

How do events in Syria affect the struggle in Palestine?

Transcript of a [57-minute segment](#) of the EI livestream, Dec 11, 2024

[Jon Elmer]

Do you want me to start with what they did in what Israel has done in Syria over the last 48 hours? 350 fighter jets, which is basically their full stock of planes, of fighter jets that were previously split between Lebanon and Gaza.

They carried out more than 320 strikes throughout Syria, all over Syria, but focusing, and Army Radio called it the largest attack in the history of the Israeli Air Force. They went at the Air Force, all of the bases, all of the Syrian Army bases, any materiel, they went after the naval platforms, they sunk their naval ships. They basically just spent 48 hours doing whatever they wanted throughout Syria immediately.

And not to be outdone, the Americans did the same thing. They carried out 75 strikes on Sunday within hours of the Southern Operations Room Free Syrian Army getting into Damascus. The Americans immediately set out with B-52 bombers, which are not used very often, to carry out 75 strikes that they say were on ISIS operational capabilities.

Difficult to know, they just give you the numbers. But Syria turned into a place that had been bombed at a historic level over the last 48 hours. And of course, I think we're going to get more into it.

There's also a significant land grab. But the Israeli military said that most of the strategic weapons stockpiles in Syria, estimated between 70 and 80 percent of the Assad regimes, which is not the Assad regimes, it's the Syrians. The Syrians' strategic weapons supply was wiped out in less than 48 hours and destroyed 15 naval vessels during that time as well.

They destroyed cruise missiles, sea-to-air missiles, air defense missiles, Scud missiles, all of the missile capabilities, fighter jets, attack helicopters, radars, tanks, hangars. We saw them bomb ministries. So it was just basically a free-for-all for the Israelis.

They came across the border significantly with a massive land grab, a strategic land grab that took Mount Hermon, which was the largest natural border. Now Israel controls that. So it's been a really, I mean, this last 10 days was a lightning fast events that sometimes take 10 years happening in 10 days and culminating in Israel land grabbing, bombing and destroying what would be used for a new Syrian state to carry out the most elementary defense of its populations have been destroyed.

And the amount of time it would take to rebuild that, it's a devastating hit.

[Nora Barrows-Friedman]

Well, that's what we're going to be talking about. Ali and Asa, why don't you situate us with more of the latest kind of regional political developments. And Helena Kaban, we're so, so honored to have you back to help us make sense of what's been happening in Syria over the last 10 days.

Yeah, it's unimaginable.

[Ali Abunimah]

Well, one update is that, what are we calling him now? Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, Ahmed al-Shara, who is the leader of Hayat al-Tahrir al-Sham, the Al-Qaeda offshoot backed by the United States and Turkey, who is now the de facto ruler of Syria, made his first comments to the foreign media today. And there's also a video of him speaking in which he makes no mention of the Israeli attack on the country whatsoever, which is astonishing, really.

And the only enemies he names of Syria are Iran and Hezbollah. So there doesn't seem to be any indication that the new de facto authority is planning to respond to this in any way.

[Nora Barrows-Friedman]

No. I mean, it really seems like they're letting Israel enact whatever Israel has been planning for taking more of Syrian land. It's astonishing, but not surprising.

[Asa Winstanley]

Yeah. So I've got a few items to take us through to kind of guide the discussion. So well, just to list the items, and then we can go through them from the beginning.

So the first one is [the article](#) that myself and Ali wrote on Monday, explaining a lot of this. And then I think we could probably skip the second one now, John's covered that for the most part. And then we've got an update on some of the stuff that's been happening in Syria, just quickly, because we're not going to get into that in too much detail.

And then a couple of analyses by Ali Hashem and Alistair Crook, and then the Iranian leaders' most recent update about all this. So first of all, Tamara, the article, just if you could put that back up on the screen again. So we wrote this as a response to what happened in Syria, giving a kind of summary of, as John said, the really fast moving events that have happened, the lightning fast moving events.

And I'm not going to get into the whole thing, but just a couple of bullet points from it. So Israeli tanks were reportedly on the outskirts of Damascus early on Tuesday, as Israel launched airstrikes across the country, being called the heaviest in the history of Syria. Netanyahu immediately claimed credit for the downfall of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, saying it was a historic day and a direct result of the blows we've inflicted on Iran and Hezbollah.

And yeah, we really explain in the article how what has been happening is, of course, viewed positively by some Syrians and many people as the overthrow of a dictator, but many other Syrians are fearful of what could happen. And many people in the region are fearful of what could happen next. There's a lot of uncertainty.

And of course, Syria was, for decades, the backbone of the access of resistance to US hegemony. It was a vital land bridge for the supply of rockets to the resistance, advanced weaponry from Iran to the resistance in South Lebanon. And many people in the region view Assad's downfall as a strategic win for Israel and the US.

And there's a lot more detail in the article. And, you know, we get into, for example, some of the rebel commanders who, anonymous rebel commanders have been speaking positively in the Israeli media about how they want to normalise ties with Israel and so forth.

[Ali Abunimah]

So let's, before you go on to the next ones, I think what we'll do is maybe we'll get Helena's reaction.

[Asa Winstanley]

Yeah, I mean, Helena, you've been following events in Syria, not just recently, but for decades. And I know you have a lot of thoughts on this. So, I mean, I don't know if you had a chance to read our article, but I know you've got a lot of thoughts on it also.

What's your take?

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, I have so many thoughts. I've been following events in Syria since I was a working journalist in Beirut in the 1970s, which kind of dates me, I guess. But I'm still a young writer.

You're a youth. Yeah.

[Ali Abunimah]

Refaat says so.

[Nora Barrows-Friedman]

That's right.

[Helena Cobban]

But yeah, so I think going back to what John said, it's important to understand that these air attacks that the Israeli army organised across nearly all of Syria, taking out everything that is a military capability, and I think John described it as the most, or maybe the Israelis themselves are describing it as the largest single air attack in history. I mean, it's actually larger than what they were doing in 1967 when they wiped out the air forces. Syria and Jordan, no, Syria and Egypt on the tarmac before they went any further.

So the situation is now that they have established clear air dominance over the whole of Syria. Or rather, no, they've established clear air dominance over the whole of Syria up to where the Turkish army is and the Turkish, like around Idlib, and then over on the east, where the Americans have their position from which they've been bombing as well. But there is zero capability now, either in terms of arrangements on the ground, or in terms of being able to mount an air defence for a Syrian national army to defend the country whatsoever, even if there were a Syrian national army at this point, which is actually not true.

Doubtful. So, you know, you have to look at the way that the Syrian army command collapsed and the role. I have no idea exactly how it was done, but clearly Bashar al-Assad who was not a military person.

He had not been trained to be the leader. His father, of course, had been the commander of the Syrian Arab Air Force before he took over the presidency in September of 1970. Also worth noting that when Hafez al-Assad did that in 1970, it was as part of a move to prevent the Syrian National Air Force and National Army from helping the Palestinians in North Jordan during Black September of 1970.

So there are a lot of things to unpack here, but I think the central thing is to note that the Syrian army, there is no Syrian Unified Army Command at all or at any level apart from I've heard some reports that maybe in some of the mountains around Lattakiyeh, there are some Syrian National Army units.

[Asa Winstanley]

And there's also reports that around 2000 Syrian soldiers have been evacuated with their equipment to Iraq.

[Ali Abunimah]

Some of the reports I've been seeing and reading, and of course it's difficult to know exactly what's true and what isn't, but you can sort of sense what is plausible. Some of the reports are that over the last few years, both Iran and Russia, which were the main powers behind the Syrian government in recent years, and they make clear the way they put it is we weren't there to support Bashar al-Assad. We were there to fight these al-Qaeda linked groups that threatened the region.

That's how they put it. You know, you can agree with that or disagree with that. But in recent years, they had pressed Assad to use the period of the truce, since what was it 2016 or 2017 or around then, to rebuild the Syrian Army and that that had by and large failed to happen.

And of course, Syria is under such intense sanctions, and the central bank is cut off from the international financial system, that soldiers were being paid something like \$10, \$15 a month, when these HTS and the other groups were being paid hundreds or even thousands of dollars a month, of course, by the foreign sponsors. And so you just couldn't really motivate them to fight. And at a certain point, the fear was that the army would break down.

So it just had been hollowed out by the sounds of it. And then the assessment in the end is that it would be a bloodbath that wouldn't be redeemable anyway. I don't know if that's true, but it sounds plausible.

[Helena Cobban]

I think that's a really good description from what I know about it. And Imam Khamenei's address today also noted some of these things, and people can maybe access that via Twitter or other ways.

[Asa Winstanley]

We have that clip actually.

[Ali Abunimah]

Why don't we start it again? I can read the subtitles, which are the translation. Obviously, this is Ali Khamenei, the guide of the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

And he spoke today, says there should be no doubt about what happened. In Syria was plotted collectively by the United States and Israel. Yes, the government of a neighboring country.

That's Turkey, but he doesn't mean Syria. Yeah. Also played an obvious role in this regard.

It is still playing an obvious role. Everyone is seeing this. But the primary planners of the US and the Zionist regime, the primary operators, the primary conspirators, the primary planners, the primary command room is in America and Israel.

We have evidence for it. These instances of evidence leave no room for doubt. So that's Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader or the leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

[Asa Winstanley]

There's two other points that he made later in the speech report that were sort of notable. He gave an optimistic prognosis for the future of the resistance axis, saying it will spread further than before. And he also seemed to confirm the analysis that perhaps we'll get onto in a little bit, saying, quote, our intelligence services warned Syrian officials several months before of the enemy's plots.

But this information was neglected.

[Ali Abunimah]

And what's it? You know, a lot of people, a lot of the fear about the fall of the Syrian government, you know, aside from central to this is what Syrian people want, and it is a divided society. Some people are very ecstatic about this, and others are very fearful and mortal fear of what the new rulers might do, just as many before were in mortal fear of the government that existed up to that point.

But in terms of the regional dynamics, a lot of people felt, well, they looked at the map and they said Syria is the land bridge between Iran and the resistance in the south of Lebanon, Hezbollah. That's how the weapons come in. Syria is the strategic depth of the resistance.

That's how people describe it. And so one conclusion some people come to, or one fear they have is, well, now Hezbollah is isolated in southern Lebanon, and therefore Hezbollah will be fatally weakened. The question I have both for Helena and perhaps for John, too, is, is that the case, given that Gaza is even more isolated than southern Lebanon, and is, as we've just seen from John's report, is still fighting?

What can we say about that?

[Helena Cobban]

John first, if you want.

[Jon Elmer]

Do you want me to go first? Sure. I think it's overstated.

The war, at least at this point, the transfers over the last 14 months, Israel has had carte blanche in Syrian airspace since October 7th. And as we know, for the decade preceding that, virtually, they had coordination with the Russians at most, and carried out strikes deep inside Syria, constantly trying to intercept, interrupt the development of strategic weapons shipments. It's an important part, there's no doubt.

I mean, just even the fighters traveling overland for training is very important. But there are other ways to get weapons in. It's not advantageous to have Syria be cut off, but there's a lot of talk about that Syria is the backbone of the resistance.

And I think we need to be very careful about those kinds of statements. The Assad government was deeply unpopular. Its soldiers did not want to fight for it.

So we can't be saying that that is the backbone of the resistance, because it's just demonstrably untrue. There'll be differences in the way that weapons can be transferred. There's different ways that fighters can move from place to place to train.

It's a devastating loss of the sovereignty of an important country in the region. And the toll that the country has paid in the first 48 hours alone is testament to that. But writing off the capabilities of the resistance, particularly Hezbollah and especially Qassam, that's not a position that I agree with.

I think that Hezbollah showed themselves to be un-invadable. That is the demonstration of their war with Israel, is that Israel cannot ground-invade, cannot carry out mechanized maneuvers, cannot put concentrated infantry forces on the ground in South Lebanon. They were repelled from doing that.

And the sovereignty of Lebanon is intact. If this 60-day ceasefire goes as it is, the sovereignty of Lebanon will be intact. There's certainly going to be a disruptive period in weapons trade, but those weapons didn't come on a convoy of trucks all the way through Iraq and Syria.

That's what was bombed. That has been a problem that goes back multiple years before this weekend, when the world got flipped on its head in the Middle East. And as far as the Palestinian resistance, they get manuals and training guides and tactical briefings, but the resistance in Gaza is built in Gaza.

It's not dependent on arms shipments from Syria. It's dependent, insofar as it is dependent, it's on rhetorical support. And over the last 14 months, the Assad regime's rhetorical support for Gaza was virtually absent.

And we maybe get into more about that when we talk about the political machinations, because Assad has been playing a game for this whole year to keep himself out of the October 7th, keep himself out of the axis of resistance. And so I think that there's a lot of discussion on social media about the backbone of the resistance being taken out. And I would urge caution on those kinds of statements.

First of all, it's not our place to make those statements. The resistance factions themselves are not making those statements. So yeah, I would just urge caution on that.

It's definitely a major disruption. There's no doubt.

[Ali Abunimah]

And I just, I want to, sorry, Helena, just allow me for a second. You know, I think this is important. The resistance didn't depend, nothing depends on the presence of any particular leader like Bashar al-Assad or anything else.

But what is important is a sovereign Syria. And nobody who supports Palestinian liberation, Asa and I say this in our article, should have anything to fear from a sovereign Syria, a Syria that is independent and sovereign and in control of itself, because we have no doubt in where the compass of the Syrian people lies. But what is being created here is a non-sovereign Syria, a Syria that has been completely robbed of its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence.

Syria is being carved up. As it stands, the state is gone. The state has been failed.

It has been failed and collapsed, not just by what happened in the last days, but by decades of sanctions aimed at hollowing the state out and forcing a collapse and really making any type of reform impossible because then, you know, when it's sort of in this survival mode. So no one has anything to fear from a sovereign Syria. The question is, will Syria be sovereign?

Anyway, Helena, I'm sorry.

[Helena Cobban]

No, that was a really important point to make, Ali. Just coming back to some of the things that John was talking about, and in particular, this question of the effects on Hezbollah, I think it's really important what Asa was talking about earlier, this from this statement that Ahmed Al-Shara, the man formerly known as Al-Julani, the statement that he gave this morning in which he said, we don't have any enemies except for Iran and Hezbollah. So he is like just blatantly saying that Hezbollah is his enemy.

Now, I don't know how many people in Syria, Lebanon, or Palestine think that that is a position they want to align with at this point when Hezbollah continues to be under terrible, terrible assault from the Zionist forces. So that's one thing. And I think it's worth contrasting that with the statements that both Hezbollah and Hamas put out, I think on Sunday or Monday, in which they sent their best wishes to the Syrian people and said, we wish the Syrian people nothing but good.

And then this Ahmed Al-Shara comes back with this statement of hate toward Iran and Hezbollah. So that's one thing to note. So Ali has previously said that people in Syria have a range of opinions.

We know that. But in our country, here in the United States, there has been this determined campaign for, let me say, honestly, the 50 years that I've been following this thing, to say that the Assad regime, whether it's the father or the son, is completely illegal and is hated by the Syrian people, and to manufacture consent for regime change. And that, obviously, it's come and gone.

At some points, the US government and the corporate media were kind of in a semi-alliance with the Assad government of the day. But definitely since 2011, this campaign for regime change in Syria, and that started with calling it a regime rather than a government, has gone into overdrive, both from the US government and, you know, just referring back to Hillary Clinton and the way that she facilitated and organized and the CIA implemented the sending of all those heavy weapons from Libya to the opposition in northwest Syria in 2012 or thereabouts, in coordination with Turkey, in very concrete support for the regime change project. So, you know, in our country, there is a huge amount of propaganda from the government and the corporate media saying that, you know, Assad is universally despised and hated inside Syria. He's, you know, he's viewed as so corrupt and all the people there hate him.

And the views of the people that working with the regime change project, you know, get amplified and we have, you know, all kinds of things happening like Hollywood and novels and novelists and people, you know, all of them kind of Syrian opposition figures whose voices are lauded. And in the present instance, in these past few days, we've seen the corporate media trying to tell us, you know, oh, the Syrians, these Syrians, these Syrians are all overjoyed with the overthrow of Assad. I just note that Craig Murray went to the Masna border crossing where the corporate media had been reporting that, you know, thousands, tens of thousands of Syrians from Lebanon were flocking back to Syria.

And he said, well, you know, there's maybe a dozen cars in line, you know. So he was kind of underlining the degree to which the corporate media are manufacturing consent for the overthrow of the Syrian government.

[Nora Barrows-Friedman]

And part of that is also the rebranding of al-Jolani and literal, like people are calling it the DEI-ification of ISIS and al-Qaeda, you know, saying that...

[Ali Abunimah]

Zelensification.

[Nora Barrows-Friedman]

The, yeah, right.

[Ali Abunimah]

DEI is diversity, equity, inclusion. It's sort of a buzzword, meaning that there was actually that headline in the British Daily Telegraph where they call Julani diversity friendly. Yes.

Inclusive, right. Yeah.

[Nora Barrows-Friedman]

He wants to include all the different Syrians.

[Helena Cobban]

Oh, and they give him a kind of Zelenski type uniform.

[Nora Barrows-Friedman]



Yeah, exactly. They gave him a nice shirt and they, yeah, he trimmed his beard a little bit. And yeah, I mean, really, really try.

I mean, this is like, you know, the rebranding efforts of all, you know, friendly, you know, dictators that have been propped up by the CIA.

[Helena Cobban]

Ahmed al-Sharaa, who is the head of this HTS movement.

[Nora Barrows-Friedman]

Ahmed Deshaer, yeah.

[Ali Abunimah]

But, you know, of course, it's undoubtedly the case that many Syrians are overjoyed and we saw Syrians coming out into the streets. Some of them were overjoyed. We saw prisoners being released and being reunited with their families.

But what we're not seeing is the Syrians who aren't overjoyed because they're not going to come out into the streets and say we're not overjoyed. Those are people who are going to be staying at home, living in fear, as many are in many parts of Syria. And they're Syrian, too.

And they have good reason to be afraid, given the record of these groups. Hayat al-Tahrir al-Sham and the various alphabet soup of ISIS related and al-Qaeda related groups that have now taken over. And Asa and I pointed this out in our article, which you don't really have to look very far back to see what's going on.

Because remember that this group was running Idlib, this enclave on the border with Syria, for the last couple of years. And Human Rights Watch, which is not always a group I put stock in, but I think we can take Human Rights Watch seriously because Human Rights Watch has always been sympathetic to Western government policy. And its longtime director, Kenneth Ross, Roth, sorry, ex-director now, but he was director during much of the Syria war, is a strong proponent of regime change.

And so the Human Rights Watch documented many of the abuses in Idlib under the rule of Jolani and HTS, including arbitrary imprisonment, torture, horrifying abuses. And we haven't seen those prisons being opened up. And in March of this year, there were widespread protests across Idlib.

This was reported by Voice of America, by Deutsche Welle, by all Western media across Idlib government against HTS and its abuses. And those protests broke out again in May against people, against HTS in Idlib, by people complaining that HTS was very abusive, including torturing people to death in its prisons. And the reason I say that is because we're being told all the time, well, aren't you happy to see people being released from prisons?

Of course, I'm happy to see political prisoners being released no matter who is holding them. It's absolutely horrifying that anyone should have been held. And nobody is pretending or should pretend that the government of Bashar al-Assad or his father was, you know, the government of Finland or any other sort of supposedly ideal liberal state.

But the whitewashing, the people who have been backed by the United States and Turkey and tacitly by Israel over the 13 years of the civil war, that's propaganda. That's not analysis. And what we aim to do here is analysis to understand the reality so that we're not taken by surprise by events.

You've got to understand who these people are. That's who they are. And to date, you can go to the FBI website and the bounty of \$10 million for al-Jolani is still there for anyone who can help the United States government to locate him.

Well, apparently they know where he is now. Maybe they'll collect the \$10 million themselves.

[Asa Winstanley]

Yeah, just viewers and listeners, if you want to learn a lot more about all that, you can go to [our article](#). We get into the details that Ali was talking about there with the history of Jolani and his record and the record of his associated groups of abuses and atrocities in Syria. But since we published the article, there's been, you know, an update on that in the sense that there's been a lot of horrific videos coming out of Syria.

And we're not going to show them because, you know, they're graphic. But since I mean, despite Jolani's rhetoric, I mean, he's been making these public statements about calling for his men not to indulge in sectarian killings and so forth. There's a lot of reports actually coming out of of just that happening of sectarian killings across Syria.

There was one video which was obtained by al-Mayadeen, which, again, we're not going to show it, but it was just one example of the kinds of things that are coming out. And in the video, we can see several men in civilian clothing, some of whose hands are bound up. And they were executed by a gang of armed men in military fatigues.

And the video is shown from their point of view, right? So they're actually filming themselves carrying out these atrocities. And at least one of them was wearing an ISIS patch.

And they are men, scream abuse and sectarian epithets at the victims, calling them pigs and nasseris, which is an abusive term for Syrians from their Alawi community, the Alawi religious sect. Two to three million, approximately, Syrians are from that religious community. And so there's a lot of fear that is going around from people in the region that we're not really hearing about in the mainstream.

[Ali Abunimah]

And even supposing that HTS, run by Joulani, who was the former emissary of al-Baghdadi, the head of ISIS. So remember, Joulani was a member of ISIS. And then he founded the al-Qaeda branch in Syria.

And now he's had this Western media makeover where he's now called the diversity friendly jihadi, literally by the Telegraph. I don't know, maybe Asa, you can even pull that headline up, or we can look at it in a minute. Suppose that HTS has been completely reformed, as people say, and it's now being run along diversity, equity and inclusion lines.

The problem is that in the chaos of Syria, the collapse of the state, all these other groups, and I've seen these videos too, we're not going to show any, of the people in ISIS patches, with ISIS patches and this sort of thing, going around murdering people and harassing them. They're not under anyone's control. That's what, you know, when you have a failed state, nobody is in control.

And that's why so many people are utterly terrified. And that has to be acknowledged too. I would be, you know, you can think of all sorts of governments that are less than ideal.

And yet, there's still an element where a lot of people are going to feel unsafe when the state as itself collapses.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, I think this has been a huge story, actually, since the US invasion of Afghanistan, and then the invasion of Iraq, and then the so-called humanitarian mission in Libya. I mean, this is what happens when they deliberately destroy the structure of a state, the defensive structure of a state. So, you know, the Israelis and the Americans between them over the last 13 years have been working on doing this to Syria.

And in the past 48 hours, their militaries have been, you know, just systematically demolishing all the defensive capabilities of the Syrian state. So yes, we have a failed state with massive Turkish incursion in the north, massive Israeli incursion in the south, and the American presence over there in the east. So people have a mix of emotions, and we don't need to get too, like, bound up with the emotionalism.

But obviously, when prisoners get released from a jail, when people who have been deported get to go back to their homes, that is wonderful. That is wonderful for Syria's people. Let's think about the many Lebanese and Palestinians who would love to see those things happen for themselves.

[Asa Winstanley]

And the Syrians in the, you know, in Idlib.

[Helena Cobban]

In Idlib.

[Ali Abunimah]

Yeah, thank you. And the millions of Syrians displaced by this 13-year war that was funded to the tune of billions of dollars by the United States, by Turkey, by Qatar, by Saudi Arabia, the sanctions that immiserated people. Millions of refugees left Syria.

Many went to Europe. And now you have these European countries that also funded the proxy war and the dirty war in Syria immediately saying, oh, we're sending you all back. And where are they?

You know, Austria announced that it's going to begin deportations of Syrians. Germany announced that it's going to stop processing asylum applications from Syrians. And other of these human rights-loving EU states are announcing the same.

To send them back to where? To send them back to a country that is in total collapse, that is being bombed, whose economy has been totally destroyed by sanctions, where there are uncontrolled sectarian gangs running around murdering people already, even within days of the state's collapse. And you're going to send all these people back there.

There was, Libya is still, nobody talks about Libya now in the Western media. All the people who are championing the regime change war in Libya, the NATO bombing and the murder of Libya's leader, which Hillary Clinton applauded and laughed about and tackled about and thought was just a wonderful thing. There's a UN report published in August.

We link to it in the article that Asa and I wrote about the utter chaos, the disaster in Libya today. It's on the edge of civil war. No one cares about it.

No one talks about it. And all those people who are talking about, oh, we're going to bring, we're going to bomb Libya into a democracy. All those people have moved on.

They don't talk about Libya now.

[Helena Cobban]

You know, I think it's also important to focus the effects of all these events on the Palestinian rights movement globally, because the re-emergence of intense sectarianism within Syria, and those kinds of sectarian comments that Ahmed Jolani, whatever his name is, his very sectarian comments and the fact that we have this kind of re-emergence of sectarianism in the global discussion, not just about Syria, but potentially this could harm again the Palestinian rights movement.

I mean, we know that the discussions, the divisions over Syria were very harmful within the Palestinian rights movement here in the United States right until October 7th of 2023. And then on October the 7th, 2023, we had the big Hamas-led breakout from Gaza, which sparked a huge amount of support all around the world, including in this country, but it also sparked very, very solid solidarity actions of a military nature from Hezbollah and from Ansar Allah in Yemen, the Houthis, which are overwhelmingly Shiite movements. Hamas and most Palestinian Muslims being Sunnis.

So suddenly that whole narrative of a sectarian divide throughout the region and that Sunnis and Shiites are fundamentally at odds with each other and we Westerners need to just stand aside and let them kill each other while actually fomenting the sectarianism as much as we can, as white people do through colonies, empires throughout history. That whole narrative of sectarian divide collapsed on October 7th and October 8th of 2023 and people stopped talking about it.

[Asa Winstanley]

One of the things we always heard from Iraqis when the civil war started in Iraq after the, you know, soon after the American and British invasion of Iraq in 2003, that horrible sectarian war that took place, time and time again you would hear from Iraqis, we never knew who was Sunni and who was Shia until they came and fomented this essentially. And that, to me, that was one of the reasons that these fanatical groups were deliberately encouraged by Western intelligence agencies.

[Ali Abunimah]

And we've said it before here that the United States has weaponized sectarianism. They did it in Iraq. They did it after Israel's 2006 defeat in Lebanon when Hezbollah's stock across the region was very high and support for the resistance was very high.

So you had this massive propaganda campaign after 2006 in Saudi-funded media across the region to try to rebrand Hezbollah as a sectarian Shia extension of Iran instead of an Arab-Muslim. Deeply indigenously Lebanese. Indigenously Lebanese.

And that has penetrated so many people's minds and it was, I thought that one of the good things of the, there's nothing, very little that can be said that's good about the last 14 months, but I thought one of the silver linings was that that sectarianism had been put to bed and people had started to understand that the fate of the region is one and that if people are disunited and allow themselves to be divided and ruled, then the United States and Israel, the road is open to them to do what they want.

It's just tragic to me how quickly that sectarianism was reawakened in so many people and weaponized in the most disgusting and revolting ways. But one question I want to put to Helena to begin with, but of course to anyone, is of course Joe Biden also claimed credit. He said that this was because of what Israel had done to Hezbollah and what Ukraine had done to Russia over the last 14 months with the unflagging support of the United States.

Those are Joe Biden's words. And so there's a lot of triumphalism in Washington and in Tel Aviv over the collapse of the Syrian government, Helena. And so do you think that has whetted their appetites to turn their regime change efforts to other countries, or whether it be Iraq, whether it be Yemen, where they have a U.S.-Saudi-backed government in waiting, living in some hotel somewhere in Saudi Arabia? And of course, what they see as the big target or prize, Iran. What do you think?

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, well, certainly that triumphalism is very evident, including Netanyahu going and standing on the slopes of Mount Hermon and saying, we have destroyed this evil regime. And actually what he didn't say is we've destroyed the entire capabilities of the state of Syria. But his Air Force was doing exactly that while he was speaking.

And this just shows the wisdom and dedication of my government. Because, of course, remember that he's under huge threat back at home from the court system. So he desperately needed a big win, and this gives him a big win.

And Joe Biden, you can also say, has political reasons to want to go out on what he considers to be a high note after just a devastating year for him politically. So there's a lot of triumphalism, and I'm sure they are hoping that this can lead to a kind of a region-wide movement in support of confronting Iran. Because Iran has always been their big prize, and there's that great little quote from General Wesley Clark way back when who said that on September the 20th, 2001, you know, within nine days of September 11th, that he heard people in the Pentagon, and that's probably Wolfowitz and Donald Rumsfeld, saying that they want to overthrow seven countries within five years, starting with Iraq and ending with Iran. Well, they didn't get their seven countries in five years, but here we are, what are we,

23 years after 9-11? And, you know, they've wrecked the countries of Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and now finally, fatally, Syria.

So maybe they want to go on and confront Iran. I don't think they're going to be able to, actually. I think both at the regional level and at the global level, the United States and its close cohort ally puppet Israel, however you describe that relationship, are much more isolated than they were back in 2001.

So that's a bigger story. I can't go into it right now. I think, obviously, the resistance in Gaza, in Lebanon, in the West Bank, the resistance activities of the Houthis, and the kind of the quiet, let's call it the support, the strong political support for that anti-Zionist resistance will continue and grow throughout the whole of West Asia, including, honestly, inside Syria itself.

There was a pretty interesting quote I saw recently from this British-Syrian author, Robin Yassin Kassab, who was always a strong opponent of Assad. And he said, well, you know, we got what we wanted. It was wonderful.

But why did the Israelis then come in and bomb everything in Syria? Well, like, you know, how naive can the guy be? Of course, that's what the Israelis are going to do with full support from the United States government.

But I think the world balance is different now than it was in 2001. The tragic thing to me is that the global majority has been so slow in coming to the defense of the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, the Lebanese in Lebanon. But I hope finally we can see something like that happen.

Of course, you can see the weakness of the global majority, honestly, in international institutions. Where is the United Nations coming out to condemn Israel's assaults against Lebanon and Syria? You know, there's supposed to be a ceasefire.

Ceasefire? You know, which part of those two words does Israel not understand in Lebanon? And in Syria, we have this UN-decreed demilitarized zone on Golan, which is policed by a UN force, the United Nations Disengagement and Observer Force, UNDOF.

Just as in South Lebanon, there is a UN force. UNIFIL, supposedly monitoring the longer term ceasefire, well actually the 2006 ceasefire in Lebanon. And Israel just punches right through as if that's fine.

You know, United Nations doesn't mean anything to us at all.

[Asa Winstanley]

One of the interesting things that we cover in our article is that it seems they may have been planning to do that quite specifically for some weeks in advance because they've been building in that so-called buffer zone. Before the offensive in Idlib started.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, I mean, a buffer zone makes it seem like it's okay, but a demilitarized zone is something that has been negotiated and decreed by the United Nations.

[Ali Abunimah]

Yeah, yeah, yeah. And there's no United Nations now. I mean, at the time, the 1974 disengagement agreement, as it was called, between Syria and Israel was negotiated.

This is a very solemn, serious thing. And it's enacted by the Security Council. And when Netanyahu just announces unilaterally, it's done, it's over, and sends his troops and his tanks into it.

You know, if things functioned the way they were supposed to, the UN Security Council should meet immediately to discuss this gross violation and act to remedy this gross violation of a disengagement and the demilitarized zone, which is enforced by UN Security Council. And yet there's nothing. There's barely condemnation.

In fact, the United States, the statement I saw, basically said that Israel's bombardment of Syria, that's a matter for Israel. So there is no United Nations anymore. Antonio Guterres, the head of the Secretary General, speaks as if he's a State Department spokesperson, basically.

There is no independent United Nations authority anymore, if there ever was. There is no Arab League. It's just, it's nothing.

It exists on paper. No one is waiting for what it has to say. No one cares if it meets or not.

So it's not just that the states have collapsed, but any sort of international system, for better or worse, has collapsed. And we live in a very dangerous time because it's not just, we focus, of course, on what's happening in Palestine and in Syria and Lebanon, but the risk of nuclear war with Russia is increasing because of reckless policies that are aimed at maintaining the hegemony and power of the United States empire. And these things are linked.

Russia and Ukraine is not a main topic of our program ever. We've got, there are very good programs out there where you can watch those and we're never going to be as expert as them. But there are also people in Washington who see what's happening in Syria as part of their war on Russia because of Russia's bases in Syria, because of Russia's presence in Syria.

And so what implications does that have? That certainly intensifies Russia's incentives to win the war in Ukraine. So contrary to what some people think, this won't be good for Ukraine from their perspective because Russia now absolutely cannot afford to fail in Ukraine.

Other Arab regimes are going to look at this and not say, oh, we need to, and not just Arab regimes and others, and not say, oh, we need to become wonderful democracies. They're going to say we need to crack down more because otherwise we might be regime changed. So there are going to be repercussions of this that we're going to see for years to come.

All sorts of different types of blowback that we can't even contemplate yet.

[Nora Barrows-Friedman]

Yeah, Helena, any final thoughts?

[Helena Cobban]

Well, I think Ali just encapsulated it really well there. But I think it's really important also for all those of us who care about ending this genocide and this occupation of Gaza. To keep our eyes very firmly on the need to avoid sectarianism and to call it out and counter it whenever we can.

And to just redouble our efforts to ensure that we have a real global majority capability that will go all around the world, forcing our governments to confront U.S.-Israeli power in West Asia. Because it's going to take a massive operation for that to happen right now. But it will happen because U.S.-Israeli power is hopelessly overextended in West Asia. And they're no longer able to manufacture the consent.

[Nora Barrows-Friedman]

Thank you so much, Helena. We will have you back on to discuss more of this as, you know, as things move so, so quickly around the region. We're always so grateful for your analysis and the context that you bring.