

Fall of the Assad Regime:

Syria Update

January 9, 2024



About the Council for a Secure America

The cornerstones of American national security are: a strong military, a vibrant economy, enduring alliances, and American ingenuity. The Council for Secure America was founded on the premise that American energy independence, in all of its forms, is the underpinning for U.S. security.

For decades, American foreign policy was forced to make concessions to foreign nations who fueled its economy. In 2019, thanks to the innovation of American energy producers, the United States achieved energy independence. This accomplishment made America the leading energy producer in the world, fortifying its national security and buttressing geo-political stability in the Middle East.

Amongst America's many allies, the US-Israel partnership is a strategic, long-lasting and ongoing bilateral alliance. Energy independence has only strengthened it.

CSA educates key audiences on the importance of domestic energy production and technologies to American and Israeli mutual national security interests.

Moreover, American energy statecraft has reshuffled the geopolitical landscape and sowed the seeds of peace in the Middle East, enabling old adversaries to become allies. In 2020, the United States brokered the Abraham Accords—promoting unprecedented normalization and multilateral ties between its closest ally, Israel, and Arab States including the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Bahrain, Sudan, and the Kingdom of Morocco.

CSA champions the ideals of the Abraham Accords and their critical impact on geopolitical security and global trade. CSA is advancing these partnerships and is committed to bringing multi-faceted awareness to complex and evolving challenges.



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Syria Facts

- Population before 2011 Civil War: **22M residents** (2M Iraqi and Palestinian refugees)
- Capital: **Damascus**
- Ethnic and Religious Groups: **Sunni and Shia Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Christians, Druze, Alawites**
- Country Size: Over 71,400 sq mi
- Official Language: **Arabic**
- Main Exports: **Petroleum, Cotton and Textiles, Agriculture**
- Petroleum Sector: **Syria has not exported oil since the implementation of international sanctions in 2011. Prior to 2011, Syria produced ~383,000 barrels per day of oil and liquids and 8.7 billion cubic meters of natural gas.** It exported its oil to Germany (32%), Italy (31%), France (11%), the Netherlands (9%), Austria (7%), Spain (5%) and Turkey (5%).



Syrian Arab Republic (1946-Present)

- Syria became independent from France on April 17, 1946. In 1948, Syria fought against the newly-declared State of Israel, ending with a demilitarized zone between the two countries.
- **Following both a 1949 and 1963 coup, then-Minister of Defense Hafez al-Assad seized power in a coup in 1970. He defined Syria as a secular, socialist state with Islam as the official majority religion. President Hafez al-Assad retained his power with an iron fist by banning and forcefully repressing all political opposition.**
- The Syrians fought Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War and lost. In 1981, Israel annexed the Golan Heights.
- During the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, Syria sided with the Islamic Republic of Iran.
- In 1990, Syria joined the US coalition in the Gulf War.
- Upon the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000, his son Bashar al-Assad assumed the Presidency of Syria. Due to his support of terrorism, President George W. Bush approved US sanctions on Syria.



Bashar al-Assad and his father Hafez al-Assad, former Presidents of Syria.

Fall of the Assad Regime in Syria

- Protests that started as part of the Arab Spring in 2010 lead to a civil war for over a decade in Syria in which an estimated 620,000 Syrians were killed.
- **President Assad kept rebel forces at bay with military support from Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia**, which at its height included ~6,000 Russian military personnel.
- After the beginning of the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire, the Syrian rebels broke their ceasefire agreement with the Assad regime (in place since 2020) and began their offensive. In just two weeks, Syrian rebel forces swept from the northwest and took control of Syria's major cities in quick succession, forcing the fall of President Bashar al-Assad.
- The rebels moved along a north-south corridor that forms the country's main spine to take Damascus, the capital, without a fight.



Fall of the Assad Regime in Syria: What is HTS?

- **Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is a Sunni Islamist rebel group once linked to Al Qaeda** which recently joined a coalition with more moderate rebel groups. **HTS is backed by Turkey while the Kurdish-led secular alliance in the Northeast are backed by the United States** and have played an important role in the defeat of jihadist groups in Syria over the past decade.
- HTS ruled Idlib Province in Northwest Syria for 5 years (managing municipal operations, collecting taxes and even respecting minority groups) and for years fought Hezbollah and Iran inside Syria.
- After the Hamas massacre on October 7 2023 and ensuing regional war, **HTS began preparing for its offensive to enlarge its control South towards Damascus. This included Turkish support**.
- The offensive, launched on November 27, worked. The rebels took control of Aleppo (Syria's largest city), then continued South to seize the city of Hama which had never fallen to rebels during the civil war. Finally, the rebels took control of Homs, 100 miles North of Damascus.
- Rebels from South of Damascus led the charge into the capital city, which fell by December 8.
- **Without soldiers from Iran or Hezbollah and with little support from Russian airstrikes, the Syrian government forces disintegrated** and President Assad fled to Moscow.



Syria's New Leader

- **Abu Mohammad al-Jolani is a hard line Syrian Islamist. He fought with Al Qaeda of Iraq, and in 2005 he was detained by U.S. forces at Camp Bucca, where he met Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the founder of ISIS.** He called Assad's fall "a victory for the Islamic nation."
- Baghdadadi later dispatched al-Jolani to establish a Syrian branch of ISIS - which became the Nusra Front.
- **The name Abu Mohammad al-Jolani itself is an assumed military nickname derived from the Arabic word for the Golan Heights.**
- In a symbolic gesture, he has returned to his given name, Ahmed al-Sharaa and has since distanced HTS from Al-Qaeda and ISIS.



Abu Mohamed al-Jolani, head of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

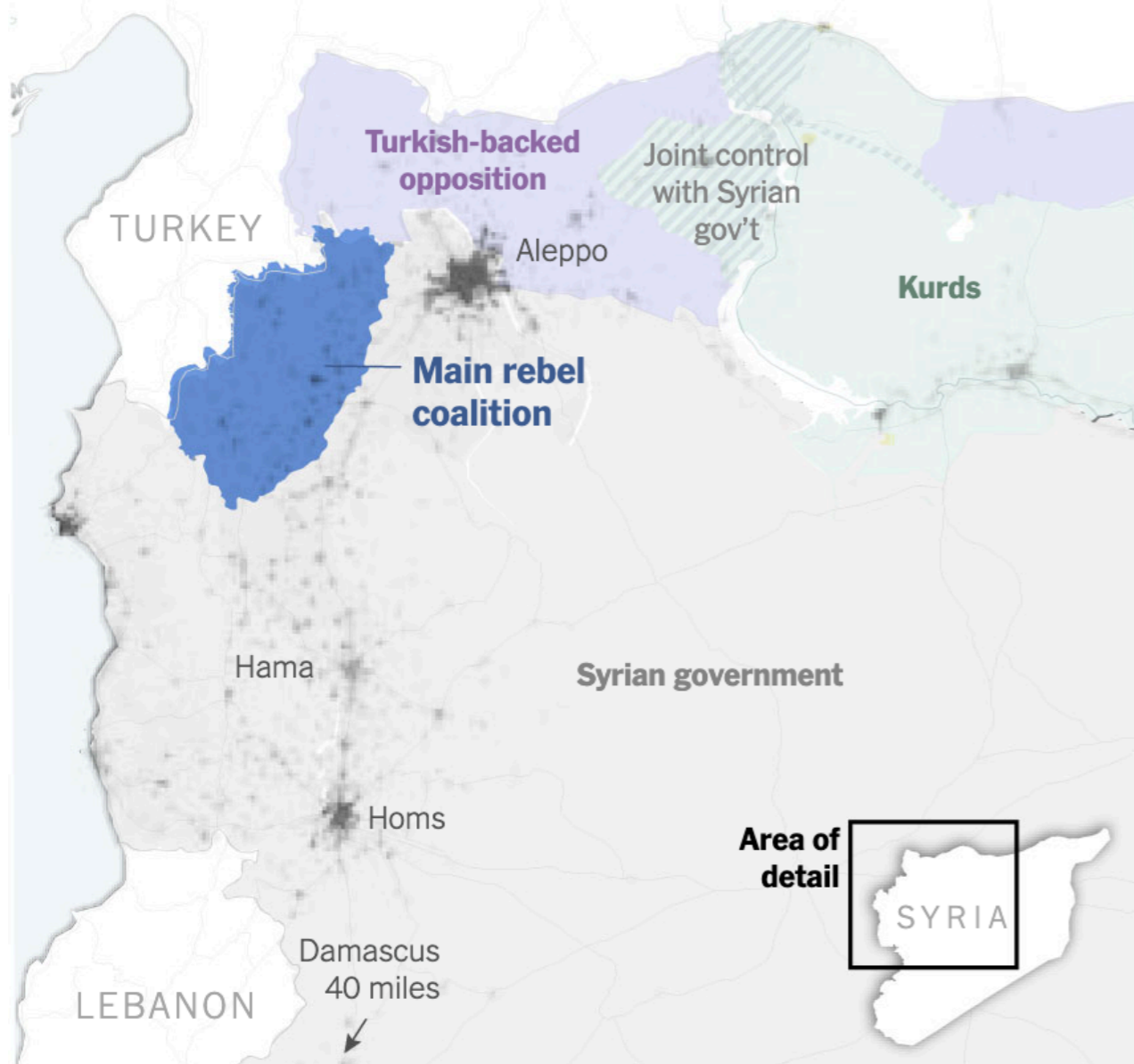
Iran Departs Syria

- **For years, Iran sent military advisors to support the Assad regime as well as two brigades under the command of the IRGC Quds Force made up of refugees from Pakistan and Afghanistan who had fled to Iran.**
- As the rebels advanced on Damascus, Tehran quickly evacuated its Revolutionary Guards and Basij paramilitary forces, which had propped up Assad.
- The Commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps told Iranian media: "Some expect us to fight in place of the Syrian Army. Is it logical for the I.R.G.C. and Basij forces to take on full responsibility while Syria's Army merely observes?"
- Iran closed its Embassy in Syria and evacuated four thousand citizens on emergency flights.
- **Dec. 9: al-Jolani said in a speech in Damascus that the Assad regime had brought many ills upon Syria and had allowed the country to become "a farm for Iranian greed."**

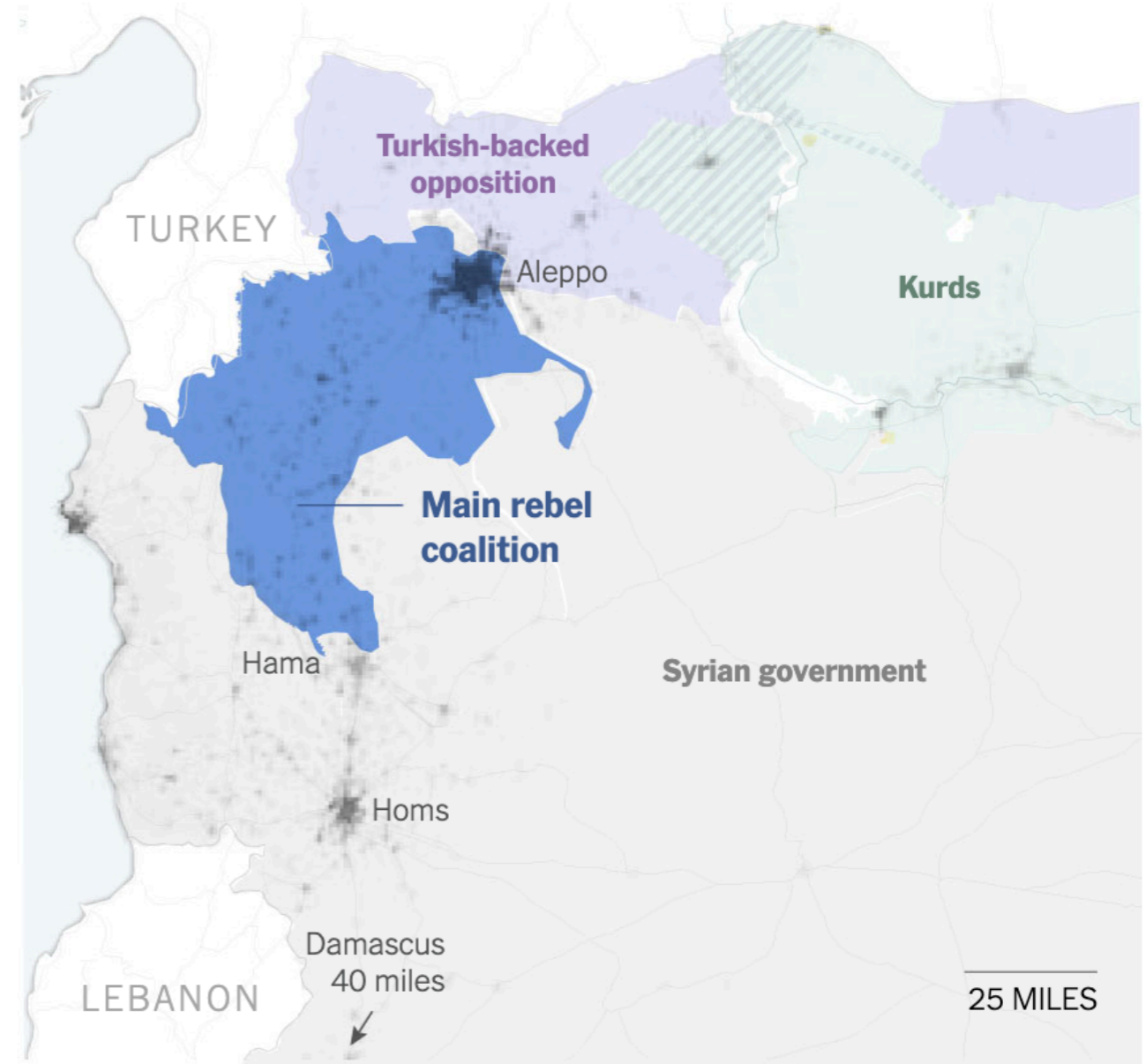


Fall of the Assad Regime in Syria: The Rebel Offensive

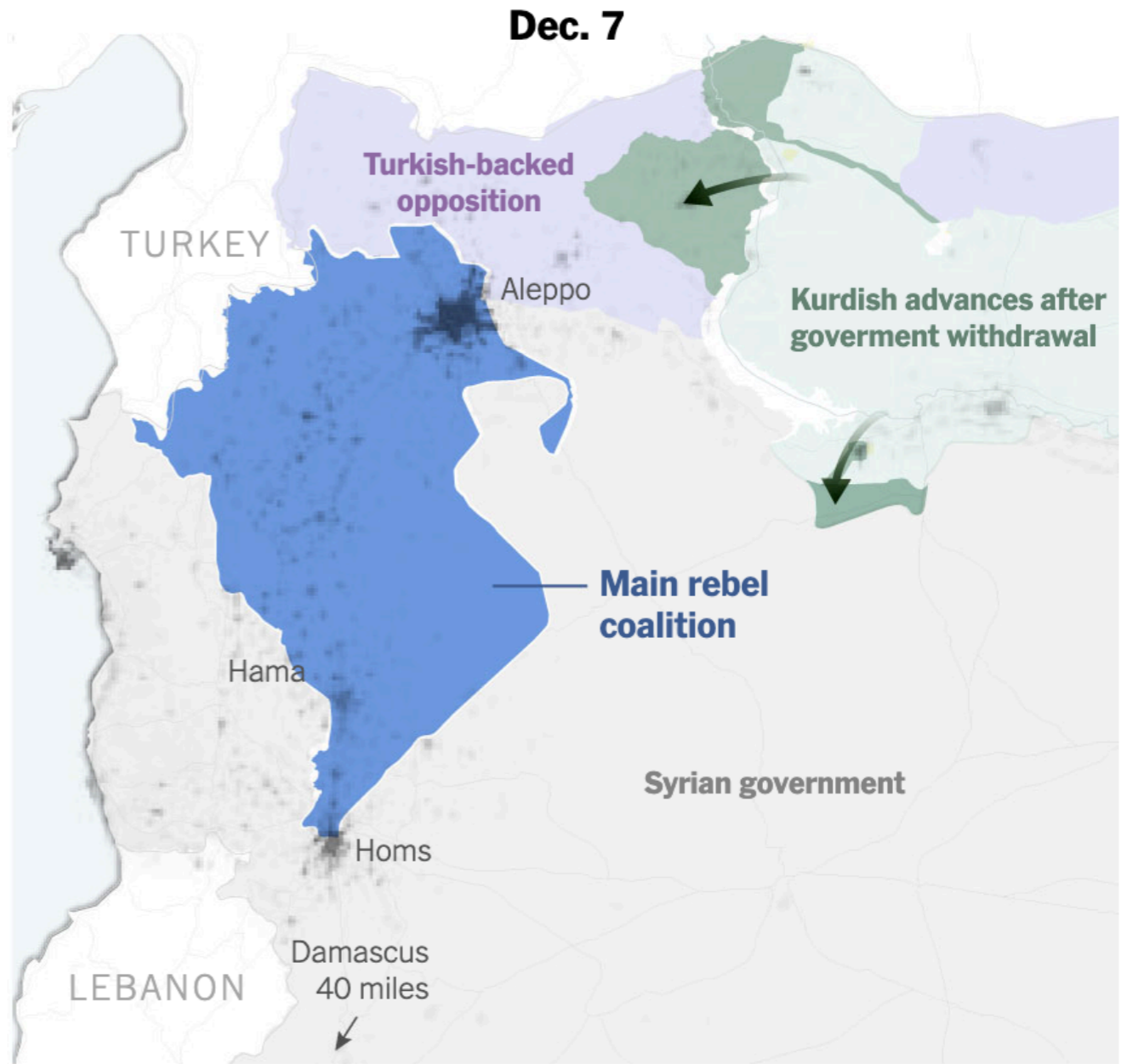
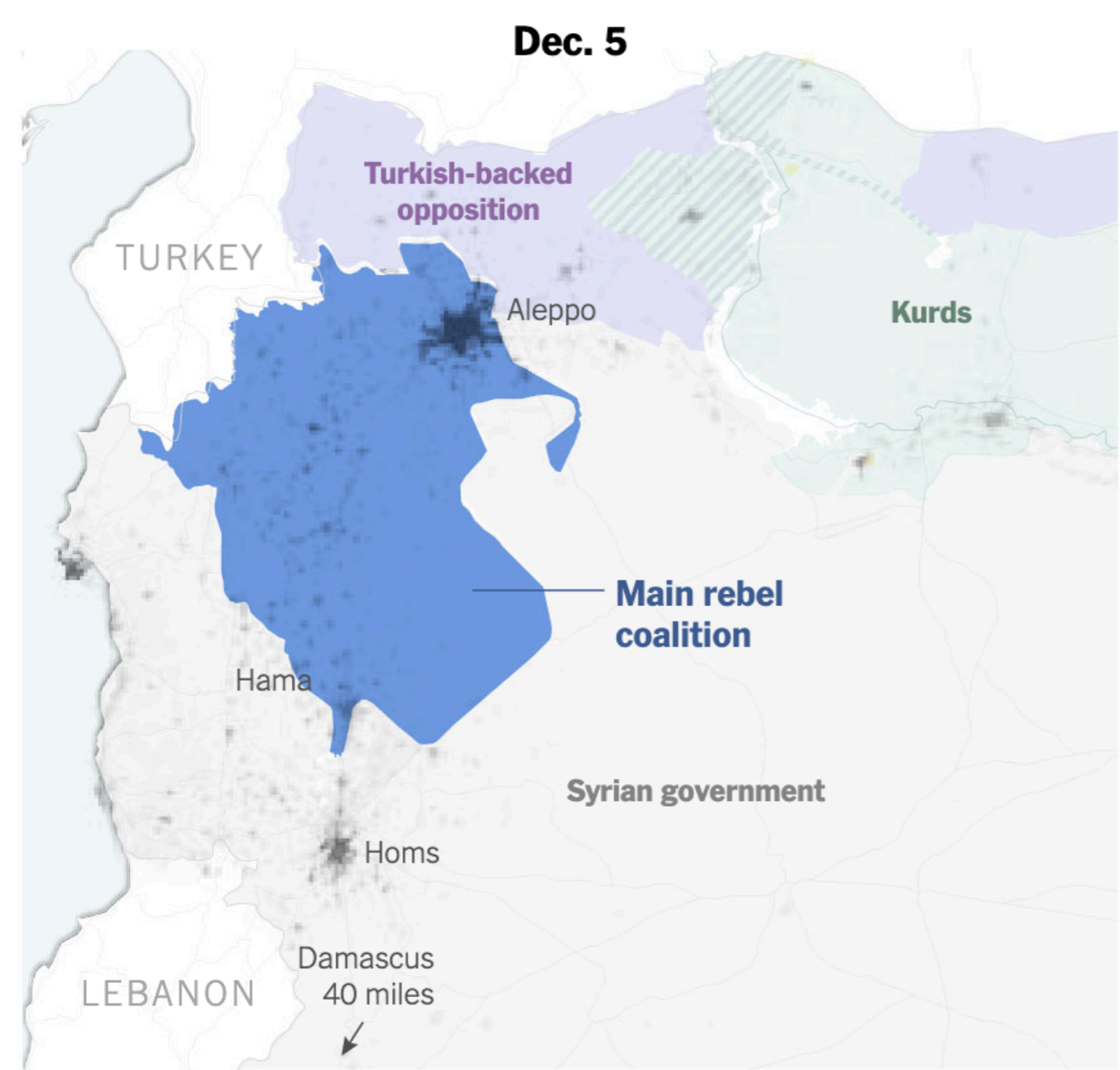
As of Nov. 26 (before offensive)



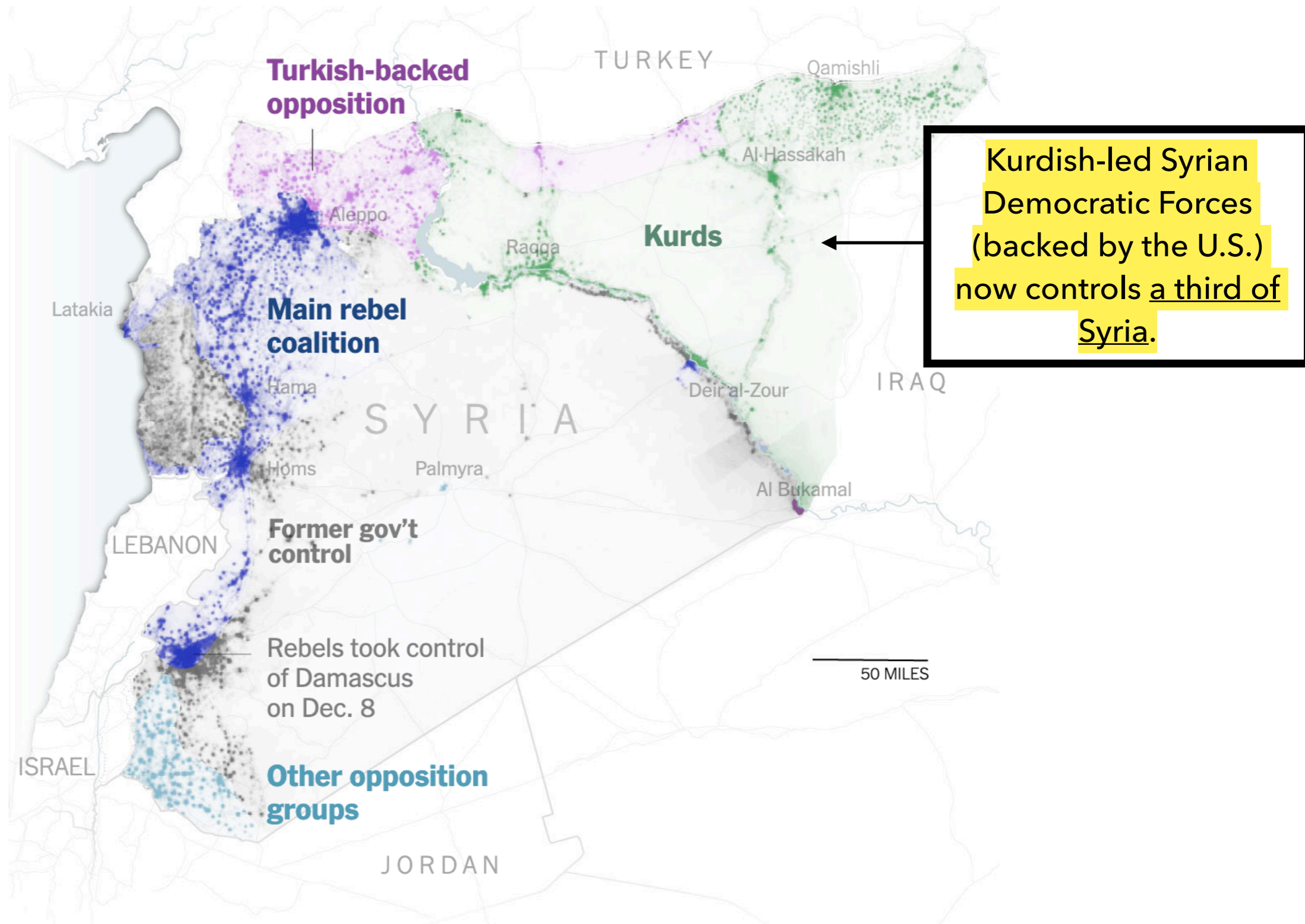
Dec. 3



Fall of the Assad Regime in Syria: The Rebel Offensive



Fall of the Assad Regime in Syria: The Rebel Offensive Today



Source: Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project • Note: Areas of control are as of Dec. 11. The main rebel coalition is led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

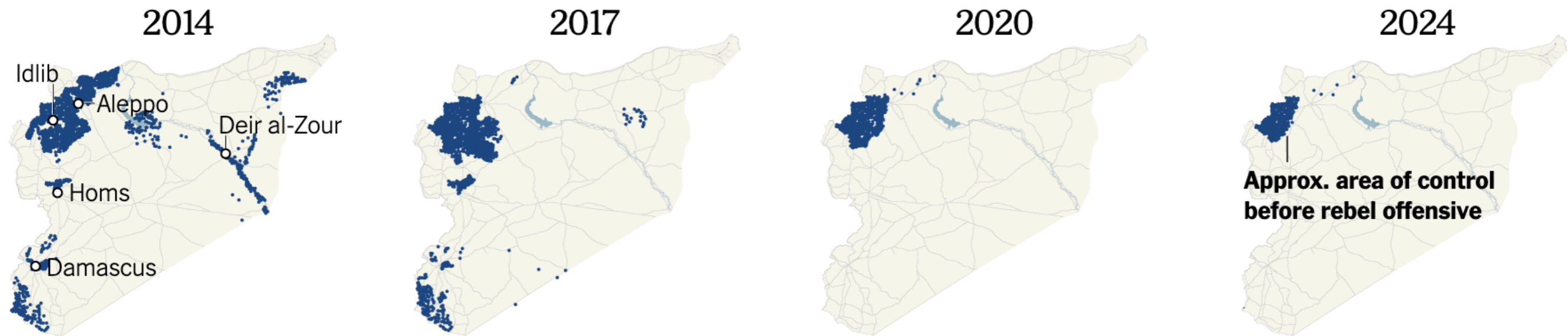


Fall of the Assad Regime in Syria: Movement of Forces Inside Syria

Opposition forces

Their territory had shrunk until late November.
Now, they control the capital.

■ Locations controlled by opposition forces



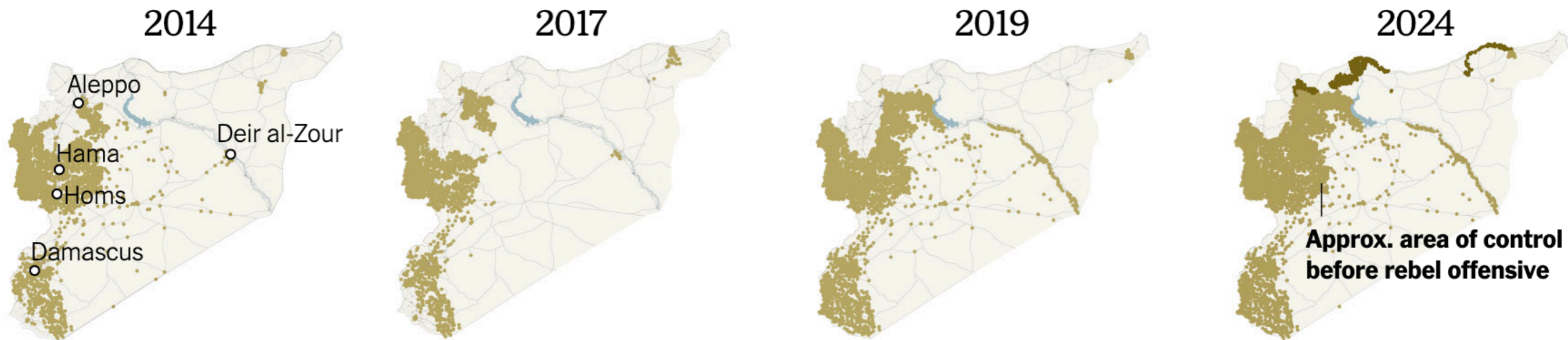
Source: The Carter Center. Note: Opposition forces include both extremist Islamic and moderate factions.

Fall of the Assad Regime in Syria: Movement of Forces Inside Syria

Government forces and allies

The conflict shifted in their favor years ago — then they lost Syria's major cities in just two weeks.

■ Locations controlled by Syrian gov't and allies ■ Joint control with Kurds



Source: The Carter Center

Fall of the Assad Regime in Syria: Movement of Forces Inside Syria

Islamic State

It once held a third of Syria.

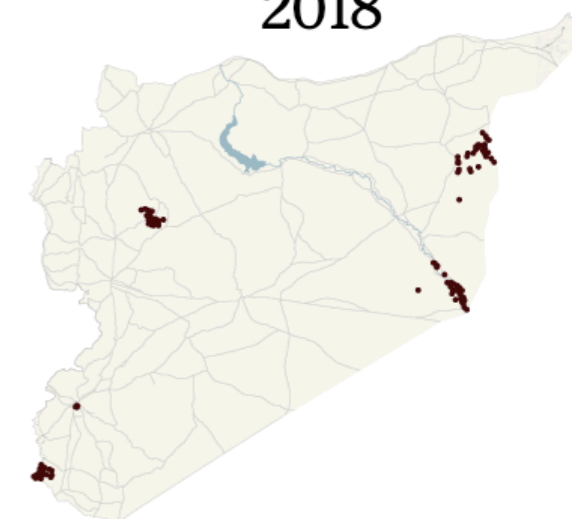
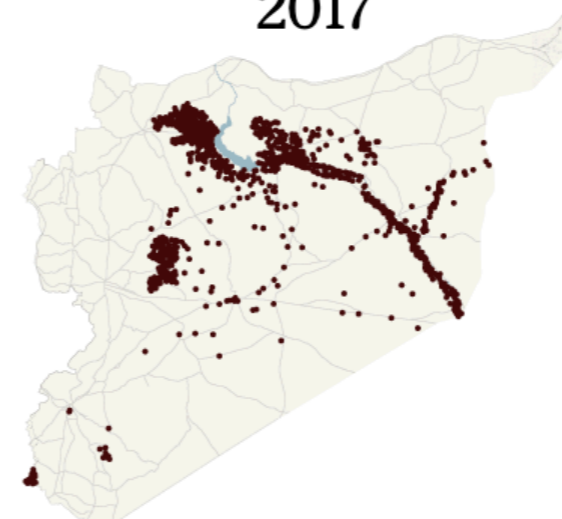
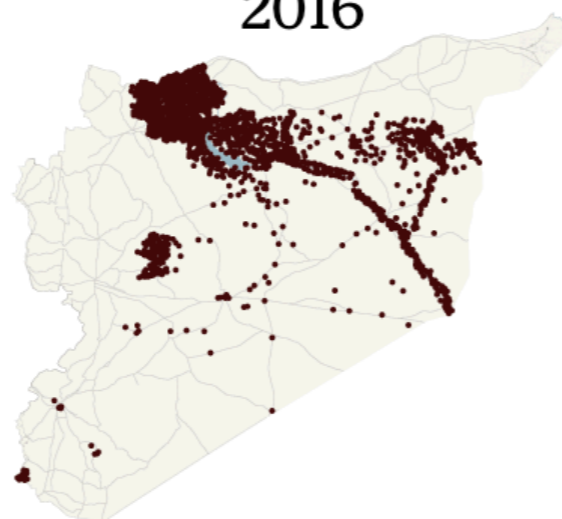
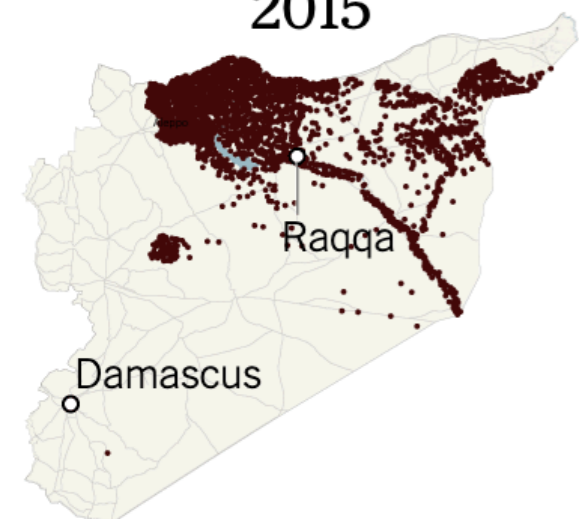
■ Locations controlled by Islamic State

2015

2016

2017

2018



Source: The Carter Center



Fall of the Assad Regime in Syria: Movement of Forces Inside Syria

Kurdish-led forces

They took territory from the Islamic State, but lost other ground to Turkish-backed forces.

■ Locations controlled by Kurds ■ Joint control with Syrian gov't

2014

2017

2019

2024

Damascus

Approx. area of control before rebel offensive

Source: The Carter Center



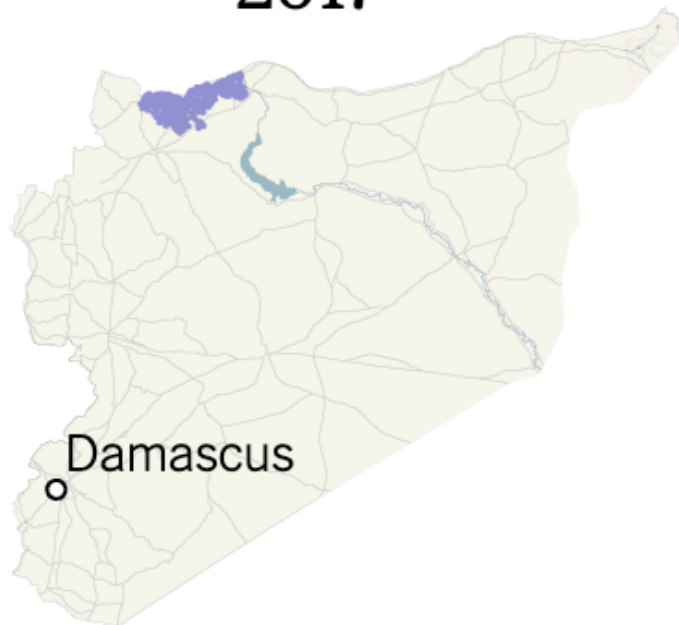
Fall of the Assad Regime in Syria: Movement of Forces Inside Syria

Turkish military operations

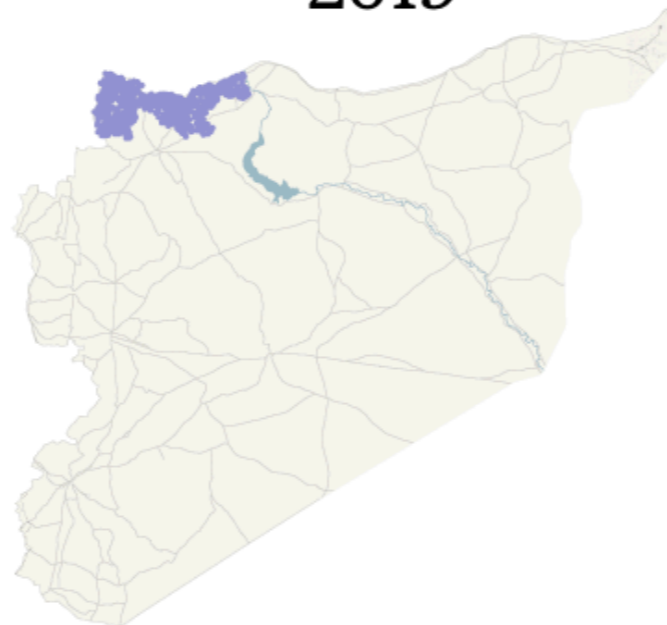
Captured parts of the northern border area from Kurdish-led forces.

■ Locations controlled by Turkish military operations

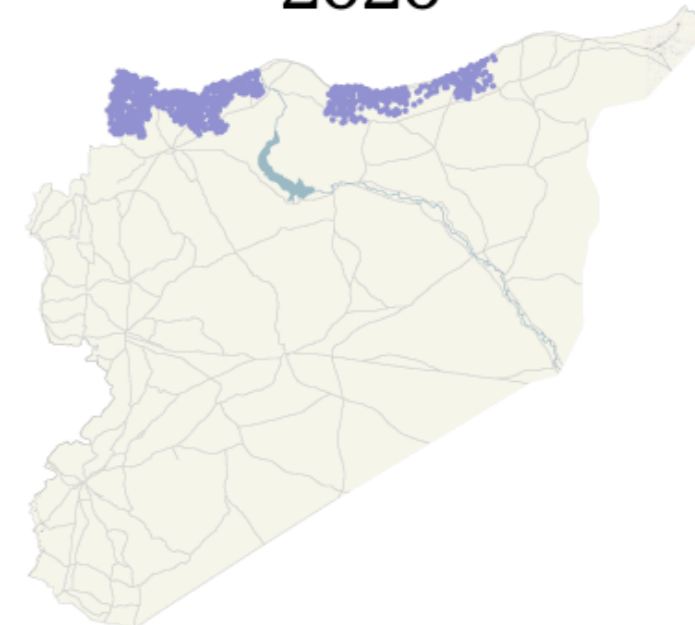
2017



2019



2020



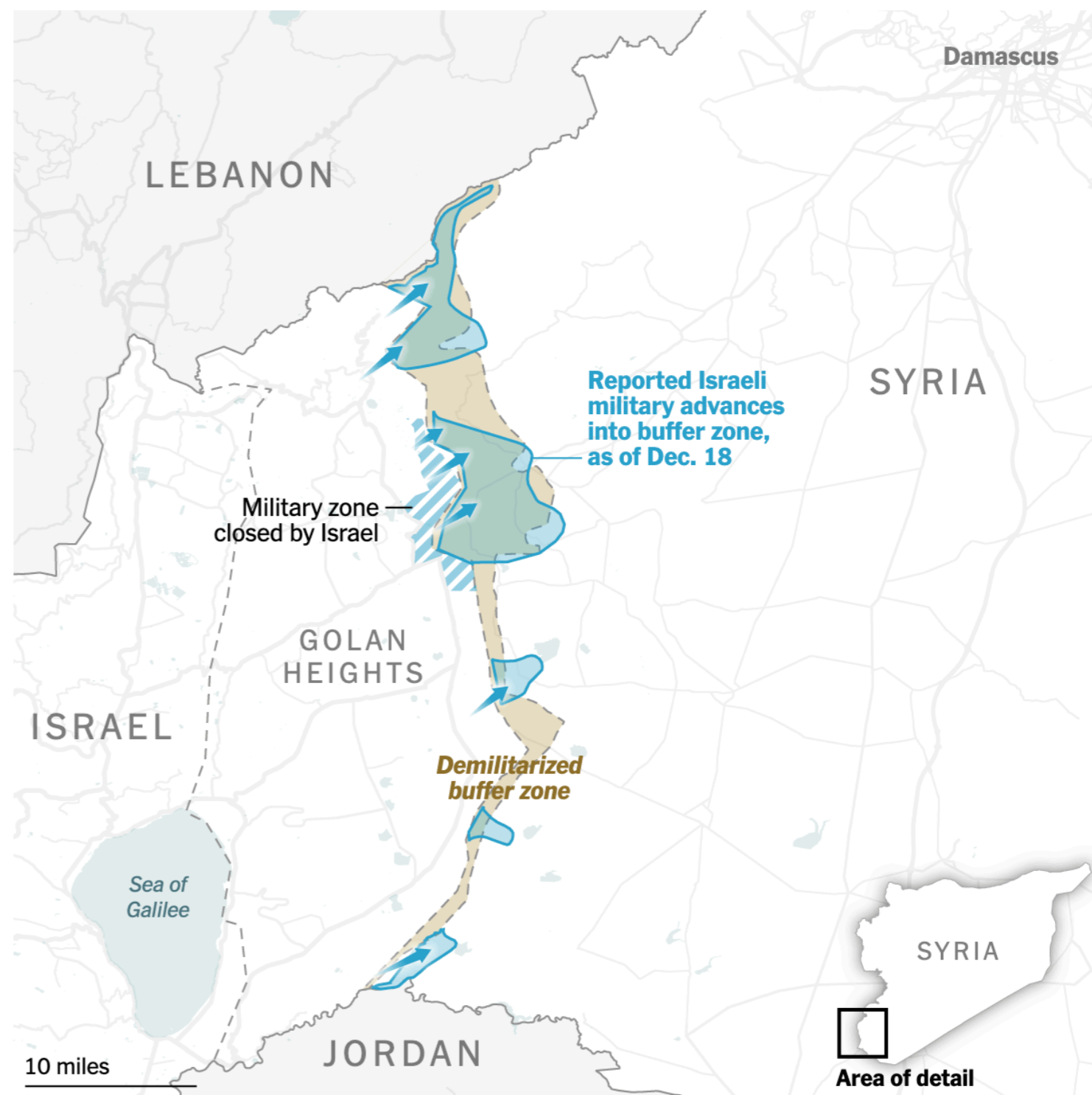
Source: The Carter Center



Fall of the Assad Regime in Syria: Israel Responds

- Dec. 7: Before the complete fall of the Assad regime, **IDF ground forces entered Syrian territory for the first time overtly since 1973**, taking control of the Mt. Hermon summit on the Syrian side - the peak of Mt. Hermon and the highest point in Syrian territory - and other locations across the Israeli-Syrian border.

Approximate advance of the Israeli military into Syria



Approximate advance of the IDF into the buffer zone between Syria & Israel



Fall of the Assad Regime in Syria: Israel Responds

- Assad had deployed the regime's anti-aircraft array around the capital city of Damascus, in the coastal region where the Alawite community is concentrated, and in the port cities of Latakia and Tartus, with radars across the entire country.
- Dec. 7-10: Israel's Air Force destroyed Syrian government's military assets including stockpiles of chemical weapons, Scud missiles, fighter jets, 15 navy vessels, drones, tanks, weapons factories, and radar equipped batteries and vehicles of Russian air defense missiles in over 350 airstrikes inside Syria.



The aftermath of an IDF strike on the Barzah scientific research center, which had been linked to the Syrian government's chemical weapons program.



Russian-made surface-to-air defense missile system (SA-17) destroyed by the IDF in Damascus.

Fall of the Assad Regime in Syria: Israel Responds

- **Within the first 25 hours, the Israeli Air Force destroyed over 100 surface-to-air missile batteries of the densest anti-aircraft system on Earth, which was the largest threat to the Israeli Air Force for the past 50 years.**
- By the end of December, IDF had attacked over 450 targets in Syria.



Note: As of Dec. 18. Locations are approximate based on daily reports. Some locations have been struck multiple times. • Source: Syrian Observatory for Human Rights • By Josh Holder

Report Prepared from a Variety of Media, Government, and Expert Sources and Are Hyperlinked Throughout

- ABC
- ADL
- Air & Space Forces Magazine
- Al Jazeera
- Al Mayadeen
- Al Mezan Center for Human Rights
- Al Monitor
- The America Times
- AP
- Arab World for Research & Development
- Axios
- BBC
- The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University
- The Brookings Institution
- Business Insider
- Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
- Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
- CBS
- Center for American Progress
- Center for Strategic & International Studies
- Channel 12 Israel News
- CIA
- CNN
- Congressional Research Service
- Council on Foreign Relations
- The Economist
- Energy Council
- European Jewish Press
- Financial Times
- FOX News
- Foreign Policy Research Institute
- France 24
- GazaNow
- Haaretz
- HAMAS Ministry of Health
- The Guardian
- Institute for National Security Studies
- Iran International
- Israel Defense Forces
- Israel Hayom
- Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Jerusalem Post
- The Jewish Chronicle
- KidnappedFromIsrael.com
- Los Angeles County District Attorney
- Levent Kemal
- Middle East Policy Council
- Middle East Research Institute
- NBC
- New Yorker
- The New York Post
- The New York Times
- NPR
- Oregon Public Broadcasting
- Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research
- Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics
- PBS
- Political Handbook of the World 2014
- Politico
- Reuters
- SKY News
- The Telegraph
- Times of Israel
- Trading Economics
- United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- USAID
- US Central Command
- US Department of Defense
- US Energy Information Administration
- US Navy
- US State Department
- US Treasury Department
- US White House
- USA TODAY
- United States Institute of Peace
- The Wall Street Journal
- The Washington Institute for Near East Policy
- The Washington Post
- TIME
- West Point Modern War Institute
- Yale School of Management
- Ynet News



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