

FDD Media Call: What's next for Syria? Assad, Jihadist terrorist groups, and chemical weapons

December 3, 2024

Featuring Jonathan Schanzer, David Adesnik, and Bill Roggio

Moderated by Joe Dougherty

DOUGHERTY: Good afternoon, and thank you for joining us for today's call. My name is Joe Dougherty. I'm the senior director of communications at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a nonpartisan research institute focusing on national security and foreign policy. We're grateful that you've taken the time to join us today as FDD experts discuss the latest developments in Syria as well as U.S. policy moving forward.

Joining us on today's call: Jonathan Schanzer, FDD executive director, Middle East scholar, and former Treasury Department of Terrorism finance analyst focusing on al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups. David Adesnik, FDD vice president of Research and Middle East scholar focusing on Syria, and Bill Roggio, FDD senior fellow and editor of FDD's Long War Journal, specializing in jihadist groups in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, North Africa, and Iran.

Some quick housekeeping before we get started. Today's conversation is on the record and we will share the transcript and recording of today's call, hopefully within the next 24 hours. Here's how today's run of show will go. First, we'll hear from Jon, followed by David, and then Bill, with Jon wrapping up the opening remarks, and then we'll open the call-up to your questions, which you can submit via chat, the chat feature, or you can raise your hand and you can ask the question yourself.

Let's get underway. Jon, over to you.

SCHANZER: All right. Thank you, Joe. Apologies in advance if you hear a little ambient music. I'm just hanging out in Florida here after a fundraising event. I want to just maybe frame what's happening in Syria right now from our perspective. Obviously, this was a jarring series of events that took place over the weekend. The return of the Syrian rebels to Aleppo, a significant moment in what I think a lot of people thought was a defunct Syrian civil war. Obviously, we had seen continued activity inside Syria, but nothing of the magnitude that we saw over the weekend. And of course, seeing the likes of HTS, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, or previously known as the Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda splinter group, overrunning Aleppo, the second-largest town in Syria, is no small issue to watch. I think at this point we can now say with certainty that the Syrian civil war never quite ended.

Perhaps the embers were burning just in a barely perceptible way. It's now back out in full view. What happens next? I don't think anybody quite knows. I'd liken this to the movie *Alien vs. Predator*. We've got two essentially bad actors squaring off. We've got the Iranian axis. That's, of course, the regime in Iran plus the Assad regime, plus the potential admixture of Shia militias that have been based in both Syria and Iraq. Not to mention the potential for the deployment of Hezbollah, which has been deployed in the past to Syria. Right now, they're a bit weaker, may not have the ability to deploy after losing 4,000 troops in the war that it has been waging against Israel over the last 14 months. On the other side of the equation, we've got that group of Sunni jihadi groups. They're of course HTS, I've already mentioned, Hayat Tahrir, al-Sham, but also a panoply of other Sunni groups that have been part of the Syrian opposition for years now.

This includes, of course, Kurdish groups. People have been asking whether he's a good guy. I think that would be too simplistic for what we're looking at right now. These are actors that support terrorism, that support terrorist-sponsoring states, that are proxies of terrorist-sponsoring states, or have non-democratic designs on Syria, to put it mildly. So we're watching all of this with great concern. We certainly are hearing the same from the outgoing Biden administration. Not a lot so far from the incoming Trump administration, but that should be interesting to see as well. The last thing that I would say before I want to hand it over to my colleagues, is that we are to some extent beginning to see the makings of a mid-level power competition in the Middle East. In other words, we have two aspiring powers, two aspiring hegemonic powers in the Middle East right now that are effectively squaring off in Syria.



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You've got the Iranians who have created this Shiite Crescent, as we call it, stretching from Iran through Iraq, into Syria, into Lebanon, and into Israel, or rather into the Gaza Strip and maybe to some extent the West Bank. And they have been waging this war against Israel, but also against American interests. This Shiite Crescent has grown and has just now suffered a significant setback with Sunnis posing a challenge to the Assad regime, which has been very much part of this Crescent. On the other side of the equation, you've got the Turks. The Turks, of course, have been significant sponsors of the Sunni jihadi groups, including HTS, in the past. They have their own designs for the region. It is quite possible that we will see a battle by proxy between these two powers begin to unfold. This is interesting because the Iranians and the Turks have been collaborating and partnering in teaming up, for example, against Israel in supporting Hamas in supporting range of other radical causes around the region.

Their interests have aligned, but in Syria, they have been at odds. It did appear that at one point, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the president of Turkey, and Bashar al-Assad had buried the hatchet. It does not appear that that is the case any longer. This conflict has flared yet again. So some interesting regional drama that I'll be keeping an eye on. But in the meantime, I do want to hand things over to my two colleagues. First, we'll have David Adesnik will speak about what is happening from the perspective of the Iranian axis and the militias that have been active in Syria and the regime itself.

After that, we'll have Bill Roggio, who has been an avid watcher of the Sunni Jihadi groups and some of which right now are on the offensive inside Syria. I'll jump back in at the end to talk a little bit about what I've been hearing from Israel. That's really more of a minority report right now. The Israeli perspective, I think, is probably less important than the broader view of the region. So with that, let me hand things over to David Adesnik. I'm going to mute myself so that you no longer hear this very annoying, ambient music.

ADESNIK: Thank you, Jon. I think one of the key points is just to remember how dependent Assad became on his patrons in the sort of the first years of the Syrian civil war, right? It's hard to remember with all the gyrations, and it was 13 years ago that it began. Iran came to his aid very quickly, which brought in Hezbollah as well, and it's important that Hezbollah lost thousands of troops in Syria, and it was something that hurt it quite a bit in terms of its image. It had come away from a 2006 war with Israel, with many Arabs seeing it as a champion who stood up to Israel more effectively than Arab states. And then it turned around, and its mission was to begin killing Sunnis who opposed the Assad regime. Of course, even Iranian support wasn't enough to keep the Assad regime in power.

Putin had to come in as well, did not want to sacrifice a long-term alliance that Russia had with the Assad regime in the regime of Assad's father. By the end of 2016, when Aleppo had fallen after a long and very painful battle, which few in the country have forgotten, which makes the current rapid fall of Aleppo seem even more surprising. That was the moment at the end of 2016 when it didn't seem like there was really any more serious threat to the regime's stability. Syria is a bit of a right triangle upside down. It has one side running mostly along the Mediterranean coast, the main highway, the M5 connects most of the main population centers. It has another perpendicular line sort of running along the border with Turkey and then the hypotenuse to use a word from high school geometry connecting those two. But there's a lot of empty territory out there.

But as long as Assad had that sort of north-south populated axis, his rule was seen to be secure even if the U.S. and its Kurdish partners were operating in 20 to 30% of the country, even if there was restiveness in the South. In recent years, despite the so-called reconciliation of those in the South, both the Sunnis and the Druze, there began to be sort of more acting up and resistance, and that was one of the signs. For people who were watching Syria carefully, the war was never over. There was always a frustration with people whoever referred to the war as being over, both because of the U.S. and Kurdish role, because of the events in the South, and because even of that small slice in the North that continued to be controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, as well as what became Turkey's SNA, Syrian National Army.

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So I began with the point about the degree of dependence on those outside backers because it underscores the significance of their sort of being removed, right? Hezbollah took another major blow really, with the pager attack and the subsequent Israeli attacks in September and October. It's hard to get a handle on the Russian support. There are reports that they'd removed air defense and airstrike assets. They've obviously mounted some strikes in the past few days, but it doesn't appear to be all that devastating. And of course, Iran lost a lot of its top coordinating officials. And in fact, just today we got reports that Israel took out yet another liaison between Iran and people in the region. And it's important to remember that even with the influx of some of the Shiite militia, those were often commanded and controlled by the Iranians and by the IRGC. I don't think they've proven themselves as independently capable of doing all that much.

And the numbers we see reports of coming in currently are several hundred, which just strikes me as very few, not capable of doing much, not clear that they can mount serious logistics. They'd have to plug into the regime, and even then they're not really sort of frontline shock troops. That's their role Hezbollah had to play. And then I want to take that picture of where these Shiite and Assad-aligned forces are, and sort of compare it to what the U.S. policy has been the past four years, or maybe I'll even make it five years, because let's go back to the first Trump administration. So after his attempts twice to withdraw U.S. forces from the East, we actually had quite a pivot when Congress approved the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act. These were extremely tough human rights sanctions named for the photographer whose pseudonym with Caesar, the Syrian military photographer.

He left the country with 55,000 images showing the battered and tortured corpses of people in Assad's dungeons. And it took a long time, but it eventually inspired this action on the Hill. So you had broad bipartisan support. And somewhat due to, some might say, peculiarity of staffing, the Trump administration at the end had people who were interested in very aggressively putting those sanctions in place, going after Assad as aggressively as possible, removing his resources. When Biden came in, there were initial commitments to sort of continue that, but we quickly saw a lack of enforcement and then a major pivot in the summer of 2021. It seems that the King of Jordan is the one who made the appeal and persuaded Biden, but there was definitely a White House faction supporting it as well. And the idea there was to quietly encourage Arab normalization.

Sort of what you saw, the Saudis, the Emiratis, especially the Emiratis who are always the leading tip, do with the Syrians. They gave up on their support for the opposition and would eventually welcome Assad back to the Arab League. Other aspects of this plan, the U.S. wanted to support a major regional gas project that the World Bank would fund. It never really came to fruition. And very interesting. To me, one of the most interesting stories that has broken in the past few days is that even in the months preceding this offensive, the U.S. officials were in discussion with the Emiratis about a potential deal lifting sanctions on Assad if he would sort of break his ties with the Iranians. If there's one point I've hammered home too many times, like a broken record, it's that people are always buying into the fantasy that you can split Assad from his most reliable backers.

People point to the sort of somewhat secularist orientation of the Assad regime. There have been moments in history when, of course, it's been at cross purposes with Islamists in its own country, but Iran is the one who has been there for Assad when he needed it most. It is the one who sent billions of dollars, millions of barrels of oil, its own troops to command the militias it raised to fight for Assad. No one else has been that dependable, and it never mattered how many atrocities Assad committed, how many images of those atrocities came out in the west. The Iranians were there for him, and they also saw the lesson from others who decided to trust Western guarantees like Libya, that you may initially be able to cut a deal, you give up your weapons, but then if you decide you want to have maybe a new massacre or ethnic cleansing, suddenly the Westerners who were so appreciative of giving up your WMD are not going to tolerate that sometimes.

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So this is why Assad has no reason to split equally, no reason to rely only on the Russians. People often frame the hope of splitting him from the Iranians and saying, well, the Russians can be his main sponsor. Russian support has been crucial. Russians have, in some ways, won the lion's share of these somewhat meager economic benefits that come with being Assad's friend to sort of pillage the last bits of what's available. But it wasn't the Russians on the ground; even when the air support proved critical, it was the Iranians who both sent their own men to command and sometimes die on Assad's behalf, as well as sending large numbers of cannon fodder and mobilizing Hezbollah. So that is why I think you really had this mistake in American policy over the past four years. There's always been a semi-official denial. "We will never normalize with Assad," has been the line from White House State Department spokesmen. But the plan was never for the United States to normalize. That was always considered a step too far. It... to build up this process through the Arab League and eventually try to cash it in for this play where you could separate Assad potentially from the Iranians and from others. I'd say the opposite policy that some of us have advocated is seeing Syria as part of the problem posed by Iran, of course, because it is a client and so dependent, we've advocated a policy of maximum pressure on Iran tightening sanctions rather than loosening them, and the same can be done on Syria. The most important thing coming up is Caesar went into effect. The Caesar Act went into effect for five years. It will expire if there's no renewal in the next few weeks. It's one of those cases where bipartisan support remains strong. Whenever a measure that's tough on Assad comes to the floor in the house, overwhelming bipartisan support, but for various reasons, either because of the legislative calendar or because people actually want to block it, it hasn't moved forward.

There's also the new problem of Captagon. There was legislation dealing with that. It's an amphetamine-like drug that Assad has begun to traffic billions of dollars worth of each year in concert with Hezbollah, and Congress has actually even actively pushed back against Biden. I mean, Republicans have seen it as something of a cudgel, but the bipartisanship shows you it's more than that. Democrats are also worried about this policy of potentially rehabilitating Assad, and now we've seen it sort of hits a final breaking point where if Assad is crumbling, it's really in a difficult place to try to revive him. And so I think now the answer, it's not an easy one. There's no sort of side to support. I think there's some people who are so eager to see him gone. It would remove hesitation about tilting things in the other direction.

I think likewise, there are people who are going to be so afraid of what Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham might do that they'd say, "Ah, let's reconsider. Let's double down actually on this policy of engaging Assad." In my view, it should be full pressure on both. It's obviously more of a challenge than picking one, but I don't think that getting into bed with either of them is a choice that is going to look very good in hindsight, several months or several years from now. And let me end on that point and turn it over to Bill.

ROGGIO: Thank you, Jon and David. Hello everyone. Thanks for joining us. Certainly, a very interesting last week with the continuation of this war. Jon is right, the war was never over. One of the things we've talked about a lot at FDD in the Long War Journal, there's an ebb and flow to the Jihad. Sometimes they're up, sometimes there's down, there's these peak periods in these trough periods, and for a couple of years it certainly was at the trough. There was not very much going on, but that all changed in the matter of the past week, and David and Jon are also correct. I agree there are no good actors. There's no one we should be actively backing. We should be hoping that they all lose.

I'll outline the major groups that are fighting here. That would be Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the Syrian National Army, the SDF or Syrian Democratic Forces, and also included with the HTS as the group of jihadist groups that fight under their own umbrella. I would just start out by saying, don't trust Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Abu Muhammad al-Julani. Continues to remain on the US specially designated global terrorist list and HTS remains a foreign terrorist organization. They're on that list for a reason, and they've remain on that list for a reason.

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Julani, his background: went to Iraq to fight US forces, fought alongside al-Qaeda. Was in the Bucca prison where he attended what US military officials called the University of Jihad. When he was released from prison, he went right back to Syria, organized al-Qaeda's branch there, Jabhat al Nusra or the Nusra Front. He was a key deputy to Ayman al-Zawahiri. He was part of the dispute with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who nominally was his boss, obviously Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi the first emir of the what became the Islamic state, but Baghdadi was also a member of al-Qaeda. That split happened because Baghdadi wanted to control the Jihad, Julani wanted control of the Jihad in Syria, Zawahiri sided with Julani. Islamic state was expelled from al-Qaeda, and the rest is history.

Julani has claimed that ... Basically, the claim is that he's denounced al-Qaeda, that there's no links between the groups. I'm told that there are still influential leaders within Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. I'm working to run that down, and if I get that information, I certainly will be publishing on that. There are foreign terror groups such as the Turkestan Islamic Party. There's Chechens, there's Uzbeks, there's fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan and other central Asian countries that continue to fight within the HTS umbrella. Now, Julani, he'll tell us, "Don't worry about this, they're not a threat to people outside of Syria that the HTS is only concerned with the fight for Syrian freedom, and they're not the global Jihadists." Julani's a very clever individual. He likes to put the suit on and talk to the press and play the moderate game. It's earned him some enemies within Jihadists, but it's also earned him people telling you that HTS has delinked itself from the global Jihad and that they can be a partner, they could be a US partner.

Again, Julani is a very clever individual. He's essentially pulling a Taliban here. The Taliban did the same thing to the US. They lulled us into believing ... Well, they lulled members of the US government into believing that they could be moderate, that they would accept women's rights, that they were no longer linked to al-Qaeda, et cetera, et cetera, and then that they would negotiate in good faith with the Afghan government. That all proved to be a lie. Look, we should never trust Jihadists when they tell us that they're moderating. Why would we trust them? But there does seem to be a propensity here in the West to want to take them at face value, watch what they do and not what they say.

I'll move on to the Syrian National Army. This is an amalgamation of various rebel groups, including many Salafist jihadist groups, so it's backed by Turkey. This is what it controls territory in Northern Turkey, as David had said, HTS controls a good portion of Idlib province and now controls Aleppo, the second-largest city. The SNA or Syrian National Army, it controls areas along the border. These are what used to be the free Syrian army, which by the way, when the US was giving it weapons, elements of the free Syrian army would turn those weapons over to groups like Jabhat al-Nusra, and other terrorist organizations to use them to fight against Assad.

One of the groups that is part of the Syrian National Army is the Ahrar al-Sham, and this is a very well-known Salafist jihadist group. The Turks use the free Syrian ... I'm sorry, the Syrian National Army to act as a buffer along the border so that there isn't that they can control that border, but they also use them to fight against the Syrian democratic forces, and that's the next group that I'll talk about.

The Syrian Democratic Forces are really what is known as the PKK or the Kurdistan Workers' Party. I know there's a lot of controversy over this. People will tell you, "Well, that's the PKK's branch in Syria, not the PKK branch in Turkey." That's just an effort to disconnect the dots. The PKK in Turkey is the same as the PKK in Syria is the same as the PKK in Iraq. They basically wear the same flag and take orders from the same leaders. The PKK is especially ... Oh, I'm sorry, it's listed as a foreign terrorist organization by the United States. It's responsible for killing tens of thousands of civilians in Turkey. It uses suicide tactics. It's a Marxist terrorist organization and it's backed by the United States. US officials have openly said that they know that the SDF, I find the ... It's ironic that we call a Marxist terrorist organization Democratic, but here we are. The US had no good options in Syria and decided to pick one, to pick an actor to back. They picked the PKK, they branded them as the SDF. They have some window dressing with some tribal militia forces who really are only capable of securing their towns, but the PKK provides the real punch for the SDF.

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Given that the PKK is on the list of foreign terrorist organizations, I've always felt ... Look, the US wants to support the PKK and at the expense of ties with its NATO ally Turkey, fine, take them off the foreign terrorist organization list. They're on the same list as Hay'at Tahir al-Sham and al-Qaeda and the Islamic State and Hamas and Hezbollah. We should treat them as such.

And the last group that is missing in the current iteration of the Syrian Civil War is the Islamic state. They're not involved in this fight at the moment. The Islamic state is still licking its wounds from coalition operations, US airstrikes that routinely target leaders and fighters as well as being ousted from losing their physical caliphate in Iraq and Syria. But that call can change. They still have capacity. They still have influence in very remote areas of both Syria and Iraq, and I suspect as they see the Syrian government or the SDF, those are the two main areas where the SDF ... or I'm sorry, ISIS abuts against, if they see a target of opportunity, if that presents itself, I suspect we'll see ISIS go on the offensive.

And I just want to reiterate that I think we shouldn't back any of these groups. As David said, we should work to weaken all of these organizations by other means. One of my concerns, the only area where I do think the US may, and this may also apply to Israel, may need to get ... actually take action as if there's chemical weapons that Assad has come under threat. We certainly wouldn't want to see them fall in the hands of jihadist organizations. That would be a threat to both Israel, to the United States and the region, but we should think very carefully about getting involved in these wars. The US, we should learn the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan that we haven't been very good at intervening in these wars and put a lot of thought if the US is going to apply for us here. Thank you very much.

SCHANZER: All right. Thank you, Bill. I'm just going to add a couple of quick thoughts here in terms of what I've heard from the Israelis, but before I do, I do want to actually point out that some of the rhetoric that we're hearing from HTS right now about their so-called moderation and the lack of need for concern that Bill mentioned and the parallel that he drew to the Taliban, there is one line connecting both of those, and I think many people are probably aware of this, but I'll just say it out loud. These are two entities that have gotten significant support and guidance from the country of Qatar. The Qataris have done quite a bit to launder the image of both the Taliban and HTS. In fact, it was the Qataris that initially came up with the idea of renaming the Nusra Front to HTS as a means of changing their brand. This is a continued concern for the US. We continue to rely on the Qataris and they have a role to play here. Exactly what their role is. It's not entirely clear right now. We've heard a lot about the Turks and their sponsorship of HTS, but I believe the Qataris are also still involved financially. That may be something that can come up in Q&A, I'm not sure if Bill, if you're tracking that.

But very briefly, I did have a chance to speak to a senior Israeli official this morning asking about their perception of what's going on in Syria. Right now I think it's safe to say their hair is not on fire just yet. It's early days. They're concerned about the chaos on their border. They're concerned primarily about that chaos reaching the Golan Heights. Up until now, that's not really been the case, but it very well could be, and so you may see the Israelis start to deploy some assets in the Golan in an attempt to thwart or strike assets of either the Iranian regime or the Assad regime. Shia militias associated with either one of those, or even the Sunni jihadis would not be beyond them, despite some of the words that they've issued so far about how Israel is not their target. It's not their target right now. We've seen Sunni jihadis turn their sights on the Israelis in the past.

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The Israelis are concerned about some of the more lethal hardware that has fallen into the hands of the Sunni jihadis. We've seen aircraft, we've seen drones and other larger systems and platforms with some of the videos and photos that have come out of Syria, indicating that the Sunni jihadis may have a larger arsenal than they once had. And again, those are weapons that could be turned against Israel. But I think primarily what we're hearing out of the Israelis right now is that the Iranians may use this as an opportunity to say that they need to deploy more forces, Shia militias out of Iraq in particular, to deploy them into Syria as a means to buttress the Assad regime. In other words, that this would be a defensive maneuver carried on their part, but in reality what that would mean, it would mean augmenting the numbers of Shia militias that are already there and that are deployed and ready to fight Israel. Of course, we've seen drones and missiles fired at Israel from Shia militias inside Syria over the last 14 months. That could significantly skyrocket if the Iranians get their way. They could use this under the shroud of war to potentially strengthen their position vis-a-vis the Israelis.

I think the likelihood of that right now seems somewhat low, but I wouldn't put it past them given that they have gone all out in this war against Israel for the last 14 months. But suffice it to say, when you talk to folks around the rest of the region, they do not welcome this chaos. We're seeing some interesting signs out of the rest of the Arab world where they're really hoping that the Assad regime stays in power, not because they love him or that they love the Iranian regime that backs him, but because their belief, I think possibly mistakenly, but their belief has been that he has brought stability to Syria since the fighting began to trail off some, I guess what? Six, seven years ago. But those are some of the thoughts from the region. Joe, back to you.

ROGGIO: Jon, I could answer that question really quick about the Turks.

DOUGHERTY: Yeah, Bill.

ROGGIO: Yeah, just I'll be very brief. The Qataris, yeah, absolutely. Anytime the Qataris enter the room, everyone should hold onto their wallets. You cannot trust the Qataris when they become an intermediary. Yes, they're a major supporter of HTS and the Turks I believe are as well. Look, this was a coordinated offensive. We saw the Syrian National Army, which is not going to launch its attacks without the approval of the Turkish government, and they coordinated their operations with HTS. So there has to be some backing. I've seen the fighters that I've seen from HTS have had clean uniform, new uniforms, new weapons, they look organized. That to me is always a major sign of a form of state sponsorship, whether they're getting that money from the Turks or the Qataris or both, and I'll just leave it at that. Yeah, I don't think this offensive begins without approval from the major backers of those groups, particularly Qatar and the Turks.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, Bill. Thank you, Jon. Thank you, David. We will open up the conversation now to your questions. You can do so via the chat feature which Brady Knox has done, and we'll have Brady's question come in first. You can also raise your hand and we can unmute the mic for you and you can ask your question verbally. We'll start with the first question from Brady. "What is the extent of Turkish support for HTS?"

ADESNIK: Oh, Bill, you want to jump in?

DOUGHERTY: Go ahead.

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ADESNIK: Going to say, so remember that it's not exactly clear the extent of certainly of control, right? The SNA is effectively subordinate. It's basically taking orders from the Turks. It's dependent on them. HTS, it's occupying an adjacent space. They effectively fought defensive actions together. The last time this war was hot was the beginning of 2020, right before the pandemic hit. There was actually an offensive by Syria, backed by Putin and Hezbollah that really forced out around 900,000 people. It took a significant chunk of [inaudible] province in the northwest that had been under the insurgent's control and reclaimed it. And really you saw a decent amount of integration, right? These are certainly not people fighting against each other. They understood they had a common enemy, but the other hand, Turkey does have something of a need for plausible deniability so that it's not actively supporting sort of an Al-Qaeda successor group like HTS.

And just if I could add one word on that, I think it's important to note, even if we have this little trust for HTS, that many Syrians and diaspora Syrian communities are investing tremendous hope in the idea of a reformed HTS because they see it's sort of on its good behavior for the moment. There are reports of prisoners being released from Assad's dungeons of actual tolerant behavior, although some Kurdish sources have claimed there's been a few scattered killings. So for the people who saw the Syrian revolution, that began as a peaceful democratic movement, beaten back, battered into submission, driven into exile, for them this is a moment of hope and they really want there to be a champion who can bring back and force out Assad, open all of the prisons. Remember, there's still likely over a hundred thousand political prisoners there suffering just as much as before. So there's going to be sort of a heartstrings appeal, and I think all of us would like that redemption narrative to be true if it were possible.

At the same time, even the reformed HTS is one that isn't exactly shy about saying it rejects democracy. It believes Islam must be the basis for all government. My understandings from another scholar, I didn't see the original that they actually endorsed October 7th, and they were perfectly glad to see that happen to the Jewish state. And there's degrees of repudiation of Al-Qaeda. As Bill noted, there are ways in which that distancing led to some hostility, but there's really questions. And when you see that even their supporters are saying, let's compare them to Hamas and the Taliban, and that's supposedly the argument in their favor that they're nationally oriented, only going against Assad. We should remember Bill made the point about the Taliban not exactly being good on its promises. Of equal importance, of course, is it's continuing to play a host to Al-Qaeda that a secure HTS would not have a lot of reasons to turn away other Jihadists who had an international mission even while it pursued national objectives.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, David. Next question from Jay Solomon and he asks, "How can the US and its allies successfully remove Assad while preventing a jihadist movement from taking over part or all of Syria?"

SCHANZER: I'll just jump in real quick. I think that there's no way that this administration or the next are going to be interested in removing Assad. We just don't do regime change anymore in Washington. It's become something of a dirty word, if you will, since Iraq and Afghanistan, this idea that the devil you know is going to be better than the chaos that ensues once you begin to try to promote regime change. My guess is that there's going to be an effort to manage this conflict. Sort of like you could imagine the Iran-Iraq War went on from 1980 to 1988 in Iraq. I'm not suggesting that we're going to see another 13 years of this fight, but we've managed the war up until now. We can continue to manage it. Balkanized Syria may be better than one where you see a full toppling of the regime. The other thing, which we haven't really got into a whole lot so far, but I think it's worth noting, is the sensitivity surrounding Russia.

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Should the US try to go in and forcibly remove Assad? It would be essentially stepping on the toes of Vladimir Putin, making Syria a battleground in great power competition. Be an interesting case to try to make it there. I'm not sure that Syria is the ideal place to tangle with the Russians. I'd rather actually see them lose in Ukraine. But this is one more potential flashpoint between Russia and the US, and I just can't imagine that's going to be priority of an incoming Trump administration or the priority of an outgoing, lame duck Biden administration. Just my thoughts. I'm certainly curious to hear what my colleagues have to say.

ROGGIO: Yeah, I'll just add to that, that you would see a Balkanized Syria with the Islamic state returning to control portions probably of Eastern Syria. You already have HTS in control of a portion of Syria. So I don't see Assad fully losing control of Syria. I think that he's still going to be able to occupy. So it's in no one's interest to see the Islamic state in control. We all remember what that looked like from what? 2013 to 2019. It wasn't pretty. So those who are hopeful for the fall of Assad without something to replace it, and I don't see anything that can replace it, that we can rely on to keep the jihadist tamped down. There's no good options here is all I would say.

DOUGHERTY: Next question we have from Lena Argiri. Bill Roggio said the US should not support the Kurds or any other actor in the region. Bill, do you also support a potential US withdrawal from the region?

ROGGIO: So look, one of the things that's frustrating in covering this is that the Kurds is used as a catch-all. If we were talking about the Iraq Kurds, the two Kurdish groups in Northern Iraq, I'd be all in on supporting them. They have been stalwart allies from even before the US invasion up until today, but we're not. We're talking about the PKK, a terrorist organization. So that's where, until the US is ready to delist them, that's where my opposition comes. That list means something. The issue of US forces in the region, there's not many US troops in Syria, and it looks like the US is going to pull out of Iraq within... At least that's part of the Biden plan by 2026. Whether the Trump administration or incoming Trump administration is going to adhere to that, that remains to be seen.

But if he does decide to follow through on President Biden's plan, then it's by default, US forces are going to have to leave the region. That small number of forces cannot be supported without the US troops that are stationed in Iraq. General Kurilla said this himself earlier this year. So that's not just my assessment, although I completely agree with them.

My view of US forces in the region, we need to really be prepared, particularly with the malicious attacks on the US bases. The US needs to beef... If we are going to stay, we need to beef up those bases, beef up our presence to be able to defend because the drone and rocket attacks are one thing, but if the militias really truly do decide to launch assaults on these bases, and these are dangerous groups, we fought against them in Iraq from 2003 to 2011 on the ground, they're responsible for killing 603 American troops and ambushes, IED and EFP attacks, and they are capable of overrunning a base if they're willing to take large numbers and casualties.

So if we are to keep troops in country, we need to be able to prepare to defend ourselves. But if we're not prepared to do that, I mean, it's really difficult to... Strictly from the standpoint of the safety of American soldiers, it's hard to advocate leaving them there.

DOUGHERTY: David, I know you've addressed that, and Brad Bowman has as well.

ADESNIK: Yeah, I think we made the point when Trump initially proposed to pull out 2018 to 2019, that we are getting a lot of return for a very small force. We are the one sort of keeping the cork in the bottle. ISIS would have a lot more room for maneuver. We see it's already substantially more effective in areas under Assad's control. It doesn't get much coverage, but they're inflicting pain on Assad's troops. And for all the problems with very flawed Kurdish allies, we have 900 troops with most of the actual fighting on the ground being done by the Kurdish partners, or to some degree the Arab tribal forces that are part of this SDF formation. And it's kept there from being a major ISIS resurgence. I agree fully with Bill. If we pull the plug on Iraq, it's very hard to keep anything going in Syria.

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And it's also worth remembering. It's not just that we're keeping ISIS down, we're keeping the Turks out to sort of borrow the old adage. Erdogan is very eager to batter all Kurds in Northern Syria, but especially the YPG that is the PKK. We've already seen him mount multiple incursions. The instant the US sort of pulled back, he started moving those troops forward and there was some ground lost. So you could expect really another multi-sided conflict between the YPG, PKK, ISIS, likely even HTS and Turkey all together at the same time. And we can prevent that at a fairly small cost.

DOUGHERTY: Andrew Bernard of JNS has his hand up. Andrew, we will unmute you so you can ask your question.

ANDREW BERNARD: Thanks for this. I was wondering if you have any thoughts on whether this will have any impact on the refugee situation, either in terms of Turkey trying to resettle refugees or causing another spike in refugee flows towards Europe.

SCHANZER: I'll just say I fully expect there to be additional refugees if fighting intensifies. Right now, I'd say that it's early days in terms of looking at these flows. People will always want to escape the fighting. The question really is how much further does this war expand? And again, I think right now it's early days. We need to watch this carefully, but it could obviously have a significant impact on Europe. It could have a significant impact on Turkey. But again, the Turks, you got to understand, I mean, they're waging this war by proxy right now. I think that the refugee issue is the last thing they're concerned about. What they'd like to do is to make Syria inhabitable again for Sunnis, and we would begin to see the flow of refugees out of Turkey if they're successful in this endeavor.

ADESNIK: Yeah, I would just add to that you're already seeing announcements.

It's from HTS about the potential for people to return to their homes in Aleppo. They're already floating the number of 100,000 people, more likely the displaced rather than refugees, meaning those who are displaced within the country rather than across an international border. You have to remember that Idlib, that slice they continued to control, has swollen from a sort of natural population in the mid 1 million range to something like 4 million. If people have just crammed in there, even the ones who haven't then crossed the Turkish border where you have a few million more.

Domestically, Erdogan faces tremendous pressure. The main reason he was talking for so long about a reconciliation with Assad is that held out the promise, at least in his mind, or he could try to sell it to his own voters, that there would be an exodus from Turkey to Syria, and the same people that are hoping for a liberation via HTS, in part it's so people can go back to their homes, and we don't know how well that'll work. HTS is selling itself also as someone that is more interested in governing than it is in imposing Islamic law or in fighting, and it is genuinely possible, if large amounts of territory are sort of freed up, not controlled by Assad anymore, there could be a move back into those areas. On the other hand, unpredictable fighting could also send new refugee flows in different areas.

DOUGHERTY: Moderator prerogative question, is it possible at some point the US will not have eyeballs in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria?

ROGGIO: I think it's quite possible. Look, the Trump administration was keen on... President Trump himself was keen on withdrawing from Afghanistan, or I'm sorry... Yeah, Afghanistan and from Syria, and wouldn't surprise me if he did follow through, basically pulled a Biden, and said, "Look, President Biden made this agreement with the Iraqi government and I have to follow through," that certainly is possible.

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We have to see how his national security establishment, how that all shakes out, but look, after the withdrawal from Afghanistan, General McKenzie, who in December of 2021, he said that the US visibility intelligence gathering capability dropped to one to 2% of what it was when the US had a presence in Afghanistan. And when he says that, I always remind people that back in 2015, the US raided two Al-Qaeda training camps that were operating in Kandahar Province. These were two of the largest camps that the general in charge had said he had seen since the war on terror began. And they only found out about those camps that was operating under the radar, because of a raid they did elsewhere in Eastern Afghanistan. So not having a presence, you pay a very, very big price in intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance. And I think it's quite possible that we can see the exit of US forces from Iraq and Syria.

ADESNIK: Yeah, just adding that some people will say that satellites and other remote assets can replace people on the ground. They can. If you recall, when we were negotiating the nuclear deal with Iran in 2015, one of the answers was that those would be a key part that we know all we need to know about what's going on in Iran. And then subsequent Israeli operations discovered quite a few things that we had no idea were going on, the nuclear archive, they found traces of enriched uranium in places the US apparently didn't know about, that the IAEA, the international inspectors didn't know about. So, there is a real price when it's not people on the ground.

ROGGIO: There is no replacement for human intelligence.

DOUGHERTY: Follow-up question from Brady Knox, changing directions just a little bit here. "This offensive was of course notable for occurring the same day as the Lebanon ceasefire. Will the renewed action in Syria draw Hezbollah's attention and likewise increase the ceasefire's chances of holding?"

SCHANZER: Yeah, it's a good question- Oh, go ahead, David.

ADESNIK: I say it's certainly drawn their attention. I mean, this is their supply line for weapons, right? That's been the sort of Iranian logic all along building, whether you call it a land corridor, a crescent, or something else. There needs to be a way to get weapons from Iranian territory into Hezbollah's hands. It's hard to go directly. Well, by sea there's problems, because your ships are vulnerable. By air, there could be problems. So, what you want to do is fly into Syria or truck into Syria and then over the Lebanese border. It's whether they have the ability to do much about it is the bigger question. I mean, obviously they lost a lot of command and control. Senior leadership, they lost a lot of personnel. I think they have every reason to try to save the Assad regime, but it'll come down to whether they can afford to do it.

And on the point of, should we tilt one way or the other? Part of my argument is we should make Iran pay the full price if it's going to try to save Assad. We should not ease up on sanctions. We should go harder on sanctions on Iran and on Syria. They were paying billions of dollars a year to do it, and they got lucky that they didn't have to pay that amount anymore after 2016 as Assad got a stronger position, and that happened before the first round of maximum pressure sanctions hit. I would like to see maximum pressure sanctions go back on, and at the same time, they should have to pay five or 10 billion a year to try to prop up Assad if they can. Make them foot that bill, even if we are not favoring either side.

SCHANZER: I'll just add one quick thing, and I think David's right when we talk about that weapons pipeline, but it does cut both ways that when you see chaos in Syria, it may be harder for the Israelis to track the weapons that are destined for Lebanon. This pipeline has been a challenge for Israel to interdict. They have really for the last decade or so been trying to identify weapons transfers under the fog of war. That has not been easy, and I suspect that if fighting spreads and we see more active war zones, it will become more difficult, not less, for the Israelis to identify weapons packages that are on their way to Lebanon.

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But generally speaking, I think from what I heard from the Israelis, they see opportunity here. They're actually, I think to some extent, hoping that Hezbollah deploys, right? They lost 4,000 fighters in this war against Israel, and if they are deployed again now to Syria, and they're forced to fight there, you'll see their ranks thinning out further. Yeah, they'll probably get some good on-the-ground fighting experience as they did the last time around fighting alongside the Iranian military, the Syrian military, the Russian military, but they will also lose fighters in the process and find themselves drawn away from the battle in Lebanon against Israel. So again, I think we've been stressing this all the way through, extremely fluid, but you can see how some of this stuff will cut both ways.

ROGGIO: I'm going to add one quick point to that. I think this is really an opportunity for the Iranians to test the Iraqi militias particularly. They have large numbers. Some of them do have combat... Remember, these are the groups that fought the Islamic state, that helped oust the Islamic state from Central, Northern, and Eastern Iraq, and as well as in Syria previously. So, this might be an opportunity for the Iranians to give Hezbollah rest and to give more battle experience to... Put those large number of troops to work, because the Iraqi militias really haven't done much in the war against Syria, so this is a place where they could prove their mettle.

DOUGHERTY: One last question to wrap up the Q&A, do we have a sense of what the next administration might do with the current situation?

SCHANZER: That's a funny question. Literally, it's funny, because we don't know. The Trump administration the last time around, we saw Trump tweeting things in the middle of the night where one moment he's saying that we're going to stay in Syria, the next that we're going to leave. It led to a lot of confusion. I'm not saying that past is prologue. I don't necessarily think that we have a clear idea, but there's also the question of whether personnel is policy. Personnel on the one side, we could look at people like Marco Rubio, or at least Stefanik, or Mike Waltz, who I think would be opponents of the Assad regime.

But on the other side, we can also see that there's, for example, Tulsi Gabbard coming in as Director of National Intelligence. It's very hard to read right now where we are with this administration. Time will tell. I think there are good signs. There are maybe a few less than good signs. I tend to think that we're probably leaning in a better direction in terms of containing this battle and not throwing our weight behind Assad, certainly not behind the Sunni jihadists either. I think containment of the conflict is the safest route for American interests, and I would be pleased to see the president go in that direction when he takes office on January 20th.

DOUGHERTY: Gentlemen, I'm going to ask each of you to do a 30-second wrap up before we go, but I just want to remind the reporters on the call, first of all, to thank you for being on the call, to remind you that you can follow up with any questions you might have with an email to press@fdd.org. If you'd like to arrange a one-on-one conversation with any of our experts here, we're happy to do that. A quick thank you to our experts here, as well as to Ellie Bufkin in the background, making sure everything goes smoothly. Why don't we start with Bill, and then David, and we'll wrap up with Jon, just a quick 30-second summary.

ROGGIO: Yeah, thanks everyone for joining us, and I just want to reiterate, we need to be very careful about even remotely thinking about supporting HTS, or any of these so-called rebel groups. We cannot fall into the trap that we fell into Afghanistan to think that they're moderates, they are not. I just always say, we certainly wouldn't treat a group like the KKK here in the United States as suddenly changing its tune and being a moderate organization, and I don't understand why we treat international jihadists... We give them far more credibility. Thanks again.

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ADESNIK: I would say the Caesar Act will expire in a few weeks. One of the worst signals of weakness and disinterest we could send is for Congress to let that expire with no success or action. I mean, it's possible if they had something queued up and it went a few days after that, but if the session ends, if the new Congress comes in and doesn't show interest, that'll immediately tell the Assad regime it has more latitude and it will make an investment in its survival, more useful for Iran and for Putin.

SCHANZER: I want to broaden out here as we wrap up. I think it's important to just acknowledge the sheer amount of chaos we're watching right now on the world stage, a seven-front war in the Middle East against Israel is still burning hot on just about every front. Despite the ceasefire that has been secured in Lebanon, we're still seeing fighting there. Of course, even though Hamas has been largely defeated, we're still seeing fighting there. Hostilities remain between the Shia militias in Iraq and Syria, the Houthis against Israel, the Iranian regime continues to wage a war against Israel as well. That has not abated. Now, on top of that, we've got the return of the civil war in Syria at levels that we've not yet seen in six, seven years. On top of that, there was the total chaos today in Korea. You've got the war in Ukraine, you've got the potential for a war in Taiwan.

We are looking at a very tenuous moment right now in terms of geopolitical affairs amidst the transition from one presidential administration to another, and amidst great power competition between the US vis-a-vis China, Russia, even the North Koreans are involved, and Iran. So, a lot to keep track of right now for those that track the foreign policy space. That's certainly what FTD is doing, we're going to continue to do it, but keeping all these files straight is no easy matter and certainly lots of room for mistakes right now as we enter into a new and more complicated phase.

DOUGHERTY: Bill, David, Jon, thank you. This concludes today's call.