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1.1. Overview of conflicts

On 27 November 2024, forces opposed to the rule of Bashar Al-Assad, led by the armed group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), launched an offensive[20] starting from the northwestern province of Idlib.[21] The HTS, which is designated as a terrorist organisation by the UN, the EU, the US and the UK,[22] advanced on government-held cities[23] and within days had taken control of the north of the country,[24] including Aleppo,[25] and was heading towards Hama and Homs.[26] On 8 December 2024, they reached Damascus and assumed control of the capital as President Assad left the country on the same day.[27] Subsequently, HTS effectively took control as the ruling party and established an interim government.[28] HTS leader Ahmad Al-Sharaa, who had previously gone by the nom de guerre Abu Mohammed Al-Jolani,[29] started acting as the de-facto leader of Syria in early December[30] and was appointed transitional president of Syria on 29 January 2025.[31] The independent non-profit-organisation International Crisis Group[32] reported on 30 January 2025 that the situation in Damascus remained mostly secure. In regions outside the capital, however, the new leadership in Damascus faces significant challenges as the country emerges from civil war.[33] Establishing law and order remains a major challenge[34] and priority[35] for the transitional administration, which, three months after taking power, is still grappling with increasing retaliatory violence and armed group activity.[36]

Etana, an independent organisation[37] focused on reporting on the ground in Syria,[38] notes, as of 3 February 2025, that in northern Syria, indications of increasing lawlessness and violence are becoming more evident across a region extending from Homs to Latakia on the coast and further east to Aleppo, with almost daily reports of killings and militant activity in recent weeks. The security situation in this area is a centre of instability driven by revenge killings and communal violence. The area is home to several Alawite and mixed sectarian communities.[39] The International Crisis Group reports that in central and western Syria 'less disciplined armed factions and unaffiliated gunmen' have begun taking advantage of weaknesses in HTS policing to engage in looting and instil fear. These groups loot and seek revenge on persons viewed as being associated with the Assad government. They have targeted members of minority groups, Alawites in particular.[40] Sectarian-based murders have peaked in the provinces of Homs, Hama, and Latakia.[41] On the other hand, former and now unemployed members of the army of the ousted regime are reportedly unwilling to lay down their arms for reasons of self-protection and pose a security threat.[42] According to Etana 'some of the violence is likely being fomented by formerly regime-backed gangs […] suspected of being behind a slew of attacks'.[43] As of 20 February, security forces continued to face increased threats as they tried to stabilise the country, including kidnappings, sectarian violence and threats from remnants of Assad's forces.

44 In early March, coordinated attacks by pro-Assad groups on security forces, particularly in the coastal areas, led to a significant escalation which resulted in large numbers of civilian casualties, mostly from the Alawite community.45 For more information see section 4.1.2.

In the north of the country, various factions are struggling for influence and control.46 Clashes between Turkish-backed militias operating under the umbrella of the Syrian National Army (SNA) 47 and the US-backed48 Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued during the reporting period. When the HTS-led opposition forces captured Aleppo in late November, the SNA simultaneously launched an offensive in the province49 targeting the territories controlled by the SDF ,50 causing the displacement of tens of thousands of civilians.51 The SDF was driven out of several towns52 in Aleppo's countryside and the SNA captured the strategically important cities of Manbij53 and Tal Rifat54. The clashes between the SDF and the SNA escalated55 at the end of December 202456 near the Tishreen Dam on the Euphrates River in the countryside of Manbij, eastern Aleppo, a vital source of water and electricity for SDF-controlled areas.57 Türkiye, which considers the SDF to be closely linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK),58 has continued air and drone strikes in northern Syria, hitting SDF targets59 as well as civilians 60 and critical civilian infrastructure61 during the reporting period. As of 28 February 2025, clashes between the SDF and the SNA were still ongoing.62 In addition to the conflict with the SNA and Türkiye, the SDF also faces a long-running conflict with tribal militias in Deir Ez-Zor as well as attacks by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).63 In March 2025, SDF leaders signed an agreement to integrate their armed forces and civilian institutions into the new Syrian government. The deal mandates a full cessation of hostilities and requires the SDF to relinquish control of border posts, the airport, and key oil and gas fields.64 The practical implementation of this agreement could not be monitored within the scope of this report.

ISIL appears to have largely withdrawn from65 the vast central desert region of Badia,66 the former rear base of ISIL-operations in Syria.67 However, according to a report by the UN Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL to international peace and security, published in January 2025, 'the Syrian Badia region continued to serve as a centre for external operational planning of Da'esh [ISIL] and remained a critical region for its activities'.68 ISIL has turned its focus to the northeast in recent months, challenging the US-backed SDF, following setbacks in central Syria since the summer, heavy Assad forces operations and US airstrikes against ISIL in September and October.69 As of 20 February, Etana reported ISIL attacks against the SDF.70

The situation in southern Syria was volatile during the reporting period.71 Shortly after it was known that Al-Assad had been ousted, the Israeli military moved into the UN-patrolled buffer zone72 in the Golan Heights border highlands,73 an area it had been breaching since at least early November74 and beyond into Syrian territory,75 into areas of southern Quneitra and south-west Dar'a.76 Also, Israel carried out hundreds of airstrikes in early December aimed at destroying weapon sites across Syria,77 more than half of which took place in Dar'a, Damascus, Rural Damascus and Latakia governorates.78 As of 20 February 2025 Israeli incursions into and beyond the buffer zone were ongoing.79

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