

## **‘Syrians must unite to create a free and democratic Syria’**

We talked to Ares Melkonyan, one of the commanders of the Shahid Nubar Ozanyan Armenian Brigade of the SDF, who announced that they are in the resistance positions against the attacks launched by the Turkish army directly and through its gangs.

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Important developments took place in Syria in December. The jihadist gangs dominating Idlib province in the north-west of Syria first captured Aleppo. Then they entered Damascus, the capital of Syria. They did not encounter any resistance. On 7 December 2024, the Assad regime was overthrown. Power was handed over to the jihadist organisation HTS, a former Al-Qaeda and ISIS successor.

Simultaneously with the HTS attack, the Turkish state, with its affiliated Syrian National Army (SMO) gang organisation, attacked areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration of North East Syria. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) responded with resistance to the attack of the SMO gangs on the areas under the control of the Autonomous Administration. Clashes continue especially around Manbij, Karakozak Bridge and Tishrin Dam. The aim of the Turkish state is to capture these regions and strategically encircle the city of Kobane. We conducted an interview with Ares Melkonyan, one of the commanders of the Shahid Nubar Ozanyan Armenian Brigade of the SDF, who announced that they are in the resistance positions against the attacks launched by the Turkish army directly and through its gangs.

***-We would like to start by thanking you for taking the time out of your busy schedule. With the overthrow of Assad, everything started to develop very fast in Syria. The jihadist coalition under the umbrella of HTS, which has come to power, is in contact with many states of the world in order to ensure its international legitimacy after Assad. What position do you think HTS will take in the US-US-Russia triangle?***

***Ares Melkonian:*** From day one, it was clear that Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham was working to change its image in the public opinion, especially in the eyes of Western countries, and to gain international legitimacy that would help it consolidate its domestic influence. It is foreseeable that Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham will be pro-US and pro-European and will distance itself from the Russian alliance. This is natural, because the overthrow of the Assad regime, which was a strategic ally of Russia, has created new balances within Syria and will consequently lead to a decrease in Russian influence and an increase in US and European influence in Syria. As a result, the new rulers coming to Damascus will certainly establish a pro-US and pro-European regime.

***-Since the day HTS came to power, Zionism has been occupying Syria step by step. It has come to within 20 kilometres of Damascus, and yet HTS and other jihadists act as if this situation does not exist, preferring to engage in conflict with Lebanon and threaten it. How should this situation be seen?***

***-It*** is true, the Israeli intervention inside Syria is part of Israeli policy and part of the war that Israel started more than a year ago in the Gaza Strip and also in South Lebanon. With the overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad regime, the Bass government's support for the Palestinian resistance was terminated. Moreover, by cutting the Iranian route from Baghdad to Beirut through Syrian territory, Israel is seeking to expand its sphere of influence and create a safer environment for the State of Israel. HTS is aware of this situation, but it is too weak to resist Israeli influence. In the past, Israel's harsh attacks on Hezbollah and Iranian militias weakened these forces and led to the overthrow of the Assad regime. Now, Israel will not only try to remain permanent in the territories it occupied in Syria, but will also try to ensure

its own security by keeping HTS as weak as possible. It should be recalled that immediately after the fall of the Assad regime, Israel carried out the largest airstrikes in its history and completely destroyed Syria's air and naval defence infrastructure. The Israeli air force reportedly carried out over 800 air strikes.

When HTS seized power, one of its first statements was that it did not want a war with Israel and that its targets were Iran and the Shiites. That is why we see that HTS has turned a blind eye to all Israeli interventions inside Syria. There will certainly be some developments in the coming days, and the new rulers of Damascus will act in a way that guarantees Israel's safety and security.

And certainly the new government will perhaps not demand the withdrawal of Israel from the territories it controls or recognise them as part of Israel. Because Israel's security is paramount. Most importantly, the Levant Liberation Movement wants to achieve a Sharia state, which it has not yet achieved, and it also seeks rapprochement with the West and America. In this case, it should not raise its voice against all the violations it is currently subjected to, but should submit to Israel's desires and close its eyes.

**'Hard times await the Syrian people!'**

***-HTS has been giving 'moderate' messages since day one. It is claimed that it will adopt an inclusive attitude towards non-Muslims and Alawites, but every day, images of mass killings, kidnappings and torture, especially in areas where Christians and Alawites live densely, are reflected to the public. Is HTS blaming the Alawites for all Assad's crimes on the grounds that they are Alawites?***

**-In fact**, words are one thing and actions are another. Yes, HTS speaks well about justice and equality, but the way it operates, especially given the many violations that have been committed and are still being committed, says something else. It is a crime against Christians and Alawites. If this points to anything, it is this: There is a perception among HTS that Alawites represent the old regime, the regime of Bashar al-Assad. This is a created perception and it is absolutely not true. Sunni Arabs were at the most important and critical points of the Assad regime. Nevertheless, HTS needs an 'enemy' after the Assad regime. In order to build and maintain its own regime. Therefore, difficult days await the Syrian people in the coming period. Because the Syrian people are a people with a wide variety of beliefs and nationalities.

***-Does a similar danger apply to Armenians and Assyrians?***

**-Of course**, the violation, threat or exclusion of any element of the Syrian people will be a sign of danger for the other elements and spectrum of Syria.

***- What is your situation in the field as the Nubar Ozanyan Armenian Brigade? In this context, in general terms, how is the course of the conflicts on the front line/on the ground. Can you inform us about this?***

**-We** exist as a military force and fulfil our military duties at the highest level. We are taking part with other components and the Syrian Democratic Forces in the fight against the daily Turkish threats and attacks against our regions. In addition, some of our comrades in the Euphrates region are deployed to counter any military action that may take place. Our forces are positioned in case of possible attacks against the Turkish occupation state, especially against the city of Kobani.

**'The autonomous region of North and East Syria is under threat!'**

**- As a brigade, do you have a call for the Armenian people, Alawites and other nationalities and beliefs in Syria?**

- First of all, we call on our people in all its diversity to stand with the military forces resisting the attacks carried out by the mercenaries supported by Turkey, especially in the Northern and Eastern regions of Syria, and to support them against the plans of the Turkish state aimed at destabilising the security and stability of these regions. We also send a message to all Syrians to unite with the entire spectrum of this people to create a free and democratic Syria. We call for an understanding that protects the rights of all Syrians, learns from the experiences of the past and rejects any monochromatic rule, instead representing Syrians in all their spectrum and colours.

**-What would you like to say to Armenians outside Syria and to the sensitive public opinion?**

- We appeal to our Armenian people and all world powers to continue to support the Syrian people. Because Syria has not yet recovered and is still in danger. Especially our regions, the autonomous region of Northern and Eastern Syria are still under threat. The attacks of the Turkish state and its gangs continue. With internal and external solidarity, with the support of the free peoples of the world and their unity with us, the sons and daughters of our people will be able to liberate and escape from all dangers.

**-Thank you for your time.**

- We thank you.

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