



Syrian Civil War and Future of Syria

For Prelims: [Islamist Militant Group](#), Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, [Arab Spring](#), [Hezbollah](#), [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria](#), [Taliban](#), [United Nations](#), [Proxy wars](#), [Organisation of Islamic Cooperation](#)

For Mains: India's strategic interests amidst the Syrian conflict, Rise of militant groups in multilateralism, Groupings & Agreements Involving India and/or Affecting India's Interests

[Source: IE](#)

Why in News?

Recently, Syrian rebels, led by the [Islamist militant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#), have claimed control of **Homs, Syria's third-largest city**, in a significant blow to President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

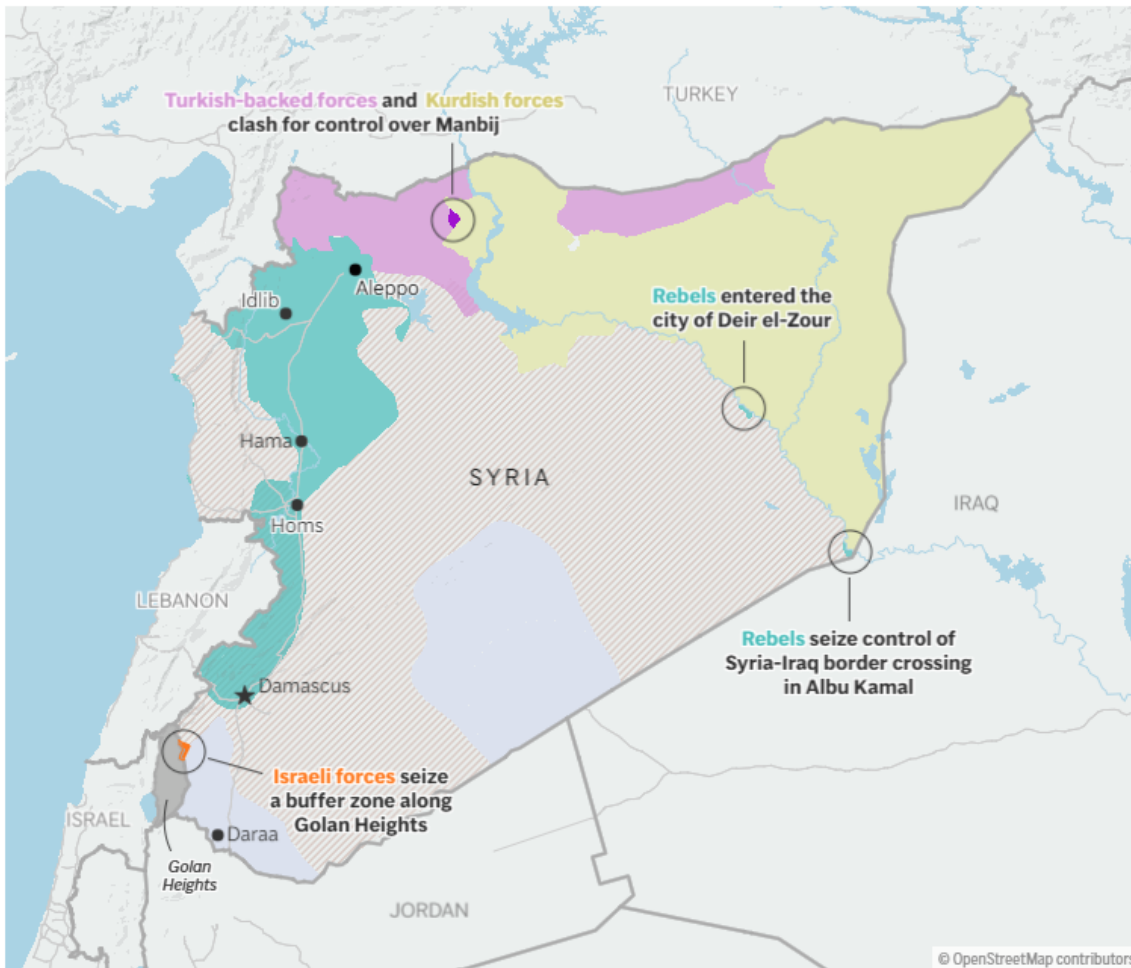
- This development, amidst the **ongoing civil war**, has raised concerns about the future of Syria, as it **faces a growing challenge from rebel factions**.



What are the Key Factors Shaping the Syrian Civil War?

- **Syria and the Civil War:**
 - **Historical Context:** Since 1971, Syria has been ruled by the **Assad family**, with **Hafez al-Assad** serving as the authoritarian leader until his death in 2000.

- His son, Bashar al-Assad, succeeded him, continuing the family's grip on power.
- **Arab Spring Uprising:** In 2011, amidst the wave of the [Arab Spring](#), protests erupted against Assad's rule.
 - Arab Spring, wave of **pro-democracy protests** and uprisings that took place in the **Middle East and North Africa** beginning in 2010 and 2011, challenging some of the region's entrenched authoritarian regimes.
 - The grievances were manifold, including rising [unemployment](#), economic inequality, and [corruption](#).
 - The Assad regime, dominated by the **Alawite minority (a minority Muslim sect in Syria)**, was accused of marginalizing the **Sunni majority**.
- **Civil War Escalation:** Arab Spring began as peaceful protests were met with violent repression, leading to **armed conflict**.
 - Multiple rebel factions rose up, backed by foreign powers, all aiming to **oust Assad**. Ultimately led to the **fall of the Assad regime in Syria**.
- **Rise of Rebel Factions:**
 - **Hayat Tahrir al-Sham:** The primary group responsible for capturing and controlling most parts of Syria, including **Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama**, is **Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)**, originally the [al-Qaeda](#) branch in Syria.
 - This group aims to establish **Sunni-Islamic rule** and has been a major opponent of Assad.
 - **Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF):** A **Kurdish (Iranic ethnic group)-led militia**, the SDF has been primarily focused on **securing autonomy and rights for Syria's Kurdish population**.
 - While not a direct enemy of Assad, they are part of the wider opposition forces.
 - **Free Syrian Army (FSA):** This faction, supported by **Turkey**, opposes both the Assad regime and Kurdish forces, mainly due to concerns over Kurdish separatism.
- **Foreign Influence:**
 - **Russia and Iran:** These countries have been Assad's primary allies, providing military support and strategic backing.
 - **US and Turkey:** Both have supported anti-Assad factions, but Turkey's main concern is the Kurdish influence within Syria.
 - **Israel:** Given Syria's historic support for Palestine, Israel has conducted strikes against Assad's forces, further complicating the geopolitical dynamics.
- **Fall of Assad's Regime:** Bashar al-Assad's regime was heavily reliant on external support from key allies like Russia, Iran, and [Hezbollah](#). Over time, however, these alliances weakened due to shifting geopolitical dynamics.
 - During the [Israel-Hamas War in 2023](#), Israel's airstrikes in Syria weakened Assad's military strength. Russia diverted its focus to the [war in Ukraine](#), and Iran scaled back its involvement after losing key personnel in Syria.



Legend:
 Rebel control (teal)
 No longer in government control (hatched)
 Israeli forces (orange)
 Turkish-backed forces (purple)
 Kurdish forces (yellow)
 Other opposition (light blue)

Areas of control as of 9 p.m. on Dec. 8 and are approximate.
 Source: Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project / Graphic: Phil Holm

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

- The HTS was founded in 2011 as **Jabhat al-Nusra**, the al-Qaeda's branch in Syria. In 2016, it broke away to form the **Jabhat Fateh al-Shaam (JFS)**, standing for the liberation of **Shaam or the Levant** (the sub-region of the Middle East lying near the Mediterranean Sea, including Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine).
- By 2017, after merging with a **number of other groups**, the **JFS became the HTS**.

What is India's Approach Towards Syria?

- **Historical Ties:** India has long maintained friendly relations with Bashar al-Assad's Syria, based on shared historical and civilizational ties.
 - Syria has historically been an important member of the Nehru- championed **Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)**.
 - India's stable relations with **Syria and key Middle Eastern players** are vital for **countering Pakistan's narratives** in Muslim-majority nations.
- **Recent Diplomatic Engagement:** Syria, a Muslim-majority country, has consistently supported **India's position on the Kashmir issue**, unlike many other **Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)** countries that often oppose it, particularly Pakistan.
 - India has invested in projects like the **Tishreen power plant** and the **Hama iron and**

steel plant.

- India sent humanitarian aid to Syria following an earthquake in February 2023 as part of **Operation Dost (friend)**.
- In late 2024, India hosted the **6th Round of India-Syria Foreign Office Consultations**, reinforcing the bilateral relationship.
- **Caution Amid Crisis:** India has called for a **peaceful, inclusive, Syrian-led political process** while emphasizing the need to preserve Syria's unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.
 - It has also expressed concerns over the safety and protection of minorities, including Alawites, Druze, Kurds, and Christians, amidst the ongoing conflict.
 - The Indian Ministry of External Affairs issued a caution for Indians in Syria, advising them to leave if possible, as the situation in the capital escalated.
- **Future of India- Syria Relations:** India's ties with **Syria may be shaped by Turkey**, as its involvement with the Regional Militias. Additionally, Turkey's opposition to India on matters of Kashmir and its close relations with Pakistan **add another layer of complexity to their interactions**.
 - **US support for a post-Assad transition in Syria**, along with its close strategic partnership with India, can positively influence Syria-India relations.
 - Meanwhile, **Iran, a key ally of Assad, maintains a strong relationship with India**, particularly in areas of economic and strategic cooperation.
 - India's **neutral stance on Syria's internal matters** can ensure diplomatic flexibility, enabling it to **engage constructively** with any future leadership and foster relationships based on **mutual interests and regional stability**.

What are the Implications of Syrian Rebellion?

- **Impact on Syria and Middle East:**
 - **HTS's Influence:** Despite the HTS's claims of inclusivity toward minorities, its violent history and fundamentalist ideology raise concerns that Syria could face a future similar to **Taliban-ruled Afghanistan**.
 - Syria's ethnic and sectarian diversity, including **Sunni Arabs, Alawites, Kurds, Shias, and Christians**, complicates efforts to unify the **country under one governance model**.
 - If HTS adopts a radical path like **Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)**, it could trigger a new wave of extremism.
 - **Regional Instability:** The rebellion has **destabilized the Middle East**, affecting neighboring countries and contributing to regional tensions.
 - The involvement of various international actors has turned Syria into a battleground for **proxy wars**.
 - The rebellion in Syria continues to affect **Kurds**, especially along the **Turkish-Syrian border**.
 - Turkey views Kurdish groups as a security threat, and the instability could lead to **increased displacement and conflict, further destabilizing the region**.
- **Global Impact:**
 - **Humanitarian Crisis:** The conflict has displaced millions of Syrians, creating one of the largest refugee crises in modern history.
 - The **United Nations** reports approximately **5.5 million** Syrian refugees live, primarily in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Europe.
 - **Terrorism and Extremism:** The chaos in Syria has allowed extremist groups like **ISIS to gain a foothold**, posing a **global security threat**.
 - **Economic Impact:** The conflict has disrupted trade routes and economic activities in the region. It has also affected **global oil prices**, as instability in the **Middle East often leads to fluctuations in the energy market**.
 - Instability in Syria could impact the **Gulf region**, crucial for India's energy security and trade.
 - **Human Rights Violations:** The war has seen widespread **human rights abuses**, including the use of chemical weapons, targeting of civilians, and destruction of infrastructure. These actions have drawn international condemnation and calls for

accountability.

Conclusion

The fall of Assad's regime is a pivotal moment in the Syrian Civil War, but peace remains uncertain. With HTS rising to power, **Syria's future is fraught with challenges, including foreign influence and internal divisions.** India must carefully balance its historical ties with Syria while safeguarding its citizens and interests.

Drishti Mains Question:

Discuss the implications of the Syrian conflict and its potential impact on India's strategic interests.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q1. Consider the following pairs: (2018)

	Towns sometimes mentioned in news	Country
1.	Aleppo	Syria
2.	Kirkuk	Yemen
3.	Mosul	Palestine
4.	Mazar-i-sharif	Afghanistan

Which of the pairs given above are correctly matched?

- (a) 1 and 2
- (b) 1 and 4
- (c) 2 and 3
- (d) 3 and 4

Ans: (b)

Q2. Which one of the following countries of South-West Asia does not open out to the Mediterranean Sea? (2015)

- (a) Syria
- (b) Jordan
- (c) Lebanon
- (d) Israel

Ans: (b)

Q3. The area known as 'Golan Heights' sometimes appears in the news in the context of the events related to (2015)

- (a) Central Asia
- (b) Middle East
- (c) South-East Asia
- (d) Central Africa

Ans: (b)

Q4. Yom Kippur War was fought between which sides/ countries? (2008)

- (a) Turkey and Greece
- (b) Serbs and Croats
- (c) Israel, and Arab countries led by Egypt and Syria
- (d) Iran and Iraq

Ans: (c)

PDF Reference URL: <https://www.drishtiias.com/printpdf/syrian-civil-war-and-future-of-syria>

