

Don't be a woman, don't be a Kurd – a weekly news review

This week's review looks at the skills and limits of Ahmed al-Sharaa (or Jolani), at what women can expect from HTS, and at the brutal history of Turkey's mercenary militias, before going on to the week's events: An SDF counteroffensive, the Turkish foreign minister's meeting with al-Sharaa, a position statement from the SDF, further clampdowns in Turkey, and a possible visit to Öcalan.

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This week has seen further fighting around Syria's Manbij, important meetings in Damascus, and significant Kurdish moves in the world of realpolitik. It has seen new attacks on Kurdish freedoms in Turkey – and, in the midst of this whirl of events, it has ended with an announcement that, weather permitting, two leaders of Turkey's pro-

Kurdish DEM Party will make a long-anticipated visit to Abdullah Öcalan's island prison this weekend.

Before writing about this week's events, I want to look further at the background of some of the key players to better understand what is at stake.

Looking beyond Jolani's rhetoric

We are brought up to look for the fairytale ending, to dream about the hero who will swoop in and save his people. Even when experience tells us that real life doesn't work like that, our optimism tries to fit the most unlikely people into this ideal role – bringing inevitable disappointment. Political leaders are far from immune from this optimism, and it can be enough for someone to share a common enemy for them to become the vehicle for political hopes. Since Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, took over control of most of Syria, many hopes have been transferred onto their shoulders, and especially those of their leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, who most of the world first came to know under his nom de guerre of Jolani.

Al-Sharaa is clearly a canny operator who, despite his terrorist designation, has been evolving a modus vivendi with Western powers – carefully distancing himself from some more extreme elements, limiting his focus to Syria, and avoiding targeting US interests. Ahmed Al-Rumah, writing for MENA Research Centre, [claims](#) that today only 3% of HTS fighters adhere to a strict Salafi-jihadist framework. Shiraz Maher [explained to Britain's Channel 4](#) how, for two to three years, Al-Sharaa has been reaching out to non-Muslim groups to build his image as a statesman. At the same time, he has been ruthless in his suppression of opposition, and wants to see Syria governed by Sharia Law.

Even if we take at face value al-Sharaa's claim to have left behind his al-Qaeda beliefs on the Road to Damascus, we can hardly expect this conversion to extend to all his followers, and to the Islamist militias which HTS have brought under their overall command. Indeed, this week some of these foot soldiers have pictured themselves committing bloody revenge against members of Assad's Alawite community.

As Kurdish leaders have cautioned, al-Sharaa and HTS must be judged by what they do and not what they say, and there have already been various worrying developments. Significantly, the newly established interim government includes no one from groups other than HTS, and no women.

Before looking in more detail at the prospects for Syrian women, I want to add a short note on the achievements of the HTS "Salvation Government" in Idlib, which have been much praised in recent articles. It is not difficult to believe that the Idlib authorities are more efficient and effective than those in the mercenary-run Turkish occupied areas, but that is setting the bar very low. Idlib has been reliant on international aid, and as recently as 2022 (before the earthquake made the situation even worse) [the UN claimed](#) that 70% of the population was not getting enough to eat, and 1 in 3 children were undernourished. At the same time, Idlib has produced an emir élite that [lives a life of profligate luxury](#)

Women as second-class citizens

There is no excuse for underestimating the dangers facing half of Syria's population. We don't need to guess how HTS treats women, we can look at the situation in Idlib where they developed the system of governance that they are now wanting to apply to the whole of the country, and where leading figures in the interim government learnt their administrative practices. Kongra Star, the umbrella body for North and East Syria's women's organisations, has put together an [information sheet](#) on the situation in Idlib. This explains that the social and legal situation in operation there is based on HTS' interpretation of Islamic law, which affects many areas of life, including education, employment, and social relations, and which leaves women at greater risk of abuse and violence. They comment that the administration followed a pattern in which advice and admonition (accompanied by welcome social support) evolved into harassment as the organisation consolidated their power, and that the same pattern could be repeated countrywide. Others have observed that Idlib had seen a relaxation of rules, including on women's dress, in the last couple of years in order to court Western support; but this could revert, and women's life is still very restricted.

Kongra Star includes quotes from women describing their experience of living in Idlib. Rana, a 42-year-old widow, explained "Without the escort of a male family member, 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." Hala, told them, "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."

Not only are there no women in al-Sharaa's interim government, but a [government spokesperson has made it clear](#) that there are some roles that will be systematically denied to women. He told a Lebanese television interviewer, "A woman is an important and honoured element of society but her tasks should be in line with roles she can perform. For example, if we say a woman becomes responsible for the defence ministry, is this in accordance with her being and her psychological and biological nature? There is no doubt that it is not in accordance. Can she perform the tasks and responsibilities attached to this role like a man? She can't, in my opinion." In this scenario, the decision on whether or not a job would be deemed suitable for women would be made by "experts".

Already, we have seen women [putting on a headscarf](#) in order to be photographed with al-Sharaa, or even to carry out a CNN interview. (Some Islamists have criticised al-Sharaa for being photographed with a woman at all.)

The brutality of Turkey's SNA

When it comes to Turkey's mercenary militias, which Turkey calls the Syrian National Army, or SNA, and which are largely focussed on attacking the Kurds, there is already a wealth of evidence from local and international organisations of endemic human rights

abuses in the Turkish occupied areas where these groups are in control. A [new report](#) on the situation in the 120km by 30km strip of land between Serê Kaniyê and Girê Spî (Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abyad), which was occupied by Turkey in 2019, evidences the brutal continuation of these abuses.

The report is based on the testimonies of eighteen people who suffered “arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance and torture, at the hands of SNA factions”.

The prisoners were generally accused of working with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, or with the Administration’s Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), or of terrorism and sabotage. They were forced to sign “confessions”, and their release depended on the payment of ransoms or bribes. Appalling conditions were combined with deliberate neglect, and denial of family contact. All “endured torture in cruel, repeated, and systematic forms, reminiscent of the methods used in the notorious prisons of the Syrian regime”. And “torture was not merely a method to obtain information; rather, it was used as a tool to humiliate the victims and exert psychological control, leaving deep, lasting impacts that endure for a lifetime.”

The authors conclude, “These persistent and widespread abuses point to a systematic and well-coordinated campaign of violence and persecution, potentially sanctioned as official policy by the SNA factions. The goal appears to be the forcible displacement of Kurdish communities and the consolidation of control over the region through violence and intimidation.”

We have seen a similar situation playing out in Manbij, now newly occupied by SNA militias – as I detailed last week.

On the battlefield

The focus of military action has remained on the west bank of the Euphrates, between Manbij and Kobanê, though there have also been Turkish bombardments in other places close to the front lines. Kobanê remains under severe threat of SNA/Turkish attack, despite the presence of American patrols, but Monday saw the launch of a counteroffensive by the SDF, which has recaptured villages on the Manbij side of the river and freed a female member of the Manbij internal security services who had been captured by the SNA.

The Tishreen dam and the bridge across the river leading to Kobanê have continued to come under attack from Turkish artillery. There have been more fears over possible and disastrous breaching of the dam, and it has been unable to produce electricity, leaving vital water pumps without power and millions of people without water.

On Thursday Turkey’s Ministry of Defence claimed control of the dam, but that lie was soon exposed by a [video](#) showing the SDF spokesperson speaking from the dam without a Turkish soldier in sight.

The SDF [claims](#) to have inflicted heavy casualties on the SNA militias. As well as bringing territorial and strategic gains, the offensive boosts morale and strengthens the SDF's negotiating position.

Hakan Fidan in Damascus

On Sunday, Turkey's Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan, visited al-Sharaa in Damascus. After a long talk in Assad's presidential palace, and before taking coffee in the hills overlooking the city, the two men gave a public statement. [Fidan presented Turkey's usual inversion of the truth](#), portraying the Syrian Kurds as illegal occupiers and Turkey (which does occupy large areas of the country and was trying to make a deal with Assad until the last moment) as Syria's friend who will help them cleanse the country of PKK/YPG and ISIS terrorists. "On this occasion," he concluded, "I would like to emphasize once again that there is absolutely no place for the PKK/YPG in Syria." Al-Sharaa, maintaining his more moderate tone, said that all military groups would dissolve themselves and a new national army be formed; and he made clear that "We will not allow any weapons to be outside the state, whether from the revolutionary factions or from the factions present in the SDF region."

On Tuesday, as he had predicted, Al-Sharaa met with leaders of different armed factions who [agreed to merge their forces](#) into the national military.

Kurds and realpolitik

This has left the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria in a difficult position. They have always argued that their region is part of Syria and that the SDF should be part of the Syrian Army, but they don't want to give up all their autonomy within the state, nor to expose themselves to the aggressive forces by which they are surrounded without means of defence. Their position was laid out in an [interview](#) given by SDF Commander in Chief, Mazloum Abdi, to Asharq as-Aswat. "The priority," he explained, "is for military operations to stop throughout Syrian territory, especially the attacks carried out by Turkey and its loyal factions on the Syrian Democratic Forces, so that we, as Syrians, can discuss the future of our country among ourselves without external interference or guardianship. The areas of the Autonomous Administration are Syrian areas and their representatives must have a role and a voice that is heard, and they must participate in building the future."

The SDF call for dialogue, and for the system of government to be decided by the Syrian people. They agree that Syria must have a single national army for defence of the country and its citizens, and that the SDF will integrate into this, but they need direct discussions on how this would work. They are ready in principle to transfer border control to Damascus, and they will work with the new government to fight ISIS. Abdi made clear that Syria's natural resources belong to the whole country, and that the SDF have no organisational links with the PKK – some PKK members have been there to fight ISIS, but they will leave at the end of military operations. He noted that they had had field coordination with HTS since the second day of their operation against Assad, which was needed to prevent clashes in Aleppo and to facilitate the evacuation of al

Shahba. And he admitted that the danger of a Turkish attack on Kobanê was still very high.

Veteran Kurdish politician, Salih Muslim, notes that Turkey appears to be giving a message to al-Sharaa (or Jolani) not to establish relations with the Autonomous Administration. He observes, “If Turkey withdraws its hand from Syria and ends its efforts to create separation there, we can reach an agreement with Jolani.” And he points out, “If the attacks on our people stop and assurances are given, there will be no need for weapons.” But, “As long as our gains are targeted, it is our natural right to defend ourselves.” These are incredibly difficult conditions from which to negotiate and to salvage something of the dreams that so many have worked and died for.

Turkey’s hard line was repeated in President Erdoğan’s [message to his party](#) on Christmas day: “The separatist murderers (meaning the SDF) will either bid farewell to their weapons, or they will be buried in Syrian lands along with their weapons.” And there are reports that Turkey’s visceral antagonism towards Kurdish society has even caused them to [threaten IDPs who they have settled in Kurdish areas](#) and who now want to go home to their original part of Syria. Turkey doesn’t want them to leave and to make space that Kurds might return to, as this would undo their carefully engineered demographic changes.

North and East Syria may be the one part of the country that tries to implement all those things that Western nations are supposed to care about, such as women’s rights and ethnic inclusivity, but that has won them little support. After meeting Fidan in Ankara, Germany’s Foreign minister, [Annalena Baerbock](#), called for “Kurdish groups to be disarmed”, citing Turkish “security concerns”. Her vaunted “feminist foreign policy” seems oblivious to the plight of women in Syria.

The United States has been more supportive because of their reliance on the SDF in the fight against ISIS.

Russia has [maintained some bases in Syria](#) and is building relations with HTS, who were previously the target of their bombing campaigns. Their Foreign Minister, [Sergei Lavrov](#) keeps up the old tired claims about “Turkish concern” and “groups seeking to secede and seizing the country’s oil resources” – a characterisation of the SDF that the SDF have repeatedly debunked.

Inside Turkey

Turkey’s foreign aggression has been matched by more internal oppression. A week ago, Turkey targeted and killed two Kurdish journalists working in Syria. The state then clamped down on the protests against the killings, with bans, threats, detention in custody, and criminal investigations. They are even investigating the Istanbul Bar Association for calling for an enquiry into the deaths. Ozlem Goner [explained to Democracy Now](#) the significance of the two journalists: Nazım Daştan has shown Turkey’s involvement with ISIS sine 2014, and Cihan Bilgin documented the [lives](#) of people displaced from Afrîn by Turkey’s 2018 invasion.

Another journalist has been indicted on the basis of doing an interview with Saleh Muslim; and last Sunday the Kurdish Publishers Association announced that, in just three weeks, the authorities had banned 120 Kurdish-language books, magazines, newspapers, and other Kurd-related publications.

And finally, the long awaited [announcement](#) that the promised meeting between Abdullah Öcalan and DEM Party deputies Sırrı Süreyya Önder and Pervin Buldan will take place this weekend – weather permitting. When it comes to crossing the water to İmralı island prison, the weather often provides an excuse for cancellation of the visit.

Dealing with Erdoğan has often been compared to playing chess. This must be three person chess at the very least.

Sarah Glynn is a writer and activist – check her [website](#) and follow her on [X \(formerly twitter\)](#) or [bluesky](#)