

Research Briefing

13 December 2024

By Philip Loft,  
Claire Mills (Russia)

# Syria after Assad: Consequences and next steps in 2024/25



## Summary

- 1 Fall of Assad, December 2024
- 2 Leading domestic actors in Syria
- 3 What does Assad's fall mean for Iran, Turkey, Russia, and Israel?
- 4 What is the process for a political settlement?
- 5 Islamic State/Daesh

Number

### Image Credits

European Space Agency, The Middle East as seen by Envisat/CC BY-SA 3.0

### Disclaimer

The Commons Library does not intend the information in our research publications and briefings to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. We have published it to support the work of MPs. You should not rely upon it as legal or professional advice, or as a substitute for it. We do not accept any liability whatsoever for any errors, omissions or misstatements contained herein. You should consult a suitably qualified professional if you require specific advice or information. Read our briefing [‘Legal help: where to go and how to pay’](#) for further information about sources of legal advice and help. This information is provided subject to the conditions of the Open Parliament Licence.

### Sources and subscriptions for MPs and staff

We try to use sources in our research that everyone can access, but sometimes only information that exists behind a paywall or via a subscription is available. We provide access to many online subscriptions to MPs and parliamentary staff, please contact [hoclibraryonline@parliament.uk](mailto:hoclibraryonline@parliament.uk) or visit [commonslibrary.parliament.uk/resources](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/resources) for more information.

### Feedback

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email [papers@parliament.uk](mailto:papers@parliament.uk). Please note that authors are not always able to engage in discussions with members of the public who express opinions about the content of our research, although we will carefully consider and correct any factual errors.

You can read our feedback and complaints policy and our editorial policy at [commonslibrary.parliament.uk](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk). If you have general questions about the work of the House of Commons email [hcenquiries@parliament.uk](mailto:hcenquiries@parliament.uk).

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Fall of Assad, December 2024</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1	Background: The Syrian civil war, from 2011	7
1.2	Fall of Assad, November/December 2024	9
1.3	What is the humanitarian situation?	10
1.4	What is the status of Syrian refugees?	11
<b>2</b>	<b>Leading domestic actors in Syria</b>	<b>13</b>
2.1	Areas of control and ongoing conflict	13
2.2	Hayat Tahrir al-Sha (HTS)	16
2.3	What is UN, US, EU and UK policy on HTS?	18
2.4	The Syrian National Army and Turkey	19
2.5	Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces	20
<b>3</b>	<b>What does Assad's fall mean for Iran, Turkey, Russia, and Israel?</b>	<b>22</b>
3.1	Iran and Hezbollah	23
3.2	Russia	24
3.3	Turkey	26
3.4	Israel and the occupied Golan Heights	28
<b>4</b>	<b>What is the process for a political settlement?</b>	<b>31</b>
4.1	Forming a transitional government in Syria	31
4.2	Will the UK, US, EU work with HTS?	33
4.3	UN Security Council Resolution	34
<b>5</b>	<b>Islamic State/Daesh</b>	<b>37</b>
5.1	How strong is Islamic State?	37
5.2	What is the position of the US forces?	37
5.3	What is happening to the coalition to combat Islamic State?	38

## Summary

In December 2024, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that President Bashar al-Assad, who had governed Syria since 2000, had resigned and [he had been offered asylum in Russia](#). Russian media say [he is now in the country](#).

The announcement follows the [rapid collapse of the Assad government's military forces](#) in Syria in the wake of an offensive from [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS) and [other opposition groups](#), including the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), that was launched in November 2024 and culminated in the capture of Damascus in early December.

What happens next in Syria and the region is uncertain. [HTS has announced a transitional government](#) and a [general amnesty](#) for those conscripted into the Assad forces. Opposition groups continue to vie for territorial control, with HTS and SNA taking areas controlled by the US-backed Kurdish led Syrian Democratic forces (SDF), including [important oil fields](#). HTS is [proscribed as a terrorist organisation](#) by the [UN](#), US, EU, [UK](#) and others.

In December 2024 Israel has conducted [military actions targeting Syrian military assets](#) and chemical weapons facilities previously held by the Assad government and says it has temporarily occupied the [Syria-Israel buffer zone](#).

This research briefing addresses questions over UN peace negotiations for Syria; the key local and international actors in Syria; the status of Syria's chemical weapons; the significance of Assad's fall to his allies in Russia, Hezbollah, and Iran; the situation for Israel and the United States; and the strength of Islamic State/Daesh. It also sets out UK and US statements.

The Commons Library research briefing, [Syrian civil war: timeline, UK aid and statistics](#), has a timeline of events in Syria since 2011, and describes the humanitarian situation, UK aid to Syria, and further resources on the conflict.

## What is the situation in Syria?

Bashar al-Assad has left Syria, and, according to the Russian Foreign Minister, [he has resigned the presidency](#). Several armed groups in Syria now wield control. Assad, HTS, SNA and SDF have all been accused of [human rights violations](#) during the conflict.

Humanitarian need in Syria remains high, with an [estimated 16.7 million people in need, the highest since 2011](#). Food inflation has been high and Assad government subsidies for food and fuel had also been reduced. There has

been [extensive damage to Syrian infrastructure](#), including schools, roads and hospitals. Syria's neighbours have also been seeking the [return of refugees](#).

The Assad-appointed Prime Minister remained in the Syrian capital, Damascus, and on 10 December handed over control to an administration [led by past leaders of the HTS administration in Idlib](#), where HTS was based. The administration says it will remain in place until 1 March 2025.

The Syrian opposition is not united and [the country remains divided](#). HTS and the SNA have also taken territory from the SDF in December 2024. Russian military bases [remain in coastal areas of Syria](#), Israeli forces have a presence in southern Syria, and US forces remain in the Syrian northeast.

## What are international attitudes towards HTS?

HTS has [its origins in Al-Qaeda](#) although it says it broke from the group in 2016. Its leader [Abu Mohammed al-Jolani](#) (whose real name is Ahmed al-Sharaa) participated in the insurgency against US and UK coalition forces in Iraq in the 2000s.

The [UN Security Council](#), [UK](#), [US](#), [EU](#), and others consider it a terrorist group. All have said they will [judge HTS by its actions](#), not words and [they want it to protect civilians](#), all minority groups and implement a peaceful transition of power. In December 2024, Prime Minister Keir Starmer said [it was "too early" to reconsider its proscription](#) as a terrorist organisation in the UK.

## What role do Turkey and Israel have?

While Assad has fallen, some conflict and military activity is ongoing. In addition to US airstrikes against Islamic State/Daesh (see below), Israel and Turkey are two external actors continuing to be militarily active in Syria:

- The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) have moved from the [occupied Golan Heights](#) to occupy a UN buffer zone. It says this is a [temporary move to pre-empt possible attacks](#) and reflects the withdrawal of Assad government forces from the zone. The IDF has also carried out around [350 strikes against chemical weapons and military facilities](#) in Syria since the fall of Assad. Israel did not previously target Assad forces in Syria – it has [attacked Iranian and Hezbollah forces in Syria since 2013](#), however.
- Turkey continues to back the SNA, who launched operations against the SDF in November ([Turkey has been launching such attacks since 2016](#)). Turkey argues the SDF has links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), who have been waging [an insurgency in Turkey](#) and are considered a terrorist organisation by the EU and UK, among others.

## What does Assad's fall mean for the region?

Analysts judge Turkey, which backed the opposition, as the [most likely beneficiary of Assad's fall](#). Turkey had been in failed negotiations with Assad to normalise relations in 2023 and 2024, with the [aim of returning Syrian refugees](#) from Turkey. [Turkey hosts around 2.9 million Syrian refugees](#).

To Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, the fall of Assad marks [a strategic defeat for Iran's "axis of resistance"](#). This is a [network of armed and terrorist groups](#) Iran has developed, including Iraqi militias, Assad in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza and the Houthis in Yemen, to threaten Israel and others. The loss of Assad cuts a significant land route from Iran to Lebanon and follows the weakening of Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran as military forces in their [conflicts with Israel in 2023/24](#).

Russia was also a significant backer of President Assad, and its [military bases in Syria](#) were thought to have allowed it to project power across the Mediterranean and the Middle East and North Africa. The [future of these bases is now uncertain](#).

The consequences for Israel are also uncertain. There was no direct conflict between Bashar al-Assad and Israel, but the two countries have never signed a peace agreement and [fought significant conflicts from 1948 onwards](#).

## How strong is Islamic State/Daesh?

[Islamic State lost its last territory in Syria in 2019](#). However, the US warned the group has claimed [double the number of attacks in Syria](#) in 2024 as in 2023 and [may seek to take advantage of Assad's fall](#).

The [US has 900 troops in Syria](#), most of which are based in the north east alongside the SDF. [It intends for these troops to remain](#) to ensure the defeat of Islamic State. The SDF holds [several thousand Islamic State fighters in detention](#), as well as hosting several camps of their family members.

## What is the status of political negotiations?

The [US](#), [UK](#), [European Union](#) and UN have called for political negotiations under [UN Security Council Resolution \(UNSCR\) 2254 \(2015\)](#) (PDF). This calls for a new Syrian constitution to be negotiated and free and fair elections held.

In recent years, most negotiations have taken place under the [Astana process](#), between Iran, Turkey and Russia. These did not agree a political settlement. In December 2024, Astana process countries, as well as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and Qatar called for [talks under UNSCR 2254](#).

# 1 Fall of Assad, December 2024

In December 2024 Bashar al-Assad resigned the Syrian presidency, thirteen years since the first protests began in 2011 against his rule. This ended over 50 years of rule by the Assad family in Syria, who had taken power in 1971 under Bashar's father, Hafez al-Assad.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 Background: The Syrian civil war, from 2011<sup>2</sup>

### Timeline and statistics on the conflict

The Commons Library research briefing [Syrian civil war: timeline, UK aid and statistics](#), December 2024, includes a timeline of events from 2011 to 2024.

Estimates vary, but between 350,000 and 606,000 people are estimated to have been killed in Syrian civil war since 2011. [The Assad government also deployed chemical weapons](#), and [Islamic State/Daesh](#) rose to capture significant territory in both Iraq and Syria before losing its final Syrian territory in 2019.

Six foreign actors were involved militarily: Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia in support of Assad; the US against Islamic State and in support of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces; Turkey in support of the Syrian National Army (both Turkey and the US acting in opposition to Assad); and Israel, targeting Hezbollah and Iranian forces.

In addition, the UK and France conducted airstrikes in 2019 against chemical weapons facilities used by Assad forces. In 2013, the House of Commons had voted against military action in response to the alleged use of chemical weapons.

The military intervention of Russia in 2015 was widely seen as a turning point, allowing Assad forces to expel the opposition from Syria's second city, Aleppo. Most observers increasingly considered that Assad would hold onto power and Syria would become [one of many "frozen conflicts" worldwide](#), with little change in military control. By 2020, Assad forces held around 60%

<sup>1</sup> Brookings Institute, [Assessing a half-century of Assadist rule](#), December 2020; Chatham House, [Syria's transactional state](#), April 2024

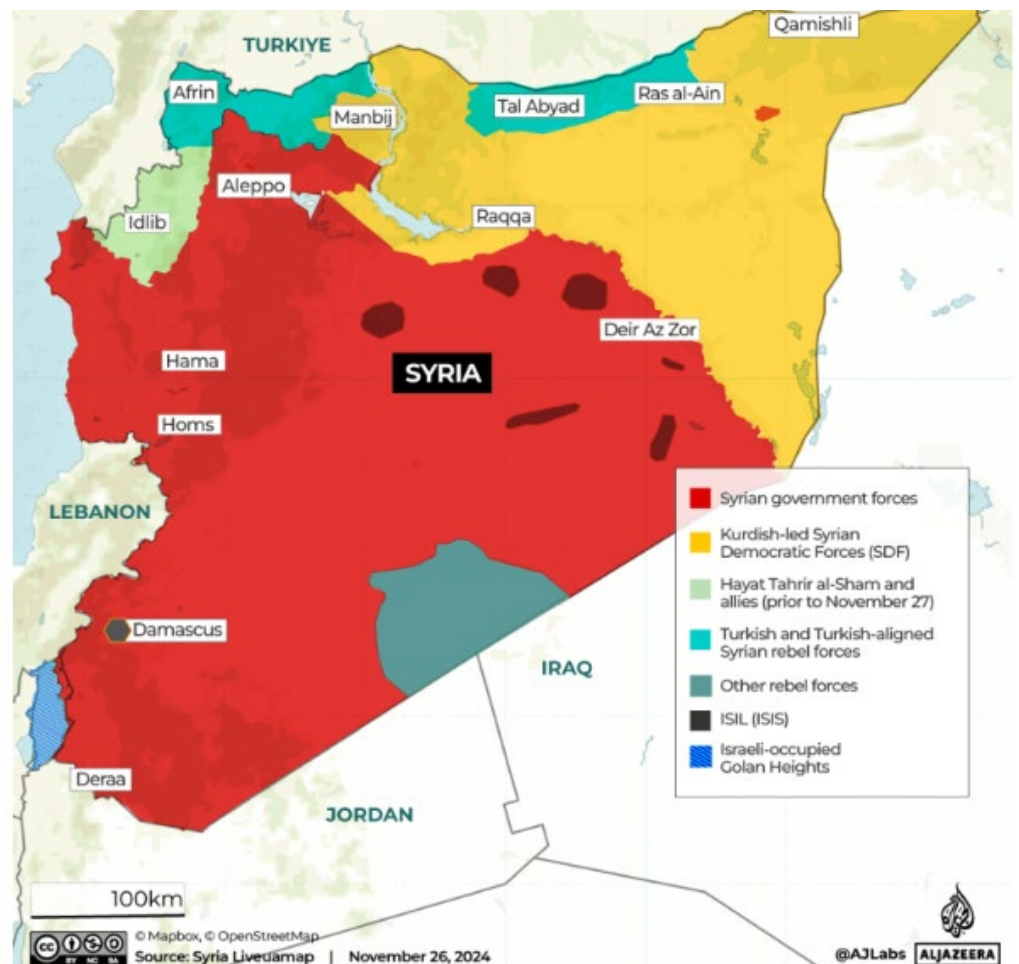
<sup>2</sup> This section sourced from Commons Library research briefing, [Syrian civil war: timeline, UK aid and statistics](#). See also [Syria back in the Arab League](#), for information on the six foreign actors.

to 70% of Syrian territory and, despite continued violence and fighting, there was little significant change in zones of control again until 2024.

International attitudes to Assad also changed, and regional powers increasingly reached out to his government in the 2020s when he appeared likely to remain in power. Having been suspended from the [Arab League](#) in 2012 (the league consists of Arab states in the Middle East and North Africa), Assad was invited to rejoin in 2023. The significance of this was limited by continuing US sanctions under the [Caesar Syria Protection Act](#), which sanctions Assad government officials, the economy (including the oil and construction sectors) and non-Syrian entities that did business with Assad.<sup>3</sup> The legislation is due to expire in December 2024, unless renewed.<sup>4</sup>

## Zones of control in Syria, November 2024

The map below shows regional control in Syria before Assad's flight.



Note: Islamic State/Daesh (ISIS) has not held territory since 2019. Source: [The opposition's battles shown in 11 maps](#), Al-Jazeera, 8 December 2024. Image cropped. [CC-BY-SA](#).

<sup>3</sup> See Commons Library research briefing, [Assad back in the Arab League](#), June 2023, section 3.4

<sup>4</sup> US Department of State, [Press briefing](#), 9 December 2024; [US, UAF discussed lifting sanctions](#), Reuters, 2 December 2024



## 1.2

# Fall of Assad, November/December 2024

The collapse of the Assad government and military took place rapidly from 27 November to 8 December 2024.

His major allies are judged to be distracted or weakened by other conflicts; with Israel (in respect of Hezbollah and Iran in 2023/24) or with Ukraine (Russia, from 2022).<sup>5</sup>

Loyalty to the Assad government was also likely undermined by the continued weakness of the Syrian economy, which has experienced high inflation, including for food and household gas, the reduction in government subsidies for essential goods, and failure to lead significant reconstruction efforts to repair damage from the civil war.<sup>6</sup>

There had also been recurrent protests in southern Syria since 2023.<sup>7</sup>

## Timeline of opposition offensive

On 27 November 2024 Heyet Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, see section 2.2), one of the largest armed opposition groups in Syria (proscribed as a terrorist group by the UK Government), began an offensive from Idlib, in north-western Syria.<sup>8</sup>

On 29 November it began to enter Aleppo, Syria's second city, last held by opposition groups in 2016. Russian and Assad government forces responded with airstrikes and shelling in an attempt to stop the advance.

The Syrian National Army (SNA, see section 2.3), backed by Turkey and centred in northern Syria, also launched attacks. Some its attacks were focused on Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, see section 2.4), a Kurdish-led coalition group, elements of which the Turkish Government considers to be linked to terrorist groups in Turkey.<sup>9</sup>

On 5 December, HTS-led groups captured Hama, Syria's fourth largest city, around 125 miles north of Damascus.

On 6 December, the SDF said it captured the main crossing point with Iraq, near Deir city.

On 7 December, HTS-led groups captured Homs, the third-largest city, 100 miles north of Damascus. Homs is on a strategic route, linking the capital

---

<sup>5</sup> Engelsberg Ideas, [The Syrian war never really ended](#), 2 December 2024

<sup>6</sup> Middle East Institute, [Syria's economic freefall continues despite Arab League return](#), 16 August 2023

<sup>7</sup> Washington Institute, [A year of Suwayda protests](#), 16 August 2024

<sup>8</sup> Section 1.2 from [How it happened: Two seismic weeks that toppled Syrian government](#), AP, 8 December 2024; [A timeline of the stunning offensive \[...\]](#), Washington Post, 8 December 2024; [US-backed Syrian Kurds seize eastern city](#), Reuters, 6 December 2024

<sup>9</sup> [Rebel groups attack Kurdish-held areas](#), FT, 2 December 2024; [Kurds' dream of self-rule under threat as Turkish-backed forces sweep across Syria](#), France 24, 12 December 2024

Damascus with Russian military port facilities and airfields in Latakia and Tartous on the Mediterranean coast.

On the same day, local opposition forces in southern Syria captured Daraa, south of Damascus.

On 8 December, opposition forces entered the suburbs of Damascus. Syrian state media reported Assad left office. The HTS leader moved to the capital.

The number of casualties and civilians displaced from the offensive is uncertain. One estimate published by the UK-based Syrian Observatory of Human Rights was that over 571 people were killed, including combatants and civilians (to 3 December).<sup>10</sup> On 12 December the UN estimated that 1.1 million people had been displaced since 27 November due to conflict.<sup>11</sup>

### Further reading on Assad's collapse

- Carnegie Endowment, [Why did Iran allow Bashar al-Assad's downfall?](#), 11 December 2024
- Carnegie Endowment, [Anatomy of a military fall](#), 10 December 2024
- Financial Times, [Why Bashar al-Assad's regime crumbled](#), 9 December 2024
- France 24, [Why the Assad collapsed in Syria](#), 8 December 2024
- Foreign Policy, [How the world got Syria wrong](#), 8 December 2024
- Foreign Policy, [Why Assad's regime is collapsing so quickly](#), 5 December 2024

## 1.3

### What is the humanitarian situation?

The Commons Library research briefing, [The Syrian civil war: timeline, UK aid and statistics](#), December 2024 sets out the humanitarian situation in Syria and for Syrian refugees in the wider region.

The UN estimated around 16.7 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance in 2024, with the greatest numbers in what were opposition-controlled areas in the north of the country. The briefing also sets out UK aid commitments to Syria for 2024/25 and past years.

<sup>10</sup> Syrian Observatory on Human Rights, "[Deterrence of aggression](#)" calculation, 3 December 2024

<sup>11</sup> UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [Syria-flash update no 5](#), 12 December 2024

## Minority ethnic and religious groups in Syria

There are many minority ethnic and religious groups in Syria:

### Demographics

- Minority ethnic groups: Kurds constitute around 10% to 15% of the population (2 million). They are mostly concentrated in the north and northeast.
- Religious demographics: Sunni Muslims constitute 75% of the population, with Alawite Muslims (of which Assad was an adherent) 12%, other Muslims 2%, Christian denominations around 10% and Druze 3% to 4%.<sup>12</sup>

### Human rights reports

Human rights monitors have raised concerns about human rights violations by the Assad government and the major opposition groups now in control, including HTS, the SDF and SNA. See the below resources for the human rights situation:

- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), [The 2022 human rights and democracy report](#), July 2023
- US State Department, [Reports on human rights practices: Syria](#), 2024
- Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, [Human rights violations](#)
- Amnesty International, [Syria](#)
- Human Rights Watch, [Syria](#)

## 1.4

## What is the status of Syrian refugees?

In November 2024, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) recorded 4.8 million Syrian refugees and asylum seekers registered in the region, with the largest numbers in Turkey (2.9 million) and Lebanon (768,000).<sup>13</sup> Both Turkey and Lebanon have sought the return of Syria refugees, citing economic and other pressures. They reiterated these positions in 2024.<sup>14</sup> Many Syrian refugees in past surveys have expressed a desire to return, once conditions change.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Minority Rights Group, [Syria](#), updated June 2019

<sup>13</sup> UNHCR, [Response to displacement from Lebanon to Syria](#), 31 October 2024

<sup>14</sup> [Turkey to work for return of Syrian migrants to return home safely \[...\]](#), Reuters, 9 December 2024; [Syria refugees don't want to return, officials in Lebanon and Syria see exodus as opportunity](#), AP News, 9 November 2024

<sup>15</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, [Don't rush Syrian refugees return](#), 11 December 2024

There are also many Syrian refugees in Europe. Germany hosts the most, at around 1 million, followed by Austria, at 95,000. Since the fall of Assad, many European countries, including Germany, Austria, France, Greece, and the UK, have said they will pause processing asylum applications while they assess the situation. There are around 30,000 Syrian refugees in the UK.<sup>16</sup>

On 11 December, the Home Secretary Yvette Cooper told the Commons that:

many claims for asylum relate to the Assad regime, which is clearly not in place now. It would therefore not be appropriate to grant asylum decisions on those cases in the current circumstances. We need to monitor the evolving situation so that we can get new country guidance in place and take those decisions, but we will do that in a sensible and serious way, which is about getting the asylum and immigration systems back under control.<sup>17</sup>

UNHCR has said “the suspension of processing of asylum applications from Syrians is acceptable” in the context of conditions of December 2024, “as long as people can apply for asylum” and lodge asylum applications. The agency said Syrian refugees must be allowed to make voluntary decisions on whether to return.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> [Syrian asylum seekers in limbo \[...\]](#), BBC News, 9 December 2024

<sup>17</sup> HC Deb, [11 December 2024](#), c903

<sup>18</sup> UNHCR, [Comment on asylum processing suspension and returns](#), 10 December 2024

## 2 Leading domestic actors in Syria

This section looks at the key domestic actors in Syria, and UK, US, EU and UN policies on Hayat Tahrir al-Sha (HTS). Section 4 discusses the potential for a political transition from Assad's government to a new government.

### Further reading on domestic actors in Syria

- International Crisis Group, [Priorities after Assad's fall](#), 12 December 2024
- Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, [Domestic and regional impact of the political earthquake in Syria](#), 9 December 2024
- Royal United Services Institute, [Fall of Bashar al-Assad and Syria's unfinished business](#), 9 December 2024
- Italian Institute for International and Political Studies, [The end of Assad: a new chapter in Syrian history](#), 8 December 2024

### 2.1 Areas of control and ongoing conflict

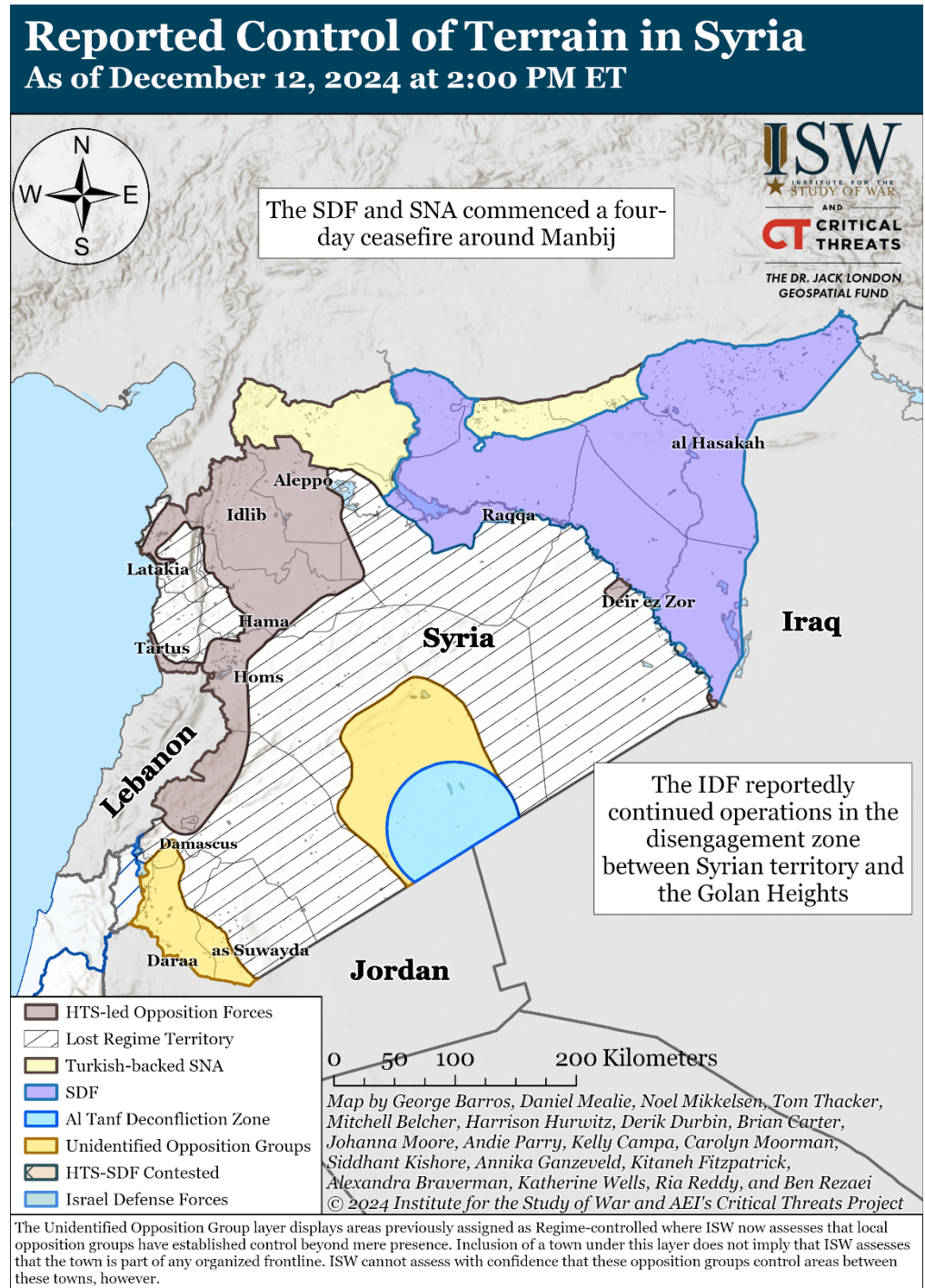
While the government of Assad has fallen, the Syrian opposition is not united, and the country continues to be divided between different armed groups. As of early December 2024, there are six main areas of control:

- Hayat Tahrir al-Sha (HTS), which led the November/December offensive. They now appear to control the largest area of territory. Since Assad's fall, they have taken control of some areas previously held by Kurdish groups.
- The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), focused in the north-east, where US troops also have a presence.
- The Syrian National Army (SNA), not the army of Assad but rather a coalition of Turkish-backed groups in the north of Syria. After Assad's fall, they continued to be in a state of conflict with the SDF.
- Unidentified opposition groups in areas south of Damascus.
- Israel Defence Forces in the south, centred on the occupied Golan Heights (see section 3.4 for Israeli action).

- Small areas of Russian control, near to its naval and air bases (see section 3.3 for Russian action)

It is unknown how far Assad government forces, Iran-backed militias, Lebanese Hezbollah, or other armed groups have a presence or coherence. Islamic State remains active but holds no territory (see section 5)

The below map shows areas of control, as of 12 December 2024.



Source: Institute for the Study of War, [Iran update](#), 13 December 2024. © Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project. See updated maps on the [Institute's website](#).

## What is the status of Syria's chemical weapons?

The government of Assad confirmed it had chemical weapons in 2012. There were reported and alleged chemical weapons attacks by Assad forces against the opposition in each year between 2013 and 2019. Some attacks were also perpetrated by non-Assad forces. The [Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons](#) (OPCW), which is the international body responsible for overseeing global efforts to eliminate chemical weapons, has confirmed the use of chemical weapons in several reports.<sup>19</sup>

In 2013, Syria joined the OPCW. This brought with it obligations to declare and remove all chemical weapons. In 2024, the OPCW continued to question whether they had been completely destroyed.<sup>20</sup>

On 5 December 2024 the UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Izumi Nakamitsu, said that Syria's destruction or conversion of "large quantities of chemical warfare agencies and munitions" could not be fully verified. Russia accused the representative of attempting to "taint Syria and its allies" and said Assad had been acting in "good faith".<sup>21</sup>

The UK Government said in the same meeting in December 2024 that "thousands of munitions and hundreds of tonnes of chemical agent remained unaccounted for" and these weapons represented an "unacceptable risk". It also said the perpetrators of the chemical attacks had to be held to account.<sup>22</sup> On 7 December, before Assad fell, the UK Government said the use of chemical weapons by Assad would be a "red line".<sup>23</sup>

The fall of Assad has led to a fear of proliferation of the weapons once held by his government.<sup>24</sup> Israel said in December it has launched some attacks targeting suspected chemical weapons facilities (see below, section 3.4). The US and OPCW say they are working with partners to identify and remove chemical and biological weapons.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Arms Control Association, [Timeline of Syrian chemical weapons activity, 2012 to 2022](#), October 2023; Independent International Commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, [14<sup>th</sup> report of the Commission of Inquiry, A/HRC/36/55](#), 6 September 2017, para 67

<sup>20</sup> OPCW, [Syria and the OPCW](#), accessed 11 December 2024

<sup>21</sup> UN, [Syria's declaration on chemical weapons programme "cannot be considered accurate" \[...\]](#), 4 December 2024

<sup>22</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), [No matter how long it takes \[...\]](#), 5 December 2024

<sup>23</sup> [UK would take appropriate action if Syria crosses "red line" \[...\]](#), BBC News, 7 December 2024

<sup>24</sup> [Assad's fall brings "the moment" to rid Syria of chemical weapons](#), Reuters, 9 December 2024; [Syria's president has stocks of chemical weapons. What happens to them now?](#), New York Times, 9 December 2024

<sup>25</sup> [US aims to secure or destroy Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles](#), The Times, 9 December 2024

## 2.2

## Hayat Tahrir al-Sha (HTS)

### Who are Hayat Tahrir al-Sha?

Hayat Tahrir al-Sha (HTS, or the “Organization for the Liberation of the Levant”), has been the major opposition group in Idlib province, in north-western Syria, since the late 2010s. HTS has its origins in Al-Qaeda, being founded as Jabhat al-Nusra in 2011, before becoming Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in 2016 and merging with other groups in 2017 to form HTS.<sup>26</sup>

HTS has some contact with Turkey, though not as much as the Syrian National Army (see below), and the group is a designated terrorist organisation in Turkey.<sup>27</sup>

The leader of HTS is Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. Since the fall of Assad, official communiques refer to him by his real name, Ahmed al-Sharaa. He was a member of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, where he was imprisoned for participating in the insurgency against UK and US forces.<sup>28</sup>

### How have they governed Idlib?

HTS and other opposition groups formed the “Syrian Salvation Government” in Idlib in 2017. The administration took responsibility for health, education, and other social services. There was some local armed opposition and there were protests against its rule up to and including October 2024.<sup>29</sup>

In March 2024, it was reported that Ahmed al-Sharaa had offered to resign as leader of the government due to the ongoing protests against HTS. The group instead pledged reforms to its security forces and prison system, which have been accused of committing human rights violations.<sup>30</sup>

Analysts note that the group has sought to present a more moderate stance to appeal to other opposition groups within Syria. Many analysts consider it a [jihadist group](#) that is currently focused on power within Syria, rather than seeking to act internationally, though also note not all its members will share

<sup>26</sup> Italian Institute for International Political Studies, [Syria's broken status quo](#), 5 December 2024; Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), [Terrorism background: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#), 2018 and ACLED, [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#), 25 July 2023 and European Council on Foreign Relations, [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham \(Syria\)](#), 10 November 2020; [Who's in control of Idlib?](#), BBC News, 18 February 2020

<sup>27</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, [What role is Turkey playing in Syria's civil war?](#), 6 December 2024

<sup>28</sup> [From Syrian jihadist leader to rebel politician](#), BBC News, 9 December 2024

<sup>29</sup> [HTS accused of violent response to women's protest in Syria's Idlib](#), BBC Monitoring, 21 October 2024; [Anti-HTS protests break out in north west Syria](#), BBC Monitoring, 14 September 2024; [Protests grow against powerful Jihadist group in Syria enclave](#), VoA, 7 March 2024; [Syrian protesters rise up against Islamists in Idlib](#), DW, 25 May 2024; [HTS makes rival jihadis in Syria's Idlib \[...\] give up weapons](#), Al Monitor, 20 November 2021; [Who's behind the "Salvation government" running northern Syria?](#), BBC Monitoring, 13 December 2019

<sup>30</sup> [HTS leaders offers to quit](#), BBC Monitoring, 13 March 2024; [HTS linked authority details progress on reforms](#), BBC Monitoring, 2 April 2024



the leadership's rhetoric or stated direction and are uncertain on its long-term objectives.<sup>31</sup>

In its 2024 report on freedom of religion or belief, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom noted HTS has been seeking to “reposition itself as a state-like administrative regime that acknowledges religious diversity”. However, it reported violations of freedom of religion took place in 2023:

The group publicized its tolerance of the first Christian liturgy celebrated in Idlib in over a decade and pledged to redistribute property it had confiscated from Christians and Druze. However, HTS continued to impose its interpretation of Sunni Islam on both Muslim and non-Muslim residents of Idlib. In August, the SSG [Syrian Salvation government] invoked its interpretation of Shari'a in new rules for Idlib's schools, and HTS security forces continued their arbitrary and unlawful detention of human rights advocates and private individuals critical of HTS's “rule or religious doctrine.”<sup>32</sup>

In its April 2024 report covering human rights in Syria, the US State Department also noted allegations that HTS in Idlib had held detainees in what it termed “security prisons” without the right to appeal. HTS also arrested groups seeking to protest against its rule and detained political opponents, journalists, activists and civilians perceived as critical of their rule of religious doctrine. Allegations of torture have also been made.<sup>33</sup>

## What did HTS say on Syria's future after Assad?

On 8 December 2024 the leader of HTS, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, said that the group would “continue to work with determination to achieve the goals of our revolution [...] to complete the path we started in 2011”.<sup>34</sup>

In one media clip, on 8 December he said that Syria had been “abandoned as a playground for Iranian ambitions” under Assad and criticised the “corruption”, “sectarianism” and [trade of the captagon drug](#).<sup>35</sup>

In a December 2024 interview with CNN, he said the opposition would transition “into a state of governance, institutions and so on” after the fall of Assad. He said “HTS is merely one part of [building Syria] [...] and it may dissolve at any time”.<sup>36</sup>

He also suggested that that “there will no longer be a need for any foreign forces to remain in Syria” after the fall of Assad.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations, [Guns and governance: HTS](#), 2020; [Syria: HTS Islamists pledge to show tolerance for minorities](#), DW, 4 December 2024

<sup>32</sup> US Commission on International Religious Freedom, [Annual report 2024](#), 2024, p68

<sup>33</sup> US Department of State, [2023 country reports on human rights practices: Syria](#), April 2024

<sup>34</sup> [“New history written” says HTS leader](#), Al Jazeera, 8 December 2024

<sup>35</sup> [HTS leader says all Syria “can breathe freely” after rebel “victory”](#), BBC Monitoring, 8 December 2024

<sup>36</sup> [Syrian rebel leader says goal is to “overthrow” Assad regime](#), CNN, 6 December 2024

<sup>37</sup> As above

## 2.3

# What is UN, US, EU and UK policy on HTS?

## UN Security Council

HTS is designated as a terrorist group by the UN Security Council.<sup>38</sup> Following the fall of Assad, the UN Envoy for Syria, Geir Pederson, said on 10 December 2024 that the designation was a “complicating factor” but said decisions should await HTS actions:

what we need now to see is, of course, that the good statements and what we are seeing on the ground at the beginning, that this is now followed up in practice in the days and the weeks ahead of us. And the most important test, the most important test will be how the transitional arrangements in Damascus is organized and implemented.<sup>39</sup>

It is for UN Security Council members to determine whether a group removed from the designation list. The effect of the terrorist designation is to impose an asset freeze, travel ban and arms embargo by all UN member states against the group.<sup>40</sup>

The UN Security Council adopted a resolution maintaining the exemption for humanitarian providers from the asset freeze measures against some listed terrorist organisations in Syria before Assad’s fall, on 6 December 2024.<sup>41</sup>

For more information for UK sanctions see section 4 of the Commons Library research briefing [Syria’s civil war in 2023: Arab back in the Arab League](#) and part 7 of the [UK’s Syrian \(Sanctions\) \(EU Exit\) Regulations 2019](#), as amended.

## United States

The United States has listed HTS as a foreign terrorist organisation, and its leader is subject to a US\$10 million bounty.<sup>42</sup>

On 2 December 2024, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said that the group is “a terrorist organization designated by the United States. So, we have real concerns about the designs and objectives of that organization”.<sup>43</sup> Following the fall of Assad, the US administration said that the HTS “had elements affiliated with groups that have American blood on their hands”.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> For background, UN Security Council, [Consolidated list: Qe.De.137](#), as of 5 December 2024

<sup>39</sup> UN Special Envoy Syria, [Statement, 10 December 2024](#)

<sup>40</sup> UN, [The de facto authority in Syria is a designated terrorist group](#), 12 December 2024

<sup>41</sup> UN, [Unanimously adopting Resolution 2761 \(2024\) \[...\]](#), 6 December 2024

<sup>42</sup> US State Department, [Foreign terrorist organisations](#), accessed 9 December 2024; FBI, [Up to US\\$10 million reward offered \[...\]](#), 10 May 2017

<sup>43</sup> [US left facing difficult situation in Syria](#), CNN, 2 December 2024

<sup>44</sup> White House, [Remarks by APNSA Jake Sullivan](#), 8 December 2024

## European Union

EU High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, Kaja Kallas, said on 10 December HTS would be judged “not by their words but by their deeds” and said it was “too early” to decide on the group.<sup>45</sup>

## United Kingdom

The UK has proscribed the group as a terrorist organisation and has no contact with it. On 2 December 2024 the Middle East Minister, Hamish Falconer said:

We do not talk to HTS, which is a proscribed terrorist organisation—it is proscribed for a reason and remains proscribed, and we are concerned by many of the public statements it has made.<sup>46</sup>

On 9 December, Foreign Secretary David Lammy told the House of Commons the UK would judge the group “by its actions, monitoring closely how they and other parties to this conflict treat all civilians in areas they control”.<sup>47</sup> In a separate statement, Prime Minister Keir Starmer said the same day that it was “far too early” for a change in policy.<sup>48</sup>

## 2.4

## The Syrian National Army and Turkey

### What is the Syrian National Army?

The Syrian National Army (SNA) is a Turkish-backed coalition centred in northern Syrian on the Turkish border. It not an official Syrian state body and was opposed to the rule of President Assad.

The SNA was established in 2017. It focused on countering Islamic State/Daesh and the People’s Defence Units (YPG), which form part of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, see below). Turkey judges that elements of the SDF are tied to the [Kurdistan Workers Party \(PKK\)](#), a proscribed terrorist group in Turkey.<sup>49</sup> See below, section 3.3, for Turkish action.

The US State Department [report on human rights in Syria](#), covering 2023, also makes allegations of human rights abuses committed by the SNA.

---

<sup>45</sup> [Kallas urges “no revenge” in Syria’s transition](#), Euro News, 10 December 2024

<sup>46</sup> HC Deb, [2 December 2024](#), c64

<sup>47</sup> HC Deb, [9 December 2024](#), c693

<sup>48</sup> [Too early to remove Syrian rebels from terror list—Starmer](#), BBC News, 9 December 2024

<sup>49</sup> [The Syria National Army, a rebel group loyal to Turkey](#), Le Monde, 6 December 2024; Atlantic Council, [Efforts to tame the Syrian National Army](#), 18 June 2024

## What actions has it taken in 2024?

The Syrian National Army joined the HTS attack on Aleppo in November 2024, attacking Assad government forces and those of the SDF. The offensive against the SDF continued until 10 December, when the SDF and SNA reached a ceasefire agreement in the northern city of Manbij as a result of US mediation. The SDF were to withdraw from the city.<sup>50</sup> However, reports of fighting have continued.<sup>51</sup>

## 2.5

## Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces

### Who are the Syrian Democratic Forces?

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are a coalition of Kurdish-led forces in north-eastern Syria which also includes Arabic fighters and both Muslim and Christian groups. It was created in 2015 with US support. It operates through an administration known as the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria, which was established in 2018. Among its objectives are seeking greater autonomy for Kurds in Syria (the Kurdish minority in Iraq has an autonomous government under the Iraqi constitution).

The SDF consists of several groups, including the People's Protection Units (YPG). The YPG was created in 2012 and Turkey judges it to have ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a designated terrorist group in Turkey and elsewhere.<sup>52</sup>

### What role has it played in the conflict?

The SDF was opposed to Assad and has played an important role in combatting Islamic State/Daesh. It holds a large number of Islamic State members in detention and their families in camps. See section 5, for more on Islamic State.

The US State Department [report on human rights in Syria](#), covering 2023, also makes allegations of human rights abuses committed by the SDF.

During the Syrian civil war, the SDF controlled the majority of Syria's functioning oil production.<sup>53</sup> In 2024, it joined the November offensive and said it captured the eastern city of Deir Al-Zour and Syria's major crossing

---

<sup>50</sup> [Syrian democratic forces, rebels reach US-brokered ceasefire \[...\]](#), Reuters, 10 December 2024; [Syrian national army besieges Tel Rifit \[...\]](#), AA, 1 December 2024; [Syrian opposition group clears Manbij of US backed PKK/YPG terrorist group](#), Daily Sabah, 9 December 2024

<sup>51</sup> [Despite ceasefire, fighting continues in Manjib](#), VoA, 11 December 2024

<sup>52</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations, [Guns and governance: SDF](#), 2020

<sup>53</sup> [Syria war: who benefits from its oil production?](#), 21 November 2024

points with Iraq from Assad.<sup>54</sup> It since lost territory to both the SNA and HTS in December. This includes the loss of Deir Al-Zour to HTS.<sup>55</sup>

In December 2024 Foreign Secretary David Lammy said the UK would work with Kurdish groups to contain Islamic State in the northeast:

Notwithstanding the complexity of the situation, we have to work with all groups in an inclusive manner, but I will be really clear that in the UK, we remain concerned about Daesh, and about extremism in camps that we know exist in the north-east. We are vigilant about those issues, and we are happy to—we have to—work with Kurdish minority groups, who will assist us in that enterprise.<sup>56</sup>

US National Security Advisor, John Kirkby, has also said that while the US judged Turkey to have “legitimate” security concerns, the SDF must be allowed to focus on countering Islamic State:

we have said publicly in the past that some of these operations elsewhere along that border [between Syria and Turkey], conducted by Turkish military forces, are problematic is because it does have that risk of pulling the SDF away from the counter-ISIS mission, which we don't want to see happen. And those are conversations that we're having with the Turks as well.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> [Kurdish-led SDF capture eastern Syria \[...\]](#), New Arab, 6 December 2024

<sup>55</sup> [Syrian rebels claim control of oil-rich Deir ez-Zor from SDF](#), Rudaw, 11 December 2024

<sup>56</sup> HC Deb, [9 December 2024](#), c702

<sup>57</sup> White House, [On the record press gaggle with National Security Advisor](#), 10 December 2024

### 3

## What does Assad's fall mean for Iran, Turkey, Russia, and Israel?

### Further reading on regional and global significance

- Washington Institute, [Don't assume Iran's supply lines to Hezbollah are cut](#), 12 December 2024
- [What Assad's fall means for Turkey](#), BBC Monitoring, 12 December 2024
- [What Assad's fall means for Russia](#), BBC Monitoring, 11 December 2024
- [The Middle East's dangerous new normal](#), Foreign Affairs, 10 December 2024
- [Washington needs a new Syria policy](#), Foreign Policy, 9 December 2024
- [Assad's fall in the Middle East's 1989](#), Foreign Policy, 9 December 2024
- Wilson Center, [With Syria's collapse Russian's regional play disintegrates](#), 9 December 2024
- Chatham House, [Fall of Bashar al-Assad is a blow to Iran and Russia—and a boost for Turkey](#), 8 December 2024
- Foreign Policy, [What's next for Syria and the Middle East?](#), 8 December 2024
- [With Assad's fall, Iran's "axis of resistance" unravels](#), New York Times, 8 December 2024
- Council on Foreign Relations, [Will Iran become more dangerous after Assad's ouster in Syria?](#), 8 December 2024
- Atlantic Council, [Rebels have toppled the Assad regime. What's next for Syria, the Middle East and the world?](#), 8 December 2024
- [End of Assad rule will reshape regions' balance of power](#), BBC News, 8 December 2024
- Wilson Center, [What Syria's opposition resurgence means for Ankara](#), 6 December 2024
- Stimson, [What Turkey hopes to gain from the HTS offensive in Syria](#), 5 December 2024

## 3.1

## Iran and Hezbollah

**Syria as a strategic link for Iran**

The fall of Assad is widely seen as a defeat for Iran’s strategy in the Middle East. It removes a significant element from its alliance network in the region, which it uses to project power, threaten Israel, and attack US forces.

Syria, under Bashar al-Assad and his father, Hafez, has been one of the longest-standing allies of post-1979 Iran (when the Shah was overthrown and the Islamic Republic was created). Syria formed part of what Iran has called the “axis of resistance”, constituted of Iran, Iran-backed Shia militias in Iraq and Syria, the Assad government, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza and the Houthis in Yemen. Syria has been a key land route for Iran to supply Hezbollah and Hamas and threaten Israel.<sup>58</sup>

**Syria’s role in Lebanon**

Syria has historically also played an influential role in Lebanese politics. It intervened militarily in Lebanon during the [Lebanese civil war](#) (1975 to 1990), [dominating Lebanon’s domestic affairs](#) after the civil war, with final Syrian forces withdrawing in 2005. Hezbollah was one pro-Syrian group in Lebanon, and its political alliances with other Lebanese groups were partially formed on sharing a pro-Syrian outlook.

While the ability of Syria to project its influence fell with its withdrawal in 2005, it continued under Bashar al-Assad. The politics of the two countries remained interlinked through Hezbollah, Syrians displaced to Lebanon, and [historical divisions in Lebanese politics between pro-Syrians and anti-Syrians](#).<sup>59</sup>

**Iranian and Hezbollah investment in Assad**

Iran is estimated to have spent more than US\$30 billion in support of Assad during the civil war, as well as providing his government with subsidised oil and other resources.<sup>60</sup> Iranian militias deployed in Syria were estimated to have numbered between 20,000 and 30,000 personnel, while Hezbollah was estimated to have had 7,000 to 10,000 fighters in Syria (out of a total of 40,000 to 50,000).<sup>61</sup> Certain numbers are unknown.

Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran have each been weakened militarily through their conflicts with Israel in 2023/24. In October 2024 then Israeli Defence

<sup>58</sup> See Commons Library, [Iran’s influence in the Middle East](#), updated July 2024

<sup>59</sup> Royal United Services Institute, [Lebanon in Limbo: No escaping the Syrian gales](#), October 2012 and [Lebanon: the return of Pax Syriana?](#), November 2017

<sup>60</sup> Carnegie Endowment, [Why did Iran allow the downfall of Assad?](#), 9 December 2024

<sup>61</sup> As above and Atlantic Council, [Iranian influence in Syria](#), November 2020 CSIS, [The escalating conflict with Hezbollah in Syria](#), June 2018

Minister, Yoav Gallant, described both Hamas and Hezbollah as no longer effective proxies for Iran.<sup>62</sup> Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said Assad fell because of Israeli military action in 2024 against his allies.<sup>63</sup>

## Iran, Hezbollah and Syria after Assad

The Financial Times in December 2024 cited unnamed Iranian officials as saying that Iran was increasingly “frustrated” with Assad, that he had been unable to halt Israeli air strikes in Syria in 2024 (see below) and that he was moving away from Iran in his rapprochement with Arab Gulf States from 2023.<sup>64</sup> Iran has denied having any military presence in Syria since Islamic State lost its Syrian territory (in 2019).<sup>65</sup> In December, Iran has flown around 4,000 Iranians out of Syria. It is unclear whether these were civilians or government or military personnel.<sup>66</sup>

Following the fall of Assad, the Iranian foreign ministry said that would seek to maintain ties with Syria. Statements made by the Iranian ambassador to Syria no longer described HTS as a terrorist group, which it did when Assad was in power, signalling a desire to advance ties.<sup>67</sup>

One Hezbollah official has described Syria after the fall of Assad as a “major, dangerous and new transformation”.<sup>68</sup> The group has also criticised Israeli military action in southern Syria.<sup>69</sup>

## 3.2

## Russia

### Russian backing for Assad

Russia has militarily supported the Assad regime since 2015 when it [intervened in support of Syrian government action against Islamic State](#). Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, said at the time that it was doing so “at the invitation of the legitimate Syrian government”.<sup>70</sup> Observers questioned Russia’s motives, however, and accused the Russian Government

---

<sup>62</sup> See Commons Library, [Middle East instability in 2023/24](#) and briefings on Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah; [Israeli defence minister: Hamas, Hezbollah no longer effective proxies for Iran](#), Reuters, 27 October 2024

<sup>63</sup> YouTube, [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s statement from the Golan Heights](#), 9 December 2024

<sup>64</sup> [Iran “lost faith” in Assad before his ousting](#), Financial Times, 8 December 2024

<sup>65</sup> [Iran says Assad government ignored advice for ‘political solution’](#), BBC Monitoring, 8 December 2024

<sup>66</sup> [Ayatollah Khamenei defiant \[...\]](#), FT, 11 December 2024

<sup>67</sup> [Iran on Syria: people will decide the future](#), Tehran Times, 8 December 2024; [Iran’s Syria ambassador strikes positive note on post-Assad era](#), BBC Monitoring, 8 December 2024

<sup>68</sup> [Lebanon’s Hezbollah sees “major, dangerous”, change in Syria](#), Reuters, 9 December 2024

<sup>69</sup> [Hezbollah issues first statement since toppling of Assad](#), BBC Monitoring, 11 December 2024

<sup>70</sup> [“Russian Foreign Minister Defends Airstrikes in Syria”](#), New York Times, 1 October 2015



of intervening with the primary objective of sustaining President Assad in power.<sup>71</sup>

## Russian military presence in Syria and region

By supporting President Assad, over the last decade Russia has been able to expand its existing military presence in the region, securing a permanent naval presence at the Syrian base of Tartus on the Mediterranean coast and at Hmeimim air base in Latakia.<sup>72</sup> According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies' Military Balance 2024, 4,000 Russian military personnel were based in the country, although there have been reports that many of those personnel may have been re-deployed to Ukraine.<sup>73</sup>

Having a strategic military presence in the Syria has allowed Russia to project power into Africa, in particular in support of its operations in Libya and the Sahel, and to secure access to the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, thereby pressuring NATO's southern borders.<sup>74</sup>

## What does Assad's fall mean for Russia?

The fall of Assad is widely considered, among Western observers at least, as "a strategic political defeat" for Russia.<sup>75</sup> It raises questions over Russia's ability to exert and maintain influence in areas of strategic importance and Russia's reputation as a credible ally and protector.<sup>76</sup>

### Russia's military bases

In the immediate aftermath of Assad's departure, Russia's priority is to retain its military bases in Syria. On 8 December 2024, Russian State news agency TASS reported that the government had secured an agreement with armed opposition leaders in Syria for the security of Russian military bases and

---

<sup>71</sup> "Russia's war plan in Syria", RUSI Analysis, 2 October 2015

<sup>72</sup> Russia has had a presence at Tartus since the early 1970s. It was only in 2017 that a long-term lease agreement was signed, and Russia's military presence was significantly expanded at Tartus and a base established at Hmeimim (see "[How Assad's fall threatens Russia's military influence in Syria and across the region](#)", Radio Free Europe, 9 December 2024); [Importance of Russia's military bases in Syria and how it could keep them](#), BBC Monitoring, 12 December 2024

<sup>73</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, Military Balance 2024; "[Rebel gains in Syria put Russia on the back foot](#)". Carnegie Politika, 6 December 2024 and "[Assad's downfall- the winners and losers](#)", Politico, 9 December 2024

<sup>74</sup> Russian bases in Syria have been used as a staging post for its Africa operations and as a repair and replenishment base for its naval assets. Institute for the Study of War, [Africa File Special Edition: Syria's potential impact on Russia's Africa and Mediterranean ambitions](#), 4 December 2024

<sup>75</sup> Institute for the Study of War, [Russian offensive campaign assessment](#), 8 December 2024

<sup>76</sup> As above. Questions over the reliability of Russia as an effective security partner have already been raised within the context of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 after Russian peacekeepers failed to prevent Azerbaijan's military takeover of the disputed region (see Library research briefing, [What is happening in Nagorno-Karabakh?](#))

personnel in the country.<sup>77</sup> Opposition forces are in full control of Latakia province where both bases are located.<sup>78</sup>

However, there have also been widespread reports that plans for the evacuation of Russian military assets in the country are in place. Russia's naval fleet has been moved offshore and preparatory work is reportedly underway at Hmeimim air base and other sites.<sup>79</sup>

The loss of Russia's military bases in Syria would have significant implications for [Russian military operations in Africa](#), having been used as a logistical staging post, and for its presence in the Mediterranean. The latter has already been undermined by Russia's inability to use its Black Sea fleet in the Mediterranean after Turkey closed the Turkish Straits linking the Black Sea and the Mediterranean at the beginning of the Ukraine conflict.<sup>80</sup>

On 9 December 2024, Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov said that the future of Russia's bases in Syria would be the subject of discussion with Syria's new leaders and that any speculation was "premature".<sup>81</sup> The Institute for the Study of War suggests that "Russia's continued military presence in the country is not guaranteed", noting that the Kremlin's close relationship with former President Assad is likely to have undermined any positive relationship with Syria's opposition groups.<sup>82</sup>

## 3.3

## Turkey

### What are Turkey's aims in Syria?

Turkey has supported the opposition to Assad, with it primarily working with the Syrian National Army (SNA). In 2016 it intervened militarily in the conflict.

Turkey has been focused on four objectives:

---

<sup>77</sup> ["In brief: Assad in Moscow, security of Russian bases: what Kremlin source said"](#), TASS Russian state news agency, 8 December 2024

<sup>78</sup> ["Functioning of Russian bases, Israeli army in the buffer zone: situation in Syria"](#), TASS Russian state news agency, 9 December 2024

<sup>79</sup> Institute for the Study of War, [Russian offensive campaign assessment](#), 10 December 2024 ; [Russian ships move from Syria base](#), BBC Verify/News, 11 December 2024; [Russian forces reportedly withdrawing from northeast Syria](#), BBC Monitoring, 12 December 2024

<sup>80</sup> Under the terms of the Montreux Convention, Turkey has sovereignty over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits (the Turkish Straits) connecting the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. In February 2022 Turkey closed the straits to all warships (except those returning to their bases in the Black Sea), in an effort to preserve the naval balance of power in the region. In early January 2024, the Turkish government confirmed that it would not allow passage of the vessels through the Straits for as long as the war continues, (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, [Statement regarding disinformation about UK mine hunting ships](#), 2 January 2024). An explanation of the Convention can be found in [The Conversation: What the Montreux Convention is, and what it means for the Ukraine war](#), March 2022

<sup>81</sup> ["Kremlin says to discuss Russian bases with Syria's new rulers"](#), Al Arabiya, 9 December 2024

<sup>82</sup> Institute for the Study of War, [Russian offensive campaign assessment](#), 8 December 2024

- defeating Islamic State/Daesh
- combatting Kurdish groups it says are tied to terrorist activity by the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in Turkey
- creating the conditions to allow for the return of Syrian refugees (Syria hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees, at 2.9 million)
- implementing UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015) for a political settlement to the conflict.<sup>83</sup>

In October 2023, the Turkish parliament voted to extend Turkey's military operations in Syria and Iraq for a further two years.<sup>84</sup>

In 2023 and 2024, Turkey was in talks on potentially re-establishing diplomatic relations with the Assad government. These failed. Turkey asked President Assad to take steps to contain the Kurdish-led groups that it views as linked to the PKK in Turkey and to allow for the return of Syrian refugees. President Assad asked Turkey to withdraw its forces from Syria and end its support for armed groups in Syria.<sup>85</sup>

The failure of these talks is reportedly one reason why Turkey backed the HTS offensive in November 2024.<sup>86</sup> The Turkish Government has publicly rejected the claim.<sup>87</sup>

## What is the Kurdistan Workers' Party?

The [Kurdistan Workers' Party](#) (PKK), has waged an insurgency since 1984 against the Turkish state, seeking greater cultural and political rights and an autonomous or independent Kurdish state. The conflict has resulted in nearly 40,000 deaths. The PKK is proscribed as a terrorist organisation by the UK, United States and the European Union.<sup>88</sup>

Although some ceasefires were in place in the 2000s, there have been substantial hostilities since 2015 and increased Turkish military activity against Kurdish groups in northern Syria and Iraq, which Turkey argues are linked to terrorist activity in the country.<sup>89</sup>

Turkey considers the PKK to have links to Kurdish groups in north-east Syria, including the [People's Defense Units](#) (YPG). The YPG forms part of the wider

---

<sup>83</sup> [Erdogan has interests in Syria's reignited war](#), DW, 4 December 2024; Atlantic Council, [What does Turkey gain from the rebel offensive in Syria?](#), 5 December 2024

<sup>84</sup> [Turkey extends Syria, Iraq operations by another two years](#), France 24, 17 October 2023

<sup>85</sup> [What hurdles face Syria normalisation?](#), BBC Monitoring, 16 July 2024

<sup>86</sup> [Turkey could benefit from rebel offensive in Syria: experts](#), France 24, 12 December 2024

<sup>87</sup> [Where Turkey stands as Syrian government falls to opposition insurgents](#), AP, 8 December 2024

<sup>88</sup> Commons Library, [Turkey under Erdoğan: recent developments and the 2023 elections](#), section 1.4

<sup>89</sup> Washington Institute, [Turkey's war in northern Iraq: By the numbers](#), 28 July 2022

Syrian Democratic Forces coalition (see section 2.5), though the US, UK and EU consider the PKK a terrorist group.<sup>90</sup>

In November 2024 the UK Government said it recognises Turkey’s “legitimate security interests in Syria” and says it must “protect civilian lives and infrastructure, and to avoid destabilising activity”.<sup>91</sup>

## 3.4 Israel and the occupied Golan Heights

### History of Israel-Syria relations

Israel and Syria have technically been in a state of war since 1948. There were direct military engagements in the Arab Israeli wars of 1948, 1967, and 1973. They were both also participants in the Lebanese Civil War (1975 to 1990). Syria has not recognised the state of Israel. There was no direct conflict during the Syrian civil war between Assad forces and Israel, however.

During the Syrian civil war Israel conducted air strikes on Lebanese [Hezbollah](#) and the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (an Iranian force that works overseas to support armed and terrorist groups).<sup>92</sup>

### Status of the Golan Heights

In 1967 Israel captured the [Golan Heights](#), in south-western Syria, in the Third Arab Israeli War. The Golan Heights are strategically important, being a site of high ground and adding depth to Israeli or Syrian defences.<sup>93</sup>

The Israeli Knesset (parliament) passed a law annexing them in 1980. Around 20,000 Israeli settlers and 20,000 Syrians live in the Golan. Syria, under Assad, said it would not agree to a peace agreement with Israel until Israel withdraws.<sup>94</sup>

UN Security Council Resolution 497 (1981) says the Israeli legislation of 1980 is “null and void and without international legal effect” and “demands” that Israel rescind the legislation.<sup>95</sup>

In 2019 the US recognised the Golan Heights as Israeli territory. The UK Government continues to consider them to be Syrian territory.<sup>96</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> SWP, [Turkey’s military operations in Syria and Iraq](#), 30 May 2022. Home Office, [Proscribed terrorist groups or organisations](#), 26 November 2021.

<sup>91</sup> PQ 15621 [[Syria: Turkey](#)] , 28 November 2024

<sup>92</sup> See Commons Library, [Syria’s civil war in 2023: Assad back in the Arab League](#), section 2.5

<sup>93</sup> [Golan Heights profile](#), BBC News, 29 August 2023

<sup>94</sup> As above

<sup>95</sup> [UN Security Council Resolution 497 \(1981\)](#)

<sup>96</sup> Trump White House, [Remarks by President Trump at signing of presidential proclamation \[...\]](#), 26 March 2019; FCDO, [UK position on the Golan Heights has not changed](#), 27 March 2019

## Israeli military action in December 2024

In December 2024, Israel Defence Forces (IDF) reinforced their positions on the Golan Heights and occupied some posts in the [demilitarised buffer zone](#) between Israel and Syria. The zone was established in 1974, after the Fourth Arab Israeli War.<sup>97</sup> Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that Assad government forces had withdrawn from the border, and this marked a collapse of the agreement.<sup>98</sup>

Media reports suggest Israel has been strengthening its positions in the area earlier in 2024.<sup>99</sup>

The Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz said some armed groups from Syria had “infiltrated areas near the border”. He said the IDF had taken “limited and temporary control”.<sup>100</sup> Israel denies any advance towards Damascus.<sup>101</sup>

The Israeli Defence Minister, Israel Katz, said that he has ordered a “sterile defensive zone” to be created in southern Syria, without a permanent Israeli presence, to limit any potential threats to Israel.<sup>102</sup> He has told Israeli troops be “prepare[d] to remain” throughout the winter.<sup>103</sup>

The IDF has confirmed it has conducted aerial attacks on “strategic capabilities left by the Syrian military so it will not fall into the hands of the jihadists”. Prime Minister Netanyahu said that the new Syrian government must not allow Iran to re-establish itself in Syria or allow the transfer or Iranian arms.<sup>104</sup>

Foreign Minister Gideon Saar says it has struck suspected chemical weapon and long-range missile sites.<sup>105</sup>

On 10 December the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said it had conducted 350 air strikes and destroyed between 70% and 80% of former Assad government military capabilities. This included airbases, air defences, weapons depots and production sites.<sup>106</sup>

---

<sup>97</sup> [IDF deploys in Golan buffer zone](#), Times of Israel, 8 December 2024

<sup>98</sup> YouTube, [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's statement from the Golan Heights](#), 9 December 2024, at 00:40

<sup>99</sup> [UN force says Israeli work on Syrian frontier saw “severe violations” of cease-fire](#), AP, 12 November 2024

<sup>100</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [FM Sa'ar briefs foreign journalists](#), 9 December 2024

<sup>101</sup> [Israeli warplanes pound Syria \[...\]](#), AP, 11 December 2024

<sup>102</sup> [PM: Israel wants “correct” ties with new Syrian regime](#), Times of Israel, 11 December 2024

<sup>103</sup> [Israeli troops to remain in Syria over winter](#), Telegraph, 13 December 2024

<sup>104</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [PM Netanyahu at the Kirya in Tel Aviv](#), 10 December 2024

<sup>105</sup> [Saar to foreign journalists: Israel temporarily took over Syrian areas \[...\]](#), Israel National News, 9 December 2024

<sup>106</sup> [In historic campaign across Syria \[...\]](#), Times of Israel, 10 December 2024

The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights in Syria monitors military activity. From 8 to 11 December it recorded 352 Israeli air strikes in 13 Syrian provinces.<sup>107</sup>

### International response

On 10 December 2024 UK Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, said he had spoken to Foreign Minister Saar on 9 December and said there “are legitimate security concerns for Israel, particularly in the context of a country that has housed [Islamic State], Daesh and al-Qaeda”.<sup>108</sup>

France has called for Israel to withdraw from the buffer zone.<sup>109</sup>

The US State Department says it wants the 1974 agreement upheld. It is discussing Israeli military actions in private with the Israeli Government.<sup>110</sup>

The UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, said the Israeli action represented a “very troubling development” and “needs to stop”.<sup>111</sup>

Arab states, as well as Iran and Turkey, have been critical of Israeli military action as a violation of Syrian territory and international law.<sup>112</sup>

### Israeli call for attacks on Kurdish-led forces to stop

The Israeli Foreign Minister said that attacks on Kurdish forces in the north east of Syria must stop and the “international community must protect those who fought bravely against ISIS” as well as other minority groups.<sup>113</sup>

---

<sup>107</sup> Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, [For fourth day in a row, Israeli fighter jets destroy weapons of Syrian regime army \[...\]](#), 11 December 2024

<sup>108</sup> HC Deb, [9 December 2024](#), c700

<sup>109</sup> [France tells Israel to withdraw its forces \[...\]](#), Le Monde, 11 December 2024

<sup>110</sup> US Department of State, [Department press briefing](#), 10 December 2024

<sup>111</sup> UN Office of the Special Envoy for the Secretary General for Syria, [UN Special envoy for Syria \[...\]](#), 10 December 2024

<sup>112</sup> [Arab countries condemn Israel's seizure of buffer zone in Syria's Golan Heights](#), AA, 10 December 2024; Foreign Ministry of Iran, [Iran slams repeated Israeli raids on Syrian infrastructure Golan](#), 10 December 2024; [Qatar, Turkey, Egypt condemn Israel's activity across Syrian border](#), Times of Israel, 10 December 2024

<sup>113</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [FM Sa'ar briefs foreign journalists](#), 9 December 2024

## 4 What is the process for a political settlement?

HTS has appointed a transitional government for Syria, and international actors have called for inclusive negotiations on Syria's political future under UN frameworks. However, the risk of violence and a power vacuum continues. As set out above, the Syrian opposition is not united, and some fighting has taken place. Islamic State/Daesh also remains active (see section 5).

### Further reading on Syria's future

- Foreign Policy, [Assad must face justice for his government's atrocities](#), 8 December 2024
- New Humanitarian, [Syria faces huge humanitarian challenges as it begins post-Assad era](#), 9 December 2024
- New York Times, [Assad's rule was brutal. Will what comes next be better?](#), 9 December 2024
- Atlantic Council, [A blueprint for bringing about a new Syria](#), 10 December 2024
- Arab Center DC, [A new Syria is born: hopes and challenges](#), 11 December 2024
- Chatham House, [While international support is crucial, Syrians must lead their country's political transition](#), 11 December 2024
- Just Security, [Syria's pursuit of freedom and self-governance](#), 12 December 2024
- Human Rights Watch, [Post-Assad transition should center human rights](#), 12 December 2024

### 4.1 Forming a transitional government in Syria

#### Appointment of transitional government

Following the resignation of Assad, his Prime Minister, Mohammad Jalali, said he would manage any transition to opposition forces. He had been appointed in September 2024 by Assad following elections to the Syrian parliament,

which were [dominated by the ruling Baath party of Assad](#).<sup>114</sup> He remained in office until 10 October 2024, when a new government was appointed.<sup>115</sup>

The Baath party has also announced it would suspend its work and activity until further notice, and that properties and finance would be handed over to the Syrian interior ministry.<sup>116</sup>

Some Assad government members have also reportedly left Syria for Lebanon.<sup>117</sup>

The transitional government will be led by Mohammed al-Bashir, who led the HTS administration in north-western Syria, which was called the “Salvation Government”. He will run the transitional government to 1 March 2025 and intends to keep the same individuals who ran HTS administration in Idlib.<sup>118</sup>

## Announcement by the new administration

HTS and transitional government have issued statements saying that:

- There will be an amnesty to those conscripted to fight in Assad forces.<sup>119</sup>
- It will dissolve the armed forces of the Assad government and secure any chemical weapons depots.<sup>120</sup>
- It will suspend the Syrian constitution and parliament (dominated by the Baathist party of former President Assad) for three months and create a committee to amend the constitution.<sup>121</sup>
- Officials should not interfere with women’s dress or appearance.<sup>122</sup>
- It will seek accountability for those who committed human rights abuses.<sup>123</sup>

---

<sup>114</sup> [Syria’s Assad tasks EU-sanctions former minister to form government](#), BBC Monitoring, 14 September 2024; [Syria announces parliamentary election results](#), BBC Monitoring, 18 July 2024

<sup>115</sup> [Syria’s PM al-Jalali says ready to cooperate \[...\]](#), Al Arabiya, 8 December 2024

<sup>116</sup> [Syria’s Baath party suspends work](#), Abram, 11 December 2024

<sup>117</sup> [Did Syrian officials flee to Beirut?](#), L’Orient, 11 December 2024

<sup>118</sup> [Syria’s new transitional PM calls for stability and calm](#), BBC News, 10 December 2024; [Who’s who in Syria’s first interim government](#), Al Monitor, 11 December 2024

<sup>119</sup> [HTS-led coalition announces general amnesty for Assad soldiers](#), New Arab, 9 December 2024

<sup>120</sup> [Syrian rebel leader says he will dissolve toppled regime forces \[...\]](#), Reuters, 12 December 2024

<sup>121</sup> [Syria govt pledges “rule of law” after Assad’s overthrow](#), France 24, 12 December 2024

<sup>122</sup> [Syrian government services to a “complete halt” as state workers stay home](#), ABC News, 9 December 2024

<sup>123</sup> [Syria’s new leaders vow punishment for atrocity under al-Assad](#), New York Times, 10 December 2024; [HTS leader pledges to punish ex-government figures \[...\]](#), BBC Monitoring, 10 December 2024



However, not all opposition groups have endorsed the amnesty and some have called for “revenge attacks” against Assad government officials.<sup>124</sup> Rights group report some have taken place.<sup>125</sup>

Prime Minister Bashir has also set out priorities, including arranging the return of Syrian refugees, ensuring security, and providing basic services. He acknowledged the last may be challenging, given the weaknesses in the Syrian economy and revenue.<sup>126</sup>

The “political affairs bureau”, affiliated with the Idlib government backed by HTS, has also announced it would protect Christians, Shia and Alawite Muslims, and other minorities in Syria.<sup>127</sup>

The HTS leader, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani (real name Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa) has also said that “people are exhausted from war. So the country isn't ready for another one, and it's not going to get into another one”.<sup>128</sup>

## 4.2

### Will the UK, US, EU work with HTS?

As set out above, in section 2.2, the US, EU and the UK designate HTS as a terrorist organisation. All three say it is too soon to make a judgement on removing the terrorist designation.

The G7 reiterated its support for UNSCR 2254 (2015) in a statement of 12 December 2024 (see next section) and said they would only work with a transition process and Syrian government that is:

credible, inclusive, and non-sectarian governance that ensures respect for the rule of law, universal human rights, including women’s rights, the protection of all Syrians, including religious and ethnic minorities, transparency and accountability.<sup>129</sup>

The G7 is formed of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United States and United Kingdom, as well as the European Union.

#### UK statements

David Lammy says the UK will take a “cautious” approach to HTS:

---

<sup>124</sup> [Islamists call for retribution against Assad ‘henchmen’, defy HTS](#), BBC Monitoring, 12 December 2024

<sup>125</sup> [Revenge attacks, “sectarian strife”, reported](#), BBC Monitoring, 12 December 2024

<sup>126</sup> [We want to bring all Syrian refugees home \[...\]](#), AA, 11 December 2024; [Interim Syrian PM vows to rebuild country \[...\]](#), Arab Weekly, 11 December 2024

<sup>127</sup> [HTS linked body vows to protect Christians \[...\]](#), BBC Monitoring, 10 December 2024; [HTS linked body reaches out to minority communities \[...\]](#), BBC Monitoring, 5 December 2024; [HTS linked authority reaches out to Shias \[...\]](#), BBC Monitoring, 30 November 2024

<sup>128</sup> [Jolani says no more war](#), New Arab, 11 December 2024

<sup>129</sup> FCDO, [G7 leaders’ statement on Syria](#), 12 December 2024

Thus far, HTS have offered reassurances to minorities in Aleppo, Hama and Damascus. They have also committed to co-operating with the international community over monitoring chemical weapons. We will judge HTS by their actions, monitoring closely how they and other parties to this conflict treat all civilians in areas they control.<sup>130</sup>

Speaking in December, he said it would be “hasty” to make announcements in reopening the UK embassy in Damascus.<sup>131</sup> The UK closed its embassy in 2013. European states with embassies in Syria include Italy, the Czech Republic and Greece.<sup>132</sup>

## United States statements

The US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said the transition process and new government in Syria must protect human rights and address terrorism:

[it must] fully respect the rights of minorities, facilitate the flow of humanitarian assistance to all in need, prevent Syria from being used as a base for terrorism or posing a threat to its neighbours, and ensure that any chemical or biological weapons stockpiles are secured and safely destroyed.<sup>133</sup>

He said the US stood ready to recognise and support a Syrian government that is developed by the Syrian people without foreign interference:

All nations should pledge to support an inclusive and transparent process and refrain from external interference. The United States will recognize and fully support a future Syria government that results from this process. We stand prepared to lend all appropriate support to all of Syria’s diverse communities and constituencies.<sup>134</sup>

## 4.3

## UN Security Council Resolution

The UN-led Geneva peace process, based on [UN Security Council Resolution \(UNSCR\) 2254 \(2015\)](#) (PDF), seeks to negotiate a Syrian-led political transition to end the conflict. It also calls for the territorial integrity of Syria to be retained, for a new constitution to be negotiated, and for free and fair elections to be held, supervised by the UN. The Security Council (hyperlinked added):

Reconfirms its endorsement of the [Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012](#), endorses the “Vienna Statements” in pursuit of the full implementation of the Geneva Communiqué, as the basis for a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political

---

<sup>130</sup> HC Deb, [9 December 2024](#), c693

<sup>131</sup> HC Deb, [9 December 2024](#), c699

<sup>132</sup> Commons Library research briefing, [Syria in 2023: Assad back in the Arab League](#), p30 and [Italy returns to Damascus](#), Le Monde, 31 July 2024

<sup>133</sup> US State Department, [The Syrian people will decide the future of Syria](#), 10 December 2024

<sup>134</sup> US State Department, [The Syrian people will decide the future of Syria](#), 10 December 2024

transition in order to end the conflict in Syria, and stresses that the Syrian people will decide the future of Syria [...]

Expresses its support, in this regard, for a Syrian-led political process that is facilitated by the United Nations and, within a target of six months, establishes credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance and sets a schedule and process for drafting a new constitution, and further expresses its support for free and fair elections, pursuant to the new constitution, to be held within 18 months and administered under supervision of the United Nations, to the satisfaction of the governance and to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability, with all Syrians, including members of the diaspora, eligible to participate.<sup>135</sup>

Successive rounds of UN-led talks failed to make substantial progress on a peace settlement or the development of a new Syrian constitution. The last talks in Geneva on a new constitution last took place in 2022.<sup>136</sup>

The continued failure of UN-led peace and constitutional talks allowed other diplomatic paths pursued by Russia, Turkey and Iran. Since 2017, Russia, Iran and Turkey have participated in talks in Astana (formerly NurSultan, the capital of Kazakhstan). While the US has participated as an observer, it criticised them as undermining the Geneva process. The process has had some success in de-escalating the conflict militarily but has not found a political solution.<sup>137</sup>

Iran and Russia may also no longer have the influence in Syria they had under Assad, limiting their ability to facilitate negotiations.

## What has the UK said?

On 2 December 2024 the UK issued a joint statement with the United States, France and Germany urging de-escalation and talks under UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015):

We are closely monitoring developments in Syria and urge de-escalation by all parties and the protection of civilians and infrastructure to prevent further displacement and disruption of humanitarian access. The current escalation only underscores the urgent need for a Syrian-led political solution to the conflict, in line with UNSCR 2254.<sup>138</sup>

The UK representative to the UN Security Council, James Kariuki, reiterated this position to the council on 3 December 2024.<sup>139</sup>

## Astana members and Arab states

In a statement of 8 December, the foreign ministers of Astana process countries (Turkey, Russia and Iran) and Arab states, including Qatar, Egypt,

---

<sup>135</sup> [UN Security Council Resolution 2254 \(2015\)](#) (PDF), paras 2 and 4

<sup>136</sup> [UN envoy urges Syria to rejoin Geneva constitution talks](#), Al Monitor, 17 March 2024

<sup>137</sup> Sada, [The Astana process six years on](#), 1 August 2023

<sup>138</sup> FCDO, [Joint statements on developments in Syria](#), 2 December 2024

<sup>139</sup> FCDO, [Only a Syrian-led political solution will resolve this conflict](#), 3 December 2024

Saudi Arabia and Jordan, said there should be a halt to military operations to prepare for the launch of negotiations under the Security Council resolution:

The Ministers stressed the need to stop military operations in preparation for launching a comprehensive political process, based on Security Council Resolution 2254, to put an end to the military escalation that leads to the shedding of more innocent and defenseless blood and prolonging the crisis, and to preserve the unity, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria and to Protect it from slipping into chaos and terrorism and ensure the voluntary return of refugees and the displaced.<sup>140</sup>

## What have others said?

- European Union: High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Kaja Kallas, has called for all stakeholders to engage with UNSCR 2254 (2015) and ensure an “orderly, peaceful and inclusive transition”.<sup>141</sup>
- Russia: says it maintains contacts with all Syrian opposition groups and “strongly supports” efforts to establish a political process under the UN resolution (8 December).<sup>142</sup>
- China: hopes that stability will return as soon as possible (8 December)<sup>143</sup>
- Iran: says it backs the resolution and that the “fate of Syrian and its future must be determined [...] without foreign interference or imposition” (8 December 2024).<sup>144</sup>

---

<sup>140</sup> [Joint statement by foreign ministers of Arab countries and the Astana process](#), Qatar News Agency, 8 December 2024

<sup>141</sup> European Council, [Syria: statement by the high representative](#), 9 December 2024

<sup>142</sup> Russian Foreign Ministry, [Foreign ministry statement](#), 8 December 2024

<sup>143</sup> Chinese Foreign Ministry, [Ministry spokesperson’s remarks](#), 8 December 2024

<sup>144</sup> [Iran on Syria: people will decide the future](#), Tehran Times, 8 December 2024

## 5 Islamic State/Daesh

[Islamic State/Daesh](#) has its origins in Al-Qaeda groups in Iraq in the 2000s. Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) was founded in 2013. It is a designated terrorist group by the UN Security Council, UK, and many others. In the 2010s it launched an extensive campaign across Syria and Iraq. In 2023 the UK Government acknowledged the atrocities committed against the Yazidi people by Islamic State in Iraq in 2014 as [an act of genocide](#).

### 5.1 How strong is Islamic State?

Since 2019 Islamic State/Daesh no longer holds territory in Syria or Iraq. However, it remains active and in June 2024 the US military said it considered the group is “attempting to reconstitute”.<sup>145</sup> HTS is not allied to Islamic State.

US Central Command said that from January to June 2024 Islamic State claimed to have conducted 153 attacks in Syria and Iraq. This was around double the number of claimed attacks in 2023. Around half of attacks in 2024 have been focused on fuel convoys and mostly in the east of Syria.<sup>146</sup>

The US and the [Global Coalition to Defeat Islamic State](#) is continuing to target the estimated 2,500 fighters that remain in Iraq and Syria. Around 9,000 fighters remain in detention. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) also have around 44,000 people linked to Islamic State, mostly women and children, in Al Hol and Roj Camps. Their repatriation is being sought by the US and others.

Those in detention include British nationals. In 2024 the rights charity, Reprieve, estimated there were around 70 Britons in north-east Syria, including 40 children. In 2023 the Home Office had estimated 200 of the 800 Britons who went to Syria remained unaccounted for.<sup>147</sup>

### 5.2 What is the position of the US forces?

The US has around 900 troops in Syria, most of whom are based in the north east alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces, to ensure the defeat of Islamic

<sup>145</sup> This section from Centcom, [Defeat for ISIS mission in Iraq and Syria for January-June 2024](#), 16 July 2024

<sup>146</sup> [Can IS capitalise on Syria's instability?](#), BBC Monitoring, 10 December 2024

<sup>147</sup> [What does the fall of Assad mean for Jihadi brides? \[...\]](#), The Times, 9 December 2024

State. They have continued to conduct attacks against the group in November and December 2024.<sup>148</sup>

The US says it will retain these troops in Syria and “and will take measures necessary to prevent a resurgence of the Islamic State”.<sup>149</sup> It plans to continue to work with the Syrian Democratic Forces.<sup>150</sup>

## 5.3

### What is happening to the coalition to combat Islamic State?

In September 2024 the United States and Iraq reached an agreement on plans to withdraw US-led “Global Coalition Against Daesh” forces from Iraq. Coalition forces are to leave the majority of Iraq by September 2025, and transition to a bilateral security partnership, which “supports Iraqi forces and maintains pressure” on Islamic State. Coalition forces presence will remain in Iraq to support the US and coalition action in Syria until September 2026.<sup>151</sup>

The UK Government supported the agreement and said it would advance a new bilateral relationship with Iraq.<sup>152</sup>

In March 2024 US General Michael Kurilla had told the US Congress that there were risks to a “premature” departure from Syria and Iraq:

We must also prevent a premature Coalition departure from Iraq and Syria. If Iran and Russia were to succeed in their goal of pushing us out before our partner forces can operate independently, it is my assessment that ISIS would reconstitute the ability to seize territory within two years. The Global Coalition’s sustained presence not only helps our partners in their fight against ISIS, it also prevents the reemergence of territorial control and ensures the group does not have a safe haven in Iraq or Syria to plan global attacks. The eventual transition to a traditional security cooperation framework must be predicated on Partner Force Development and Security Sector Reform in Iraq, and continued repatriations, secure detention facilities, and a political pathway for the SDF in Syria.<sup>153</sup>

---

<sup>148</sup> US Department of Defence, [Press Secretary holds an on-camera \[...\] press briefing](#), 2 December 2024; US Centcom, [Central Command conducts dozens of airstrikes to eliminate IS camps](#), 8 December 2024

<sup>149</sup> [US will remain in eastern Syria and seek to prevent IS resurgence](#), Reuters, 8 December 2024

<sup>150</sup> White House, [Remarks by APNSA Jake Sullivan](#), 8 December 2024

<sup>151</sup> US Department of State, [Joint statement announcing the timeline for the end of military mission](#), 27 September 2024

<sup>152</sup> Ministry of Defence, [UK response to the conclusion of the Global Coalition’s military mission in Iraq](#), 28 September 2024

<sup>153</sup> Centcom, [Statement of General Michael Kurilla on the posture \[...\]](#), 7 March 2024

## Further reading on Islamic State/Daesh in Syria

- Washington Institute, [Syria crisis leaves Islamic State prisons and detention camps vulnerable](#), 9 December 2024
- Hudson Institute, [The Islamic State's operations in Iraq and Syria](#), 5 December 2024
- Middle East Institute, [Don't leave Syria. The mission is far from over](#), 22 November 2024
- Counter Extremis, [ISIS Redux: the central Syrian resurgence in September 2024](#), 15 October 2024
- UN Security Council, [Letter from the Chair of the Security Council \[...\] concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, Al Qaida and association individuals, groups \[...\]](#), (PDF), 22 July 2024
- Washington Institute, [One year of the Islamic State worldwide activity map](#), 20 May 2024

The House of Commons Library is a research and information service based in the UK Parliament. Our impartial analysis, statistical research and resources help MPs and their staff scrutinise legislation, develop policy, and support constituents.

Our published material is available to everyone on [commonslibrary.parliament.uk](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk).

Get our latest research delivered straight to your inbox. Subscribe at [commonslibrary.parliament.uk/subscribe](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/subscribe) or scan the code below:



 [commonslibrary.parliament.uk](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk)

 [@commonslibrary](https://twitter.com/commonslibrary)