

The (Next) Battle for Northwest Syria: U.S. Policy Implications

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The director of the Syrian Emergency Task Force joins three Washington Institute experts to discuss the stunning rebel advances in the west.

On December 4, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Andrew Tabler, Anna Borshchevskaya, Aaron Zelin, and Mouaz Moustafa. Tabler is the Institute's Martin J. Gross Senior Fellow and former director for Syria at the National Security Council. Borshchevskaya is the Harold Grinspoon Senior Fellow in the Institute's Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East. Zelin is the Institute's Gloria and Ken Levy Senior Fellow and coeditor of its recent compilation [Jihadist Governance and Statecraft \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jihadist-governance-and-statecraft\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jihadist-governance-and-statecraft). Moustafa is executive director of the Syrian Emergency Task Force. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Andrew Tabler

The surprising collapse of regime forces in northwest Syria is due to a convergence of local and global factors. The regional context has shifted significantly amid Israel's actions in Lebanon, the weakening of Iran's "axis of resistance," and the decreasing presence of Iranian militias in Syria. Russian air support, which had been crucial since 2016, is also diminished. And despite years of pressure, Bashar al-Assad's regime failed to make meaningful concessions in negotiations with Arab nations and Turkey, while U.S. sanctions hindered reconstruction. This erosion of Assad's capabilities emboldened the opposition group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which launched a dramatic offensive from its home territory in Idlib. Many HTS fighters hail from Aleppo and were frustrated with the lack of change; they are now advancing toward Hama and beyond.

Amid the fighting, the possibility that Assad may break with Iran in order to obtain relief from international sanctions is still being raised. Yet Tehran remains a staunch supporter of the regime; ongoing Israeli military strikes inside Syria have likewise made it difficult for Assad to distance himself from Iran. At the same time, the Biden administration's hesitation to renew U.S. sanctions mandated by the Caesar Act risks undermining Washington's leverage in the long-stalled political process outlined by UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Without a political settlement, Syria risks becoming a fragmented country vulnerable to external influence and terrorist groups. The U.S. government must focus on managing this crisis rather than neglecting it.

Anna Borshchevskaya

Ultimately, Russia's role in Syria has been defined more by its challenge to the U.S.-led global order than by a genuine commitment to peace or counterterrorism. President Vladimir Putin is waging a long-term geopolitical struggle against the West, and the Syrian conflict has served as a strategic arena for asserting this opposition. Moscow's priority has been to preserve the Assad regime and establish a Russian strategic foothold on the East Mediterranean, with little real effort made to reach a political resolution.

Moscow has also attempted to frame its intervention as part of a broader counterterrorism effort, but its actions on the ground suggest otherwise. In fact, Russia's airstrikes have indirectly strengthened Sunni extremist factions by frequently targeting civilian infrastructure in the Sunni-majority country.

It would therefore be a mistake to believe that Russia can mediate or otherwise facilitate a diplomatic solution to the conflict. A state of low-level instability in Syria serves Moscow's interests by ensuring that various actors are dependent on its help. Of course, this will not stop Russia from attempting to present itself as a mediator in the current crisis—perhaps by offering assistance in Syria in exchange for concessions in Ukraine. Yet taking this bait would be a dangerous mistake.

The fall of Assad would constitute a significant defeat for Russia and potentially affect its ability to make further military advances in Ukraine. In contrast, the HTS offensive represents an opportunity for the United States because it is the first time that Assad has faced defeat since Russia and other foreign backers intervened on its behalf. Washington must now consider how Syria plays into the larger picture of U.S. foreign policy.

Aaron Zelin

Many observers have questioned why HTS chose to launch its offensive now. The answer seems clear: the group sought to exploit Russia's focus on Ukraine and Iran's growing weakness amid the decimation of its proxies in Gaza and Lebanon. Although the offensive has taken many by surprise, active fighting has persisted in this area for years, and indications of another regime offense emerged as recently as

October. In response, HTS has led a successful campaign of its own by integrating its activity with other opposition groups.

Regarding the U.S. designation of HTS as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), it is important to understand that the group has become more nuanced and complicated in recent years. It broke from al-Qaeda and the wider global jihadist movement in 2016. Although no women hold senior positions in its local government, they are not barred from going to school or taking part in the workforce. Religious minorities do not have equal political representation in HTS territory either, but religious freedoms have visibly improved under its governance.

Yet the group still consists mainly of conservative Islamists whose views include vocally supporting Hamas's October 7 attack against Israel. In addition, some of its members are foreign fighters affiliated with other U.S.-designated FTOs. If new talks emerge on removing HTS from the FTO list, Washington could ask that all such foreign fighters be extradited in exchange for this concession. Whatever the case, the incoming Trump administration will need to take the Syria conflict seriously.

Mouaz Moustafa

Although HTS is just one of many groups in the military command room established to coordinate this offensive, it is the one with the most experience in governance. Eight years of evidence show that it is no longer part of any transnational terrorist organization—in fact, it has been actively fighting terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. At the same time, HTS has been governing for seven years in Idlib, where minorities and women are protected and integrated into society. The same is now happening in newly liberated territories such as Aleppo and Hama.

When President Trump takes office in January, he should recognize that Iran and its proxies are losing in Syria. The Biden administration is completely asleep on this issue, but we hope the Trump administration realizes that this could be the biggest blow to Iran and its support for Hezbollah. In addition to ousting Assad, Iran, and Russia from Syria, the offensive also offers a way to advance Resolution 2254 and finally move toward a democratic Syria for all Syrians, enabling a safe return for those forced to leave by the war.

This summary was prepared by Claudia Groeling. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family. ❖

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