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**Strategic and geopolitical  
implications of the regime  
change in Syria***Strategic and geopolitical implications of the regime  
change in Syria***Abstract:**

The overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's government in December 2024 marks a dramatic shift in the strategic outlook of Syria and the Middle East. Despite the apparent end of the country's long-standing civil war, the seizure of power by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) generates uncertainty and may lead to renewed tensions, geopolitical rivalries between powers or even the reactivation of the conflict. This readjustment carries profound implications on multiple levels. Firstly, domestically, the radical nature of HTS and its ties to jihadism threaten the stability and the establishment of a plural and legitimate government after the conflict. Then, at the regional level, these changes underway foster competition among regional actors such as Turkey, Israel and Iran, each seeking to expand their influence in pursuit of their strategic interests. Finally, Syria regains prominence on the global geopolitical stage, affecting major international actors like the United States, Russia and the European Union at a time of significant transformations within the international order. Therefore, the aim of this article is to analyse the set of geopolitical dynamics and the strategic outlook, both locally and internationally, in order to understand the consequences of HTS's rise to power in Syria.

**Keywords:**

Syria, Middle East, jihadism, international geopolitics, HTS

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## Introduction and current context

On 8 December 2024 one of the most complex conflicts of our century came to an end. The Syrian civil war was at a stalemate since 2020, with Bashar al-Assad's regime controlling two thirds of the country and the main cities. Meanwhile, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), linked to the Kurds, dominated the northeastern province of Rojava, the islamists of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in the northwest in Idlib, and the pro-Turkish Syrian National Army (SNA) held the border northern provinces of Al Raqqa and Halab, along with Turkish troops. Despite the apparent stagnation and the government's favourable position, on 27 November 2024 HTS launched a sudden offensive that, with the support of islamist factions and the SNA backed by Turkey, overthrowing Assad taking advantage of the weakness of the regime.

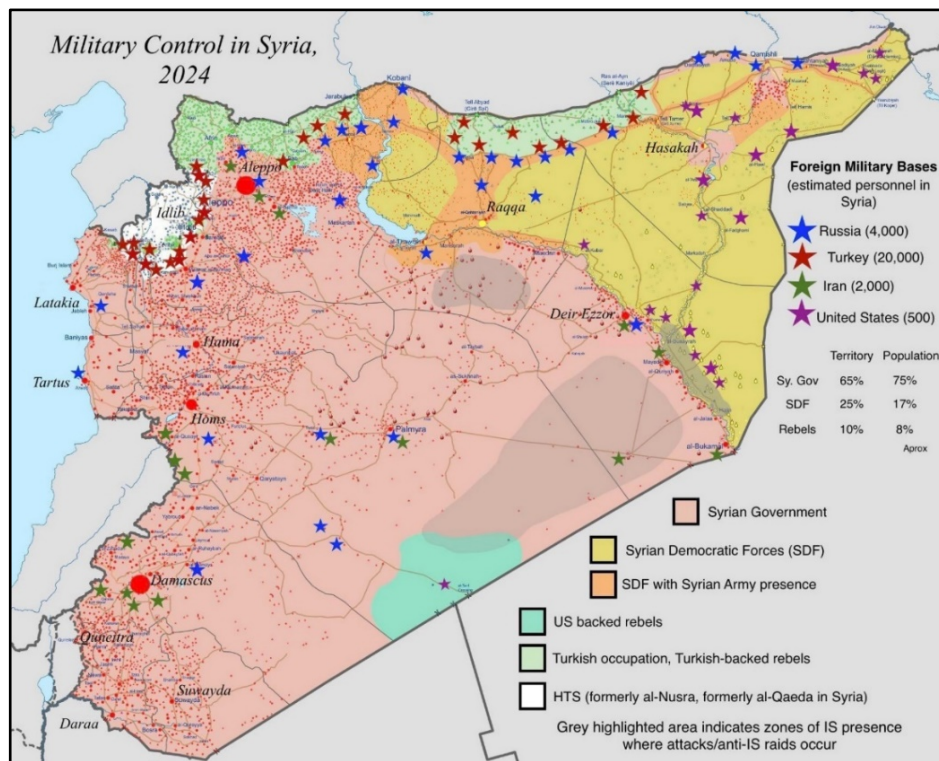


Figure 1. Map of the situation of the conflict and military foreign presence by November 2024. Source: Adapted from Wikimedia Commons

The exhaustion after over a decade of conflict, the harsh international sanctions or the diversion of Russian assets to Ukraine greatly weakened the Assad government at a political, economic and military level. This, added to the external pressure of Erdoğan's neo-Ottomanism or the confrontation of Israel against their allies of the Iranian Axis of Resistance. Such setting was leveraged by HTS, led by Mohammed al-Jolani, to make

breakthroughs and capture the capital city of Damascus in a matter of a few days, to force the flight of Assad and to achieve the de facto control of the country.

International geopolitical dynamics shaped the development of the Syrian civil war, as well as they were decisive for this regime change. Already since its breakout in 2011, it became a proxy war between the United States and the revisionist powers of Russia and Iran. The US was an ally since the very beginning of moderate opposition groups like the Free Syrian Army or the Kurds from the SDF in order to provoke a change in the government. On the other hand, Russia was a firm ally of the government of the Arab Republic of Syria and was pursuing to secure their strategic bases in Tartus and Latakia, providing crucial military support and making use of its veto power in the United Nations Security Council to veto any resolution to intervene in the war.

Plus, between 2014 and 2019 the Islamic State entailed a great threat to international security because of its rapid expansion throughout Syria and Iraq, but, thanks to the respective efforts by Washington and Moscow, it was possible to neutralise this jihadist organisation along with local forces. Meanwhile, Syria took part in the Axis of Resistance led by the Islamic Republic of Iran, historical strategic ally that pursued to extend their regional influence through their military support and that of other aligned militias, like the Lebanese Shia organisation of Hezbollah.

Likewise, islamist militias were instrumentalised during the war by Turkey as an attempt to repress the Kurd separatist aspirations and to prevent the spillover effect to their own territory. Ankara gave utmost importance to Syria in their regional strategy, so they made use of Sunni militias like the SNA or HTS so as to protect their interests and consolidate their particular sphere of influence of islamist inclinations, sustained in their flexible and balanced relationships with all implied actors. In turn, Israel maintained an official position of non-intervention in the civil war, in spite of their traditional support to the Kurd community in Rojava and their self-determination or their firm opposition to the Assad regime, viewing its embeddedness into the Iranian sphere of influence as a great threat. In response to this, Israel intensified their attacks against Syria since October 2023.

To this confluence of various interests, it should be included the recent weakening of the government and its main allies. Russia had focused their efforts and resources in the war in Ukraine, and Iran and Hezbollah were drained after their confrontation against Israel.

The strategic readjustment of Moscow and the Axis of Resistance limited their respective capabilities to face the unexpected offensive by HTS, which counted on the strategic support of Turkey and their affiliated militias in Syria. As a result, the strategic alignment between Turkey and HTS: the islamist organisation would build an islamist-oriented regime in Syria in exchange for military, logistic and political support or international mediation. This way, the Turkish government would currently be the best positioned actor to protect their objectives among the existing tensions and divergences.

### **Consequences and impact of the new islamist regime in Syria**

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham or Organisation for the Liberation of the Levant is terrorist group of Salafist ideology established in 2017 as an scission from Al-Nusra Front, formerly known as Al Qaeda Syria. Its current leader, Mohammed al-Jolani, directed the just mentioned organisations, having also previously reached high-ranked positions in the leadership of Al Qaeda Iraq, the predecessor group to the Islamic State or ISIS.<sup>1</sup> Al-Jolani decided to separate from Al-Nusra in 2017 merely to avoid being an objective of Russian or US attacks for the fact of belonging to Al Qaeda structure. However, he or HTS never declared their renounce to jihadism or the objectives of this ideology.

The same day they seized power, HTS was considered a terrorist organisation by the UN Security Council, the European Union, Russia, the United States or the United Kingdom, among others. Besides, a search and warrant order with a bounty of 10 million dollars by the United States existed for the group's leader. This warrant was retired few days after the toppling in order to facilitate the establish of possible institutional relations with the new islamist regime. In fact, its leader actual name is Ahmed al-Sharaa, name which he is starting to use again as political figure to dissociate himself from its past as jihadist fighter.<sup>2</sup>

HTS was the central actor in Idlib, the islamist opposition stronghold, creating the self-determinate National Salvation Government in 2017. They opted since its establishment for a less radicalised discourse in order to gain legitimacy and key alliances like the Turkish. Nevertheless, during the last recent years the European Union Asylum Agency or the US Department of State denounced serious violations of human rights, women

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<sup>1</sup> Rodríguez, Yago. 2024. "Mohamed al-Jawlani, Un Lobo Con Piel De Cordero." The Political Room. 2024. <https://thepoliticalroom.com/blog/mohamed-al-jawlani-un-lobo-con-piel-de-cordero>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*

rights, terrorist attacks, repression against minorities or the imposition of the sharia law in Idlib.<sup>3</sup> Since they govern the country, HTS have tried to push for an image far from jihadism and have promised to respect religious plurality. Achieving a whitewashing of their image in the international community would allow them to obtain support from international (Turkey, Saudi Arabia or, potentially, the US) and local actors in turn of controlling the reactivation of groups associated to Assad or Iran, mainly.<sup>4</sup> HTS would seek pragmatic alliances with a view to clinging to power, using them as reliable counterbalances to contain the Iranian influence at a domestic level too.

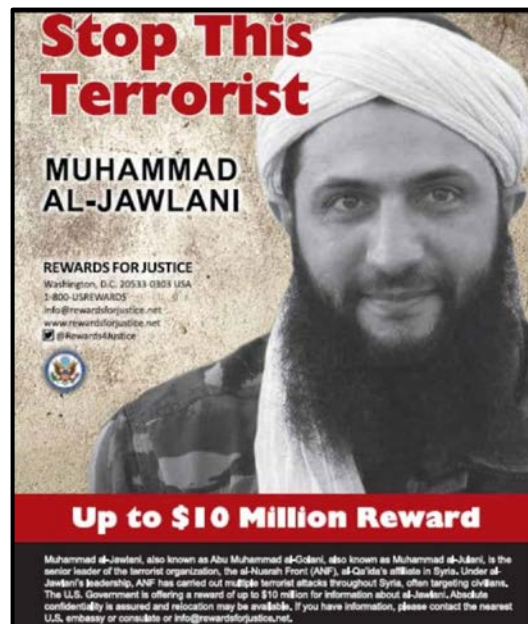


Figure 2. Search and capture warrant by the US Embassy in Syria for HTS leader Al-Jolani. Source: X

The doubts regarding the formal renounce to jihadism by HTS became stronger after just a few days in control of Syria, since the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) confirmed over a hundred extrajudicial executions and repression against the Alawite Shia community under the pretext of belonging to the previous governmental apparatus.<sup>5</sup> This situation reinforces sectarianism, because many individuals within the present

<sup>3</sup> European Union Agency for Asylum. 2020. "Syria. Anti-government Armed Groups." EUAA.

<https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-syria/13-anti-government-armed-groups>.

United States Department of State. 2024. "2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Syria" Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/syria/>.

<sup>4</sup> Dzulhisham, H. E. 2025. "The Future of Iran's Axis of Resistance in Syria and Lebanon." Nanyang Technological University of Singapore - S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. March 3, 2025. <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/the-future-of-irans-axis-of-resistance-in-syria-and-lebanon/>.

<sup>5</sup> RTVE. 2025. "Represalias Y Ejecuciones En Los Antiguos Bastiones Del Régimen De Al Asad."

<https://www.rtve.es/play/videos/telediario-fin-de-semana/represalias-ejecuciones-antiguos-bastiones-regimen-asad/16403366/>.

security forces act under a jihadist ideology, what spreads fear among non-Sunni communities. Unlike the Druze (religious minority of Arab ethnicity concentrated in Sweida) or the Kurds, the Christian and Alawite groups lack own militias that can guarantee their security. Hence, on March 6<sup>th</sup> Alawite factions rebelled against military objectives of the regime in response to marginalisation and as a sign of rejection.

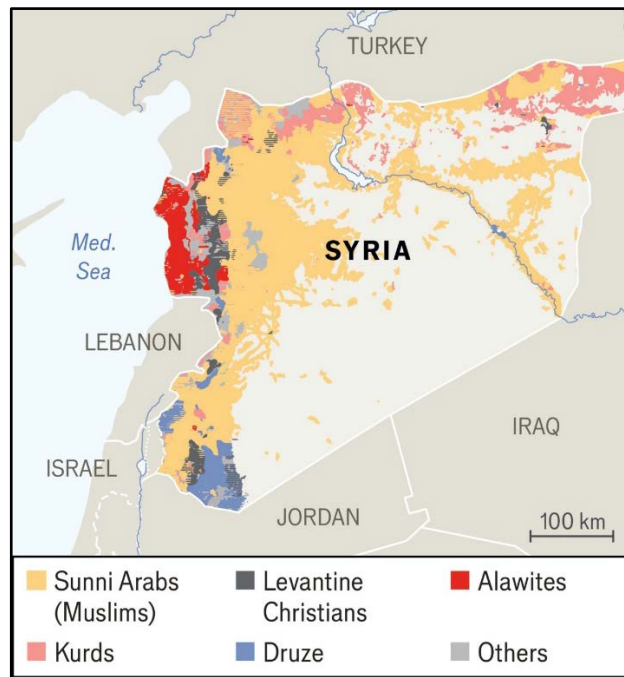


Figure 3. Ethnic map of Syria. Source: The Economist

The authorities responded with a harsh repression against these minorities, with the SOHR confirming 1454 casualties (973 of which were civilians, mostly Alawite and Christian) in the following 72 hours <sup>6</sup> and UNHCR the forced flee to Lebanon of at least 15 thousand people in eleven days.<sup>7</sup> The incidents were reported for weeks and MEP Nikolas Farantouris declared, thanks to his presence on the ground and local sources, that governmental forces took the lives of over 7 000 civilian Alawites and Christians, looted their businesses and destroyed their houses in an attempt to force their ethnic cleansing.<sup>8</sup> In addition to this, on account of the absence of official data, French scholar Fabrice Balanche estimates the number of casualties around 5 000, based on extraofficial

<sup>6</sup> The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights. (2025, 9 marzo). *Genocide in Syrian coastline and Latakia mountains 72 hours on*. SOHR. <https://www.syriahr.com/en/357479/>

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR. 2025. "UNHCR Lebanon flash update - February-March 2025." *UNHCR Lebanon*. <https://www.unhcr.org/lb/media/unhcr-lebanon-flash-update-february-march-2025>.

<sup>8</sup> Farantouris, N. (2025, 17 marzo). "URGENT - Concerns regarding the situation in Syria." Enviado a la presidencia del Parlamento Europeo, Consejo de la UE, Comisión Europea y la Alta Representante de la UE. Disponible en: <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/GmQX6OZXIAA9oY?format=jpg&name=large>.

sources.<sup>9</sup> Such repression has not been justified yet by the government, but all points to Islamist members in their ranks.<sup>10</sup> It must be noted how radical figures related to the regime have publicly called for acts of this kind, for example, the case of Egyptian jihadist and sharia authority Yahya Taher al-Farghali.<sup>11</sup>

Considering all these reasons, it could be stated that HTS has not completely separated itself from jihadist influences and more guarantees are needed for a legitimate and plural government. The Syrian people require of a political framework that truly ensures the stability, not mere declarations by the new authorities. Authorities that took national power violently with a military offensive and postpone the celebration of elections in Syria for at least four years.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, the coexistence between identitarian groups could be at risk as a product of religious authoritarianism.

## Regional geopolitical effects and opportunities

### *Turkey*

The Turks might be the actor whose strategic position has been the most reinforced after the rise to power by HTS, with whom they have cooperated since its creation against the past government. The decisive strategic support from Ankara in the offensive is oriented at the consolidation of the new Syria within their sphere of influence, mutually assisting each other in their goals. In this regard, it is primordial to assess the weight of Sunni Islamism for Erdoğan in his geopolitical envisioning, who now sees in the transitional authorities a central pillar in his project, along with the successful containment of the influence of the Moscow-Tehran partnership.<sup>13</sup>

This, alongside a critical posture against Israel, helps bolster the Turkish soft power in

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<sup>9</sup> Balanche, Fabrice. 2025. "Geography of the Alawites Massacre" Fabrice Balanche. March 25th 2025. <https://www.fabricebalanche.com/en/analysis/geography-of-the-alawite-massacre/>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>11</sup> Al-Farghali published a post on Facebook in which he called for the ethnic cleansing of Christians and Alawites to change the demography of the Syrian coast and to settle over 80.000 jihadist foreign fighters with the purpose of consolidating radical Islam. Post by this HTS member available [here](#). Additional article available [here](#).

<sup>12</sup> Reuters. (2025, February 3<sup>rd</sup>). Syria's Sharaa says it will take 4-5 years to hold presidential election. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-sharaa-says-it-will-take-4-5-years-hold-presidential-election-2025-02-03/>

<sup>13</sup> Dalay, Galip. 2024. "Turkey has emerged as a winner in Syria but must now use its influence to help build peace." Royal Institute of International Affairs. Chatham House. December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2024. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/12/turkey-has-emerged-winner-syria-must-now-use-its-influence-help-build-peace>.

the Islamic world, presenting itself as a saviour of the Syrian people and collaboration in the reconstruction of the country. Reconstruction in which Turkish companies will have an essential role, assisting to the growth of the national economy, where the construction and infrastructure sector is fundamental. Also, this serves to reduce the enormous pressured generated by the 3,5 million Syrian refugees in the country, facilitating their return and contributing to the domestic stabilisation.<sup>14</sup>

A convergent area for HTS and Turkey would be the Kurdish question. The SDF defend since the change of regime that they no longer seek the secession from Syria and are willing to take part in a plural government, maybe because of their weakened position before both actors, having to relinquish their separatist or autonomy ambitions. Indeed, on March 10<sup>th</sup> the leader of HTS, al-Jolani, and that of the SDF, Mazloun Abdi, agreed to the integration of the military and civilian institutions controlled by the SDF in Rojava within the new state structure.<sup>15</sup> This surprising movement after years of enmity might respond to the Kurdish fear for the potential withdrawal of US troops, their principal ally. As a result of this, before being at the mercy of Damascus and Ankara, they have apparently opted for obtaining security guarantees in return for the renouncement to autonomy plans. Then, Turkey sees the Kurdish threat neutralised and manages to reach a longstanding security priority, also thanks to the dissolution and abandonment of the armed fight by the PKK.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, Turkey has experienced an increase in their regional power share in relation to Israel, Iran or Russian without a direct confrontation. After years of implication in northern Syria, constrained by the Assad government and its allies, Turkey can now expand their military presence and posts throughout all the territory and influence the conformation of state institutions. They seem to have reached an agreement for the use or temporary cession of the air bases of Althias, Tadmur and Minaq, evidencing enhanced defence and military cooperation.<sup>17</sup> This agreement would allow a greater scope in their

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<sup>14</sup> Barkey, Henri J. 2024. "What Role Is Turkey Playing in Syria's Civil War?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/what-role-turkey-playing-syrias-civil-war>.

<sup>15</sup> Berry, Alex. 2025. "Syria: Sharaa Signs Integration Deal With Kurdish-led Forces." *Dw.Com (Deutsche Welle)*, March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025. <https://www.dw.com/en/syria-sharaa-signs-integration-deal-with-kurdish-led-forces/a-71885130>.

<sup>16</sup> Initials for the Kurdistan Workers Party, separatist organisation that pursues the independence of the Kurdish people in Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey. Classified as a terrorist organisation by the EU, the US and Turkey.

<sup>17</sup> Beeri, T. & Shapira, B. (March 25<sup>th</sup> 2025). *Syria – Turkish Presence in Military Airports and Aerial Friction with Israel*. Alma Research And Education Center. <https://israel-alma.org/syria-turkish-presence-in-military-airports-and-aerial-friction-with-israel/>

operations and the potential capture of intelligence information about rivals in the region: Iranian militias, Israeli moves, activity from Kurdish groups or opposition factions to HTS.

Turkey sees reinforced its position before Iran or Israel too, regarding this as victory in their particular regional struggle and being established as the dominant power in Syria. With respect to Moscow, Turkey required until recently the mediation of Putin in their relations with the Syrian government or the Kurds. Now that Russia needs to negotiate to retain their bases in the country, the roles are reversed and Turkey could step in their assistance so long as they agree to favourable conditions for Ankara, becoming an important counterbalance for the Russians.<sup>18</sup>

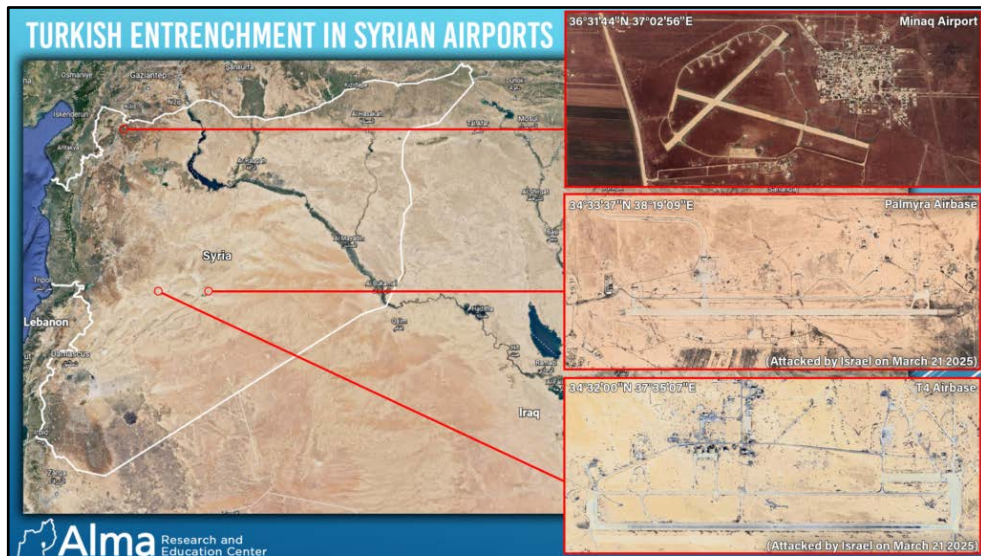


Figure 4. Entrenchment of Turkish positions in Syrian airports. Source: Alma Research and Education Centre

### *Iran*

By contrast, Iran may have suffered the greatest setback with the toppling, losing a firm ally and direct access to their assets in Lebanon, what could delay the rebuilding of Hezbollah after its dismantling in hands of Israel. This clash importantly tired the Axis of Resistance out, which was unable to effectively intervene in the offensive and was forced to withdraw its presence from Syria. This favours the Turks in the regional balance of power for now, but Tehran will probably bet on the enhancement of their alliance in

<sup>18</sup> Dalay, Galip. 2024. "Turkey has emerged as a winner in Syria but must now use its influence to help build peace." Royal Institute of International Affairs. Chatham House. Diciembre 13, 2024. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/12/turkey-has-emerged-winner-syria-must-now-use-its-influence-help-build-peace>.

Yemen or Iraq and the reconstruction of those in Syria and Lebanon to re-establish the pre-existing power configuration.<sup>19</sup>

Along these strategic lines, Iran could regain influence in the area through the Shia Popular Mobilisation Forces from Irak with a view to prevent a Turkish or Israeli dominance.<sup>20</sup> These groups may be able to de-stabilise HTS national project, seeking to retake control of the logistic and military aid to Hezbollah despite greater obstacles to do so. Other elements of this readjustment could be the escalation of Houthi actions in order to distract Israel or the United States or, also, leveraging sectarian tensions in Syria to instrumentalise the Alawite or Christian unrest in their own benefit, supporting militias that progressively exhaust the interim regime.<sup>21</sup>

### **Israel**

The State of Israel was one of the most interested parties in the fall of Assad, having intensified its airstrikes on Syria in the days before and after the overthrow, in what became its largest air campaign in decades,<sup>22</sup> contributing to paving the way for HTS. This aimed to weaken Syria's military power and eliminate its strategic or technologically advanced arsenal so that it would not fall into the wrong hands.<sup>23</sup> Its capabilities and logistics were then neutralised, with the new regime needing years on its own to fully recover. On the same day Damascus was taken, Israeli military forces rushed to extend their occupied territory beyond the Golan Heights, reaching Mount Hermon, around 30 km from the Syrian capital. Israel sought to strengthen its northern border with a wider buffer zone considering the political instability and nature of HTS.<sup>24</sup> This signals an ambition to impose conditions and rules in this new regional context, in which the fall of a

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<sup>19</sup> Dzulhisham, H. E. 2025. "The Future of Iran's Axis of Resistance in Syria and Lebanon." Nanyang Technological University of Singapore - S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. March 3, 2025. <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/the-future-of-irans-axis-of-resistance-in-syria-and-lebanon/>

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>21</sup> «What Was Syria's Violence About? Interview to Muhsen al-Mustafa». 2025 Interviewed by Michael Young. Carnegie Endowment For International Peace. March 11th 2025. <https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2025/03/what-was-syrias-violence-about?lang=en>.

<sup>22</sup> Al Abdullah, M., & d'Hauthuille, V. (December 19<sup>th</sup> 2024). *Syria: Israeli airstrikes reach an all-time high after Assad regime falls*. ACLED. <https://acleddata.com/2024/12/19/syria-israeli-airstrikes-reach-an-all-time-high-after-assad-regime-falls/>

<sup>23</sup> Strachota, K., Wasilewski, K., & Matusiak, M. (April 7th 2025). *No prospect for stability: internal and regional drivers of the situation in Syria*. OSW Commentary. Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich Centre for Eastern Studies. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2025-04-07/no-prospect-stability-internal-and-regional-drivers-situation>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*

strong ally of the Axis of Resistance benefits Tel Aviv's security objectives, while also hindering Hezbollah's reorganization in Lebanon.

At the same time, Israel would view the radical ideology of the new government and the growing Turkish influence in the area as clear risks. There is a deep distrust towards the al-Jolani regime, but Israeli media reported the existence of communication channels with the new authorities to impose conditions and guarantees, likely prompting the targeting of airbases that the Turkish military intended to use in Syria, since this was viewed as a threat.<sup>25</sup> With Syrian capabilities diminished, Israel would want to use its airspace to carry out potential autonomous actions against Iran, although Turkish presence poses a challenge and could lead to future frictions. Here, Israel would view Moscow as a key ally to counterbalance the Ottoman clientelism, welcoming the maintained presence of Russian bases in the country as a way to sustain a balance of power among powers.

Domestically, an alliance with the Druze community (a significant minority also within Israel) would be regarded as favourably in order to expand the buffer zone and extend its influence. A similar approach had been sought with the Kurds, aiming for security guarantees and to contain Turkish ambitions before the agreement with HTS. Thus, in the event of rights violations against Druze or other minorities, Israel could justify an intervention in the country. For now, HTS has shown neither hostility nor opposition to Israeli actions,<sup>26</sup> perhaps making concessions to avoid tensions or out of fear of retaliation. Ultimately, Tel Aviv will carry out a multidimensional strategy to eliminate any pro-Iranian resistance groups, contain Turkey's influence and deter any threat that might undermine its present or future security and geopolitical objectives in its regional power accumulation.

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<sup>25</sup> Beeri, T. & Shapira, B. (March 25th 2025). *Syria – Turkish Presence in Military Airports and Aerial Friction with Israel*. Alma Research And Education Center. <https://israel-alma.org/syria-turkish-presence-in-military-airports-and-aerial-friction-with-israel/>

<sup>26</sup> Beeri, T. & Shapira, B. (March 25th 2025). *Syria – Turkish Presence in Military Airports and Aerial Friction with Israel*. Alma Research And Education Center. <https://israel-alma.org/syria-turkish-presence-in-military-airports-and-aerial-friction-with-israel/>

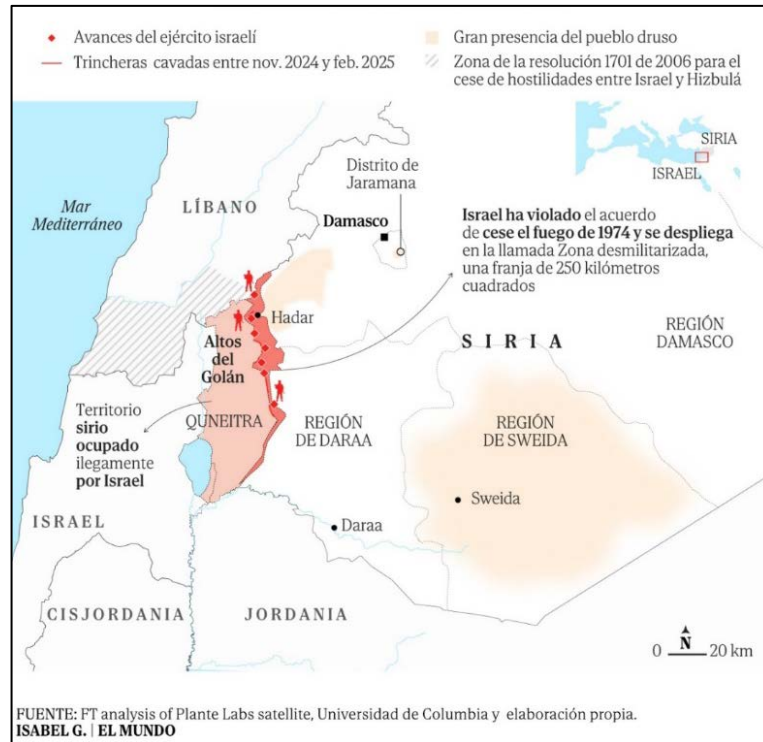


Figure 5. Map of Israeli occupation and Druze presence in Syria. Source: El Mundo

## Global strategic and geopolitical implications

### *Russia*

The fall of Assad was a considerable blow to the kremlin’s global interests, unable to react to the offensive owing to the exhaustion in Ukraine, being relegated by Turkey as the hegemonic power in the area. Russia would prioritise to maintain their airbase in Hmeimim and the port of Tartous, crucial in the logistics and operations in the Mediterranean, Africa and regional influence. Because of their strategic value, there is mutual interest with HTS in establishing relations and renegotiate conditions to retain them under Moscow’s control, in spite of the toppling of their ally Assad. This demonstrates pragmatism by HTS in their balanced diplomacy to cling onto power.<sup>27</sup>

Alternatively, it could be expected that Russia redistributes assets or relocates to airbases (Al Khadim, Al Qardabiyah and Matan al Sarra) and maritime bases (Tobruk) in Libya.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Department of Political Affairs in the Liberated Areas of Syria. 2024. “Zayavlenie, kasayushcheyesya grazhdan Kitaya i Rossii v Sirii [Declaration regarding Chinese and Russian citizens in Syria].” X. <https://x.com/syriadpa/status/1865151183515537712>.

<sup>28</sup> López Miralles, Iván. 2025. “El futuro de las bases rusas en Siria ante la nueva realidad política.” The Political Room. January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2025. <https://thepoliticalroom.com/blog/el-futuro-de-las-bases-rusas-en-siria-ante-la-nueva-realidad-politica>.

This situation has weakened Russian power projection and their capabilities of containing Turkish ambitions or fighting extremist surges, making cooperation with Israel necessary to counterbalance these challenges, always aiming to maintain a good understanding with Erdoğan too. Thereby, Putin would find himself in a more uncomfortable position when negotiating with Turkey on other issue such as Ukraine or Armenia. It should also not be overlooked that, as a NATO member, Ankara could potentially collaborate at some point to sabotage Russian objectives in Syria.

The Russians could use repression against minorities to justify their military presence in Syria, having sheltered thousands of Alawite and Christian civilians in their bases to protect them during the March crisis.<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting the importance of Russian forces underpinning the Assad regime and in the fight against ISIS during the civil war, but whereas they were once spread across various outposts throughout the country, they are now limited to the main bases they control.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, their role in tasks such as counterinsurgency against terrorist groups or maintaining stability will decrease considerably, shifting focus instead to using these bases as a bridge for their operations in Africa and as a counterweight to other powers, especially against Turkish hegemony or Western influence.

### **United States**

The change of regime was possibly assessed as an strategic victory in Washington after years of support to opposition groups and sanctions. The United States intervened since 2015 against the jihadist threat of ISIS and other organisations, closely collaborating with the SDF Kurds. With the defeat of terrorism, they maintained military presence (around 2000 troops according to the Pentagon at the time of the overthrow)<sup>31</sup> to support their Kurdish allies, conduct counterterrorism operations and contain Russian, Turkish, and

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It must be signalled that the port of Tobruk lacks the infrastructure to host Kilo class submarines, unlike the Tartous port.

<sup>29</sup> Reuters. 2025. "Russia says 9,000 Syrians fleeing violence have taken refuge at its Hmeimim air base," March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/russia-says-9000-syrians-fleeing-violence-have-taken-refuge-its-hmeimim-air-base-2025-03-13/>.

<sup>30</sup> Gumrukcu, Tuvan, Suleiman Al-Khalidi, and Guy Faulconbridge. 2024. "Exclusive: Russia pulling back but not out of Syria, sources say." Reuters, December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-pulling-back-not-out-syria-sources-say-2024-12-14/>.

<sup>31</sup> Olay, M. (December 19<sup>th</sup> 2024). *DOD Announces 2,000 Troops in Syria, Department Prepared for Government Shutdown*. U.S. Department Of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4013726/dod-announces-2000-troops-in-syria-department-prepared-for-government-shutdown/>

Iranian interests. Trump's second term points at a complete withdrawal of troops from the country, but HTS government presents challenges due to Turkish domination, the terrorist threat and the weakening of its counterbalance in the SDF. Thus, guarantees for regional objectives will be reduced. Indeed, Trump stated that the rise of HTS was a "hostile takeover" serving Turkish interests.<sup>32</sup> It should also be remembered that the SDF controls prisons in Rojava holding approximately 8 200 jihadist inmates,<sup>33</sup> preventing mass releases and a new international jihadist resurgence, as many of them are foreign fighters.

All in all, the US is considering a withdrawal, leaving the burden of countering extremist groups or Iranian militias to Israel, which would further increase its autonomy. Israel is calling for Washington's continued presence to ensure greater security and is urging caution in lifting sanctions to prevent the rapid strengthening of HTS, the resurgence of pro-Tehran militias and jihadists or a Turkish disruption of the regional order.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, the Trump administration does not consider Syria a priority, but he could be willing to establish relations to bolster broader geopolitical shifts in the Middle East: normalising Israel–Saudi Arabia relations, marginalising the Palestinian cause and bringing about Iran's definitive collapse.

### ***The European Union***

The role of the European Union in the region should not be underestimated, as it shares key interests with other powers in areas such as energy security, human rights and the refugee issue. During the civil war, the EU expressed its rejection of the former government and was deeply committed in humanitarian aid and the reception of Syrian refugees, having mobilized a total of €30 billion for these purposes.<sup>35</sup> Now, if Brussels seeks to play an influential position, the EU must rely on its diplomatic power to engage UN agencies in effective stabilisation and development efforts. The return of more than

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<sup>32</sup> Trump calls rebel victory in Syria «unfriendly takeover» by Turkey. (December 16<sup>th</sup> 2024). *France 24*. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20241216-trump-calls-rebel-victory-in-syria-unfriendly-takeover-by-turkey>

<sup>33</sup> Shea, Dorothy. 2025. "Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Situation in the Middle East" United States Mission to the United Nations. March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2025. <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-the-situation-in-the-middle-east-47/>.

<sup>34</sup> Jones, Dorian. 2025. "International Report - Future of US Troops in Syria in Question, Under Pressure From Turkey and Israel." *Radio France Internationale*, February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2025. <https://www.rfi.fr/en/podcasts/international-report/20250224-future-of-us-troops-in-syria-in-question-under-pressure-from-turkey-and-israel>.

<sup>35</sup> «Syria». 2025. Enlargement And Eastern Neighbourhood. January 17<sup>th</sup> 2025. [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/syria\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/syria_en).

one million refugees currently residing in Europe is a major issue, but it would be problematic to pursue this while rights violations remain a persistent risk and the appropriate framework is still missing.

Despite the sectarian crisis in March and HTS's past, the EU has approached positions. The European Commission attributed the crisis to "remnants" of the Assad regime,<sup>36</sup> while the High Representative, Kaja Kallas, condemned the events and called on HTS to clarify them in an impartial manner.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, on March 17, the EU organised a conference with members of the government, during which nearly €6 billion in aid was pledged for Syria and neighbouring actors.<sup>38</sup> This likely intends to prevent the resurgence of opposition groups aligned with Assad, Iran or Russia at a time in which the EU is facing major challenges due to the war in Ukraine.

The possible recognition of HTS as a legitimate government would deviate from UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which demands a democratic and pluralistic process that excludes terrorist organizations, something that was a requirement for the European External Action Service in 2020.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, a notable incident occurred during the visit of German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock in January 2025, when al-Jolani refused to shake her hand, but did so with her male advisors and French counterpart.<sup>40</sup> These events reveal a gap in democratic values and ideology with HTS and could undermine Brussels' legitimacy as a defender of a rules-based international order or counterterrorism efforts for prioritising strategic interests.

One such strategic interest is energy security, with alternative routes through Syria and Turkey to reduce reliance on Russian resource supplies.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, this would be a significant boost for Syria's fragile economy. Other interested actors include Qatar,

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<sup>36</sup> Hipper, Anitta. 2025. «Spokesperson Statement On Latest Developments In Syria». European Union External Action Service. March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2025. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/spokesperson-statement-latest-developments-syria\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/spokesperson-statement-latest-developments-syria_en).

<sup>37</sup> Kallas, Kaja. 2025. «Siria: Declaración de la Alta Representante en nombre de la Unión Europea sobre la reciente ola de violencia». Consejo de La Unión Europea. March 11<sup>th</sup> 2025. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/press/press-releases/2025/03/11/syria-statement-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-the-recent-wave-of-violence/>.

<sup>38</sup> «EU mobilises €5.8 billion in international support for Syria's transition and the region». 2025. Comisión Europea. March 18<sup>th</sup> 2025. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac\\_25\\_833](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac_25_833).

<sup>39</sup> Diplomatic Service of the European Union. "The EU and the Crisis in Syria." EEAS. 2020. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-and-crisis-syria-0\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-and-crisis-syria-0_en).

<sup>40</sup> Camut, Nicolas. 2025. "Handshake-gate in Syria." *POLITICO*, January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2025. <https://www.politico.eu/article/syria-germany-annalena-baerbock-handshake-france-barrot-no-surprise/>.

<sup>41</sup> Hobhouse, Caspar. 2025. «Energising Syria's Future». European Union Institute For Security Studies. March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2025. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/commentary/energising-syrias-future>.

due to resources and closer alignment with HTS, and Turkey, as a logistical hub with strong ties to the government.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, caution must be exercised to prevent such projects from becoming new instruments of coercion against the EU, while also not losing sight of the need to respect human rights and promote democratisation in Syria.

In order to have a positive impact and avoid being relegated to the background, the EU must seek shared economic and security benefits that allow to promote European objectives in the face of competing powers, while contributing to reconstruction and the establishment of a prosperous and just society. Without this, serious sectarian fractures, escalating conflict or the reactivation of extremist groups are likely to resurface, posing a threat to the stability of both the Middle East and Europe.

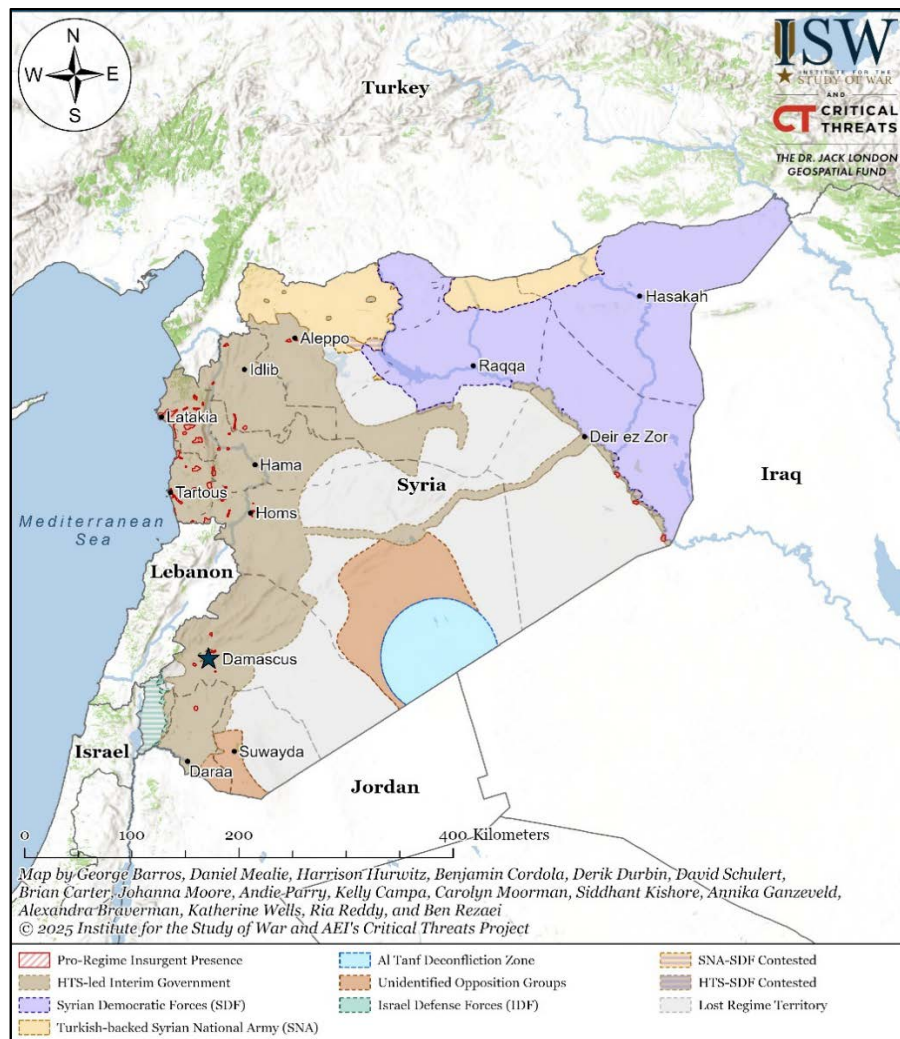


Figure 6. Map of the recent situation in Syria (April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025). Source: Adapted from ISW Press.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem

## Conclusions

The identity issue remains a major source of social fracture and sectarianism in Syria, which poses a significant obstacle to the creation of a pluralistic, moderate, and inclusive government capable of ensuring stability and peaceful coexistence. Respect for international law provisions regarding Syria must become a priority, especially the enforcement of UN Security Council Resolution 2254. If the underlying causes of the tensions are not addressed, it is highly likely that the conflict will return, as much of the broad spectrum of national actors remains, to varying degrees, dissatisfied with the current situation. The widespread exhaustion after nearly fourteen years of war has enabled this major strategic and societal realignment, but once the various groups regain their strength, the war could easily reignite. Therefore, if peace is not achieved and a broad, pluralistic, and free government is not established, Syria will remain weak, easily manipulated, and a battleground for geopolitical disputes among more powerful countries seeking to advance their own interests—thus denying the Syrian people the right to shape their own government and future.

Syria once again stands out for an unstable landscape largely fueled by geopolitical rivalries among external powers. The fall of a strategic rival like Assad was hastily presented by many international actors as a success, distracting public attention from the nature and ideology of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, whose record since 2017 shows clear jihadist influences. The group's terrorist classification was ignored by the international community following the overthrow. This evolution of the situation highlights the importance of realism in contemporary geopolitics, where national strategic objectives of global powers take precedence over any other variable—even accepting a radical government in Syria as long as it aligns with their interests. This applies across the board—from the pragmatism of the Western bloc, including the EU and the United States, who are inclined to tolerate the new regime, to Russia, which could also recognize the new authorities in exchange for respect toward its own geopolitical ambitions.

There is, therefore, a clear lack of will and interest within the international community in the pacification and democratization of Syria, with external interference being one of the main problems. In fact, the change of government itself was fuelled by Turkey's strategic objectives, as it seeks to consolidate its regional power in competition with other global

actors. The dominance of geopolitical dynamics over national ones obscures the fact that a group with an Islamist ideology was allowed to govern after violently seizing power—something that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. This is especially striking in Europe, which welcomed millions of Syrians who fled their country due to the severe insecurity caused by jihadism during the civil war. As a result, by allowing the erosion of the Syrian people's freedoms, tensions within the country will only increase. Combined with the rise of a geopolitical order dominated by the selfish goals and interests of states, this will generate new frictions among involved actors and could lead to security problems that threaten peace on both a national and international scale.

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