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QI Panel:

Syria and the United States After Assad

December 12th, 2024

12:00-1:00 PM ET

Adam Weinstein 0:54

Okay. Thanks for everyone who's joined. So far, we are actually waiting on two potential panelists, one being Joshua Landis, who's running a couple minutes late, and the others is someone who may join, who is from the US mission of the Syrian Democratic council. So that's the Kurdish political mission from the northeast. They may join. They may not be able to join. As you can imagine, they have a lot of a lot going on right now, but Josh should be joining in a couple of minutes with that. I'm going to introduce the panel. And if you're not familiar with the Quincy Institute, the Quincy Institute is a think tank based in Washington, DC, that advocates for a more restraint oriented US foreign policy rooted in diplomacy, rather than foreign military interventions. And today we're talking about Syria and the United States after Assad.

And we have a great lineup, we have our own, Stephen Simon, who's a senior research fellow at the Quincy Institute and has significant experience in government from 2011 to 2012 he served as the National Security Council. On the National Security Council as Senior Director for Middle Eastern and North African Affairs, and of course, works directly on Syria issues, especially during those years. And he also worked on the NSC staff from 1994 to 1999 during the Clinton administration, on counterterrorism and Middle East security policy. And his most recent book, *Grand Delusion, The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East*, was published last year. Josh Landis, who should be joining as a non resident Fellow at the Quincy Institute and the Sandra Mackey Chair and Professor of Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, and he's the director of the Center for Middle East Studies there. And of course, he's he's written extensively on Syria for for decades. Now, we also have Carolyn rose, who's the director of the strategic blind spots portfolio at the new lions Institute, where she leads research on various topics, but she has particularly focused on the Captagon trade, which was, of course, a drug trade emanating from Syria, and a bit understudied, but very significant to the war there and potentially to the aftermath of the War. My name is Adam Weinstein, if you don't know, and I'm the Deputy Director of the Middle East program here at the Quincy Institute. And if our Syrian colleague joins, I'll introduce her, her then.

So while we're waiting, I think we'll just get started with with questions. I'm sorry that not everyone is here yet, but I'll start with you, Steve, were you surprised by the events of the last 10 days, by the HGS siege of Aleppo and then potentially broken brokered surrender of Assad, in which he evacuated to Russia, and then the sea this Well, we, I don't even know if we can call it a siege. The HTS just walked into Damascus. Were you surprised by those events?

Steven Simon 4:15

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Yeah, I guess I was. No. I think you know, the phrase I think people use is, you know, shocked, but not surprised. If you, you know, can parse that it's, it was one of those things that you know, one doesn't expect, really, because typically one looks at Syria as a kind of a steady state, you know. And, and this is one of the reasons why the Civil War, you know, surprised people way back when, in 2011 and it's, you know, the reason why people are kind of surprised by what's going on in Syria now, it tends to escape people's, you know, attention. Patient for various for various reasons, and also, you know, as as Bob Jervis, the late and very distinguished international relations scholar, you know, used to say, nothing, nothing is more surprising than a coup. It's extremely difficult to predict. And in a way, this was, this was a coup, a kind of a Turkish inspired coup. So the short answer is, is kind of Yes

Adam Weinstein 5:40

Like I said, four years beyond COVID, and I still forget to unmute myself. I don't know when I'll learn. But anyway, another question I have is you just just a little bit ago, the Ministry of Interior of the new Syrian government, I released a photo with Turkish foreign minister Fidan, and in that tweet, they announced that there was a Turkish Qatari delegation that had arrived in Damascus, including Turkish foreign minister Hakan Friedan and others as well. And they were meeting with the new government, including the new prime minister. And interestingly enough, and maybe I'm over reading into this in the photo, they just show the Turkish flag. They don't show the Qatari flag, and the focus is on feed on. And I found the optics of that a bit interesting. Which leads me to the question, who is running Syria? Is it HGS, or is it turkey? Or is it something in between?

Steven Simon 6:43

Yeah, okay, so my inclination is to see this as, you know, essentially a Turkish coup. Now, the Turks in the in the Qatars have been, you know, have constituted an axis since the early days of the Syrian civil war. You know, low those many years ago and and they've they finally reached their their objective. They're ideologically aligned. Their foreign policies are aligned, and their goals vis a vis Syria, you know, in particular, are aligned. So I'm not, I'm not at all surprised to see, to see that, of course, the but the Turks have several objectives vis a vis Syria that are met by their sponsored sponsored incursion and conquest of Syria by HTS and conqueries of Sunni militias that are backed by Turkey first, Turkey has long sought a buffer zone within Syria. That's that's an effort that's ongoing for a while, and that has already achieved a lot of its objectives. They are very concerned to put pressure, if not completely, to subjugate Syrian Kurds, because the gains that they've made towards autonomy within the Syrian context that Turks find, you know, threatening for their domestic situation and domestic relations with the Kurds.

So there's, there's that Erdogan himself developed quite a serious antipathy to Assad. And was, you know, very eager to see Assad, God and and Erdogan himself is, is, ideologically, if I can put it that way, aligned with with HTS. The Turks had sponsored the HTS kind of mini caliphate in Idlib government in Syria, they provided protection for it, they provided money for it, and so forth. And of course, you know, the Turks are swimming in and Syrian refugees, which I think

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that they'd like to see, repatriated to Syria, and that that was also not going to happen as long as Assad was in, was in power, so the Turks were over incentivized.

Now, lately, there's been one other wrinkle, which, you know, as you know, I've got my eye on, which is how the Turks posture in Syria against Israel, the Turkish Israeli relations have taken a real dive. They're very tense. Erdogan has spoken in, you know, fairly hostile, even aggressive, terms, about about Israel and consequence of Israeli actions in the in the context of the Gaza war. Um. Yeah, and, and he might be looking at Syria as a place where he could deploy his forces closer to Israel's border and exert some, some real, practical pressure. So I think the incentives on the Turkish side were over determined. I mean, you know, there were so many of them, any, any, any two of them would have been enough to parlay Turkish sponsorship of HTS and Idlib into a smash and grab and ultimately a successful coup in Syria.

Adam Weinstein 10:33

And of course, I'm sure that Bashar Assad is regretting not laying siege to Idlib when he had the opportunity. But of course, his hands were tied by Russia, and that was partly due to negotiations between Turkey and Russia, and part of the reason that the Turks didn't want a siege of Idlib. There were many reasons, but one reason is they didn't want to see a new wave of Syrian refugees. We'll get to that later, and we'll talk about Israel, but speaking of Syrian Kurds, we are joined now by Sinam Sherkany, who, who's very busy right now, and I might have to leave at 30 after the hour, or even before that, but I want to give her a chance to speak. She's the Chief of Mission for the US mission of the Syrian Democratic council. So she's a representative of the Syrian Democratic Council, and she's a diplomat of the autonomous administration of north and east Syria, and serves on the STC Presidential Council. So she can correct me if I'm wrong or if I've characterized this incorrectly, but more or less it's the political wing of PDF, and you can read her extensive bio online. I want to give her a chance to speak. See, are you with us?

Sinam Sherkany 11:45

Yes, I'm with you. Are you hearing me?

Adam Weinstein 11:48

We're hearing you, but we're not seeing you.

Sinam Sherkany 11:51

Just let me open the screen.

Adam Weinstein 11:57

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So maybe in a couple minutes you could give us. You know, a lot of the attention has been on Aleppo and Damascus, and of course, those areas are under control of the new government, but there's still an entire other part of Syria, northeastern Syria, that is, is under the control of the SDF. And of course, there's US troops there as well. So maybe you can give us your readout of what the situation is in northeastern Syria since all of Damascus.

Sinam Sherkany 12:24

Thank you so much for giving me the time. I would be leaving soon because I have another meeting, but it is an opportunity to clarify now the situation in northeast Syria since the collapse of an Assad, which we owe the Syrian people be happy to see him collapsing after 50 years of tyranny, and, you know, suffering the people, Syrian people, but now, after the collapsing of Assad, what post Assad? What do we need as the Syrian people in Syria to cease the new Syria? Do we need to see Syria as an Islamic jihadist ruled by them as Taliban, whatever Afghanistan, this is what we are concerned about. Or do we see? Do you want Syria to be a secular Syria, civilized Syria, with all the Syrian ethnic minorities being in the government? So regarding this issue, as soon as the HDS started to enter Aleppo. The the the national Syrian Army, backed by Turkey, they moved immediately to our region, where we have the displaced people of ofi Kurdish people of Afrin, who has been displaced by Turkey in 2018 when they occupied the city, more than 150,000 of the displaced people, Kurdish people in the sharba and Tel RIFA, they have been there for six years in the camps SNA backed by Turkey immediately attacked these people. They committed a lot of atrocities, killing the people, Kurdish people, beheading a woman, Kurdish woman in and starting to rob some their things and provoke them.

But so for that, we wanted to evacuate our people to the northeast Syria to keep them safe. This is what we did so we could evacuate 120,000 of the people to come to the northeast Syria. Still we have about 15,000 missing. Don't know what happened to them, either being kidnapped or killed. Nobody knows about some family are missing. Now we have in the northeast Syria now a catastrophe, humanitarian issues for these people, to keep them safe, warm and provide them with all the assistance the other things now, as soon as it happened, now the s and. Started to attack the member city. Members city, it has been liberated by our forces, Syrian Democratic Forces in 2016 from ISIS. We liberated the city. And I can tell here the city majority are Arabs, not Kurds, even though the Kurds with the Arabs, moved to game, they shed bloods to liberate their city from ISIS SNA they they backed by Turkey. They attacked the city, and they want to take it back. So what happened, after many days of fighting with them, we the Americans, with the mediate with the Americans and with the Global Coalition, to mediate between us and them to have a ceasefire. We respect that we had a ceasefire in members. We respect the agreement. And then they say, okay, as a, as a, as a goodwill intention for from us. We are going asking to hand over this city to the SNA. We did that now, members completely has gone to the SNA by the agreement in order to have a ceasefire. But unfortunately, this group, they did not committed to the ceasefire agreement. Again, started to attack the Kobani city. Kobani city, which is the first city witnessed the end of ISIS, the beginning of the end of ISIS, when they defeated in Kobani.

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Again, we have the American they, they also interfered, to I mean mediated between them to have some ceasefire. Now it stopped little bit, but they are now attacking the dam, which is close to the Cobani, between Kobani and the other side of the river. The dam, it is called the Shri dam Tom. It is on the Euphrates River. This dam provide electricity and water to the many of the in the northeast Syria and in Aleppo city. We are at the dam as the SDF to protect it. And these groups, they want to destroy the dam. So for that, we are trying. Now there is a severe fighting on the dam. Now we we call the International Committee and the global coalition that mediated to have a ceasefire agreement. We tell them that these people, they are not committed the ceasefire agreement. So again, they say, Okay, let us have an agreement there to stop this, and we will give the the dam for, I mean, a civilian to to manage it still. Now we don't know, we didn't have, still the agreement, but there is, maybe we always have the intention to end any bloodshed, Syrian bloodshed. This is what we want, because we want to end the bloodshed in order to build a new Syria.

Now, together, this is what's going on. Now, I will let you know in the northeast Syria. Now, most of the people, they are worried. Kurdish people, especially, they are worried because Turkey may attack our region. Christian people, they are under threat in the northeast Syria and even the Alawite who are at the coast now, after the collapse of Assad, they are also afraid and very worried about some genocide, or, you know, crimes will happen against them as they are allowed from the HDS, something happened In the coast. Yes, they killed some people in their homes. They killed many Alawis people. They are targeting them, I mean, to to their ethnicity, ethnicity. So this is the problem now. We hope that the HDS can move in a good way. They can, can work as a Syrian, for all the ethnicities, all the minorities, to be sharing in the government. What we have seen now the new government. They have established a temporary government till March 25 it is only from their own people, from Idlib and from the HDS, no one from the other minorities, no Kurds, no Syriac, no Christian. You know that is not good. This is not a good sign for I mean the beginning of Syria, or Syrian, new Syria. So we hope that maybe we will have a better government, sharing power government with all the minorities, all the components in Syria. Syria is a diverse we have to protect the diverse in Syria. We have to protect the minorities in Syria. We are really very concerned about our future as a Kurdish people, especially as a Christians, as otherwise, all of them. Are worried now, so is it now? Can we see that Syria going toward Islamism, toward extremism? That will be a very bad sign. This is we don't want to see it. We hope that we will not see that.

Till, so far in a report, we couldn't find any violation from HDS, but we have seen many members from HTS who are not Syrians. They are from shashan, I don't know from other countries. So we know that HTS, it has been designated as a terrorist group, the jolani. He was from al Qaeda, then Al- Nusra, and then he became HTS, and now he became the leader of Syria. You know, that is the things we have to take it into concentration. We need now the United States to help the SDF, Syrian Democratic Forces in order to be able to protect the people in Syria, the people, the minorities, as a Kurd and the Arabs, even in the northeast Syria, all the Arabs, they want the SDF, because they know how this Islamist group backed by Turkey, how they committed a lot of crimes. They will. They will. Don't want to see that some of the Arabs in their

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reserve, they they they want to have HTS. We don't have any problem that we want to get a relation with the HTS. Now we have some coordination in order to have as they are in the factor now a government then, so we need to reach them. We are, I mean, trying to reach them. We are trying to have a relation and to tell that we are a part of Syria, we have to be in this Syrian government and youth government.

Adam Weinstein 21:47

To interject for a moment. The Biden administration has stated that, in order that it's open to recognizing the new government in Syria, but that an inclusive government would be part of that. Now, of course, HTS has made it these sort of public, very public olive branches to the Christian community and so forth. And they've, they've used it to say they're more moderate, but they don't seem to have an inclusive government yet, although it's only been a few days, you know, I have a follow up question, though, for you, because I know you have to drop off soon. You mentioned that, you know, Arabs have left the SDF. You know, sometimes some people in the US think that the SDF is just Kurdish. But of course, it does have Arab members. Some of them have left in there zero to become part of HTS. So, so, I guess two questions. I mean, how worried are you about these, about these defections? And then, you know, do you think that the SDF is going to be able to potentially come to some kind of understanding, both with Turkey and HTS and in the case of SNA which is even more controlled by Turkey, is there going to be any understanding there?

Sinam Sherkany 22:56

We wish to have actually recall, to have a dialog with Turkey. In order to end all this problem, Turkey always attacking us. I mean calling or saying that we are bad girls. You know, this is what we accusing us. We are in Syria. We have been working since 2011 so till now, we are working for Syria as a Syria as a country liberated the Syrian territory. We paid 12,000 of our people to fight the ISIS. Most of them are Kurdish. Now the SDF forces, it skirt and Arab majorities. So about maybe 5045, something like that. Arabs or 50. Sometimes they say, I don't, I mean exactly, but it is more than 40% of the Arabs in the SDF. So we are to get together, Arabs and Kurds. They, they, they were together to fight ISIS. So we need to gather also to protect our region. We need to have a dialog with Turkey. Turkey is always accusing us being, you know, bad Kurds or a big K, whatever. But we have in the region Kurd, Arab, Syria, Christian, when they are attacking this region, there is a genocide will happen for the Christian for the Kurd, again, the genocide will happen for the Christian people in 1915 it will be repeated again now we know the third how they think so.

Because of that, we don't want to have any genocide in the 21 century. We don't want to have any extremism in the 21 century. We need to have a dialog with Turkey. We are open to that. And we ask the American, I mean, the government here, the Biden administration, to inter to mediate between us and the turkey, to stop all the fighting and conflict between us. So far, we didn't find anything. We hope that to reach to any, you know, agreement together, we need to

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stop any conflict and see. Area in order to build our country together. This is what we hope, and this is what we ask, also for.

Adam Weinstein 25:09

Okay, well, I think that's a good note to end on. I know you have other meetings to attend to, so free to stay if you want, but or drop off if you have to. I really appreciate your your time.

Sinam Sherkany 25:18

Thank you. I have to leave now. Thank you so much for your and thank you. Have a good day.

Adam Weinstein 25:26

So Caroline, you've been quite patient. And I don't mean to to jump around topics here, but of course, to really have a truly narratively coherent discussion about Syria, we would need five hours. So we are going to jump around topics a little bit, because something that doesn't get discussed enough is the Captagon trade that was fueling the war in Syria, and perhaps might be used by non state actors. Now that the Assad regime is gone, you've really built a niche specialty in this topic. And I know that new lines published a very extensive report on Captagon, and I know it's a it's a topic that doesn't get much attention in the media, but is important to the US government. So maybe you can briefly explain to listeners what the Captagon trade is, how the Assad regime used it, and what might be the future of it, and then, and then we might circle back to the Israel topic, because I know that a lot of folks in the Q and A are asking about that

Caroline Rose 26:25

Of course, and thanks so much for having me on to speak about this. We've seen actually Captagon pop up quite frequently today and yesterday, because there have been now a series of laboratory and warehouse seizures that exposed the very close relationship that the regime had with Captagon production and trafficking. So in a way, it's been it's kind of nice to see some of these new videos and footage that confirm that what we've been researching for a very long time is in fact the case, and the relationship is, in fact, just as strong as our project and many other investigative researchers and journalists have been saying for years. So just to talk about Captagon and to explain what drug this is, because it really is not a very popular substance outside of the Middle East, Captagon is an amphetamine type stimulant, an ATS that was established as a licit pharmaceutical product in the 1960s it had a very brief tenure in the licit market until the mid 1980s until the World Health Organization began to schedule the drug, and it then, of course, trickled into the illicit market, first Starting out as an illicit underground drug in the 1990s to early 2000s in the Balkans, and then slowly it made its way to the Levant, to Lebanon and then into Syria. Had a brief stint in Turkey, where there were some small scale labs throughout the early 2000s Captagon production was very small scale. I mean, you would find this stuff being made in someone's basement. It was, it was very little and very easy to make, very little scientific. Know how was required for Captagon production. And so because of

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that, you would see, you know, local traffickers or warlords or criminal networks engaging Captagon production to diversify the different illicit products that they were either manufacturing or trafficking.

Fast forward to the 2010s, Captagon began to be almost exclusively associated with the Islamic State, something that wasn't necessarily entirely the case. When it came to Captagon inside of Syria, there were a few reports that ISIS fighters had taken Captagon to conduct some operations. And because of that, there was a huge, I think, surge in media attention on Captagon and how it was related to ISIS as a terrorist organization, when, in fact, Captagon actually, as a whole, was being produced in many more cases, across the board, across Syria, amongst warlords, members of the opposition, as well as terrorist organizations like ISIS, additionally, Captagon became a commodity to be taxed at checkpoints. That's when we really started to see Syria flourish at its peak, at the peak of the Syrian civil war, as this checkpoint economy, militias would impose taxes on trafficking organizations that were trying to shuffle Captagon through and reach their destination markets.

But at the end of the 2010s, that's when we started to see some interesting signs that Captagon was exploding in the region. The demand markets were always the same. Gulf states that were there were many different communities that sought out Captagon as a drug that would allow them to participate in recreational. Uh activities as well as a drug that would bolster productivity. So you would have foreign worker populations that really sought out Captagon to work second or third shifts, um or work long hours. University students that also sought out Captagon to stay up late for exams and to study, as well as food insecure communities that sought out Captagon to save meals or to stay up late to work, and ultimately, in the late 2010s or so, yeah, the late 2010s and early 2020s that's when we started to see Captagon being shipped in huge sized consignments, often through maritime routes on commercial shipping vessels that made a lot of analysts like myself think twice about okay, is this a trade that is exclusively associated with organizations like the Islamic State, and ultimately, the fact that Captagon was being dispatched from ports like the port of Latakia Tartus and some very notable border crossings that often had either the exclusive or the majority of access from the regime, along with industrial scale packaging materials and capabilities that really Only a state actor would have access to. That's really what started, I think, the journey for analysts and researchers like myself as well as others other organizations, to really embark and figure out what actors are behind the Captagon trade.

And we soon found in 2020 2021 2022 really at the peak of the Captagon trade that the fourth Armored Division, the Syrian Air Force Intelligence Directorate, the Military Intelligence Directorate, and many Assad family members like Wassim, Badia al Assad, Samir al Assad, munfer al Assad, plus regime allies and friends of Bashar, personal friends, people like Amir kitty, coder, Tahir al Kelley, they were all embedded in different phases of Captagon production and or trafficking. They really allowed Captagon to mushroom into an industrial scale trade that was at least in 2022 estimated to be around ten billion annually, accounting for both seized and unseized pills, so the pills that are being spotted as well as the pills that are trickling through undetected by law enforcement. And by the end of 2023 there was an excellent study conducted by the Syrian Observatory for political and economics that estimated that Captagon

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was worth at least \$2.4 billion for just regime aligned actors. What we know in terms of just how they were using this revenue, it's very clear that the revenue was not being trickled immediately back into the Syrian economy or public services. Instead, this was really lining the pockets of regime allies, and in some cases, regime officials, that allowed them to essentially stay afloat amidst sanctions, amidst the war torn economy, and allowed them to sustain the lifestyle that they had before the Syrian war, you saw many cousins of Bashar Al Assad driving extremely luxurious cars, throwing extravagant parties and being able to travel to different places and enjoy a very comfortable, wealthy lifestyle. This also extended to many allies that they had in Lebanon, particularly those that either had allegiance or were directly affiliated with Hezbollah that also perpetuated this trade and offered this outlet to Lebanese ports to help sustain the trade.

Now it's quite interesting, because you know, our work over at the Captagon trade project that the new lines Institute. We've been trying to track a lot of these laboratories, both large and small, and we had always pointed to Duma, Latakia, Damascus, Tartus, and in some cases, some hot spots in Aleppo, as well as some small scale laboratories in Dada and sueda as some of the hot spots for Captagon production. And then in recent days, we've seen now at least two large scale Captagon production facilities, as well as two to three different staging warehouse facilities storing Captagon. And I want to add that these are the first Captagon lab seizures that have been recorded in the history of Syria, seizing Captagon for years the regime did a, I would say, pretty comprehensive job of covering up production, denouncing that production was happening inside of regime. Held territories, pointing fingers to the opposition, pointing fingers to other actors and its adversaries, saying that there was no manufacturing whatsoever inside of regime. Held territories. And then, of course, as soon as Assad is on a plane to Moscow and the regime falls, we are already seeing extensive evidence of industrial scale production inside of hot spots like Duma Latakia and Damascus and so I expect that more of these seizures will happen. In terms of looking ahead, I think that it's very clear that there's going to be a shortage in Captagon supply, at least in the short term. When you look at some of these factories, I mean, it's incredible the industrial scale manufacturing equipment that they had. There's going to be no actor that will be able to replace that immediately. But they have been preparing for this.

We can see at least in 2022 2023 and 2024 actors started to trickle out from Syria into places like Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, Kuwait, even, and in some cases, Libya, Germany and the Netherlands, and they've started to set up very small shops of Captagon production facilities. And likely that's what we'll see in the coming years. In the coming months, even a lot of these actors try and get creative, establish different trafficking routes, different places for production, additionally. And probably the most scary outcome that we'll likely see is the next step, and it's it's the next kind of door into another substance, and it's the question of what alternative substance could take the place of Captagon. And the answer is methamphetamine, and we've already seen skyrocketing rates of crystal meth consumption in the Middle East, in places like Iraq, also in the Gulf, where it's commonly referred to as shabel. And likely, the Captagon shortage could create a greater demand for for crystal methamphetamine and methamphetamine tablets. So that is something

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Not to cut you off, but do you see, I mean, so, I mean, obviously, the Assad regime was using its at least, to insulate their lifestyle, and to some, you know, to some extent, be able to to to fund certain activities. And of course, the Assad regime was extremely sanctioned, and but you know, as a Syria was sanctioned, and of course, HTS is an FTO designated foreign terrorist organization. Jelani himself is designated as a global terrorist. Obviously, certain regional countries are moving to accept the reality of the new Syria and and perhaps the US government will look the other way in the name of stability, but maybe we can talk to Steve about that. But if they don't look the other way, and Syria remains extremely sanctioned, and the integration into the region economically is slow. I mean, you foresee HTS somewhat relying on Captagon to stay afloat.

Caroline Rose 38:00

I could see it to a degree. And I think what we've seen thus far with HTS, if you just look at Idlib as a case study, the name of the game, there had been taxation. It's a checkpoint economy. You're taxing a lot of the illicit substances that were flowing through, although in recent years, I will say HGS did, I would say they did a very intentional job of trying to disclose and seize Captagon shipments that were coming through, as well as methamphetamine hashish shipments that were flowing through the Northwest as a way a rhetorical tool to point fingers at the regime and create kind of this moral high ground, likely what would continue if there is a need for alternative revenue streams? I think that we could see low level Captagon production continue in Syria, and then likely the taxation of Captagon through, you know, border checkpoints and whatnot. But now that we're seeing the dismantling and the disassembling of some of these major Captagon factories and warehouses, and the fact that Jelani also, in this like victory speech that he made recently, just a few days ago, he talked about Captagon he also talked very briefly about cleansing Syria, of like this, this this image that, and this association it had with illicit drugs, I see, at least as HTS is trying to do this makeover of and it's like kind of a makeover of moderation. I could see them trying to put an arm's length between them and the illicit drug industry in Syria. Of course, this could be something that could be overturned very quickly, but likely, I think, that they will at least try and keep production of Captagon at an arm's length, whereas they might tax and may not necessarily intervene with low level, small scale Captagon producers that are not associated with the. Governance in Syria. These might be just warlords that are operating in the south, and then they essentially just tax for just a little bit of extra cash on the top.

Adam Weinstein 40:11

Okay, well, that's very interesting. I wanted to feature that because it's an under reported story in the Syrian civil war, but in some ways, how some of the events were being being funded. I'm going to circle back now to Stephen you. We have a bunch of questions in the chat about Israel, and you were getting to that earlier, particularly about the strikes that we've we've seen Israel conduct in in the last few days. What is that all about? Steve, you're on you're on mute.

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Steven Simon 40:53

I think it's primarily about disarming the new regime the you know, over the course of the, I don't know, half century that Syria was at war with Israel, it and vice versa. I guess the Syrians stockpiled an enormous amount of heavy weaponry and munitions, and these would have constituted Assad's unintended legacy or bequest to the successor government. And the Israelis wanted to deprive the new government of this legacy. The Israelis were also concerned to destroy the research institutes that operated under the Ministry of Defense in the Ministry of Defense in Syria, because it's where the Syrians developed, perfected and and and fabricated the precursors to the nerve gasses and and other very, very toxic substances that it had weaponized as Syria's strategic response to Israel's possession of nuclear weapons. Many of these stockpiles of of sarin and other toxic substances were destroyed in the wake of the 2013 chemical weapons attacks in the in the suburbs of Damascus, under an agreement implemented by the UN but reached initially, between the United States, Russia and and the Assad regime. So I don't think that there's a lot of of the substances left, but the Israelis, I think, wanted to level the infrastructure from which those substances had emerged to begin with. So they've done that, you know as well. Now they may have other targets of which I'm unaware, but the overall objective is to ensure that if if the new regime feels an army, it's it's not going to start out with a lot of tanks and artillery and and mobility assets that would enable it to to attack Israel with any effectiveness.

Adam Weinstein 43:40

Now, yeah, of course, his nom de jolani is Golani. Is in the Golan Heights, and he has family links there, and now he's on video basically saying all the right things that the Syrian people have done with war. He doesn't want to start a new war. His only enemies are Hezbollah and Iran. And in some sense, this must be music to the Israelis ears. But, you know, I suspect they don't trust it all that much. But why did they allow the I mean, why did they allow the Assad regime to keep the pilot light on this industrial base and this ability to produce chemical weapons and heavy weapons? I mean, surely they could have conducted these strikes on the Assad regime. But we've discussed this before, and it seems that what they really wanted was was a weak Syria.

Steven Simon 44:32

Well, to be sure, the Israelis favor a weak and divided Syria on its on their border. There's a little question about that. But they also, in the case of the Assad regime, had concluded that he was that Assad was a kind of loyal opposition, you know, and not a red meat eating. You know, fierce, implacable enemy of Israel, in a way that would lead to, you know, serious aggression, the use of chemical weapons, and, you know, all that kind of thing. In essence, the Israelis had concluded that, with respect to Syria, deterrence worked. That, you know, Assad understood what the penalties would be if he got out of line, and therefore he avoided getting out of line and and as long as Assad was in power, in any case, he concentrated the bulk of his forces, his military capacity, around Damascus itself. This is what dictators do. You know, the army

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becomes more of a Praetorian Guard or a regime survival tool. Then, then it, then it is a, you know, a tool for power projection across the borders of the country. So you have a big army, but it's mostly assets bodyguard the Israelis, I think, understood this and in any case, the Israelis had a lot of other targets to strike, you know, over the past 10 years or so, and these constituted primarily Iranian assets, or the assets of Iranian proxies or convoys attempting to bring weapons, particularly rockets and missiles, across the Syrian border into Lebanon to buttress the the arsenal of Lebanese, Lebanese Hezbollah. So I wouldn't you know for a moment, minimize the operational tempo of Israeli strikes against, you know, Syrian targets while Assad was in power, essentially, Syrian airspace was a free fire zone, you know, for years for the Israelis, and they made enthusiastic use of you know that, but, but now you know they're they're looking at their strikes have a somewhat different purpose than they did then.

Adam Weinstein 47:13

Caroline, you had a tweet the other day saying something similar. Prime Minister Netanyahu had made a statement if the new regime in Syria allows Iran to re establish itself or allows the transfer of Iranian weapons to Hezbollah, we will respond forcefully, and we will exact a heavy price. Of course, that's it's interesting that He's tying it to Iran and Hezbollah. Since, you know, it's a little it's a little bit laughable that Jelani would be, would be friendly to them. And you, you wrote essentially, you know what? What, in shorter form, What? What? What? Steve just said is that you know it wants to ensure that Syria remains weak and to hamper the transitional government from functioning effectively or having too high of an operational capacity militarily. But I'm curious, do you have any thoughts beyond that, or on why in his comms, Netanyahu is talking about Iran and Hezbollah, when this sort of seems detached from the reality on the ground.

Caroline Rose 48:15

Well, yeah, I think that ultimately, this really draws to the question of really, what we've all been asking since the outbreak of the this offensive after October 7, which is, what's the end goal here? And I think that Israel has established this line of look we're seeking to target and essentially disable Iran's proxy network in the Middle East. And as, I think, repetitively, as we've seen the opening and the closing, or at least closing of halfway, of these new fronts had now been added in Lebanon, to a degree, in the in the West Bank, and now in Syria, there's this question of, okay, if it is about Iran, if it is about Iran and Iran aligned militias, then why? After we've seen really a massive exodus of Iran aligned proxy networks? Of course, there are still that remain inside of Syria, but still, after we've seen this influx of them back into Iraq, particularly aligned with hosted militia networks, along with the regime, the fourth Armored Division. Many of those individuals and those networks have reportedly departed Syria. Then, why are we seeing the systematic bombardment of Syria's conventional military capabilities, its naval fleet, its air bases, its chemical weapons stockpiles.

And ultimately, what that says to me, it's not necessarily about Iran, Iranian access to the Mediterranean. It's not about, you know, the land bridge or the Shiite crescent, or any of the

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other names that we've given to Iran's proxy strategy. In the Lamont but really it's a bit more towards and it points to the fact that Israel's objective here is to try and dampen and to try and put more obstacles in this new transitional Government's way when it comes to trying to challenge Israel or potentially create new, you know, obstacles for for Israeli forces as well as, of course, try and commandeer additional territorial acquisitions beyond the Golan Heights. I think this is also about creating a larger buffer and having that as leverage against any new potential Syrian government. So I think that this is about a strategy of weakening Syria, just like it's a strategy of weakening Lebanon. And likely, you know, if there's ever going to be a an engagement with Iraq, I think that will also be the same strategy as well.

Adam Weinstein 51:01

So, Steve, we've talked about the Israeli military's campaign objectives in Syria. Let's move on, in the last eight minutes to the US military's objectives. Now we heard from from sinam, which, of course, she has a particular view of things due to her relationship to the SDF and the Turks have their own view. For those of you listening now, we will have a panel on Monday at 12pm that talks about the Turkish perspective and features go no tool who wrote erdogans War, which is one of the best books on Erdogan's view of Syria I've read. And then we'll also have Colonel rich Utzon, who I think has a lot of experience with the SDF, and, of course, Kadir ustun from Seta, who will be able to provide the turkey's more official perspective, I think so we'll hear from the Turkish perspective, and they will, in some ways, perhaps be a response to some of synonyms points, although she won't be on that panel.

But what's the American perspective on northeastern Syria and objectives in Syria? Steve, I mean, Jelani had a bounty on his head, and yet he was operating freely in Idlib and giving talks at universities like he was a professor sometimes, and I suppose if the Americans had really wanted him dead, he would have been dead a long time ago. We still have 900 US troops in northeastern Syria, purportedly there to fight ISIS, although maybe some of it was really about watching what the Iranians are doing. What is the future of the US troops there? What are US security priorities in Syria. What's going to happen in northeastern Syria? Are we going to be able to have better relations with Turkey, or is this SDF problem still going to be a thorn in the side of things? I know that's a lot of questions, but maybe you can give us a summary.

Steven Simon 52:58

Well, I'm still reeling at the thought of professorial lectures constituting atrocities. Most of my students would probably agree, actually. So yeah, the United States had three objectives, maybe four, depending if you want to split hairs by maintaining, you know, a force of 900 soldiers and Marines in in Syria, the one the stated version of the clarity mission was the defeat ISIS campaign. And you know, for that purpose, 900 unified uniformed personnel, appropriately equipped, were the disproportionate response to the fading threat of ISIS. So they kept their eye on things and they back stopped. You know the Kurds, in terms of the Kurds assumption of responsibility for security at the whole complex which housed, you know, 1000, continues to house 1000s of former ISIS people, or maybe they're still ISIS people and their families. So that

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was, that was the stated intention. But there were several other objectives, the one which to which you alluded, was keeping an eye on Syria and actually interdicting, keeping an eye on Iran, and interdicting attempts by Iran to use the so called land bridge, the land corridor, across Syria to Lebanese Hezbollah. For the purposes of the resupply of that organization from Iraq through the big border crossing points in southeastern Iraq, Ataf and Abu Kamal. So that was a. Second one, it was, you know, essentially, to hamstring Iran, to put up, to put a spoke in the wheel of Iran's efforts in Lebanon and Syria. Now. Thirdly, it was to protect the Kurds against the Turks, the Kurds, that is the SDF had and continues to have. We'll see how this works out under Trump, but they have a strong base of support in Congress, particularly in the Senate, the Kurds are viewed as having been reliable allies, and we were shoulder to shoulder with the Kurds in combat. That's that's a big distinction for many in the United States and therefore, you know, Kurdish aspirations for autonomy and particularly to be fireproofed against Turkish aggression, or Turkish attempts to subordinate Syrian Kurds, struck quite a chord in Washington, particularly when Senator John McCain was still alive and in the Senate campaigning on behalf of the Kurds. So that's kind of a big thing, and that there was always tension in Washington between that objective and, of course, the US treaty relations with the Turks. The Turks are constitute the southern flank of NATO, Turkey, Greece and Italy, but Turks are an important linchpin of it. So these objectives vis a vis the Kurds, the sentiments vis a vis the Kurds tended to clash with alliance commitments or tacit Alliance obligations. You know you're an ally to treaty ally with Turkey, you have to take their security interests, seriously, their security interests, you know they say are compromised by the Kurds. So you know that that puts different factions of the US government, or different impulses within the US government in contestation. Okay, so that's another thing. If you talk to some of the diplomats from the first Trump administration, who were in charge of Syria policy, you know, they'll say, well, there was yet another related objective, which was to create a swamp in which the Russians would sink so the United States would make the Soviet that make the Russians strategic commitment to Syria more difficult and more expensive to maintain, and by raising costs to the Russians, well, that would be a good thing, just by definition, You know, for the United States.

So that's where the, you know, the those, those factors were motivating, you know, America's now long standing presence in Syria. There's a new, you know, there's a new pharaoh coming to town who knew not Joseph and his name is Donald Trump, and you know, he has already said quite emphatically that the US doesn't have a stake in Syria and the 900 troops that are there now will be pulled out when he is president now in his first term, he did try to pull troops out of Syria, but, you know, he didn't really retain a focus, and there was no coherent policy coordination process. So inertia ruled the day, and despite several attempts by Trump, when he was president of the United States, to get American troops out of Syria. He didn't succeed. I think, you know, he's particularly, you know, focused now, or at least, you know, for the moment, on this. So it may well happen. If that does, then, you know, I'll just, I'll just wrap up, really, by saying, if that happens, then, in a way, the US will have contributed to the unification of Syria. Because, you know, the Turks and the HTS will not, but they won't accept Turkish Kurdish autonomy. They just won't accept it. So the Kurds will be reabsorbed under HTS and Turkish authority within Syria, and the major division within Syria will. Have been

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healed. Arguably, that's well, how that goes down in Washington, you know, really remains to be seen, and it's part and parcel of this larger question of how the Senate and the and the new Trump administration will will interact.

And you know, if you look at the negotiations that have been going on, if I can put them that way, the bargaining going on behind the scenes over Pete Hegseth proposed nomination as Secretary of Defense, you can see that the old Senate resistance to certain administration priorities like the security of the Kurds In the US, moral obligation to the Kurds won't be I'm trying to find the right words here, but won't be sustainable, given sort of the new and in a sense, unprecedented sway of the White House over the Senate that that, I think we'll see in, at least in the first few years of the Trump administration.

Adam Weinstein 1:01:26

Well, I have to, we'll have to end it there. I suspect you're right about that analysis of how Trump's going to approach it. It will be a, of course, a violent reintegration of the country, I suspect. And we'll talk more about that on Monday at noon on the turkey panel. By the way, we don't have a landing page yet for it, but next Thursday, we're going to have a discussion between Steve Simon and Professor Omar Dahi, who's a professor of economics at Hampshire College, but focusing on the Middle East, and he grew up in Syria. So we'll have somewhat of a fireside chat about a reflection of the events in Syria. And I'm sure so many more things will happen by by Thursday next Thursday, that there will be a lot more to discuss. Then there's also a new short brief that we call a note that Steve Simon and Josh Landis just just Landis had something unexpected that prevented him from coming here. So I'm sorry for those who wanted to hear from him, but they just published a note together, and it's a it's very readable. It's not it's not very long. I recommend that everyone, everyone read it, and I think my colleague is hopefully going to put it in the chat. But with that being said, I want to, yeah, it's in the chat now. I want to thank Carolyn and Steve, and despite that, she's not here anymore. Sinam for joining us today. This topic is so massive, we could talk about it for five hours. So hopefully the you know, what we were able to discuss was interesting to all the viewers, and I appreciate all the viewers who stayed on, especially over time. So please join on Monday and next Thursday if you can, and thanks for your time, everyone.