

Situational Assessment/ December 06, 2024

Deterrence of Aggression – Future Prospects Amid International and Local Complexities



Introduction

On November 27, 2024, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and several Syrian armed opposition factions in northwest Syria launched a military operation named "Deterrence of Aggression." Initially focused on western Aleppo countryside, the operation soon expanded to include Aleppo Province and the countrysides of Idlib and Hama. Two days later, factions of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army launched the "Dawn of Freedom" operation, aiming to capture the Tell Rifaat area, which is controlled by the Kurdish Protection Units (YPG). Both operations marked a breach in the frontlines between regime and opposition forces in northwest Syria, which had been stabilized under the "Turkish-Russian" ceasefire agreement of March 2020.

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and the armed opposition factions achieved swift and surprising victories. As of the date of this report, they have taken full control of Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city and its economic capital, in addition to most of its countryside, as well as the countrysides of Idlib and Hama. The battles are now approaching the outskirts of Homs in central Syria. In less than a week, the operation transformed from a small-scale operation aimed at stirring stagnant waters in the Syrian political file into a resounding event that could reshape regional dynamics and open the Syrian conflict to numerous scenarios, given its intersection with evolving regional and international developments

First: The Local Context in Northwest Syria

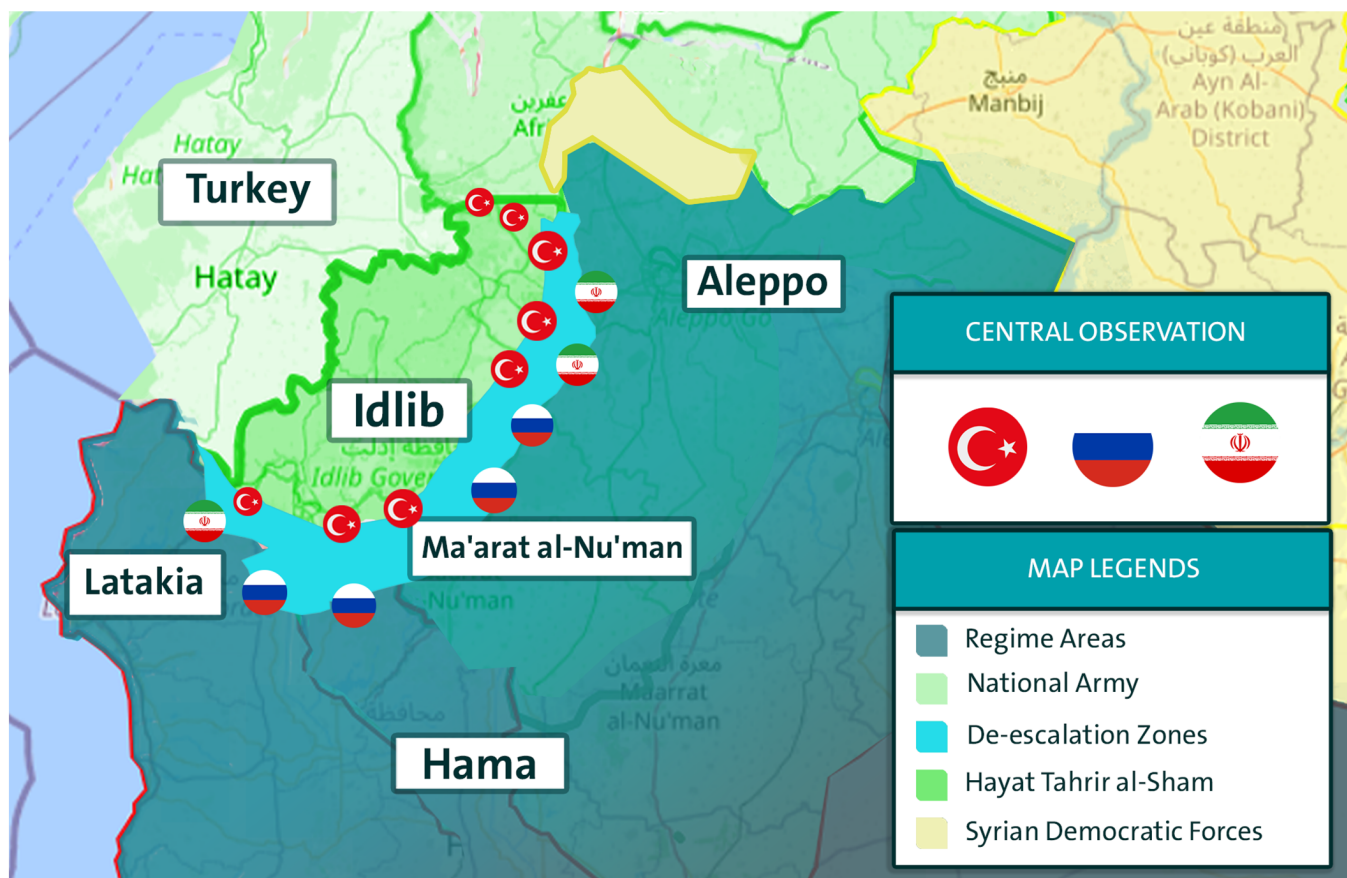
Before discussing the outcomes of the operation, it is essential to understand the complex context of northwest Syria, which has been reshaped by the conflict that began with the 2011 uprising. The population of areas outside the control of the Syrian regime in northwest Syria is estimated at around 6 million people. These residents are spread across three main regions: Idlib and the western Aleppo countryside, which is home to approximately 4 million people living under the control of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), governing through the Syrian Salvation Government; the Euphrates Shield areas, encompassing Jarabulus, Azaz, and Al-Bab, alongside the Olive Branch areas, including Afrin and its countryside, where around 2 million people reside. Additionally, an estimated 1.5 million people live in camps scattered across these regions.

Over the past decade, this area has suffered significantly due to the ongoing conflict between the regime and opposition forces. Many of its inhabitants were forcibly displaced to these regions, including opposition fighters and their families, originating from areas such as Rif Dimashq, Daraa, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. These displacements occurred under reconciliation agreements brokered by Russian and Turkish mediators after the regime and its allies established control over those areas. The northern regions adjacent to Idlib were shaped by two major military operations. The first operation was launched by the Turkish army in 2016, in collaboration with Syrian opposition factions, targeting the Islamic State (ISIS). This operation resulted in the establishment of a zone of influence known as the "Euphrates Shield" area. The second operation was carried out by Turkish forces in 2018, alongside their Syrian opposition allies, against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). This led to the creation of another zone of influence known as the "Olive Branch" area.

In a different context, four de-escalation zones were designated during the fourth round of the Astana talks on May 4, 2017, with the participation of three key countries: Turkey, Russia, and Iran. These zones included Idlib Province and parts of neighboring provinces, such as Latakia, Hama, and Aleppo. They also encompassed specific areas in the northern part of Homs Province, Eastern Ghouta, and certain areas in southern Syria, including Daraa and Quneitra provinces. The aim of establishing these de-escalation zones was a temporary measure intended to immediately halt violence, improve humanitarian conditions, and create suitable conditions for achieving a political resolution to the conflict in Syria.

The boundaries of the fourth de-escalation zone were delineated during the sixth round of the Astana process in September 2017 and were formally established under the Sochi Agreement on September 17, 2018. This zone encompassed the entirety of Idlib Province, along with parts of the Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia countrysides. However, due to the regime forces' continued incursions into the fourth de-escalation zone, Turkey and Russia reached a new agreement in Sochi in October 2019. This agreement stipulated that Turkey would establish twelve observation points and create a demilitarized zone within opposition-held areas, with a depth of 15 to 20 kilometers, free from heavy weaponry. The primary goal of this agreement was to reopen international highways connecting Aleppo with both Damascus and Latakia, a goal that was not achieved. Moscow accused Turkey of failing to fulfill its commitments, using this as justification for the regime forces' expansion into the Aleppo and Idlib countrysides.

With intensive support from Russian air forces, the regime forces were able to exceed the boundaries of the demilitarized zone agreed upon in Sochi. Between September 2019 and March 5, 2020, regime forces and their allied militias seized nearly half of the territory covered under the 2018 Sochi Agreement. The final boundaries were established following the intervention of the Turkish military under the operation named "Spring Shield," which successfully halted the advance of regime forces and Iran-backed militias. Resulting in a Turkish-Russian ceasefire agreement. Despite the relative stability in the following years, the region has witnessed sporadic clashes and mutual shelling between Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and regime forces, as well as Iranian-backed militias, interspersed with airstrikes by Russian aircraft.



Second: Regional and International Interconnections in the "Deterrence of Aggression" Operation

Some international perspectives have linked the "Deterrence of Aggression" operation to the repercussions of the October 7 events and the outcomes of the war in Lebanon. This connection can be viewed from two angles. The first angle sees it as an opportunity seized by Turkey and opposition factions to improve their negotiating position in the Syrian arena by weakening Iran's role. The second considers it part of broader global arrangements aimed at expelling Iran from Syria and delivering pressures on Russia's interests in the country, especially amidst the strained relations between Russia and the West over Ukraine. However, to gain a comprehensive understanding, this analysis must be placed within the context of the intertwined interests of the various powers involved in the Syrian conflict.

1-The Syrian Regime's Stance on October 7 and Its Success in Breaking Diplomatic Isolation

Since Russia's intervention in Syria in 2015, the Syrian regime has relied on a strategy of wagering on time to shift the balance of power in its favor on the ground. This approach has been based on changes in the regional and international climate, aiming to establish new realities that would allow it to circumvent the political solution outlined in UN Resolution 2254, which most key actors in the Syrian conflict emphasize as essential.

The regime has indeed succeeded in achieving significant portions of this strategy, leveraging substantial military support from its allies, Russia and Iran. Although the victories secured were not entirely decisive, they enabled the Syrian government to regain control over large swathes of Syrian territory.

Following October 7, 2023, the Syrian regime adopted a stance distinct from what is known as the "Unity of Arenas" strategy within the Axis of Resistance (comprising Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Gaza). Despite Syria's logistical role in facilitating the delivery of weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Syrian front remained restrained. In contrast, Israeli strikes in Syria— which significantly escalated during this period—were limited to targets associated with Iran and Hezbollah.

It appears the Syrian regime viewed this restrained conduct, emphasizing its independence as a sovereign state separate from militia influences, as a key opportunity to rebuild its legitimacy by engaging in regional roles aimed at fostering stability. This calculated approach allowed Syria to maintain a balanced position, avoiding American and Israeli targeting while still retaining the understanding of its Iranian ally

Most importantly, the regime achieved notable progress in breaking its diplomatic isolation, advancing in three key directions:

-Restoration of Syria's Seat in the Arab League and Resumption of Diplomatic Relations with Saudi Arabia

In May 2023, Arab foreign ministers decided to reinstate the participation of Syrian government delegations in Arab League meetings. This decision paved the way for the reopening of embassies and the exchange of ambassadors between Damascus and Riyadh after a 12-year hiatus.

-Revival of the Syrian-Turkish Normalization Process under Russian Mediation By the end of 2022, Damascus and Ankara embarked on a path to normalize relations through meetings at the level of defense and foreign ministers, under the sponsorship of Moscow.

-European Efforts to Shift the Approach to the Syrian Issue Italy, along with several European countries, initiated independent efforts to adopt a more flexible stance toward Syria, driven by pressures such as the refugee crisis. These efforts included a willingness to support early recovery projects in the country.

2-Rejection of Political Solutions and Disregard for Turkish Interests

The Syrian regime appeared relatively comfortable with its diplomatic position, a sentiment reflected in the Syrian president's speech during the extraordinary Arab-Islamic Summit in Riyadh last November. The regime continued to reject political solutions, undermining the Arab initiative that called for practical and effective steps toward resolving the crisis based on the "step-for-step" approach aligned with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Instead, the regime focused on strengthening bilateral relations with Arab countries, attempting to reestablish the conditions that existed prior to 2011.

Regarding the Normalization of Relations with Turkey, normalization talks between Syria and Turkey have reached a deadlock. Turkey remains firm in its stance, refusing to schedule a withdrawal from Syrian territory without securing two key guarantees. The first pertains to security assurances for combating the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and the second involves achieving a political solution that facilitates the return of over 3.5 million Syrian refugees currently residing in Turkey. Despite Russian mediation, the Syrian regime has maintained a rigid position, leveraging two factors. The first is the growing Arab openness toward Damascus, and the second is Turkey's pressing need for normalization. Turkey's urgency is driven by several factors, including the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) interests in improving its domestic standing after recent losses in municipal elections, its desire to address the Syrian refugee issue, its national security concerns over the Kurdish question, and its need to establish understandings with both Damascus and Baghdad.

3-Turkey's Leverage Amid the Withdrawal of U.S. Mandates from Russia and Iran

Iran provided substantial support to the Syrian regime in its war against the opposition and capitalized on the 2015 nuclear agreement to bolster its regional role. The Democratic U.S. administration effectively granted Iran a "mandate" to intervene in Syria, especially considering Iran's pivotal partnership with the United States in combating the Islamic State in Iraq. However, Russia's intervention in Syria in September 2015 resulted from Russian-American understandings, culminating in the issuance of UN Resolution 2254 in December 2015, which calls for dialogue between the government and the opposition to achieve a political transition. Nonetheless, U.S.-Russian relations have severely deteriorated due to the war in Ukraine, reaching a peak of tension recently when President Biden authorized Ukraine to use long-range ATACMS missiles.

The Russian-Ukrainian war has become a pivotal point in the global conflict between two blocs: the United States and its allies on one side, and Russia and China on the other. This struggle has been reflected in various hotspots around the world, including Korea, Taiwan, Africa, and Palestine, raising the likelihood of Syria once again becoming an arena for settling scores between major powers.

The events of October 7 and their repercussions have also reshaped U.S. calculations in the region. Israel received unconditional American support in its war against Hezbollah and Hamas, escalating confrontations with Iran and its regional allies. With increasing U.S. pressure to expel Iran from Syria, and the return of President Trump, known for his hardline stance on Iran, the drive to reduce Iranian influence in Syria appears poised to intensify in the coming period.

Based on these developments, and following the conclusion of the ceasefire agreement that included provisions to halt the flow of weapons to Lebanon, Turkey appears to have viewed this as an opportune moment to achieve several strategic objectives in the Syrian file. These objectives include imposing a new reality on its partners in the Astana process, pressuring the Syrian regime to engage in negotiations under the strain of military operations, and positioning itself before the United States as a new guarantor of regional stability ahead of the incoming U.S. administration. This approach is driven by several factors:

-Repercussions of the Battle in Lebanon: The severe damage dealt to Hezbollah, who is considered the primary force supporting the Syrian regime's presence on the ground, prompted Turkey to take advantage of the vacuum created by Hezbollah's waning influence.

-International Consensus on Expelling Iran from the Region: Efforts to halt the flow of weapons to Lebanon and contain Iranian influence provide Turkey with an opportunity to strengthen its position as a regional alternative in managing balances.

-Potential for Understanding with a War-Wearied Russia: Turkey is betting that Russia, exhausted from its prolonged war in Ukraine, will avoid direct confrontation. Shared economic interests between the two countries, as well as the need of Russia's for Turkey as a regional power to safeguard its future interests in Syria, and Turkey's role as a mediator in the Ukraine conflict further support this likelihood.

-Exploiting the Window Before Trump's Return: Turkey recognizes that Trump's potential return to power might bring new approaches aimed at halting regional conflicts and imposing a geopolitical reality aligned with U.S. interests. Accordingly, Ankara seeks to establish a new reality that aligns with its interests, particularly in countering Netanyahu's plans for a redefined Middle East.

Third: The Structure and Scope of the "Deterrence of Aggression" Operation

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham launched a military operation under the name "Deterrence of Aggression," in collaboration with a group of military factions unified under a joint operations room called the "Military Operations Management." Initially, these forces identified a set of military objectives at the start of the operation. However, these objectives evolved and expanded following significant and rapid successes achieved on the ground.

1-Participating Factions:

I-Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS):

The most powerful and prominent faction involved, HTS originated from Jabhat al-Nusra and rebranded under its current name in 2017 following the merger of several Syrian armed factions. HTS opposes the Astana negotiations, viewing them as part of what it calls a "conspiracy against the Syrian revolution." The group remains a contentious point between Turkey and Russia, as Russia demands its dismantling under the terms of the Russian-Turkish agreement, citing its classification on international terrorism lists. HTS has undergone structural changes, including declaring its separation from al-Qaeda, and continues efforts to improve its image.

II-National Liberation Front (NLF):

A coalition of Syrian armed opposition factions in Idlib Province, formed in 2018 amidst threats of a regime offensive on the region

III-Ahrar al-Sham Movement:

Established in 2011, Ahrar al-Sham identifies itself as a comprehensive Islamist reformist movement aiming to overthrow the Syrian regime and establish an Islamic state. Once among the strongest factions in Syria, its influence waned after the assassination of its leaders in Ram Hamdan in 2014. The group describes itself as a comprehensive military, political, social, and Islamic entity.

IV-Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP):

Comprising Uyghur Muslim jihadists who arrived from their homeland in China in small numbers under the banner of jihad in 2013, the group saw continued inflows of members and their families throughout that year. They were later joined by other jihadists from Gulf, North African, Asian, and Western countries. The group is known for its strong reputation and influence, demonstrating significant combat expertise and effective battlefield management.

What stands out in this military operation is the high level of discipline demonstrated by the participating factions, closely resembling the performance of regular armies. This distinctive military discipline bolsters assumptions of Turkish support for the operation, evident in several observable aspects of the operations, including:

- Formal elements such as advanced weaponry, standardized uniforms, the absence of factional flags in favor of the opposition flag, and strict media discipline.
- No recorded violations against civilians or combatants, as reported by human rights organizations thus far.
- High combat efficiency, organization, and pre-planned strategies, reflected in deliberate movements and consistent, significant successes.
- The use of drones, which have proven pivotal in shifting the course of battles and narrowing the gap with the Syrian army, which is supported by the Russian air force.

2-Objectives of the Operation

The Military Operations Management described the operation as a preemptive strike. Its declared objectives, as stated by key leaders, include:

- Protecting civilians in areas under its control in Idlib and western Aleppo countryside from the threat of shelling and military attacks by the regime.
- Disrupting the regime's plans by launching preemptive strikes on its positions, aiming to reduce the military influence of the regime and its allied militias in opposition-held areas.
- Facilitating the return of displaced persons who were forced to flee their homes due to military operations and repeated bombardments, enabling them to return to their original homes and regions.

The opposition factions achieved swift territorial gains, capturing over 250 square kilometers within two days of launching the operation. This included dozens of villages and towns across Aleppo and Idlib. The region then witnessed a sudden collapse in the Syrian regime's frontlines under the coordinated offensive, which resulted in the opposition taking full control of Aleppo—out of regime hands for the first time in 50 years of its rule—as well as the entirety of Idlib Province and key strategic international highways, reaching Hama City.

This rapid progress can be attributed to several factors:

- Hezbollah's withdrawal from Syria and the lack of sufficient Iran-backed fighters in the region.
- The opposition factions' training, combat efficiency, and access to technical and logistical support.
- The collapse of Syrian army morale in the face of the opposition's swift advances.
- The reluctance of the local population to fight, driven by harsh economic conditions, dissatisfaction with regime policies, and in some cases, sympathy for the advancing forces.

Fourth: Regional and International Reactions and Expected Scenarios

The unexpected successes of the operation have raised expectations among its participants and large segments of the Syrian population. This includes those in opposition-held areas, refugees in host countries, and even residents of government-controlled regions, who see it as a potential breakthrough to end stagnation and push the Syrian issue toward a political resolution or a transformative change that could alleviate their dire living conditions.

However, it has also sparked concerns among other Syrians about an uncertain future, the resurgence of the horrors of conflict, or the implications of a victory by Islamist factions. These concerns center on how these factions will manage relations with Syrians of diverse backgrounds, despite the inclusive rhetoric and practices they have demonstrated thus far.

These developments have elicited varied reactions and differing stances from regional and international powers. This is particularly significant given that the Syrian conflict has long been shaped by the will, interests, and calculations of influential states and their proxies on the ground. Among the most prominent actors in this context are the United States, Turkey, Russia, Iran, and the Gulf Arab states.

1-Arab and International Positions:**The United States and its Allies (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom):**

A joint statement was issued calling for de-escalation in Syria, emphasizing the need to protect civilians and infrastructure in conflict areas. The statement highlighted the urgent need for a comprehensive political solution to the Syrian crisis, to be achieved through a peace process led by Damascus in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. This resolution provides a framework for a political transition that ensures stability and inclusiveness for all Syrian parties.

Turkey: Turkey reaffirmed that the stability of Idlib is a strategic priority and reiterated its commitment to the Astana agreements aimed at managing the situation in the region. Expressing deep concerns over the recent escalation, Turkey described the attacks on Idlib as a significant threat to regional security, given the proximity of these areas to its borders. The Turkish Foreign Minister stated that it is inaccurate to consider the events solely as external interference, holding the Syrian regime responsible for the developments due to its unwillingness to negotiate with the opposition. Accordingly, Turkey insists on the necessity of the Syrian regime engaging in a serious political process with the opposition to resolve the ongoing crisis.

Russia: Russia reaffirmed its full support for the Syrian regime, emphasizing that the situation in Aleppo represents a violation of Syrian sovereignty. Moscow called for the swift restoration of regime control over the region. This support has been evident in Russia's direct military intervention, with Russian air forces conducting more than 450 airstrikes since the start of the operation. Despite this backing, Russia dismissed the military official in charge of its operations in Syria, reflecting dissatisfaction with the field performance in light of the developments.

Iran: Iran views the offensive as a violation of the Astana agreements, claiming it is part of a U.S.-Israeli plan to destabilize the region. Iran expressed its readiness to defend the Syrian regime and criticized Turkey, with the Deputy Supreme Leader accusing Ankara of miscalculating and falling into a U.S. trap.

Arab States: The UAE, Egypt, and Jordan issued statements supporting Damascus, emphasizing the importance of restoring security and stability while underscoring the need to respect Syria's unity and territorial integrity. Conversely, some Arab countries expressed concerns over the escalating conflict but stressed the necessity of adopting a comprehensive political approach to address the current situation. Iraq announced the securing of its borders with Syria and expressed its readiness to support Damascus in maintaining security and stability in the region.

Israel: According to Israeli media, the current developments in Syria may benefit Israeli security, particularly if Hezbollah deploys its forces to Syria, potentially reducing tensions along Israel's northern borders. "Haaretz" reported that Israeli officials are preparing for all possible scenarios, including the potential fall of the Syrian regime. Israel's Foreign Minister stated that the country does not side with any of the warring parties. However, Israel's position reflects concerns over two possibilities: either Iran strengthening its military presence in Syria or Islamist forces gaining control over areas adjacent to Israel's northern borders.

2-Scenarios for International and Regional Engagement in the Conflict

The international landscape is marked by a clear divergence of positions that makes reconciliation difficult. While the Syrian regime has garnered Arab sympathy due to concerns over Turkish-backed political Islamist forces gaining control of Syria—a development many Arab states view as a threat to their national security—the prospect of providing substantial support to the regime remains complex and fraught with challenges. On the other hand, it appears unlikely to shift the regime's stance toward accepting a political solution as long as it continues to receive unwavering Iranian support. For Iran, an opposition victory would signify the complete loss of its regional project, creating an opening for numerous scenarios that could reshape the region's dynamics.

Scenario One: Revisiting the 2016 Aleppo Model

The Syrian regime aims to replicate an approach similar to 2015, following the Russian-Iranian intervention that enabled it to reclaim most of the territories under opposition control, or by leveraging fears of extremist Islamist forces taking over. However, this scenario seems unlikely to succeed because of several reasons:

I-Different Context from 2015:

The events of 2015 were based on a U.S.-Russian understanding that resulted in UN Resolution 2254, outlining a framework for a political solution. This agreement also involved a division of roles: U.S. influence in eastern Euphrates and Russian dominance in the rest of Syria. Additionally, there was a tacit U.S. "mandate" for Iran, stemming from a side agreement linked to the Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran.

II-The scenario for the recapture of Aleppo in 2016 required three conditions that are currently unavailable: First, the presence of ground forces, which the Syrian regime no longer possesses, especially after the blows suffered by Iranian militias and Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria. Second, Russian military intervention, which relied on intensive bombing tactics, as well as the involvement of the Wagner Group. Third, Arab support, which seems unlikely given the lack of trust in the Damascus regime's

commitment to advancing a political solution. Additionally, Arab support in this case would mean the resurgence of Iranian influence, which the Arab states are aiming to weaken in Syria.

III-It appears that the opposition has learned its lesson and is striving to provide regional and international assurances by presenting a civilian front, especially with the presence of the Turkish guarantor.

IV-The regime has lost a significant portion of its popular base and is experiencing a moral collapse in its controlled areas following its loss of Hama. Furthermore, its narrative of protecting minorities has crumbled after the Druze uprising in Sweida (August 2023) and the detachment of the Ismaili sect from the regime. This came after Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham entered the city of Salamiyah under an agreement with the Ismaili council and the city's dignitaries.

Scenario Two: Iraqi Involvement and Unconditional Iranian and Russian Support

Both Russia and Iran remain committed to their ally in Damascus despite their engagements on other fronts, as both possess sufficient military capabilities to alter the course of the battle. Russia, currently contributing through airstrikes to contain the offensive, could intensify and make its involvement more effective if Iran provides experienced ground fighters. Although Iran's military arms have suffered significant losses in their conflict with Israel, it can still rely on a large number of Iraqi militias, particularly given the eagerness of some factions to defend the Damascus regime. However, this scenario remains unlikely, at least for the following reasons:

I- The intervention of Iranian militias would ignite a sectarian war between Sunnis and Shiites, potentially creating a fire belt stretching from Tripoli in Lebanon to Mosul in Iraq. Such an escalation would threaten the stability of the entire region for years, a scenario many Arab and international parties would reject due to its catastrophic implications for regional and global security.

II- This scenario would present Israel with an opportunity to exploit sectarian conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon to redraw the regional map in line with its interests. Intensified conflict could lead to the fragmentation of the region into warring sectarian states, weakening centralized governments. This fragmentation would enable Israel to expand its influence and tighten its control over the West Bank and Gaza, as well as strengthen its military operations in southern Lebanon and Syria without facing unified opposition.

III- Such a gamble could provoke a confrontation with Turkey's firm stance on protecting its national security. Turkey has strong maneuvering capabilities, leveraging its balanced relationships with both the United States and Russia, in addition to its military and economic strength. In contrast, Iran faces increasing international isolation and internal crises, which compel it to seek to rebuild ties with the West and negotiate understandings with the Trump administration, when it returns to power.

IV- There is a growing Iraqi stance against involvement in the Syrian war. Notably, Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr reaffirmed Iraq's refusal to engage in Syria, emphasizing that the Syrian people alone should determine their future. Furthermore, Hezbollah, after its heavy losses in its war with Israel, does not appear to be in a military position to participate in a conflict of this scale. Additionally, U.S. targeting of Iranian militias on the Iraqi border reflects America's opposition to Iran's involvement in destabilizing Syria.

V- Following the loss of the Hama battle, it is unlikely that Russia would risk losing its interests in a war doomed to fail. Such involvement could turn Syria into a profound adversary and jeopardize Russia's relations with Turkey.

Scenario Three: The Battle of Hama and Shaping the Parameters of a Settlement

The political settlement in Syria is now directly tied to the military outcomes on the ground, particularly in the battles of Hama and Homs, which may define the upcoming scenario—whether achieving a political resolution or reverting to stalemate with new conflict boundaries. The opposition factions' success in taking control of Hama marked a significant turning point in the balance of power. They now stand on the brink of entering Homs, expected to fall soon to opposition forces due to the chaos that erupted within the Syrian army after its retreat from Hama, potentially leading to a swift collapse.

Given this situation, regional and international actors, especially Russia and Turkey, are likely to seek to maintain a balance that prevents the complete collapse of the regime. This approach aims to avoid a political or security vacuum that could lead to broader chaos in the region, redirecting military objectives toward defined political boundaries that support a comprehensive settlement. This effort will hinge on the upcoming Astana tripartite meeting scheduled in Doha on December 7, where Turkey is expected to leverage the military success in Hama to push for a political settlement with the Syrian regime. This would involve a Turkish-Russian understanding aligned with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Signs of this direction have already emerged following the recent escalations. However, this settlement faces fundamental challenges, the most notable being the differences among Astana parties. Diverging interests among Turkey, Russia, and Iran hinder the achievement of a final agreement. Additionally, the Syrian regime and its ally Iran's intransigence regarding a political solution may obstruct reaching a consensus among the stakeholders. If this deadlock persists, Homs could become a focal point for field-level maneuvers. Russia and Iran might aim to preserve the current military maps until international shifts become clearer, with all parties waiting for the return of Trump to power.

Meanwhile, Turkey, in collaboration with opposition factions, will aim to secure victory in Homs. If successful, it could lead to the regime's total collapse, paving the way for opposition forces to march unimpeded toward Damascus. This scenario would necessitate a political transition under Turkish guarantees and international oversight.

Conclusion:

The Syrian crisis, which erupted in 2011, transcends a mere military conflict among warring factions; it is a multifaceted political, social, and economic crisis requiring comprehensive and fundamental solutions at all levels. Analyzing the dynamics of deterring aggression reveals that the outcomes of such operations remain contingent upon numerous factors that go beyond military escalation. Understanding the full dimensions of this operation necessitates considering both local and broader regional and international contexts, allowing for lessons to be drawn in anticipating future solutions. The military operation currently unfolding in the region is deeply infused with emotional intensity and a long history of suffering. However, the operation occurring at a critical juncture, cannot be understood in isolation from regional and international developments.

Since Russia's military intervention in 2015, Western influence has waned, enabling the Syrian regime to achieve significant military advances in recent years. However, regional shifts after October 7 have reignited the Syrian file, potentially revitalizing efforts for a political resolution—though this depends on the actions of key stakeholders involved in the crisis. If Russia and Iran decide to support the Syrian regime's efforts to reclaim opposition-held territories, this could deepen divisions among Syrian factions and create new conflict lines. Ignoring the profound shifts in regional and international dynamics renders such a scenario fraught with risks of escalation that could extend beyond Syria and reshape the broader region.

Thus, a political solution remains the optimal path to avoid further destruction and ensure long-term stability. Achieving this requires a return to UN-led diplomatic tracks, particularly the Geneva process, and a pursuit of a comprehensive settlement that forms the foundation for resolving the crisis. However, such a scenario is likely to take time due to fundamental disagreements among the Astana trio, which are expected to reflect on the ground in the coming days and hours, depending on the outcomes of the battle in Homs.

