

SYRIA IN 2024: RETURN TO THE REGIONAL FOCUS

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17 JANUARY 2024



EXPERT BRIEF
REGIONAL POLITICS

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Abstract: Syria has been off the regional radar except once mentioned within the scope of the Gaza crisis. This situation was unsurprising, as the country has undergone a relatively calm period since early 2020, crystallizing in the fact that the boundaries of the zones of influence have not changed since then. Different sides of the Syrian conflict, ranging from HTS to the PYD, consolidated their grip in their respective zones of influence over the past years. Nevertheless, as the Gaza crisis drags on, Syria is likely to come to the fore due to multiple factors that can be summarized as follows:

- Iranian Backed Militias' Attacks on the US Forces in Syria
- Drug Smuggling from Southern Syria into Jordan
- Increasing Regime Bombardment on Idlib
- World Food Program's Decision to End Help to Syria and Ailing Syrian Economy
- Developments in Northeast Syria and Turkey's Reaction

Introduction¹:

More than three months into the October 7th attack on Israel, Tel Aviv has not reached its stated goal of eliminating Hamas and releasing all the hostages in Gaza thus far. Yet, Israel's deliberate, disproportionate, and vicious attacks against Gazan civilians, which did not discriminate between civilians and combatants, have created a humanitarian disaster in the tiny Gaza Strip. As of January 11th, at least 23,469² people, among them 8000³ children, were brutally murdered, and 59,604 were wounded in the Israeli attacks. Thousands of people are still under the rubble, meaning the death toll will increase dramatically once the dust settles in the Strip.

Due to this grim reality and the fact that Gaza is undergoing a catastrophe in every possible sense, it has naturally occupied the agenda of the international media for a long time. However, as has been experienced in many similar other humanitarian tragedies, it is beyond doubt that as the war in Gaza drags on, the tragedy is likely to face the threat of being normalized in the media by not making headlines every day, unlike in the initial heated days of the crisis. The fact that Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which corresponds to a global event just like the September 11 attacks, has been off the agenda of the international media lately is a stark reminder of this situation.

Syria in Focus: Possibility of a Regional War

When asked whether the Gaza crisis would trigger a regional war in the Middle East after October 7th, one of the first countries that came to mind was Syria. Syria's long-standing alliance with Iran, the intense presence of Iranian-backed militias in Syria, and possible attacks from Syria on the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights had all turned eyes towards this

country. Yet, despite the expectations, Syria has so far tried to keep itself away from the fallout of the Gaza crisis as much as possible. Since Operation Spring Shield was conducted by Turkey against the Syrian regime and its non-state allies in early 2020, Syria, which is de facto divided into four zones of influence among different actors, has undergone a relatively calm period. This has been a crystal-clear picture, as boundaries of the zones of influence in the country have not changed since then. Different sides of the Syrian conflict, ranging from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to the PKK's Syrian offshoot Democratic Union Party (PYD), consolidated their power in their respective zones of influence during these years at a time when violence largely subsided in the country. Nevertheless, despite this partial calmness, the possibility of Syria, which has not been in the spotlight for a long time except within the context of the Gaza crisis, to enter the regional radar in the coming period increases. Various indicators that cause this situation are as follows:

Attacks by Iranian-Backed Militias on US and Israeli Targets

Although Iran is not directly involved in the Gaza crisis, it has engaged in the war through its proxy forces in the region. From Iraq to Lebanon, from Yemen to Syria, Iran's non-state proxies are engaged in a 'controlled' fight against Israel for the time being. In this regard, Iran-backed militias have conducted many attacks⁴ on the US troops stationed in Syria since the outbreak of the Gaza crisis. Due to the unreserved support given by the USA in particular and the West in general to Israel in the Gaza crisis, Iranian-backed militias have resorted to this method in order to put pressure on Washington for a ceasefire in Gaza. Up until now, the US has provided Israel with a blank check in the Gaza War and did not put significant pressure on Tel Aviv for a ceasefire.

In addition, small-scale attacks were carried out from Syria on both the Golan Heights⁵ and the Israeli city of Eilat.⁶ Although these attacks forced Israel to respond to Iran-backed militias in different regions, they could not force Tel Aviv to agree to a ceasefire in the Gaza crisis. Israel responded to these attacks by striking Damascus⁷ and Aleppo⁸ airports in Syria. A more significant development occurred in the last days of December. Brigadier General Razi Mousavi, a member of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, was killed⁹ in an attack by Israel in Damascus. The fact that Mousavi is presented as Iran's top commander in Syria shows the importance of the attack, and Iran was quick to vow to take revenge¹⁰ against Israel for the killing of Mousavi. Following this development, the deputy chief of Hamas, Saleh al-Arouri, was killed¹¹ in Beirut in an attack conducted by Israel. This attack was significant as it marked the first Israeli attack on Beirut since 2006. It was followed by a US strike, leading to the death of an Al Hashd Al-Shaabi commander¹² in Iraq. Given this interconnected nature of the militias, it seems that the attacks on Tehran-backed forces will increase. This is the first indication that tension will likely rise in Syria in 2024.

Jordan's Fight Against Drug Smugglers in Syria

The second indicator that may cause tensions to rise in Syria is Jordan's fight against Syrian drug smugglers. Syria's southern neighbor, Jordan, has been one of the worst affected countries by the Syrian crisis that started in line with the eruption of the Arab Spring. The country hosts hundreds of thousands¹³ of Syrian refugees, for example. Amman, one of the first capitals to break ties with Syria after 2011, has normalized its relations with the Damascus regime in recent years. More precisely, Jordan not only normalized its relations with Syria but also encouraged¹⁴ other countries to normalize with the regime through different diplomatic maneuvers.

Several reasons were behind the Amman administration's desire to normalize its relations with Damascus. Two critical factors were sending Syrian refugees back to their countries and improving the ailing Jordanian economy.¹⁵ On top of this, stopping the drug flow from Syria to Jordan was a primary objective. However, Jordan could not achieve serious success in any of these objectives. What is worse, Jordan's experience concerning preventing the drug was nothing but a sheer tragedy and disappointment. Drug smugglers affiliated with the Lebanese Hezbollah positioned in Syria, along with the Assad regime, have constantly renewed their methods to smuggle Captagon (a type of drug they produce) into Jordan. Finally, they tried to smuggle drugs into Jordan through drug-laden¹⁶ drones. Due to this situation, from time to time, even clashes took place between the Jordanian army and smugglers. Some drug dealers were killed¹⁷ by the Jordanian army during the clashes. Starting from the second week of December 2023, severe clashes that lasted for hours between dealers who were trying to smuggle weapons and drugs from Syria into Jordan and the Jordanian army took place. The situation reached its climax when Jordan conducted air strikes against the mentioned smugglers located in southern Syria. This bombardment was not the first of its kind. In May 2023, the Jordanian army carried out air strikes against the smugglers in Southern Syria.

Following the recent events, some smugglers were killed by the Jordanian army, and nine drug dealers were captured alive. Some members of the Jordanian military were also injured¹⁸ in the clashes in question. According to Jordanian authorities, more than 5 million¹⁹ Captagon pills were seized as a result of these incidents. In addition to drugs, Jordanian authorities seized weapons such as automatic weapons and anti-tank rockets. Another noteworthy point is as follows: The Jordanian administration blamed Iran for drug trafficking. However, in its statements, the Amman administration still tries to use careful wording against the Assad regime, although the responsibility lies with Damascus and its allies.

Attacks on Idlib and HTS' Struggle with SNA

The Idlib conundrum is the third dynamic that will bring Syria to the fore in 2024. Emboldened by the diplomatic openings, as seen in Syria's return to the Arab League, and Assad's participation in diplomatic summits like the OIC summit in Riyadh after the outbreak of the Gaza crisis, the Assad regime is eyeing the Idlib province. The Syrian regime and its allies constantly carry out attacks against the Idlib province, a region that hosts more than 4 million civilians and is controlled by HTS, which is the evolved version of the Nusra Front, the former branch of Al Qaeda in Syria. Although Idlib has long been targeted intermittently, the intensity of the attacks carried out by the regime army, Russian warplanes, and Iran-backed militias has increased, especially since the Gaza crisis started. Dozens²⁰ of civilians have lost their lives, and hundreds of people have been injured in these attacks. In early January, following the regime attacks on civilians in Idlib, Turkish F-16s²¹ were seen flying over Idlib, although the airspace is controlled by Russia. Although the F-16s did not bomb any area, they meant to send a political message to the Assad regime. On the same day, Turkey targeted some regime positions through its artillery.²² Ankara is in favor of the status quo in Idlib, as a fierce attack on Idlib by the regime and its allies may lead to a new refugee influx towards Turkey's borders.

In addition to those, as mentioned earlier, the heavyweight HTS has been trying to expand the areas it controls for a long time. For this purpose, it occasionally confronts its rival, the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA). For instance, in late September, HTS engaged in a power struggle²³ with the SNA through its allies in the Euphrates Shield region and controlled some areas for a short while. Although the tension later calmed down through Turkey's interference, the recurrence of the problems between the parties in the upcoming period is probable and only needs a tiny spark.

Moreover, a recent crisis within HTS seems to have worsened the security situation in Northwest Syria. Iraqi Abu Maria Al-Qahtani, one of the founders of the Nusra Front and known as number two in the HTS after the organization's leader, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, was dismissed by the group a few months ago. Since his dismissal, there has been a mystery about his fate. Recently, the rumors of his death were leaked to the media. As of now, it is a mystery whether he really died, under what circumstances he died (if the rumor is true), or whether the organization itself executed him.

Additionally, a second crisis occurred within the organization with the Ahmad Zakour crisis. Zakour, a high-ranking figure within HTS just like Qahtani, announced that he left²⁴ the organization and disavowed the group's actions. Zakour and some of his followers later fled

to Azaz in the Aleppo countryside, where he hails from, to take shelter in his tribe, Baggara. Thereafter, videos showing intense clashes in Azaz between supporters of the HTS leader Jawlani and Zakour's loyalists were reflected on social media.²⁵ Some civilians were reportedly wounded in the clashes. The mystery surrounding Zakour's fate has not been unlocked until now, just like Qahtani's. Nonetheless, it is evident that the atmosphere will continue to be tense in Northwest Syria. There is little doubt that HTS will continue to challenge the SNA as soon as it sees a window of opportunity to bring the SNA-controlled areas under the authority of the HTS-backed Salvation Government.

World Food Program's (WFP) Decision to End Support to Syria and the Ailing Syrian Economy
The support provided by the World Food Program (WFP) to millions of needy people in Syria, where more than ninety percent of the population lives below the poverty line and at least 70 percent of the country needs humanitarian aid, was a life-saving function. However, WFP announced that it would end its main assistance program across Syria at the beginning of 2024²⁶ due to shrinking budgets. Lately, 2.5 million people have benefited from the support of WFP, which had previously gradually reduced the aid it provided to Syria. The donor fatigue due to the prolongation of the Syrian war (It has lasted more than the sum of World War I and II), the need to support millions of Ukrainian refugees after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the fact that hundreds of thousands of Gazans will need humanitarian help due to the unfolding Gaza crisis, have altogether contributed to the WFP's latest decision.

The grim picture showing that millions of people will be deprived of humanitarian aid is likely to trigger a severe humanitarian crisis in Syria. Due to the ailing Syrian economy²⁷ coupled with very high unemployment²⁸ and inflation rates, people have been trying to leave Syria illegally and reach European countries for a long time. It is not a remote possibility that WFP's latest decision will accelerate this trend as more Syrian civilians will be pushed into a more desperate situation and poverty. Moreover, it is clear that even if these people, who have nothing to lose, stay in Syria, they are likely to create various problems due to the painful/dire conditions they find themselves in. Namely, economic problems are likely to lead to societal problems, or social decay, to be more precise. This is the fourth dynamic that will put Syria back on the regional radar in 2024.

Developments in Northeast Syria

The fifth factor/dynamic likely to put Syria at the center of discussions is some critical developments in Northeast Syria. Recently, various political steps have been taken in the PYD/Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-controlled areas in Northeast Syria, which are seen to

be in a better situation than the rest of the country, thanks to the natural resources they control, fertile agricultural areas, and the financial/political support they receive from the US. As a result of a series of meetings held in Raqqa, a new 'social contract'²⁹, which can be considered as the 'constitution' of Northeast Syria, was recently adopted in the areas under PYD/SDF control. In addition, the administrative entity under the control of the PYD changed its name once again and became the 'Democratic Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria (DAANES)'.³⁰ With the latest developments, the structure of DAANES has also been reshaped. Although the social contract renewal issue has long been discussed, it is noteworthy that the process was concluded shortly after the clashes that took place between the SDF and Arab tribes³¹ in Deir ez-Zor. The clashes resulted in the loss of lives of many, including civilians.

In addition to these changes, the Syrian Democratic Council, known as the political wing of the SDF, also elected two new names as its co-chairs. Although it is claimed that Mahmoud Meslat, one of the elected co-chairs, is close to the Turkey-backed Syrian opposition³², has previously met³³ with President Erdoğan, and declared his willingness³⁴ for dialogue with Turkey upon getting elected to the new position, Ankara would likely deem the abovementioned developments as 'acceleration, deepening, and consolidation in the PKK's state-building project' in Syria. As a matter of fact, Turkey considers Syria and Iraq as a single file regarding its cross-border operations. This trend is highly likely to continue in 2024, as evidenced by Ankara's airstrikes targeting PYD-controlled areas in Northeast Syria³⁵ as a result of the total death of 21 Turkish soldiers³⁶ ³⁷ in the clashes with the PKK in Iraq at the end of December and mid-January 2024. It is also noteworthy that the PKK started its attacks in winter, unlike in previous years. Due to the developed drone industry in Turkey, the PKK was not able to conduct attacks against the Turkish posts.

Nonetheless, the decreased Turkish drone activity in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq due to the severe weather conditions in the area seems to have incentivized the PKK to reinstate its attacks. For a long while, Turkey has been carrying out operations through the National Intelligence Organization (MİT) against PKK members in areas where it deems threats from, including regions such as Sulaymaniyah and Deir ez-Zor³⁸, which are hundreds of kilometers away from Turkey's borders in both Syria and Iraq. Moreover, in Northeast Syria, Turkey has increased its attacks on the PYD-controlled areas, especially on critical infrastructure and oil fields that provide a source of income for the PYD-SDF. Since Northeast Syria is coded as a hotbed of terrorism by Turkey, no change is expected in Ankara's approach towards the region in the near term. In such a period, the US seems to be totally disinterested in

the political developments in Northeast Syria. This situation is observed in the SDF chief Mazloum Abdi's remarks. Abdi has recently stated that the US has not commented on the newly accepted 'social contract' and administrative restructuring of the DAANES.³⁹ Moreover, Abdi, from time to time, complains that the US is not taking steps in the face of the Turkish airstrikes in Northeast Syria. In fact, this situation is unsurprising as US officials have consistently and repeatedly made clear that their presence in Syria stems from the fight against ISIS.

Conclusion:

Hamas' October 7th attack and the ensuing vicious Israeli response have shifted the regional focus. Beyond this, the Gaza crisis has turned into a global event, like the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the September 11 attacks, due to its ramifications reaching beyond the MENA region. Nevertheless, Syria, which has generated many complications for the neighboring countries, will likely come under the regional spotlight due to various dynamics in 2024. Syria is far from being stable, and it will continue to be so for the years to come. Although the regime was emboldened after Syria returned to the Arab fold, 2023 and the preceding years showed the Assad regime's dire situation, as evidenced in the months-long widespread protests⁴⁰ against the Syrian government in the Druze-populated Suwayda province in Southern Syria and the constant ISIS attacks⁴¹ carried out against the regime forces in Badia Desert, leading to many casualties from the Assad loyalists. Other zones of influence face different problems in the security and economic realms. In a nutshell, not only Syria's neighbors but also major powers are obliged to carefully monitor the developments unfolding in the country in 2024, as Syria remains a ticking bomb. Doing otherwise is likely to lead to a heavy cost for the countries partaking in the Syrian conflict.

Endnotes

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