



The Rebel Attack in Syria: What does it mean for Israel?

December 6 , 2024

Overview¹

- ▶ On November 27, 2024, armed organizations opposing the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, led by the **Islamic-jihadist organization Hayat Tahrir al-Sham**, launched Operation Deterrence of Aggression Operation (Rad' al-Udwan) against Syrian army forces and their allies in northwestern Syria.
- ▶ On November 30, 2024, Turkish-sponsored rebel organizations Operation Dawn of Liberation initiated Operation "Dawn of Liberation" (Fajr al-Hurriya) in the Aleppo region, attacking Syrian regime forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-Arab militia supported by the United States.²
- ▶ The rebels took control of Aleppo and Hama, as well as military bases, airfields and security facilities operating under the sponsorship of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah.
- ▶ Iran and "resistance axis"³ organizations expressed support for the Syrian regime, making diplomatic efforts to calm the situation and deploying forces to Syria. Iran also accused the offensive of being an "Israeli-American conspiracy" whose objective was to weaken the "resistance axis."
- ▶ According to the rebels, they wanted to prevent Syrian regime forces from attacking the opposition enclave in northwestern Syria. They also noted that the "resistance axis" focus on fighting Israel and the withdrawal of Hezbollah forces from Syria to Lebanon were key factors in their considerations for initiating the offensive at this time.
- ▶ **In ITIC assessment, although the rebels currently focus on fighting Assad's regime and its allies, and Islamic-jihadist takeover of advanced weaponry, including fighter jets, could pose a long-term threat to Israel. In addition, the increasing instability in Syria**

¹ Click <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en> to subscribe and receive the ITIC's daily updates as well as its other publications.

² Information about the various rebel organizations can be found at the end of the report.

³ Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, the Palestinian organizations, the Shi'ite Houthis in Yemen and the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq.

could trigger a new wave of displaced persons who might also move toward Israel's border. However, the rebels' offensive also poses a threat to Iran and the "resistance axis," which have used Syria as a route for transferring weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon and a location from which to attack Israel. The focus of Iran and the militias on fighting the rebels, who have also taken control of strategically important "resistance axis" sites, may hinder their ability to assist Hezbollah in the reconstruction process after the fighting against Israel.

Syrian Rebels Attack the Regime

Rebel organization attacks

► On November 27, 2024, several organizations opposing the Syrian regime, led by the Islamic-jihadist organization **Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Headquarters for the Liberation of al-Sham)**,⁴ launched Operation Deterrence of Aggression against Syrian army forces and their allies in northwestern Syria:

► The rebels advanced from the Idlib region, where they had been operating under Turkish sponsorship, toward Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city. Exploiting the retreat of Syrian regime forces, who were caught off guard, the rebels seized dozens of villages and military and security compounds, cutting off the Aleppo-Damascus road, a main thoroughfare. On November 30, 2024, the rebels completed their takeover of Aleppo, which had been under regime control since December 2016.

► Rebel forces then advanced toward the city of Hama. Syrian regime forces established defensive lines in Hama's rural areas and were aided by Russian fighter jets to slow the rebels' advance toward the city. On December 4, 2024, reports indicated that Syrian army forces had withdrawn from Hama and rebel forces had taken control of the city.

⁴ Al-Sham ("Greater Syria") is a historical region encompassing the territories that now comprise Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel.

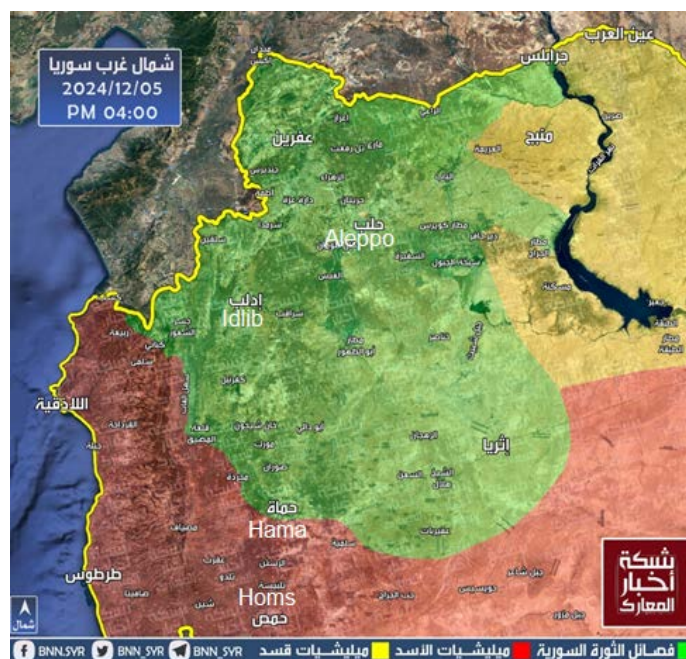


Right: Rebels at the Aleppo fortress after liberating the city (Inab Baladi, December 1, 2024).

Left: A rebel APC enters Hamas-affiliated, December 5, 2024

► On November 30, 2024, while Operation Deterrence of Aggression was being carried out, Turkish-sponsored rebel organizations, led by the Syrian National Army (SNA), launched the Operation Dawn of Liberation targeting Syrian regime forces, loyalist militias and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-Arab militia supported by the United States. Abd al-Rahman Mustafa, the prime minister of the Syrian National Coalition, an umbrella organization for the opposition,⁵ stated that the goal was to cut off the SDF supply lines and create a corridor from al-Sheikh Najjar, northeast of Aleppo, to the towns of Ayn Issa, Tal Rifaat, and Manbij. According to reports, on December 1, 2024, Syrian National Army forces captured Tal Rifaat, a strategic point overlooking the Euphrates River.

⁵ Founded in 2012, it is recognized by many countries as the official representative of the Syrian opposition. The coalition consists of opposition organizations representing various sectarian groups in Syria and works toward establishing a democratic and free Syria in place of the Assad regime.



Map of the rebels' advance: green, territory occupied by the rebels; red, territory controlled by the Syrian regime; yellow, territory occupied by the Kurdish forces (Shabakat Akhbar al-Ma'arik, December 5, 2024)

Rebels take control of weapons

►During the advances in Operation Deterrence of Aggression and Operation Dawn of Liberation, rebel organizations took control of Syrian army headquarters, a large quantities of weapons, Aleppo International Airport, and four Syrian Air Force airfields (al-Arabiya, December 5, 2024; Sky News Arabia, December 3, 2024):

- ◆ Kuweires Military Airbase: Situated in the eastern rural area of Aleppo, it has a main runway and ten hangars. The rebels seized several fighter jets and a significant quantity of weapons, including a Russian-made Pantsir aerial defense system.
- ◆ Menagh Military Airbase: Situated near the city of Azaz in the northern rural area of Aleppo, it is a helicopter base and has two runways, one of which is 1.2 kilometers long.
- ◆ Abu al-Duhur Military Airbase: The second-largest airbase in northern Syria, situated between the Aleppo, Hama and Idlib provinces, it occupies an area of 16 square kilometers.
- ◆ Al-Nayrab Military Airbase: Situated near Aleppo International Airport, it is the base for fighter jets and was used by the Syrian army and pro-Iranian militias for weapon shipments arriving from Iran. Several fighter jets remain at the site.



Rebels at the Kuweires airport stand next to a MIG (al-Jazeera, December 1, 2024)

- ◆ The rebels also seized the town of al-Safira and the Jabal Azan base in the southern rural area of Aleppo. Security facilities in the area were previously targeted by Israeli strikes and were used by IRGC, Hezbollah and other pro-Iranian militias, including the Iraqi al-Nujaba Movement, for developing and storing weapons (al-Jazeera, December 2, 2024).
- ◆ According to reports, on December 5, 2024, the rebels took control of the Russian Podlet-K1 radar system at the headquarters of the Syrian army's 25th Special Forces Division in the Hama area. It is an advanced radar system which is a crucial component of the S-300 and S-400 aerial defense systems, capable of detecting targets at a range of 10 to 30 kilometers and an altitude of up to 10 kilometers (Defence Blog, December 2024).



Russian radar installation which fell into rebel hands (Nidaa Post X account, December 5, 2024)

Iranian and "resistance axis" involvement

► Iran was caught off guard by the rebel offensive in Syria, during which Yunrat Phur-Hashemi (Hajj Hashem), a senior officer in the IRGC in Syria, was killed, and the Iranian consulate in Aleppo was attacked. Iranian officials claimed the events in Syria were the result of an "American-Zionist conspiracy" whose objective was allegedly to weaken the regional pro-

Iranian axis. Tehran focused on diplomatic efforts to calm the situation in Syria and expressed support for the Syrian regime while preparing for active military involvement. According to reports, Javad Ghaffari (Seyyed Javad), head of the IRGC's Special Operations Department (Division 4000) and former commander of the Syria Corps in the Qods Force until 2021, had recently returned to Syria (Iran International, December 3, 2024).⁶

► Pro-Iranian militias in Iraq declared their readiness to support the Syrian regime but claimed that no decision had yet been made regarding sending additional forces to Syria. However, according to reports militia forces had already crossed the border into Syria near Albukamal and begun moving toward Aleppo and Hama (OALD2 X account, December 2, 2024; al-Amid Telegram channel, December 3, 2024).

► There were also reports of the extensive deployment of pro-Iranian militia operatives in Damascus, out of concern that the rebels might continue their advance toward the city. A "source close" to the pro-Iranian militias stated that after the Syrian rebels announced that Shi'ite holy sites would be targeted, it was decided to deploy significant forces in the Damascus area, particularly around al-Sayyidah Zaynab, a key compound for pro-Iranian militias (Baghdad Today, March 1, 2024).

► On December 5, 2024, Na'im Qassem, Hezbollah deputy secretary general, accused the rebels of operating under the American and Israeli sponsorship. He said that the organization would stand with the Syrian regime to thwart the "aggression" (al-Manar, December 5, 2024).

► "Sources in Hezbollah and the Iraqi militias" reported that Iran was working to recruit fighters in the region to assist the Syrian regime forces. It was also reported that Iran had already deployed Hezbollah operatives in Syria, primarily near the Lebanese border, close to Hama and Homs, as well as militia operatives, most of whom were stationed in eastern Syria. According to the report, the operatives were currently in defensive positions but were prepared to act if orders change (The Washington Post, December 4, 2024).

► Abu Mohammad al-Julani, the leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, sent a video message to Mohammad Shia al-Sudani, Iraq's prime minister, warning him not to intervene in the conflict in Syria or allow the Popular Mobilization, the umbrella organization for pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, to cross the border. He claimed that they had no intention of expanding the conflict into Iraqi territory (al-Arabiya, December 5, 2024).

⁶ For further information, see the December 2024 ITIC report: "[Spotlight on Iran and the Shiite Axis November 27 – December 4, 2024](#)".

Why Did the Rebels Attack?

► Operation Deterrence of Aggression marks the largest military offensive by Syrian opposition organizations in four years. In 2020, following fighting between regime forces supported by Hezbollah and Iran, and opposition forces, the presidents of Russia and Turkey agreed to a ceasefire. According to the agreement, based on the Astana Process Accords, opposition organizations remained in an enclave in northwestern Syria, mainly in the Idlib province, under Turkish sponsorship, and buffer zones were established between them and regime forces.⁷

► Hassan Abd al-Ghani, spokesperson for the al-Fatah al-Mubin operations room, which coordinates the rebels' campaign, stated that the objectives include thwarting the Syrian regime's plans through a preemptive attack against its militia forces, protecting civilians from the threat posed by regime forces, securing liberated areas, returning displaced persons to their homes, reducing the regime's and militias' influence in opposition-controlled areas of northwestern Syria, and limiting their attacks on these regions (Al Jazeera, November 27, 2024). Several factors motivated the rebels to launch the current offensive:

- ◆ **Increased attacks by the Syrian regime on the rebel-controlled enclave:** Reports indicated that nearly 400 people had been killed in clashes between the regime and rebel forces in the outskirts of Aleppo since the beginning of 2024. On November 26, 2024, 16 civilians, including two children, were reported killed in an artillery strike on the city of Ariha in Idlib (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, November 26, 2024).

- ◆ **The weakness of Hezbollah and the "resistance axis":** Hezbollah and the pro-Iranian Iraqi militias, which played a key role in supporting the Syrian regime against the rebels, had been redeployed in Syria since October 2023 because of their involvement in fighting against Israel, particularly following the escalation in Lebanon in September 2024. Rebel sources confirmed that Hezbollah's withdrawal from northwestern Syria and the redeployment of militias from western and southern Aleppo toward the Iraqi border, the Syrian Golan Heights and the Lebanese border were the main considerations in launching the operation (al-Jazeera, December 2, 2024). Hari al-Bahra, president of

⁷ The Astana Process, led by Russia, Turkey and Iran, was launched in January 2017 in an attempt to end the Syrian Civil War, and serves as a forum to prevent the crisis from escalating. During the talks, it was agreed in 2017 to establish four "de-escalation zones." Idlib and parts of the neighboring provinces in northern Syria; the rural area east of Damascus; the area between Hama and Homs; and the region near the borders with Israel and Jordan.

the Syrian National Coalition, noted that one reason for the rebels' rapid success was that Hezbollah and the pro-Iranian militias were involved in the confrontation with Israel. He added that preparations for the operation had begun a year earlier but were delayed because of the fighting in Gaza and Lebanon, with the ceasefire in Lebanon providing the green light for the operation (Reuters, December 2, 2024).

◆ **Reduction of Russian forces in Syria:** Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine forced it to redirect resources away from the forces stationed in Syria, which had supported the regime against the rebels until 2020. Rebel sources reported that Russia kept fewer than ten aircraft at the Hmeimim Air Base in western Syria, with only six or seven operational because of a lack of spare parts (al-Jazeera, December 2, 2024).

► An "official Turkish source" claimed that Turkey had not authorized or supported the rebel offensive in northwestern Syria (Reuters, December 2, 2024). However, it is believed that Turkey is exploiting the two rebel operations to push the Syrian Democratic Forces away from the border regions in northern Syria (Turkey regards the militia as the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), designated as a terrorist organization) and reduce pressure from Syrian displaced persons in the Idlib enclave and inside Syria to allow them to return to their homes (The New Arab, December 4, 2024). According to reports, after the rebels took control of Tal Rifaat, many displaced persons returned to the town (Hurriyet, December 4, 2024).

Rebel Organizations Participating in the Attack

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (the Headquarters for the Liberation of al-Sham)

► The organization leading the rebel coalition in Operation Deterrence of Aggression is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (the Headquarters for the Liberation of al-Sham), headed by Abu Mohammad al-Julani (Ahmed al-Shara). He was a member of the Islamic State in Iraq, the precursor of ISIS, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In 2011, following the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, he was dispatched to establish a branch of the organization in Syria. In January 2012, he founded Jabhat al-Nusra (the Support Front). After disputes with al-Baghdadi, he left ISIS and transformed the Jabhat al-Nusra into al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate.

►In 2016, following American airstrikes on Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Julani announced a split from al-Qaeda and the establishment of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (the Front for the Liberation of the Levant). In January 2017, he merged his organization with several other Islamist factions, forming Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. The organization has also been involved in building administrative and civilian facilities in the Idlib province but has faced allegations of human rights abuses (The New York Times, December 2, 2024). After Hama was occupied on December 5, 2024, he released a statement in which for the first time, he identified himself by his real name, Ahmed al-Sharaa (al-Arabiya, December 5, 2024).



**Al-Julani in Aleppo after taking over the city
(Military Operations Administration X account, Central Elections Committee 4, 2024)**

►In recent years, in addition to its civilian activities, the organization has also focused on improving its military capabilities. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham operates a military academy managed by Syrian army defectors and has implemented reforms in its military structure, including the establishment of a unified command and combat units. It has also initiated independent weapons development, including UAVs, guided missiles and artillery shells, using 3D printers and other open technologies, and also weapons captured in battles against Syrian forces and their allies (Financial Times, December 5, 2024). One of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's most important military units is al-Asa'ib al-Hamra' (The Red Headbands), which leads the front-line battles against Syrian regime forces. The unit, about which influence was first

published in 2018, has undergone training for operations behind enemy lines and specializes in "complex and high-risk missions" (al-Arabiya, December 5, 2024).



Al-Asa'ib al-Hamra' fighters (Katibat Yassin X account, December 4, 2024)

Ahrar al-Sham (Movement of the Free of the Levant)

►The organization was established in 2011 when four Islamic groups opposing the Assad regime merged. Its objective was to establish an Islamic state in Syria (Monte Carlo International, December 2, 2024).

Al-Jabha al-Wataniya lil-Tahrir (National Liberation Front)

►The front was formed in 2018 when 11 factions of the Free Syrian Army united. According to reports, it has approximately 30,000 members based in the Idlib province (Monte Carlo International, December 2, 2024).

Jaish al-Izza (Army of Glory)

►The organization was founded by Jamil al-Saleh, a defector from the Syrian army, and is based in the northern rural area of Hama (Monte Carlo International, December 2, 2024).

Syrian National Army

►A coalition composed of nearly 30 Turkey-sponsored armed factions considered the continuation of the Free Syrian Army, the official force of the Syrian opposition forces after the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War. The Syrian National Army was previously involved in fighting ISIS and in past Turkish military operations against Kurdish SDF forces in the Turkish-Syrian border area (Anadolu Agency, October 9, 2019).