



From Assad to Al-Sharaa

A review of the first year without the Assad regime

One year has passed since HTS militias advanced from Idlib and took Damascus. Assad abdicated and Syria was declared “free”. For 54 years the Assad family had oppressed the population under the ideology of the Baath Party. The peoples of Syria celebrated – whether in the metropolises or in the diaspora – the end of the Assad dictatorship. Hope for a new, free Syria became tangible again. Since 8 December 2024, the day Assad handed over the government and fled to Russia, much has changed in the country. This dossier aims to provide an overview of the sequence of events and to assess the current situation.

Previous circumstances

The events of 8 December 2024 were not a sudden strike of liberation and not an unexpected fall, as many politicians and political organisations claimed. The Assad regime had already been tottering for years and finally abdicated in December 2024. The Arab Spring broke out in 2010 and spread like wildfire from Tunisia across the entire Middle East, including Syria. In 2011 there were nationwide uprisings, the so-called Syrian Revolution, which soon turned into the Syrian civil war. Outside the regime, numerous militias organised themselves – partly supported by imperialists and regional-reactionary states – that fought for territories and influence. In Syria there were and are the Syrian Army, various militias and organisations such as the SNA, HTS, the IS and the Syrian Democratic Forces (Arabic QSD, English SDF), but also imperialist and regional powers such as Russia, the USA, Iran and Turkey. Creating an overview of the situation in Syria over the last 15 years is extremely complicated; a small overview is provided by our Avashin newsletter from December 2024, which focuses on the various forces in Syria.

In the competition of the various militias, which never really subordinated themselves to the state, as well as through the ongoing sanctions against the Assad regime, the latter had long before 2024 become a powerless and economically isolated shell. Russia had provided support due to its strategic relations with the Syrian Baath regime. With the outbreak of the Ukraine war, this support was no longer sufficient to maintain the regime. Iran also provided massive support to Syria, which was part of the Axis of Resistance. Since October 2023, the forces of this Axis of Resistance – Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran itself – have been considerably weakened by attacks

from Israel and the USA. Thus the long-since meaningless Assad regime finally came to an end, and Assad fled into exile in Russia.

8 December 2024 – a bloodless transfer of power

It is important to emphasise that on 8 December there was no fight for the seat of government. Assad leaves the country without a fight and power over Syria is handed over. The USA and other Western-oriented states always kept open the option of expanding influence over Syria and therefore strengthened HTS (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Committee for the Liberation of the Levant) in Idlib. HTS originated from the al-Nusra Front, which in turn emerged from al-Qaida. From 2017 it had already ruled Idlib and was able to develop undisturbed on the ground. On 8 December, HTS troops then advanced and took power.

What is particularly striking here is the reaction of the European states and the USA. While they ideologically and militarily waged war against Islamist forces such as IS or the Taliban, they rolled out the red carpet for HTS and the current Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa. In a television interview he announced that he regretted his past with al-Qaida and was now a new person. Previously known under his nom de guerre Golani, he radicalised as a student in Iraq and met IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in captivity. On Baghdadi's behalf he built up the al-Nusra Front in Syria, which then joined al-Qaida instead of IS. Previously a \$10 million arrest warrant had been issued for al-Sharaa. HTS was removed from the international terror list and economic sanctions against Syria were lifted. In essence, an entire propaganda campaign was launched to whitewash and legitimise the past of an Islamist organisation. Thus the former Islamist leader Ahmad al-Sharaa became the President of Syria, who this year already gave speeches at the UN General Assembly.

Thus a new era has dawned in Syria. We have various forces and interest groups that want to shape the new Syria and fight for participation. We have the central government under the hand of President Ahmad al-Sharaa, which cooperates with Islamist groups and currently claims central power in Syria. Another force is the democratic autonomy administration, which is located in north-east Syria and is militarily defended by the forces of the Syrian Democratic Forces. It represents the democratic demands of the peoples of Syria. The Alawites in the west and the Druze in the south of Syria are ethnic groups that also demand a certain status in Syria. The three groups mentioned carry the will to secure their right to exist in the new Syria and also to fight for it. Furthermore, there are Arab tribes and armed forces in Deir ez-Zor and other areas as well as the bases of imperialist forces such as the USA, France and Russia. In the north, Turkey occupies Afrin, Serekaniye, Al-Bab; in the south, Israel occupies the Golan Heights and Druze areas.

All the forces mentioned want to contribute their interests and influence to a new Syria. What this will look like has not yet been decided. However, the following

events have crystallised certain forces and also revealed the contradictions that have arisen in Syria.

December 2024 – January 2025 – The Tishrin Resistance

With Assad's flight, the situation in Syria was uncertain and various militias took up the fight. Above all HTS, but also the SNA (Syrian National Army), repeatedly attacked the democratic autonomy administration/Rojava and tried to weaken it in such a situation. In December, Manbij was taken by the SNA – a city that is the first west of the Euphrates. Next they wanted to advance east to the Tishrin Dam.

Thus the Tishrin Dam, which supplies hundreds of thousands of people with electricity and water, was attacked from the air and from the ground at the end of December to such an extent that it had to cease operations on 20 December 2024. It lies on the Euphrates River, which forms the border between the democratic autonomy administration in the east and areas in which the SNA was active at the time in the west. Thus the dam became a strategically important point. If the Turkish-backed proxies had overcome it, there would have been an incursion and possibly an occupation of the autonomy administration. Furthermore, the destruction of the dam would have led to the flooding of entire areas. To protect the Tishrin Dam from air strikes, peace watches were set up from 8 January. Hundreds of people from the civilian population went to the site, danced and formed a human shield to avoid bombardments. Nevertheless, civilians were attacked in the middle of the crowd. The SNA was successfully repelled in the meantime. In the 117 days of the Tishrin Resistance, the population of north-east Syria, who risked their lives to protect the dam, and the SDF became one and won the battles with the act of revolutionary people's war. On 13 April, the self-administration and the transitional government reached an agreement on the future of the dam. The dam is now jointly controlled by the self-administration and the Syrian state. Military presence around the dam is to be drastically reduced. The SNA troops on the west side of the Euphrates are replaced by soldiers of the Syrian state. The SDF fighters on the east side of the Euphrates were replaced by units of the self-administration's internal security forces (Asayiş).

29 January – Victory Conference in Damascus

On 29 January, al-Sharaa invited his followers and alliance partners to the "Victory Conference" in Damascus. There he announced the annulment of the 2012 constitution and declared the old parliament dissolved. He announced a reorganisation of the armed forces and stated that security organs affiliated with the government would also be officially dissolved. He legitimised these decisions that day by appointing himself transitional president of Syria. The fact that the population had no say in these decisions was sharply criticised by the DAANES. The autonomy administration demanded an "inclusive national framework" in which decisions

should be taken with all population groups, denominations and components of Syrian society, including women and youth.

Only men took part in the meeting. Among them were some personalities already known as jihadist leaders. For example Ahmad Ihsan Fayyad al-Hayes alias Abu Hatem Shaqra, who murdered Hevrîn Xelef, the general secretary of the Syria Future Party. The conference was thus a demonstration of power and clearly showed that the new leadership of Syria has no claim to represent the interests of all Syrians.

24/25 February – Dialogue Conference in Damascus

On the weekend of 24/25 February, a national dialogue conference was held in Damascus on the initiative of the transitional government. 500 representatives of the transitional government, NGOs, religious groups and civil society organisations took part. On site, the future state structure, the political system of a new Syrian state, military and economic issues, the rights of the population and the creation of a new constitution were discussed. What at first sight looks like a positive initiative by the HTS leadership later turned out to be a performative event. All Kurdish representatives, including the autonomy administration, which represents 30 % of Syria, as well as the Druze community, were not invited. Later the DAANES stressed that this conference did not represent the Syrian people. The final declaration emphasises the unity of Syria and the monopoly of violence of a central Syrian state. Thus all armed groups outside the central government, including the SDF and the Druze militias, which had to defend themselves repeatedly during the year against attacks by Islamist troops, are to be banned. Furthermore, there was a call for the acceleration of the formation of a constitutional committee and respect for human rights.

The Israeli army was called upon to withdraw from the buffer zones; the Turkish occupation in northern Syria was not mentioned. The content and final declaration clearly reflect the political aspirations of the HTS leadership. It seems as if the conference wants to satisfy the demand for more participation of the population and thus put the legitimization of the new Syrian leadership on a solid footing.

1–10 March – Massacre of Alawites in western Syria

At the beginning of March, HTS and Islamist militias marched into the north-west of the country. The Alawites live there by the sea in the regions of Tartus and Latakia. Because the Assad family was Alawite, the Alawites in Syria are often generally suspected of complicity with Assad. From March 2025, 1,500 people were killed in the region and dozens of women abducted. On 10 March, the Defence Ministry of the transitional government announced that the operation in the coastal region had been “successfully” completed. Afterwards, hundreds more civilians were massacred.

After the attacks, al-Sharaa announced the establishment of an investigation commission to clarify everything. On 22 July, the report stated that 1,426 people, including 90 women, had lost their lives. Nevertheless, the massacres were legitimised with the justification of fighting “remnants with connections to the previous regime” and “criminal gangs”. Thus the atrocities of HTS and other militias were clearly defended by the investigation commission. From March onwards there were repeated protests in the coastal region and in Europe.

Even though the Alawites have certain demands for autonomy, their degree of organisation compared to other ethnic groups has not been very high.

All the more important was the founding of the Political Council for Central and Western Syria, which was proclaimed on 27 August under the leadership of Syrian Alawites. It demands the introduction of a federal system in Syria in order to stop the violent attacks and establish peace between the regions. Furthermore, the council called for the convening of a new national conference under the leadership of the United Nations. It accuses the transitional government of being “a terrorist system that seized power at a certain political moment” and of maintaining close contacts with the Turkish regime.

On 25 November, Ghazal Ghazal, chairman of the Supreme Islamic Council of the Alawites, called for a rally. Hundreds of people took to the streets demanding a decentralised Syria. The government responded to these protests with arrests and shots at the demonstrating crowd.

The hate campaign and the subsequent massacres of the transitional government are the beginning of a restructuring into an Arab-Sunni regime that will not tolerate the autonomy of other peoples and religious groups. Furthermore, the massacres at the very beginning of the year were a threat to all peoples and faiths to demonstrate the consequences of resistance.

10 March – The agreement between the transitional government and DAANES

The transitional government quickly realised that the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) is a force that cannot be ignored. It administers one third of Syria and has a 100,000-strong fighting force with the QSD (Syrian Democratic Forces). Thus on 10 March 2025, transitional president Ahmad al-Sharaa and QSD commander-in-chief Mazlum Abdi met as representatives of the two parties and signed an agreement. The meeting showed that the DAANES is officially recognised by the HTS and perceived as a negotiating partner. The following decisions were taken in the agreement:

1. Guaranteeing the right of all Syrian women and men to representation and participation in the political process and in all state institutions on the basis of their competence, regardless of religious and ethnic origin.

2. Recognition of the Kurdish population group as an indigenous population group [...]
3. Ceasefire in all areas of Syria.
4. Integration of all civilian and military institutions in North and East Syria into the administration of the Syrian state, including border crossings, airport as well as oil and gas fields.
5. Guaranteeing the return of all displaced Syrian women and men to their cities and villages [...]
6. Support of the Syrian state in its fight against the remnants of the Assad regime [...]
7. Rejection of calls for division, hate speech and attempts to sow discord between the population groups of Syria.
8. Establishment of executive committees that work towards the implementation of the agreement by the end of the current year.

Above all, decisions 1 and 2 on the equality of the peoples of Syria were brought to the negotiating table by the DAANES and are an achievement for the peoples of Syria. Here the self-administration represents the democratic forces, the various peoples and also the women of Syria. Even though it was criticised that Mazlum Abdi enters into dialogue with an Islamist, the negotiation of two parties is necessary in politics in order to represent one's own interests. The DAANES and thus the Rojava revolution have become a contracting party here. After the adoption of the agreement, the question arose as to what the implementation would look like. A commission was set up for each of the points, in which the DAANES and the transitional government are represented. The aim is to monitor the decisions. To this day, the agreement is far from being achieved, but rather marks the beginning of a process between two parties and for the formation of a new Syria.

13 March – Signing of the transitional constitution

On 1 March, al-Sharaa announced the establishment of a commission to draw up a transitional constitution. Thus on 13 March a transitional constitution was presented. It is to remain in force until 2030, and a committee will be responsible until then for drafting a permanent constitution. The name "Arab Republic of Syria" is retained. Thus the official name alone does not represent the peoples of Syria. In Article 3, paragraph 1, it was laid down that the head of state of Syria must be Muslim and that "Islamic jurisprudence is the most important source of legislation". Here the Arab-moderate Islamist orientation becomes clearly visible. The central system and a rejection of any decentralisation or independence aspirations of Syrian territories are clearly emphasised.

Furthermore, it is mentioned that the Syrian army is a "professional national institution" and that weapons outside its control are prohibited, whereby all violence is to fall into the hands of the Islamist transitional government.

In the 15-page document, the procedure for the elections is also determined, which we will evaluate in the section on the October elections.

Al-Sharaa commented on the announcement with: “a new history for Syria in which we replace oppression with justice”. However, this only lays the bureaucratic foundation for consolidating the power of him and the central government. Shortly after publication, the DAANES announced that it would not accept this constitution because it was “beyond the actual reality of Syria”.

The social contract that represents the constitution in North and East Syria was discussed and edited through several instances of society before its adoption. The Syrian transitional constitution was presented two weeks after the establishment of a committee and immediately signed.

29 March – Appointment of the transitional government

In December an interim government was proclaimed that was to take over state affairs. On 29 March, al-Sharaa announced the dissolution of this interim government and presented a 23-member cabinet, including 22 ministers and al-Sharaa himself.

The foreign minister Asaad al-Schaibani and defence minister Murhaf Abu Qasra, appointed in December, remained in office. The former HTS intelligence chief Anas Chattab was appointed interior minister. The former head of government of the HTS protectorate in Idlib, Mohammed al-Baschir, became head of the energy department. The Christian Hind Kabawat is minister for social affairs and the only female representative in the cabinet. The Alawite Jarub Badr becomes transport minister. The Druze Amgad Badr is entrusted with the management of agriculture and the new education minister Mohammed Abdul Rahman Turko joins the cabinet as a Kurdish representative.

Sharaa describes the cabinet formation: “a declaration of our common will to build a new state”. However, it shows a mixture of the continuation of the same political leadership in Idlib, only centrally from Damascus, and the attempt to appease the population with a representation of minorities. The HTS cadres are personalities who committed human rights crimes during the civil war and were on terror lists. For example, before heading the HTS intelligence service, Anas Chattab was an administrator with the Jabhat al-Nusra organisation and maintained close contacts with al-Qaida.

Even though an attempt was made to include all minorities, a central state is formed with figures from various minorities. A “diverse” line-up without pluralistic politics internally and externally only has a performative character. A diverse line-up is an attempt to keep the population calm internally and to satisfy supporting states such

as the USA and EU as well as human rights organisations and the public. The Islamist HTS leadership was given a diverse, democratic coat of paint.

25 April – Kurdish Unity Conference in Qamishlo

On 25 April the conference on Kurdish unity took place in Qamishlo. In the light of the transitional period in Syria and the dialogue process of the Kurdish freedom movement with the Turkish government, Kurdish representatives from three parts of Kurdistan, representatives of NGOs and journalists took part in the conference. The central participating parties were the PYD (Democratic Union Party), the ENKS (Kurdish National Council, Syrian offshoot of the KDP) and the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan). The conference represents a milestone in the common will of the Kurdish national and democratic forces. 400 delegates came together to discuss the future order of Syria in the future and the unity of Kurdistan. The final document called for a decentralised Syria with respect for all ethnic and religious groups. Afterwards, a joint Kurdish negotiating committee is to be established, which aims at cooperation between Kurdish parties and representation at international and national level.

13 July – Attacks on Druze in Suwaida

On 13 July, transitional government forces attacked Suwaida in southern Syria. A region inhabited mainly by the Druze minority. The pretext was clashes between Druze militias and armed Bedouins who also live in the region. This led to fighting between government troops and Druze militias. In total 1,500 people died, including 800 Druze. On 18 July, Islamist militias opened fire in the Al-Watani hospital in Suwaida and massacred 200 people. Pictures show bodies lying in and around the entire hospital. Druze women were kidnapped during this period and male prisoners had their beards shaved off for humiliation. During the fighting, the Kurdish women's defence units YPJ offered their support to Suwaida with the words: "As women's defence units, it is not only our duty to stand up against attacks on women and oppressed peoples wherever they occur – it is the basis of our existence."

Due to centuries of oppression, the Druze were so organised that their militias were able to defend the region. Thus in these battles the areas and the identity of the Druze were defended and all hostile troops were forced to withdraw on 20 July. Afterwards, the transitional government imposed a blockade so that no electricity, water or food reached the southern Syrian region. The aid convoys of the democratic self-administration were deliberately stopped by the transitional government.

According to the current situation, the Druze are organising themselves in their areas so that they administer themselves. The transitional government no longer has much influence on the ground. The Druze society is nevertheless divided. There are clergy with great influence who take different attitudes. For example, the cleric Hikmat al-Hijri called for unconditional self-defence and rejected any collaboration with the

transitional government. According to him, a new Syrian state with a secular model should be built. However, in the past he maintained good relations with the Assad regime and sought support from Israel. The clerics Sheikh Jarbou and Sheikh al-Balous entered into dialogue with the new government in order to achieve a ceasefire.

After the attacks on the Druze, Israel repeatedly bombed Syrian troops and the capital Damascus. The USA then mediated a ceasefire between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President al-Sharaa. Although Israel justified the attacks with the protection of the Druze, it is obvious that the areas occupied by Israel in southern Syria should not fall into the hands of Syrian troops. Israel has no interest in protecting the Druze, but is trying to win the favour with minorities in order to gain sympathy in the region and throughout Syria. Nevertheless, it is clear that Suwaida was successfully defended only through the self-defence of the Druze people.

16 July – Interim status of the negotiations and the role of the USA

Tom Barrack, US ambassador for the Middle East, has been in the public eye since December 2024 and plays a central role in today's Middle East policy. In July, SDF commander-in-chief Mazlum Abdi met with co-chair for foreign relations Ilham Ahmed, as well as spokespersons Foza Yusif and Abid Hamid Mihbaş, Tom Barrack and the French envoy Jean-Baptiste Faivre as well as al-Sharaa in Damascus. The subject of the meeting was the negotiations between DAANES and the transitional government that had begun with the 10 March agreement. Tom Barrack made it clear that the USA is committed to a central Syria. Former German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock also called on the SDF to lay down their arms and submit to the new government. On 11 November, the transitional government, which was established by jihadists, joined the international anti-IS coalition.

9 August – Conference of the Peoples in Heseke

After the fighting for the self-administration, the massacres of the Alawites and the blockade of Suwaida, a historically significant step for the new Syria was initiated at the beginning of August. On 9 August, a conference of the peoples was held in Heseke on the initiative of the Democratic Self-Administration. Under the motto "Diversity strengthens our togetherness, cooperation secures our future", 500 representatives of all ethnic and religious groups of North and East Syria came together. The diversity of Syria should not be presented as a threat but as an enrichment for Syria, participants said. The conference saw itself as an expression of collective resistance against war, exclusion and political marginalisation. In the final declaration, the participants called for a new democratic constitution so that everyone can participate in political events in Syria. Furthermore, a comprehensive national congress was demanded in order to create a common will for the whole of Syria. While the transitional government massacres and persecutes the peoples of

Syria, the democratic self-administration is an initiating force that unites the various peoples of Syria.

5 October – Elections in Syria

Already at the beginning of the HTS takeover of power, elections were promised to the people. However, they were only to take place in five years. Under pressure from Western states, they had to take place this year. In Chapter 3 of the transitional constitution, the election procedure was then determined in March. The election procedure provides that al-Sharaa appoints one third of the parliament. This means that 70 of the 210 parliamentary seats alone are determined by the transitional president.

The other two thirds are determined by a ten-member election commission appointed by al-Sharaa. This election commission established people's commissions in every province. To join these people's commissions, one had to prove that one had no connections to the old regime and commit to the concept of the central state. Opposition members or enemies in the eyes of the HTS leadership were excluded from the elections. The provinces of Suwaida, Raqqa and Heseke were excluded from the elections from the outset. In Suwaida, Druze resistance continues to prevail, Raqqa and Heseke are parts of the democratic self-administration. The reason given was the "insecure situation" in the regions.

In the end, the elections were a performance in which predetermined candidates and no people's representatives were allowed to run. The DAANES announced that the Syrians are denied the right to free elections and half of the Syrian population was excluded from the elections.

6 October – Attacks on Kurdish neighbourhoods in Aleppo

In Aleppo, the SDF troops that had been stationed there in December were withdrawn in April. Currently, only the Asayiş (security forces of the self-administration) are active in the city. The Kurdish neighbourhoods of Şêx Maqsûd and Eşrefiyê may not be entered by other militias or the HTS.

On the afternoon of 6 October, Syrian government troops completely sealed off the districts. Then an attempt was made to penetrate the neighbourhoods with tanks and armoured vehicles. In response, the administrative council called for peaceful protests. The mass protests were answered by the transitional government with tear gas and ammunition. This led to broader attacks and fighting between transitional government troops and the Asayiş (security forces of the self-administration). During the night, mortar shells were used against the local population. In total there were two dead and 60 injured. A massacre could be prevented.

10 November – Al-Sharaa visits the White House

On 10 November, al-Sharaa meets US President Donald Trump. Sharaa is the first Syrian president since 1946 to be a guest at the White House. The US State Department extended the lifting of sanctions against Syria by a further 180 days. The complete lifting of sanctions must be voted on by the US Congress. After the meeting, Syria's accession to the international anti-IS coalition was announced. This once again shows very clearly that diplomacy is oriented according to political and economic interests. Thus a government founded by former al-Qaida cadres, which this year was busy massacring thousands of Alawites and Druze, was rolled out the red carpet. Trump praised al-Sharaa to the press and said: "He is a very strong leader".

Final assessment

On the "Day of Liberation", rallies and celebrations were held throughout Syria on 8 December. The government organised a military parade. Afterwards, al-Sharaa gave a speech to the people: "to build a strong Syria, secure its stability, preserve its sovereignty and shape a future that does justice to the victims of its people".

In its statement on 7 December, the DAANES commemorated all those who fell. It emphasises that the fall of the Assad regime is a success, but the longest road still lies ahead. Namely the building of a democratic, free and decentralised Syria. The transitional government receives sharp criticism in the statement for its measures and massacres in the first year of government.

Even with the optimism about Assad's resignation, we look back on a year filled with false promises, massacres and an undemocratic exclusion of the population. In this year a government has built itself up that from the very beginning shows itself to be no more democratic than the Assad regime. Thus the hope of the Syrians has been replaced by uncertainty about the future. A country damaged by 13 years of war has been denied the hope for peace and democracy.

But we have also seen that the crimes of the HTS government do not go unanswered. The Tishrin resistance, the organisation of the Alawites and the defence of Suwaida show that the peoples of Syria are ready to repel reactionary attacks and build a just society. Today it is especially important that these forces and the oppressed of Syria stand united against the transitional government and expose it.

The slogan "Status for Rojava, Democracy for Syria" remains relevant in the coming period as well. With various initiatives, the Democratic Self-Administration has shown that it is leading in the democratisation of Syria. It is not only open to working with all the oppressed of Syria, but is also in a position to represent them vis-à-vis the transitional government. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the existence and nature of the self-administration are currently being openly discussed. In recent months, the transitional government has shown through the attacks in western Syria,

Suwaida and also provocations in Deir ez-Zor that it is not shy of attacking North and East Syria. Nevertheless, the SDF armed forces are professionally trained and many times larger than the Syrian army.

Today it is the task of all democratic forces in Europe and worldwide to uphold the demands of the peoples of Syria. The transitional government is a composition of former al-Qaida and HTS officials who are not afraid to repeat today the human rights violations committed in Iraq or in the Syrian civil war. We urgently appeal that exposing the HTS and the transitional government is today the top priority. The future of the DAANES is uncertain today, but its continued existence also lies in the hands of the solidarity movement – to take to the streets for its status, to become active and to take initiative.

Peoples Bridge, 8 December 2025