

# Syrian Army confronts shock offensive by militants in Aleppo

## Kurdish forces brace for insurgents' attacks

### International Desk

Syrian troops on Saturday battled foreign-backed militants inside the country's second largest city, Aleppo, for the first time since 2016, while warplanes targeted militants' supply lines following a surprise attack by the insurgents. The insurgents broke through government defense lines in Aleppo on Friday and entered the city's western neighborhood. The insurgents launched their shock offensive in Aleppo and Idlib countryside on Wednesday and wrested control of dozens of villages and towns along the way, including a strategic town south of Aleppo.

The Al-Watan newspaper reported airstrikes on the edge of Aleppo city, targeting militant supply lines.

Twenty fighters were reportedly killed in the airstrikes that targeted militants' reinforcements.

State media reported that a number of "terrorists" have infiltrated parts of the city. Syrian troops chased them and arrested a number who posed for pictures near city landmarks, state media said.

### Preparing for counterattack

Syria's armed forces said in a statement Saturday that to repel the large attack on Aleppo and save lives, it has redeployed and is preparing for a counterattack. The statement acknowledged that the insurgents entered large parts of the city but said they have not established bases or checkpoints. The resurgence of militants "is a temporary measure and (the military central command and armed forces) will work to guarantee the security and peace of all our people in Aleppo," the military statement said.

Russia's state news agency TASS quoted Oleg Ignasyuk, a Russian Defense Ministry official coordinating in Syria, as saying that Russian warplanes targeted and killed 200 militants who launched the offensive in the northwest on Friday.

The foreign ministers of Iran and Russia in a phone conversation on Saturday firmly supported Syria's national sovereignty and territorial integrity and backed the country's government and army in confronting terrorist groups.

In a phone conversation with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi "emphasized the need for vigilance and coordination" between Iran and Russia "to confront the actions of terrorists in Syria," a Foreign Ministry statement said.

The Kurdish-majority neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsood in Aleppo is bracing also for a possible attack by militants. The People's Protection Units (YPG), which controls the neighborhood, published a video early Saturday morning that it said shows "civilians... preparing to defend their neighborhood in the event of an attack."

### Turkey's role

Farhad Shami, spokesperson for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a US-backed force spearheaded by the YPG, said on Friday that they are closely following the developments and that Turkey is behind the offensive.

On a Syrian state TV morning show Saturday, commentators also blamed Turkey for supporting the insurgents' push into



AFP

Aleppo and Idlib Provinces.

Reuters reported on Saturday that opposition sources in touch with Turkish intelligence said Turkey had given the green light to the offensive.

However, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, whose country has backed militants in Syria since the beginning of foreign-backed insurgency in the Arab country in 2011, said on Friday that Ankara

is not involved in the ongoing conflict in Aleppo.

Back in 2011, demonstrations against Syrian government turned into a full-scale war which was supported by many Western and regional countries.

Ankara initially sought to topple President Bashar Assad after the foreign-sponsored conflict erupted in 2011, but as government forces regained territory with the

help of Russia and Iran, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reversed course.

Since then, Turkey has continued to support the militants who fled to Idlib Province. The militants also were given an opportunity to leave for Idlib with their families. Following an agreement between Russia, Iran and Turkey in May 2017, Idlib governorate became part of a 'de-escalation' area.

## Iranian luminary grills UNHRC president on Gaza

Gholam Ali Afroz, an inductee to Iran's scientific and cultural hall of fame, took to his X social media handle to question the United Nations' double standards and duplicitous approach regarding the ongoing suffering of Palestinian children in the besieged Gaza Strip. In a scathing swipe at Omar Zniber, the sitting president of the UN Human Rights Council, Afroz pushed a line of Socratic questioning that suggests that the council has not performed its duties even by its own standards and definitions of "human beings" and "[human]

rights". "Do the oppressed children of Gaza have the right to live?" asked the distinguished professor of psychology at the University of Tehran poignantly.

"What is UN role in this matter?" he underlined.

The United Nations has for months been criticized for its inaction, at best, and shrugging, at worst, at the unspeakable horrors that the Israeli army is inflicting in Gaza through incessant air strikes and unlawful use of starvation against civilians, including women and children.

## No more capacity to host migrants in Iran: Minister

### International Desk

Iran's Interior Minister Eskandar Momeni said on Saturday that the country has no capacity to host more migrants, adding that good measures have been taken by the government to organize migrants.

Referring to the presence of millions of illegal migrants in the country, Momeni said, "Our country is not able to allocate so many subsidies and job opportunities to foreign nationals because there are six million foreign nationals in the country, some of whom are illegal."

He also pointed to the progress in construction of walls along the borders to prevent the illegal entry of migrants in the country, saying that organizing of foreign

nationals starts from the borders and the regulations related to blocking the entry routes are being implemented.

He also said that the laws related to the employment of migrants by Iranian employers must be implemented properly, although good measures have been taken in this regard.

Under the international laws, the country which hosts migrants from other countries should receive international aid while the international aid given to Iran with several million immigrants is close to zero.

Iran has recently begun to repatriate illegal Afghan nationals living in Iran. The move is part of the efforts to meet the target set by the government to deport two



million illegal migrants by the end of the Iranian calendar year on March 20.

The number of illegal immigrants in Iran is unofficially estimated to be around 10 million, with many seeking better economic opportunities or fleeing conflict in their home country, especially since the 2021 takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban.

## Escalating tensions in...

### Unfolding events

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In a remarkable series of events over the course of less than three days, insurgent forces were able to take control of several cities and villages, including the strategically important town of Saraqib, located south of Aleppo. On Friday, November 29, they also gained control of Aleppo, which represents a notable shift as it is the first time since 2016 that the city has changed hands. The implications of this development are both symbolic and practical for the Syrian government, reflecting a significant moment in the ongoing situation.

Aleppo is widely recognized as Syria's economic hub, and its potential capture by opposition forces could significantly impact Bashar al-Assad's territorial control. For more than a decade, Aleppo has symbolized state governance in northern Syria, and its occupation may alter the military dynamics, potentially favoring the insurgent groups.

The recent events coming to pass in northern Syria, marked by the loss of General Kiomars Haj Hashemi, a senior Iranian military advisor, underscore the intricate dynamics at play in the region. This situation may illustrate the wider involvement of multiple nations in the ongoing developments. Additionally, reports have emerged indicating that insurgents are

now equipped with advanced weaponry and new drones, which suggests the possibility of external support for their activities.

### Foreign stakeholders

Israel perceives the ongoing tensions in Syria, particularly those influenced by anti-Assad groups, as an opportunity to enhance regional stability. Since October 7, Israel has focused on disrupting communication channels within the Axis of Resistance, which operates across Lebanon and Syria. In this context, Israeli airstrikes have targeted various weapon depots in northern Syria, which Israel suspected were intended to support Hamas.

Following a ceasefire agreement with Hezbollah, Israel acknowledges the necessity of redirecting its focus to the Syrian front. In this regard, Israel seeks to foster stability in the region, encourage a reduction of Iranian and Hezbollah influence along its borders, and engage diplomatically with Assad's government to gain potential concessions.

Conversely, the present circumstances pose significant challenges for Russia. While Moscow remains committed to addressing its involvement in the conflict in Ukraine, it is important to recognize that Syria retains considerable strategic importance for the country. Should Russia be unable to extend military support to

the Syrian government and if the opposition achieves notable progress, there is a risk that Moscow could lose its strategic presence in the Middle East. This situation could potentially limit access to the Mediterranean via Tartus, which has implications for regional stability.

Russian leaders face the important task of navigating the situation in a way that promotes success on one front while preserving influence on others. It is essential to consider the Syrian Army's reliance on Russia for support, including military supplies and the deployment of personnel. Acknowledging this interdependence can foster a positive and sustainable partnership moving ahead.

Concerns have been raised regarding Turkey's actions, with some observers suggesting that Ankara may be employing strategies reminiscent of its previous support for Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in addressing Kurdish forces in northern Syria, now directed toward exerting pressure on Assad's government. In 2019, Turkey initiated an operation known as "Peace Spring" in northern Syria, justifying its actions as measures taken in self-defense and highlighting the need to address potential threats beyond its borders to ensure regional stability.

This statement reflects Turkey's perspective that its military operation in north-

ern Syria aims to mitigate the potential regrouping of terrorist groups. Nevertheless, the operation's primary objectives are twofold: to create distance between Kurdish forces and Turkey's borders, and to establish a secure buffer zone intended to accommodate Syrian refugees who are currently in Turkey.

In light of the setbacks from a recent operation, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has adjusted his approach and indicated a willingness to engage in dialogue with Bashar al-Assad. The anticipated discussions are expected to focus on the Kurdish issue in northern Syria and the development of a framework to facilitate the safe return of Syrian refugees currently residing in Turkey. However, President Assad has emphasized that any negotiations would require the complete withdrawal of Turkish forces from northern Syria as a prerequisite.

Given the current situation, where Russia is on one side and Iran and Hezbollah are on the other, and the Syrian government lacks sufficient military support, Turkey appears to be taking advantage of the opportunity. It seems to be supporting groups like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in an effort to pressure Assad into negotiations or to pursue its objectives through violent means.

It turns out that Erdogan may not be the primary architect behind the recent devel-

opments in Syria. Rather, he seems to have skillfully navigated a situation that was already evolving.

### Conclusion

Given the complex dynamics in the region, it stands out a mile that Syria's allies are engaging on multiple fronts. This situation underscores the strategic importance of Damascus and the need to support its allies. As a result, Russia may contemplate deploying some of its military resources to Syria, which could include either weaponry or personnel. Additionally, Iran, a key regional ally of Syria, has consistently expressed its support for the Syrian government. There is now a growing motivation for Iran to consider direct intervention, especially in light of recent attacks on its military positions and the unfortunate loss of one of its advisors.

In this context, should Israel choose to discontinue its military support for certain groups, or if Turkey decides to reassess its interests in collaborating with them, it is probable that the insurgent advance will be effectively curtailed in the near term. However, if these groups continue to receive considerable and ongoing foreign assistance, it could lead to a resurgence of tensions on the Syrian front, underscoring the need for careful diplomatic engagement.