

## Syria on the brink of a global game

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The events in Syria are developing rapidly. In just one week, the front configuration in the Arab Republic has reverted to the outlines of 2015–2020, Bashar al-Assad’s government controlled only Damascus, a part of Aleppo province, and the Mediterranean coastline. At that time, with the support of Iran and Russia, Assad managed to regain control over most of the country, including the strategic M5 Highway connecting the four largest Syrian cities (Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo).

Current events indicate that the lack of full support on the ground from Tehran and Moscow has led to a sudden attack by a conglomerate of rebel armies and jihadist groups, which overturned the defenses of the government forces in a matter of days. It is possible that the anti-government forces' push was driven by the opposition's confidence that allies would not be able to provide the necessary support to B. Assad. “Hezbollah”, with which Iran's IRGC bolstered Assad's position, is almost decapitated and weakened in battles with the IDF in Lebanon, and a significant part of the Russian Aerospace Forces, and other Russian units based in Syria were redeployed to the Ukrainian front. Given these circumstances, a synchronized march of the “*rebel armies*” on the largest Syrian cities was expected, and the question was when such a decision would be made by the centers overseeing the so-called “*Syrian opposition*”.

An analysis of the events outlines the main beneficiaries of the new Syrian flare-up as the USA, Israel, and Turkey, whose interests are closely intertwined in the issues of eliminating the regime of B. Assad and the territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR).

Israel seeks to demonstrate hostility towards the so-called “*Shiite arc of the Middle East*”, which includes Iran-allied state regimes and proxy groups. Turkey aims to eliminate the Kurdish formations loyal to B. Assad in Syria and expand the scale of its occupation policy in the northern SAR. The intentions of the USA are driven by more extensive objectives derived from the strategy of global pressure on Russia. It is no coincidence that the combat operations in Syria are synchronized with the climax on the Ukrainian front, where Kyiv has diminishing chances of stabilizing the front, and the post-election events in Georgia, which could lead to a civil war. Therefore Washington aims at forcing Moscow to divide its forces between Ukraine and Syria and, under favorable circumstances, to deprive Russia of its strategic asset – military-political presence in the Middle East.

Recent events in Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria are linked to the domestic political situation in the United States. It seems that the Democrats, on the eve of handing over power to the Republicans, are deliberately creating fiery problems for them along the entire perimeter of the Russian-American geopolitical front. These include president Joe Biden's sanctioning of the Ukrainian Armed Forces strikes with Western ballistic missiles deep into Russian territory, the radicalization of the pro-Western Georgian opposition in its struggle against the elected authorities, and the destabilization of the situation around the Russian

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grouping in Syria, fraught with the danger of direct confrontation between Russian and NATO forces, represented by Turkey. Thus, the Democrats are presenting Donald Trump, who promised to '*extinguish*' conflict hotspots in a short period of time, with a puzzle that will not be easy to solve.

Despite the facts indicating the connection of the USA, Israel, and Turkey with the situation in Syria, they themselves deny any involvement in the recent events in Syria. Tel Aviv demonstrates that it is only concerned with the problems in Gaza and on the Lebanese border. Ankara, represented by Hakan Fidan, signals that Turkey is not interested in another large-scale escalation in Syria, at least considering the threat of a new influx of Syrian refugees into the country. In turn, Biden's administration stated that the news of the resumption of hostilities around Aleppo came as a complete surprise to them. And all this despite the fact that, according to Arab sources, during the fighting, as in Lebanon, pagers exploded in the hands of the Syrian army fighters and their supporting forces; the jihadist attack began the day after the announcement of a truce in Lebanon and the arrival of NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte in Ankara; and Turkish flags are already flying massively over administrative buildings captured by terrorist groups in Syria.

In any case, the events in Syria are not only an existential threat to that country but also a challenge to Russia and Iran. The fate of their strategic plans for the Middle Eastern policy is being decided in Syria. In the event of the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, Russia and Iran will be cut off from this region, and, accordingly, NATO's southern flank will approach their immediate borders. The events in Syria will also be a test for the already complex Iranian-Russian relationship, especially on the Syrian track, where the parties have competed for influence over Bashar al-Assad and his policies. According to several Middle Eastern sources, the harmful signs of this rivalry were the main reason for the weakening of the Syrian leader's positions and the loss of vigilance of the military forces under his control in the country. If Tehran and Moscow do not consolidate their actions on the Syrian problem based on mutual understanding and mutual concessions, the fall of Syria will be inevitable. This will also threaten the prospect of signing an Iranian-Russian strategic partnership agreement, the conclusion of which, despite optimistic assurances from both sides, has already stalled for several reasons.

According to the media, Tehran has already begun an operation to deploy its special forces to Syria. In turn, Moscow promised B. Assad to strengthen its Aerospace Forces in the SAR (Khmeimim base) with the latest multi-purpose fighters and to increase the arsenal of weapons. In addition, the Kremlin has replaced the commander of the Russian group in Syria, which may indicate dissatisfaction with his performance in light of recent events, as well as a decision to take tougher actions.

It is obvious that Syria's allies understand the vulnerability of their positions in this Arab country and are ready to join the fight to save B. Assad's government. The question is whether Moscow and Tehran are ready to act in close coordination to increase their chances of success.

Following the logic of the unfolding events, it can be assumed that if the USA, Israel, and Turkey manage to maintain the pace of their actions and neutralize the efforts of Iran and Russia, then after the SAR, and possibly simultaneously with its fragmentation, Iranian

proxy groups in Iraq and Yemen may also come under attack. Destabilization on Iran's northern borders is also not excluded, especially in the Armenian Syunik, near which, in Nakhijevan, the accumulation of Azerbaijani army forces and assets are informed. It is unlikely that such activity has started solely on Baku's initiative and with Ankara's consent alone. The Syrian track has shown that the unfolding game is a team effort, which may have more extensive goals than the overthrow of the ruling regime and the division of that country.