

Syrian Crisis

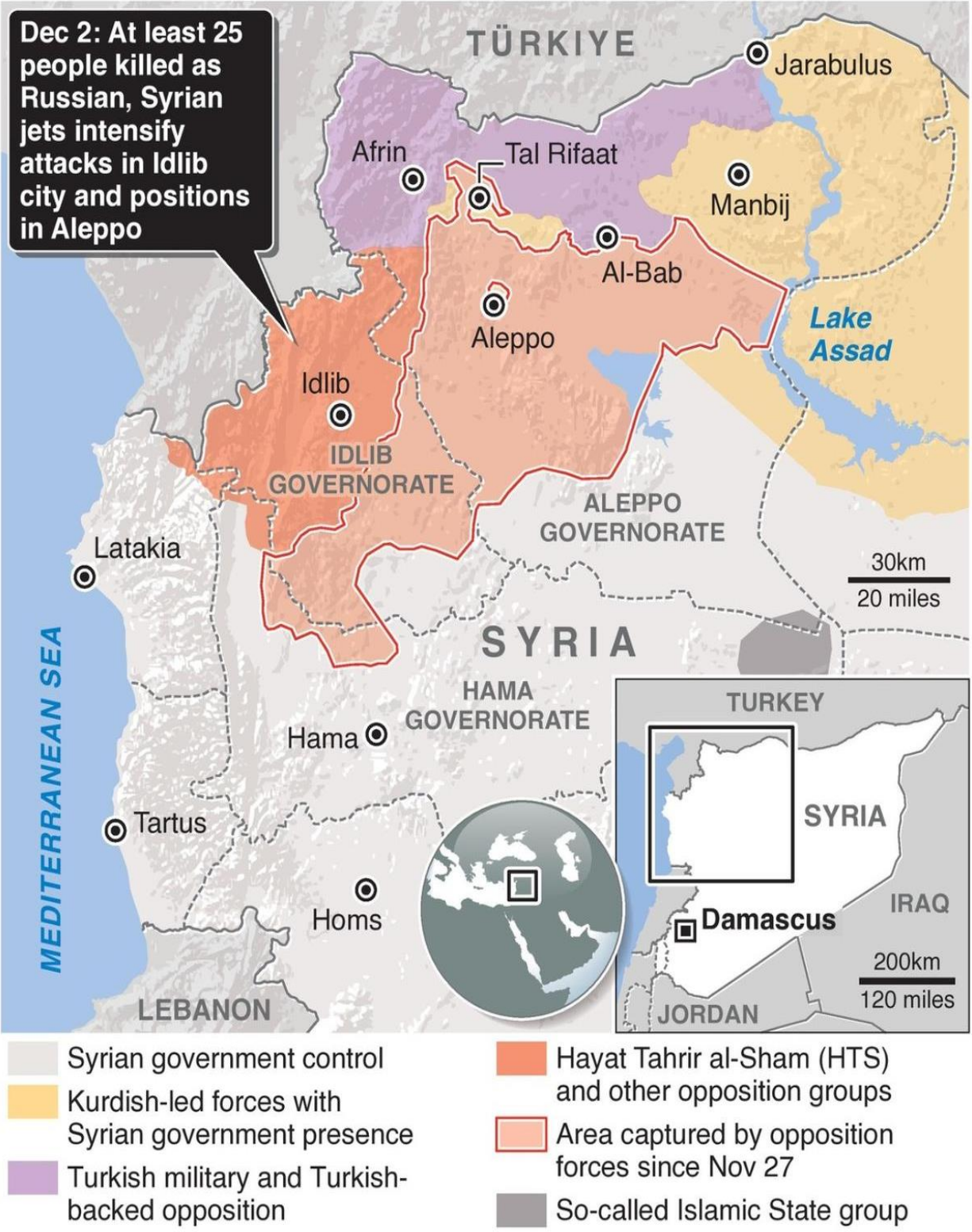


Context:

- **Islamist militants in Syria's northwest launched a surprise attack last week against the forces of President Bashar al-Assad and made dramatic territorial gains.**
- **According to news agency Reuters, Assad, who ruled the country for 24 years, fled from the country to an undisclosed location in a plane.**

Syrian rebels advance after taking Aleppo

Syrian and Russian forces have carried out a series of air raids in northwestern Syria in a bid to push back opposition fighters





1. What has caused the recent escalation in Idlib?

- The recent escalation began with Syria’s **“Military Opposition Command”** launching an offensive on **November 27**, seizing **Aleppo** and intensifying conflict.
- Earlier this month, **Turkey** opened **two more military posts in Idlib** in addition to its previously existing posts in northwestern Syria.
- Reports emerged on **February 8** that the **Syrian forces** were **encircling the Turkish observation post at Al-Eiss**, a town in the **province of Aleppo**, capturing the town and some surrounding areas.
- **On February 10**, at least **five Turkish soldiers** were **injured in attacks by the Syrians**.
- This was followed by **more attacks** that resulted in the **killing of two Turkish soldiers** and another five being wounded.
- Following the **repeated attacks on Turkish forces** in the region, on Friday, **Ankara threatened “imminent” attacks on Syrian government forces** in retaliation.
- The **UN said** that the escalation in **Idlib** would **result in a “bloodbath”**.

2. Enlist major stakeholders in Syria?

Stakeholders	Role
Syrian government forces	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The army fought alongside the National Defence Forces, a pro-government paramilitary group, and was supported by Hezbollah, Iran and Russia.

	
<p>Syrian Democratic Forces</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This Kurdish-dominated, United States-backed group controls parts of eastern Syria.• While not a direct enemy of Assad, they are part of the wider opposition forces. 
<p>HTS and other allied rebel groups</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the largest fighting force, was in control of Idlib for years before this offensive.• It is the primary group, originally the al-Qaeda branch in Syria responsible for capturing and

controlling most parts of Syria, including Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama.



Turkish and Turkish-aligned Syrian rebel forces

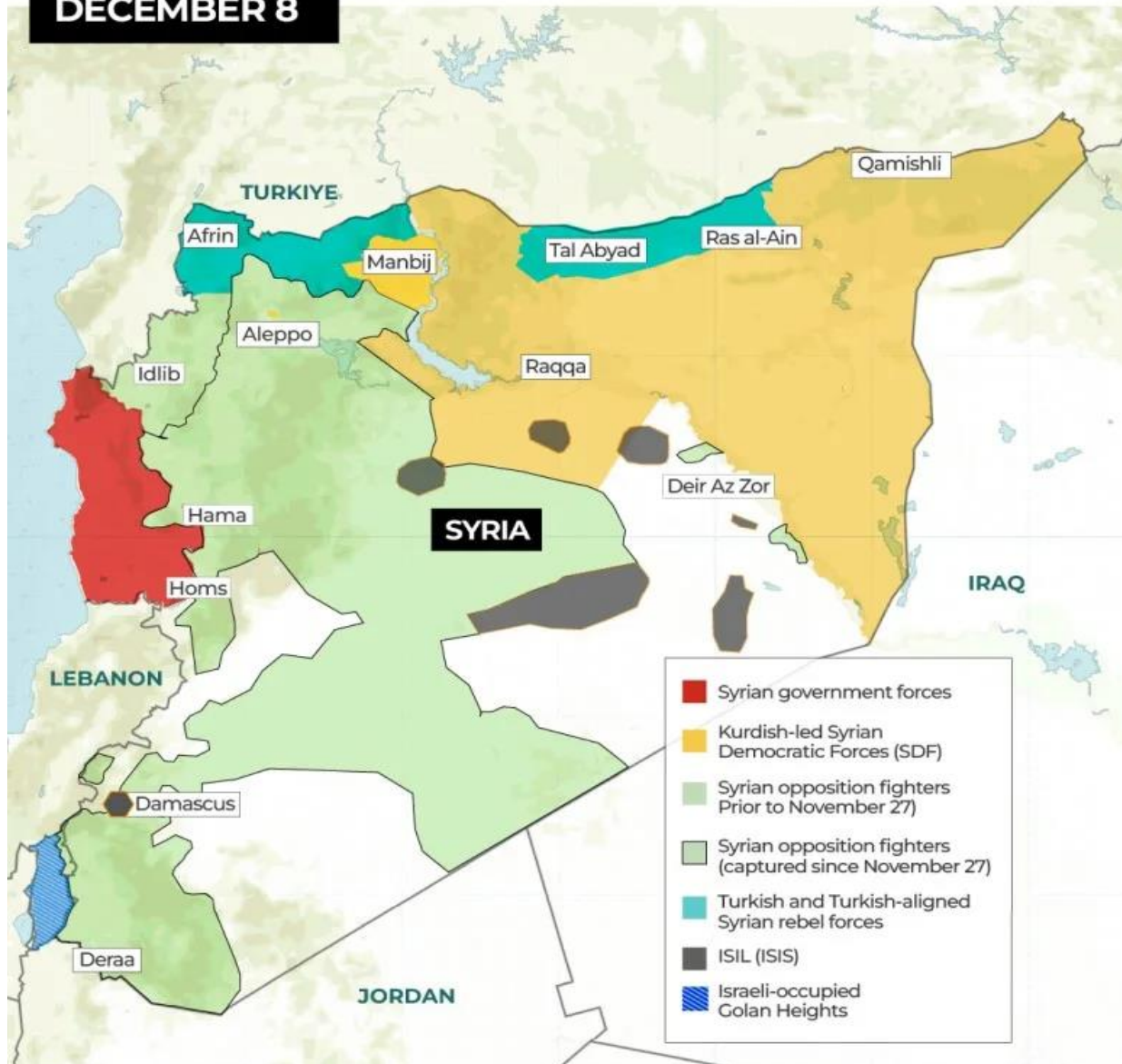
- **The Syrian National Army is a Turkish-backed rebel force in northern Syria.**



MIDDLE EAST

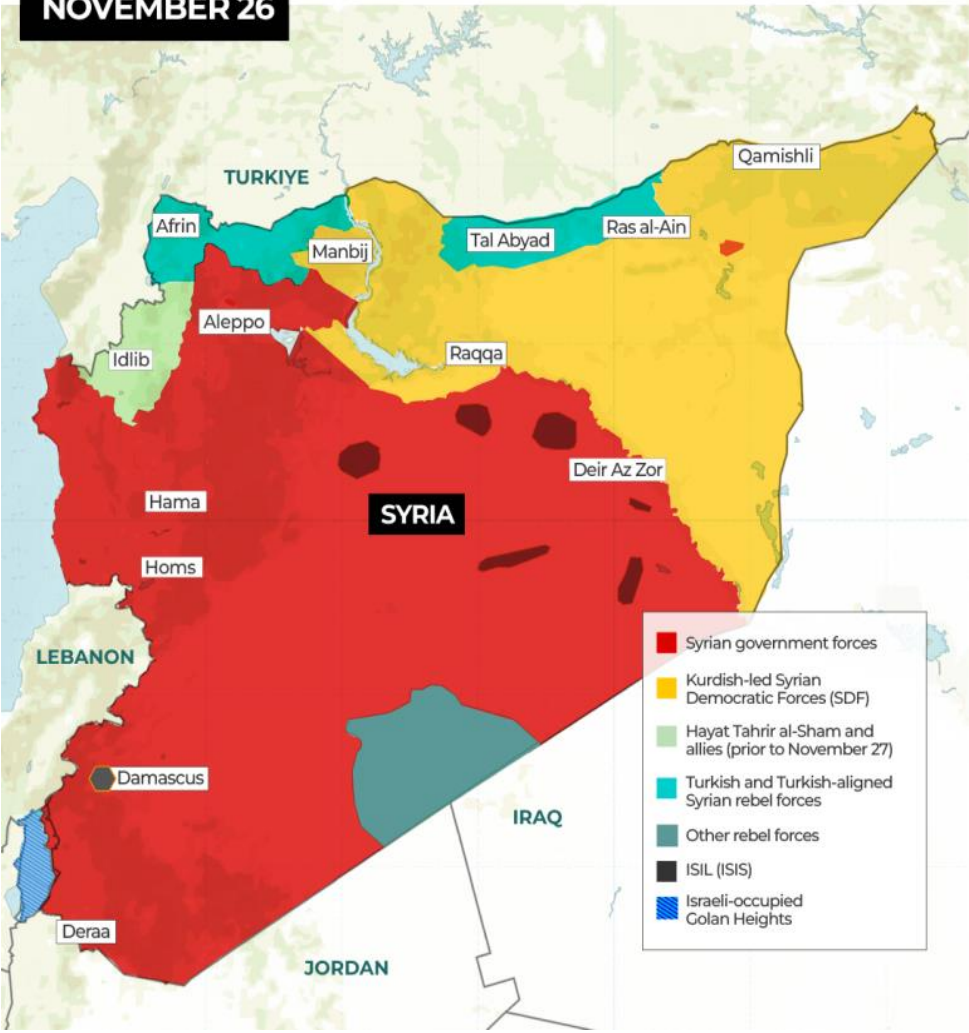
Who controls what in Syria?

DECEMBER 8



3. Enlist the timeline of the recent Syrian crisis?

- In the early hours of **November 08, 2024** morning, **Syrian opposition fighters announced that they had captured the capital, Damascus**, and that **President Bashar al-Assad had fled the country**.
- In just **11 days**, the **24-year rule of President Bashar al-Assad came to an end**

Date	Event
<p>Build-up to November 27</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before November 27, Syrian opposition forces were mostly confined to their stronghold in the northwestern governorate of Idlib, following a ceasefire brokered in March 2020 by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin. • The map below shows Syria’s territorial control before November 27. <p>MIDDLE EAST Who controls what in Syria?</p> <p>NOVEMBER 26</p> 

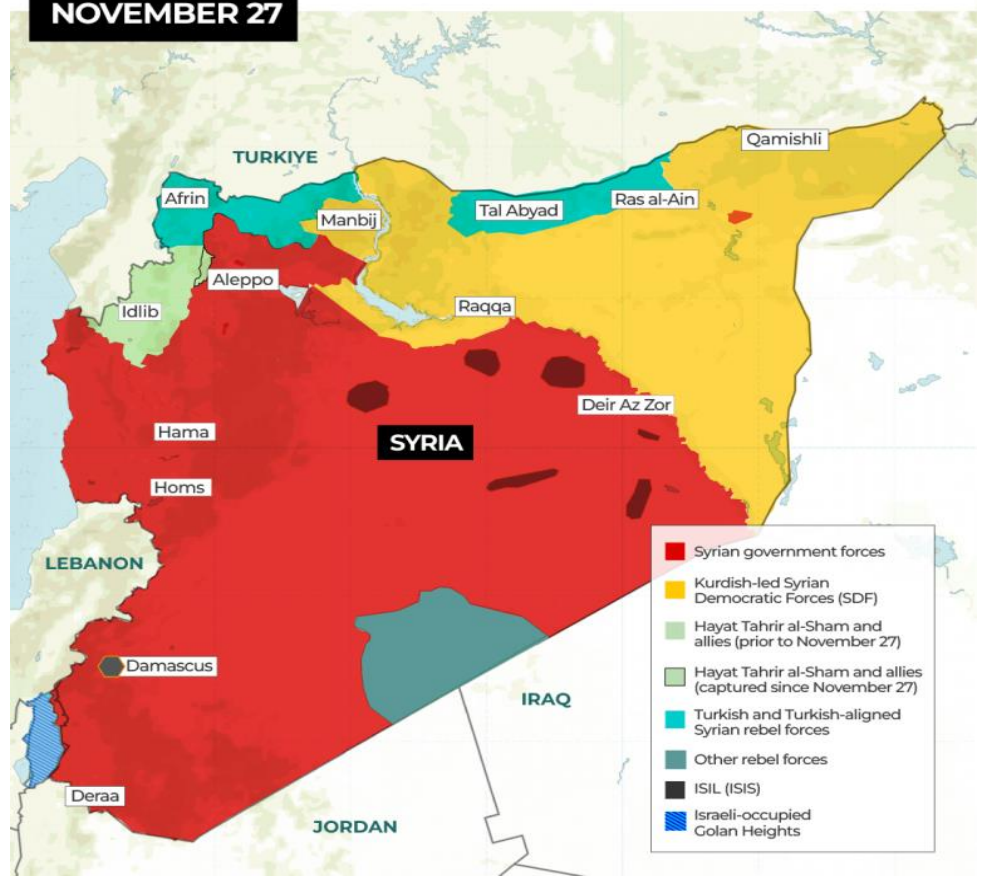
**Day 1 –
November
27**

- **On Wednesday, November 27**, just one day after a ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon came into effect, **Syrian opposition forces, led by HTS, launched an offensive from their base in the Idlib governorate** in northwestern Syria.
- The rebel group said their attacks were in **retaliation for recent Syrian government assaults on cities in Idlib**, including **Ariha and Sarmada**, which had resulted in **several civilian casualties in recent weeks**.
- The **Syrian regime responded by shelling rebel-held areas** while **the Russian air force carried out air strikes**.

MIDDLE EAST

Who controls what in Syria?

NOVEMBER 27



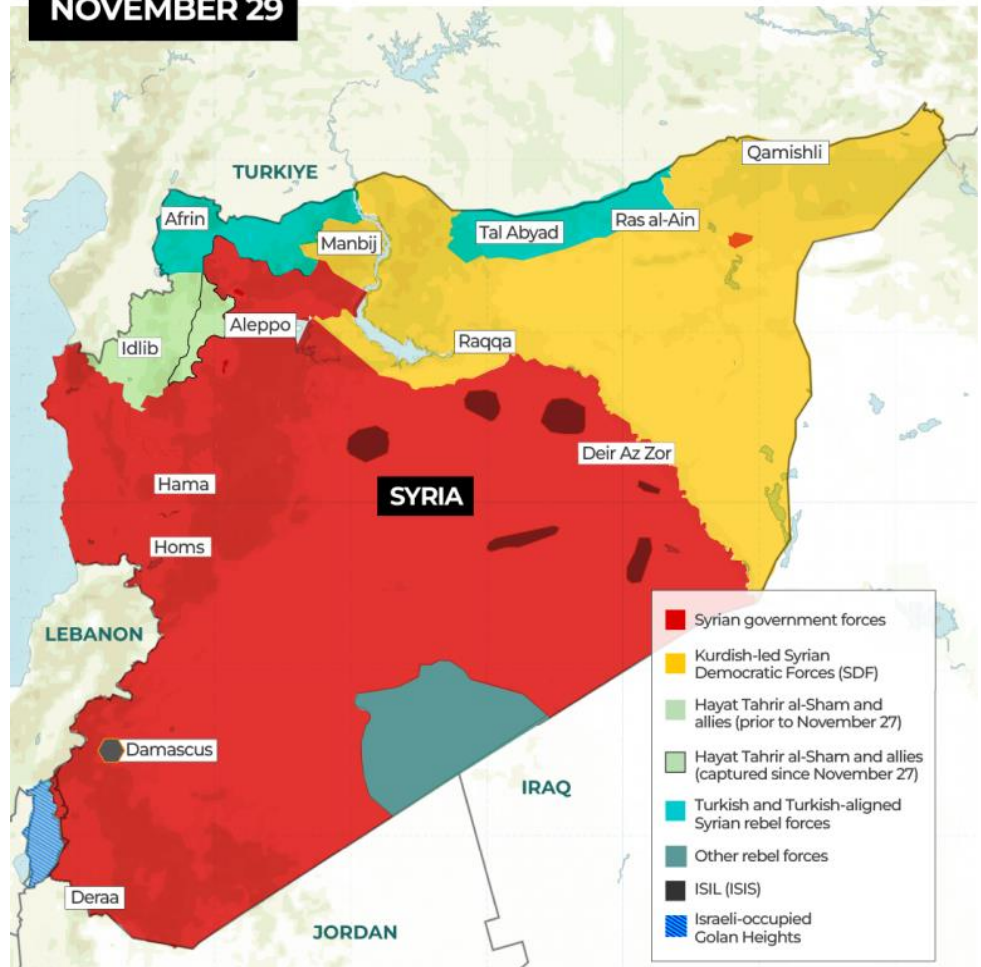
<p>Day 2 – November 28</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By Thursday, November 28 the rebels had captured more territory and expelled government forces from villages in eastern Idlib, then began pushing towards the M5 highway, a strategic road that leads south to the capital, Damascus, about 300 km (186 miles) away. <p>MIDDLE EAST Who controls what in Syria?</p> <p>NOVEMBER 28</p>
<p>Day 3 – November 29</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By Friday, November 29 rebel forces had entered parts of Aleppo city after detonating two car bombs and engaging government forces on the city’s western edge, according to a Syrian war monitor and fighters.

- Syrian state television said **Russia was providing Syria's military with air support.**

MIDDLE EAST

Who controls what in Syria?

NOVEMBER 29



Day 4 – November 30

- **By Saturday, November 30** images and videos began circulating online showing rebel fighters taking photos next to the ancient Citadel of Aleppo as they advanced through the city.
- After capturing Aleppo, the rebels advanced south, towards Hama.

	<p>MIDDLE EAST Who controls what in Syria?</p> <p>NOVEMBER 30</p> <p>SYRIA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Syrian government forces ■ Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) ■ Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and allies (prior to November 27) ■ Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and allies (captured since November 27) ■ Turkish and Turkish-aligned Syrian rebel forces ■ Other rebel forces ■ ISIL (ISIS) ■ Israeli-occupied Golan Heights
<p>Day 5 – December 1</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By Sunday, Syrian and Russian jets intensified their air attacks in Idlib city and positions in Aleppo as government forces tried to slow the advance of opposition fighters. • In his first public comments since the start of the offensive, President al-Assad said his forces would continue to defend the government’s “stability and territorial integrity against terrorists and their supporters”

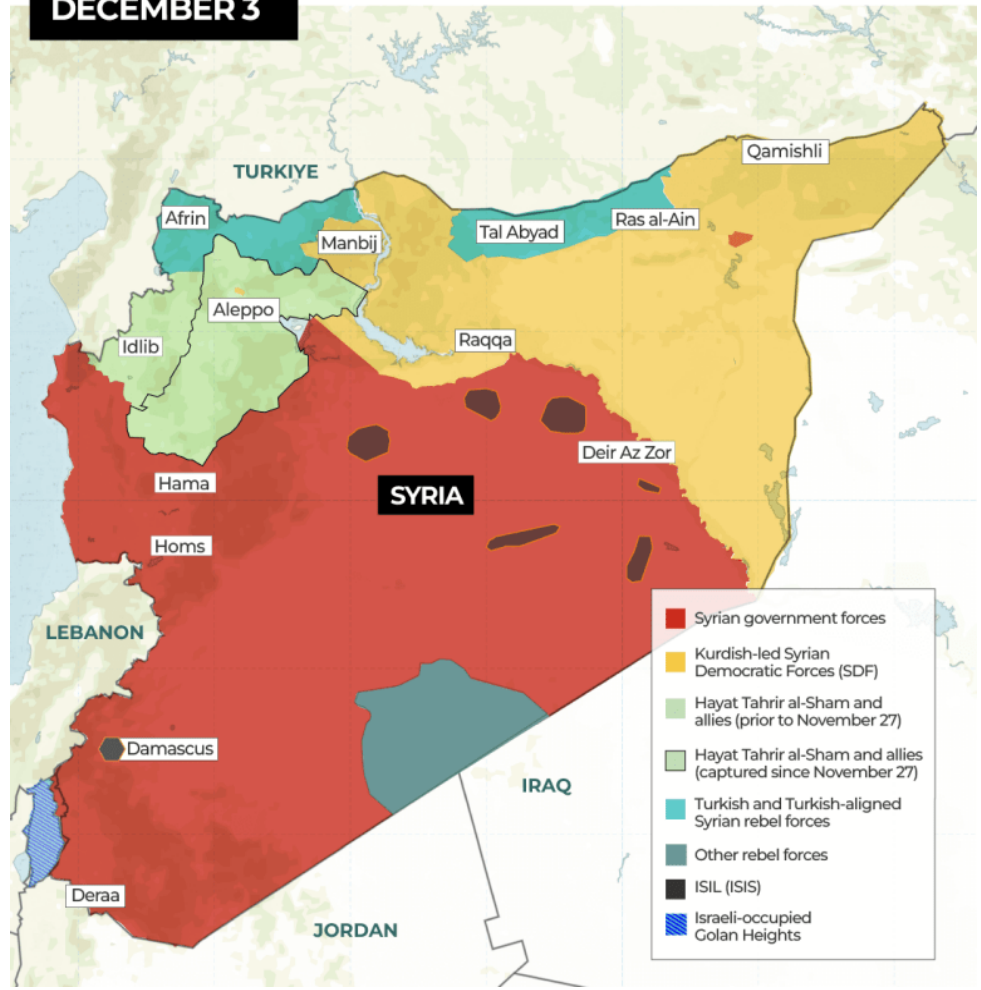
	<p>MIDDLE EAST Who controls what in Syria?</p> <p>DECEMBER 1</p> <p>Legend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Syrian government forces ■ Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) ■ Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and allies (prior to November 27) ■ Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and allies (captured since November 27) ■ Turkish and Turkish-aligned Syrian rebel forces ■ Other rebel forces ■ ISIL (ISIS) ■ Israeli-occupied Golan Heights
<p>Day 6 – December 2</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fierce battles continued in the outskirts of Hama as Syrian opposition fighters advanced to the strategic central city Syria’s fourth largest. ● As the site of the most brutal politically motivated massacre in Syria’s recent history, the city also held symbolic importance.

	<p>MIDDLE EAST Who controls what in Syria?</p> <p>DECEMBER 2</p> <p>SYRIA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Syrian government forces ■ Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) ■ Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and allies (prior to November 27) ■ Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and allies (captured since November 27) ■ Turkish and Turkish-aligned Syrian rebel forces ■ Other rebel forces ■ ISIL (ISIS) ■ Israeli-occupied Golan Heights
<p>Day 7 – December 3</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Syrian government said its counteroffensive had pushed back opposition fighters attempting to advance into Hama. • In contrast, opposition forces said they captured more Syrian troops and Iran-backed fighters in fierce battles.

MIDDLE EAST

Who controls what in Syria?

DECEMBER 3



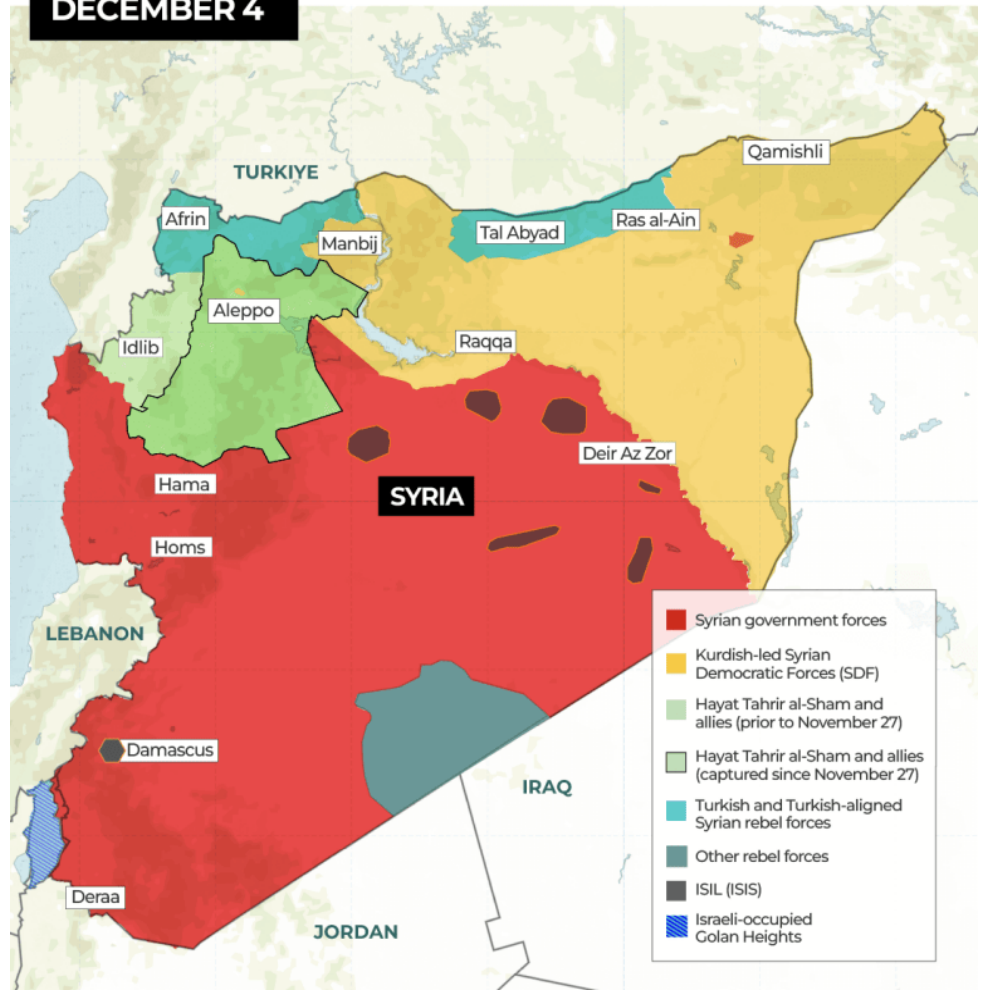
**Day 8 –
December 4**

- Opposition fighters continued to push further south as they **captured more towns in the Hama governorate.**
- A regime air strike killed Syrian photographer **Anas Alkharboutli**, who was working for German news agency **dpa**, near the city of Hama.
- **Alkharboutli, 32, had long documented Syria’s 13-year war.**

MIDDLE EAST

Who controls what in Syria?

DECEMBER 4



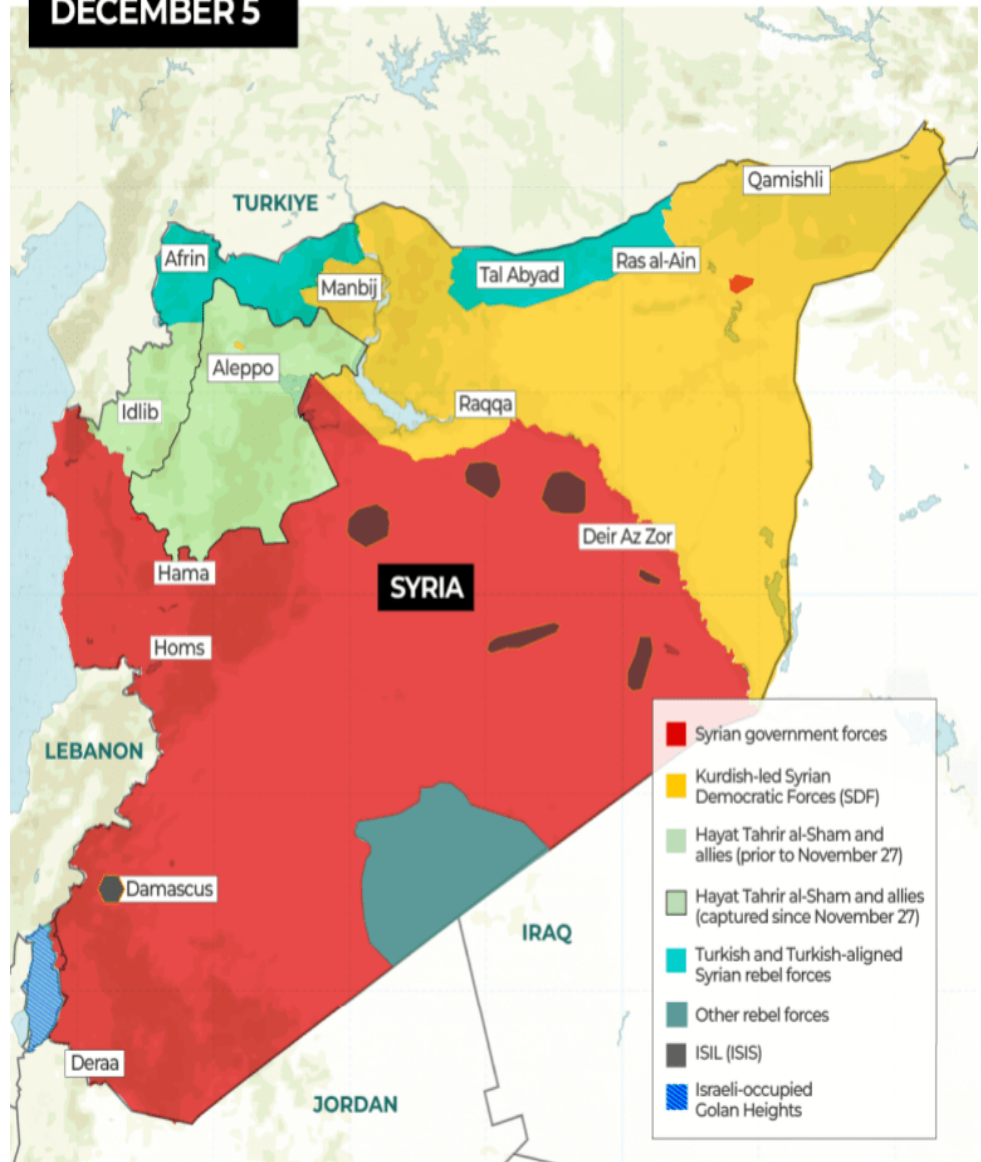
**Day 9 -
December 5**

- **By Thursday, December 5 the rebels announced they had full control of Hama.** Seizing the city brought them **one step closer** to severing the **coastal cities of Tartous and Latakia** from the rest of the country.
- **Latakia is a key political stronghold for al-Assad and Syria's Alawite community,** as well as a strategic Russian naval base.

MIDDLE EAST

Who controls what in Syria?

DECEMBER 5



**Day 10 -
December 6**

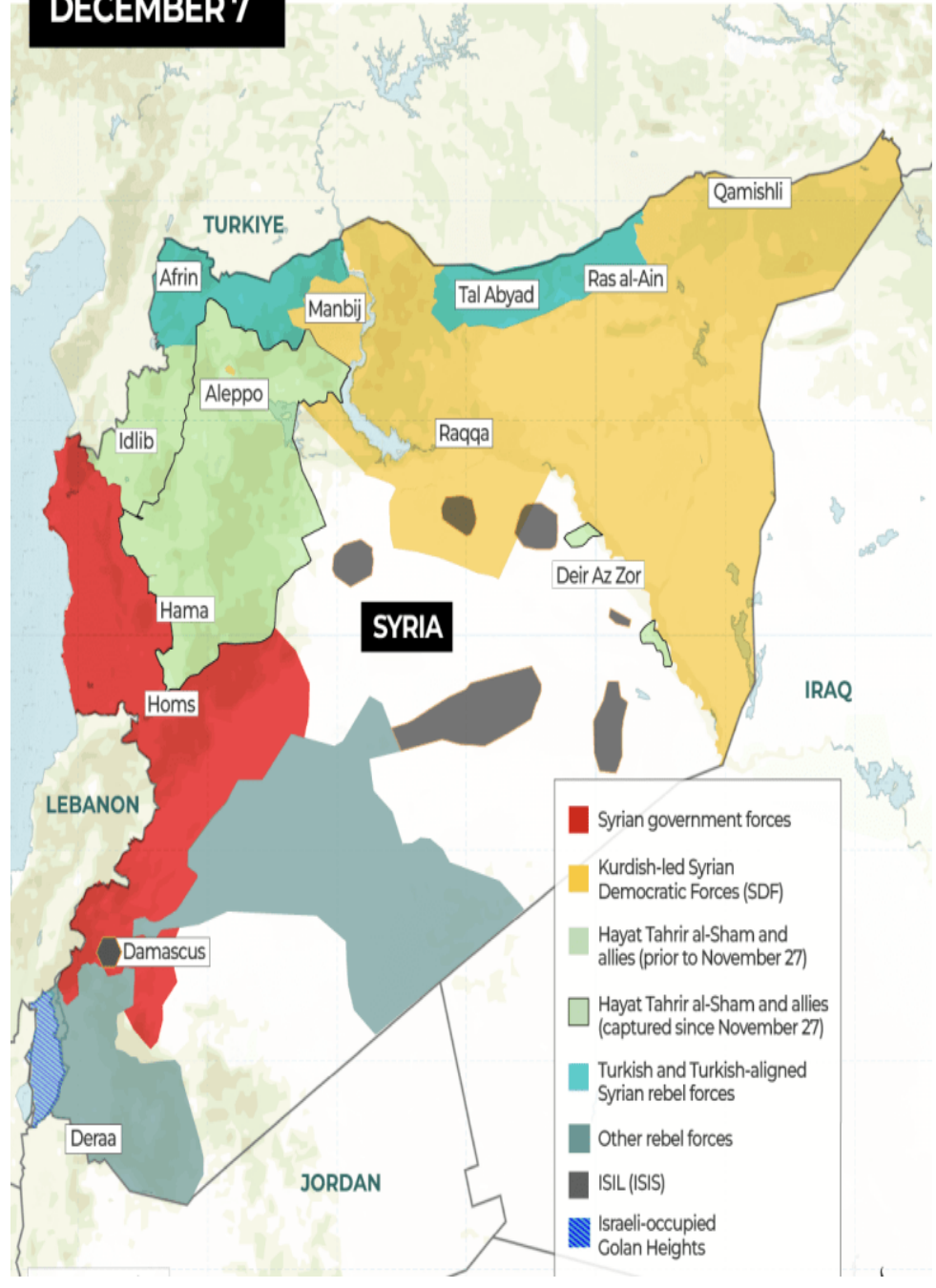
- The capture of Hama paved the way to Homs, Syria’s third-largest city.
- Homs, a key crossroads city linking **Damascus** to Syria’s coastal areas, lies approximately **46 km (29 miles)** south of Hama.

	<p>MIDDLE EAST Who controls what in Syria?</p> <p>DECEMBER 6</p>
<p>Day 11 – December 7</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On Saturday, December 7 southern forces started moving and Deraa-based opposition fighters said they seized control of the city, the fourth strategic loss for President Bashar al-Assad’s forces in a week. • Deraa, which lies only a few kilometres from the border with neighbouring Jordan, is known as the cradle of the 2011 revolution.

MIDDLE EAST

Who controls what in Syria?


DECEMBER 7



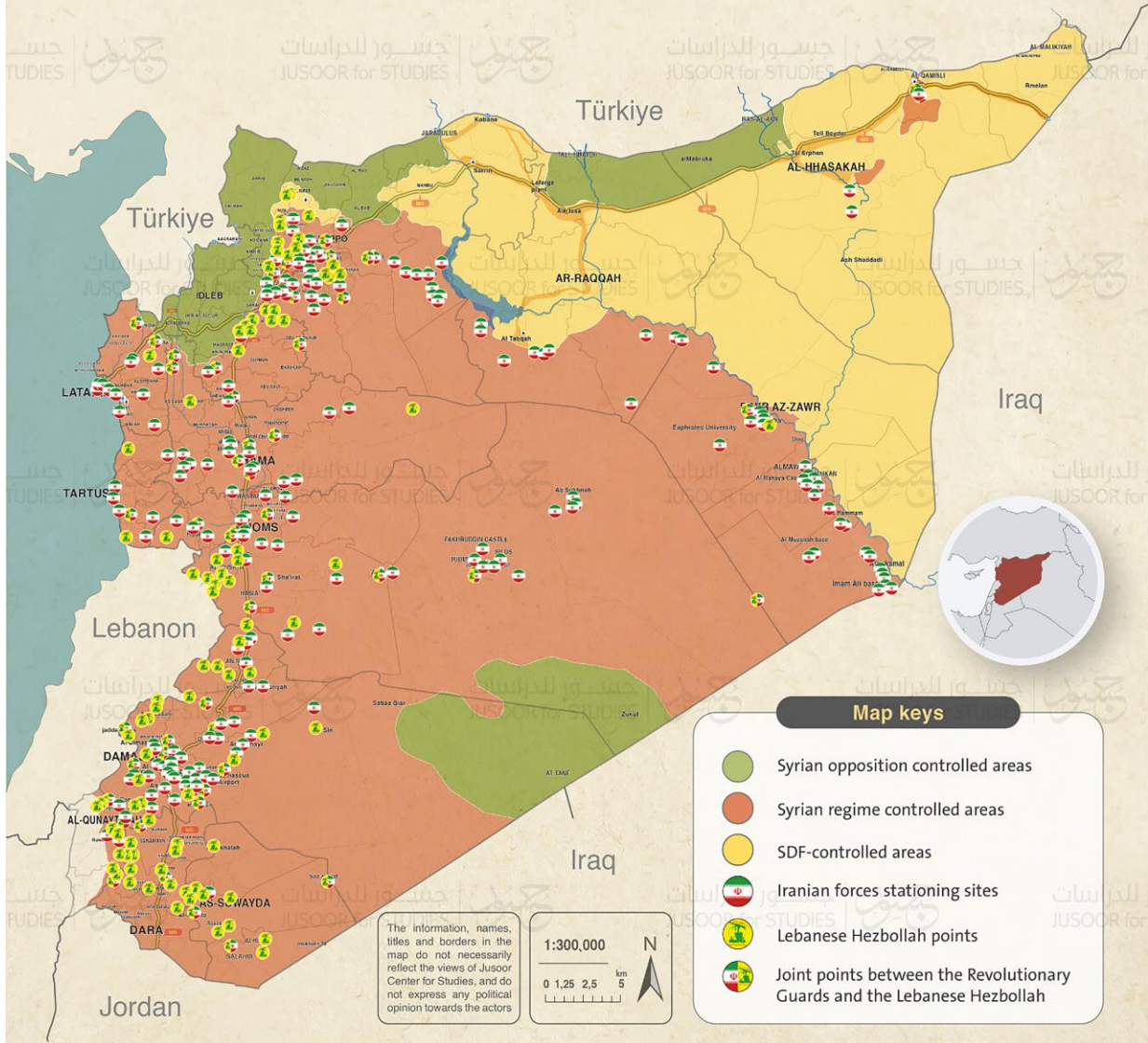
4. What are the reasons for the fall of Assad’s regime?

Reasons	Analysis
<p>Shift in Regional Security Dynamics</p>	<p>Russia:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The country is preoccupied with the Ukraine war. • This led to the reduced troop presence in Syria.
	<p>Hezbollah:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hezbollah, which at one point sent thousands of its fighters to shore up Assad’s forces, has been weakened by a yearlong conflict with Israel. • Hezbollah believes the number of its fighters killed by Israel in the last year could be as high as 4,000 including its all key leaders. 

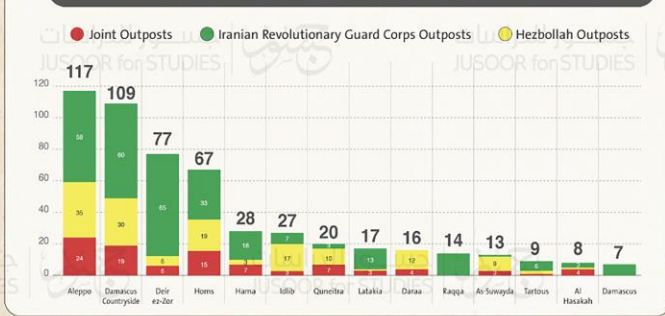
	<p>Turkey:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over the year to mid-2024, Türkiye maintained its military installations in Syria and added a single new position, bringing the number to a total of 126. • These include 12 bases and 114 outposts, most of which are located in Aleppo governorate (58) and Idlib (51) • Turkey is supporting the Syrian opposition not just to weaken Assad but to target the Kurdish military stationed in an autonomous Kurdish enclave in northern Syria across the Turkish border.
	<p>Iran:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2024, the Iran–Israel proxy conflict escalated to a series of direct confrontations between the two countries • On the evening of 13 April 2024, Iran launched a drone and missile attack on Israel, targeting among other unconfirmed trajectories sites in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and Arad region and two airbases in the Negev desert under Operation True Promise. • This led to a shift in focus of Iran from Syria to Israel and Hezezbollah. • The country has seen its proxies across the region degraded by Israeli airstrikes.

	<p>Israel strikes military bases in Iran</p> 
<p>Economic Pressures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syria's economy remains in a dire state due to sanctions, war destruction, and corruption. • There have been signs of internal dissent and protests, particularly in historically supportive areas like Suwayda and Daraa, demanding economic relief and political reforms. • The Syrian pound has depreciated against the US dollar, and consumer price inflation is high.
<p>Rebel forces</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syrian rebel groups took control of the capital after a lightning-fast offensive across the country. • The leader of the Islamist militant group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, is very much putting himself forward as the figurehead of a post-Assad future in Syria.

MAP OF IRANIAN FORCES IN SYRIA MID 2024



Distribution of Iranian military positions by province



Number of Iranian military positions in Syria



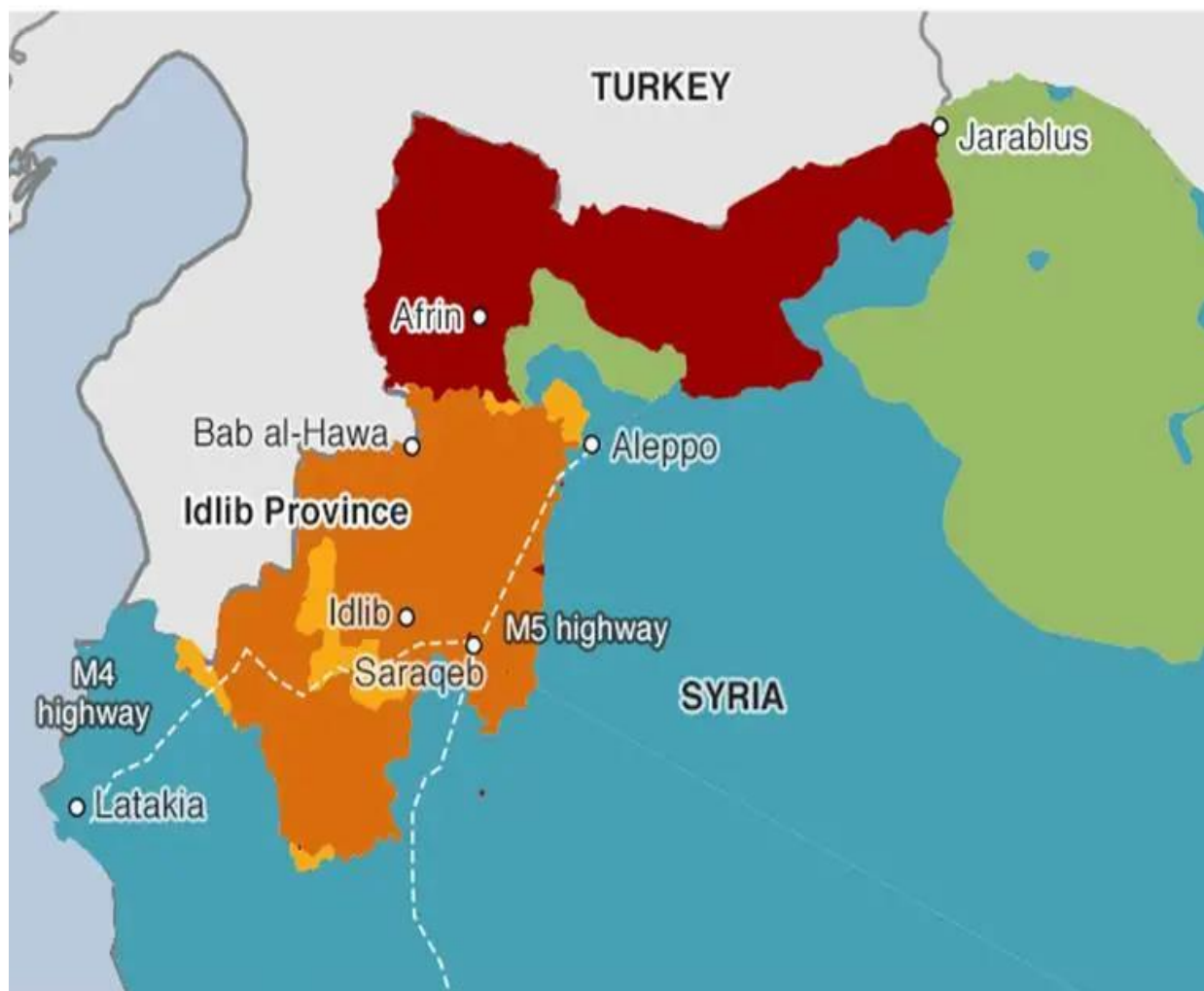
5. Who controls Idlib now?

- Since the province fell to **opposition forces**, there is **no one group that controls Idlib**, but rather, several separate factions.
- International watchdogs say that the dominant faction in Idlib is the **Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)**, a **UN-designated terrorist organization set up in 2017, with links to al-Qaeda**.

Idlib province



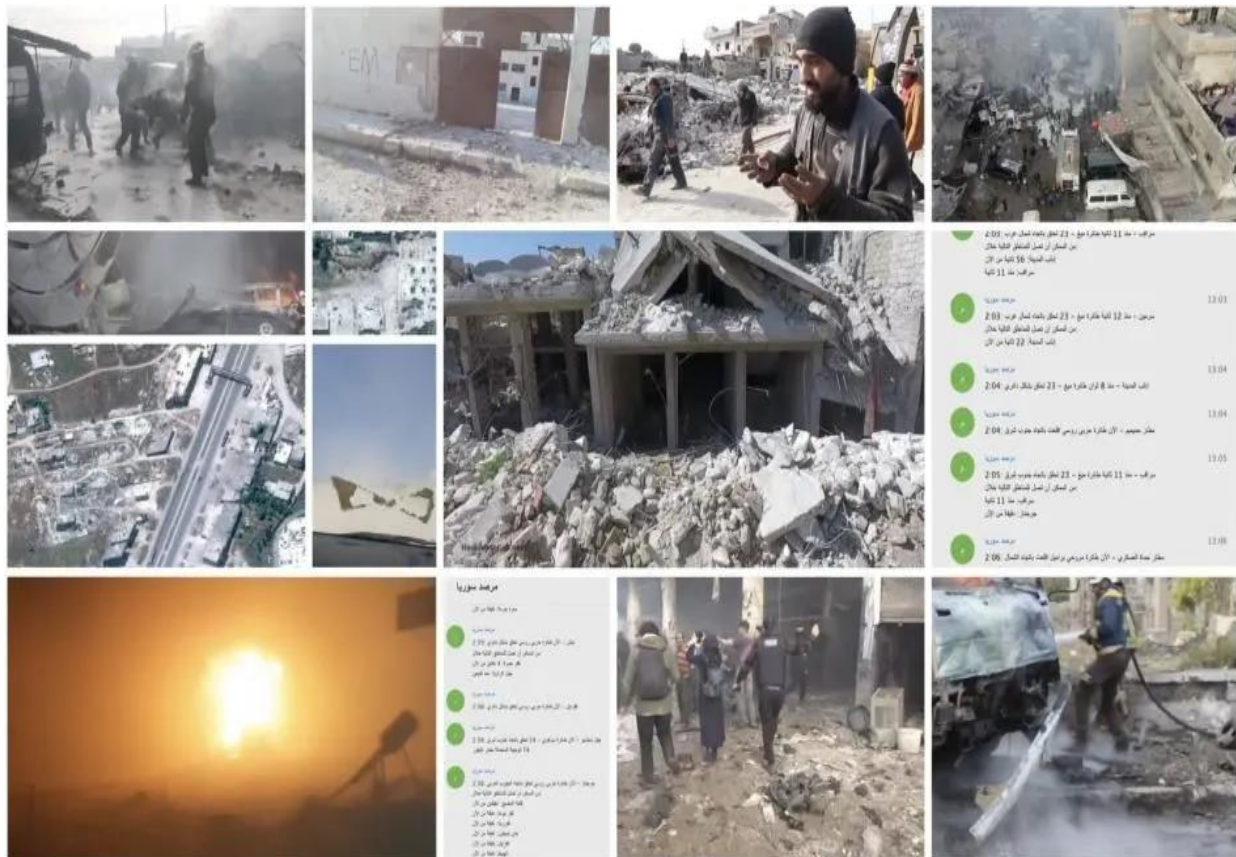
- | | |
|---|---|
|  Turkish-backed Syrian rebels and Turkish military |  Syrian government |
|  Kurdish forces |  Jihadist forces |
| |  Syrian rebels |



6. Why is Idlib important?

- During the **uprising since 2011**, Idlib was the focus of protests and fighting in the **early phase of the Syrian war**.
- As the uprising descended into armed conflict, **Idlib became the focus of a rebel campaign**, which temporarily captured the city and the governorate before a government offensive in April 2012.
- The province along with parts of Hama, Latakia and Aleppo is the last stronghold of the **rebel and jihadist groups** that have been **trying to overthrow President Assad since 2011**.
- **Idlib is also strategically important** to the government.
- It **borders Turkey to the north and straddles highways running south from the city of Aleppo to the capital Damascus**, and west to the Mediterranean city of Latakia.

7. Why did Syrian government forces target Idlib now?



- In **2017, Russia and Turkey agreed to de-escalation in Idlib** and the province remains **one of the last out of the control of the Syrian government.**
- When **Syrian government forces overtook three other de-escalation zones** elsewhere in Syria, **Turkey approached Russia in 2018 with a proposal to establish a demilitarized zone in Idlib**, in what came to be known as the Sochi accord.
- **Turkey also proposed** that it would **disarm the Sunni militant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham** and remove it from the area, and **agreed to reopen the crucial M4 and M5 highways.**
- However, the situation escalated when **Turkey failed to deal with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham** according to the **terms of the proposal with Russia.**
 - Months of fighting followed, devastating towns and displacing thousands of people.
 - **Syrian government forces also recaptured the M4 and M5 highways.**
 - **Idlib's strategic location has also made it a target for Syrian government forces.**

8. Why is Idlib important for Turkey?



- **Idlib's proximity to the Turkish border** makes it not only important for the Syrian government, but also a **cause of concern for Turkey**.
- Since the war started in Syria, **thousands of displaced Syrians** have sought refuge in **Turkey** over the years.
- According to the latest known figures, **Turkey presently hosts some 3.6 million refugees** and is feeling the **socio-economic and political strain of their presence in the country**.
- **More conflict in Idlib** would only serve to **displace more people**, pushing them towards the Turkish border.
- **Turkey** has been witnessing a **surge in hostility** among its citizens towards **refugees** and a **fresh wave of refugees** will only **exacerbate the situation**.

9. What is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)?



- The **HTS (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham)** is led by **Abu Mohammad al-Joulani**, a **42-year-old Syrian militant**.
- **Joulani had moved to Iraq** in his early 20s to fight the **American** occupation of the country (2003) and joined **al-Qaeda**.
- When **al-Qaeda in Iraq** was commanded by **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi**, **Joulani emerged as one of his close lieutenants**. When **Baghdadi** decided to send a contingent of **al-Qaeda jihadists** across the **border to Syria to fight President Assad** after the civil war broke out, he chose **Joulani to lead the pack**.
- Later, **Joulani fell out with Baghdadi** as the former wanted **al-Nusra to join the Islamic State**.
- **Joulani wanted to retain** his group as an autonomous **al-Qaeda branch in Syria**.
- When the world's focus shifted towards the **Islamic State**, **Joulani steadily built his empire in Idlib**.
- The **Islamic State was defeated** and **Baghdadi was killed**, but **Joulani emerged** as the face of **anti-regime Syrian militancy**.
- He **first changed the name of al-Nusra to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham** and later, the **name was changed again to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)** as he **sought to distance his group from al-Qaeda**—though the HTS never renounced its Islamist ideology.
- **Rebels and jihadists who lost territories elsewhere flocked towards Idlib** as it offered refuge to all of them.
- Over the years, **Joulani's men built a parallel state in Idlib**.
- Joulani is a **U.S.-designated terrorist**, but, after **establishing his rule over Idlib**, he **declared that his fight was against Mr. Assad**, not against the U.S.
- He has not faced any major attacks from the **U.S., which still has hundreds of soldiers in eastern Syria**.

10. Can Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) bring stability to Syria?

- **Hayat Tahrir al-Sham**, originally **linked to Al-Qaeda**, led the **offensive against Assad** but now **faces challenges in governance and legitimacy amidst Syria's long-standing instability**.
- In the wake of recent events, **Syrian Prime Minister Mohammad Ghazi al-Jalali** has pledged **full cooperation** with the leadership the Syrian people will select.
- **HTS remains a hardline organization**, but experts argue that there have been attempts **to operationalise a civilian government**.
- Since **2016, Julani** has been **positioning himself** and his group as credible caretakers of a **Syria liberated from Assad**.
- While **HTS seeks to establish legitimacy**, it faces significant challenges, including **human rights violations** committed by its members and **ongoing conflicts with other groups**.

11. What will be the impact of the recent regime change in Syria?

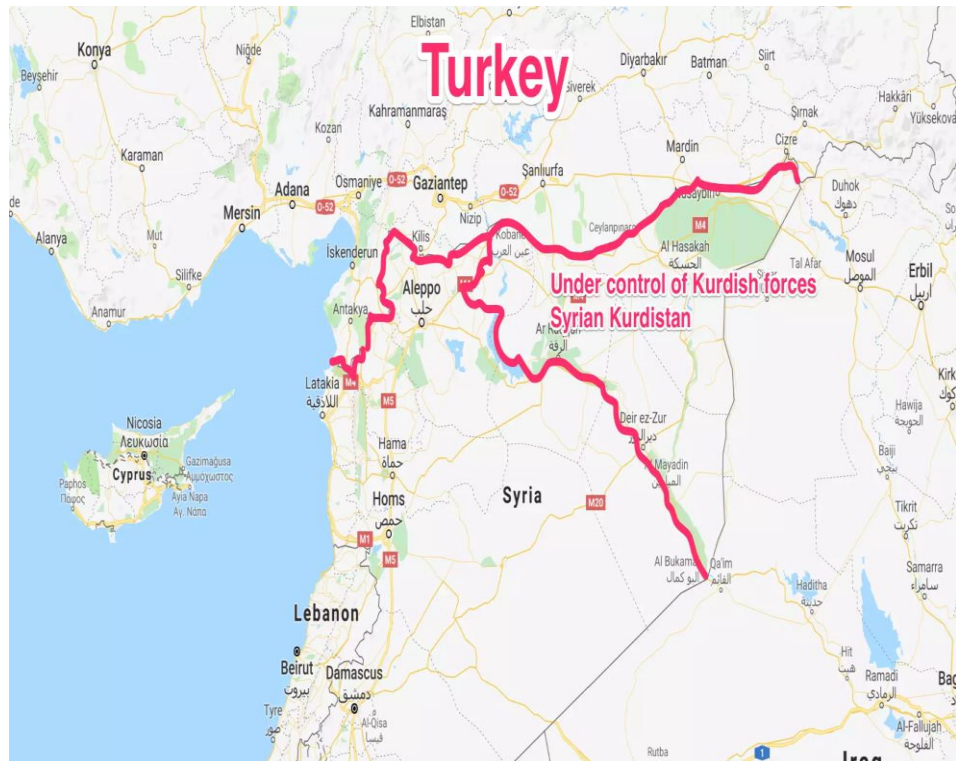
- The **dramatic toppling of the Syrian regime** at the **hands of rebel forces** this weekend could have **deep ramifications not only for the Middle Eastern country**, but on **global geopolitics and markets too**, according to analysts.

Countries	Impact
USA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economists point out that the fall of Assad, and the accompanying weakening of Russia and Iran after the loss of a key ally in the region, will give the U.S. President-elect Donald Trump and Western powers a welcome boost.


- Assad’s downfall and the “**de facto defeat**” of **Russia and Iran** in the process, has **massive implications for markets in terms of unwinding fears around the dollar’s pre-eminence**, while increasing the momentum that could develop behind **Trump’s global trade vision**

Turkey

- **Turkey, which shares a 560 miles long frontier with Syria, has been a main backer of opposition groups aiming to topple Assad since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011.**



- **Turkey used its Syrian proxies to push back Kurdish forces which pose a threat at its southern border.**
- Despite being **designated as a terrorist organisation** in Ankara, **Turkey has operated alongside HTS.**
- **Turkey is set to be the biggest external beneficiary of Assad’s fall.**

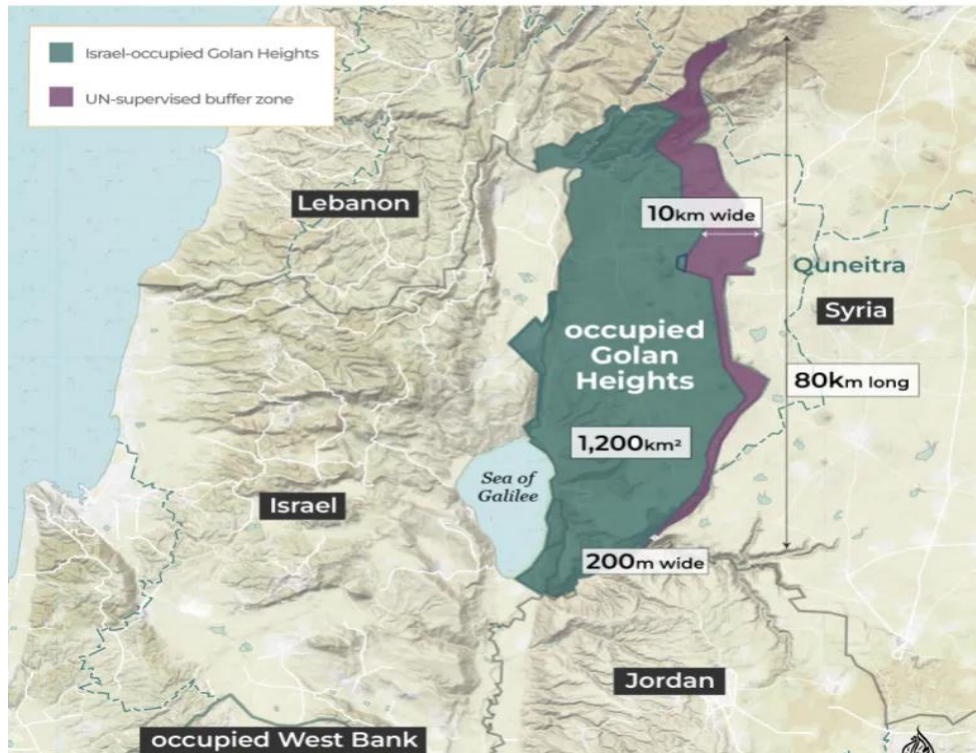
	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • However, Turkey stands to benefit only if the Assad regime is replaced by a functioning government able to face the daunting task of delivering stability to a diverse country with competing factions that will need billions of dollars in aid and investments to rebuild
<p>Israel</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meanwhile, Israel has lauded the fall of the Assad regime but challenges still persist for it as the new regime in neighbouring Syria would be of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) which is an offshoot of Al-Qaeda and is a designated terrorist organisation in Israel. • Israel is seen as a beneficiary of Assad’s fall because of its impact on Iran, which has used Syria as a supply route to its proxy in Lebanon, the militant group Hezbollah. • Israel has looked to severely weaken this supply chain as part of its military campaign against Iranian proxies in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. • Israel took control of the buffer zone in Golan Heights in what it termed as part of its "enhanced preparedness."

- **Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu** has said that the **Golan Heights, occupied by Israel for almost 60 years, will remain part of Israel “for eternity”**.

ISRAEL'S WAR ON GAZA

What is Syria's Golan Heights?

Israel has occupied 70 percent of the Golan Heights since capturing it from Syria in 1967. A United Nations observer force created a ceasefire buffer zone in 1974. In 1981, Israel annexed the territory it occupies, and only the United States has recognised the annexation.



Russia

- The other most notable “loser” from Assad’s overthrow is his ally and backer **Russia**, which has helped prop up Assad’s regime since the start of the civil war.
- **Moscow** has a vested interest in keeping the new government on side as it operates an air base in **Hmeimim**, along with a naval base in **Tartus** that gives it access to the **Mediterranean Sea**.

- Rebel forces have given the **Kremlin** assurances that they would guarantee the safety of **Russian military bases** and **diplomatic institutions** in **Syria**, but **Russia's long-term military presence** in the country is seen as far from certain.



Iran

- In the aftermath of **opposition rebel groups** swiftly **toppling Syria's government**, Iran's leadership is struggling to come to terms with the **loss of long-time ally Bashar Assad**.
- **Syria has been a cornerstone** of what Tehran describes as the "**Shia Crescent**," a **geopolitical vision** aimed at **linking Iran to its allies in Lebanon and beyond**.
- Iran's supreme leader, **Ayatollah Ali Khamenei**, once **described Syria as the "pillar" of the "Axis of Resistance,"** a **network of Iranian-backed groups** that oppose Israel and US influence, in the Middle East.
- **Syria has also provided a corridor for Iranian weapons** and other support to reach its **proxies in Lebanon**.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analysts argue that while Iran might continue supporting proxy groups in the region, its financial and military capacity has been significantly diminished.
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12. What is the timeline of the Syria crisis?

- The **sudden collapse of Bashar al-Assad's rule over Syria** marks the culmination of a nearly **14-year rebellion** and a key moment in a **civil war that killed hundreds of thousands of people, displaced half the population** and drew in outside powers.
- The **first protests against Bashar Assad in 2011** quickly spread across Syria and were met by security forces with a wave of arrests and shootings.

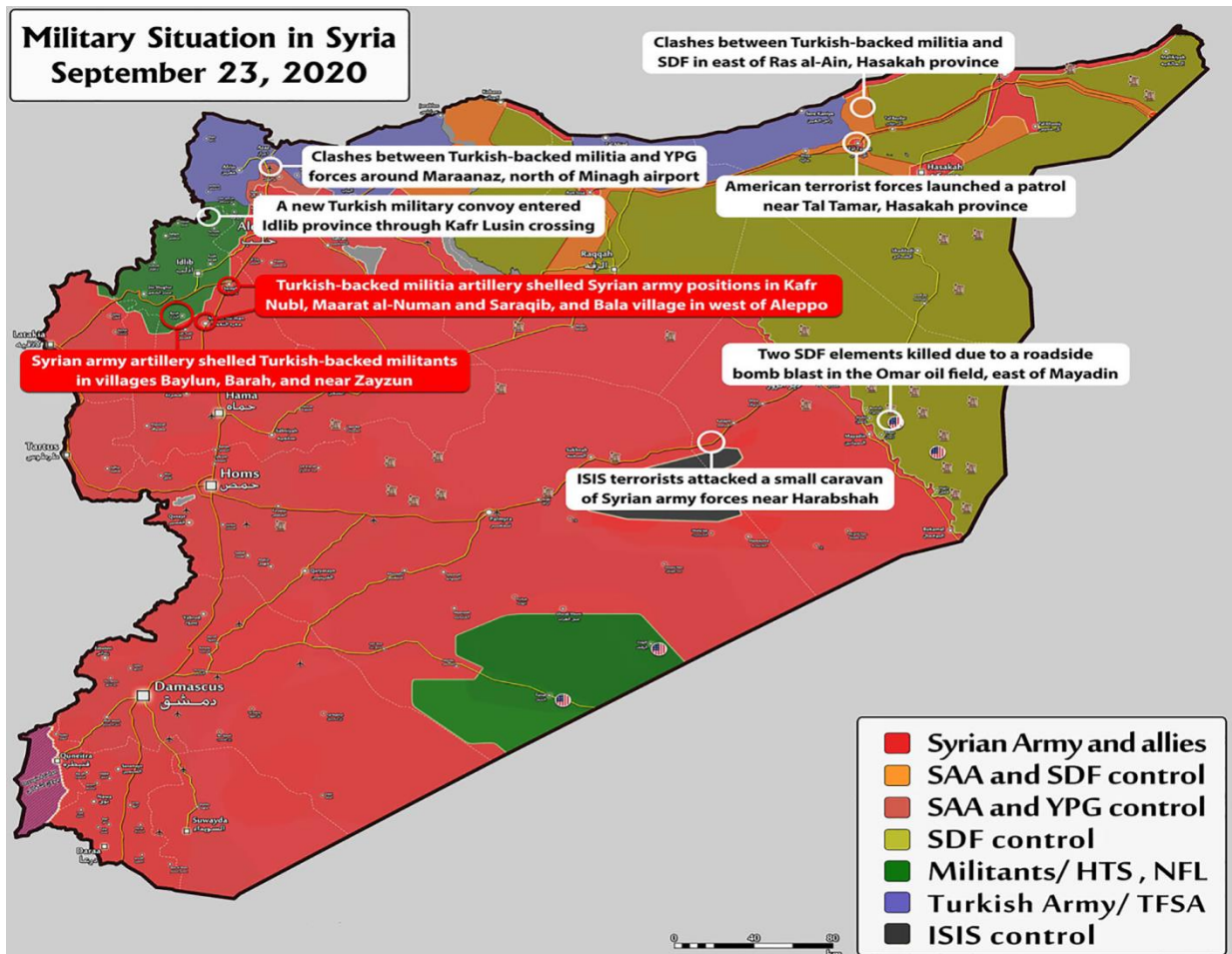
Year	Event
2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The first protests against Assad quickly spread across the country, and were met by security forces with a wave of arrests and shootings. Some protesters take up guns and military units defect as the uprising becomes an armed revolt that will gain support from Western and Arab countries and Turkiye.



<p>2012</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A bombing in Damascus is the first by al Qaeda's new Syrian affiliate, the Nusra Front, which gains in power and starts crushing groups with a nationalist ideology. • World powers meet in Geneva and agree on the need for a political transition, but their divisions on how to achieve it will foil years of U.N.-sponsored peace efforts. • Assad turns his air force on opposition strongholds, as rebels gain ground and the war escalates with massacres on both sides.
<p>2013</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lebanon's Hezbollah helps Assad to victory at Qusayr, halting rebel momentum and showing the Iran-backed group's growing role in the conflict. • Washington has declared chemical weapons use a red line, but a gas attack on rebel-held eastern Ghouta near Damascus kills scores of civilians without triggering a U.S. military response.
<p>2014</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islamic State group suddenly seizes Raqqa in the northeast and swathes more territory in Syria and Iraq. • Rebels in the Old City of Homs surrender, agreeing to move to an outer suburb - their first big defeat in a major urban area and a precursor to future "evacuation" deals. • Washington builds an anti-Islamic State coalition and starts air strikes, helping Kurdish forces turn the jihadist tide but creating friction with its ally Turkiye.
<p>2015</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With better cooperation and more arms from abroad, rebel groups gain more ground and seize northwestern Idlib, but Islamist militants are taking a bigger role.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia joins the war on Assad's side with air strikes that turn the conflict against the rebels for years to come
2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alarmed by Kurdish advances on the border, Turkey launches an incursion with allied rebels, making a new zone of Turkish control. • The Syrian army and its allies defeat rebels in Aleppo, seen at the time as Assad's biggest victory of the war. • The Nusra Front splits from al Qaeda and starts trying to present itself in a moderate light, adopting a series of new names and eventually settling on Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).
2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Israel acknowledges air strikes against Hezbollah in Syria, aiming to degrade the growing strength of Iran and its allies. • U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led forces defeat Islamic State in Raqqa. • That offensive, and a rival one by the Syrian army, drove the jihadist group from nearly all its land.
2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Syrian army recaptures eastern Ghouta, before quickly retaking the other insurgent enclaves in central Syria, and then the rebels' southern bastion of Deraa.
2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islamic State loses its last scrap of territory in Syria. • The U.S. decides to keep some troops in the country to prevent attacks on its Kurdish allies.
2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia backs a government offensive that ends with a ceasefire with Turkey that freezes most front lines. • Assad holds most territory and all main cities, appearing deeply entrenched.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rebels hold the northwest. • A Turkey-backed force holds a border strip. • Kurdish-led forces control the northeast.
2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Hamas attack on Israel on Oct. 7 triggers fighting between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, ultimately reducing the group's presence in Syria and fatally undermining Assad
2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rebels launch a new assault on Aleppo. • With Assad's allies focused elsewhere his army quickly collapses. • Eight days after the fall of Aleppo the rebels have taken most major cities and entered Damascus, driving Assad from power.



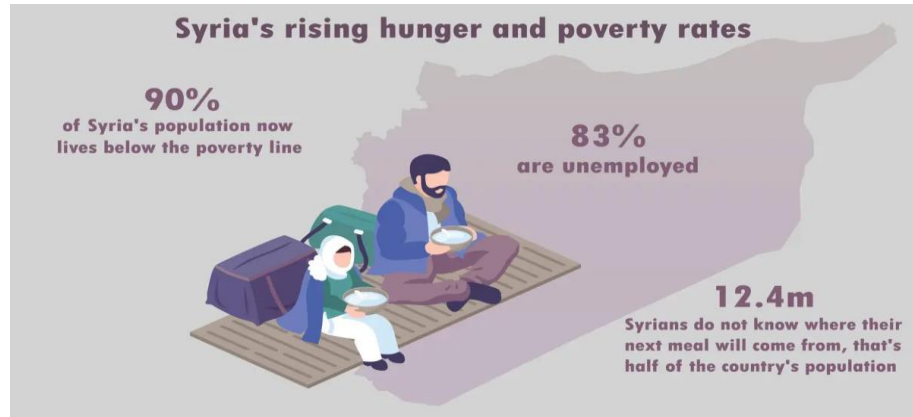
13. What were the reasons for the Syrian civil war?

- In March 2011, pro-democracy demonstrations erupted in the southern city of Deraa, inspired by uprisings in neighbouring countries against oppressive rulers.

The reasons for the Syrian civil war are as follows:

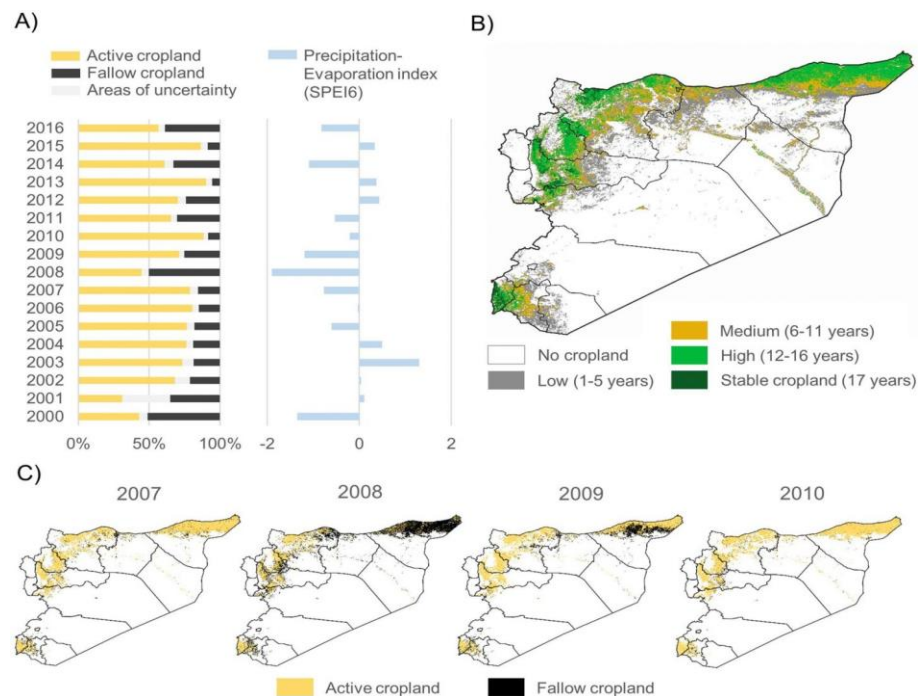
Reasons	Analysis																																										
<p>Unemployment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The country also faced particularly high youth unemployment rates. • At the start of the war, discontent with the government was strongest in Syria's poor areas, predominantly among conservative Sunnis. • These included cities with high poverty rates, such as Daraa and Homs, and the poorer districts of large cities. <div data-bbox="511 1045 1414 1717" style="text-align: center;"> <p>Syria: Unemployment rate from 2004 to 2023</p> <table border="1" style="margin: auto;"> <caption>Syria: Unemployment rate from 2004 to 2023</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Year</th> <th>Unemployment rate (%)</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr><td>2004</td><td>9.52%</td></tr> <tr><td>2005</td><td>8.82%</td></tr> <tr><td>2006</td><td>8.17%</td></tr> <tr><td>2007</td><td>8.42%</td></tr> <tr><td>2008</td><td>10.94%</td></tr> <tr><td>2009</td><td>8.14%</td></tr> <tr><td>2010</td><td>8.61%</td></tr> <tr><td>2011</td><td>8.61%</td></tr> <tr><td>2012</td><td>13.8%</td></tr> <tr><td>2013</td><td>14.48%</td></tr> <tr><td>2014</td><td>14.8%</td></tr> <tr><td>2015</td><td>14.29%</td></tr> <tr><td>2016</td><td>13.87%</td></tr> <tr><td>2017</td><td>13.55%</td></tr> <tr><td>2018</td><td>13.55%</td></tr> <tr><td>2019</td><td>13.3%</td></tr> <tr><td>2020</td><td>15.18%</td></tr> <tr><td>2021</td><td>14.8%</td></tr> <tr><td>2022</td><td>13.81%</td></tr> <tr><td>2023</td><td>13.81%</td></tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Source: World Bank © Statista 2024 Additional Information: World Bank; 2004 to 2023</p> </div>	Year	Unemployment rate (%)	2004	9.52%	2005	8.82%	2006	8.17%	2007	8.42%	2008	10.94%	2009	8.14%	2010	8.61%	2011	8.61%	2012	13.8%	2013	14.48%	2014	14.8%	2015	14.29%	2016	13.87%	2017	13.55%	2018	13.55%	2019	13.3%	2020	15.18%	2021	14.8%	2022	13.81%	2023	13.81%
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<p>Poverty</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • According to the World Bank, over 20% of Syrians were living in poverty before 2011. 																																										


- The poverty rate had been **steadily increasing since the early 2000s** due to **rising food prices, an influx of refugees, and a decrease in private sector employment.**



Drought

- The **unrest coincided with the most intense drought ever recorded in Syria, which lasted from 2006 to 2011.**
- This **resulted in widespread crop failure, an increase in food prices and a mass migration of farming families to urban centers.**

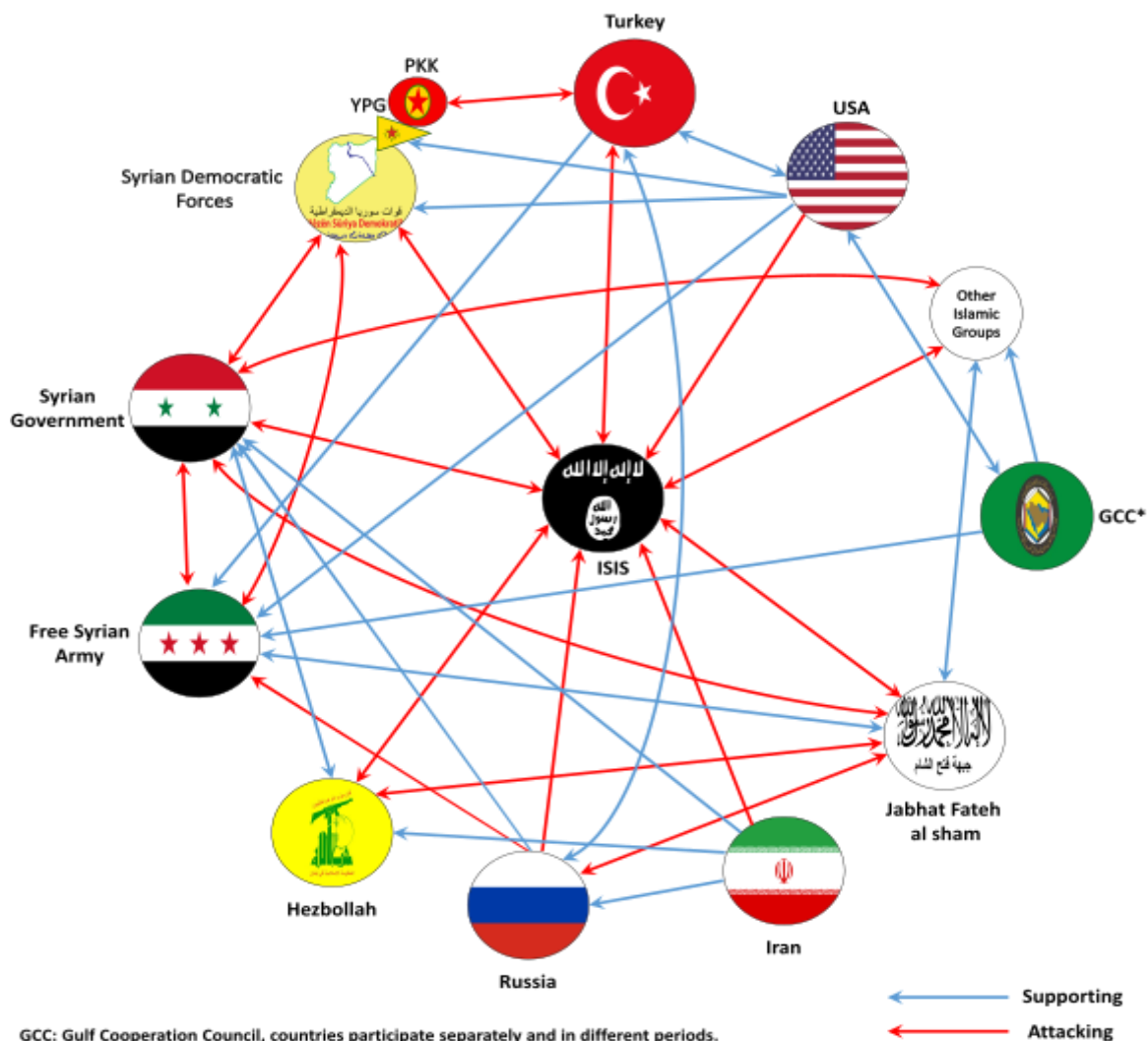


<p>Corruption</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The persistence of corruption, sectarian bias towards Alawites, nepotism and widespread bribery that existed in party, bureaucracy and military led to popular anger that resulted in the eruption of the 2011 Syrian Revolution. • The country ranked 129th out of 183 countries as per the 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index. • The country ranked 178th out of 180 countries as per the 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index. 
<p>Lack of democracy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before the Baath Party took power in 1963, Syria was a democracy in name only. • The state of democracy in Syria during the Shukri al-Quwatli presidency was highly limited due to the strong influence of the military. • The Ba'ath Party coup in Syria in 1963 effectively ended all forms of democracy in the country and ushered in a period of authoritarian rule.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizens were not allowed to freely express their opinions or to organize for political purposes. • Human rights violations were commonplace, and the government often resorted to violence in order to maintain control.
<p>Arab spring</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2011, successful uprisings that became known as the Arab Spring toppled Tunisia's and Egypt's presidents. • This gave hope to Syrian pro-democracy activists.
<p>Increase in State repression</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In September 2010, The Economist newspaper described the Syrian government as "the worst offender among Arab states", which engaged in imposing travel bans and restricted free movement of people. • More than 400 individuals in Syria were reportedly restricted by Assad regime's travel bans in 2010. 

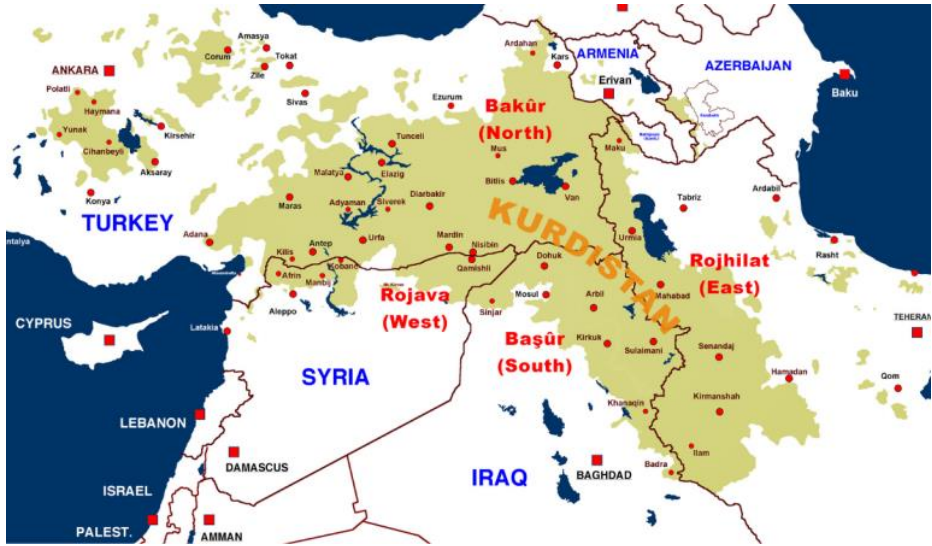
<p>Iran's interference in Syria affairs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iran has long supported Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government and has used its Shia allies and proxies in the region, such as Hezbollah, to help prop up Syrian forces. • Iran has also provided military, financial and logistical support for Shia militias fighting in Syria and has been accused of trying to spread its own version of Shia Islam in the country.
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14. Enlist key players and their role in the Syrian civil war?




- **The key players involved in the Syrian civil war are as follows:**

Key Players	Role played
<p>Assad regime / Syrian government.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hafez alAssad ruled an authoritarian military regime from 1970 to 2000. • His son, Bashar alAssad, succeeded him and remains in power. • The Assad family is part of a ruling elite made up of predominantly Alawites, an offshoot of Shi'i Islam, who make up an estimated 12% of the population. • Sunni Muslims comprise 75% of the Syrian population, while Christians make up about 10%. • Many Syrians oppose the Assad regime's brutal tactics in dealing with protests and opposition. 
<p>Iran</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Iranian government has long supported the Assad regime in Syria. • Iran, with a predominantly Shi'i population, is believed to have given the Assad regime military aid in the form of training, weapons, and intelligence sharing.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aiding Assad ensures an ally against Iran's regional rivals, Israel and Saudi Arabia.
<p>Kurds</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kurds are the world's largest ethnic group without a state. • Kurds make up sizable minorities in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. • Kurdish militias have served as key U.S. allies in the fight against ISIS. 
<p>Hezbollah</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An extremist Shia militia group based in Lebanon with historically close ties to the Iranian government and the Assad regime.
<p>ISIS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Various names for the same group that split off from al-Qaeda in Iraq. • ISIS aims to create an Islamic state. • Although it once controlled territory in Iraq and Syria, it has been pushed out of Iraq and controls a shrinking amount of territory in eastern Syria.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ISIS has recruited fighters from the region and from around the world. • It has been able to sustain operations through oil revenue, taxes, ransoms, and selling ancient artifacts from conquered territories. 
<p>Syrian opposition / rebels</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A variety of political groups and armed rebels – some with ties to extremists make up Syria’s opposition to the Assad regime. • Sharp disagreements and a lack of unity have made it difficult for coalitions to unite and gain international support.
<p>Gulf states</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early in the Syrian Civil War, many Gulf states (including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates) viewed support for the Syrian opposition as a way to reduce Iran’s influence in the region. • As the Syrian conflict has continued and instability grows in the Middle East, there is increased division among Gulf states about how to resolve the Syrian conflict.

<p>Jordan</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The lengthy conflicts in Syria and Iraq have had a tremendous impact on Jordan. • The more than 600,000 Syrian refugees who have fled to Jordan have severely stressed the country's resources.
<p>Turkey</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Turkey has been one of the main supporters of Syrian opposition forces. • As part of the U.S.-led coalition, Turkish President Erdogan supported airstrikes against ISIS targets. • Turkey opposes Kurdish gains in the region based on concerns that its own Kurdish minority will want more autonomy. • Turkey has taken in an estimated 3.5 million Syrian refugees.
<p>United States</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After the Assad regime used chemical weapons against Syrian civilians in 2013, the Obama administration threatened military force. • Instead, UN Security Council Resolution 2118 authorized the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to establish procedures for the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons. • In 2014, the Obama administration led an international coalition fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq. • The United States provided air support, special forces support, and weapons to Syrian rebels and Kurdish forces fighting ISIS.



	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The United States largely avoided direct conflict with Syrian forces, but President Trump ordered airstrikes against Syrian air bases (April 2017) and suspected chemical weapons research and storage facilities (April 2018) in response to alleged chemical weapons attacks against Syrian civilians.
<p>Russia</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Russia has strong historical ties to the Assad regime.• The Russian government has provided Assad’s government with troops, air support, weapons, training, and diplomatic support at the UN and in peace talks.• Russia has an air base and navy base in Syria.• Russia brokered a deal in 2013 to aid Syria in removing its chemical weapons stockpile under UN Security Council Resolution 2118.• Russia intervened in Syria in October 2015 with the stated goal of targeting ISIS, but the United States claims that Russian forces have instead targeted non-ISIS rebel forces fighting the Assad regime. 


15. Why have peace talks failed?



- Many peace negotiations have taken place over the years, but they have failed.

Peace talk	Analysis
<p>2012: The first peace talks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The United Nations held the first peace talks in 2012 in Geneva. • A transition period which would result in Assad's removal was discussed, but in 2015 Assad began consolidating his position with Russia and Iran's backing.

	
<p>2016: A second attempt in Astana</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2016 there was a second attempt at peace talks in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. • ‘De-escalation zones’ were agreed upon, which temporarily reduced the violence. • Eventually, it failed when the Syrian regime continued airstrikes in the de-escalation areas. 
<p>2018: New talks in Sochi</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two years later in January 2018, Russia sponsored new talks in Sochi.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Sochi talks were called by Russia's president, Vladimir V. Putin, with the stated goal of breaking a longstanding impasse in negotiations to end the seven-year civil war. • But the Syrian opposition refused to take part in the meeting because Assad's removal from power was not a precondition for the talks. 
<p>2020: A ceasefire</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2020 Russia and Turkey brokered a ceasefire which reduced the intensity of fighting. • Since then, news of the conflict has rarely made the headlines. • But while international interest may have waned, the fighting continues and millions of displaced Syrians face brutal winters, floods that wash away shelters, and financial issues

16. Highlight the refugee crisis in Syria due to the civil war?



- Experts estimate that **13.1 million Syrians** need humanitarian assistance, such as medicine or food.
- **Nearly 3 million** of these people live in hard-to-reach areas.
- **More than 5.6 million refugees** have fled the country, and another **6.1 million** are displaced within Syria.
- **Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan** are credited with hosting the most Syrian refugees.
- The **majority of Syrian refugees** have stayed in the **Middle East**.
- Syria's neighbours, **Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey** are hosting over **90% of the refugees**.
- Other families have fled to neighbouring Iraq, Egypt or North Africa.



17. What is the history of India-Syria relations?



- **In 1957, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru** made a pit stop at the Syrian capital **Damascus**, on his way to the **United States**.
- **India and Syria had established diplomatic relations seven years earlier**, and to mark that friendship, a street in **Damascus' historic Ummayad Square** was named '**Jawaharlal Nehru Street**'.

Aspects of relation	Analysis
Shared Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syria, under the Assad family first Hafez al-Assad and later Bashar al-Assad has consistently supported India on critical issues, particularly regarding Kashmir. • While many Islamic nations rallied around Pakistan's stance on Kashmir, Syria was one of the few countries that stood apart, often voicing its support for India's sovereignty. • The Assads' secular governance aligned with India's own principles, creating a strong foundation for collaboration. • Syria has historically been an important member of the Nehru-championed Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). • Even after India revoked Article 370 in 2019, which granted Jammu and Kashmir special autonomy, the Syrian government unequivocally described it as India's "internal matter".



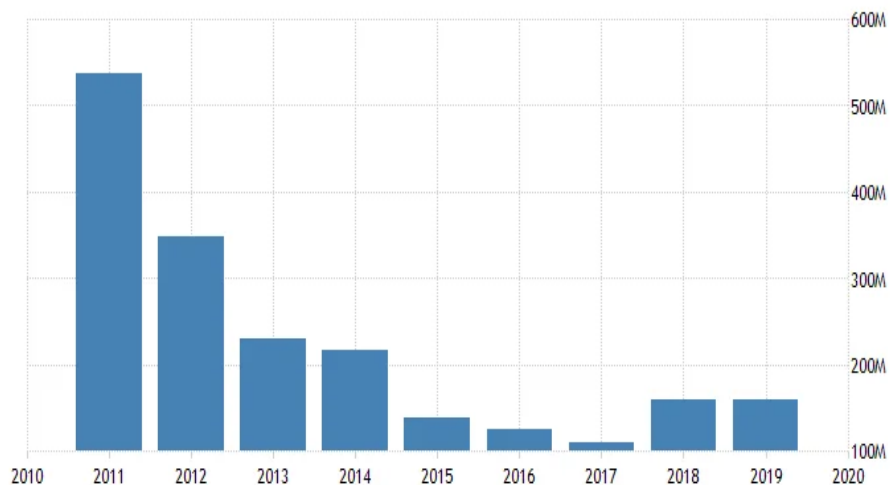
**India's
Diplomatic
Stance**

- **India has consistently championed a Syrian-led resolution to the conflict in accordance with the United Nations Security Council.**
- **India has maintained its embassy in Damascus, even during the peak of Syria's civil war.**
- **New Delhi has historically supported Syria's claims over the Golan Heights - contested by Israel.**
- **In 2010, former President Pratibha Patil visited Damascus and reiterated that stance.**



Economic And Cultural Ties

- Beyond **diplomacy, economic and cultural exchanges** have been a **cornerstone of India-Syria relations**.
- In **2003, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee** visited Syria and signed **MoUs on biotechnology, small industries, and education**.
- **India provided a \$25 million line of credit and a \$1 million grant** for a **biotechnology centre in Damascus**.
- In **2008, Bashar al-Assad** visited India, where he endorsed **plans for agricultural cooperation and studies** on Syria's **phosphate resources**.
- India offered to **establish an IT Center of Excellence in Syria**.
- Indian **exports to Syria** have included **textiles, machinery, and pharmaceuticals**, while imports have focused on **raw materials such as rock phosphate and cotton**.
- According to resources, **exports to Syria from India stood at a revenue of more than \$159 Million by the year 2020**.



Countering Pakistan'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For India, maintaining stable relations with Syria and other key players in the Middle East has also been crucial in countering Pakistan's narratives within these Muslim-majority nations.
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18. What did Assad's fall mean for India?

- From **Syria's support for India on the Kashmir issue to Delhi's backing of Syria's claim over the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights**, Delhi and Damascus have been partners.
- The **fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime** could have far-reaching implications for India.

Aspects	Implications
Bilateral relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • India's engagement with Syria has been a part of its broader strategy to enhance its presence and influence in the Middle East. • In return for Syria's support on issues like Kashmir, India has provided significant development and humanitarian assistance. • Most importantly, India has supported "Syria's legitimate right to regain the occupied Golan Heights". • India sent humanitarian aid to Syria following a deadly earthquake in February 2023 as part of Operation Dost (friend).



- At the United Nations, **India has also refused to support sanctions against Syria.**
- Now as a new regime is set to take a seat in Syria, **it would be worth noting if the 'give and take' continues for mutual benefit.**

Rise in terrorism

- The **fall of Syria's Bashar-al-Assad** has increased worries for Indian agencies who warn that **Islamic State (IS)'s** presence in India may get a **boost and reignite the Kashmir issue.**
- The **Islamic State** may look for **Indian youth for recruitment for more activities.**
- **ISIS** may try to **interfere in the Kashmir issue again with the fall of Assad.**
- According to various reports and estimates, around **100-150 Indians** are believed to have travelled to **Syria and Iraq to join the terror organisation.**
- Some notable cases of Indians joining IS in Syria include:
 - **Areeb Majeed:** A 23-year-old engineering student from Mumbai who joined IS in 2014.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fahad Tanvir Sheikh: A 27-year-old from Thane, Maharashtra, who joined IS in 2014. ▪ Saheem Tanvir Farooqi: A 27-year-old from Thane, Maharashtra, who joined IS in 2014. 
<p>India's investment in syria</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • India, for decades, has been investing in Syria's infrastructure and development, aiming to strengthen bilateral ties and leverage Syria's geostrategic location. • India has two significant investments in Syria's oil sector and has extended a USD 240 million Line of Credit for a thermal project. • In 2004, an agreement between ONGC and IPR International for oil and natural gas exploration, and another joint investment by ONGC and China's CNPC to acquire a 37% stake in a Canadian firm operating in Syria. • The USD 240 million Line of Credit was for the Tishreen Thermal Power Plant project. • India has also supported capacity building for Syrian youth.

- Under India's 'Study in India' programme, 1,500 seats were offered to Syrian students for UG, Master and PhD programmes in four phases from 2017 to 2018.



- In trade terms, **bilateral trade** between the two nations was over **USD 100 million from 2020 to 2023**.
- **Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL)**, an **Indian State-owned company**, was awarded a **485 million US dollars contract in 2008** to supply **400 megawatts (MW)** to the **Tishreen power plant near Damascus**.
- The power supply project was partially funded by **the Export-Import Bank of India**, which provided a **soft loan of 240 million US dollars** and released the **first payment of 100 million US dollars in 2010**.
- **Syria or an international financial institution** was expected to cover the remaining **245 million US dollars**.

19. Will Assad's fall hurt India on the Kashmir issue?

- **Falling of the Bashar-al Assad regime in Syria may come as a setback for India, especially on the Kashmir issue.**
- **The Syrian President and his late father had backed India's position on Kashmir for decades.**
- **Unlike other Islamic nations that have backed Pakistan on the Kashmir question, Syria has been steadfast in its support of India, asserting that India has a right to resolve the Kashmir issue in "any manner" and "without external assistance."**
- **Syria had limited ties with Pakistan and supported India's stance on multilateral platforms.**
- **Syria described India's revocation of Article 370 as India's internal matter.**
- **India will be worried about the position that the post-Assad dispensation will take on Kashmir.**
- **The HTS is backed by Turkiye, which is close to Pakistan and If the new regime comprises the HTS it may not take India's side on India-Pakistan issues.**
- **The HTS' victory over the Russia and Iran-backed Assad could similarly boost Islamist militants not just in the immediate region but beyond in South Asia.**
- **Already Jammu and Kashmir is witnessing a surge in militancy.**

20. What is India's take on the Syrian crisis?



- A day after rebel forces overthrew President Bashar Assad's authoritarian government in Syria, **India on Dec 09 2024** joined leading nations to call for **stability and preserve the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Arab nation.**
- **The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)** said it is monitoring the **unfolding developments in Syria** and advocated a **peaceful and inclusive Syrian-led political process** going forward in that country.
- The MEA said the **Indian embassy in Damascus** is in contact with the **Indian community in Syria** for their "**safety and security**".
- According to official data, **there are about 90 Indian nationals in Syria, including 14 who are working in various UN organisations.**
- In an advisory issued on Friday, the **Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)** asked **Indian citizens to avoid travelling to Syria.**
- The **ministry also asked Indians currently residing in Syria** to remain in touch with the **Indian embassy in Damascus.**

21. What is the relevance of the topic for UPSC CSE?

- **For Prelims:** Syria crisis, Middle east, Arab league Al-Aqsa Mosque, Israel, UNSC.
- **For Mains:** Impact of the ongoing Syria crisis conflict on the stability of the Middle East region.

Some previous years prelims questions.

Q1. Consider the following pairs: (2018)

Towns	Country
1. Aleppo	Syria
2. Kirkuk	Yemen
3. Mosul	Palestine
4. Mazar-i-sharif	Afghanistan

Which of the pairs given above are correctly matched?

- (a) 1 and 2
- (b) 1 and 4
- (c) 2 and 3
- (d) 3 and 4

Ans: (b)

Q2. The Yom Kippur War was fought between which sides/ countries?
(2008)

- (a) Turkey and Greece
- (b) Serbs and Croats
- (c) Israel, and Arab countries led by Egypt and Syria
- (d) Iran and Iraq

Ans: (c)

Q3. Which one of the following countries of South-West Asia does not open out to the Mediterranean Sea? (2015)

- (a) Syria
- (b) Jordan
- (c) Lebanon
- (d) Israel

Ans: (b)

Q4. The area known as ‘Golan Heights’ sometimes appears in the news in the context of the events related to (2015)

- (a) Central Asia
- (b) Middle East
- (c) South-East Asia
- (d) Central Africa

Ans: (b)

Some previous years mains questions.

Q1. The Indian diaspora has scaled new heights in the West. Describe its economic and political benefits for India. [10 Marks] [2023]

Some questions from this year and previous years interview transcripts.

Board Sanjay Verma Sir:

- What is the reason for the involvement of so many countries in Syria?

Board BB Swain sir:

- Whether the regionalisation of the Israel-Hamas war has started.
- Where did Iran conduct airstrikes yesterday?

Board RN Choubey sir:

- Tell me something about Human right violation in Afghanistan Iran and Syria

Some questions for QUIZ.

Q1. Consider the following Countries:

1. Turkey
2. Iraq
3. Jordan
4. Lebanon
5. Israel

How many of the above countries border Syria?

- (a) Only two
- (b) Only three
- (c) Only four
- (d) All five

Ans: (d)

Some questions for POLL.

Q1. Can recent Syrian development impact Israel-Hezbollah peace deal?

- (a) YES
- (b) NO
- (c) Can't say.

Q2. Should India be concerned about power change in Syria?

- (a) YES
- (b) NO
- (c) Can't say.

