

# Who Are the Terror Groups That Now Control Syria?

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has done the lion's share of the fighting in the past two weeks—but who is behind this group?

12 5 Play Save

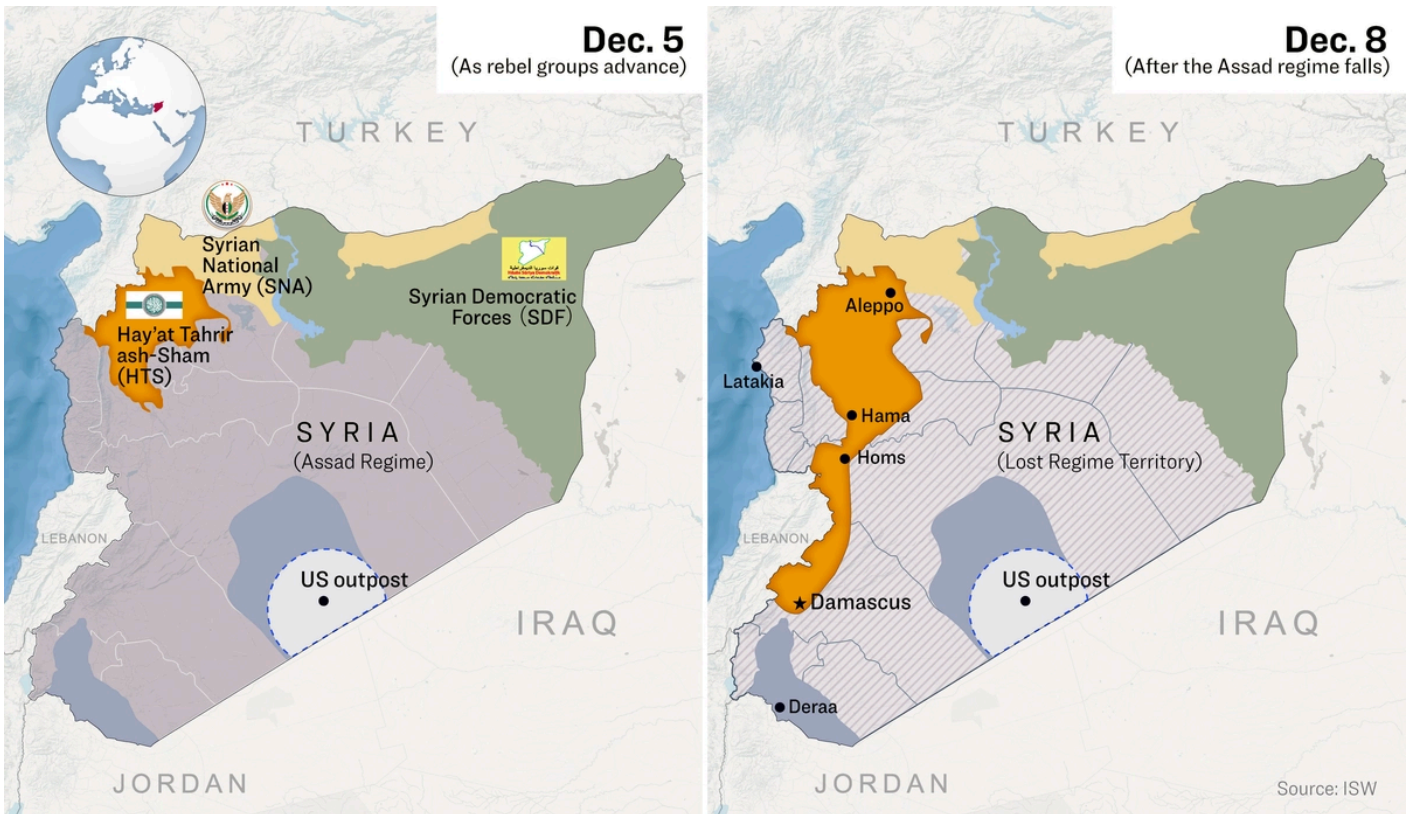


Illustration by The Epoch Times

After more than 50 years in power, the Assad regime has fallen, and former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has fled to Moscow.

Who does that leave in charge of Syria?

There are at least five different groups in control of different parts of Syria. Here's who they are.

## Share



### Hayat Tahrir al-Sham



The main terror group—which seized Aleppo, Hama, and Homs in a whirlwind offensive starting on Nov. 27 and culminating in the Assad regime collapse on Dec. 7—is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which means Organization for Liberating Syria, in Arabic.



HTS began as al-Nusra Front, an affiliate of al-Qaeda, the Islamist terrorist group founded by the late Osama bin Laden. The group was [designated](#) a foreign terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department in 2018.

Its leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, who uses the nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Golani, is the subject of a \$10 million [bounty](#) by the United States.

In his first televised interview in 2014, al-Golani told the Qatari network Al Jazeera his goal was to see Syria ruled under Islamic law and said there was no room for Alawite, Shiite, Druze, and Christian minorities.

The group has committed human rights abuses “including torture, forced disappearance, rape and other sexual violence, and killing in detention,” that the United Nations documented through 2020, [according](#) to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

“Having taken over government prisons and established additional jails, HTS has used sectarian motivated detention and related abduction and demands for ransom against members of minority groups,” the Commission said.

Al-Golani has changed his tune considerably in the past decade.

In 2021, he told a U.S. journalist from the PBS network that HTS poses no threat to the West.

“Yes, we have criticized Western policies,” said al-Golani, who then sported a blazer and slicked back hair. ”But to wage a war against the United States or Europe from Syria, that’s not true.

“We didn’t say we wanted to fight.”



Hayat Tahrir al-Sham leader Abu Mohammed al-Golani addresses a crowd at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, Syria, on Dec. 8, 2024. Abdulaziz Ketaz/AFP via Getty Images

For the past eight years, HTS has been on the defensive, holed up in Idlib Province in the far northwest of Syria.

But as Russia became increasingly disengaged from Syria as a result of its war in Ukraine, HTS saw the opportunity to test the resolve of the Assad regime's troops.

On Nov. 27, it launched a surprise attack on Aleppo and soon found Assad's troops were falling back, fighting without Russian air support, and not showing the brutality they had previously conducted.

Al-Golani spotted the opportunity to drive south, taking the city of [Hama](#) and then [Homs](#) and Damascus.

### Premium Picks

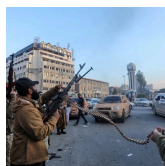
---



US Launched Airstrikes in Syria Targeting ISIS Terrorists, Central Command Confirms



Rebels Exert Control Over Syria as Assad Given Sanctuary in Moscow



It Would Be a Mistake to Label Syria an Ex-terrorist Haven Just Yet

Throughout the offensive, al-Golani and the HTS carefully choreographed social media propaganda to portray itself as a Syrian nationalist group.

Before the fall of Damascus, al-Golani told CNN: "Syria deserves a governing system that is institutional, no one where a single ruler makes arbitrary decisions.

"Don't judge by words, but by actions."

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom said in a 2022 [fact sheet](#) that “Despite HTS’s concerted public relations campaign to rehabilitate its image, its authoritarian and ideologically driven governance—as well as its ever-evolving relations with other non-state and state actors vying for control in parts of Syria—puts northwest Syria’s religiously diverse population at continued risk.”

## How HTS-led Rebels Advanced Rapidly South to Damascus

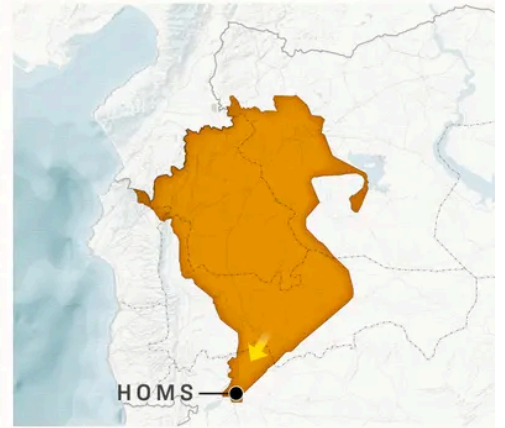
**Dec. 3** HTS advances south, and east to take Aleppo, Syria's second largest city.



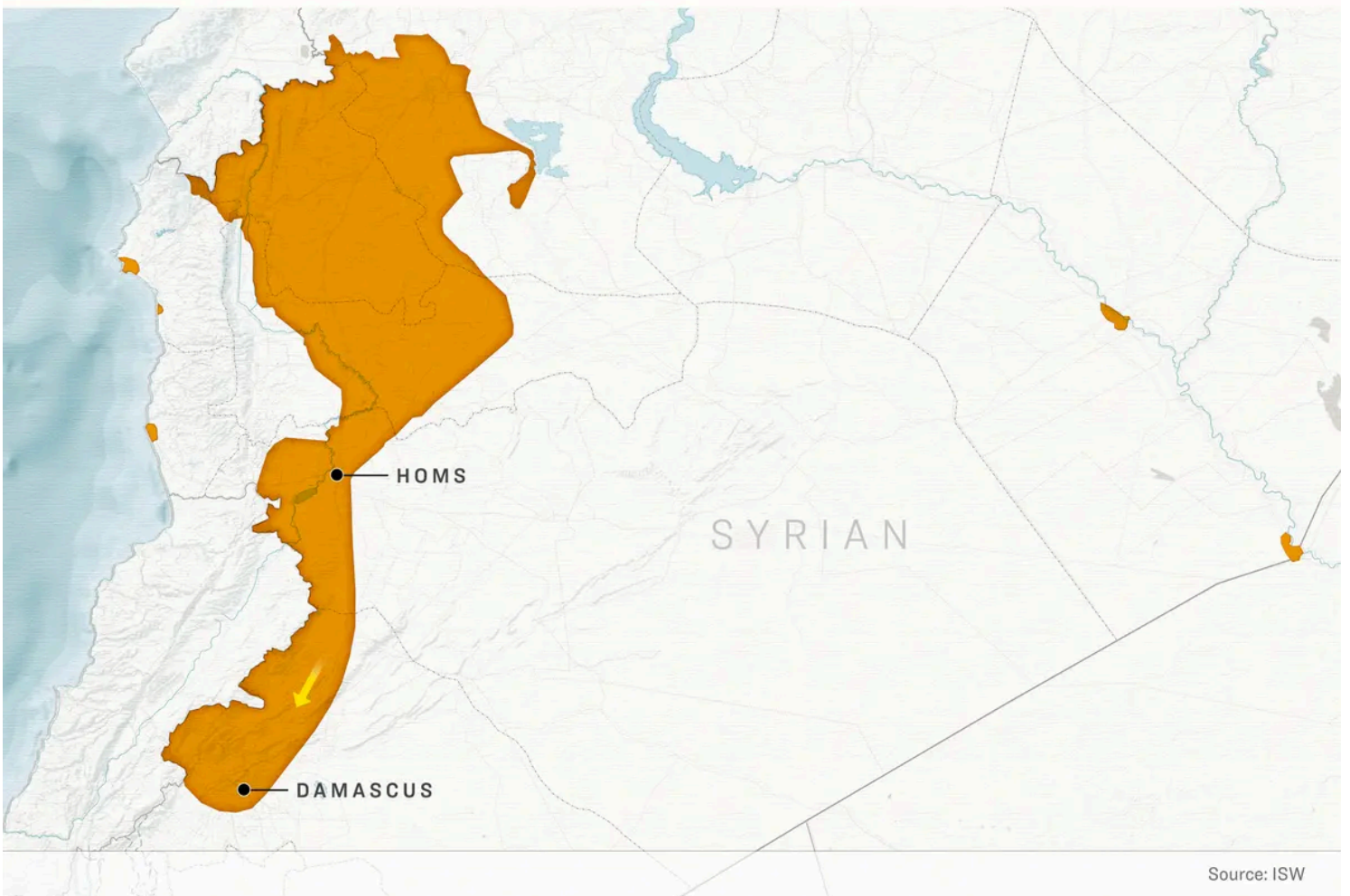
**Dec. 5** HTS takes another key city, Hama.



**Dec. 7** HTS now controls the country's third largest city, Homs.



**Dec. 8** HTS claims victory over the country as they take the capital, Damascus.



Source: ISW

Illustration by The Epoch Times

# Syrian National Army

The Syrian National Army (SNA)—different from Assad’s own Syrian Arab Army—was formed by soldiers who had defected from Assad’s army in 2011.

The SNA—originally known as the Free Syrian Army—backed by the Turkish military, was sent to push both ISIS and Kurdish forces away from the frontier with Turkey.

The SNA now controls a large swath of territory in northern Syria, parallel to the Turkish border.

When the HTS began its offensive against the Assad regime on Nov. 27, the SNA joined it and took part in the fighting in Aleppo.

When the HTS turned south toward Hama and Damascus, the SNA headed eastward, taking territory from the Assad regime but then butting heads with the Kurdish-led forces around Manbij.

## Syrian Democratic Forces

Syria, like neighboring Turkey and Iran, has a sizable Kurdish minority, and when the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) organized itself into the People’s Protection Units (YPG), which took control of large swaths of northeast Syria in 2012 as the Assad regime pulled troops out to fight enemies elsewhere.

Turkey saw the YPG as inseparable from the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a terrorist group that has fought for an independent Kurdish state in southeast Turkey.

In October, PKK terrorists killed five people during an attack on a Turkish aerospace factory in [Ankara](#).

But in Syria, the YPG was one of the few armies able to stand up to ISIS, and it was supported by the United States after 2014.

The YPG later formed the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an alliance of Kurdish and Arab militias.

The SDF now controls most of Syria, east of the Euphrates river, including the former ISIS capital of Raqqa, which is collectively known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

On Dec. 6, the SDF captured Deir el-Zor, another major city in eastern Syria.

And on Dec. 8 and Dec. 9, its forces fought with the rival SNA for control of the city of Manbij.

There are unconfirmed reports the SNA has ousted the SDF from Manbij.





## Southern Operations Room

In the past couple of weeks, a new rebel group appeared in the far south of Syria, taking the city of Daraa, which had been the birthplace of the uprising against the Assad regime in April 2011.

It is known as the Southern Operations Room (SOR) and includes fighters from the Druze minority, who also live in southern Lebanon and Israel’s Golan Heights.

## ISIS

There are still remnants of the extreme jihadist group ISIS, sometimes referred to as Daesh, in the east of Syria, but it appears to be far from the threat it was between 2014 and 2018.

On Dec. 2, Pentagon spokesman Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder told reporters that U.S. forces deployed in Syria were “singularly focused on the enduring defeat of ISIS and ... remain essential to ensuring that ISIS can never again resurge in Syria.”

Roughly 900 U.S. troops are currently deployed in Syria, where they control oil fields located near the east bank of the Euphrates River.

ISIS gained prominence in 2013 and swiftly conquered territory in eastern Syria and northern Iraq, ruling it together as a self-titled caliphate.

It displayed astonishing brutality, including beheading Western hostages and captured soldiers, but was eventually defeated militarily by a combination of U.S., Iraqi, Syrian, and Kurdish forces.

Reuters contributed to this report.

## More Premium Reports

[See More](#)



### Hurricane Helene Recovery in North Carolina Town Fueled by Devoted Locals



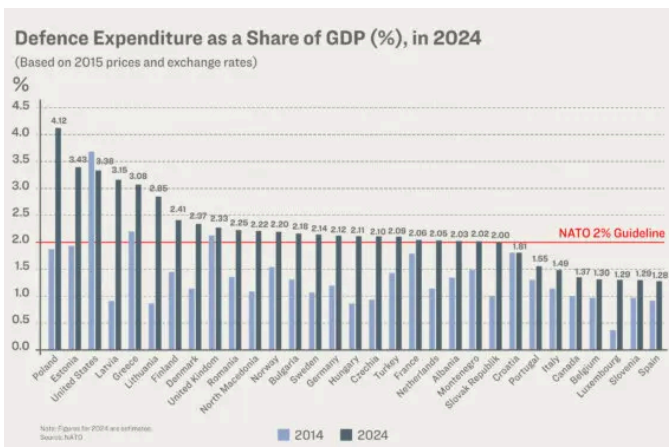
### Landlords Increasingly Faced With Squatters, Sometimes With Deadly Consequences



### In Secret Meeting, Xi Jinping Ordered New Strategy to Attack Falun Gong Globally



### With DOGE, Musk, Ramaswamy Confront the 'Immovable Object'



## Majority of NATO Nations Show Sharp Uptick in Military Spending



## What to Expect From Trump Administration's Mass Deportation Plans



## California Residents Say Toxic Landfill Is Sickening Them; Landfill Says It's Under Control

## Why More Middle Income Americans Are Struggling to Save Money



## The Hunt for the Best Christmas Tree Ever



## Colorado Mountain Man Has Been Logging Weather for 50 Years