

The data from this report come from the November 1, 2024, version of GRID—the GTTAC Record of Incidents Database.

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RESEARCH BRIEF
The Global Terrorism and Trends Analysis Center



The Evolving Dynamics of the Syrian Civil War: Syria's Rebels and Uncertain Future



December 23, 2024

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The GTTAC Record of Incidents Database (GRID) collects and classifies open-source data on terrorism incidents globally and is used to support the development of the Annex of Statistical Information for the Country Reports on Terrorism. Data used in this report are from the GRID. Views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the United States government.

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The Syrian civil war had been relatively quiet in recent years, experiencing only minor skirmishes and no major changes in control. This changed abruptly when rebels took advantage of President Assad's key allies' preoccupation with other conflicts. Since early in 2022, Russia's conflict in Ukraine has diverted substantial manpower and resources. Russia's focus and most of its military assets—including troops, fighter jets, and mercenaries—are now concentrated on Ukraine, unlike its resource allocation during its 2015 intervention in Syria that supported Assad. The attention on Ukraine contributed to the Syrian military's rapid defeat by rebel groups in late November 2024 and the fall of the Assad regime in early December.

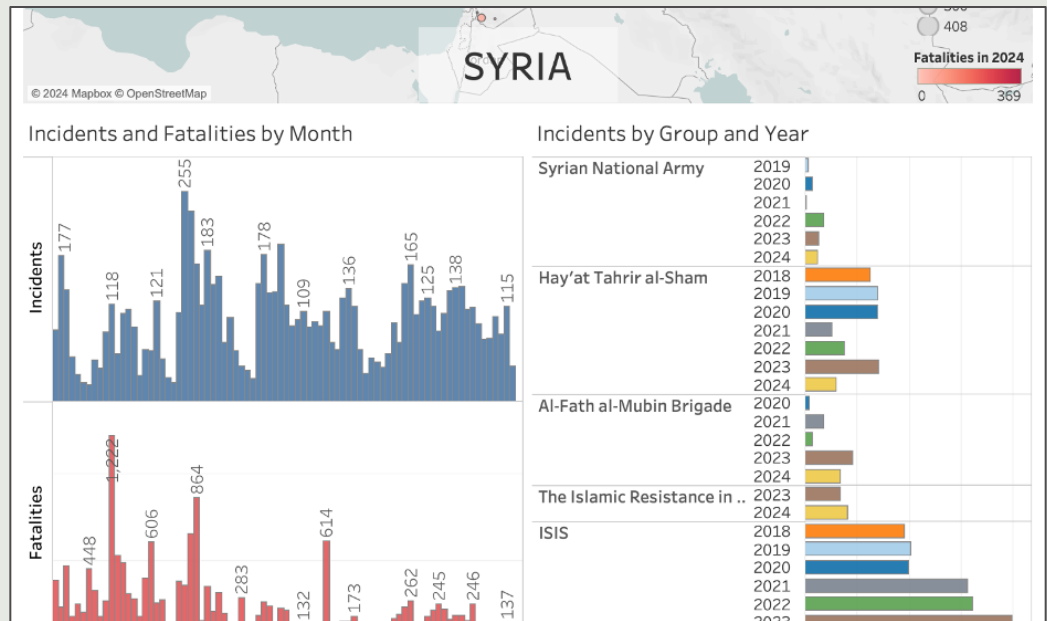
Similarly, at the height of the civil war in 2015, Iran deployed hundreds of troops and spent billions of dollars to support Assad. Thousands of Shiite fighters—primarily from Lebanon's Hizballah but also from Iran-backed groups in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen—have fought alongside the Syrian Arab Army.

However, the capabilities of Iranian-backed groups have been strained severely by their heightened conflict with Israel over the past year, in the wake of the war in Gaza. Hizballah, Iran's key proxy that once bolstered Assad, has suffered heavy losses from continual Israeli military actions and airstrikes in Lebanon and Syria.

Türkiye has been active during Syria's civil war, supporting rebel factions with arms, military, and political support.



Figure 1. Attacks From Nonstate Actors in Syria (2018 to October 2024; Source: GTTAC Record of Incidents Database [GRID])



These Türkiye-backed groups fight mostly under the banner of the Syrian National Army to contain the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) militia. Türkiye accuses the YPG of being an extension of a domestically banned Kurdish rebel group, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), separatists designated as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) by the United States. Türkiye also wants the roughly three million Syrian refugees living there to return home.

The YPG is the largest militia force in the U.S.-backed and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alliance, which controls much of Syria’s Northeast. The SDF largely avoided conflict with Assad’s forces during the war.

However, Turkish troops and allied rebels seized stretches of territory from the YPG and SDF along Syria’s northern border. In 2020, Türkiye and Russia mediated a ceasefire to stop the Syrian government’s attempt to reclaim Idlib, a stronghold of rebels in the Northwest. The region was controlled primarily by the Islamist faction Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which subsequently played a key role in overthrowing the Assad regime.

HTS claims to have severed ties with al-Qa’ida in 2016 and has fought against the remnants of the terrorist group in northwest Syria. Despite this, in May 2018 the U.S. Department of State linked HTS to the al-Nusra Front, al-Qa’ida’s former branch in Syria, with the

GTTAC Defining Terrorism

An incident is deemed a terrorist act if it conforms with Title 22, Section 2656f, of the U.S. Code. It is therefore defined as a violent act carried out by nonstate actors that meets the following inclusion criteria:

- The violent act aims to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal.
- The violent act includes evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to an audience (or audiences) larger than the immediate victims.
- The violent act occurred outside the precepts of international humanitarian law, as far as it targeted non-combatants.

The Global Terrorism Trends and Analysis Center includes only those incidents for which all three criteria were met. In some cases where terrorists initiate an action that targets military forces rather than non-combatants, this would be considered an incident.



purpose of designating HTS as an FTO.

In recent years, HTS and allied groups typically have coordinated attacks through the HTS-led alliance called al-Fatah al-Mubin Brigade, targeting military positions of the Syrian Arab Army and its allied militia in Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia Governorates.

On November 27 a coalition of rebel groups in northern Syria, led by HTS, exploited this power vacuum by launching a surprise armed offensive, dubbed “Repelling the Aggression,” against Syrian government forces in Aleppo, aiming to “liberate territory.”

By November 29 the rebels, having advanced through western Aleppo, entered the city center of Aleppo, the provincial capital. Concurrently, factions of the Türkiye-backed Syrian National Army, which are active in northern Aleppo, launched a separate assault on areas held by the SDF.

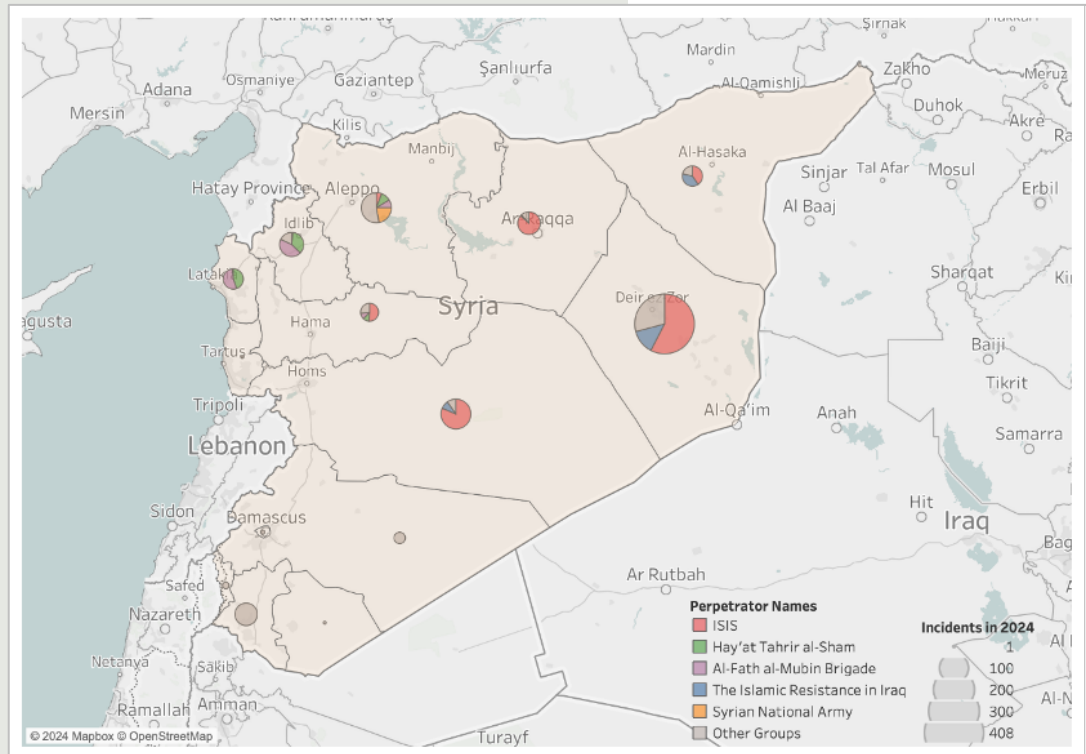
On Sunday, December 8, the rebel groups entered Damascus and ended the rule of the Assad family, which had been in power since 1971. An offensive that could have led to months of prolonged fighting concluded in days, culminating in a nearly uncontested march into the capital.

While many unknowns remain, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has begun dismantling Assad’s government and establishing its own administration. As of today, the discourse of the HTS leader and the interim prime minister has been positive, giving hope that a highly fractured and traumatized society will be afforded an opportunity to reconcile.

Understanding the Data

GRID records only those incidents that meet its criteria for inclusion. While some incidents do meet those criteria, this is not necessarily representative of some of the complex and multifaceted incidents.

Figure 2. Nonstate Actors and Their Attacks in Syria (2018 to October 2024; Source: GRID)





As the host to more than three million Syrian refugees, Türkiye has significant expectations from the new developments in Syria and seeks stability there to facilitate the safe and voluntary return of these refugees to their homelands. An active supporter of the Syrian National Army (SNA), Türkiye has also maintained a complex relationship with HTS. Notably, Türkiye's intelligence chief recently was seen alongside HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani in Damascus, signaling strong relations with HTS and a willingness to engage with influential actors in Syria.

However, Türkiye's primary concern remains the Kurdish armed group known as the People's Protection Units (YPG). Ankara views the YPG as an extension of the PKK. Türkiye's strategic objective is to establish a buffer zone along its southern border to prevent the YPG's influence from extending into Turkish territory.

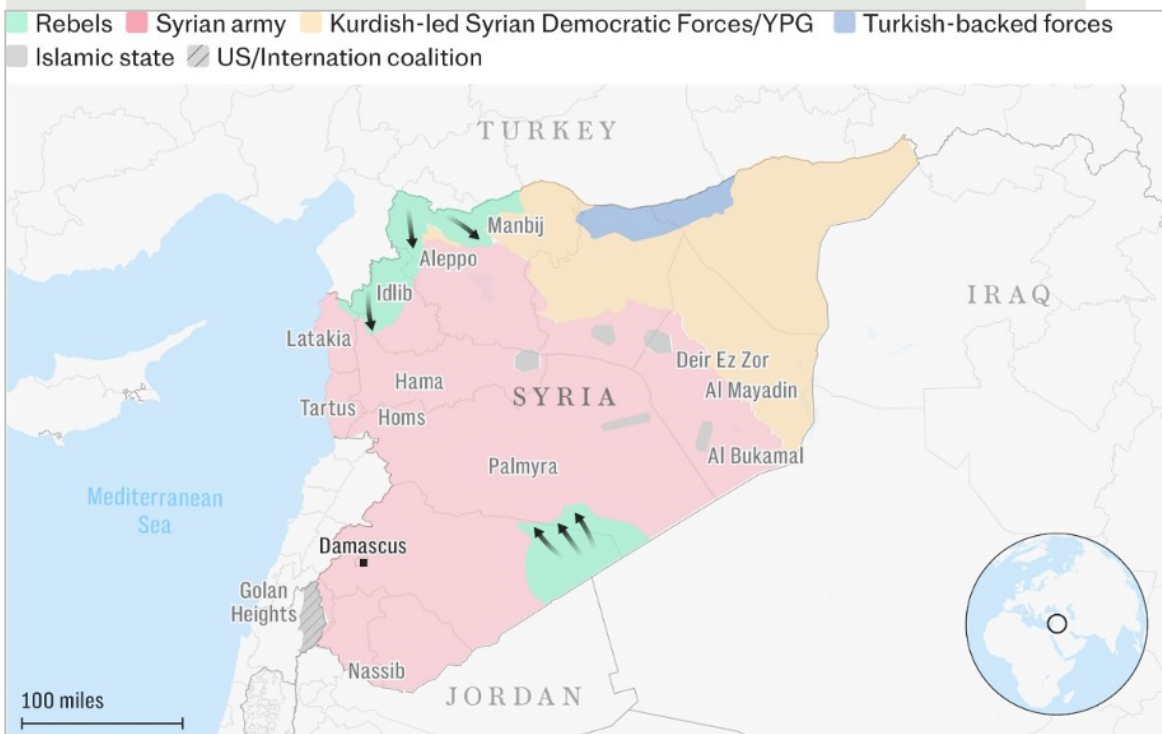
On December 6, 2024, the Turkish-backed SNA began large and intensifying military operations in the eastern countryside of Aleppo Governorate. The operations included intensive drone surveillance and artillery strikes against multiple communities in the northwestern countryside of Manbij under SDF control.

Following a ceasefire agreement brokered by the United States, the SDF withdrew its troops on December 11, ending five days of conflict. In light of President-elect Trump's initial

Review the Data

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Figure 3. November 27: HTS Launches Offensive Against the Syrian Army From the Northwest of the Country and Marches on Aleppo (courtesy of Telegraph)





statements on Syria, it appears the United States will adopt a more hands-off military policy, placing the onus on regional actors, particularly Türkiye, to take on a leading role.

It is possible that ISIS will try to take advantage of the power shift in Syria to regroup, especially in the areas controlled by the SDF such as eastern Deir Ezzor and Raqqa, while HTS advances toward eastern Syria. HTS rebels captured the city of Deir Ezzor after intense battles with the Kurdish-led SDF and claimed that the group will advance toward Raqqa and Hasakah and other areas in eastern Syria.

It is highly probable that the Sunni Arab divisions operating under the SDF-backed Deir Ezzor military council will split from the formation and join the HTS forces. The fate of the Kurdish forces would depend upon the U.S. decision whether to continue its presence in Syria.

In the aftermath of decades of conflict and the authoritarian and brutal Assad regime, there is cautious hope that HTS can fulfill its promises to establish an inclusive, functional, and legitimate government. However, Syria will require significant economic and political support from regional countries and the United States to seize this opportunity.

Figure 4. Reported Control of Terrain in Syria (as of December 8, 2024; map and legend courtesy of the Institute for the Study of War)

