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Civil War Paths

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# THE MILITARY OPERATION IN ALEPPO AND THE DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

EDOARDO CORRADI

*(University of Genoa)*

## The military operation in Aleppo and the developments in the Syrian civil war

*Edoardo Corradi (Università degli Studi di Genova)*

Edoardo Corradi is currently post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Genoa, Italy. He is currently researching on several dynamics of civil war, specifically rebel coalitions, rebel governance, and rebel diplomacy. He teaches at the University of Genoa, Florida International University, and Sciences Po (Menton campus). He is the *Principal Investigator* MA.G.A.S. project.

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# THE MILITARY OPERATION IN ALEPPO AND THE DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

*Edoardo Corradi*

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*The fall of Aleppo after the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-led military operation has triggered a huge domino effect on the other non-state armed groups active in the country. The Syrian National Army, supported by Turkey, conquered several strategic towns in Northern Syria, forcing the Syrian Democratic Forces to retreat toward Manbij and Raqqa along with thousands of civilians already displaced.*

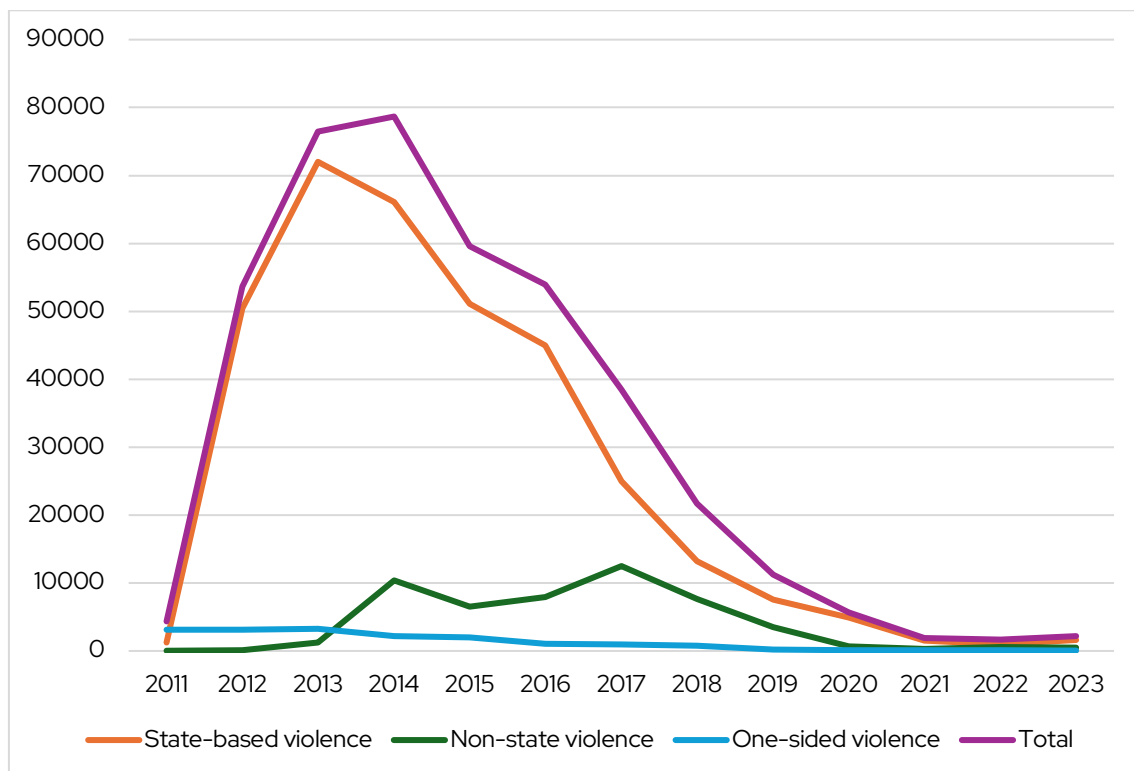
On 27 November 2024, the armed group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) launched a military operation (**Deterrence of Aggression**), that led HTS to take control of the city of Aleppo, the second largest town of the country after the capital Damascus, and launched other attacks toward Hama, potentially opening the way toward Damascus. The HTS-led military offensive, followed by military operations launched by other non-state armed groups, had weakened the Syrian regime, opening different windows of opportunity for the different state and non-state actors active in the country. The military operation *Deterrence of Aggression* demonstrated the high level of complexity of the Syrian civil war, in which several actors with different ideologies are currently fighting, alongside different external supporters such as Turkey, Russia, Iran, and the United States.

## A Frozen Conflict?

On different newspapers and magazine appeared how Syria is facing a new conflictually after years of di relative peace. However, according to the data collected by several research centers, the reality is far from the one presented.

As reported by the [Uppsala Conflict Data Program](#), the level of victims (per type) is still high, despite diminished if compared with the 2011-2019 period. In the last year, more than 12,000 people have died in the Syrian war, mostly accounting the regime-led military operation aimed at regaining control of different areas of the country.

Figure 1: Casualties in the Syrian civil war (2011-2023)



According to several analysts and researchers, the HTS-led military offensive is due to the different [problems](#) faced by the Syrian regime. Against this background, Damascus has been able to regain control of several portions of the Syrian territory, but it has not been able to maintain the internal necessary cohesion to avoid the resurgence of conflictuality. However, according to others, other than the internal weaknesses of the Assad regime, the cause that explains the HTS-led military operation is deeply intertwined with the current conflicts in

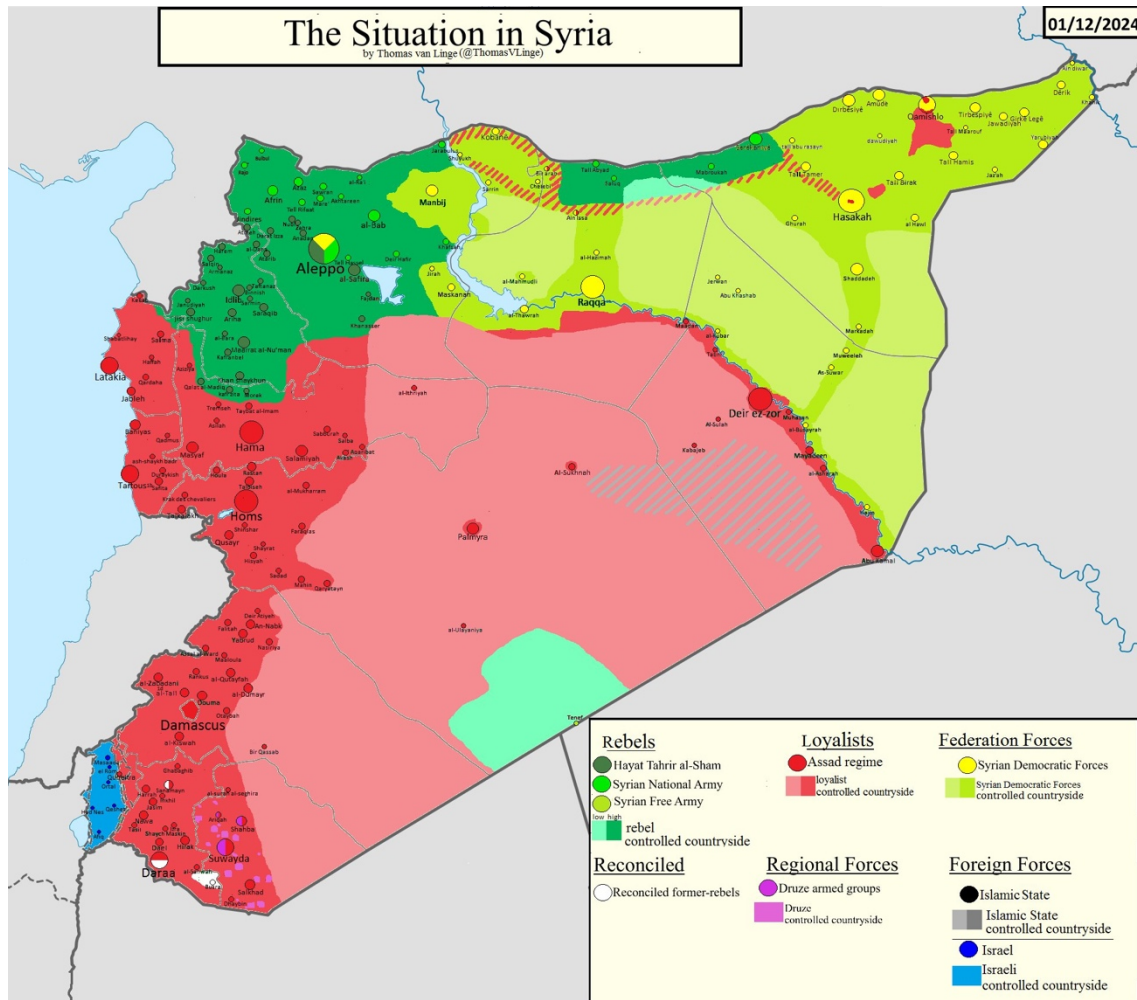
the regional and international systems. The recent developments of the war in Gaza and Lebanon have affected both Hezbollah and Iran, both allied with Assad. The combination of these different factors opened a window of opportunity for the rebels to successfully conduct their military operation on Aleppo and Hama.

### **Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and the Battle for Aleppo**

Currently, numerous armed groups contest both political and territorial power with Bashar al-Assad's regime, distinguishing themselves through their military, organizational, and governance capacities. Among these groups is [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS), led by Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani. Formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra and **linked to al-Qaeda** (AQ), the group severed its ties with AQ several years ago. In 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra rebranded itself as **Jabhat Fateh al-Sham**, declaring that it no longer had connections with non-state organizations outside Syria. In 2017, the transformation of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham into **Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham** occurred following its merger with several other groups, establishing it as one of the main non-state actors in Syria.

HTS's rebranding efforts [have been instrumental](#) in its attempt to **position itself as a significant actor in northwestern Syria**. This context helps explain why recent statements from HTS leader al-Jawlani have included messages aimed at **reassuring Christian and Shiite populations** in areas newly controlled by HTS. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham was the primary actor behind the military operation *Deterrence of Aggression*, which led to its military control of Aleppo after the city had been recaptured by Assad in 2016.

Figure 2: Territorial shifts after the military operation *Deterrence of Aggression*, source: <https://x.com/ThomasVLinge/status/1863304056753602861>.



### The Syrian National Army and the Syrian Democratic Forces

The Syrian National Army (SNA), established in 2017 and supported by Turkey, emerged from the ashes of the Free Syrian Army, the leading force in the armed uprising against Assad in 2011. It unites various factions aligned with Turkey's foreign policy in Syria. The SNA has benefited from Turkish financial and military support, controlling several areas in northwestern Syria following Ankara's military operations against the Kurdish militias, the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), which now lead the Syrian Democratic

Forces (SDF). The SDF, in contrast, was formed in 2015 during the Kurdish military offensive against the Islamic State and has **received financial and military support from the United States**, leading to tensions between Ankara and Washington over the Kurdish issue in Syria.

HTS's military operation in Aleppo and Hama prompted both the SNA and the SDF to secure various areas to strengthen their political influence in Aleppo and its surroundings.

Although not initially mobilized during HTS's offensive, the **SNA** moved toward **Aleppo** with the aim of isolating the **SDF** in northwestern Syria. As reported in the latest statement by the SDF's Commander-in-Chief, Mazlum Abdi, the SDF agreed to cooperate with other non-state actors active in northwestern Syria to withdraw from areas under their control in Aleppo, Tel Rifaat, and the Shahba region. This decision follows a strategic calculation by the SDF to avoid armed clashes that could prove detrimental to all factions, opting instead to abandon areas now encircled by the SNA and HTS.

These developments have led to the evacuation of thousands of Kurdish civilians, already displaced from the Afrin region, to areas under SDF control, particularly those controlled by the Kurdish militias, the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ).

## Conclusion

The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham military operation *Deterrence of Aggression* has highlighted several factors: the **structural weakness of the Syrian regime**, despite the ongoing process of international normalization; the **military capabilities of various armed groups**, notably HTS, which shows that this operation had been long in the making; the **dynamic nature of the conflict** and its relationship with the broader **regional and international context**. The evolution of military operations by different armed groups and the reactions of

the foreign powers involved – Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the United States – could lead to the development of multiple scenarios.





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