



The threat of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham for women in Syria

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), also known as Tahrir al-Sham, emerged in 2017 as a coalition of several Salafist jihadist groups involved in the Syrian civil war. It includes groups with close links to Al-Qaeda as well as former Islamic State (IS) fighters. It is internationally designated as a terrorist organisation. Nevertheless, with the support of international forces, including Turkey in particular, it launched an offensive against Aleppo, Hama and Damascus on 27 November 2024, overthrowing the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad. By invading the capital Damascus and Homs, HTS proclaimed a new government without the participation of other Syrian political parties and demographics and intend to rule Syria on the basis of their Islamist fundamentalist ideology.

The situation of women under HTS control

Since 2015, the Idlib region in northwestern Syria has been under the control of various Islamist mercenary groups, including precursors of HTS. HTS seized power in Idlib in July 2017. Since then, they have worked to install their own political and economic system, which has many links to the Turkish state. They have also imposed their strict religious practices on the population, especially women.

Under the rule of the HTS in Idlib, the population experienced major changes in their daily lives. They introduced a strict social and legal system based on their interpretation of Islamic law. This brought with it many restrictions and challenges for women. Women's social and religious freedom was limited, with far-reaching consequences in areas such as education, employment opportunities and social relations. These harsh conditions have resulted in women becoming more vulnerable to violence and suffering hardship.

Media reports on the HTS and its treatment of women

According to an anonymous journalist from the Al Ain News Agency (al-ain.com), hundreds of women protested against the rule of HTS in the city of Idlib in northwestern Syria on 25 December 2020, demanding the release of prisoners. The women held banners that read: *'We do not accept ransom, we only accept revenge. We will not sell the blood of our children to al-Jolani. Idlib is free and will remain free'* and *'Hayat get out of Idlib'*. There were also calls for an end to house raids by members of HTS security forces, who have become warlords and control all aspects of life in Idlib province.

The news agency Al-Arabi Al-Jadeed (newarab.com) reported in 2022 that extremist groups in Idlib are inspired by the experience of Afghanistan. Their restrictions on the population depend on the degree of their control and the stability of their power. They reported that *'Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham worked with a single strategy when they started to control Idlib. If they saw a young man smoking, they would approach him and admonish him on religious grounds, as well as girls who wore make-up, short jackets or bright colours. At first, they passed these admonitions off as advice, but as their power grew, they began to harass women. Even today, they refuse to allow men and women to gather. Moreover, men are forbidden to enter women's clothing shops'*.



Experiences of women in Idlib with HTS and its methodology

- Rana (42, widow) *'After my husband was killed, I was in great need. Without the escort of a male family member (mahram), I am not allowed to work outside the house. I sew in secret to feed my children. I am always afraid of being discovered by the members of the commission.'*
- Samira (35, teacher): *'Before Tahrir al-Sham came to power, I worked in a public school. Now I have to teach separate classes for girls only, with a restricted curriculum. My salary has been cut and sometimes I don't get paid at all. I feel like a prisoner in my workplace.'*
- An anonymous activist: *'The extremist organisations are also growing and gaining support within the poor conservative sections of society on the grounds of implementing Sharia law. In these communities they start social projects, distribute financial aid and promote religious and ideological education. As they gain power, they begin to impose their religious interpretations on society and use violence and arrests to control their application - all with the intention of implementing Sharia law.'*
- Hala (28, human rights activist): *'I have been arrested twice for my human rights activities. My interrogations have been humiliating and painful. We tried to set up a support network for women, but we had to work in complete secrecy for fear of repression by the Commission.'*
- Nora (38, doctor): *'After strict restrictions were imposed, I left the hospital. I worked alone in the women's department under arbitrary conditions. Most of my colleagues fled the region in search of freedom.'*
- Ayshe (27, teacher and migrant from Damascus): *'We are Muslims and have known our religious teachings since childhood. But for someone to come and interfere in all the details of our lives under the pretext of religion is a disaster.' ... 'A girl who wears jogging trousers that only cover her knees is called liberal because the trousers must reach to the ankle. It is better to wear Islamic clothing and a loose black veil than a veil that hides every detail of the face and body. But no make-up or colourful clothes should be visible on the face.'*

What status will women have under the HTS regime in Syria?

HTS currently claims to control 70% of Syrian territory. In major cities such as Damascus, Homs and Aleppo, they have started using the same methods as in Idlib to target women in public, criticising them for their dress and appearance and demanding that they wear headscarves. They are also using women, like the newly appointed family secretary, to campaign for the implementation of restrictive rules for all of Syria, based on the guidelines in Idlib.

If the HTS consolidates its power, it will have far-reaching consequences for the lives of women in Syria. They will be deprived of their rights and freedoms in the name of religion, leading to an increase in cases of sexual violence, abduction and forced migration. And women will be even more burdened than before in their social and economic responsibilities for their families, on top of the already existing humanitarian crisis.