

Catch up: Syrian rebel groups vow revenge; ExxonMobil expands production



A leader of **Hayat Tahrir al-Sham**, the Islamist group that led the offensive that toppled Bashar al-Assad in **Syria**, vowed to pursue those responsible for torture and killings under the dictatorship, ruling out any possibility of pardons. In Qardaha, a town in the north, the Assad family tomb was set on fire. Videos showed men insulting Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father. Earlier the Biden administration urged HTS not to claim automatic leadership and instead establish an inclusive [transitional government](#), reported Reuters.

ExxonMobil announced plans to increase oil production. The American [oil giant](#) said it will produce 5.4m barrels of oil per day by 2030, up from 3.7m last year, and increase annual capital expenditure from roughly \$29bn a year to \$33bn a year. ExxonMobil's aggressive strategy contrasts with **Chevron's**, its biggest rival, which is cutting spending. Last week **OPEC+** postponed a planned increase in output citing weak demand.

Albertsons sued **Kroger**, a rival American grocery chain, a day after two separate judges [blocked their proposed \\$25bn merger](#). Albertsons accused Kroger, which was planning to absorb its nearly 2,000 stores, of failing to make “best efforts” to get regulatory approval, and is seeking damages. America’s Federal Trade Commission argued that the deal would reduce competition and result in higher prices.

Christopher Wray said he would step down as the **FBI’s** director before his ten-year term ends. Donald Trump appointed Mr Wray to run the agency in 2017 but soured on him when the Justice Department began [investigating the Trump campaign’s ties to Russia](#). Mr Trump had already signalled his plans to fire Mr Wray by nominating [Kash Patel](#), a loyalist, for the job.

Ukraine launched an attack on **Russian** infrastructure, causing a fire at an oil refinery in Bryansk, a region in the west which hosts pipelines transporting oil to Europe. The [drone strikes](#) also damaged an industrial facility in Taganrog, a port near the Ukrainian border. Ukraine said the attack was in retaliation for Russian strikes on the country’s energy facilities.

The **Taliban** accused Islamic State of killing Khalil Haqqani, its minister for refugees, in a suicide bombing. At least six other people died in the blast in Kabul. Mr Haqqani was a senior member of the [Haqqani network](#), a leading faction in the Taliban’s tapestry of allegiances. America deemed Mr Haqqani a global terrorist, previously offering \$5m in exchange for information on him.

A judge in Texas blocked an attempt by **The Onion**, [a satirical news organisation](#), to buy **Infowars**. The website, founded by Alex Jones, a conspiracy theorist, filed for bankruptcy in 2022 after losing a defamation suit for claiming that the Sandy Hook massacre was staged. The court said the Infowars auction was rushed, limiting competitive bidding.

Figure of the day: 25%, the rough share of British households receiving their electricity from Octopus Energy, up from less than 2% in 2018. [Read the full story.](#)

The future of Syrians in Europe



The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's brutal regime is prompting questions over what will happen to more than 1m Syrians who sought refuge in Europe during their country's 13-year civil war. The [rapid influx](#) was in part what prompted a "migration crisis" in Europe in 2015, which benefited some hard-right [politicians](#).

Statues of the fallen dictator had barely hit the ground when several EU countries, including Germany and Italy, said they were halting the processing of asylum applications from Syrians. Austria has mooted a "programme of orderly repatriation and deportation" but says this is focused on criminals. Along with Italy, it had previously debated working with the Assad regime to see if migrants could be sent back. Nothing is likely to happen fast: European authorities designate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the rebel group now in charge in Damascus, as a terrorist organisation, making it hard to arrange for repatriations even if that were feasible.

A nudge for Europe's economy



The euro zone's economy is only about 1% bigger than it was a year ago. And inflation, at 2.3% in November, is close to the European Central Bank's target of 2%. That's why the ECB won't relax yet. The prices of services have been rising by around 4% a year and there is sustained pressure from growing wages—the Netherlands, which has the most up-to-date figures, estimates these as rising at 6.5%.

Nonetheless, when the ECB meets on Thursday for the first time since the election of Donald Trump, it may want to give [Europe's economy](#) a push by cutting interest rates by 0.25 percentage points, to 3%. France is without a government and has to cut spending. Germany's economy remains stagnant. Business confidence has been declining throughout 2024. The widely watched purchasing managers' index is signalling contraction. And a trade war with the incoming Trump administration looms. Better keep the euro-zone economy grinding ahead.

The Democrats in search of direction



As Donald Trump prepares to return to the White House, Democrats are adrift. President Joe Biden has ceded the spotlight. Kamala Harris is weighing up her future after losing the election in November. In that leadership vacuum, Democratic lawmakers and analysts are offering [competing diagnoses](#) of where the party went wrong and prescriptions for how it can right itself.

Centrists say the party waited too long to address the border crisis and failed to distance itself from unpopular culture-war stances. Leftists say Democrats need to embrace pro-labour economic populism to win back working-class voters. The next chair of the Democratic National Committee will help set the agenda. On Thursday the DNC's rules committee meets to plan how the elections, due in February, will be structured.

So far five candidates—all men, four of them white—have put their names forward. Ken Martin, who leads Minnesota's Democratic Party, is the frontrunner. He is calling for a “massive” re-brand aimed at convincing working-class Americans that the Democrats are behind them—but offering few details on how to do that.

Macron mulls a new PM



France's president, Emmanuel Macron, heads for a visit to Poland on Thursday, fleeing his [country's political troubles](#). He will meet Donald Tusk, the Polish prime minister, to discuss how Europeans might organise Ukraine's security under the incoming American administration. Mr Macron orchestrated talks on Saturday between Donald Trump, the president-elect, and Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's president, when both came to Paris for the re-opening of Notre Dame Cathedral.

Mr Macron's domestic woes have hurt his European standing. He is expected to announce a new prime minister on Thursday, to replace Michel Barnier, who was [evicted by parliament](#) last week. The French president has held talks with party leaders reaching from the left to the conservative right, though excluding the furthest fringes. Mr Macron will need cross-party agreement not to topple his next appointee. Whoever he picks will still have to draw up a new budget, and deal with a National Assembly split into three minority blocs.

“The Nickel Boys” shines on screen



Colson Whitehead has won a cabinetful of awards for writing inventively about race in America, with pathos, humour and curiosity, and without didacticism. He won his second Pulitzer for [“The Nickel Boys”](#), a novel about two boys—decent, steadfast Elwood and cynical Turner, who become friends at the Nickel Academy, a grotesque chanel house of a reform school in Florida in the 1960s. The book is based on a true story: dozens of boys were abused, killed and buried on the grounds of the state-run Dozier School.

[The film version](#)—directed by RaMell Ross, best known for his documentary work about rural Southern African-Americans—is released in cinemas in New York this week. Mr Whitehead’s books have not always translated well into film because so much of what makes them compelling is his masterful, wry voice. But “Nickel Boys” has received sterling early notices; Mr Ross’s restrained, patient style, which earned him an Academy Award nomination in 2019, seems well suited to the grim subject matter.

Daily quiz



The Economist

We will serve you a new question each day this week. On Friday your challenge is to give us all five answers and, as important, tell us the connecting theme. Email your responses (and include mention of your home city and country) by 1700 GMT on Friday to QuizEspresso@economist.com. We'll pick randomly from those with the right answers and crown three winners on Saturday.

Thursday: Which movie starring Ernest Borgnine won the Oscar for best picture in 1956?

Wednesday: Who was the lead singer of the band Culture Club?

Ignorance is not innocence but sin.

Robert Browning