

# The Syrian Civil War/Revolution: A Background

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# 1. Historical Background

## The Assad Family

Hafez al-Assad (1930–2000)

Bashar al-Assad (b. 1965)



**1**

**Pan-Arabism?**

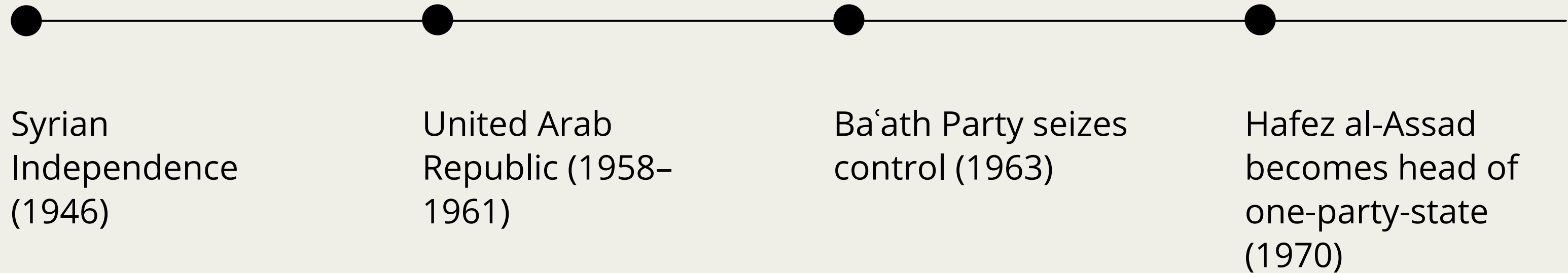
**2**

**Ba'athism?**

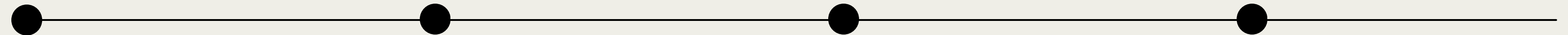
**3**

**United Arab  
Republic?**

# Timeline leading up to Civil War







Palmyra prison  
massacre (1980),  
Hama massacre  
(1982)

20,000 dead

Death of Hafez and  
ascension of  
Bashar al-Assad  
(2000)

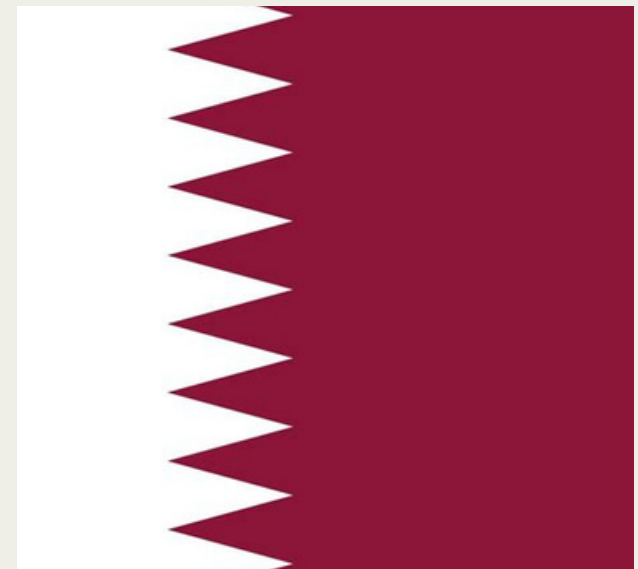
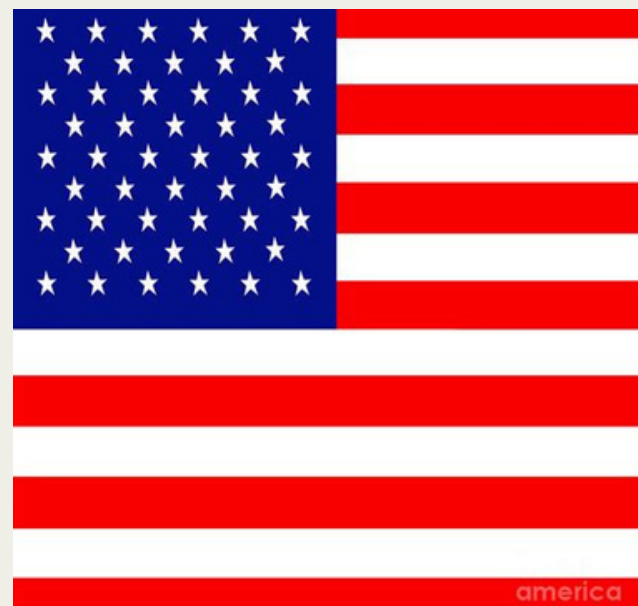
2001 suppression of  
“Damascus Spring”

Arab Spring (2011)

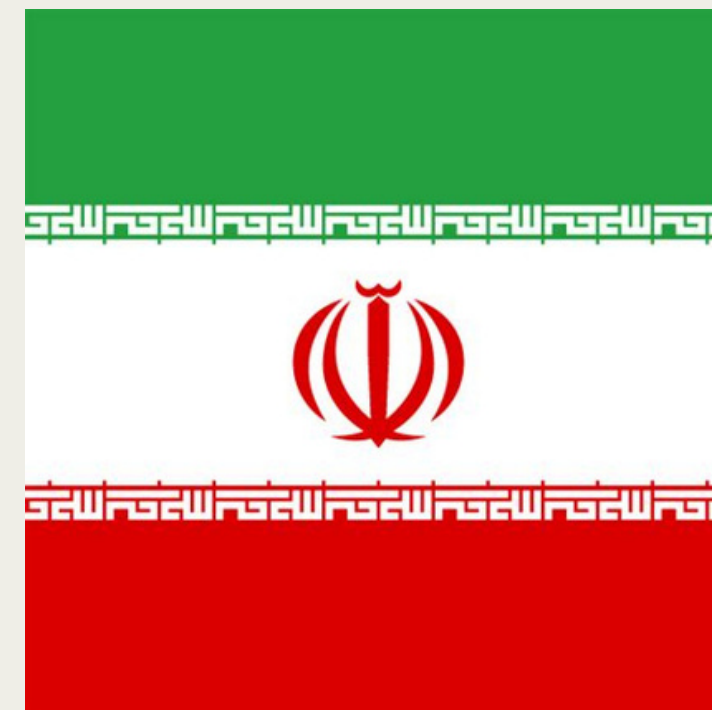
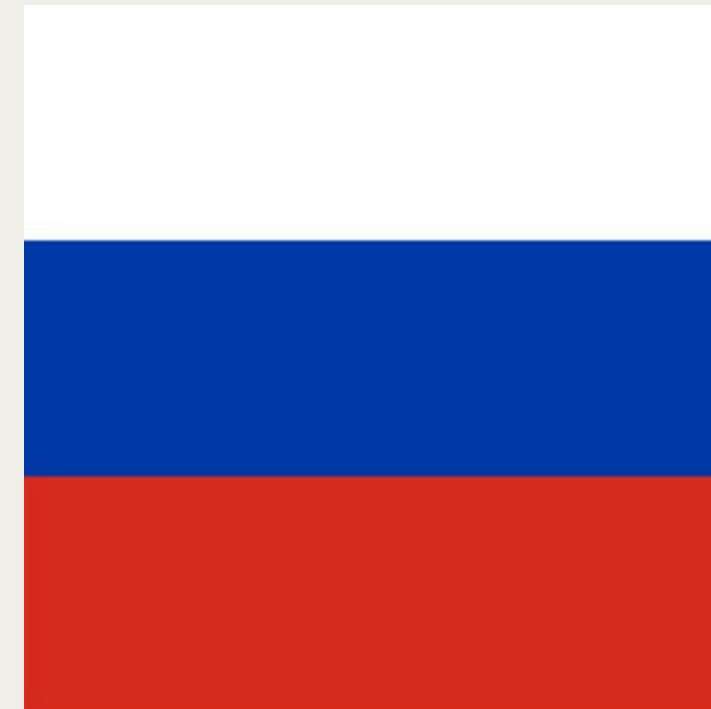
Peaceful protests are met  
with live ammunition,  
arrests, and torture by  
security forces

Formation of Free  
Syrian Army or FSA  
(July, 2011)

# OPPOSE



# SUPPORT



## 2. Escalation and Fragmentation (2012–2014)

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### **2012: Mass exodus of soldiers**

60,00 soldiers defect to the opposition, form the FSA

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### **Kurdish militias emerge in the North**

Led by the YPG (People's Protection Units), declare autonomous control over Kurdish-majority regions rich in oil reserves

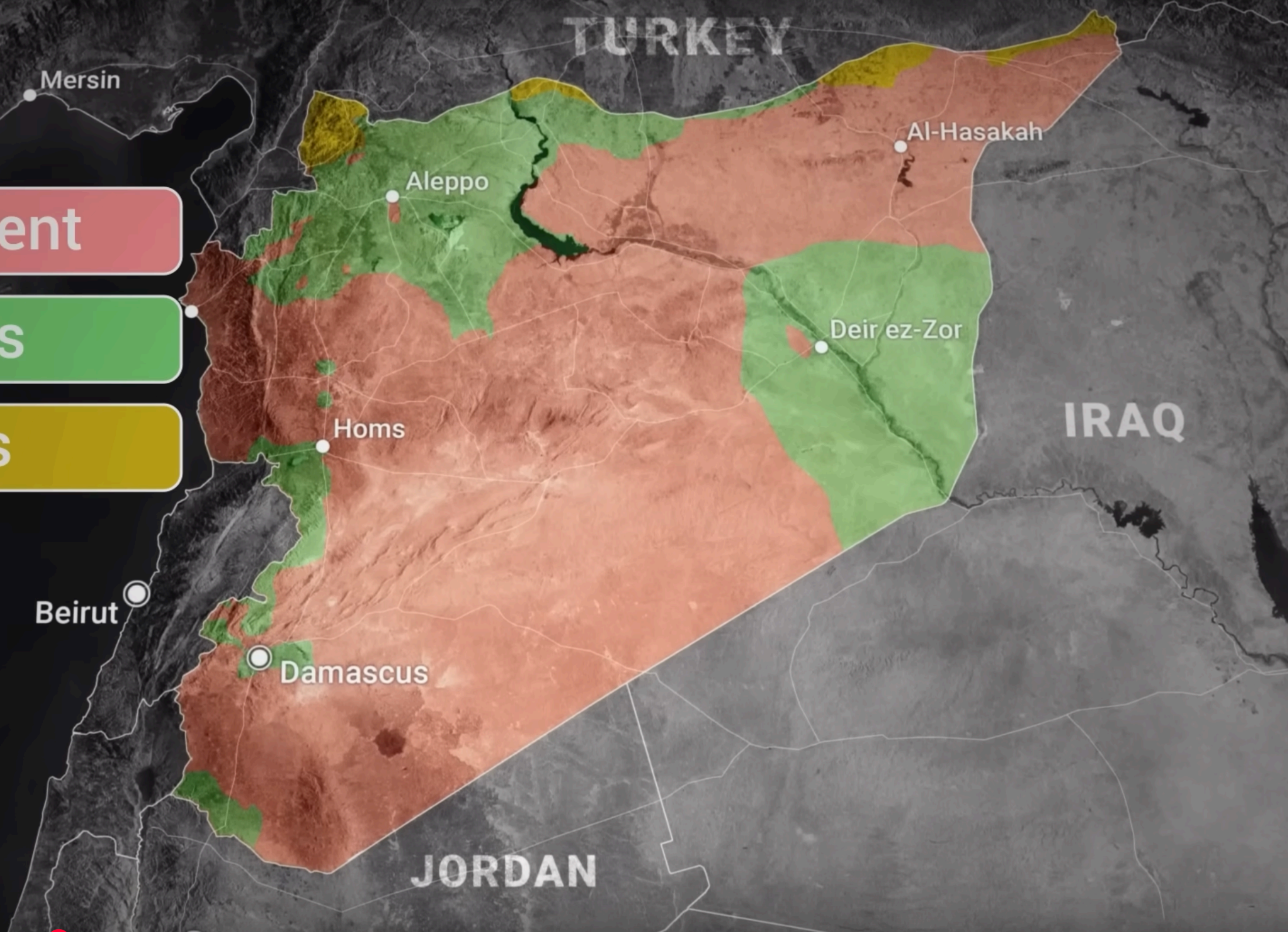
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### **Late 2012: Regime looses northern Syria and much of the East**

Rebel gains in Latakia, an Alawite stronghold, mark symbolic and strategic victories



- Government
- Rebels
- Kurds





# Major Rebel Factions

## LEFTIST

North: **YPG**



Syrian Democratic  
Forces (**SDF**)

## ISLAMIST

Damascus: **Liwa al-Islam**, later became  
**Jaysh al-Islam**

Idlib: **Suqour al-Sham**  
and **Ahrar al-Sham**

Aleppo: **Liwa al-Tawhid**

## SALAFIST-JIHADIST

Nationwide: **Jabhat al-Nusra**, linked to al-Qaeda, later distanced itself

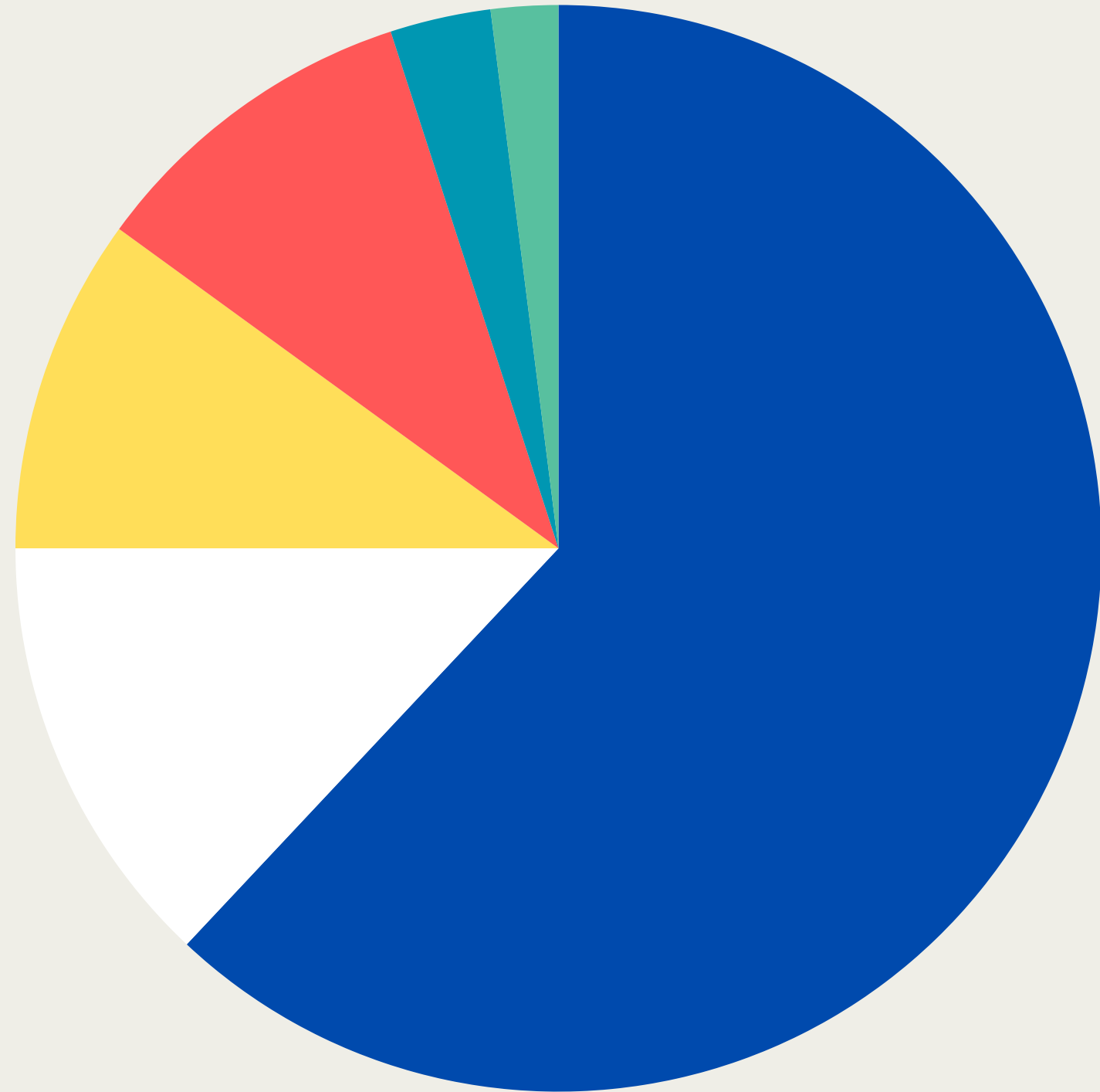


Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham  
(**HTS**)

Nationwide: **ISIS**, also al-Qaeda affiliate, later splits, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi

# Ethnic and Religious Make-up

Used by Assad regime to fuel dissent





# 3. The Rise of ISIS and Foreign Intervention (2014–2020)

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## **2013–2014 ISIS gains power**

Power vacuum and chaos facilitate the rise of ISIS, which captures large territories in eastern Syria, including Raqqa (its de facto capital)

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## **September 2015: Assad forces massive loss of territory**

Assad's forces control only 26% of Syria

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## **Direct Russian intervention**

Russia begins direct military intervention (air strikes) in September 2015, tipping the balance back in Assad's favor

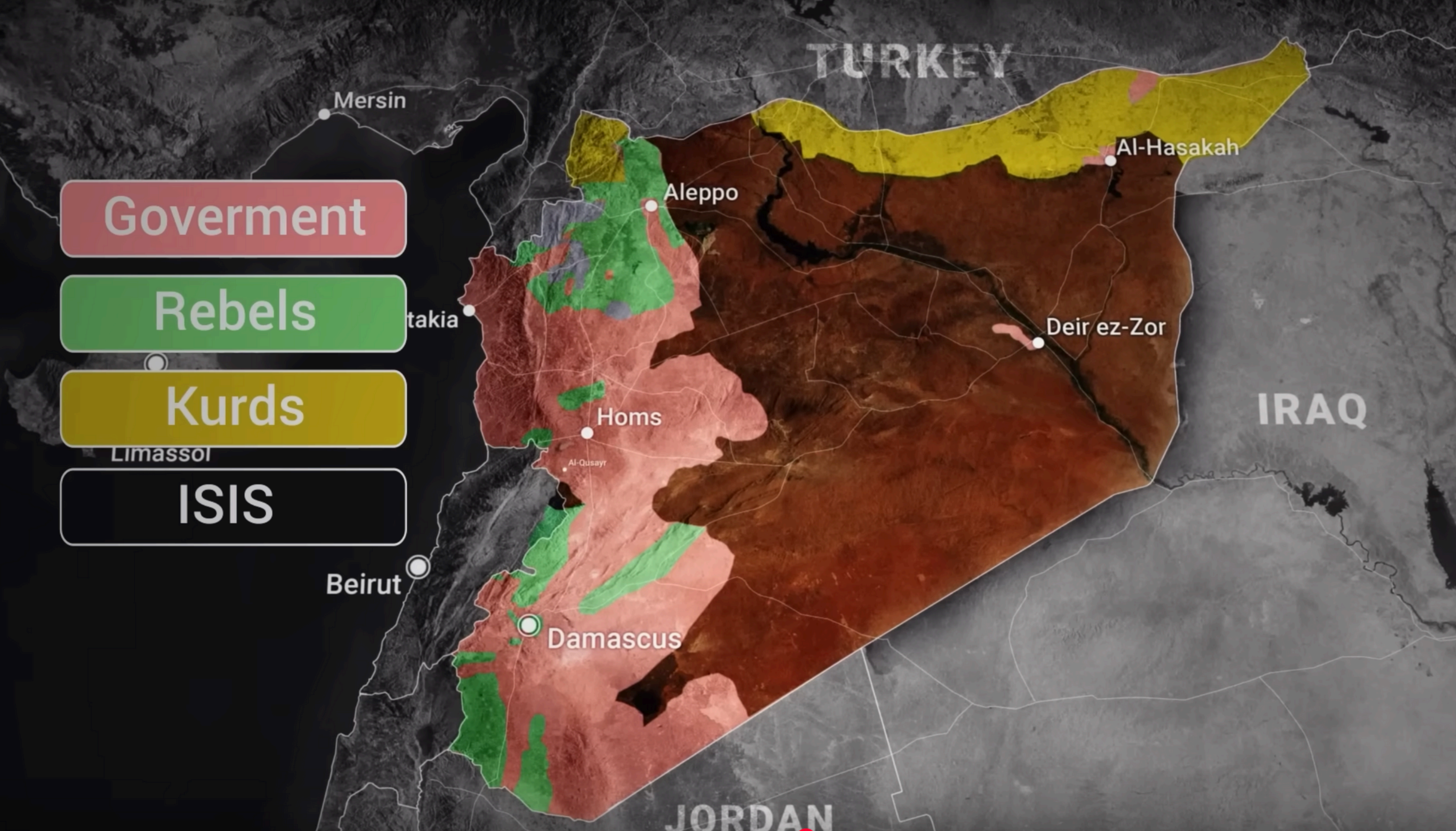


Government

Rebels

Kurds

ISIS







What happens to ISIS?

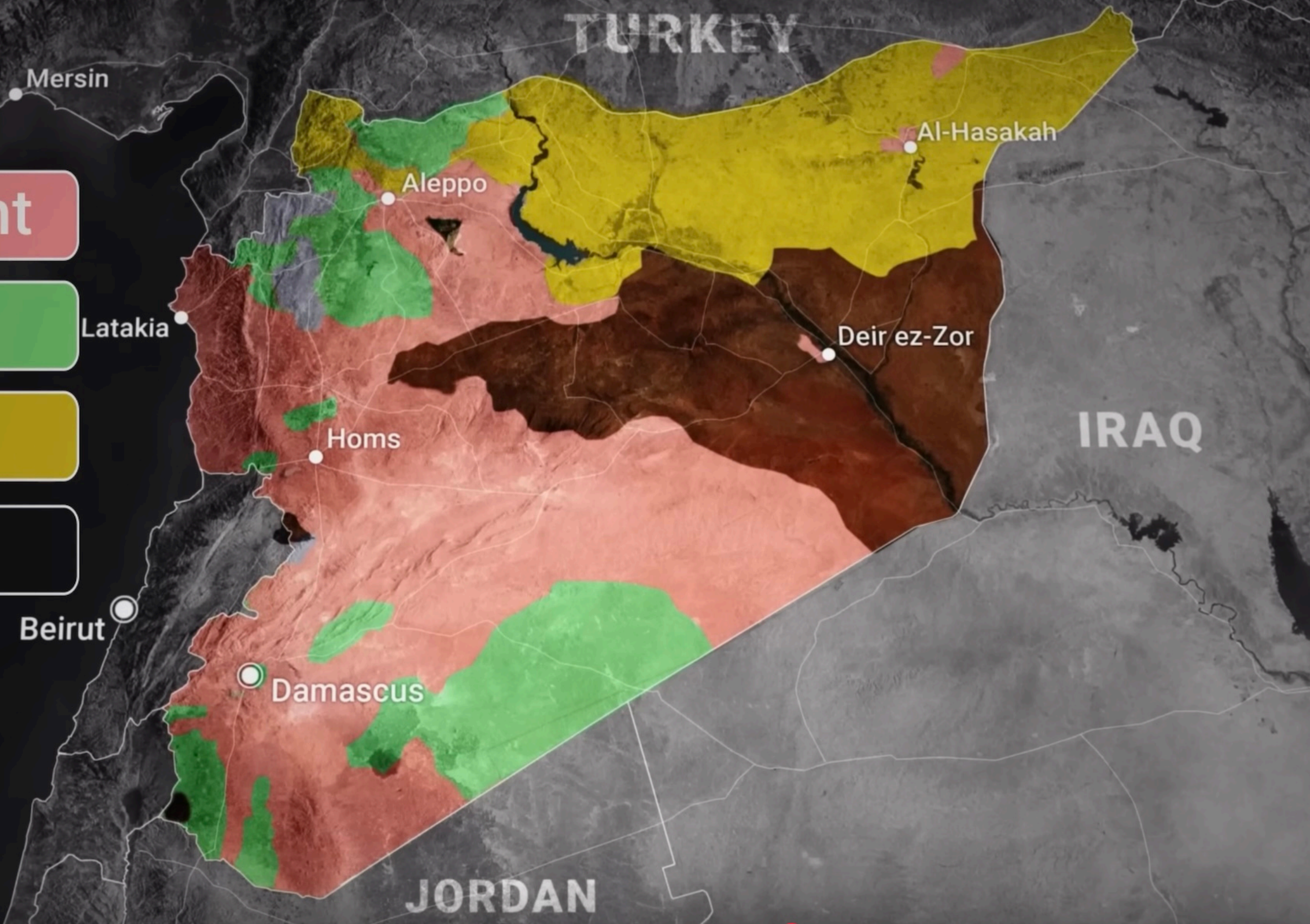


Government

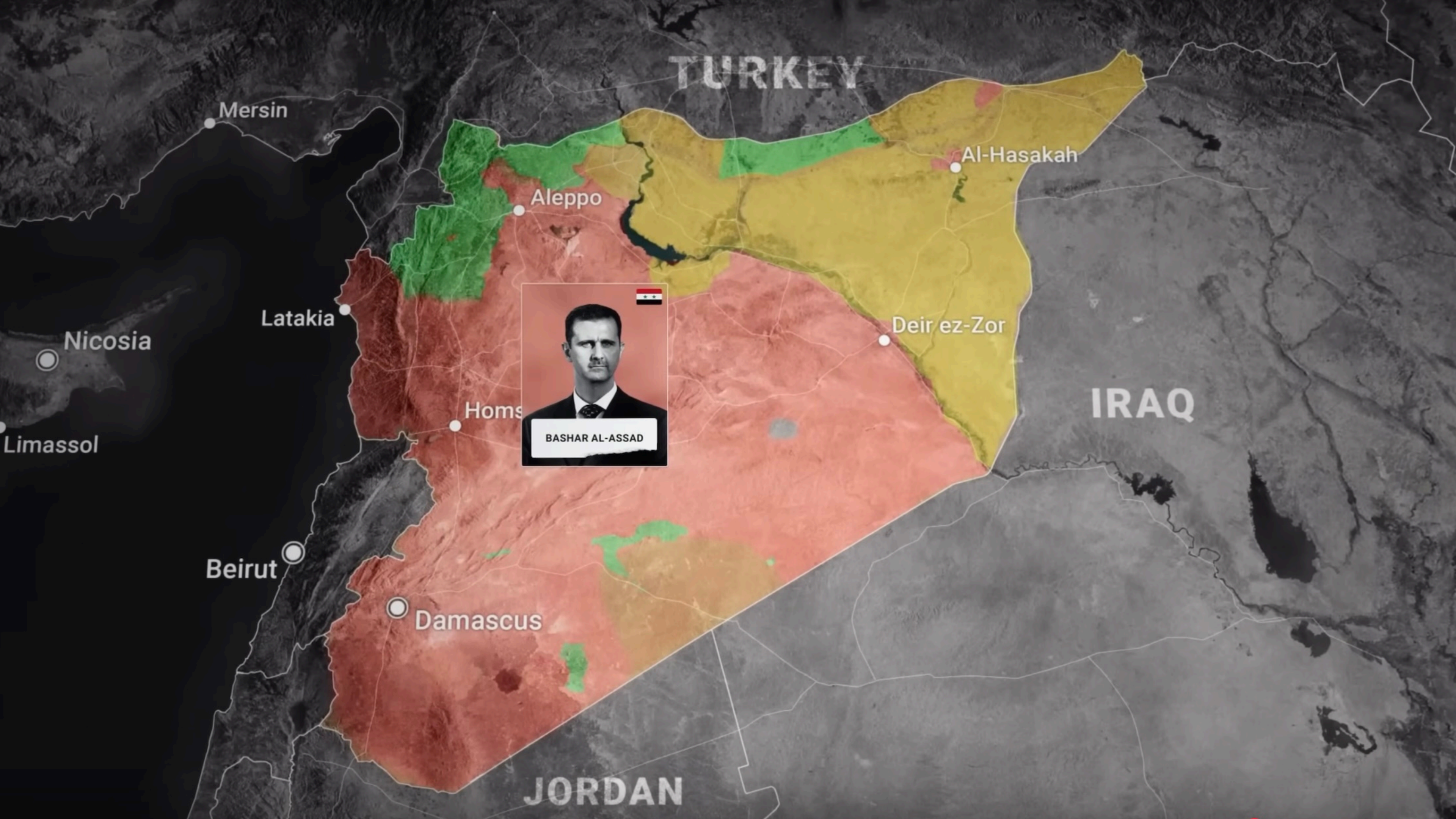
Rebels

Kurds

ISIS







TURKEY

Mersin

Aleppo

Al-Hasakah

Latakia

Nicosia

Limassol

Homs

Deir ez-Zor

IRAQ

Beirut

Damascus

JORDAN





# 4. Return of Assad regime

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**2014: ISIS demoralized after Kobani**

Failure to capture the Kurdish-held Kobani leads to fall-back, continued US air support drives ISIS troupes back

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**2017–2020: Syrian Army regains territory**

Government forces, backed by Russia and Iran, begin retaking key cities, areas in the North (held by Turkish-backed rebels and Kurds) and Northeast (under US-supported SDF) remained outside regime control

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**2023: Diplomatic Shift and Arab Normalization**

The Arab League reinstates Syria's membership, Saudi Arabia resumes diplomatic ties with Damascus, and Turkish President Erdogan publicly calls for direct talks with Assad, but Assad rejects



1

How and why  
is Assad  
holding on to  
power?

2

Which tactics  
is the regime  
utilizing?

5 reasons for holding on/being able to maintain power:

1. existential battle with revolutionists – fate of other autocratic rules in region
2. ‘inherited’ right to the country – familial entanglement, nepotism
3. Alawite minority
4. emergence of ISIS – bolstering of position → bulwark against terrorism
5. Iranian and Russian support vs international stalemate/reluctance

Strategies of subjugation:

- Massive human rights violations: up to 90,000 persons believed to be imprisoned (2012–2019), 30,000 died of torture and starvation
- Rape as a silencing tactic – fear of reaction in their communities, breaks not only victims but their families
- Secretarian cleansing → forced homogenization, disowning of populations
- Use of chemical weapons

“Why does the regime practice torture so extensively? What is the origin of this obsession with documenting death, by numbering corpses? Death by torture or starvation practised on an industrial scale is the Assad **regime’s way of asserting its unlimited power**. It proves its ability to kill whoever it wants, whenever it decides [...] Thus, the objective of torture is not so much to obtain information as to **break the enemies, to dehumanize them, to make them realize that they are dealing with a machine capable of crushing their bones at any moment.**” (Majed, p. 160)

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“More importantly, the Syrian government has used chemical weapons to display its impunity, both to its supporters and enemies. **It sets itself up as an eternal “master” in the eyes of all.** Another perverse dimension of the use of chemical weapons and its consecration as a “red line” at the international level must be underlined: the focus on this prohibited weapon has had the **effect of relativizing the impact of all the other crimes**, which appear as almost banal acts of war since they are below the threshold of the famous ‘red line’”. (Majed, p. 163)

# **4 Steps towards the Fall of Assad**

**01**

**Russia's war  
in Ukraine**

**02**

**Death of  
Hassan  
Nasrallah**

**03**

**Iran: unrest  
and  
economic  
decline**

**04**

**Syrian Army  
underpaid and  
demoralized**

# CURRENT MAJOR REBEL GROUPS



**SDF**



**SNA**



**HTS (Abu Mohammad al-Joulani/ Ahmad al-Shara)**



**SOUTHERN OPERATIONS ROOM**



**(ISIS)**

# Humanitarian Impact

16.5 million Syrians need humanitarian assistance in 2025 (European Commission).

Over 7.4 million are internally displaced, and more than 4.6 million are refugees abroad, mostly in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan (European Commission).

14.5 million people are food insecure (European Commission).

Around 2 million children are out of school due to the conflict (Context News).

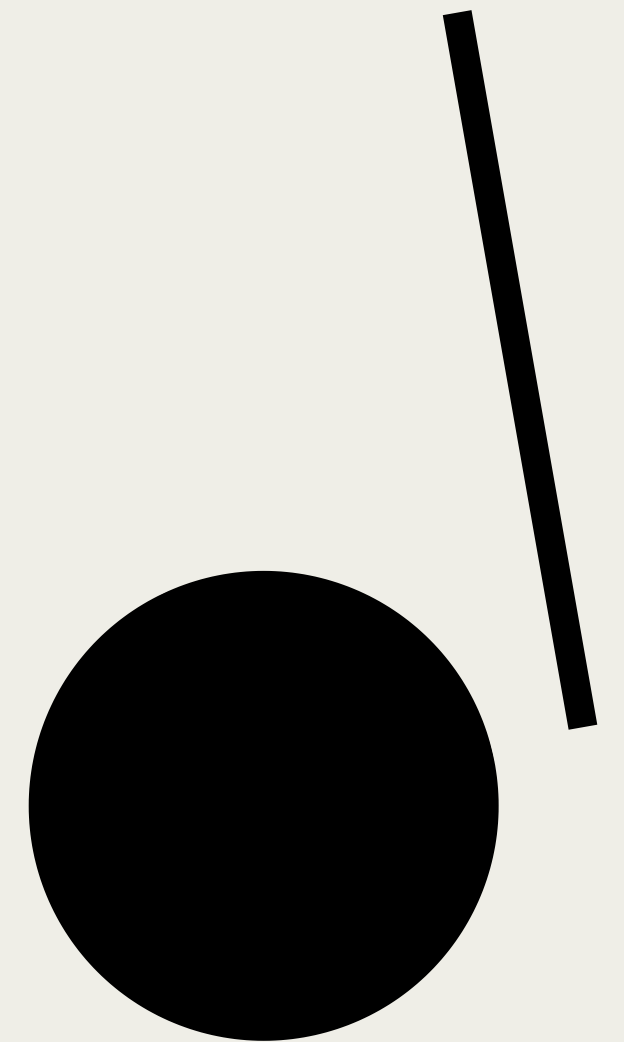
Over 90% of the population lives below the poverty line (Human Rights Watch).

An estimated 600,000 people have died since the conflict began (VOA News).

More than 27% of housing in Syria has been destroyed or damaged (World Bank).



“The regime's use of fear, social divisions, and military repression created an atmosphere in which Syrians, traumatized and demoralized, resorted to a ‘flight’ or ‘freezing’ response. For years, they endured their “silence”, striving to maintain a semblance of "normal life" despite the constant backdrop of oppression. The sounds of injustice were pervasive in the air, yet speaking out remained a dangerous endeavor. In this climate of fear, the act of resistance and the reclamation of a collective voice only became possible after decades of suppression.”



Thank you!

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