

US-backed Islamist militias storm Aleppo, Syria

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On November 27, Islamist militias launched a major offensive into Aleppo, northern Syria's largest city. The Al Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) militia took Aleppo by December 1 and is attacking south towards Hama and Homs. This ended a four-year ceasefire brokered by Russia, Iran and Turkey that froze the war that began in 2011 in Syria between NATO-backed militias and government troops backed by Russian and Iranian forces.

It is a major escalation of the global war unfolding in Ukraine, the Middle East and beyond between NATO countries, on the one hand, and Russia, Iran and China, on the other. Israel's genocide in Gaza and its bombing of Hezbollah in Lebanon are critical fronts in the war. Another front is emerging, as Washington and its NATO allies restart attempts to seize Syria and use it as a base against Russia, Iran and the entire Middle East.

Before the latest offensive, NATO-backed Islamist militias, including HTS and the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA), held Idlib province and nearby pockets of Aleppo, Hama and Latakia provinces. Tensions mounted last year, as the Ukrainian regime asked NATO for missiles to bomb Iranian factories in Syria reportedly making drones for Russian troops in Ukraine. This September, the *Kiev Post* reported that the "Chemist" unit of Ukraine's GUR military intelligence had attacked Russian troops around Aleppo and the Golan Heights.

Israel's war on Gaza and Lebanon, by damaging Hezbollah forces which had played an important role in Syria, set the stage for the current offensive. China's Xinhua news agency estimated that 1,000 people have been killed in the current offensive, during which HTS and its allies seized all of Aleppo city and its surroundings.

The major NATO powers have not yet formally endorsed the offensive on Aleppo. "The group leading the current offensive is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which was linked to the Islamic State and Al Qaeda" and "is still considered a terrorist group by the United States," the *New York Times* wrote. This "leaves governments that once supported moderate rebels against [Syrian President Bashar] al-Assad

in a tricky spot, unable to endorse either side."

This offensive clearly has NATO support, however. It comes from areas of Syria supplied from Turkey, a NATO member state, mobilizing militias like the FSA that received US funding through programs like the CIA's 2012-2017 Operation Timber Sycamore. Indeed, as the *Times* makes clear, the offensive was made possible by the Ukraine war and Israel's war in Lebanon:

Now, with [Syria's] allies weakened or distracted by their own conflicts, rebels have seized the opportunity to shift the balance of power. ... Iran has been weakened by Israeli airstrikes, battlefield losses by its proxy forces—the so-called axis of resistance—and an economic crisis at home. Hezbollah, one of those proxy forces, has been battered and diminished after 13 months of war with Israel and the killing of its leader, Hassan Nasrallah. And Russia is now nearing the end of its third year of a war of attrition with Ukraine.

This reveals the strategic and financial interests underlying NATO support for the Gaza genocide. The Biden administration and its NATO allies see the murder of countless thousands of defenseless men, women and children as crucial to their attempts to subjugate the Middle East. It allows them, first of all, to try to avenge their failure to topple Assad in nine years of a bloody war in Syria, from 2011 to 2020. This war for domination of the oil-rich Middle East is, however, only part of a broader imperialist war for world hegemony, currently aimed mainly at Russia and China.

Yesterday, Syrian and Russian warplanes bombed the Islamist rebel militias, and hundreds of members of pro-Iranian Iraqi militias crossed into Syria to fight alongside Assad's army. A senior Syrian military source told Reuters these fighters, from the Badr or Nujabaa militias, had

crossed the border in small groups to avoid air strikes: “These are fresh reinforcements being sent to aid our comrades on the front lines in the north.”

Last night, Telegram channels close to Tehran reported that the Syrian army had launched a counterattack south of Aleppo. They claimed Syrian forces had retaken Khanasir and were attacking northwards towards the Al Safirah industrial zone just south of Aleppo city. However, they reported that Syrian government forces were continuing to struggle in fighting around Hama.

Turkish-backed Syrian National Army forces also reportedly went on the offensive and captured the town of Tal Rifaat from the US-backed Kurdish nationalist YPG (People's Protection Units) militia. This blocked the YPG units from moving further north closer to the border with Turkey, whose armed forces and ruling class are deeply fearful that US-backed Kurdish nationalist groups could set up an independent Kurdish state in parts of Syria and Turkey itself.

Yesterday, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said that Turkey “would never allow the terrorist structure in Syria to turn into a state.” This threat, aimed at the Kurdish nationalists, also apparently aimed to distance the Turkish government from the Al Qaeda forces. Fidan said: “The oxygen mask of the terrorist groups in the region is in America. If the US cuts off the oxygen, they cannot live for three days.”

Iran, Russia and China all issued statements of support for Syria. While Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov said close military contacts were continuing between Russia and Syria, Iranian officials pledged full cooperation with Syria.

“In cooperation and interaction with Muslim countries, we will definitely thwart efforts by the Zionists to disrupt unity among Muslims and spread terrorism and insecurity in the region,” Iranian President Massoud Pezeshkian said. “We believe that Syria will once again overcome the Zionist plots. Iran stands with the Syrian government and people to that end.”

China, which announced a “strategic partnership” with Syria during Assad’s September 2023 visit to Beijing and has sent military trainers to Syria, also issued statements of concern. China “supports Syria’s efforts to maintain national security and stability,” said Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian. “China is willing to make positive efforts to prevent further deterioration of the situation in Syria.”

The US-backed Al Qaeda offensive in Syria threatens to trigger a Middle East war of cataclysmic dimensions, rapidly dragging in all the major world powers. The bankruptcy of the Russian, Chinese, Iranian and allied regimes flows from the fact that the NATO imperialist powers are interested not

in preventing but in escalating the war. Pursuing their agenda of world hegemony, the imperialist powers trample upon overwhelming popular opposition at home to war between major nuclear powers.

In particular, it is ever more evident that Trump, while he issued a few demagogic criticisms of the Ukraine war during the Biden administration, intends to escalate the war. Yesterday, he responded to the Aleppo invasion with a post on his Truth Social network threatening a wider war unless Israeli hostages held in Gaza were released. Trump wrote:

Please let this TRUTH serve to represent that if the hostages are not released prior to January 20, 2025, the date that I proudly assume Office as President of the United States, there will be ALL HELL TO PAY in the Middle East, and for those in charge who perpetrated these atrocities against Humanity. ... Those responsible will be hit harder than anybody has been hit in the long and storied History of the United States of America. **RELEASE THE HOSTAGES NOW!**

The targets of such threats from Biden and Trump are responding not by surrendering but by preparing for a broader conflict with the United States. After Trump repeatedly threatened to lock any country who does not use the US dollar out of US markets with a 100 percent tariff, Russia and Iran publicly announced last week that they had ceased all use of the US dollar in their bilateral trade.



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