The Impact of the Regime Change in Syria on DAESH and Jihadist Networks in Türkiye

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Introduction

The popular uprising that began in Syria in 2011, which first turned into armed conflict and shortly thereafter into a civil war, deeply affected not only Syria's internal political order but also the security architecture of the Middle East. The civil war, which lasted for approximately 13 years, led to the weakening of state authority in Syria, enabled non state armed groups to maintain long term control over certain regions of the country, and allowed terrorist organizations to govern some areas for extended periods of time. During this period, Syria became not only a space in which terrorist groups or externally supported militias controlling different parts of the country could disseminate their ideologies, but also an operational base, an opportunity to obtain financial resources, a territorial base for sustaining organizational continuity, and a recruitment ground for expanding their activities to wider areas. The conflict environment in Syria has perhaps created an international attraction center unprecedented in recent decades. Iran has brought Shia Muslims from various countries in the Middle East such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Iraq, and even Yemen to fight in Syria and in some cases to settle there. However, it became clear that the appeal of the YPG and DAESH extended far beyond Syria's borders. While hundreds of individuals, many of them from Europe, traveled to Syria to fight within the ranks of the YPG/SDF, the number of those who sought to join DAESH and live within the borders of the so called Caliphate it claimed to establish exceeded tens of thousands.

The Syrian civil war has had a strong capacity to affect other countries and to spread to them both directly and indirectly. By the third year of the war in Syria, DAESH, which had emerged in Iraq but found a wide operational space in Syria, was able to destabilize Iraq. With the emergence of DAESH, the balance of the civil war in Syria also changed. Beyond this, however, DAESH became a major center of attraction to a degree that no other radical jihadist organization had previously achieved. Between 2014 and 2016 alone, the number of people who traveled from different parts of the world to join DAESH in Iraq and Syria and to live under its so called Caliphate exceeded the total number of individuals who had traveled to all jihad fronts up to that time, including Afghanistan.[1] Naturally, this situation directly affected Türkiye's security, Syria's most important neighboring country and the primary gateway along the travel routes used by foreign fighters.

Türkiye has been one of the countries most affected by developments stemming from the Syrian civil war, due to the intense humanitarian mobility and its role in regional political developments. The conflict dynamics in Syria have not only affected Türkiye's border security and foreign policy but have also transformed the nature of radical jihadist movements, thereby bringing the threats of radicalization and terrorism in Türkiye to different dimensions. Although Al Qaeda and radical Salafi jihadist movements had already been active in Türkiye before the Syrian civil war, this threat began to change significantly from 2012 onwards. However, the main transformation started after the establishment of DAESH in 2013.

After 2013, radical Salafi jihadist organizations in Türkiye, particularly DAESH, expanded and strengthened to an unprecedented degree in terms of logistical support mechanisms, ideological mobilization processes, and operational capabilities. At the same time, just as the years in which DAESH reached the peak of its power influenced radical Salafi jihadist movements in Türkiye, the periods during which the organization lost territory in Syria also had an impact on networks in Türkiye for different reasons. The organization, which carried out numerous attacks in Türkiye between 2013 and 2017, also experienced a transformation in its presence in Türkiye in parallel with the process through which it began to lose territorial control in Syria in 2018. For instance, DAESH was unable to carry out any significant attacks in Türkiye between 2017 and 2024. This situation demonstrates that the Syrian civil war and the shifts in the balance of power among different groups have had a profound impact on radical Salafi jihadist movements in Türkiye. For this reason, it can be argued that the end of the civil war in Syria, which lasted for 13 years, and the establishment of a new political order in the country may have consequences not only for Syria's security but also for radical Salafi jihadist organizations operating in Türkiye.

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1 The Soufan Group. (2015). *Foreign fighters: An updated assessment of the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq*. New York: The Soufan Group. S.4

Following the establishment of a new administration in Syria under the leadership of Ahmad al Shara, the security environment in the country has been changing frequently. While some regions have become relatively secure, others continue to experience fluctuating security dynamics depending on the period. How this new security environment has affected and will affect the presence of DAESH in Syria is an issue of considerable importance for the country's future. It has been observed that the organization, which remained largely silent in the first months following the end of the Assad regime, began to become active again from mid 2025 onwards and drew significant attention toward the end of the year. In addition, the outcome of the power struggle between the Syrian government and the SDF in favor of the Syrian government has constituted a turning point affecting the presence of DAESH in Syria. Following the developments that took place in January 2026, the shift in the balance of power in the rural areas of Raqqa, Deir ez Zor, and Hasakah quickly became evident. Moreover, the closure of the camps where the families of DAESH militants had stayed for more than seven years[2] has made it necessary to reassess the organization's presence in Syria.

It has long been observed that the organizational adaptation strategies developed by jihadist organizations in response to military pressure have led these groups to operate in more flexible, dispersed, and network-based forms. This situation indicates that the activities of such organizations may not remain limited to specific geographical areas; rather, they may continue to exert influence in different countries through transnational networks.

In this context, analyzing the effects of the new security environment that emerged following the change in Syria on jihadist networks in Türkiye has become an important area of research. It can be anticipated that the transformation in Syria's security environment will directly affect DAESH's strategic priorities, organizational structure, and areas of activity. This situation necessitates both the reassessment of existing security risks and the analysis of potential threats that may emerge in the future for Türkiye.

The primary aim of this study is to examine, from a multidimensional perspective, the effects of the new security environment that has emerged in Syria on jihadist networks in Türkiye. The study seeks to answer two main questions. First, how do the political and military developments in Syria affect radical Salafi jihadist networks in Türkiye? Second, what kinds of security risks and policy needs does the emerging security environment generate for Türkiye? Answering these questions will contribute both to a better understanding of the current security dynamics and to policy development processes aimed at addressing future challenges.

Methodologically, this study is based on a literature review that draws primarily on academic publications and news sources. In addition to these two main sources, reports published by national and international think tanks have also been taken into consideration. Based on these data, the relationship between the transformation of the security environment in Syria and the patterns of activity of jihadist networks in Türkiye is examined within an analytical framework.

One of the main limitations of this research stems from the fact that radical Salafi jihadist networks are, by their nature, closed and covert structures. For this reason, it is often not possible to obtain direct data regarding the full scope of their organizational activities. Accordingly, the study is based primarily on an analysis conducted through open source data and the existing literature. Nevertheless, efforts have been made to enhance the analytical depth of the research through statistics and tables prepared on the basis of the available data.

In summary, this study aims to provide an analysis to better understand the effects of the changes in Syria's security environment on jihadist networks in Türkiye. In this context, the study seeks to contribute to the identification and prevention of potential emerging threats by examining the relationship between developments in Syria and the security environment in Türkiye.

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2 Vale, G. (2019). Women in Islamic State: From caliphate to camps. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT). https://doi.org/10.19165/2019.03.9. ss. 8-9

The Emergence and Evolution of Radical Salafi Jihadist Dynamics in Türkiye Before the Syrian Civil War

Until the mid 1970s, radical Salafi ideas had only a limited influence on Islamist movements in modern Türkiye. From this period onward, it is observed that radical Salafi ideas began to find space through the translation into Turkish of the works of radical Salafi ideologues and or thinkers who interpreted the concept of jihad as armed resistance. From that time onward, journals in which these ideas were expressed and associations formed by individuals sharing similar views later constituted the foundations of broader networks that would emerge in subsequent years. Indeed, in the early 1980s, it was observed that the first Turkish citizens began traveling to Afghanistan to wage jihad in the conflicts against the Soviet occupation.[3] However, participation during the 1980s was generally individual and extremely limited in scale.

During the 1990s, the conflicts in Bosnia and Chechnya brought jihad zones closer to Türkiye, leading to an increase in the participation of Turkish citizens in conflicts abroad. Indeed, between September 1992 and January 1994, 22 Turkish citizens lost their lives in the conflict in Bosnia, while 43 Turkish citizens were killed in Chechnya between 1994 and 1999. The growing participation in these conflicts, together with the atmosphere created by groups that had begun to come together in the 1980s, contributed to the emergence of a new radical generation that closely followed international developments and prioritized participation in jihad. Considering that a significant number of these individuals had traveled to at least one other conflict zone, it indicates that by the late 1990s a certain legacy had begun to take shape.

Since this new generation did not perceive Türkiye as a conflict zone, it did not attempt to establish a comprehensive organizational structure within the country; instead, many traveled to fight in Afghanistan, Kashmir, Bosnia, Chechnya, and Ogaden. During this period, a small, loose yet effective network emerged that facilitated the participation of more than one hundred Turkish citizens in jihad activities abroad. In summary, the individual radicalization that characterized the first generation of jihadists gradually gave way to group dynamics. However, financial and logistical ties established with actors abroad led the radical ideology aligned with Al Qaeda to begin displacing other ideological currents from the field.

After the September 11 attacks in 2001, as in the rest of the world, Al Qaeda gradually became the main center of attraction for many radical Salafi circles in Türkiye. While there was a significant increase in the number of individuals traveling from Türkiye to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan, a new tendency also began to emerge, unlike in the previous period. Certain cliques that emerged from within radical Salafi groups began to turn toward carrying out attacks in Türkiye. Although this was not a phenomenon encompassing all radical groups or all factions within them, it nevertheless contained important indications of the transformation that would occur in the near future. Indeed, the first attack carried out by a Turkish citizen was recorded in March 2003. In the same year, the first major Al Qaeda terrorist attacks in Türkiye, the November 15 and 20 attacks, were carried out. Although the militants were Turkish citizens, approximately one third of the members of the cell responsible for the attack were captured in Syria and sent to Türkiye.[4] During the same period, following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, militants of Turkish origin began to attract attention within Al Qaeda, which had started operating in Iraq.

After 2003, although the focus of militants of Turkish origin remained on Afghanistan and Iraq, from 2005 onwards at least one major attack was prevented by security forces almost every year. Most of the individuals involved in these thwarted attacks either traveled to Afghanistan after being released or became part of the logistical networks that were gradually developing within Türkiye. In summary, on the eve of the

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3 Yılmaz Vurgun, S. (2024). Mehmet Kazım Orbay'ın Son Posta Gazetesi'nde Kaleme Aldığı Afganistan Gezisi. Vakanüvis-Uluslararası Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi, 9 (2), 1661-1719.

4 Bianet. (2025, 17 Kasım). ***İstanbul sinagog saldırılarının 22. yılı***. https://bianet.org/haber/istanbul-sinagog-saldirilarinin-22-yili-313615

outbreak of the civil war in Syria, radical Salafi jihadism in Türkiye had largely completed its transformation from individual choices to organized networks. The transition from non Salafi radical movements to new networks aligned with Al Qaeda led to a shift from individual preferences toward learned patterns of behavior. Family ties, "heroic" narratives, and newly formed social environments played a greater role than socioeconomic factors. In this context, with the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, the impact of radical Salafi movements on Türkiye proved to be far stronger than initially anticipated.

DAESH During the Syrian Civil War and Its Impact on Jihadist Networks in Türkiye

Even before the uprising began in Syria, there were already connections between radical Salafi groups in Türkiye and their counterparts in Syria. For example, Luai Sakka, who provided financial support for the November 15–20, 2003 attacks, and who was later captured in 2005 while planning a bombing attack against Israeli ships docking at Turkish ports, as well as his associate Hamed Obysi, were Syrian nationals.[5] As noted above, some members of the cell that carried out the attack were captured in Syria and brought to Türkiye. The relations established during that period began to manifest themselves shortly after the civil war started in Syria.

The Period from the Outbreak of the Civil War to the Establishment of DAESH (2011–2013)

The Syrian civil war dramatically altered the trajectory of radicalization and organizational development among jihadist networks in Türkiye. In 2011, when hundreds of foreign fighters from different parts of the world began arriving in Syria to join the jihad against the Assad regime, there was no clear division among radical Salafi groups. Although disagreements occasionally emerged between local Syrian opposition groups and radical Salafis, these differences did not lead to major ruptures due to the strength of the common enemy. At the early stages of the conflict, the Syrian government lost control over much of the country's borders within a short period of time, allowing individuals arriving to fight to enter Syria through Iraq, Türkiye, and Jordan. The outbreak of the conflict also drew the attention of radical Salafi networks in Türkiye. Militants who had previously been convicted for al Qaeda related activities and later released from prison began traveling to Syria and participating in the fighting. Some of the earliest members of this group lost their lives in the Syrian conflict. Those who were killed were not limited to former al Qaeda convicts; some individuals who had served as their lawyers or had worked with them in humanitarian aid organizations were also killed in Syria. However, the impact of the Syrian civil war on radical Salafi networks in Türkiye was not limited to the departure of some former militants to fight in Syria. For thousands of militants from Central Asia, the Caucasus, North Africa, and Europe seeking to reach Syria, Türkiye became an important transit point. The coordination of these illegal crossings became a significant source of financial revenue for radical organizations. During this period, although several foreign al Qaeda cells attempted to carry out attacks in Türkiye following the death of al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, the focus of radical Salafi groups shifted toward Syria, leading to changes in both the level and the nature of the threat directed at Türkiye. Hundreds of individuals attempting to travel to Syria were apprehended either at the border or before reaching the border region. However, as the conflict intensified, the mass movement of civilians toward the border created opportunities for members of terrorist organizations to exploit the situation. By early 2013, DAESH, which had emerged in Iraq and quickly expanded into Syria, fundamentally altered both the trajectory of the Syrian civil war and the dynamics of radical Salafi jihadist organizations in Türkiye.

Changing Dynamics in Syria After the Establishment of DAESH and Their Impact on Türkiye (2013–2017)

The establishment of DAESH quickly altered the balance among Syrian opposition groups. In 2013, the organization initially avoided direct confrontation with various opposition groups. However, as it grew stronger, it began to engage in conflicts not only with the Syrian army but also with opposition groups, in

5 BBC Türkçe. (2006, 20 Mart). ***Sakka için ilk duruşma***. https://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/europe/story/2006/03/060320_turkey_trial.s

some cases even more intensely than with the regime forces. Within approximately one and a half years, the organization defeated some armed groups while forcing others to retreat into certain areas within Syria, where they became increasingly confined. This rapid rise of the organization led a significant portion of the militants arriving in Syria from abroad to leave al Qaeda affiliated groups and local factions and join DAESH. Indeed, during the same period, the number of individuals traveling from Türkiye to Syria who joined DAESH quickly surpassed those joining al Qaeda affiliated organizations. With the emergence of DAESH with the ambition of establishing a state, its effective international propaganda activities, its control over extensive resources, and the establishment of a strong bureaucratic structure capable of strategic decision making enabled the organization to stand out among other groups. As a result, the influx of male militants from different parts of the world to the battlefield was soon accompanied by women, children, and entire families. This development quickly had a significant impact on jihadist networks in Türkiye and on the country's counterterrorism efforts. As male militants who believed they could settle in Syria invited their families to join them, and as women persuaded by local recruitment networks affiliated with the organization set out on the journey, it became evident that groups of individuals with profiles not typically associated with militant mobilization were beginning to move toward Syria. Many of these individuals were not wanted in their home countries for membership in terrorist organizations. For this reason, hundreds of people who had no warnings or restrictions against them were able to travel to Türkiye, after which they were sent to Syria through illegal routes by logistical networks that supported them. In addition, other states did not provide Türkiye with a consistent flow of intelligence regarding the travel of individuals who had previously been involved in conflict zones and therefore had militant backgrounds. As a result, by 2014, most of those apprehended in Türkiye for membership in DAESH or al Qaeda consisted of individuals who were caught while attempting to cross into Syria. During this period, a piece of data published in open sources attracted considerable attention. The Turkish General Staff released striking information regarding individuals apprehended at the Türkiye Syria border. According to the Turkish General Staff, 992 foreign nationals who could be considered foreign terrorist fighters were stopped at the Türkiye Syria border. When the threat perception created by DAESH's advance along Türkiye's borders prompted Turkish security forces to take action, DAESH began to carry out attacks targeting Türkiye. Although it is often assumed that the organization's first attack against Türkiye was the assault on the Consulate General of the Republic of Türkiye in Mosul[6], this is not accurate. Approximately five months before this incident, which took place on June 11, 2014, gunfire was opened from the town of Çobanbey in Syria's Aleppo province toward a Turkish border outpost along the Türkiye–Syria border, and the Turkish army responded to the attack. Two months later, in Niğde, three DAESH militants who were inside a vehicle stopped by security forces carried out an attack that resulted in casualties among Turkish police forces. [7] Although no direct attacks occurred within Türkiye during 2014, seven attacks targeting Türkiye were carried out along the border area and outside the country by DAESH throughout the year.

In 2015, the number of attacks carried out by DAESH targeting Türkiye rose to fourteen. Six of these were bombing attacks carried out within Türkiye. In 2015, the year in which DAESH reached its peak in Syria, changes were also observed within radical Salafi networks in Türkiye. As the organization attempted to build a centralized proto state structure in Syria, it also initiated a process of organizational structuring in Türkiye as an extension of that state structure, guided by strategic objectives. This structuring was based on two separate processes that appeared independent from one another but were both controlled from the center. The first was a network centered around a cell operating along the Gaziantep Adana line, built upon former militants and their local networks and led by Yunus Durmaz, a former member of al Qaeda. This network

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6 T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı. (2014, 11 Haziran). ***No: 196, Musul'daki başkonsolosluğumuz yerleşkesine gerçekleştirilen baskın hakkında***. https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-196_-11-haziran-2014_-musul_daki-baskonsolosluguumuz-yerleskesine-gerceklestirilen-baskin-hk_.tr.mfa

7 Anadolu Ajansı. (2014, 20 Mart). ***Niğde'de güvenlik güçlerine saldırı: 2 şehit***. https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/nigdede-guvenlik-guclerine-saldiri-2-sehit/173278

directly planned and carried out some of the attacks that took place that year. The second was another network, largely composed of foreign nationals and based in Istanbul. As Türkiye increased its operations against DAESH within the country, these networks became more aggressive on the one hand, while on the other they diversified their logistical connections and developed a structure capable of generating financial resources, recruiting militants, and providing accommodation for individuals seeking to cross into Syria in different provinces of Türkiye. According to data compiled from open sources, more than 2,200 people were detained in operations carried out in Türkiye in 2015. More than half of them were apprehended while attempting to cross into Syria illegally or while being held in certain locations for that purpose.

The year 2016 marked a period in which DAESH underwent transformation in Syria and the threat posed by DAESH in Türkiye reached its peak. In 2016, DAESH carried out five bombing attacks and three assassinations, the vast majority of which occurred before Türkiye launched Operation Euphrates Shield against DAESH in northern Syria. In addition, 23 attacks targeting different objectives were prevented that year. During the same period, the number of individuals detained in operations conducted by Turkish security forces reached 3,000. The escalation of events culminated in the terrorist attack carried out in the early hours of January 1, 2017, when a foreign DAESH militant attacked an entertainment venue in Istanbul. Following this attack, security forces launched a series of intensive operations. Throughout the year, many local and foreign cells of the organization operating within Türkiye were dismantled in numerous operations. In March 2017, Türkiye completed Operation Euphrates Shield and liberated the district of al Bab in Aleppo from DAESH. After this development, the organization's collapse in Syria accelerated. As the operations of the US led International Coalition intensified, DAESH began to lose control of many areas in Iraq and Syria. With 2017, which can be considered a turning point in the organization's decline, both DAESH and the influence of the organization on radical Salafi networks in Türkiye entered a new phase.

The Collapse of DAESH and Evolving Threats

It would not be accurate to suggest that both the collapse of DAESH and the transformation of jihadist networks in Türkiye occurred within a very short period of time. Although DAESH was unable to carry out an attack in Türkiye between January 1, 2017 and 2024, this was not due to the organization's unwillingness. Following the Reina attack, a major wave of operations against DAESH was launched in Türkiye. The table below presents statistics that are in themselves highly illustrative regarding the prevention of the organization's attacks after 2017 (Table 1).

Table 1. Prevented DAESH Attacks in Türkiye, 2014–2022

Year	Number of Prevented Attacks
2014	327
2015	1650
2016	3434
2017	4884
2018	3024
2019	3382
2020	2798
2021	2815
2022	2820

However, it can be observed that the organization did not abandon its pursuit of attacks despite the increasing operations against it. For instance, according to official data, DAESH attempted 12 attacks in Türkiye in 2017. After consecutive operations carried out against the organization, this number decreased significantly in the following years.

In 2017, the organization's territorial losses and the death of many of its militants began to reverse the movement of militants and their families traveling from different parts of the world to Syria. Although there are no official statistics available on this issue, data compiled from open sources show that among the individuals apprehended in operations against radical Salafi organizations in Türkiye, the proportion of those attempting to cross the border was approximately 11 percent. By contrast, data collected in a similar manner indicate that this ratio had been 57 percent in 2015 and 35 percent in 2016. This situation demonstrated that, in connection with the transformation the organization experienced in Syria in 2017, the nature of the threat it posed in Türkiye also began to change. As the organization weakened in Syria, the movement of DAESH militants and sympathizers began to reverse. Having lost many of its key leaders and hundreds of militants, numerous members of the organization left Syria in search of survival. Similarly, hundreds of individuals who had departed from their home countries intending to travel to Syria and Iraq were unable to reach their destinations. These individuals were neither able to return to their home countries nor able to reach the conflict zones. Among the countries most affected by this situation was Türkiye.

As the organization transformed into a looser structure in 2018, it began seeking opportunities for organization and concealment in Türkiye. For this reason, several high level figures of DAESH such as the organization's so called Minister of Health, Minister of Agriculture, senior intelligence officials, and regional military commanders began to be captured in Türkiye. In addition to those who were apprehended while in hiding, small groups arriving from Syria and individuals who had come from other countries but were unable to return to their own countries began to organize themselves into independent and small cells. During this period, since the organization's leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi was still alive, the central structure continued to exert a loose influence over these cells. For this reason, references began to be made to the so called "Türkiye province." It can be said that from this period onward the network in Türkiye that had been engaged in activities such as providing shelter, collecting funds, accommodation, and transportation underwent a transformation, and that it was replaced by a hybrid organizational structure in which foreigners and Turkish nationals cooperated effectively. This transformation should not be interpreted as the transfer of DAESH's full operational capacity to Türkiye. During this process, mid level experienced militants replaced older cadres, while new recruits began to fill the ranks left by former militants.

In 2019, the trend that had begun in 2018 continued. In addition, however, local DAESH cells were observed to have resumed activity and attempted attacks. Yet, the power struggle that emerged within the organization following the killing of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, together with the blows the organization suffered in Syria and Iraq, led to the weakening of the central decision making mechanism, and this was also reflected in Türkiye. From 2019 onward, as the central structure lost its influence, a period began in which logistical networks controlled by cells coming from distant provinces became more dominant. Especially with the collapse of the so called Türkiye Province project, the organization's presence in Türkiye came to consist largely of logistical networks operating on its behalf and small operational cells. In other words, for DAESH, Türkiye ceased to be a primary target as it had been between 2014 and 2017. Instead, it gained a different kind of importance as a space for maintaining the organization's international logistical connections and for regrouping the members of the next generation necessary for the organization's potential resurgence. For this reason, with the exception of the unusual developments observed in 2022, the organization's search for attacks in Türkiye remained limited (Table 2). The dynamics of attempted attacks were influenced more by newly emerging local cells and by instructions transmitted through connections with Afghanistan. This was because, for the structure that constituted the core leadership of the organization, one of the main

priorities had become the rescue of women and children remaining in camps in Syria. The increase in activity observed after 2022 largely stemmed not from the surviving leaders of the organization in Syria and Iraq, but from newly emerging cells seeking to demonstrate themselves and from the efforts of the Afghanistan based structure that regards itself as the true heir of DAESH.

Table 2. Prevented DAESH Attacks in Türkiye, 2017–2025

Year	Number of Prevented Attacks
2017	12
2018	1
2019	3
2020	3
2021	4
2022	18
2023	???
2024	13
2025	4

Security Environment in Syria After the Change

The civil war profoundly transformed Syria's political, social, and security structures. However, with the collapse of Bashar al Assad's rule in December 2024, Syria entered a new period. Nevertheless, as can be understood from other examples around the world, the overthrow of an authoritarian regime does not automatically bring stability. During the long years of the Baath regime, the security system had been shaped through intelligence services loyal to the leadership, paramilitary militias, and a centralized security bureaucracy. Therefore, the disintegration of these structures also led to a serious weakening of the capacity of the security forces. However, since the group that came to power is aware of this weakness, the new security environment in Syria is not being managed simply as a transition to a "post regime period." While the security forces are being restructured, internal political struggles within the country continue. As the new Syrian administration attempts to reorganize the army and law enforcement institutions, it is not yet possible to say that tensions within the country have completely ended. Within this atmosphere, DAESH has adopted a distinct strategy.

It can be observed that DAESH has adapted to changing security conditions by turning toward more flexible and dispersed organizational models. The weakening of the classical organizational model based on territorial control has led these structures to transform into formations that are more network based and reliant on transnational connections. This transformation makes it easier for such organizations to establish links with sympathizer networks in different countries without being confined to a specific geographic area. In particular, propaganda activities conducted through digital platforms enable these organizations to maintain their ideological influence.

Period of Observation and Quiet Reorganization

In fact, Syrians occupy a very limited position within the organization's leadership cadre. With the exception of Abu Muhammad al Adnani, who served as DAESH's spokesperson for a period, there has been no prominent Syrian figure among the organization's highest level leadership. During the period when DAESH expanded from Iraq into Syria, a structure known as the Sham Province was established within the

organization. However, even the leadership of this Sham Province was not assigned to a Syrian. Abu Muslim al Turkmani, one of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's two deputies, was appointed as the head of DAESH's Sham Province. After Turkmani was killed, the identity of the individual who assumed this position was not publicly announced. Despite the fact that DAESH recruited thousands of individuals from Syria and captured many provinces of the country, Syrians were not assigned to the highest level positions within the organization. Instead, Syrians generally served in middle level roles, sometimes acting as border crossing coordinators, logistics officers, or mid level administrators in certain areas. Nevertheless, DAESH was able to secure widespread support particularly among Sunni Arab tribes in Syria. The provinces with the highest level of recruitment into DAESH in Syria were Aleppo, Homs, Raqqa, and Deir ez Zor. At one point, Raqqa was even regarded as the capital of DAESH in Syria. For this reason, after the organization went underground in Syria, its top leaders consistently chose to hide within Syrian territory. Indeed, figures such as Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and Abu Ibrahim al Qurayshi were killed in Idlib. In summary, rather than being a country from which DAESH's leaders primarily emerged, Syria has functioned more as a source of recruitment and a place of concealment for the organization due to the level of support it has obtained among segments of the local population.

After 2019, following the heavy defeats DAESH suffered against the Assad regime and the SDF as a result of US and Russian bombardments, the organization's most important strategy in Syria became hit and run attacks. Between 2019 and 2024, DAESH carried out attacks in the desert region east of Homs and in the eastern part of Deir ez Zor under the control of the PYD. While DAESH conducted operations against the Syrian army in the desert region of Homs, it also carried out attacks against the SDF in Deir ez Zor and Raqqa.

After the overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria on December 8, DAESH chose to observe developments rather than react immediately to the events in Syria. As can be clearly seen in the table below, it carried out most of its attacks in areas controlled by the SDF. In contrast, instead of launching immediate attacks in areas controlled by the Syrian government, it preferred to first adapt to the new situation. The most important reason for this is the similarity between the social base of the groups that constitute HTS and the radical Salafi base that constitutes DAESH. Most radical Salafis in Syria are not ideologically opposed to DAESH. The disagreement between HTS and DAESH is related less to ideology than to how power should be achieved and who should hold it. While HTS argues that a more gradual and flexible strategy should be followed in order to reach power, DAESH has preferred to fight all of its enemies simultaneously. HTS, on the other hand, chose to cooperate with some relatively more moderate Islamist groups in Syria and gradually absorb them into its own structure. In addition, while HTS has emphasized the prominence of Syrians, DAESH has argued that the Caliphate must be held by an Iraqi. Moreover, when foreign militants who joined DAESH are compared with those who joined HTS, DAESH appears to be far ahead. Despite these tactical and strategic differences, the social bases of DAESH and HTS are not composed of groups that are distant from one another. In fact, among individuals belonging to the same tribe or family, some support DAESH while others support HTS. Some figures who today hold important positions within HTS were previously part of DAESH's ranks. In addition to these militants and leaders, a similar overlap can also be observed at the civilian level. Many HTS members have extended family members who support DAESH. For example, the majority of those who stayed in the recently closed al Hol camp are relatives of tribes from Deir ez Zor and Raqqa. Because of this mutual support at the societal level, DAESH refrained from attacking the Syrian government after December 8.

However, DAESH's wait and see policy began to change starting in March. From that point onward, the belief that HTS would abandon the jihadist groups in the country by aligning itself with Western countries began to gain prominence. The main reasons behind this perception were the targeting of certain jihadist commanders by US drones and the growing rumors that Ahmad al Shara might hand over jihadist leaders in

exchange for being recognized as a legitimate leader by Western countries. Having difficulty infiltrating the bureaucracy controlled by HTS, DAESH began calling its supporters outside Syria to return to the country. These calls were announced through the organization's online communication channels such as Telegram and Rocketchat. In addition, the calls to return to Syria were reinforced through the organization's media outlets such as al Naba. It soon became evident that these calls were beginning to produce results. In this context, it is reported that hundreds of DAESH sympathizers have so far returned to Syria. In particular, the deteriorating economic conditions in Türkiye in recent years and the lack of acceptance by Turkish society have led many sympathizers and their families to return to Syria.

As a result of these developments, from mid 2025 onward DAESH began to reorganize in the eastern and southern rural areas of Aleppo as well as in the desert regions of Homs. The militants, almost entirely composed of Syrians, quietly and cautiously organized themselves into loose cells. The center of this organization is Aleppo. While DAESH remains weak in the northern and western parts of Aleppo, it is once again becoming a significant force in southern and southeastern Aleppo. Indeed, for this reason the center of DAESH attacks against Syrian government forces in November and December was Aleppo. The second region outside Aleppo where DAESH has been able to organize and maintain strength is the eastern countryside of Homs. Bedouin tribes in the eastern rural areas of Homs, where settlements are extremely sparse, provide support to DAESH. In addition, the presence of DAESH east of Deir ez Zor has continued without interruption. However, there is no clear evidence indicating that the militants of DAESH in this area are linked to the newly emerging leadership in Aleppo. Instead, the militants operating east of Deir ez Zor maintain closer ties with the organization's branch in Iraq. Nevertheless, since the eastern bank of Deir ez Zor has also come under the control of the Syrian government, it is possible that a connection between Aleppo and Deir ez Zor may soon be established, which could enable DAESH to expand its sphere of influence.

It is currently estimated that the number of DAESH militants in Syria exceeds 2,000. Some open sources suggest that this number is considerably higher. However, certain analysts, particularly those based in the United States, tend to exaggerate the number of DAESH militants in order to legitimize the US presence in Syria. Even if the number of DAESH militants in Syria is relatively limited, it is evident that the organization's support base is much broader. This support base has continued to expand as the Syrian government has developed closer relations with states such as Russia, China, and the United States. In addition, developments such as the establishment of a parliament in Syria, the drafting of a constitution, and the continuation of former regime supporters in official positions have contributed to the expansion of DAESH's support base. Furthermore, Israel's occupation of Syrian territory and the Syrian government's attempts to reach an agreement with Israel have generated widespread public reactions in Syria. In particular, a potential Israel–Syria agreement could further increase support for DAESH.

In light of all these factors, it can be said that DAESH has maintained its capacity to carry out attacks in Syria, but does not intend to initiate a large scale wave of attacks across the country. The most important reason for this is that DAESH is still in a phase of reorganization. Even if the organization carries out attacks from time to time, these are expected to remain limited both in number and in geographic scope rather than taking the form of a widespread wave of attacks.

Prisons and Detainees

The second category related to the presence of DAESH consists of militants held in prisons. Until the Syrian government gained control of the eastern side of the Euphrates, there were no prisons in areas controlled by Damascus that held only DAESH militants. Most DAESH militants were detained in Idlib, where they shared prisons with other dangerous criminals. However, the situation was somewhat more complex in areas controlled by the SDF. When the United States captured the last DAESH strongholds in Syria in

2019, approximately 12,000 DAESH militants were detained. There were differing reports regarding both the number of these militants and the locations where they were held. In a report prepared for the US Congress in 2022, it was suggested that around 12,000 DAESH militants were being held in 28 prisons. Another report published the same year stated that the number of prisons was 14 and that the number of detained militants was around 10,000. Moreover, 5,000 of them were Syrian, 3,000 Iraqi, and 2,000 from other countries. For a long time, the most well known prisons under the control of the SDF were those in Malikiyah, Tabqa, Qamishli, Hasakah, Kobani, Shaddadi, and Raqqa. Some of these prisons, such as those in Tabqa, Raqqa, and Shaddadi, came under the control of the Syrian government as it expanded its control east of the Euphrates. In summary, at least until the agreement between the SDF and Damascus becomes clear, it can be said that there are still prisons for which both sides bear responsibility.

However, the transfer of prisons did not take place safely everywhere. For example, when the SDF suddenly withdrew from Shaddadi, militants held in the notorious Shaddadi prison managed to escape. According to the SDF, 1,500 militants escaped from the prison, while official figures reported that 120 militants had fled. (It was later announced that 80 of those who escaped had been recaptured.) Considering the size of Shaddadi prison, it is unlikely that as many as 1,500 people were being held in such a facility. However, regardless of the exact number, the fact that prisoners escaped from these prisons cannot be denied. At the same time, doubts have increasingly emerged regarding whether all those held in these prisons are actually DAESH militants. For example, it was revealed that political detainees and even small children were being held in Aktan Prison in Raqqa, where DAESH militants were reportedly detained. This situation has created widespread suspicion among the Syrian population that not everyone imprisoned in these facilities is in fact a DAESH militant.

Even in the United States' own reports, while the number of militants was reported as around 10,000 only three and a half years ago, recent statements refer to approximately 7,000 DAESH detainees. Of the remaining 3,000 militants, some have died under the poor conditions in prisons, while others have escaped. In recent press statements, there has been considerable confusion regarding DAESH detainees in Syria. It has been claimed that most of the militants transferred outside Syria are not Syrian citizens. However, according to the United States' own reports, at least 5,000 of the detainees, roughly half of them, are Syrian nationals. In this case, the United States appears to be transferring militants from Syria to Iraq who are predominantly Syrian rather than Iraqi citizens. In other words, either the figures provided by the United States regarding the number of DAESH militants are inaccurate, or misleading information is being given regarding the identity of the militants transferred to Iraq.

Considering the length of time the militants have been held in prison, and the conditions in which they are kept, the level of radicalization that may have developed suggests that the description of the thousands of prisoners in the Sina prison in Hasakah, known as Guweyran, as "DAESH's army in prison" is not inaccurate. The conditions in these prisons are extremely poor. There are no social facilities, and prisoners live together rather than in separate cells. Within the prisons, the organization's rules have effectively become dominant. Hygiene and health conditions present an inhumane situation. Civilians whose relatives are held in prisons where DAESH militants are detained state that they have completely lost hope for their relatives. According to them, even if these individuals were not DAESH militants before entering prison, the harsh conditions in prison have effectively turned them into militants. No deradicalization programs have been implemented in these prisons, and detainees have been subjected to ill treatment. For this reason, transferring the prisoners held in DAESH prisons to other countries is considered a necessary measure for ensuring Syria's security.

DAESH Camps: al Hol, Roj, and Others

The third category that should be examined when discussing the presence of DAESH in Syria is the observation camps in the country. Until recently, these camps hosted tens of thousands of Syrian and foreign civilians, primarily those who had remained in the town of Baghuz in Deir ez Zor, which had been the last stronghold of DAESH. In 2021 and 2022, the total number of civilians held in the camps reached around 90,000. However, some of these civilians were taken back by their families in Iraq and Syria under guarantee arrangements. Several European and Central Asian states also repatriated their citizens in small groups. As a result, the total number of people remaining in the camps declined to around 30,000.

Although the most well-known camps where individuals associated with DAESH were held in Syria were al Hol and al Roj, there were also relatively civilian camps scattered across Raqqa, Hasakah, and Deir ez Zor. The vast majority of those living in these camps were women and children. Al Hol, the largest of the camps, came under Syrian security forces' control following the SDF's withdrawal. During the confusion at the beginning of this process, reports circulated among residents of nearby settlements that some civilians had escaped from the camp. Information from the field indicates that more than 1,000 people were quickly taken out of the camps by their families. During this period, protests and sit ins began in the camp due to the reactions of residents who were unable to leave. In order to prevent the tensions in the camp from being reflected in the international media, the Syrian government declared a security zone not only within the camp but also around the town of al Hol. To suppress the growing tensions and prevent them from escalating further, the Syrian Ministry of Interior deployed its most elite units to al Hol. However, the future of al Hol had not yet been decided. At one point, nearly half of the camp's residents were Syrian citizens, around 30 percent were Iraqi nationals, and the remainder were citizens of other countries. However, with the repatriation of Iraqi nationals over the past two years, the majority of those remaining in the camp gradually came to consist of Syrian citizens. Eventually, as it became clear that the camp could not be sustained and due to strong public opposition in Syria to keeping civilian families in the camp, al Hol camp was closed. Most of the people there were released and sent to join their families, while some were relocated to a camp near the town of Akhtarin in northern Aleppo.

Table 3. DAESH Attacks in 2025

DAESH Attacks in 2025		
	Areas Controlled by the PYD	**Areas Controlled by the New Syrian Government**
January	3	
February	5	
March	4	1
April	10	2
May	8	1
June	5	1
July	15	
August	20	
September	15	1
October	14	
November	6	2
December	7	7

Security Risks for Türkiye Arising from the Transformation in Syria

The prolonged conflict in Syria and the new security environment that has emerged in recent years have generated multidimensional security risks for Türkiye. Geographic proximity, border security concerns, humanitarian mobility, and the presence of transnational radical networks make Türkiye one of the countries most directly affected by these developments. Although the political and military transformation in Syria has narrowed the operational space of some radical organizations, it is not possible to argue that these structures have been completely eliminated. On the contrary, such organizations have adapted to changing security conditions by transforming their modes of operation and sustaining their presence through alternative methods. This situation has created new and more complex security risks for Türkiye.

One of the most significant security risks for Türkiye is the continued presence and potential persistence of transnational radical networks. Some jihadist organizations operating in Syria have responded to military pressure and territorial losses by restructuring their organizational models and shifting toward more flexible and decentralized network structures. Such networks are often organized not through a strict central command hierarchy but through ideological affinity and personal connections. This form of organization makes it easier for these structures to establish links with individuals in different countries and to develop spheres of influence that extend beyond national borders. In this context, the possibility that certain individuals or small groups in Türkiye may establish indirect connections with such networks constitutes a risk area that must be carefully monitored by security institutions.

Another significant risk area for Türkiye is the process of digital radicalization. Today, radical organizations increasingly conduct their propaganda and mobilization activities through digital platforms. Propaganda content disseminated through social media, video-sharing platforms, and encrypted messaging applications facilitates the spread of radical ideologies to wider audiences. The intensive use of digital platforms, particularly among younger populations, can further amplify the influence of such content. Because digital radicalization processes often do not require direct contact with physical organizational structures, they tend to remain less visible, making them more difficult for security institutions to detect and monitor.

Another important security risk concerns the potential existence of cell based structures. Although some radical organizations operating in Syria have lost their centralized organizational structures due to military pressure, they have continued to operate in the form of small and relatively autonomous cells. These cells often maintain a low profile and can remain inactive or unnoticed for long periods of time. One of the defining characteristics of such cellular structures is their ability to operate without direct dependence on a central organizational hierarchy and to mobilize rapidly under certain circumstances. This characteristic makes the detection of potential threats significantly more difficult for security institutions.

Another risk area created by the security environment in Syria concerns the mobility of foreign fighters. During the Syrian civil war, a large number of individuals from different countries traveled to the region to join various radical organizations. In recent years, the weakening of some of these organizations and the changing balance of power on the ground have raised the possibility that these individuals may move toward other countries. Due to its geographical location and regional connections, Türkiye is among the countries that may be affected by such movements. For this reason, monitoring the mobility of foreign fighters and identifying potential security risks in advance remains critically important.

Another risk arising from developments in Syria for Türkiye is the potential spread of ideological influences at the societal level. The conflict environment can become a powerful mobilizing tool in propaganda activities. Narratives built around victimhood, religious references, and identity-based discourse can create conditions that make some individuals more susceptible to radical ideologies. Such narratives may influence not only active members of these organizations but also potential sympathizers. For this reason, processes

of radicalization should be addressed not only from a security perspective but also by considering their broader social and ideological dynamics.

Türkiye's security policies in recent years and the operations carried out against radical organizations have contributed significantly to keeping such risks under control. Strengthening border security, restricting the movement of foreign fighters, and conducting operations against radical networks have been among the key factors limiting the operational capacity of jihadist networks within Türkiye. Nevertheless, the fact that the security environment in Syria has not yet fully stabilized and that regional power balances remain fluid indicates that potential security risks continue to exist.

In conclusion, the new security environment that has emerged following the transformation in Syria generates multilayered risks for Türkiye that extend beyond border security alone. Factors such as the presence of transnational radical networks, processes of digital radicalization, cellular organizational structures, and the mobility of foreign fighters occupy an important place in Türkiye's security agenda. Therefore, to manage these risks effectively, security policies should not be limited to military and law enforcement measures but should be addressed through a comprehensive approach that also encompasses the digital sphere, societal resilience, and international cooperation.

Policy Recommendations

The transformation of the security environment in Syria necessitates the continuous reassessment of Türkiye's security policies. The evolving dynamics of regional conflicts, the changing operational patterns of radical organizations, and the increasingly complex structure of transnational networks make it insufficient to address security risks solely through military or law enforcement methods.

The new security atmosphere that emerged after the transformation in Syria has led to a noticeable shift in the operational patterns of jihadist networks in Türkiye. In particular, the tendency of these organizations to develop more flexible, decentralized structures in response to military pressure has led to a growing shift in their activities toward digital spaces. The use of online platforms for propaganda, ideological mobilization, and communication enables radical networks to maintain their influence beyond national borders. This situation demonstrates that security risks for Türkiye are not limited to the physical domain but also include significant digital and ideological dimensions.

Therefore, Türkiye's security strategy should be shaped within a comprehensive framework encompassing multiple dimensions, including border security, governance of digital spaces, international cooperation, and strengthening societal resilience. Policy recommendations developed in this context should aim not only to manage existing threats but also to reduce long-term risks of radicalization.

One of Türkiye's priority policy areas is the sustainable strengthening of border security. The long land border with Syria has served as a major transit route throughout the conflict, both in terms of humanitarian mobility and potential security risks. In recent years, steps taken to reinforce border security have significantly weakened transit networks linked to radical organizations. Nevertheless, border security should not be limited to physical measures alone. It should also include elements such as intelligence sharing, technological surveillance systems, and coordinated security mechanisms implemented in border regions. Such a multilayered approach would enable the earlier identification of emerging risks in border areas.

Another important policy area is the prevention of digital radicalization. Today, radical organizations increasingly conduct their propaganda and mobilization activities through online platforms. Propaganda content disseminated via social media, video-sharing platforms, and encrypted messaging applications facilitates the spread of radical ideologies to wider audiences. For this reason, efforts to counter digital radicalization should not be limited to technical measures such as removing content or restricting access. They should also include developing alternative narratives that challenge radical ideologies and promoting

greater societal awareness. In particular, raising awareness among young people about the risks of radicalization and strengthening critical media literacy in digital environments are among the policies that can produce effective outcomes in this area.

International cooperation also plays a critical role in countering radical networks. The transnational nature of jihadist organizations makes it difficult to eliminate such threats solely through measures taken at the national level. For this reason, strengthening Türkiye's cooperation with both regional and international security institutions is of great importance. Coordination in areas such as intelligence sharing, monitoring the movement of foreign fighters, and tracking financial networks can significantly limit the operational space of radical organizations. In particular, closely monitoring security developments in Syria and assessing their impact on regional security dynamics has become a strategic necessity for policymakers.

Strengthening societal resilience also emerges as an important policy area for preventing radicalization processes. Preventing the spread of radical ideologies cannot be achieved solely through operations conducted by security institutions. It also requires the development of social policies capable of building resistance to radicalization at the societal level. Educational programs, social projects implemented with local communities, and the contributions of civil society organizations can play a significant role in this process. In particular, increasing young people's access to social and economic opportunities is among the key factors that can reduce the appeal of radical ideologies.

Another important policy area is the development of early warning mechanisms related to radicalization processes. The activities of radical networks are often not openly visible, and the radicalization of individuals may unfold over an extended period of time. For this reason, the dynamics of radicalization processes need to be better understood through academic research, field studies, and data-based analyses. Such efforts can help security institutions and policymakers identify potential risks earlier.

Finally, the impact of developments in Syria on Türkiye's security policies should be evaluated on a regular basis. Because the regional security environment is highly dynamic, threat perceptions and risk factors may change over time. For this reason, Türkiye's security strategies should remain flexible and adaptable. Regularly updating security policies and strengthening coordination among different institutions will help ensure more effective preparedness against emerging threats.

In conclusion, the new security environment that has emerged following the transformation in Syria requires Türkiye's security policies to be addressed from a multidimensional perspective. Comprehensive policies developed in areas such as border security, countering digital radicalization, strengthening international cooperation, and enhancing societal resilience will play an important role in managing the security risks Türkiye faces. Such a holistic approach can contribute both to controlling existing threats and to preventing radicalization processes in the long term.

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