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Context of the latest developments in Syria

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Introduction

The war in the Middle East has been escalating for 14 months. It has long since moved beyond the war in Gaza, which killed tens of thousands of people in the first few months alone and drove hundreds of thousands to flee their homes. Over the last few months, the war has increasingly escalated. In October, Israeli troops invaded Lebanon, for example, where the Israeli army and Hezbollah, which is allied with Iran, are fighting each other, even if there have been ceasefires in the meantime. The so-called “axis of resistance” against Israel, which is led by Iran, includes Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and Hamas, as well as the Syrian regime, which has been politically and militarily weakened for years and has been able to hold on to power in parts of Syria mainly thanks to Russian support. However, after the Islamist militia Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) captured the cities of Aleppo, Homs and Hama in early December, it did not take long for Assad to be overthrown after more than a decade of uprisings and civil war - and this was due to the fact that the focus of allies Iran and Russia had shifted as a result of the war in Gaza and Ukraine. For many Syrians who were tortured and had to flee under the Baath regime, which had been in power for over 50 years, and also for many Kurds from Rojava/northern Syria, who experienced oppression and state violence under the regime, this is a reason to celebrate. However, the joy over Assad's downfall must not overshadow the dangerous situation that is emerging as various Islamist militias gain power.

Regional powers such as Turkey and Israel are now trying more than ever to profit from this chaotic situation. The situation is confusing and cannot be understood outside of the power interests of various state and non-state actors that have been operating there since the start of the civil war in

2011. Here we see an urgent need to understand the events in the region from the perspective of women and minorities. This document is an attempt to contextualize the consequences of the events from a feminist perspective. The focus is primarily on northern Syria and the role of Turkey - a NATO state and a regional power that has been pursuing power and expansionist interests in Syria for years.

As women who are committed to peace and against patriarchal and state oppression, we see it as our responsibility to inform people about how these moments of chaos affect women and minorities. We see it as our responsibility to expose the power and profit interests of various actors. A free Syria can only be a Syria in which women are also free and have an active role in shaping political and social life. The current events pose new dangers, especially for the self-administration in Rojava/North and East Syria, whose development is primarily the result of the strength of women.

Background: Syrien after 2011

After the start of the civil war in 2011 and the uprisings against the Baath regime, millions of people fled Syria. The war, the violence of the regime, but also the emergence and strengthening of Islamist militias, drove millions to flee. The relations of power in the country changed in different ways in each region. With the ousting of the regime in northern Syria by Kurdish forces, the Rojava Revolution began in 2012 in the city of Kobanê and the establishment of the self-administration, now the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), with a democratic system in which minorities and women organize themselves autonomously. However, the civil war and the influence of regional and international powers also paved the way for reactionary patriarchal forces such as the Islamic State (IS) and the al-Nusra Front, while in the south Assad was able to keep some areas under his control until recently with the support of Russia.

Where groups such as IS took control, there were forced Islamization, massacres of the population, especially of minorities, and femicides. In Shingal in northern Iraq, IS carried out a genocide in 2014, which was primarily a femicide and an attack on women: thousands of women and girls were abducted and sold as “sex slaves”. Large parts of Rojava were also besieged by IS. The city of Kobanê, where the Rojava revolution began, was liberated from IS rule in 2015 after 134 days of resistance by the YPG People's Defense Units and the YPJ Women's Defense Units. IS was largely pushed back and weakened over time by the Rojava defense forces, in particular by the resistance of the women. An important supporter of IS is and was Turkey, whose army intervened directly militarily from 2016 with its own operations and attacked the self-administration. Rojava has had to defend itself against Turkish attacks and militias allied with Turkey for years. In addition to major offensives such as in Afrîn in 2018 or Gire Spê and Serêkaniyê in 2019, Turkey has been waging a low-intensity war for long periods of time. IS has been massively weakened for several years, but there have been repeated

attempts to reorganize, which have been facilitated by Turkey's support. In addition, numerous other Sunni and Shiite (proxy) militias are operating in Syria, which are also fighting each other.

What happened in the past few days?

The Islamist alliance Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) emerged in 2017 and can be seen as an “offshoot” of the al-Nusra Front. It dominates the border town of Idlib and led the most recent offensive against the Syrian regime. On the night of December 8, 2024, after taking control of Aleppo, Homs and Hama, it announced its capture of the capital Damascus, closely followed by reports of Assad's fall and his escape from Syria. HTS leader Al-Jolani is currently presenting himself as moderate and speaks of wanting to unite different political factions and sections of society. However, women and minorities in the self-administration in northern and eastern Syria are particularly skeptical of the former Al-Nusra leader's claims.

The news of the fall of the regime coincided with reports of attacks on the self-administration in Rojava by the SNA, a Turkish-backed mercenaries that was involved in the invasion of Afrîn and the murder of Kurdish politician Hevrîn Xelef. Images are already circulating of women being abducted by the SNA, which also includes former IS members, in the city of Minbic, which was liberated from IS rule in 2016. They are destroying symbols of self-administration and setting fire to flags bearing the face of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) who has been imprisoned since 1999 and who was particularly active in organizing women in the Kurdish movement.

At the same time, Turkey is continuing its attacks in northern Syria, which aim to destroy the self-administration in Rojava. On December 8, for example, Turkish drones attacked a village populated by Christians near Til Temir. On December 9, the Turkish army carried out a drone attack on a village near Ain Issa in which twelve people, including children, were killed.

To what extent, or for how long, the HTS will tolerate the self-administration in Rojava, whose political values and interests are completely opposed to its own, and whether it will engage in a dialog with the representatives of the self-administration or fight them in cooperation with Turkey, remains to be seen. What is certain is that northern Syria is strategically and economically important as a region and that several actors have an interest in fighting the self-administration. Turkey and its affiliated jihadist armed groups in particular are pursuing their goal of attacking the women's revolution in Rojava and bringing large areas of Syria under their control, Turkifying and Islamizing them.

In other parts of Syria, the fall of the regime and the liberation of political prisoners is being celebrated. More than 50 years of oppression and rule by the Baath regime are over. For many people in and from

Syria, this is a relief. But the question is what happens next - especially for democratic and progressive forces there, for women and for minorities.

Displacement, fighting, deportations - what happens next?

It is already becoming apparent that regional and international powers are trying to gain political and military advantages from the situation in Syria and assert their geopolitical interests. Syria has been at the mercy of the presence of foreign powers, occupation and proxy wars for more than a decade. The “liberation” of Syria is being talked about, while on the one hand Islamist forces are gaining power, Israel is attacking Syria by air, and Turkey is occupying areas in Syria and attacking Rojava with its jihadist allies. In Europe, on the other hand, governments were already talking about deporting Syrian citizens as quickly as possible less than a day after Assad's fall - despite the continuing insecurity of the situation.

Despite military attacks and attempts to isolate the self-administration politically and economically, Rojava could not be defeated. Since the beginning of the revolution, Rojava has become a source of hope for people in the region and throughout the world. The confederal system, with its autonomous women's structures and the self-organization of ethnic and religious minorities, is a model that could create peace and equality throughout the country. But it is constantly under attack. A major threat to democracy and freedom in Syria and Rojava, now even stronger than before, comes from the Turkish state and its jihadist allies. They also pose a threat to other minorities living in Syria. The situation of internally displaced persons in Syria must also be particularly emphasized. Hundreds of thousands of people who fled from the Turkish invasion of Afrîn six years ago have now fled from the Shehba region to Rojava to escape the Islamist groups and are dependent on emergency aid from organizations there.

Rojava can be the key to peace

Despite the ongoing threats and difficulties it now faces, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria also sees the collapse of the Assad regime as an opportunity for a new democratic order. The escalation of violence is particularly affecting the civilian population, which is already suffering from the economically and politically unstable situation in the country. A democratic reorganization can only be successfully implemented if all minorities are included and a truly democratic structure is established that puts all population groups on an equal footing. Self-administration could play a central role in this context. Women play a key role in the political, economic and military structure of self-administration. They occupy important positions, particularly in the autonomous administration and the Women's Defense Units (YPJ). Equality and women's rights are central principles in Rojava's social model, as are justice and solidarity among the ethnic groups.

The situation and developments on the ground should be followed with great attention and solidarity by all democratic, left-wing and feminist forces. A free Syria must also include freedom for women, minorities, and all oppressed peoples and classes. Society alone should decide what happens to Syria, not states and Islamist militias that turn society against each other and foment hatred, violence and war. We must take action to achieve this.

What can we do?

→ Take action:

Protests against the attacks on Rojava are currently taking place in many cities. You can find information on upcoming dates via the initiatives Defend Kurdistan and Women Defend Kurdistan, as well as on the channels of the Kurdish communities KCDK-E. You can also find out about solidarity circles and open meetings and become active in them. In addition, you can contact the local press, journalists and politicians - we can build up pressure so that the situation in Rojava is discussed in reporting and politics.

→ Donate:

The self-administration in Rojava is under attack and at the same time has the important task of caring for multiply displaced people who have found refuge there. Here are some trustworthy organizations you can donate to:

Foundation of Free Woman in Syria (WJAS)

Account Holder Name: Kurdistanhilfe e.V.

Referene: NOTHILFE

IBAN: DE40 2005 0550 1049 2227 04

The Kurdish Red Crescent Heyva Sor

Account Holder Name: Heyva Sor a Kurdistan e.V.

Reference: Rojava

IBAN: DE49 3705 0299 0004 0104 81

or via Paypal to heyvasorakurdistan@gmail.com

→ Where you can inform yourself on latest developments:

You can find more up-to-date information on the situation in Rojava on these channels:

- Rojava Information Center (english)
- Civaka Azad - Kurdisches Büro für Öffentlichkeitsarbeit (german)
- Nachrichtenagentur ANF (german, english, türkish)