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A familiar tragedy

The recent rebel offensive in Aleppo has shattered the Assad regime's façade of stability. What does this mean for the future of the conflict?

In late November, Aleppo – a symbol of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's reclaimed dominance – witnessed a dramatic insurgent offensive that shattered the regime's façade of stability. Under the banner of 'Deterrence of Aggression', the fighting group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) launched a surprise operation that rapidly overturned years of regime control in western Aleppo and led to the recapture of the provincial capital itself on 30 November. At the same time, Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) factions seized the opportunity to launch their 'Dawn of Freedom' campaign targeting Kurdish-held areas in northern and eastern Aleppo. The twin offensives upended regional stability, weakening Assad's forces and escalating tensions across the already fragile landscape.

The resurgence of hostilities after almost a decade of cautious calm has exposed fundamental weaknesses in the Assad regime, highlighting its dependence on external support and inability to secure stability independently. Opposition factions have demonstrated renewed strength, forcing regional and international stakeholders to reconsider their strategies. Despite Assad's forces regrouping around Hama – which HTS reportedly captured on 5 December – the offensive underscores the regime's precarious hold on power. For Europe's proponents of normalising relations with Assad, this serves as a stark warning: normalisation is a strategic mistake that will neither secure stability nor curb migration.

A crack in Assad's façade

Ever since the regime's recapture of Aleppo and other territories in 2016, it had been tailoring a well-crafted narrative: Assad has won, and Syria is safe and stable! The current events, however, have shattered this illusion. The little to no resistance that Assad forces demonstrated in the first shockwave unveiled some serious structural flaws. HTS's swift gains

exposed the regime's military weaknesses, exacerbated by its reliance on external actors such as Iran and Russia. The Syrian military, ill-equipped and overstretched, failed to respond effectively, leaving key areas vulnerable. This failure was compounded by a security vacuum created by Hezbollah's redeployment — although likely only partial. As Assad's forces scramble to reorganise, any counter-offensive is expected to depend heavily on increased assistance from Tehran and Moscow — assistance that comes at a high price.

Russia's response, while critical, has been restrained. Russian air strikes provided some relief to Assad's struggling forces, but Moscow's call for the regime to 'swiftly restore constitutional order' signals limited enthusiasm for greater commitment. This could reflect a broader strategic recalibration by Moscow, prioritising its resources in Ukraine. Alternatively, Russia could exploit Assad's vulnerable position to push its Assad-Erdogan agenda, which the Syrian leader has stubbornly resisted in recent months.

Iran is expected to step up its involvement, potentially deploying forces – primarily auxiliary militias – to bolster Assad's positions. Entrenched in Tehran's orbit, this reliance limits Assad's autonomy and eliminates the 'calculated silence' he displayed during the Israel-Hezbollah war. Trapped between Iran's growing influence and potential Israeli retaliation, Assad's room for manoeuvre is shrinking. Israel, committed to curbing Iranian influence in Syria, may exploit this instability but risks pushing Assad further into Iran's embrace, complicating US and UAE efforts to pivot Assad away from Tehran. However, Iran's preoccupations and Hezbollah's diminished interest might constrain their support.

The opposition: reunification or renewed fragmentation?

Operation 'Deterrence of Aggression' was surely neither spontaneous nor haphazard. The coordinated ground offensive, combined with advanced technologies such as drones, indicates long and careful planning. Moreover, the operation's stated aim of deterring further regime hostilities followed a month of intensified Russian air strikes on various locations in Idleb after rumours of a possible military operation had been widely circulated.

On the one hand, the Aleppo offensive reinvigorated the Syrian opposition and demonstrated its ability to challenge the regime — a capacity that had been thought to be dormant since 2016. HTS's operation likely served multiple objectives: securing a stronger position in

the event of Turkish negotiations with the regime, addressing internal civilian discontent, and freeing up additional territory and resources to accommodate the needs of the displaced population it hosts in Idleb. Capitalising on regional instability presented a unique chance to break a protracted stalemate. These tactical successes have restored the opposition's relevance, granting them greater leverage with all stakeholders — leverage that could shape the forthcoming talks that are likely to follow after the storm has passed.

For the international community – especially Europe – the lesson is clear: stability in Syria cannot be built on the shaky foundation of normalisation with Assad.

On the other hand, Operation 'Dawn of Freedom' reveals a divergence of objectives that serves Turkey's independent agenda. Ankara seized the opportunity presented by the chaos in Aleppo to advance its long-standing objectives. Through Operation 'Dawn of Freedom', Turkey has achieved significant gains in Tel Rifat, further pushing back Kurdish forces and solidifying its desired buffer zone. Turkey's tactical alignment with opposition factions reflects Ankara's goal of gaining leverage over both the Kurds and Assad, whom it seeks to bring to the negotiating table. However, the growing dominance of HTS could pose long-term risks to Ankara's interests.

While the opposition appears united, it actually remains deeply fragmented — a vulnerability that could undermine recent gains. The soon-to-be-conflicting agendas of HTS and Turkish-backed factions complicate their ability to sustain their advances in the medium term, especially when conflicts over management and resources are likely to arise. Moreover, HTS's jihadist identity and its designation as a terrorist organisation by several Western powers further isolate it from potential international recognition and support. Without unity and a coherent strategy, the opposition risks squandering the momentum gained in Aleppo, leaving the ball in Turkey's court again to re-orchestrate the scene to its liking. However, the fluidity of events leaves room for unexpected developments.

High stakes for Syria's future

Donald Trump's return to the presidency brings significant uncertainty to US policy in Syria. The disengagement of his previous administration, notably the 2019 withdrawal of US troops, reflects a pattern that could reshape the dynamics of the region. This shift is underscored by the appointment of Tulsi Gabbard, known for her anti-interventionist stance

and support for re-engagement with Assad, as Director of National Intelligence, signalling a possible pivot towards a more conciliatory approach to the Syrian regime. Such changes could marginalise opposition forces and undermine the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), leaving it vulnerable to Turkish advances and regional instability. Moreover, reduced US involvement could exacerbate threats such as the resurgence of ISIS, further destabilising northern Syria.

For the international community – especially Europe – the lesson is clear: stability in Syria cannot be built on the shaky foundation of normalisation with Assad. The Aleppo offensive underscores the inherent fragility of his regime and the ongoing volatility of the Syrian conflict. Achieving a sustainable resolution requires moving beyond short-term fixes and superficial engagement. It requires a principled, long-term strategy that tackles the root causes of instability and rectifies the failures of a flawed approach to managing Syria's so-called frozen conflict.

The EU's 'Three No's' policy – no normalisation, no reconstruction and no sanctions relief – remains a crucial safeguard against these risks. But Europe needs to take a more proactive stance. In light of the Aleppo offensive, the EU should increase support to moderate opposition forces, strengthen accountability measures to deter war crimes and prioritise humanitarian assistance to address the dire conditions of displaced populations. A comprehensive, unwavering approach is essential if Europe is to play a meaningful role in fostering Syria's path to lasting stability.



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