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Russians in Syria Urged to Leave Country

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A poster shows Syrian President Bashar Assad installed at a broken window in the town of Masyaf, Syria. **Omar Sanadiki / AP / TASS**

Russian citizens who live in Syria should flee the lightning Islamist-led rebel offensive using any available commercial passenger flights, the Russian Embassy in Damascus said Friday.

"The Russian Embassy in Damascus reminds Russian citizens living in the SAR [Syrian Arab Republic] of the possibility of leaving the country using commercial flights through operating airports," it said.

In a statement on its Telegram channel, the diplomatic mission described the more than week-long rebel advance as a "difficult military and political situation in Syria."

The Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) rebel alliance launched its offensive on northern Syria on Nov. 27 seeking to overthrow Russian- and Iranian-backed President Bashar al-Assad.

In a little over a week and for the first time since the Syrian civil war began in 2011, HTS captured Syria's second city Aleppo, as well as the strategically located city of Hama.

The rebels recently announced on Telegram their capture of Hama following street battles with government forces, describing it as "the complete liberation of the city."

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A British-based war monitor that relies on a network of sources inside Syria said HTS was now at the gates of Homs. Syria's defense ministry denied claims that it had withdrawn its troops from Homs.

The capture of Homs would mean cutting the seat of power in Damascus from the Mediterranean coast.

The Russian embassy said it planned to continue working as normal despite the lightning Islamist rebel offensive.

Open-source military analysts said satellite images showed the Russian navy had evacuated its warships from its base in the port of Tartus. Russia said it was conducting exercises in the eastern Mediterranean.

The United Nations said the violence has displaced 280,000 people, warning the numbers could swell to 1.5 million.

AFP contributed reporting.

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