

# The Sectarian Risk: Turkey's Syrian Mission

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*Turkey's **Recep Tayyip Erdoğan** must be delighted about what is unfolding in Syria, though it is a feeling bound to be tempered by swiftly changing circumstances. Iran's Shia proxies have been weakened by relentless Israeli targeting and bombing. Russia's eyes and resources are turned towards war in Ukraine. With reports that Syrian rebel groups are now fighting on the outskirts of the capital Damascus, the Assad regime looks frail, its leader either in hiding or evacuated.*

In the salad mix of jihadis, nationalists, and run of the mill mercenaries, Turkey's hand looms large. It's intervention in Syria's conflict was motivated by two main goals: the containment, if not elimination of Kurdish militants in northern Syria, seen as indistinguishable from their PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) counterparts in Turkey itself, and creating conditions of stability or "safe zones" that would enable a return of Syrian refugees when feasible.

Since August 2016, Turkey has made three incursions seizing parts of Syria's north, imposing an occupation using regular troops and auxiliary forces including the Syrian National Army (SNA) and a coalition of groups comprising former Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters. In 2018, the Military Police was established by both Turkish authorities and the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), a force ostensibly intended to protect the civilian population. Instead, this period of Turkish rule has been marked by brutality, repression and sheer neglect.

In its [February 2024 report](#), Human Rights Watch documented instances of abductions, arbitrary arrests, unlawful detentions (these include children), sexual violence and torture. The perpetrators spanned elements of the SNA, the Military Police, members of the Turkish Armed Forces, the Turkish National Intelligence Organisation (Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı, MİT), and various military intelligence directorates. To this colourfully gruesome range of cruelties can be added the abuse of property rights, looting, pillaging, confiscation of property, extortion and the absence of any consistent system of restitution.

The group enduring the heaviest burden of suffering are Kurdish residents, notably those that had received protection from the US-backed Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) comprising the People's Protection Unit (Yekineyen Parastina Gel, YPG), and the Women's Protection Unit (Yekineyen Parastina Jin). These forces proved crucial in countering the Islamic State (ISIS) group. In October this year, Erdoğan [reiterated](#) the long held view that such Kurdish protective units were merely "the Syrian branch of the PKK terror group, destined to be abandoned, left isolated." Arabs and other groups seen as having links to the SDF and the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES), have also been targets of Turkish-led ire.

The SNA is no friend of the headline grabbing Islamist outfit, Hayat Tahrir-al Sham (HTS), the primary spear in the lighting operation against the Assad regime. HTS has marketed itself as a self-sufficient, modern, more considered group, less fire and brimstone from its al-Qaeda and al-Nusra iterations and supposedly more tolerant to other religions, sects and views. Its leader, Abu Mohammad Al-Jolani, has managed to receive praise and plaudits in the Western media for that change, [despite his listing](#) by the US State Department as a “Specially Designated Global Terrorist” worthy of a [\\$10 million reward](#) to anyone willing to offer information leading to his capture.

Even on the progress of HTS, Turkish influence cannot be discounted, despite Ankara eschewing open support for the group. As Fuad Shahbazov, [writing](#) for the Stimson Center remarks, the recent advances of HTS “would have been unthinkable without Turkey’s military and logistical backing, and provision of advanced weaponry.” It has also [been suggested](#) that Ankara gave a nod of approval to the offensive led by HTS after it failed to secure a rapprochement with Assad.

Erdoğan’s statements on the advance show a slippery mind in operation. On December 6, he [told reporters](#) after Friday prayers that the target of the offensive was evidently Damascus. “I would say we hope for this advance to continue without any issues.” But he also expressed the view that these advances were “problematic” and “not in a manner we desire”. While not elaborating on that point, it could be gleaned from the remarks that he is concerned about various “terrorist organisations” operating in the rebel forces.

The next day, the Turkish President decided to be [lofty in his assessment](#) as the rebels entered the suburbs of Homs. “There is now a new reality in Syria, politically and diplomatically,” he declared in a speech delivered in the southern Turkish city of Gaziantep. “And Syria belongs to Syrians with all its ethnic, sectarian and religious elements.”

In keeping with the views of other leaders responsible for intervening in the affairs of another state, Erdoğan spoke of Syrian independence as viable, the will of its people as inviolable. “The people of Syria are the ones who will decide the future of their own country.” He hoped that the country would “quickly regain the peace, stability, and tranquillity it has been longing for 13 years.” He went on to remark that “responsible actors and all international organisations” should support the preservation of the state’s territorial integrity.

The audacity of such statements does nothing to conceal the sectarian and ethnic dangers unfolding at the end of this Ankara-sponsored mission. The fall of Bashir al-Assad will imperil Shia communities and do even more harm to the Kurds, leaving the door open for Salafism. The rebel groups, only united by the common cause of overthrowing Assad, may well find battling each other hard to avoid. As for the territorial integrity Erdoğan speaks of, Turkish officialdom and policy will never wear it short of any number of guarantees Ankara is bound to extort on hefty terms. And as for refugees? Expect many more to gush out in desperation.

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