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Source: Indian Express.

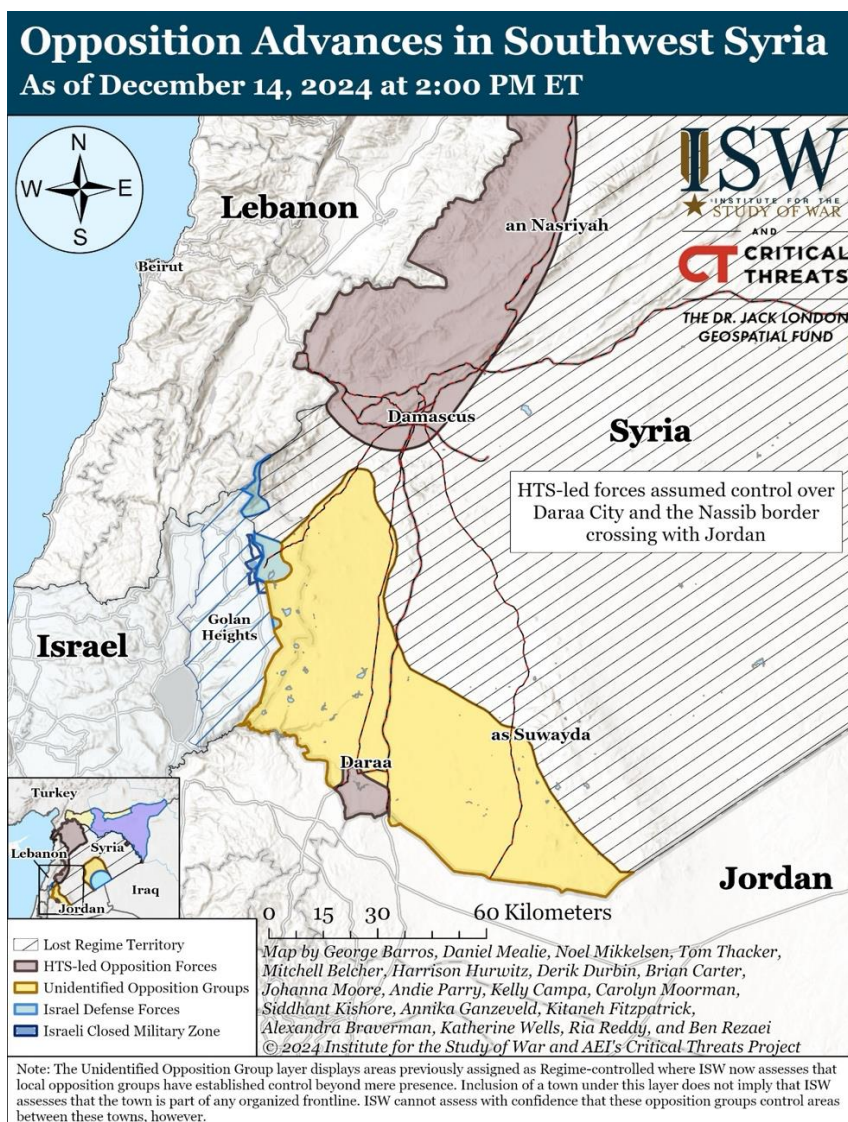
What will Syria look like?

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On the 8th of December 2024, following an eleven-day military offensive, the coalition of Syrian rebel groups led by Hay' at Tah'rīr al-Shām (HTS) seized power in Damascus. Bashar al-Assad's flight from Syria ended five decades of dictatorial rule, certainly representing an epochal event in Syrian history. Moreover, a 13-year-long imaginary line starts from the first uprisings in 2011 in Daraa and reaches the present day is drawn by HTS's entry into Damascus. Albeit sudden, the fall of al-Assad's regime was certainly not unexpected: alongside the traditional shortcomings and problems of the Syrian regular army, during 2024 the new regional and international dynamics have led to a progressive reduction in the support given to the government front by strategic allies, Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, above all. Moreover, in parallel with the weakening of the government front, there has been a strengthening of the military capabilities of the ex-rebel factions over the past year.

The future of Syria is still very uncertain, marked by the uncomfortable past of HTS, its leader, and the other groups that participated in the offensive against Damascus, as well as by the many fault lines that exist within Syrian society and even in the very rebel structure that now controls Syria.



Source: ISW and CT.

Ahmad al-Sharaa, also known by his war name Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, the leader of HTS, is a former member of al-Qaeda and founder in 2012 of the al-Nusra Front in Syria. Al-Jolani cut ties with the organization founded by Osa bin Laden and with transnational jihadism only in 2016, got rid of the most radical elements within his group and in 2017 merged the al-Nusra Front with other organizations, creating HTS. Al-Jolani's first decisions and statements immediately after entering Damascus seem to confirm a moderate approach and openness to dialogue and negotiation: firstly, al-Jolani resumed his civilian name, renouncing his fighter name; secondly, he has made numerous inclusive statements in favour of minorities, in particular Christian and Druze, and even in favour of former affiliates of the Alawite al-Assad regime, referring to a tolerant, inclusive and non-violent Islam, very different from that professed by international jihadist groups; thirdly, he chose, in the very first hours after his arrival in Damascus, to confirm the position of Mohammad Ghazi al-Jalali, former Prime Minister under al-Assad, intending to proceed with an adequate transfer of power to the new leadership; finally, it granted amnesty for all conscripts and reservists of the Syrian army, with the sole exception of those whose participation in the abuses will be unequivocally proven.

Despite these initial decisions, there is still a concern that the signs of openness and tolerance shown by HTS are only the *Veil of Maya* behind which those original tendencies that look to a radical version of Islam are hidden. This is similar to what happened, for example, with the Taliban before their return to Kabul. Al-Jolani's media strategy speaks to the West in an attempt to reassure the international community, accredit the new Syrian government and erase that particularly cumbersome history in the ranks of international jihadism. After all, the presence of HTS in many of the international terrorist blacklists, from the United Nations to many Western countries, is there to remind us exactly this past. The same experience of government that HTS has carried out in Idlib since 2019, despite some openings towards minorities, underlines the possible distortions of this preached moderation: the regime imposed was an authoritarian regime in which sharia was applied. In addition to these elements of uncertainty, there are certain incidents that transpired during the days following the fall of the al-Assad regime, particularly in the province of Hama. Although not directly attributed to HTS, there would have been, summary executions, looting, and violence against civilians belonging to certain religious minorities. Even if HTS truly intends to pursue a path of religious moderation and inclusivity, as publicly stated thus far, it may not be capable to controlling all the numerous Sunni rebel groups and the diverse souls that exist within the former anti-government front and Syrian society itself. The potential inability of HTS to contain violent outbursts by other groups operating on Syrian territory could jeopardize the fragile trust that religious minorities have demonstrated so far in al-Jolani and his professed inclusive and moderate approach, thereby leading to a growing fragmentation of Syria.

On the other hand, the HTS is the most potent faction within the unified command that spearheaded the offensive against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. However, the coalition is comprised of numerous other factions that differ greatly from one another in terms of ideology, approach, leadership and even external sponsors. Although all of these differences have so far been cushioned by the need to fight a common enemy and by HTS's ability to curb competition, the existence of a multitude of different approaches and ideologies could re-emerge in a violent form now that it is a matter of governing the entire country and deciding what the future of Syria should be. Al-Jolani's decision to appoint Mohammed al-Bashir, his right-hand man and former mayor of Idlib, as interim Prime Minister for the transition, has raised some discontent among the rebel groups that have taken power in Damascus as HTS proceeded with the appointment from its ranks and without any consultation.

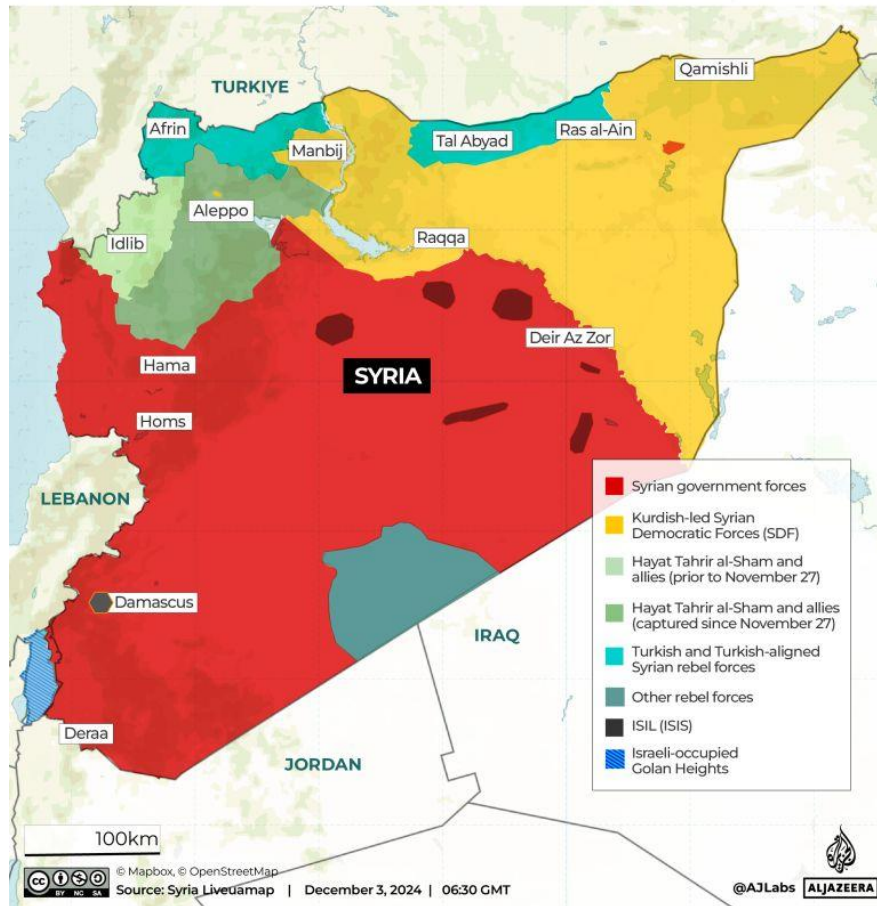
Therefore, there are many potential levels of conflict, although latent presently. For this reason, it is not possible to exclude the hypothesis of a scenario similar to the Libyan one, in which each group, militia, and centre of power would end up governing a specific area in the absence of a centralized power having the legitimate monopoly of force and the ability to control the entire national territory. In Syria the variable deriving from the complex religious situation would then be added to the Libyan model, which could lead to a new and violent civil confrontation on a confessional basis.

In addition, there are many other factors of varying magnitudes that will undoubtedly impact the future development of the Syrian situation. First of all, it will be important to assess how HTS and its affiliates will interact with the Kurdish-majority militias that control about 40% of the territory.

MIDDLE EAST

Who controls what in Syria?

Syrian and Russian jets have intensified air attacks in Idlib city and positions in Aleppo as the government of President Bashar al-Assad tries to slow the advance of opposition fighters who launched a surprise offensive last week.

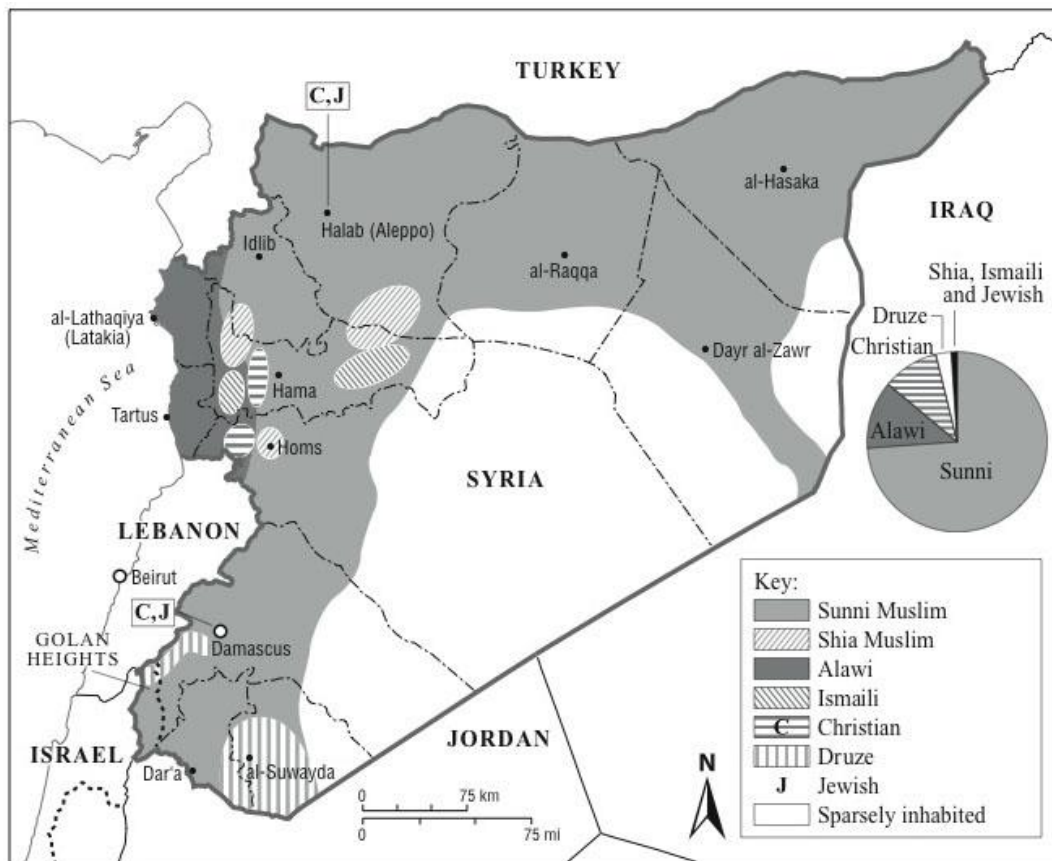


Source: al Jazeera.

Secondly, we must consider the role played by external actors, including Russia, Iran, Turkey and Israel, as well as Western countries, which have influenced in varying degrees the developments of the Syrian situation over the past 14 years.

Thirdly, it is imperative to draw attention to Syria's future military capabilities and, consequently, to the raids that Israel is conducting with the aim of destroying Syria's military arsenal before it can fall into the hands of terrorist groups. Although Israel's fears are understandable, the total destruction of Syria's military capabilities will render any government in power in Damascus completely unable to defend itself against any possible threat. Without a central army capable of controlling the territory and without the means to do so, a vacuum could be created right in the heart of the Middle East region, in the very country that, like Iraq, was the cradle of IS and whose supporters and affiliates are still present in large numbers.

Finally, the deteriorating economic situation may gradually result in an escalation of internal insurrection, including violent ones. After 14 years of war, the Syrian economy has been devastated, the infrastructure is now non-existent and the population is largely living in a state of absolute poverty. Furthermore, a possible return of Syrians now abroad could exacerbate the situation. It will be very difficult for the new Damascene government to attempt to revive the economy and attract foreign investment under the sanctions; and it is also hard to imagine the cancellation of the sanctions' regime as long as HTS remains on the lists as a terrorist group.



Source: Heritage for Peace. Religious distribution.

It is too early to draw conclusions with respect to the developments of the Syrian situation. Once again, history shows a period of fragmentation and reorganization with uncertain outlines begins starts after the “revolutionaries” beat the dictatorship. The al-Assad regime has ended after fifty years in power, but there are still countless uncertainties about what “liberated” Syria will look like in the future.