

# Islamist Syria, made in the USA – a weekly news review

Today's review looks at the situation in Syria through the lens of American Imperialism, focussing especially on how this has empowered Islamist groups, and on the roles of Turkey and Israel.

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As political hacks elaborate on the body language of the line of ex-presidents assembled to say a final farewell to 100-year-old Jimmy Carter, it is frightening to think that each one of these men is responsible for the deaths of thousands. They have presided, in turn, over an empire that sees itself as having a divine right to control the world in America's interest – or, more properly, in the interest of America's elite.

Despite nice rhetoric about freedom, the end has always been allowed to justify the means. The result has been massive global inequality and suffering, and also all sorts of troubling alliances, some of which have resulted in predictable blowback. US self-interest has led them to support oppressive dictatorships, and also to back a medley of

groups that oppose left-wing ideas or fight America's perceived competitors in the Soviet Union, and now in Russia. These groups have included all sorts of far-right operations – even former Nazis. Increasingly, since US support for the Mujahedeen against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, US-backed groups have included militant Islamists. As in the Afghan example, the American strategists have often found that they have created forces that they cannot control.

As the world praises the humanitarian work of his Carter Centre, we can remember that it was Jimmy Carter who, with his National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, supported the Mujahedeen in their fight against the Soviet-backed Afghan government, enabling the growth of the Taliban and creating the conditions that gave birth to al-Qaeda. And it was Carter who [set out America's interventionist role](#) in the Persian Gulf region, which came to be called the Carter Doctrine. He told Congress in his 1980 State of the Union Address, "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."

America's role in the rise of political Islam hasn't just been through direct support. Even more important, has been their systematic crushing of secular leftist organisations, leaving the field free for Islamist groups to become the most significant poles of attraction for those wishing to resist the liberal world order. And American interventions through war and sanctions have created the economic stress and political free-for-all in which Islamist groups recruit and operate.

Despite the unintended consequences of their Afghan interventions, the United States has continued to provide backing to jihadi groups, even while constructing a political discourse in which political Islam serves as an existential enemy – a discourse that has been used to justify substantial support for their insatiable military industrial complex.

### **Syrian regime change**

America's desire for regime change in Syria, which continued through different US presidencies, was not concerned with how Bashar al-Assad treated the Syrian people. Assad was targeted for his closeness to Iran and Russia, and the threat this posed to the dominance of the United States and its Israeli outpost. Syria's civil war provided an opportunity for America to work towards his downfall. Edward Hunt, in *Foreign Policy in Focus*, [explains](#) that the plan was always to create a situation in which Assad would be forced to hand over power, and that, to avoid the seizure of power by extremist groups, the US aimed to achieve this end through long slow pressure. They combined diplomatic isolation and harsh economic sanctions, with just sufficient military pressure, through opposition groups, to deny Assad victory.

Between 2012 and 2017, a covert operation by the CIA, with the help of the UK, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, poured hundreds of millions of dollars into arming, training, and supporting jihadi groups fighting Assad. Even after this, the United States continued to rely on opposition groups to maintain military stalemate. Idlib became the gathering

point of opposition fighters expelled from other regions, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a descendant of al-Qaeda, became the dominant group in Idlib. Former US Diplomat, James Jeffrey, [claimed in an interview with Frontline](#) in 2021 that HTS “are the least bad option of the various options on Idlib, and Idlib is one of the most important places in Syria, which is one of the most important places right now in the Middle East.” And he explained that as the US representative, “I just did everything I could to be able to monitor what they were doing and ensuring that those people who spoke to them knew what our policy was, which was to leave HTS alone and would communicate — and I assumed would communicate that to them.” The day-to-day survival of Idlib was assisted by international aid coordinated by the United Nations.

Edward Hunt chronicles how, like everyone else, the US was taken by surprise with the rapid collapse of Assad's regime, but how, nevertheless, and despite their concerns over HTS, they were quick to claim credit for the hollowing out that enabled Assad's fall. As well as lifting the ten-million-dollar bounty they had put on the head of HTS leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, they have put a six-month waver on sanctions for essential services. (It is shocking, though no longer surprising, that sanctions on essential services could ever be considered acceptable.)

### **ISIS and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria**

While HTS has been focussed on replacing Assad in Syria and could ally themselves strategically with America's plans for regime change, ISIS, which emerged and thrived in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq, has been an uncompromising enemy of all things Western. And, of course, it was through opposition to ISIS that the US entered a strategic alliance with the Kurds. The US has always made clear that that alliance only pertains to action against ISIS and that they are indifferent to the fate of the Kurdish-built Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria except in so far as this affects the containment of ISIS.

America was also happy that the war against ISIS left the Autonomous Administration in control of a large part of Syria, including important wheat-growing areas and oil wells, so contributing to the weakening of Assad. However, America didn't steal the oil and wheat, as Assad apologists have claimed. These have provided vital sustenance to the Syrian people of the embattled Autonomous Administration. The threat to Syrian wheat supplies comes from America's NATO ally, Turkey, who deliberately sets fire to crops and bombs grain silos. They [bombed two different grain silos](#) on Thursday night.

### **Turkey**

Turkey is clearly using the opportunities created by the Syrian civil war to pursue their own neo-Ottoman and anti-Kurdish agenda, but they rely on their relationship with the United States, and also on American and European arms. Turkey is visible behind HTS, and directly employs violent Jihadi groups as mercenaries, but the later have been largely diverted into Turkey's own war of destruction against the Kurds. America and their European allies have supported Turkish actions that weakened Assad, and have generally tolerated their attacks on the Kurds.

Historically, America's desire to stamp out any emergence of left politics and to cement Turkey's loyalty to NATO resulted in the active support of right-wing Turkish nationalism, encouraged indulgence of anti-Kurdish oppression, and made space for the growth of Islamist politics in Turkey.

## HTS

In Syria, as the PKK's Mustafa Karasu [explained in a recent interview](#), Turkey "played a role in the emergence of HTS. HTS only existed in the area dominated by Turkey. It was in Afrin and Idlib, where Turkey was dominant. And HTS could not have stayed there without Turkey. In fact, it could not have stayed without the support of the [US-led anti-ISIS] coalition. Because at one point, Russia and Syria were going to enter the region, but the US intervened and didn't let them attack. While Turkey was supporting them logistically."

HTS wasn't supposed to become so dominant, but when you support proxy groups, these things can happen. For Turkey, HTS's promotion to de facto rulers has been welcomed as a new mechanism for Turkish power. Turkey has been busy consolidating their influence in the new interim government and working to persuade HTS to give no quarter to the Kurds. But even they do not fully trust HTS. The border crossing between Turkey and Turkish-occupied Afrin has been handed over to HTS control, but the Turkish Governor of Afrin has refused to transfer management of the local councils.

From the perspective of the Syrian people, there are serious concerns about HTS's Islamist agenda, about their ability to prevent inter-ethnic violence, and about the prospects for a transition to democracy and a more representative government. These concerns are particularly acute for ethnic and religious minorities and for women. Of the many HTS actions that have set alarm bells ringing, one of the most serious must be the appointment as Minister of Justice of a man who was earlier a judge for HTS' predecessor, al-Nusra, when he was [actively involved in the public execution of women](#) under their uncompromising Sharia law. In a video from 2015 he is seen reading out a sentence for corruption and prostitution before signalling to an executioner to shoot the condemned woman in the head.

There have been many reports and videos of inter-ethnic violence since the HTS take over, especially of violence against Alawites who are all accused of supporting Assad, regardless of their actual role. Attacks appear to be the products of local vigilantism and revenge rather than being organised from above. It is hard to get a sense of how widespread a problem these are, as there have also been [false scare stories](#) designed to trigger division and violence.

For the Kurds and their neighbours in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, negotiating a modus vivendi with HTS would be a daunting task even without Turkey's attempts to scupper any concessions to regional autonomy – though both parties have a pragmatic approach and a strong incentive to make negotiations work.

However, at the same time, the Autonomous Administration and its Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are having to fight off ferocious military attacks from Turkey.

### **Turkey's attacks**

Turkey's campaign to eradicate Kurdish identity has been largely tolerated by the United States, though not supported by them. Turkey has vowed to make the SDF give up their arms and allow the region to come under centralised control from Damascus; and Erdoğan has [reiterated his threat](#) to carry out another full military invasion.

For now, the focus of Turkish aggression continues to be the Tishreen Dam across the Euphrates east of Manbij. This has been under repeated attack from Turkey's mercenary militias – which they call the Syrian National Army (SNA) – backed by Turkish planes and drones. The SNA has suffered heavy losses, leading Turkey to increase their air attacks and to bring in more armoured vehicles. The SDF is now operating drones of their own, to great effect.

[Fears that Turkey's attacks will breach the dam](#) and cause catastrophic flooding have intensified. [The whole of society has been mobilised](#). People are preparing food for the soldiers, and making themselves ready to defend their communities. Hundreds of civilians have come into the region to hold a vigil on the dam, despite a Turkish bomb attack on their convoy, which killed five and injured 15. The Autonomous Administration is calling for international protection for the dam.

### **Kurdish oppression within Turkey**

Despite raising hopes of renewed peace talks and a solution to the Kurdish Question, the Turkish government has also continued their policy of Kurdish oppression within Turkey. There have been [blocks put on the social media accounts](#) of several Kurdish media outlets, and the families of the two journalists murdered by Turkey in Syria have [not been allowed to collect the bodies](#) and bring them home for burial on the Turkish side of the border. Two more DEM Party co-mayors have been [deposed and detained, and replaced](#) by a government-appointed trustee.

### **Israel**

The other big winner in the new Syria is America's other major Middle Eastern ally, and effective American stronghold, Israel. Assad's Iranian ties and Syria's geography made Syria a lynchpin in the "Axis of Resistance". Now, that axis has been broken, and Israel has also grabbed the opportunity to occupy the strategic Golan Heights and to destroy Syria's military capability.

HTS's rise and their operation against Assad are believed to have benefitted from the covert support of both these US allies, and also European governments with interests in the region, as well as of the United States. While Turkey and Israel love to indulge in rhetoric against the other, and each has accused the other of [directly threatening their existence](#), their long history of economic, and even military, collaboration is an open

secret. Both will work with anyone if they believe this will further their own ambitions. In 2016 the former head of Mossad [admitted to al Jazeera](#) that Israel was treating wounded fighters from al-Nusra Front, the predecessor of HTS.

While Turkey and Israel may often find it beneficial to work together in practice, public hostility remains important, with Turkey aspiring to be seen as leader of the Sunni world, and Israel taking a hardline against Turkey's proclaimed anti-Zionism. Israel regards the Kurds as a prop in this performance, and also as a potential buffer between them and hostile Muslim groups. Zionists love to profess their support for the Kurds and to berate President Erdoğan for oppressing them, in the same way that Erdoğan berates Israel for oppressing the Palestinians. Professions of support from Israeli leaders have become louder and include calls for an independent Kurdish state. While some might find the prospect tempting, if such a plan ever became more than a rhetorical device and political threat, it would leave the Kurds exposed to enemies on all sides. Notably, it is not what the Autonomous Administration is calling for. They have always insisted that they are an integral part of Syria. Even talk of Israeli support for the Kurds can be damaging. It provides ammunition for those who seek to sow divisions between the Kurds and their Arab neighbours; though, as I discussed last week, it may also have helped trigger a possible reopening of peace talks. If Israel really wants to strengthen the Kurdish position, they need to lobby America behind the scenes.

## **Donald Trump**

In the Middle East it is America that is calling the shots – and, in just over a week, that means Donald Trump. Trump [openly acknowledges](#) that Syria is undergoing a Turkish invasion, but that doesn't stop him from describing Erdoğan as a friend that he respects. In a rewriting of history that omits his own role in greenlighting Turkey's 2019 invasion, Trump talks about Erdoğan stopping his attack on the Kurds in response to his request, and then refers to the importance of making deals. Fears of a repeat of the 2019 disaster have been considerably lessened [by Trump's choice of advisers](#), which includes key figures who have knowledge of the region and are critical of Erdoğan.

Having enabled the rise of HTS, the United States and their allies are now anxious to restrain HTS's Islamism. Kurds are seen as providing a secular balance, as well as being recognised for their central role in containing ISIS. Turkey has suggested that they, Turkey, could take over the ISIS prisoners and the camps for ISIS families that are now being guarded by the Autonomous Administration and that are a potential threat to the whole world; however, ISIS grew through Turkish support.

While fierce fighting continues round the Tishreen Dam, US diplomacy appears to be stopping (or delaying) Turkey from carrying out their threatened cross border attack. Their arguments are bolstered by the presence of US troops – now up to 2,000 from the previous 900. No-one expects the United States to go to war with Turkey, but there are limits to how far Turkey can risk antagonising their powerful US ally. French troops are also there, as part of the coalition against ISIS, and France has declared support for the Syrian Kurds and the SDF. There have been proposals for the [US and France to take control of the border area](#) next to Turkey, so undermining Turkey's attempts to claim



that the SDF posed a cross-border risk to Turkish security. But Turkey has so far been [dismissive](#) of this, saying they will talk only with the United States.

The Autonomous Administration knows that the United States only works in its own interest, but that they can't survive without the protection of US troops. They have been [trying to impress on Trump](#) the importance of keeping US troops in Syria to prevent the resurgence of ISIS. The US empire, which has been responsible for bringing about so many of the problems in the Middle East – as elsewhere – is now needed to stop the forces it has unleashed from causing even greater mayhem, and the Rojava revolution must rely on the protection of a capitalist superpower.

So, does this mean that we can never be more than pawns in the imperialists' games, and is real freedom impossible? We have to believe that humanity is capable of more than this or we have no chance of survival as a species, but this situation underlines the necessity of spreading revolutionary ideas and of fomenting progressive change in the imperial nations themselves. Change has to spread and become international, or it will be crushed.

Sarah Glynn is a writer and activist – check her [website](#) and follow her on [Twitter](#) or [bluesky](#)