

Palestine: Assad strikes Idlib as world looks to Gaza

Friday 10 November 2023, by [DAHER Joseph](#), [HAGE Clara](#) (Date first published: 6 November 2023).

Joseph Daher, a professor at the University of Lausanne, spoke to L'Orient-Le Jour about the increase in strikes on northwest Syria.

This is the most violent escalation Syria has seen in three years. In one month, more than 65 civilians, including 20 children, were killed in strikes targeting Idlib, said the White Helmets, the Syrian civil defense operating in northwest Syria.

While all eyes are focused on the war in Gaza, the Syrian regime's forces, backed by the Russian army, relentlessly pound what is considered the last stronghold of the opposition. Idlib is mainly controlled by the jihadist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group and other opposition factions supported by Turkey, which itself is attacking Kurdish areas on its border with Syria.

The Syrian government intensified strikes mere months after Syria's return to the Arab League in May, bringing 12 years of suspension to an end. Speaking to L'Orient-Le Jour, University of Lausanne professor Joseph Daher takes stock of the situation.

Q- Why have the Syrian regime and its Russian ally begun to step up their strikes against the opposition [at this time]?

A- The shelling of Syria's northwestern region has never really stopped in recent years. However, there has been an intensification of Russian and Syrian regime bombing since Oct. 5, following an attack on a graduation ceremony at a military academy in the city of Homs, which killed up to 120 people. The explosives-laden drones most likely came from a neighboring area controlled by the Islamist opposition's "armed groups" that are affiliated with the Turkish state and HTS. This first event served as a pretext for the Syrian regime and its Russian ally to start stepping up the bombardments, which continued throughout the month. Since early October, more than 65 civilians have been killed and more than 120,000 people have been displaced.

At virtually the same time, the Turkish army bombed areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria [led by Kurdish forces, allies of the United States in their fight against the Islamic State organization], following a suicide attack on Oct. 2 at the entrance to the Interior Ministry in the Turkish capital, Ankara, which injured two policemen and was claimed by a group affiliated to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

But the continuation and intensification of bombing in the northern regions by these actors is also linked to their desire to take advantage of the current international attention on Israel's deadly armed offensive against the Gaza Strip and the impunity available to the Israeli government to do so. These players therefore feel that they have more room to maneuver in the current political context to carry out these bombings.

Q- What does this say about the regime's current strategy towards this last opposition

stronghold, at a time when Bashar al-Assad is enjoying a degree of rehabilitation in the region?

A- The strategy of the Syrian regime and its Russian ally is to take advantage of the current situation to cause as much damage as possible and exacerbate the humanitarian tragedy in the north-west in order to put further pressure on Turkey in terms of the forced displacement of people fleeing the bombardments. Meanwhile, Ankara is expelling and seeking to expel many Syrians from Turkey (the return of Syrian refugees to their country was at the heart of the election campaign in the country in May). These bombings aim to push Turkey to further take into account the Damascus authorities' interests and to encourage Ankara to work more closely with them. However, for Ankara, an accelerated normalization with Damascus is out of the question because of the Syrian regime's inability — due to its political, military and economic weakness — to guarantee the Turkish government's interests on two fundamental points: the "Kurdish threat" in the north-east, and the reception and management of Syrian refugees expelled from Turkey.

Q- What consequences might this have for the balance of power in Syria, given the other players involved?

A- The balance of power in the north-west will not be altered by these bombings in the short term, but they could undoubtedly reinforce forms of collaboration between the various players involved, in particular Russia, Iran and Turkey, on the north-west file, as well as that of the north-east, even if other regional (the war in Gaza) and international (Russia and Ukraine) factors also need to be taken into account for any major change in the dynamics in northern Syria.

Syria's northwest territory has become an integral part of the Turkish state's border security framework, and so its future depends mainly on Ankara's security considerations. More generally, given the absence of any prospect of political transition and the Syrian regime's weakness which prevents the latter from recapturing the north-western territory by its means, the fate of the people of this region depends mainly on negotiations and discussions between Turkey, Russia, and Iran.

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