Saving Syria’s Ghouta

What is the issue?

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- An agreement was reached between armed groups in Eastern Ghouta and a UN delegation to evacuate some militants from the besieged enclaves.
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- This is the first major deal reached since the attack on the city began, and more such deals are to be clinched to reduce casualties and bring peace.

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How did the situation evolve?

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- Ghouta is a suburb which lies close to the Syrian capital Damascus, which came under rebel control since early in the civil war (that began in 2011).
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- The territory recently came under attack by government forces to flush out the multiple rebel groups that have their presence.
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- As Ghouta is one of the last rebel strongholds and houses close to 4 lakh civilians, the battle is proving to be brutal and catastrophic.
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- Recently, the city came under virtual siege and essential supplies were cut, and reports of rebels deploying people as human shields also emerged.
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- More than 1000 people were estimated to be killed in the past week alone but Syrian Government and its Russian backers seem unrelenting in vigour.
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- UN Security Council unanimously called for a seize fire, which helped in reducing the intensity and helped start a dialogue with the rebels.
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What has come out of the negotiations?

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- UN peace makers have struck a deal with the main rebel group 'Jaish al-Islam', to facilitate the evacuation of militants belonging to "HTS" from Ghouta.
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- 'Hayat Tahrir al-Sham' (HTS) was formerly an Al-Qaeda front and is an internationally designated terrorist group.
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- Notably, despite endorsing ceasefire in the UN Security Council, Russia has been justifying its assaults on Ghouta by sighting the presence of HTS.
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- HTS evacuees are expected to proceed to Idlib, which is another rebel held town in north-western Syria (see map).
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- The deal has come after more than a month of protracted negotiations even as the rebels stayed stubborn in the face of intense government bombardment.
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How does the future look?

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- The evacuation of HTS militants removes a hurdle for Syrian regime and Russia to cease hostilities and engage the other armed groups diplomatically.
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- Notably, besides Jaish al-Islam - "Faylaq al-Rahman", an affiliate of the Free Syrian Army is also a major player in Ghouta.
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- The rebels in Ghouta currently do not have any meaningful support coming from outside that could allow them to resist regime forces.
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- The sooner the government forces and the armed gangs reach an agreement to end hostilities, the better it is for all sides.
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Source: The Hindu

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