

Recent developments in Syria: Impact on women and society

The takeover of power by HTS and what humanitarian significance this has.

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1. Short overview

Since 27 November 2024, Syria has witnessed a significant escalation in the conflict due to offensives launched by Turkish-backed extremist groups in the Aleppo region. The offensive was primarily led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an organisation linked to Al-Qaeda and followed by the Syrian National Army (SNA) and other groups of jihadist terrorists reminiscent of the Islamic State.

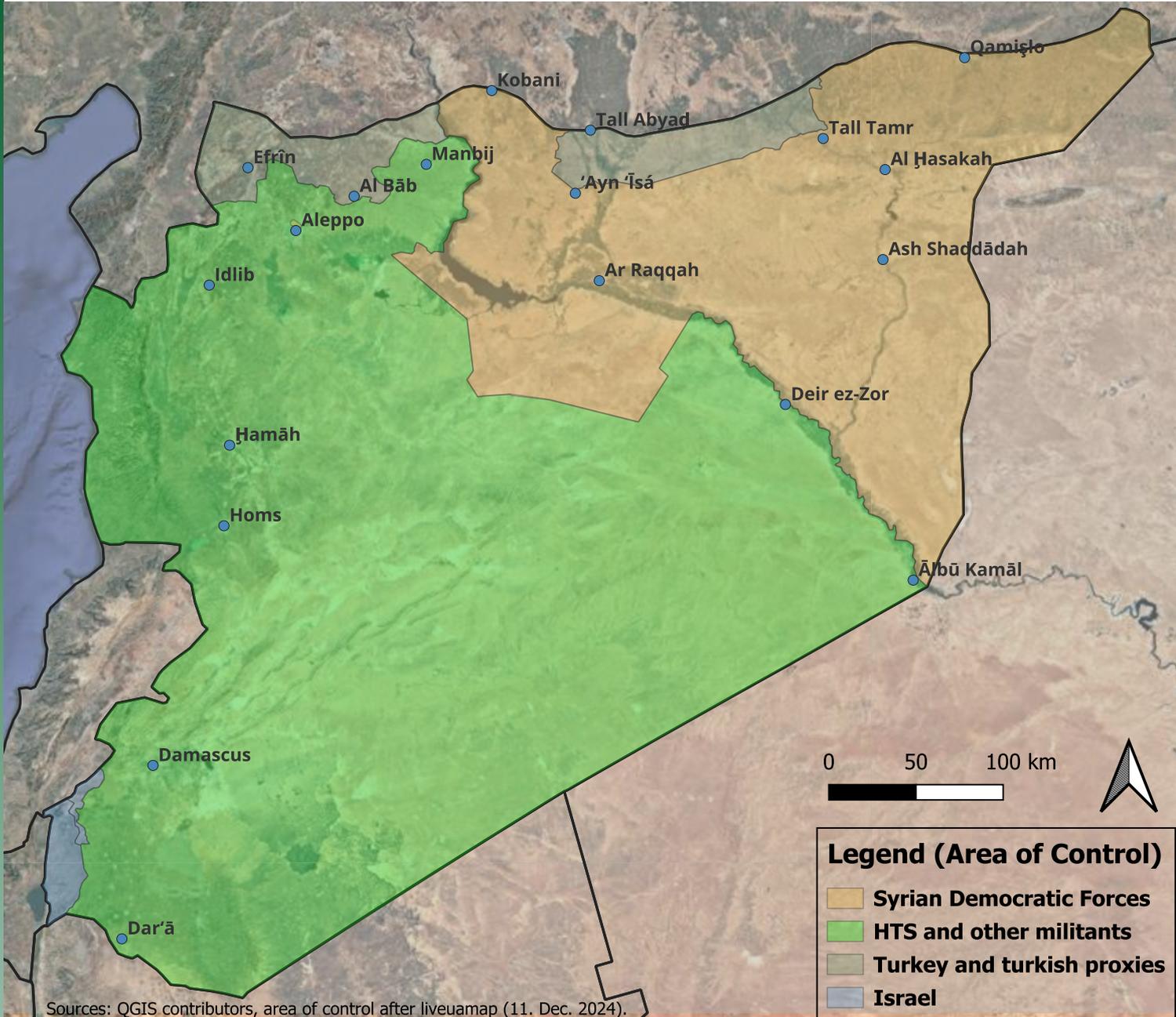
At first the combats concentrated in the provinces of Idlib, Aleppo and Hama, resulting in more than 500 deaths, including civilians, and the displacement of 48,500 people in just one week (data from the Deutsche Welle, 02/12/2024). Afterwards these paramilitary troops overran large parts of western and southern Syria without encountering any significant resistance from the Syrian army, its allied Russian and Iranian forces nor any interference of Western powers.

HTS and SNA troops then overran large parts of western and southern Syria without encountering any significant resistance from the Syrian army, its allied Russian and Iranian forces or interference from Western powers. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) took position to defend in the Sheikh Maqsoud and Eshrefiye areas of Aleppo and established a humanitarian corridor for around 200,000 people from the Shehba region who have been subjected to serious human rights violations, including beheadings, by the attacking SNA forces. The majority of the displaced persons are Kurds from Afrin who are now seeking refuge in other regions of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES).

On 8 December 2024, the Baath regime was overthrown, and the former Al-Qaeda / El Nusra fighter, and present HTS leader Muhammad Jolani declared his rule. After long years of dictatorship and war, people from the various national and religious communities in Syria - especially women - remain deeply concerned about their safety and their future. The ongoing heavy attacks by the Turkish army and the SNA on the DAANES regions, which have intensified since 8 December, underline these legitimate concerns.



Map of Syria





2. Who are these groups?

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) was formed in 2017 through the merger of several groups, including Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra), Ansar al-Din, Jaysh al-Sunna, Liwa al-Haqq, and Nour al-Din al-Zenki.

These factions are Islamist militias that, under the banner of jihad. They are known for their extremist ideology and brutal tactics, including beheadings, sexual violence, and other acts of terror. Initially formed as Jabhat al-Nusra in 2012, HTS was an Al-Qaeda affiliate, but it officially severed ties with the global jihadist network in 2016 under its leader Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani. In this sense, many former ISIS fighters are now part of HTS for ideological proximity. While HTS publicly distances itself from ISIS and Al-Qaeda, it shares roots with both organisations.

Despite their moderate public image - strategically used to garner international support. The HTS continue to share many of the same radical ideologies of Al-Qaeda and has continued to receive support from foreign actors, including Turkey, although it has also engaged in violent clashes with other opposition groups. Several reports continue to highlight its involvement in human rights abuses, and its alignment with other jihadist groups has remained a concern for both regional and global powers, as we can see from the images on social media in the region and local reports for political and humanitarian organisations on the ground.



Rebel fighters ride in a vehicle after they seized Damascus and ousted President Bashar in Syria, December 9, 2024. Mohamed Azakir/Reuters



3. Why are we concerned about their activities in the region?

The current situation in northeast Syria bears striking similarities to ISIS's rapid and unexpected capture of Mosul in 2014, with little resistance from local forces. It's important to address that HTS's ultimate goal has been to overthrow the Syrian government with the aim to establish an Islamic state based on its interpretation of Sharia law. Images of HTS fighters with ISIS emblems illustrate ideological and organisational links. Dramatic implications of this new regime, particularly for the region's stability and the future of local minority communities and Syrian society itself are evident. If HTS were to succeed in their ambitions, it could lead to further fragmentation of Syria, exacerbating sectarian tensions and potentially creating a haven for other jihadist factions. This vision for Syria's future contrasts sharply with the existing political structures in the country, particularly the Kurdish-led self-administration in the north and east (AANES), which promotes a more democratic, inclusive governance model.

Such a shift could also have regional consequences, influencing other parts of the Middle East. The presence of HTS in northwestern Syria, including in areas like Idlib, could draw in external actors, such as Turkey, which supports certain opposition groups, or even the United States and Russia, who have competing interests in Syria. The group's radical ideology, based on an interpretation of Islamic law that aligns with other jihadist movements like the Islamic State, could spark more violence and further complicate efforts to broker peace in Syria.

Furthermore, the human cost of HTS's ambitions cannot be ignored. Their violent tactics have led to widespread displacement, significant civilian casualties, and ongoing human rights abuses in areas under their control. These actions undermine efforts to achieve a political resolution to the conflict, perpetuating cycles of violence and humanitarian crises in the region.

Although they are more modest in their initial statements after the recent offensive, we have already seen serious human rights violations in the regions they occupy and control.

One example of these actions directed against the civilian population is the operation



carried out by more than 15,000 Turkish-backed SNA mercenaries in the Tel Rifaat and Shehba regions, which have housed around 200,000 people who have fled Afrin since 2018. They have launched large-scale kidnapping and enslavement campaigns against civilians in the besieged regions. Over 120 vehicles carrying hundreds of civilians attempting to evacuate to safer areas in Northern and Eastern Syria were abducted and taken to an unknown location near the Sheikh Najjar area.

The besieged civilians have endured harsh conditions, facing starvation and water shortages. Another example of these actions directed against the civilian population are the massacres against the population in Minbic in the course of a new occupation offensive. During the Turkish-backed SNA mercenaries' offensive, which has been ongoing since December 8, civilians have been both bombed from the air by Turkey and massacred by the SNA. It is reported that specifically female activists are being attacked and brutally murdered such as the three activists Qamar al-Sud, Aisha Abdul Qader and Iman al-Musa who were members of the women's organization Zenobiya on December 10.



4 What are the impacts of these actions at the regional and international levels?

4.1 Territorial Redistribution and Forced Displacement

At the regional level, one of the most significant impacts has been in the area of demographic and territorial transformation through the forced displacement of vulnerable populations caused by the actions of extremist groups, particularly Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA). The Turkish-backed forces have used military operations and extremist militias to alter the demographic composition of northern Syria, implementing Turkey's interests in reshaping the region's demography through ethnic and demographic engineering.

The main impact is seen in the waves of migration into regions still struggling with the effects of war. This puts further strain on the fragile infrastructure of these areas, exacerbating the harmful effects not only on the populations already established there but also directly on those seeking refuge. More than 200,000 of Kurdish and other minority civilians have been forcibly displaced as jihadist groups have advanced in recent days in key areas such as Aleppo, Tel Rifaat and Minbic. These groups, often supported or coordinated by Turkish forces, have carried out targeted attacks, forcing civilians to flee en masse. More than 14,000 people have been displaced by the violence in Aleppo in recent days alone, with significant numbers moving into already overburdened refugee camps.

Reports from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) highlight that, since 2012, more than 19.6 million people have been displaced (internally and internationally) in Syria, due to conflict and violence. The European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations states that "The conflict in Syria over the past 13 years has forcibly displaced more than 11 million people and caused at least 350,000 deaths. Within the country, around 7.2 million individuals are internally displaced, while over 5 million have sought refuge across international borders."



In this scenario, the regions of Democratic Autonomy are key areas of organising peoples self-defence against militarist, inhuman threats and creating relatively safe spaces for diverse communities. This is the case of the Kurdish and Christian self-organized districts of Sheikh Maqsood and Ashrafiyeh. However, they are now under siege. While other regions like Minbic, Tebqa, Reqa, Kobane, Deira Zor and Cizire are under direct attacks of Turkish airforces and artillery, leading NSA fighters as ground troops.

Amid this context of violence and uncertainty, hundreds of thousands of displaced people, braving harsh winter conditions. They face not only the brutality of extremist groups but also life-threatening weather, which heightens the risk of death and illness. One of the youngest victims of this humanitarian disaster is baby Noah, a 4-month-old forcibly displaced from the Afrin and Shahba regions. Tragically, Noah succumbed to the cold during the arduous journey, as reported by Channel 8 on December 4th. But victims like Noah are not just under the threat of harsh conditions in their journeys to find somewhere safe. Thousands of children, girls and women are at risk of gender-based violence.



Source: Ronahi TV- Caravans of refugees fleeing from Shehba to AANES regions/ December 4



4.2 Extreme violence against women and children

Gender-based violence and restrictive anti-women's rights laws are a common tactic used by extremist groups in the region. Under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), women in Idlib have been facing severe repression and violence. These women are subject to arbitrary arrests, torture, and even executions, often under false or fabricated charges. Some of the accusations levied against them include "collaborating with foreign organisations," "adultery," or "insulting Islamic sanctities." For instance, several women have been executed without a fair trial, and their families are often left powerless, unable to contest the charges due to fear of retaliation by HTS.

In many cases, these women are accused merely because they defied HTS policies, such as rejecting forced marriages to HTS members or protesting the arrest of their family members, as reported by the women's agency JINHA. The cruelty extends to the denial of funerals and family visits, as seen in the case of a mother whose daughter was executed without notice. Reports about the issue state that "At least 78 gender-based violence (GBV) service delivery points, which regularly served over 7,000 women and girls, have halted services across 14 sub-districts."

The 2020 report on the Turkish army's invasion of Afrin (2018) and Serê Kaniyê & Girê Spî (2020), in collaboration with extremist jihadist groups, proves that femicide and gender-based violence is one of the key pillars of the strategy of action in the region. The report shows that women in the Afrin region, which has been under Turkish occupation since 2018, have faced serious human rights violations, including systematic violence, abductions and forced marriages. Reports from human rights groups have highlighted that women in the region, particularly Kurdish women, have been targeted by Turkish-backed militias such as the Hamza Division, with many detained in secret prisons, tortured and even murdered. Forced marriage of minors, a practice banned under the previous Kurdish autonomous administration, has resurfaced under the occupation.

The situation is alarming, as reports continue to document daily kidnappings and murders of women, children and also men from different minority groups, such as



Kurds. As of 2024, dozens of women have been abducted or killed, with most of the victims being between 13 and 16 years old. These acts reflect the broader ethnic-cleansing strategy, where Kurdish and other minority women are not only abducted but often used as tools to assert dominance in the region.

HTS's control of Idlib has turned the region into a space of fear, particularly for women, who are treated as second-class citizens due to its radical and misogynistic interpretation of Sharia law. This severe abuse is compounded by the group's manipulation of religious authority to maintain control and stifle dissent, perpetuating a cycle of terror throughout the community. Women continue to be at the forefront of protests against these abuses, demonstrating their courage in the face of extreme oppression.

International calls for intervention have intensified, with human rights organisations urging the United Nations to take action and hold the Turkish government accountable for its role in enabling such atrocities.

The situation is compounded by Turkey's broader geopolitical interests, which involve settling religiously conservative and loyal groups in place of the local Kurdish population.

4.3 Regional Instability and Turkey's interests in the region

Despite Erdogan's rhetorical discourse that Turkey's interests in northern Syria are primarily driven by security concerns, its actions show otherwise. Its moves are driven by territorial ambitions and a desire to influence the demographic and political landscape of the region, particularly in its war against the Kurdish communities and their achievements in their autonomy project in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) region.

A key aspect of Turkish policy their claim to establish a so-called "safe zone" along its southern border within the mainly Kurdish inhabited territory of North Syria, aims at occupying further parts of northern Syria, to destroy the system of multi-cultural and multi-lingual people's self-governance.



It's important to highlight that the recent events and HTS incursions into northern Syria are not just taking place with Turkey's consent and involvement, but with the leadership of the Turkish state. This can be seen not only in the light of Turkey's interests in the region, increasing its influence and becoming a key player in geopolitical disputes with the government of Bashar Al Assad, but also in its explicit pursuit of its anti-Kurdish interests, using Islamist extremists as an instrument to destabilise regional politics and directly attacking the autonomous Kurdish communities in the region.

The HTS attacks occur after an escalating action of the Turkish government against Kurdish politics in the south of the country - Bakur region, North Kurdistan. Turkey's government continues to undermine local democracy by removing elected Kurdish mayors and replacing them with appointed trustees. These actions violate democratic principles and international norms, silencing local voices and undermining the right to self-governance.

In Turkey, activists and parliamentarians continue to be detained daily, while the use of the Kurdish language, music, and dances are prohibited. This oppression extends to Kurdish populations in other regions, including Rojava and North and East Syria, where Turkey specifically targets the Democratic Nation project and the achievements of the women's revolution. Turkey seeks to erase the political will of the Kurdish people, especially Kurdish women. Additionally, the forced displacement of Kurds, coupled with the settlement of mercenary forces and their families, is contributing to a significant demographic shift in these areas.

The military occupation of territories in the border regions - through the actions of Islamic extremist groups and direct attacks by the Turkish army - facilitates the process of Turkish demographic change or so called "ethnic cleansing", by bringing in Arab Syrian and Palestinian refugees and mercenaries to replace the Kurdish population.



5. Final words

As we have seen on other occasions, this is a time of severe human rights abuses against the populations of northern Syria and one that must be given the attention it deserves, given the risks to the region's ethnic and religious minorities, and especially its women and children.

As we saw in Afghanistan a few months ago, the moderate discourse of extremist leaders and the veneer of 'rebel' given by the Western media do nothing to protect the reality of women, children and vulnerable populations in these regions. On the contrary, it helps them to hide their crimes and violence behind the silence of the international community.

In this sense, it's fundamental that the silence of the international community, driven by geopolitical interests, stops encouraging Turkey's authoritarian practices. The Kurdish people remain determined to defend their right to self-determination and democracy. As already mentioned, humanitarian aid is urgently needed to help the hundred thousands refugees.

We see clearly that the HTS and the SNA are not a "democratic alternative" to the regime of Bashar al-Assad, but that a resurgence of the Islamic State and its ideology has started.

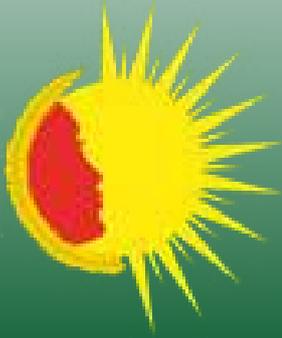
The international forces and Europe must not forget that it was the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Kurdish fighters of the YPG/YPJ who fought and sacrificed their lives to liberate the region and humanity from the crimes of the Islamic State.

Today again, they are single-handedly defending the people of northern and eastern Syria and a model of democratic administration against the Turkish-backed Islamist militias of the HTS and SNA.

Therefore, we call for a clear and firm stance against the jihadist-Islamist forces and their crimes, as well as against the occupation attacks of NATO member Turkey.



Further we call for political support and solidarity with the democratic forces, the women's freedom movement, and the Democratic Autonomy Administration in North and East Syria. These are the actual forces that need to be involved in the process for establishing a new democratic order in Syria based on the values of women's freedom, human dignity, ecological-communal economy and justice for all!



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