

# Mass protests against jihadist HTS rule in Syria

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Following the overthrow of the Russian- and Iranian-backed regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria by Islamist proxies of NATO powers, there has been a great deal of anxiety and fear, particularly among religious and sectarian minorities.

On December 8, 2024, jihadist forces led by the al-Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) seized power, creating new threats to the rights and lives of Christians, Alawites and other minorities.

According to the *Art? Gerçek* and the Mesopotamia Agency in Turkey on Wednesday, complaints of house raids, looting, harassment of women and executions have increased, especially in areas where Alawites live, since jihadists led by the HTS took power.

After two churches and a patriarchate were reportedly attacked, on December 18, in Hama, central Syria, masked and armed men set fire to a giant Christmas tree in the Christian-populated city of al-Suqaylabiyah on Tuesday. Those who tried to extinguish the tree and prevent the attack were reportedly threatened at gunpoint.

The circulation of a video on social media showing the burning of the Christmas tree in al-Suqaylabiyah sparked outrage among Christian and other communities across Syria.

Christians in Hama, Damascus and Homs took to the streets carrying crosses and protesting jihadist groups in solidarity with the people of Suqaylabiyah. The protesters formed long convoys of vehicles and demanded that minority-populated areas be cleared of jihadists.

Hundreds of people took to the streets in the Bab Tuma neighborhood of Damascus, chanting “Protect the rights of Christians.”

Andrew Bahi, a priest living in Damascus, told DPA (German Press Agency) that “We have the right to be

afraid. Over the years, the [Christian-dominated] neighborhoods of eastern Damascus have been hit by hundreds of shells and we endured in our homes, but now the atmosphere remains ambiguous. There is a conflict and contradiction between words and actions.”

Samer Elias said, “Everyone chanted demanding the protection of Christians in Syria.”

The leader of the new regime, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani (Ahmed al-Shara’a), claimed that those who burned the Christmas tree were foreign fighters and would be punished. But these and similar statements lack credibility in the face of increasing harassment and attacks by jihadist gangs.

A day after these demonstrations, protests took place in Tartus, Latakia, Hama and Homs after a video went viral of a December 5 attack on an Alawite shrine in Aleppo that houses the tomb of Hussein bin Himden al-Hasibi, considered an historical leader of the Arab Alawites. In a video allegedly made by jihadists, five civilians responsible for maintaining the shrine are killed and the shrine is set on fire during the attack. The jihadists then pose on the bodies of the mausoleum servants they killed.

Government officials appointed by the HTS have tried to appease the angry masses by saying that the attack on the shrine was not new, but took place during the capture of Aleppo in early December.

Euronews reported that the killing of three Alawite judges and an officer who served under the Assad regime in Hama on Tuesday also contributed to spark mass protests in Homs, Hama, Tartous and Latakia on Wednesday.

According to the London-based anti-Assad Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), HTS forces killed an Alawite demonstrator during a protest in Homs, further escalating tensions. Following these

incidents, a curfew was announced in the city.

The official SANA news agency announced that the HTS government launched an operation against pro-Assad forces in the countryside of Tartus. During the operation, 14 security officials from the new Interior Ministry were reportedly killed.

Alawite sheikh Ali Dareer, who lives in a predominantly Alawite neighborhood in Damascus, told Reuters: “Thousands of people are filled with resentment, anxiety, and their dignity is offended,” before adding that “However, we must remain committed to peace.”

He said that homes had been vandalised and people beaten because of their religious identity, despite HTS promises the sect would be treated with respect.

Dareer then described an incident that allegedly took place on Thursday, when people were reportedly taken off a bus and beaten because they were Alawites.

These remarks underscore the tense atmosphere in the community and the danger that the new al-Qaeda-linked ruling forces could exacerbate sectarian tensions.

In the face of the repressive policies of the HTS regime, the imperialist and regional powers that brought it to power have largely remained silent. Instead, they are doing their best to eliminate Iran’s influence in Syria, plunder its resources and increase their influence in the country.

Washington lifted its bounty on al-Jolani, paving the way for a rapprochement with the new regime. Representatives of France and Britain also met with HTS officials in Damascus. The NATO powers and their allies are trying to use HTS, which they still consider a terrorist group on paper, as a tool for their geostrategic interests.

While the US and Israel have severely crippled Syria’s military infrastructure through intensive air strikes and sought to create a compliant puppet regime in Damascus, the Israeli army has expanded its occupation and influence in the country.

As Turkey seeks to suppress Kurdish forces in northern Syria and increase its influence in the country, it has turned to more open relations with HTS. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pledged military and logistical support to the new regime, while Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan became the highest-ranking NATO official ever to visit Damascus, embracing al-Jolani. The HTS leader also pledged a “strategic

relationship” with Turkey.



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