hours." According to Ibrahim Al-Sayed speaking to the *New Arab*, about three-quarters of the residents of Sarmin have fled the town, which is "the largest displacement the city has experienced since the ceasefire agreement was signed in March 2020," due to "daily artillery and missile shelling."

It has been widely pointed out that Assad's Iranian and Hezbollah backers have been weakened due to defeat in Lebanon by Israel. In reality, this makes little sense, and hardly explains the complete rout that the Assadist armed forces have undergone. Much has also been made of the fact that the rebel offensive began at almost the same time as the Lebanon ceasefire came into effect, as if the defeat of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon was the signal for the rebels to launch the attack, even leading to conspiracy theories that Israel greenlighted the attack.

In reality, the connection is somewhat different: it is precisely the fact that Hezbollah had to stop being a counterrevolutionary force in Syria but rather *return to its resistance origins* in its own country Lebanon – i.e., standing on the side of the region's peoples resisting oppression rather than against them – that allowed for similar positive developments, i.e., the Syrian peoples' offensive against the Assad regime.

After all, as demonstrated above, it is the regime that has been attacking the rebels for the past year rather than using its forces to open a front on the Golan to aid Palestine or even to aid its ally Hezbollah, while the rebels were trying to 'deter' this aggression. The question is rather why the rebels waited so long to resist regime aggression.

In fact, there is little doubt that the rebels *purposefully waited until the Lebanon ceasefire* precisely so as not to be seen breaking any transit of arms between Iran and Lebanon across Syria while the war lasted. While the regime's ongoing offensive made the necessity of their operation more and more acute, they were reluctant to wage it as long as the conflict continued. As Aaron Y. Zelin, senior fellow at The Washington Institute, explained, HTS waited for a ceasefire "because they did not want anything to do with Israel … HTS is against Israel, it has praised the October 7 attacks, it is for the Palestinian cause, Israel has nothing to do with what HTS is doing."

According to Hadi al-Bahra, head of the exile-based opposition leadership, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), plans for the offensive were a year old, but "the war on Gaza … then the war in Lebanon delayed it" because "it wouldn't look good having the war in Lebanon at the same time they were fighting in Syria," and therefore waited till the ceasefire. While the SNC itself has no control over the fighters (especially HTS, which is not part of the SNC), the article further notes that "Rebel commanders have separately said they feared if they had started their assault earlier, it might have looked like they were helping Israel, who was also battling Hezbollah."

This also raises an interesting question about Hezbollah's intentions now. Hezbollah played a significant role in Assad's counterrevolutionary genocide, acting as a proxy for the Iranian regime. Yet when it was in its existential struggle in Lebanon against Israel, the Assad regime did not lift a finger to help. The regime's silence was stunning, it took it 48 hours to even issue a statement about the killing of Nasrallah. Meanwhile, the regime has been closing Hezbollah recruitment centers. Even in its statements on Lebanon it mostly didn't mention Hezbollah.

Assad's message to Hezbollah was: thanks for the help back then, was nice knowing you.

How likely then is it that Hezbollah will send its own battered troops back to save Assad's arse again? Hezbollah has already stated, diplomatically enough, that it has no plans to do so "at this stage," while a Hezbollah spokesperson told *Newsweek,* comically enough, that "The Syrian Army does not need fighters. It can defend its land." And this was probably an added incentive for any Hezbollah cadre who did happen to still be in Syria, and perhaps even other Iran-backed forces, to flee with the rest rather than stand and fight; and on the whole, there has been surprisingly little action by these Iran-led forces over the last week.

The other "why now" question relates to Russia. While Russian warplanes did bomb the advancing rebels, this was not at a very decisive level. Bombing civilians all year while the population remained largely passive was easy enough for a ramshackle bully state like Russia, but is less effective against an advancing revolution when not used in full force. Of course, some of this is due to Putin's catastrophic invasion of Ukraine, where most of the Russian airforce is needed to bomb Ukraine in order to maintain its illegal conquest of one fifth of that country, while Putin had thought that Syria was pacified. But, as with the Iranians, there has not been much to show for even the Russian air capacity that is present in Syria, apart from stepping up barbaric attacks on the civilian infrastructure in Idlib, such as the bombing of five hospitals, including a maternity hospital and the university hospital.

But the relatively low profile of both Russian and Iranian backers in the defense of the regime also has two other causes: firstly, the collapse of regime defenses itself means it is not just difficult but pointless to fight for a regime which will not fight for itself, indeed, as Mehdi Rahmati, a prominent Iranian analyst who advises officials on regional strategy put it, "Iran is starting to evacuate its forces and military personnel because *we cannot fight as an advisory and support force if Syria's army itself does not want to fight*;" and secondly, it may also be related to frustration with the Assad regime itself, which in turn relates to their long-term work with Turkey on the Astana process.

The role of Turkiye

While Turkiye was a major backer of the rebels in the early years, by around 2016 it began prioritizing its conflict with the SDF in Syria over support for the uprising. Its series of agreements with Russia and Iran under the Astana process between 2017-2020 to freeze the frontlines in the northwest can be seen in this context. While Turkiye guaranteed rebel compliance, Russia supposedly guaranteed regime compliance. With the frontline quiet – well, quite on the rebel side – Turkiye invaded northeast Syria in October 2019 to drive the SDF from the border region, with the

acquiescence of Trump and Putin; the reliance of the rebels on Turkish protection of their remaining enclave allowed Turkiye to coopt some in the SNA to take part in this invasion. The invasion in turn forced the SDF to allow the regime to send troops into part of the 'Rojava' region they controlled, especially the border region, thus extending regime control in Syria.

But the reason Turkiye could not simply betray the rebels outright and allow full Assadist reconquest of the northwest in exchange for alliance with Assad against the SDF is because Turkiye already has 3.6 million Syrian refugees within its borders, the largest refugee population on Earth; allowing Assad to completely take all of Idlib and Aleppo provinces would lead to another few million refugees pouring in, at a time when Turkiye actually wants to try to send as many as possible back to Syria. Refugees will not return to regime-ruled Syria as long as Assad remains in power. Therefore, Turkiye has to maintain support a certain amount of territory remaining under opposition control, and has to continue to push Assad to open a dialogue with the opposition under the terms of the Astana process and of UN Resolution 2254, which calls for a Syrian-led 'political solution' process, because such a political process, based on compromise, could also open avenues for safe refugee return.

However, while Russia and Turkey, together with Iran, had agreed to certain frontlines in 2017 under the Astana dialogue, between 2018 and 2020 the regime launched several gigantic offensives which cut the region controlled by the opposition in half, losing all of western Aleppo province, southern Idlib province and the parts of northern Hama and Latakia it had controlled. This added an extra 1.4 million displaced people to the 2.2 million already under opposition control, now squeezed into half the area. While Turkish action finally put a stop to the Assadist offensive in early 2020, this could not be satisfactory for Turkey: how could it begin sending refugees back into Syria when the liberated region was smaller than before with even more displaced?

Despite this, the Erdogan regime has continued to push for normalization with Assad for several years now, with proposals for launching a joint offensive against the SDF in the east, despite US forces stationed there who work with the SDF against any re-emergence of ISIS. Both Erdogan's ultra-rightist ally, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), and the opposition Kemalist CHP, have been strongly pushing for normalization with Assad, a joint war with Assad against the SDF, and expulsion of Syrian refugees, on the absurd grounds that peace with Assad would allow refugees to return! [Interestingly, a number of European countries, led by Italy's far-right Meloni government and Austria's FPO, have been pushing much the same line, that refugee return requires reconciliation with Assad, with Italy recently sending an envoy back to the Assad regime].

Erdogan better understands the contradiction between those two stands: that refugees cannot be sent back if there is no opposition-held territory, that the only way to send them back to Assad would be violently, causing enormous upheaval, and that either expanding opposition territory, or reaching the compromise 'political solution', or both, are essential requirements for sending back refugees. Yet Assad, while open to normalizing with Turkiye, demands withdrawal of Turkish forces as a precondition – which would likely mean Assadist reconquest – and resists all pressure to engage with the political process of UN Res 2254.

This is why much speculation has it that Turkiye gave the green-light to the offensive, to pressure Assad on these issues.

However, on November 25, just days before the rebel offensive began, Turkish foreign minister Hakan Fidan stated that the withdrawal of Turkish troops was no longer conditional on either the regime reaching an agreement with the opposition, or the opening of the 'political process'; seemingly, Turkiye was still making concessions to get the normalization process happening. The fact that the offensive was led by HTS, rather than the SNA which Turkey initially held back, also suggests that Turkiye had nothing to do with the operation.

Others note however that several days after that statement, Fidan stated that Assad is clearly not interested in peace in Syria, so perhaps exasperation did lead to Turkey giving a green light to a "limited operation." Either way, once the operation began, Turkiye could see its value in terms of pressuring Assad on the issues dividing them and returning non-regime territory to 2017 lines.

Since then, Turkish statements have been cautious. Erdogan has said nothing, while Fidan said that Turkiye had no involvement, declaring pointedly that "We will not initiate any action that could trigger a new wave of migration [from Syria to Turkiye]," and telling US Secretary of State Antony Blinken that Turkiye was "against any development that would increase instability in the region." On November 29, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement saying that "the clashes experienced in recent days have caused an undesirable increase in tension in the region. It is of great importance for Turkey not to cause new and greater instabilities and not to harm the civilian population."

One might think, OK, this was not Turkiye's plan, but if the offensive does lead to the overthrow of Assad, then refugees would be able to return, and Turkish influence extended all over Syria. However, Turkiye has no control over HTS, nor will it be able to control a Syria after a successful revolution. With its main goal still to "leverage[e] the situation to push Damascus and its allies toward negotiations" via pressure from Russia and Iran, and to jointly fight the SDF, the Turkish regime would prefer a more controlled situation. On December 2, Erdogan stressed "the Syrian regime must engage in a real political process to prevent the situation from getting worse," and that unity, stability and territorial integrity of Syria are important for Turkey.

For HTS, on the other hand, the very threat of a Turkish agreement with Assad, Russia and Iran in which it would be sacrificed was probably another reason to launch the offensive, and the independence it has gained by going so well beyond Turkey's limited plan will be jealously guarded.

Furthermore, there is also the possibility that Assad, with Russian and Iranian support, may launch a furious counteroffensive if the rebel advance does not stop; Russia has vital strategic interests on the Syrian coastal region, and Iran in parts of the center and south, and it is unlikely they would give them up without a massive fight beyond a certain line. And if that happened, it could lead to a further refugee outflow into Turkey.

Both Russia and Iran appear to be bending towards the Turkish position, and indeed, frustration with Assad's intransigence, which led to this explosion, could well be a reason for the lack of Russian and Iranian response. On December 1, Russia emphasized the importance of "coordinated efforts within the framework of the Astana Format with the involvement of Turkey." On the same day Iran's foreign minister Abbas Araqchi "held a joint press conference with his Turkish counterpart Hakan Fidan in Ankara, where both agreed that foreign ministers of Iran, Turkey and Russia should meet soon." Both are rational enough to see that if they don't try to salvage something through a political process, they may end up with nothing [update: somewhat comically, as Daraa and Suweida and Homs were falling, and hours before Assad and family fled and Damascus fell, and the whole of Syria was celebrating, that Astana meeting did place, with Russia, Turkiye and Iran demanding "an end to hostile activities" in Syria!].

An interesting side-point here is HTS's unexpected November 29 appeal to Russia, aiming to neutralize support for the regime. While condemning Russia's bombing, the Political Affairs Administration of the SSG affirmed that "the Syrian revolution has never been against any state or people*, including Russia*, and it is likewise *not a party to what is happening in the Russia-Ukraine war*, but rather it is a revolution that was started to liberate the Syrian people from … the criminal regime," calling on Russia "not to tie [its] interests to the Assad regime or the persona of Bashar, but rather with the Syrian people in its history, civilization and future" as "we consider [Russia] a

potential partner in building a bright future for free Syria."

Egypt, UAE, Jordan, Iraq: Go Assad!

As is well-known, three of the 'Abraham Accords' states – UAE, Bahrain and Sudan – restored relations with the Assad regime during much the same time period as they established relations with Israel, while Egypt, which has had relations with Israel for decades, also established strong relations with the Assad regime following the bloody military coup of al-Sisi in 2013.

Not surprisingly therefore, Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty reiterated Egypt's support for "Syrian national institutions" to his Syrian counterpart, stressing "Syria's vital role in fostering regional stability and combating terrorism." Similarly, UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed (MBZ) told al-Assad that his country "stands with the Syrian state and supports it in combating terrorism, extending its sovereignty, unifying its territories, and achieving stability." MBZ also recently put forward the idea to US officials of lifting US sanctions on the Assad regime if it cut off Iran's weapons routes to Lebanon (an idea also put forward by Netanyahu's Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer during his early November discussions with Russian leaders in Moscow). Jordanian King Abdullah II similarly said that "Jordan stands by the brothers in Syria and its territorial integrity, sovereignty and stability." Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani of the US-Iran joint-venture Iraqi regime also stressed that "Syria's security and stability are closely linked to Iraq's national security," while a number of pro-Iranian Iraqi militia groups declared they are sending forces to Syria to bolster the regime – curiously after not having sent forces to aid their Hezbollah co-thinkers in Lebanon when under existential attack by Israel.

Juan Cole runs the often very useful 'Informed Comment' site, but like everyone, he has his areas of expertise … and not. One of the problems with Syria is the tendency of people who know little about it to make up for its alleged "complexity" by making sweeping statements and buying to crass stereotypes that they normally wouldn't. In his first piece on this uprising, while correctly discussing the alliance of states like Egypt and UAE with Assad, he then proceeds, based on nothing at all, to claim "these anti-Iran forces include Israel, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Azerbaijan, and, outside the region, the United States. All are delighted at the news." He then goes on to warn them that in reality, this may not be good news for them – as if they don't already know, since they do not hold the view he so groundlessly ascribed to them!

Saudi Arabia was slower than its main allies (Egypt, UAE, Bahrain, Jordan) in restoring relations with Assad, just as it was with Israel. Despite constant media declarations that Saudi Arabia was about to normalize with Israel, it still hasn't, but in the meantime it fully normalized with the Assad regime, and even with its great rival Iran, and it played the key role in getting Assad back into the Arab League in 2023. On December 2, Saudi leader MBS met with UAE leader MBZ, for the first time in years – their alliance has been replaced by rivalry – to discuss the Syria situation. There is little doubt MBS shares his partner's concerns. As for Bahrain, it was one of the first Arab states to normalize with the Assad regime, just after UAE in late 2018, and like Egypt, UAE, Jordan and Israel, Bahrain welcomed the Russian intervention in 2015 to save Assad, as did Saudi Arabia secretly. Cole's confident speculations are clearly baseless.

"In general, GCC states are supportive of the Assad regime and are firmly against it being challenged or indeed replaced by a coalition of Islamist and jihadi factions formerly associated with al-Qaeda," according to Neil Quilliam, an associate fellow with Chatham House, while Andreas Krieg, of the defense studies department of King's College London, stressed the angle of them protecting growing Gulf, especially Emirati, investment in Syria.

USA – rebels "terrorists"

As for the US, on November 30, National Security Council spokesperson Sean Savett released the following statement:

"… The Assad regime's ongoing refusal to engage in the political process outlined in UNSCR 2254, and its reliance on Russia and Iran, created the conditions now unfolding, including the collapse of Assad regime lines in northwest Syria. *At the same time, the United States has nothing to do with this offensive, which is led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a designated terrorist organization*. [emphasis added]. The United States, together with its partners and allies, *urge de-escalation, protection of civilians and minority groups, and a serious and credible political process* that can end this civil war once and for all with a political settlement consistent with UNSCR 2254. We will also continue to fully defend and protect U.S. personnel and U.S. military positions, which remain essential to ensuring that ISIS can never again resurge in Syria."

So, the opposition is terrorist, and we want de-escalation at a time it is winning. Doesn't sound "delighted" to me. On December 2, the US, France, Germany and the UK released a joint statement urging "de-escalation," claiming the current "escalation" underlines the need to return to the "political solution" outlined in UNSC Res 2254.

Israel: Collapse of Assad regime could lead to military threats

Israel has always supported the Assad regime against the opposition; throughout the Syrian conflict, Israeli leaders (political, military and intelligence) and think tanks continually expressed their preference for the Assad regime prevailing against its opponents, and were especially appreciative of Assad's decades of *non-resistance* on the occupied Golan frontier. This put it on the same side as its Iranian enemy, with the difference that it prefers the regime without Iran – hence Israel's strong decade-long partnership with Russia starting with its 2015 intervention to save Assad; since then, the Israel-Russia agreement has allowed Israel to bomb Iranian and Hezbollah targets anywhere in Syria at will, and the world-class Russian S-400 air defence system will not touch them.

But since Israel has just come through a successful war against Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Assad regime betrayed its ally, Israel can see the opportunity to put even more pressure on Assad, to completely cut the Iranian lines into Lebanon. As such, Israeli foreign minister Gideon Saar's view that "Israel doesn't take sides" as "there is no good side there" is probably closest to the mainstream at present. Saar also said that Israel should "explore ways to increase cooperation" with the Kurds, "we need to focus on their interests," which also seems to be a common view in Israel.

On November 29, Netanyahu held a security consultation with "defence" chiefs. He was told that Hezbollah's forces will now be shifted to Syria, "in order to defend the Assad regime," which will bolster the likelihood of the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire holding, meaning that these developments "appear to be positive" in the short-term, but "the collapse of the Assad regime would likely create chaos in which military threats against Israel would develop." Channel 12, reporting on the meeting, also claimed concerns were raised that "strategic capabilities" of the Assad regime, including "the remnants of [its] chemical weapons," could fall into the jihadists' hands, so the IDF "is said to be preparing for a scenario where Israel would be required to act."

So, not exactly "delighted." This raises the question of why Israel apparently has no problem with these chemical weapons currently being in the hands of the regime! As far back as 2013, Israeli defence ministry strategist Amos Gilad stressed that while Israel "is prepared to resort to force to prevent advanced Syrian weapons reaching Hezbollah or jihadi rebels", Israel was not interested in attacking Syria's chemical weapons at present because "the good news is that this is under full control (of the Syrian government)."

It is interesting that the first point, that the blows suffered by the Assad regime "forces all members of the axis to focus on another theater that is not Israel," is likewise considered "a net positive for Israel" by Nadav Pollak, a former Israeli intelligence official at Reichman University in Israel. In other words, Iran and Hezbollah being in Syria, fighting for Assad, is no problem for Israel, as long as they are not focused on Israel. This corresponds to the times when Israel's support to the Assad regime against the uprising was something stated openly by Israeli political, military and security chiefs, except for the Iranian factor – yet at times it was even let slip that Israel supported Iranian and Hezbollah actions as long as it was focused on support for Assad.

For example, in 2015, IDF spokesperson Alon Ben-David stated that "The Israeli military intelligence confirms that the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's *ability to protect the Syrian regime has dramatically declined*, making the Israeli military command *more cautious of a sudden fall* of the Syrian regime which will *let battle-hardened jihadist groups* rule near the Israeli border;" as a result, military intelligence services are "working on the preparation of a list of targets that are likely to be struck inside Syria, *after a possible fall of the Assad regime*."

Other prominent spokespeople in the Israeli media include Dr. Yaron Friedman at the University of Haifa, who penned an article in *Maariv* which claimed that HTS "controls internal terrorism over the entire province of Idlib" and "like Hamas," receives the support of Turkey and Qatar. He notes that "the opposition consists mostly of Sunni fanatics from the Salafi Jihadi stream" who "look like Hamas terrorists." He stressed that while "Assad is far from being Israel's friend … he is the old and familiar enemy" under whom "Syria has not waged a war against Israel for more than fifty years," while "Bashar al-Assad has not lifted a finger in favor of Hamas or Hezbollah since the beginning of the war in Gaza." Therefore, "the Islamic opposition that aims to turn Syria into a center of global jihad is a much more dangerous enemy. The option of Syria under the rule of Assad under the auspices of Russia is still the least bad from Israel's point of view."

"The collapse of the regime in Damascus would pose a threat to the whole region, including Israel," according to Yehuda Balanga, at the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at Bar-Ilan University. Nevertheless, Eyal Zisser of Tel Aviv University, while largely agreeing, thinks there are voices now challenging the "the traditional Israeli approach of preferring Assad — the devil we know," with a view of delivering a blow to Iran by getting rid of the Assad regime, but, "for the moment at least, the Israeli leadership is not considering such a possibility."

One of the problems for Israel is the same as the problem for Russia and Iran – if the despot you have relied on for decades to service your varied and even opposing interests can no longer maintain that "stability," but on the contrary, his house collapses like a pack of cards, then continued support would not just be a bad investment, but be utterly pointless.

On possibility apparently discussed is for Israel to invade and establish a "buffer zone" in southern Syria if the rebels take Homs. Apparently the Golan Heights is not enough of a "buffer" for Israel.

What now? Prospects for the revolution

[NOTE: This section below was written on early December 7 after Hama had fallen but before the fall of Homs. Events moved so rapidly that it was already out of date within a couple of hours, as the southern provinces of Daraa and Suweida both fell to their own indigenous revolutions with slightly different flavors to the north – Daraa, the birthplace of the 2011 revolution, led by the Free Syrian Army with little Islamist influence, and in Suweida the revolution is led by the Druze minority – and Homs, another center of the 2011 revolution which the regime's airforce had turned into Dresden, also fell, and then not much later, Damascus itself fell to the southern revolutionaries and the desertion of regime troops and the Assad monarchy disappeared into dust – but nevertheless the

section points towards these outcomes but with a cautious tone]

With events moving rapidly, the rebels have now taken Hama before the article could be released, again the regime simply melting away, with massive scenes of celebratory welcome by the population. Hama was where Hafez Assad slaughtered 40,000 people and bombed the city to suppress another uprising back in 1982, a dress rehearsal for the slaughter of hundreds of thousands and the bombing and destruction of all Syrian cities by the regime airforce during the 2011-2018 round.

Now the rebels are on the road to Homs and may be there before you read this; former opposition fighters have already "launched a string of deadly attacks on regime forces."

Meanwhile, former rebels in the southern province of Daraa have launched a new front called the Houran Free Gathering, which stormed police stations and local intelligence headquarters, disarmed regime checkpoints, seized weapons, and launched attacks on regime troops." As of December 6, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) is in control of the Nassib border crossing with Jordan for the first time since 2018, leading Jordan to close the border. The same day, the FSA fighting groups announced the establishment of a Southern Operations Room for the south of the country.

Daraa was a major sector of the revolution, controlled by the democratic-secular FSA Southern Front, some 35,000 fighters at its height in over 50 brigades, but as Assad's forces rolled in in 2018, many fighting units underwent forced 'reconciliation' with the regime under Russian auspices; many of these have reemerged.

The neighboring Druze province of Suweida was something of a prequel of the new revolution when the people rose against the dictatorship back in August 2023, which at the time also echoed around the country; now again people have taken to the streets and demand the fall of the regime. On November 28, the 'Local Forces in Suweida' issued a statement supporting the "battles to regain the lands in northern Syria against the regime." On December 1, the spiritual leader of the Druze community in Syria, Sheikh Hikmat Al-Hajri, declared that Syrians were "at a historic turning point to end the conflict and stop the killing machine of Syrians and those who caused their displacement and migration over the years," vowing support for the "the right of the owners of the land to return to their lands" mentioning Aleppo, Idlib and parts of Hama." Meanwhile, a Druze militia called the Syrian Brigade Party issued a statement calling on Druze soldiers to defect and return home to Suweida.

In the east, the Arab-led Deir ez-Zour Military Council in the SDF launched the 'Battle of Return' and captured seven villages on the eastern side of the Euphrates from which regime militias had been launching daily attacks on the SDF. According to the SDF, this offensive was in "response to the appeals of local residents amid escalating threats from ISIS, which seeks to exploit the unfolding events in the western part of the country." Now the SDF has taken control of the west side of Deir ez-Zour city from the regime and Iranian forces (it already controlled the east side).

At this stage it appears likely that the regime will collapse, in one of the most decisive and popular revolutions to date. At the same time, there is no certainty about this, since so far the regions taken or threatened are overwhelmingly the traditional base of the revolution. Aaron Y. Zelin, senior fellow at The Washington Institute believes "we will see more hardened lines in the core areas where the regime is strongest," referring to Tartous, Lattakia, Homs, Hama and Damascus.

Of course this statement is already history in relation to Hama, and probably Homs, but there may still be parts of those two provinces where the regime could make a stand; Tartous and Latakia, 'the Alawite coast', is very unlikely to fall to the revolution, as a strong base of the regime but also where

Russia would most likely put its foot down to defend its naval bases and airbases; the ring of Sunni-majority towns ringing south and east Damascus were a major base of the revolution, but with their defeats the populations were expelled to the northwest, while the regime repopulated them with supporters, including many Shia in a sectarian engineering program, so together with a number of Christian towns to the north of Damascus and in Homs, there is potentially a ring of defence of the regime.

If Assad's allies rally to defend these core regions, then a stalemate is possible. Russia is said to be calling in its 'Africa Corp' of troops propping up juntas and exploiting the mineral wealth of northern Africa to defend Assad, the Iraqi regime is allowing militia to cross into Syria to back the regime, and Russia may decide to decisively use its airpower after all. Divisions run deep as a result of Assad's deliberate sectionalization of the conflict in 2012-13, and the resultant rise in sectarian militia among the opposition then; if there really is a remaining 'base' of the regime, it may be a chance for Russia, Turkey, Iran and the West to finally force Assad to negotiate the 'political process' based on UN Res 2254, which calls for a constitutional commission with representatives of all sides to write a new constitution to hold elections; exile-based Syrian opposition leader, Hadi al-Bahra, declared he was ready to start negotiations with Assad on December 4 [postscript: talk about being out of touch with the people he claims to be a leader of!].

Even if that happens, the offensive will hardly have been a waste, because the outcome of negotiated solutions is dependent on the bargaining position of the sides. Needless to say, the opposition will be in a massively stronger bargaining position than before the offensive.

This scenario however may still be too optimistic for regime survival. Even if some regions remain in regime hands, the loss of Homs will cut the Damascus region off from the coast. But in any case the speed of collapse may well indicate that the regime's base even in core areas has disappeared, that no-one is willing to fight for a genocidal and uber-corrupt hereditary monarchy any longer, and the markedly positive attitude towards minorities – supposedly one of Assad's bases – has removed the fear that the acceptance of the dictatorship rested upon. HTS itself is a wild card that is not controlled by Turkiye, and may well reject being pushed into a political process that is now superseded, and regardless of HTS, the revolution itself, combined with the hollowness of the regime, may impose its own solution.

This article originally appeared on Michael Karadjis's website, *Their Anti-imperialism and Ours*.