

“Israel is expanding occupied territories at the expense of Syrian lands.” Interview with Andrey Ontikov

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On December 9, Egypt accused Israel of illegally seizing a buffer zone in Syria. The area extends from the Golan Heights almost to the outskirts of Damascus. Israel troops and weaponry are now within hiking distance of the capital of Syria.

Syria is now under the administration of **Hayat Tahrir al-Sham**, an armed opposition group from Idlib, **which had been supported prior to 2017 by a covert CIA program. President Trump cut the funding in 2017, but Turkish President Erdogan continued to support the group.**

In the chaos after the fall of the Assad regime, Israel wasted no time to take advantage of the security lapse and invaded Syria from the Occupied Golan Heights towards Damascus.

Israeli Prime Minister, **Benjamin Netanyahu**, said this was a temporary measure set up for defense of the Israeli border.

Egypt and the other Arab League member states are nervously watching as Israel takes advantage of the weakness and chaos in Syria to carry out yet another land grab.

Last summer, the International Court of Justice ruled that Israel’s occupation of Palestine is in violation of international law. Now, Israel has added more occupied land in Syria to its long list of stolen territories.

The Israeli Defense Forces have also carried out airstrikes on December 9 across Syria, taking out air defense systems, missiles and military infrastructure. Currently, there is no national army existing in Syria. All facilities lay vacant as soldiers and officers fled following and during the fall of the Assad regime on December 8.

The Golan Heights were captured by Israel from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War. The United Nations recognizes the Golan as an Israeli occupied land which should be returned to Syria in a peace agreement between the two countries.

On March 25, 2019 **President Donald Trump** [gave away the Golan to Israel](#), and officially recognized Israeli sovereignty. Netanyahu hailed the move by Trump as historic.

The United Nations **Secretary-General Antonio Guterres** said the move was not recognized internationally.

Israel invaded Gaza following the October 7, 2023 attack by Hamas, and Israeli cabinet ministers have called for annexing Gaza and the Occupied West Bank. On October 1, 2024 Israel invaded the south of Lebanon.

In the absence of a legitimate government in Syria, and with Trump taking office next month, Israel may try to annex this new land grab in Syria.

Steven Sahiounie at MidEastDiscourse reached out to Andrey Ontikov, a Special Correspondent at Izvestia daily newspaper, in Moscow and a political commentator specializing in the Middle East.

Steven Sahiounie (SS): Recently, Aleppo fell into the hands of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and later Hama and Damascus fell. In your opinion, how could a militia group be so powerful to oust the Syrian Arab Army?

Andrey Ontikov (AO): It is obvious, that in recent years the Syrian command has missed the opportunity to train the army, equip it with the necessary weapons, and build defensive structures. At the same time, the armed opposition was able to obtain weapons. In addition, Syrian refugees in Turkey, who were ready to fight for little money and were motivated by their negative attitude towards the authorities in Damascus, probably became a good base for replenishing its ranks.

SS: Reports in the media claimed that there were Ukrainian drone specialists in Idlib who were assisting the HTS prior to their attack on Aleppo. In your point of view, why is Ukraine involved in Syria?

AO: It seems to me that if Ukraine sees an opportunity to somehow complicate life for Russia in one or another part of the world, it does so. Syria is the only country in a series of countries where the presence of Ukrainian troops has been recorded. There have also been reports of their activity from Sudan and Mali. So Kyiv's actions are a direct reflection of the current conflict with Moscow.

SS: In 2015, Russia came into Syria and pushed back the militias which saved the coast of Syria. In your opinion, could Russia do something to save Syria before the fall of Damascus?

AO: Russia tried to help the Syrian army. But it couldn't do its job for it. The lack of combat-ready ground forces is the main reason for the failure. Aviation can only provide cover, but it will not do all the work for the soldiers on the ground.

SS: Turkey's President Erdoğan has been supporting these opposition militias for 15 years. In your opinion, what does President Erdoğan want from supporting these groups?

AO: Erdogan is seeking to expand his influence in Syria. It is no secret that many areas of Syria country are perceived in Turkey as part of the former Ottoman Empire. Accordingly, Ankara is trying to strengthen its position. And it will probably try to strengthen its foothold to prevent the creation of an independent Kurdish state.

SS: The Arab League and the Arab countries, even Saudi Arabia and the UAE, announced their support for Syria and President Assad before he left. In your opinion, what made the Arab countries change their minds and support the Syrian government?

AO: Many Arab countries, in my opinion, have learned from the bitter experience of the so-called Arab Spring. They understand perfectly well that the violent overthrow of power often leads to the destabilization of the country and the surrounding region. It is enough to look at Libya, which has not been able to emerge from the crisis since 2011. As for Syria, now the situation there may well follow the Libyan scenario. At the very least, we see that Israel is already expanding the zone of occupied territories at the expense of Syrian lands. This is the first, but probably not the only negative result of current events.

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