

# Will Kurds Survive in the New Syria ?

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The overthrow of Bashar al-Assad was met with widespread celebrations in Syria. But the situation is full of unknowns for the Kurdish population, with Turkish-backed militias massively expanding their presence in the country.

The twenty-first century's worst humanitarian and military crisis has reached a historic turning point. This weekend, Syrians rejoiced after Bashar al-Assad was finally toppled in a shock reversal spearheaded by al-Qaeda offshoot Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The region's Kurds joined the celebrations, flooding into formerly Assadist-held areas and tearing down statues of the hated dictator. But like all Syrians, the Kurds have suffered enough turmoil during the past thirteen years of mass violence, displacement, proxy warfare, and ethnic cleansing to know the path toward peace remains long and hard.

When Turkey displaced two hundred thousand Syrian Kurdish civilians in a 2018 cross-border operation, many locals remained as close as possible to their bombed-out homes, now occupied by a ragtag collection of Sunni Arab and Turkmen militias. Tens of thousands stayed clinging to hopes of return in scattered, scarcely defended camps in the neighboring Shehba (Tel Rifaat) region, weathering Turkish shells. But as HTS launched the ten-day offensive that culminated in Assad's overthrow, Turkey and its militias took advantage, seizing even these windblown refugee camps and displacing their residents once again. Hussein Maamo, an official Syrian Kurdish representative stationed in London, tells Jacobin : "The Turkey-linked factions aim to legitimize their assaults on Kurdish areas, framing their attacks as attacks against regime forces."

Muhammed Sheikho, who is cochair of a regional council under the Kurdish-led Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), led thousands of Kurds, Arabs, and local minorities out of the camps to safety in distant regions under DAANES control. But more were left behind. "Hundreds of our people were stranded, and couldn't leave," he tells Jacobin by phone from Syria. "Some were killed, some were tortured, some were captured and their fate is unclear." Footage shows Turkish-backed fighters abusing and trampling on male and female Kurdish captives.

The DAANES project has offered a safe haven to millions of Syrians and claims to offer a model for a future Syrian settlement based on community governance, women's autonomy, and minority representation. HTS's relatively pragmatic approach could even open the door to future coordination between the Kurdish movement and other opposition actors, with the DAANES's military wing itself seizing territory from Assadist forces in the country's east. But with Turkey seeking to exploit the crisis to occupy more swathes of Syrian territory and displace millions of Kurds along its border, the latest developments leave the Kurdish-led project and Syria as a whole facing a profoundly uncertain future.

## Enemies of Enemies

If the adage "my enemy's enemy is my friend" held true, the Syrian Kurds would be the most beloved people in the Middle East. But there wasn't much time to celebrate Assad's departure to Moscow before fresh waves of violence broke out against the Kurds and their Arab allies. As

analyst Sinan Ciddi, an adjunct professor at Georgetown University, tells Jacobin, Assad's long-awaited defeat will likely result in "a situation whereby Syria is either governed by a Salafi-jihadist organization . . . or becomes an ungoverned space with a gaping power vacuum."

There is no reason for the Kurds or anyone else to mourn Assad, who is responsible for the bulk of civilian deaths in Syria and persistently sought to undermine the Kurdish-led DAANES, which now governs over a third of Syrian territory. "The [DAANES] maintained a pragmatic but fragile relationship with the Assad regime . . . defined by limited coordination against common threats," analyst Yusuf Can, of the Wilson Center, tells Jacobin. "However, the Assad regime opposed [the DAANES's] aspirations for further autonomy."

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In theory, therefore, Assad's defeat should be good news for the DAANES. But HTS, which has itself governed millions of Syrians in the northwestern city of Idlib, imposes its own, deeply authoritarian Islamist rule. Human Rights Watch has documented consistent arbitrary detention and torture of thousands of journalists, opposition figures, and civil society activists who sought to document HTS abuses or protest their authority. Though the organization has moderated its approach in recent years as part of a bid for legitimacy, HTS has reportedly conducted morality patrols, arresting young women for failing to follow religious dress codes ; arrested young men for shaving or listening to music ; and conducted public executions for witchcraft and heresy.

HTS is also known for its relatively effective service provision, in what's been called a "technocratic Islamism," and its fighters are indeed disciplined in their pursuit of a new Islamic state in Syria. This approach helped HTS achieve its initial victory by seizing Syria's second-largest city, Aleppo, with the exception of around a hundred thousand Kurds currently besieged in two inner-city neighborhoods now surrounded by HTS fighters. Locals report food shortages and electricity blackouts.

"We don't know how the situation will turn out, because these forces all impose Islam through violence," says Hamude, a media activist in HTS-besieged Sheikh Maqsur, which has retained Kurdish-led autonomy since the outset of the Syrian conflict despite suffering siege by Assad, alleged chemical weapons attacks by Islamist opposition groups, and indiscriminate shelling amounting to war crimes.

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"In Aleppo, there are Kurds, Christians, Yezidis, and many ethnic and religious groups," Hamude says. "These groups face severe danger. HTS doesn't accept these minorities, and force women to cover their heads." HTS fighters have reportedly killed at least two of the latter minority group, which suffered genocide at ISIS's hands, as they attempted to flee Aleppo. An Armenian Christian, speaking anonymously for fear of reprisal, describes scenes of recrimination and adds : "As soon as [HTS] entered Aleppo, they destroyed a Christmas tree [as a symbol of the Christian community]. They are assuring us that they will not harm us, but we are lost. We don't know what to do."

## Anti-Kurdish Agenda

Women, minorities, and all those seeking a secular, democratic future face a deeply troubling future under HTS governance. But the Islamist force has nonetheless achieved a remarkable

defeat of Assad, while generally refraining from both looting against civilians and unnecessary conflict with the Kurds. By contrast, many of the Turkish-backed militiamen who nominally joined the offensive have never fired a shot in anger against Assad's forces. Instead, they have once again focused on retributive violence against Kurdish civilians and lining their own pockets, leading even HTS to arrest Turkish-backed commanders.

The militias Turkey has united under the banner of the Syrian National Army (SNA) have long been accused of war crimes by the United Nations and Amnesty International, including raping women, mass killings against Kurdish civilians, torturing, electrocuting, executing, and parading caged civilians in the streets as a human shield. During prior Turkish military campaigns, these militias killed hundreds — and displaced hundreds of thousands — of civilians.

Those who survived have faced summary rule by Turkish-backed militias kidnapping, torturing, and executing civilians, along with an ongoing policy of forcible demographic change in regions formerly populated by Kurds, Yazidis, and Christian minorities. At the time of writing, these militias are focusing on hunting down Kurdish civilians trapped by the rapid developments while executing fresh military operations against regions under the Kurdish-led DAANES. Turkish air strikes have killed Kurdish children and targeted civilian DAANES buildings : none have targeted Assad's crumbling army.

Meanwhile, the precise extent of HTS's cooperation with Turkey is a matter of some debate. Officially, Turkey lists HTS as a "terror group" and denies any advance knowledge of the latest operations, and unlike other militias, HTS is powerful enough to act unilaterally within Syria. Certainly, Ankara has been taken aback by the speed of Assad's collapse. Yet the Turkish leadership and HTS have long coordinated through joint operation rooms ; the SNA militias that joined the latest operation are bankrolled, trained, and directed by Turkey ; and Turkish flags flew over the citadel in Aleppo following its capture, as ultranationalist Turkish politicians harked back to its former status as a jewel in the Ottoman crown. One thing is for sure, says analyst Can : Turkey will "use whatever actual gains it has" against the Kurds, both domestically and abroad.

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Turkey's key objective in Syria is simple : liquidating multiethnic, Kurdish-led governance along its border, and pushing the Kurdish population back into the Syrian desert by establishing a twenty-mile-deep "safe zone." There, it will also resettle Syrian refugees in formerly Kurdish settlements as a way of both satisfying domestic anti-refugee sentiment and entrenching ethnic change along its border.

Turkey has achieved this objective at points along the frontier. Yet, despite several close calls, it had been prevented from eradicating the DAANES by the Assad government's intransigence in negotiations over the border zone, and by the presence of Russian and US troops in DAANES territory. While allowing Turkey to rain down air strikes, wiping out the region's water, electricity, and humanitarian infrastructure, both these powers ultimately preferred to retain a foothold in the north alongside dependable Kurdish forces rather than witness further chaotic violence and a power shift in favor of Ankara.

## Multipolar Conflict

Turkey was seeking the green light for a final operation from either Moscow or Washington : unexpectedly, it was HTS who provided it. As HTS surged toward Damascus, an already weakened and distracted Russia washed its hands of its former client Assad. Iran, which has long

partnered with Assad to brutalize Syrians and use the country as a staging-ground for Hezbollah and its own militias, was unable or unwilling to intervene after a year of punishing blows dealt by Israel.

Indeed, Israel has profited from the chaos to expand its own long-term occupation deeper into Syrian territory in the south. But it has also destroyed former Syrian Army equipment with air strikes sooner than see it fall into HTS's hands, viewing the Salafist organization as an existential threat. Meanwhile, the US response to both HTS gains and Turkish threats against the Kurds was initially milquetoast. The DAANES's military wing has now moved to seize territory formerly controlled by Assad and Iranian militias, operating under the justification of their anti-ISIS partnership with the United States while establishing beachheads across the Euphrates in the face of further anticipated assaults inspired by Turkey.

The US leadership said it will continue its anti-ISIS mission in the country's east. Still, it remains unclear how far this can protect the DAANES from Turkish violence, or how the United States will interact with either HTS or the broader coalition of opposition forces throughout southern Syria — even before we consider the wild card of Donald Trump's arrival in the White House.

Given these complex realities, it would be misguided to view either key NATO member Turkey's violence against the nominally US-allied Kurds, or HTS's surge against Assad, as a simple West-East proxy conflict. But one thing is clear : it's Turkey that is now on the front foot, seeking to establish a new status quo throughout northern Syria which will freeze out both Assad allies and Iran and the dwindling Western presence in the region, leaving Turkey (NATO's second-largest army) as the key player on the ground.

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Following the ongoing and anticipated expulsion of Kurdish civilians from their exclaves in the northwest— ethnic cleansing occurring without a word of protest from the Kurds' nominal allies — Turkey's eyes are turning eastward. Around a hundred thousand internally displaced persons (IDPs) have already arrived in contiguous DAANES territory, in dire humanitarian circumstances, with several elderly people and infants freezing to death as thousands sleep outside for lack of shelter. “There is no room for the people here,” says Kurdish official Sheikho, speaking to me by phone as he watches refugees pour into a makeshift reception center in the city's sports stadium. “Some of the elderly are succumbing to the cold. All DAANES hospitals have been directed to offer care for free, but there remains an urgent need for medical support.”

Instead, these regions, and particularly multiethnic, Arab-majority city Manbij, are next in Turkey's firing line. With Iran and Russia out of the game and the West wrong-footed, Turkey will be the dominant player in a new, Islamist Syria. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has long profited from a middleman status as the enemy's enemy stationed between Moscow and Washington, seems to hold all the cards at last.

## A Future Syria

“Hope and fear can go hand in hand when thinking about Syria's future,” says analyst Can. “It's great to see oppressed people gaining freedom, but there are plenty of reasons to stay cautious — whether it's the risk of Islamist radicals, other extremist groups, or foreign powers with their own agendas.” In theory, the Kurdish movement must play a crucial role in any productive future settlement for Syria. The DAANES has long signaled its pragmatic willingness to work with a reformed Damascus administration, should it demonstrate genuine commitment to devolution and

to women's and minority rights. Hussein Maamo, the Syrian Kurdish official in London, tells Jacobin he wants to see "all Syrians involved in the decision-making process to establish a democratic, pluralistic, and secular state that remains neutral regarding religion, sects, ethnicity, and political opinion."

Unexpectedly, there are tentative signals of de-escalation between HTS and the DAANES, with each preferring to avoid conflict, to variously focus on battling Assad and fending off Turkey. HTS has issued reassurances to Aleppo's Kurds and facilitated withdrawal agreements for Kurdish civilians. DAANES representatives are currently negotiating with HTS over the future of the neighborhoods, a long-term safe haven whose population has already been swelled by IDPs fleeing the latest violence, in a potential bellwether of their future relations.

The DAANES's military wing has made gains in formerly government-controlled territory, suggesting the distant possibility of a post-Assad Syria divided between the authoritarian-Islamist HTS and pluralist, democratic DAANES — a prospect that would have sounded utterly implausible just a week ago. But representatives remain deeply cautious of the HTS leadership's supposed turn toward inclusive pluralism, while the Islamist force may well opt to side with Turkey in pursuit of international legitimacy. However the extraordinary crisis plays out, Turkish-backed violence against Kurds, women, and minorities will continue to imperil ordinary Syrians' hopes for a truly democratic future.