

The Syrian Civil War: New Phases, Old Lies

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A new bloody phase has opened up in Syria, as if it was ever possible to contemplate another one in that tormented land. Silly terms such as “moderate” are being paired with “rebels”, a coupling that can also draw scorn.

What counts as news reporting on the subject in the Western press stable adopts a threadbare approach. We read or hear almost nothing about the dominant backers in this latest round of bloodletting.

“With little warning last Wednesday, a coalition of Syrian rebels launched a rapid assault that soon seized Aleppo as well as towns in the nearby Idlib and Hama provinces,” [reported](#) NBC News, drawing its material from the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

We are told about the advances of one organisation in particular: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an outgrowth of Jabhat al-Nusra, a former al-Qaeda affiliate. While the urgent reporting stressed the suddenness of it all, HTS has been playing in the jihadi playground since 2017, suggesting that it is far from a neophyte organisation keen to get in on the kill.

From Al Jazeera, [we get pulpier detail](#). HTS is the biggest group in what is dubbed Operation Deterrence of Aggression. HTS itself comprises Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, Liwa al-Haqq, Jabhat Ansar al-Din and Jaysh al-Sunna. That umbrella group is drawn from the Fateh al-Mubin operations centre, which is responsible for overseeing the broader activities of the armed opposition in northwestern Syria under the control of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG). It is through the offices of SSG that HTS delivers essential goods while running food and welfare programs. Through that governance wing, [civil documentation](#) for some 3 million civilians, two-thirds of whom are internally displaced people, has been issued.

The group, headed by **Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani**, himself an al-Qaeda recruit from 2003, then of Jabhat al-Nusra, has done much since its leader fell out with Islamic State and al-Qaeda. For one, HTS has a series of goals. It purports to be an indigenous movement keen on eliminating the Assad regime, establishing Islamic rule and expelling all Iranian militias from Syrian soil. But megalomania among zealots will always out, and al-Jawlani has shown himself a convert to an even broader cause, [evidenced by this remark](#):

“with this spirit... we will not only reach Damascus, but, Allah permitting, Jerusalem will be awaiting our arrival”.

All of these measures conform to the same Jihadi fundamentalism that would draw funding from any Western intelligence service, provided they are fighting the appropriate villain of the moment. We should also expect routine beheadings, frequent atrocities and indulgent

pillaging. But no, the cognoscenti would have you believe otherwise. We are dealing, supposedly, with a different beast, calmer, wiser, and cashed-up.

For one thing, HTS is said to be largely self-sufficient, [exercising a monopoly](#) through its control of the al-Sham Bank and the oil sector through the Watad Company. It has also, in [the words](#) of Robin Yassin-Kassab, become a “greatly moderated and better organised reincarnation of Jabhat al-Nusra.” This could hardly cause cheer, but Yassin-Kassab at least admits that the group remains “an authoritarian Islamist militia” though not in the eschatological fanatical mould of its forebears. “It has a much more positive policy towards sectarian and ethnic minorities than ISIS.” Fewer beheadings, perhaps.

A fascinating omission in much commentary on these advances is Turkey’s outsized role. Turkey has been the stalking figure of much of the rebel resistance against the Assad regime, certainly over the last few years. Of late, it has tried, without much purchase, to normalise ties with Assad. In truth, such efforts stretch as far back as late 2022. The topics of concern for Turkey’s **President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan** are few: dealing with the Kurdish resistance fighters he sorely wishes to liquidate as alleged extensions of the PKK, and the Syrian refugee problem. The Syrian leader has made any rapprochement between the two states contingent on the withdrawal of Turkish forces from Syria.

With Damascus proving icily dismissive, Ankara got irate. Indeed, there is even a suggestion, if one is to believe the [assessment](#) by Ömer Özkizilcik of the Atlantic Council, that Turkey was instrumental in initially preventing the rebels from attacking as far back as seven weeks ago.

Much in the latest spray of analysis, along with unfolding events, will require much revisiting and revision. There is the issue of lingering Turkish influence, and whether Erdoğan’s words will mean much to the charges of HTS as they fatten themselves on the spoils of victory. There is the behaviour of HTS, which is unlikely to remain restrained in a warring environment that seems to treat atrocities as mother’s milk. (Al-Jawlani has not shown himself to be above the targeting and massacring of civilians.) The retaliation from the Syrian government and Russian forces not otherwise deployed against Ukraine also promises to be pitilessly brutal.

Then there are the untold consequences of a Syria free of Assad, a fate longed for by the coarsened righteous in Western circles and emboldened al-Jawlani. This is certainly not off the books, given that both Iran and Russia are preoccupied, respectively, with Israel and Ukraine.

Were the regime, bloodthirsty as it is, to collapse, yet another cataclysmic tide of holy book vengeance is bound to ripple through the region. Never mind: the babble about God and theocracy will be happily supplemented by covert operations and arms sales, all overseen by a wickedly smiling Mammon.

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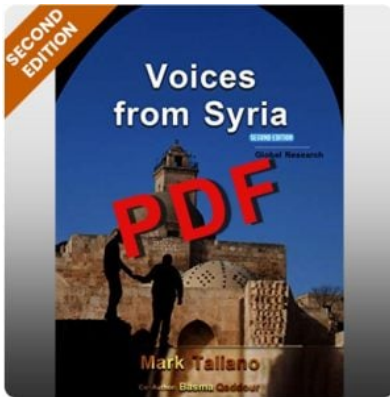
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Featured image: Location of Syria. Source: CIA World Factbook.

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