

US Is Stirring Up the Syrian Cauldron

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The circumstances surrounding the flare-up in Syria between the US occupation forces and pro-Iranian militia groups remain murky. President Biden [claims that the US is reacting](#), but there are signs that it is likely being proactive to create new facts on the ground.

The [US Central Command claims](#) that following a drone attack on March 23 afternoon on an American base near Hasakah, at the direction of President Biden, retaliatory air strikes were undertaken later that night against "facilities used by groups affiliated with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps."

However, this version has been disputed by the spokesman of Iran's Supreme National Security Council who accused Washington of "creating artificial crises and lying." The [Iranian official has alleged](#) that

"Over the past two days, American helicopters have carried out several sorties with the aim of increasing instability in Syria and transferred Daesh (Islamic State) terrorists in the territory of this country."

He said Washington must be held accountable for such activities. The official warned that Tehran will give a prompt response to any US attack on whatever false pretext against Iranian bases that exist on Syrian soil at the request of Damascus for fighting terrorism.

Is the US deliberately ratcheting up tensions in Syria even as the China-brokered Saudi-Iranian rapprochement is radically changing the security scenario in the West Asian region in a positive direction?

There is optimism that Syria stands to gain out of Saudi-Iranian rapprochement. Already, the [Saudi Foreign Ministry revealed](#) on Thursday that talks are going on with Syria for resuming consular services between the two countries, which will pave the way for the resumption of diplomatic relations and in turn make it possible to reinstate Syria's membership of the Arab

League.

Saudi Arabia has established an air bridge with Syria to send relief supplies for those affected by the devastating earthquake in February.

The backdrop is that the normalisation of relations between Syria and its estranged Arab neighbours has accelerated. It must be particularly galling for Washington that these regional states used to be active participants in the US-led regime change project to overthrow the government of President Bashar al-Assad. The Saudi-Iranian rapprochement badly isolates the US and Israel.

From such a perspective, it stands to reason that the US is once again stirring up the Syrian cauldron. Lately, Russian aircraft have been reported as [frequently flying over the US's military base At Tanf](#) on the Syrian-Iraqi border where training camps for militant groups are known to exist.

Israel too is a stakeholder in keeping Syria unstable and weak. In the Israeli narrative, Iran-backed militia groups are increasing their capability in Syria in the last two years and continued US occupation of Syria is vital for balancing these groups. Israel is paranoid that a strong government in Damascus will inevitably start challenging its illegal occupation of Golan Heights.

A key factor in this matrix is the nascent process of Russian mediation between Türkiye and Syria. With an eye on the forthcoming presidential and parliamentary election in Türkiye in May, President Recep Erdogan is keen to achieve some visible progress in improving the ties with Syria.

Erdogan senses that the Turkish public opinion strongly favours normalisation with Syria. Polls in December showed that 59 percent of Turks would like an early repatriation of Syrian refugees who are a burden on Turkish economy, which has an inflation rate of 90 percent.

Evidently, Türkiye is ending up as a straggler when the West Asian countries on the whole are coasting ahead to normalise their relations with Damascus. But the catch is, Assad is demanding the vacation of Turkish occupation of Syrian territory first for resuming ties with Ankara.

Now, there are growing signs that Erdogan may be willing to bite the bullet. The consummate pragmatist in him estimates that he must act in sync with the public mood. Besides, the main opposition party CHP always maintained that an end to the Syrian conflict needs to be anchored firmly on the principles of Syria's unity and territorial integrity.

The influential Beirut newspaper Al-Akhbar has reported citing sources close to Damascus that Erdogan is weighing options that would meet Assad's demand with a view to restore relations. The daily reported that one possibility is that Türkiye may propose a timetable for the withdrawal of its troops in Syria.

Significantly, Erdogan telephoned Russian President Vladimir Putin on Saturday and the [Kremlin readout](#) mentioned that amongst "topics concerning Russian-Turkish partnership in various fields," during the conversation, "the Syrian issue was touched upon, and the importance of continuing the normalisation of Turkish-Syrian relations was underlined. In this regard the President of Türkiye highlighted the constructive mediatory

role Russia has played in this process.”

Earlier, on Wednesday, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar held telephone talks with his Russian counterpart Sergei Shoigu to discuss developments in Syria [where he underscored](#) that the “sole purpose” of its deployment in northern Syria is to secure its borders and fight terrorism.

It is entirely conceivable that Erdogan has sought Putin’s help and intervention to reach a modus vivendi with Assad quickly. Of course, this is a spectacular success story for Russian diplomacy — and for Putin personally — that the Kremlin is called upon to broker the Turkish-Syrian normalisation.

The China-brokered Saudi-Iranian normalisation hit Washington where it hurts. But if Putin now brokers peace between two other rival West Asian states, Biden will be exposed as hopelessly incompetent.

And, if Turkiye ends its military presence in Syria, the limelight will fall on the US’ illegal occupation of one-third of Syrian territory and the [massive smuggling of oil](#) and other resources from Syria in American military convoys.

Furthermore, the Syrian government forces are sure to return to the territories vacated by Turkish forces in the northern border regions, which would have consequences for the Kurdish groups operating in the border region who are aligned with the Pentagon.

In sum, continued US occupation of Syria may become untenable. To be sure, Russia, Turkiye, Iran and Syria are on the same page in seeking the vacation of US occupation of Syria.

Thus, an alibi is needed for the US to justify that although dialogue and reconciliation is in ascendance in West Asian politics, Syria is an exception as a battleground against “terrorism.” The US is vastly experienced in using extremist groups as geopolitical tools.

The US’ real intention could be to confront Iran on Syrian soil — something that Israel has been espousing — taking advantage of Russia’s preoccupations in Ukraine. The Russian-Iranian axis annoys Washington profoundly.

The spectre that is haunting Washington is that the stabilisation of Syria following Assad’s normalisation with the Arab countries and with Turkiye will inexorably coalesce into a Syrian settlement that completely marginalises the “collective West.”

In retrospect, the unannounced visit by General Mark Milley, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff to northern Syria in early March falls into perspective. Milley told reporters traveling with him that the nearly eight-year-old US deployment to Syria is still worth the risk!

The time may have come for the militants, including ex-Islamic State fighters, who were trained in the US’s remote At Tanf military base to return to the killing fields for “active duty.”

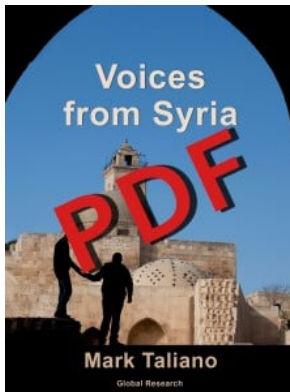
[Tass reported](#) that on Friday, the terrorist group known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham tried to break into the Aleppo region which has been under Syrian government control and relatively stable in the recent years.

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Featured image: US Joint Chiefs Chair, General Mark Milley (L) paid an unannounced visit to a US military base in Northeast Syria, March 3, 2023 (Source: [IP](#))

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