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1.2.1. Fall of the Assad government

On 27 November 2024, the militant Islamist group HTS, led by Ahmad Al-Sharaa80, led a large-scale offensive81 in northwestern Syria.82 Until then, the HTS's influence had been limited to parts of the governorates of Aleppo and Idlib.83 The initial assault aimed at separating the opposition-controlled 'Greater Idlib pocket' from the majority of Aleppo governorate controlled by pro-GoS forces. The operation involved a coalition of rebel factions, which included amongst others the Turkish-backed SNA.84 From the east, the Kurdish-led SDF deployed their fighters to territories in areas west of the Euphrates river in the governorate of Deir Ez-Zor that had previously been under the control of the Syrian army.85 By 1 December, HTS and its allied factions had captured Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city, followed by the seizure of Hama on 5 December and Homs, the third-largest city, on 7 December.86

Meanwhile, rebel forces from southern Syria advanced into Dar'a, achieving control of over 90 % of the governorate as government forces withdrew.87 In Sweida, Druze factions assumed control.88 Factions from the South formed the Southern Operations Room to support the uprising and were the first to enter Damascus,89 though they withdrew to Dar'a upon HTS' arrival in the capital.90 On 8 December 2024, the rebels declared victory in the capital. Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad fled the country that day, seeking refuge in Russia, where he was granted asylum.91

The opposition faced minimal resistance throughout their campaign, as Syrian army forces abandoned their positions,92 allowing rebels to enter the capital with little resistance.93 Contributing factors to the fast downfall of the previous Syrian government included war fatigue, corruption, a neglected army and weakened allies.94 The collapse of the Syrian army sparked widespread demonstrations in the rural areas surrounding Damascus, with civilians dismantling Assad's symbols and targeting military sites.95

Despite its long-standing alliance with Assad, Russia was unable to counter the rapid advance of opposition forces, while Iran's involvement was similarly ineffective. Although Russian warplanes initially launched strikes against the militants 96as well as against civilians, including some who were celebrating the oppositions' advances,97 Moscow's military support diminished as the rebels' swift progression outpaced its response.98

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