

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 militants⁹⁶ as 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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