Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Press Briefing
"Assessing the Collapse of the Assad Regime"

DATE

Monday, December 9, 2024 at 1:30 p.m. ET

FEATURING

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Samuel Cestari: Hello, everybody, and welcome to the CSIS press briefing assessing the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's rule in Syria and its implications. Today we have a lineup of CSIS experts who will share their insights and analysis on the developments in Syria over the last week or so, historical context, the role of external actors, and what is likely to come next.

A couple of housekeeping notes before we get started. Each of our experts will offer several minutes of introductory remarks, after which we'll turn to your questions. We'll also be distributing a transcript of today's call shortly after its conclusion. The transcript will be made available on CSIS.org.

With that, let's go ahead and get started. I'll turn first to Dr. Jon Alterman, CSIS senior vice president, Zbigniew Brzezinski chair in global security and geostrategy, and director of our Middle East Program. Jon, please go ahead.

Jon B. Alterman: Thank you very much, Sam.

If you look at a map of the Middle East Syria looks like a keystone, and it's a keystone partly because it is such an important location. It borders Turkey, a NATO ally of the United States; Israel; Jordan, a close ally of the United States; Iraq, which has been through so much turmoil. Syria is indispensable to Lebanese security. It's indispensable to Mediterranean security. U.S. adversaries Russia and Iran have both been investing in Syria for decades, and Syria is absolutely central to the Middle East security strategy of each.

Hafez al-Assad, Bashar al-Assad's father, shrewdly put Syria at the center of Arab politics. Syria didn't have wealth, but it had geography, and he was willing to both make trouble and suppress troublemakers. Renowned terrorists made a home in Damascus, but he also explored a peace agreement with the Clinton administration.

Bashar wasn't nearly as skillful as his father. His initial instinct when he took power after his father's death in 1999 was to explore opening up. Within a few years, he decided he couldn't do that and remain in power, and he reinvigorated the repressive Syrian state. It's worth recalling that as the insurgency in Iraq heated up in 2005-2006, Bashar sent jihadis out of Syria to fight Americans in Iraq. From his perspective, it was a double victory: He was having the Americans kill his jihadis for him and he saw his control over the jihadis' flow as giving him leverage in negotiations with the United States. In carefully constructed irony, the departure point for the jihadis' buses was down the street from the U.S. embassy in Damascus.

After the 2011 uprisings, he doubled down on repression – which, in my judgment, was a sign of his weakness, not confidence – and more than half-a-million Syrians lost their lives. The uprisings opened the Syrian door even more widely to foreign interference. Russia and Iran saved Assad from

overthrow in 2015, but they established a strong military presence in the country. Russia negotiated a long-term lease for its naval base at Tartus and won the indefinite use of Khmeimim Air Base. Hezbollah came over from Lebanon to help Assad remain in control, ironically creating the very vulnerabilities that Israel exploited in September 2024 to attack Hezbollah in Lebanon. Turkey established its own zone of influence in the northwest, reaching accommodations with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the organization that now seems to be most in control of Syria, and pushing against the U.S.-supported Syrian Democratic Forces in the northeast. And about 900 U.S. troops remain in Syria in the counter-ISIS mission. And of course, ISIS, which has its own international attraction in addition to its Iraqi components remains a real presence in the country.

Arab states and Israel, for that matter, have been coming around to the idea that Assad was the best of a series of undesirable options. He knew – he knew and observed red lines, he was hostile to jihadis, and he ultimately was completely transactional. If the alternative was a failed state shot through with jihadis and a forward base for an unconstrained Iran, Assad seemed like a better option. But that option collapsed in a matter of weeks.

I think there are at least five challenges in Syria right now. One is, how do you unite Syrians, who have been split apart in many, many ways, around some single set of institutions? How do you limit retribution and bloodletting? In particular, Syria has large minority communities who have been protected by the Assads, including not only the Alawite sect that Assad was a member of but Christians and others. How do you prevent the Sunni control of the country from turning into a bloodbath? How do you control jihadi elements who might exploit a vacuum in the country, whether jihadi elements within HTS or jihadi elements in other parts of the country?

How do you deal not only with the existing profound humanitarian issues in Syria, but the potential movement of many millions of people who have fled Syria to come back, many of whom have no homes to return to? And how do you align the various international actors, with all of their conflicting interests, and give each enough to either not upset an agreement or to be too weak to upset an agreement? And it seems to me that there are an awful lot of spoilers in Syria right now, and a lot of potential spoilers. And one of the big international challenges is how you keep everybody closely enough aligned so they have an interest in trying to sustain this moving forward.

For the U.S., this comes to us at a very awkward time in a presidential transition. The Trump landing teams have been slow to engage with the rest of the U.S. government. Trump's stated goal is remaining aloof from the conflict in Syria, but many U.S. allies have acute interests at stake in Syria. And the potential of problems in Syria to metastasize is large. The U.S. government has the power to recognize Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, HTS, and

remove it from its terrorism list. And that's certainly a tool. I expect the United States to use that tool cautiously. And I would expect the Biden administration to use its remaining 40-some-odd days to both maximize its leverage but also maintain its agility.

There's no question in my mind that this situation is going to evolve over many, many months. And while the decisions made now are important, the consequences of most of those decisions will not be clear until we're well into the Trump administration. There is certainly extraordinary opportunity in Syria right now, but there's also extraordinary amounts of danger. And the world seems very deeply divided at a time when at least some unity of purpose is desperately needed.

Over to Natasha.

Mr. Cestari: Thank you, Jon. Next, we have Natasha Hall, senior fellow with the CSIS Middle East Program. Natasha over to you.

Nathasha Hall: Thanks so much, Sam. And thanks, Jon, for those excellent remarks. I'm going to try not to duplicate any of those. I'm also going to try not to cough, but apologies if I do.

First, I want to take a step back before diving straight into the details here. You know, I've been working on Syria off and on, and mostly on, for the past 15 years. And it's hard to sort of underestimate what a historic moment this is for Syrians, in particular. There is really euphoria, I think, throughout Syria, amongst even minorities that were very, very cautious as HTS had launched this rebel offensive. So that's kind of where a lot of Syrians are today. But just to take a step back and just to discuss sort of the players that made this happen, I think Jon made excellent points about, externally, how this was possible.

Essentially, we saw Hezbollah leadership decapitated in recent months, the rank and file decimated, and really unable to come to the rescue in a way that it had in the past. Likewise, you saw Iran finding it difficult to actually enter Syria and actually bringing – forcing its militias to leave, which was also an astonishing development. And I'll get into to sort of why that might have been in a second. And then, perhaps most astonishing of all, Russia not coming to the aid of the Syrian regime. Syria was essentially the crown jewel of Russia's opening into the international – into the world. It was its way of becoming sort of a great power through its two bases on the coast. It was essentially a launching pad into further, you know, Russian intervention in Africa and the Mediterranean. So the fact that early on, right after Aleppo City fell, they essentially said, you know, we're busy, deal with it, was quite a stunning development.

On the other side of things, I think the Kremlin had been getting quite frustrated with Assad's intransigence. The Kremlin had been pushing for negotiations between the Assad regime and Ankara in Turkey to, at long last, reconcile. And it just did not seem that Assad wanted to offer any concessions there, or really to anyone else. And so, in all likelihood, it is likely that Turkey greenlighted this offensive. But I do suspect that all concerned, including potentially the rebels that launched the offensive, were surprised by the advances, stunning advances they made in under two weeks.

Now, on sort of the internal side of things, who sort of launched this offensive and sort of the various other players, so Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is an armed group that has been governing in Idlib for several years now. It has a civilian wing called the Syrian Salvation Government. And by all accounts, it has ruled with an iron fist there. There were actually protests just a few months ago against HTS and Jolani, primarily because of people that had died in detention under HTS custody.

That said, it is very clear from talking with people that are close to Jolani that he's a pragmatic actor, that he had been sort of a student of other insurgencies. And that's clearly played out in the offensive that we've seen, not just militarily but in terms of governance. It's likely that HTS and others were using a lot of the munitions that had been dumped on Idlib over the years from Russia and the Syrian regime to reformulate weapons. They've been using 3D printers to fill in the missing gaps. And they've created this Shaheen drone, which also, I think, helped with the offensive.

All of that said, there was relatively little bloodletting, as far as it goes, given how many people have died over the course of this 13-year civil war. Aleppo City, Syria's second-largest city, fell within a day. And rebels were actually able to control areas that they had never controlled in the western part of the city, which is very, very significant.

It's coming out in reports that it's likely that HTS had sleeper cells that were in Aleppo City. They were able to also probably infiltrate a highly secure meeting that was going on in Aleppo, and therefore creating sort of disarray amongst regime leadership when the rebels entered the city.

To a lesser extent, the Syrian National Army, or the SNA, which is backed by Turkey, played a role, but far less significant here. Of the groups, HTS is by far the most powerful, the most disciplined and the most independent actor. They control many of the financial sort of sectors within Idlib that has allowed them to be a bit more independent.

The SNA, on the other hand, is kind of just a hodgepodge of armed groups, primarily displaced from other parts of Syria to northern Syria, and they've been quite thuggish and not as disciplined in the past. And often, because of

Turkey's backing, they do have to do Ankara's bidding versus actually fighting the regime. And so, to this day, we actually see very concerning clashes between the SNA – sorry – the SNA and Kurdish-backed forces in Manbij and the surrounding areas with Turkish support from drones and potentially air support. And that is ongoing.

Towards the east – and this is, you know, probably the most significant for the United States – you had the SDF essentially take this moment as well to make some deals, to take back villages in Deir ez-Zor that had been under regime control. But most significantly, and I alluded to this point before, they took the Abu-Kamal border crossing with Iraq, which Iran had previously used to send in militias and arms shipments. And so that prohibited that, which was very, very significant during this offensive.

And then, of course, and Jon alluded to this, there is the potential of ISIS. There continue to be ISIS cells, primarily in the central part of the country and eastern part of the country. There are, of course, thousands of ISIS prisoners still in the northeast. And the clashes between Turkey and the SDF are highly concerning for that reason. The SDF, of course, guards these prisons for the United States, for Syria, for the world. And so I think immediately these clashes need to be addressed in order to stem the potential flow of instability if there's prison breaks, which have happened in the past as well.

So in terms of HTS and sort of what now, we do know that they're saying the right things. They immediately went around in Aleppo City, which is a very heterogeneous place, as well as Hama, which is also very heterogeneous ethnically and religiously, and tried to reassure minorities, Christians, even those that had lived in western Aleppo City, which was regime-controlled throughout this war, that they would not be harmed. But beyond that, I've also heard from people living in the city that they have been invited to join a sort of governing council, which shows an element of concern for inclusiveness, for the future, which is a – which is a positive sign.

They have been doing the right thing in ways that I think the U.S. military didn't quite do – or, U.S. government didn't quite do in Iraq, immediately preventing looting, trying to protect government institutions – sorry – ensuring that government employees remain in their posts. These are all really essential institutional elements for a peaceful transition in the days and weeks ahead. You know, that said, this is HTS. And so I think, to Jon's point on the designation, I've heard that the U.K. is already reconsidering the designation. That is going to be really essential for the future of Syria.

If HTS remains designated and remains a group, that could potentially have fairly devastating economic and humanitarian consequences for a country where 90 percent of the population is under the poverty line. And that is even

before the hundreds of thousands of refugees that want to return. So that's fairly concerning. That said, if there isn't sort of an established framework for negotiations and good behavior now, before that designation is lifted, that could potentially also be a major mistake down the line for Syria's future.

I mean, in terms of, I think, the – I won't talk too much about external actors here, but I would just say a couple of – a couple of things. I think the ambitions of external actors really need to be mitigated and limited during this really tenuous period. I mentioned Turkey's ambitions in northern Syria. Turkey likely wants to go back to the Adana Agreement and reestablish a 19-mile buffer zone along the northern Syrian border. But this will also mean forced displacement of Kurds. So I think really prioritizing some kind of reconciliation between the Kurdish population and Kurdish leadership and Turkey is really essential to avoid further bloodletting, and potentially, again, a reemergence of ISIS.

And then, to the south I'm hearing really concerning reports about Israel's recent sort of invasion into the demilitarized zone from the Golan Heights, where they are forcibly displacing people in these areas. And it sort of remains to be seen how much of a buffer zone they exactly need. But for now, Syrians are going to have to deal with quite a bit in terms of humanitarian issues, in terms of power struggles even amongst themselves. And I think the worst thing that can happen is we see what we did in years past, which is a Syrian sort of power struggle or civil war term internationalized and become even further fueled down the line.

And I will – I'll leave it at that.

Mr. Cestari: Thank you, Natasha.

Next we have Max Bergmann, the director of the CSIS Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program and Stuart Center. Max, over to you.

Max Bergmann: Great. Thanks, Sam. And thanks, Jon and Natasha. One of the great things about working here at CSIS is getting to listen to my expert colleagues on calls like this.

So I'm going to talk a little bit about the situation for Russia as well as for Europe. For Russia, I think this is – this is a huge blow, I think, to Russian prestige. And it remains to be seen how much of a – of a broader military and foreign policy setback this is for Russia's broader objectives globally.

To maybe take a step back, when Russia intervened in the Syrian civil war in the fall of 2015, it was of great shock, I think, to not just the United States but to many in the region that Russia would take this step, and in some ways was a sign of Russia's return as a great global power. Russia the year before, in

2014, had, obviously, intervened in Ukraine, had seized Ukrainian territory; six years before in Georgia. What we had seen with Russia in the period since the Cold War was Russia trying to sort of regain the territory adjacent to itself, but this was a sign of Russia trying to play the role again – a role that it saw itself during the Soviet period – of being a great global actor and playing a really big role in regional conflicts of which – in regions where it's not in. And Russia's intervention, I think, was very significant militarily. It provided significant airpower. It provided ground forces, especially in the form of Wagner, quote/unquote, "mercenaries" – but essentially, a largely state-funded effort that had a real impact on the ground.

And what we, I think, saw here was, basically, Russia, I think, in some – many ways taking its eye off the ball, distracted by the war in Ukraine, not having as many assets and capabilities in Syria as it – as it previously had. But as I think Jon and Natasha talked about, I mean, this isn't just a story of Russia not jumping up to defend the regime. I think failure has a thousand fathers, and this – it was also the failure of Hezbollah, of Iran, of the regime itself. But what's clear is that Russia didn't really jump in to act, and I think in part it's the lack of resources or limited resources, a limited focus, and also a sense that perhaps the regime, at a certain point it couldn't be saved.

But what does this mean, I think, for Russia going forward is a big question. So it's, I think, too early to tell what this means for the future of Russia's air and naval base in Syria. Currently, Russia's naval assets – the ships that it has in Tartus – are – have sort of been floating a few kilometers outside of the port. I think they're just sort of doing that for force protection, to sort of determine what's the next step. If Russia – Russia has not fully withdrawn from its airbases and from these facilities. If it – if it does so, it's going to have to do a lot more airlift, air flights out of these bases. So I think it is in a little bit of a wait and see. It has gotten some assurances that its forces won't be targeted. And I think what they're probably going to hope for is perhaps some agreement with the new government or new political structure to stay in place. And I think it's probably going to be incumbent not just on the United States, but upon Europeans and others that want Europe – that would like to see Russia fully evicted from Syria, in part because these bases and ports are critical for Russia's operations in the Mediterranean and in Africa. So one of the major significant aspects of Russia's initial intervention is that it has enabled Russia to become a bigger player, not just in the Middle East but in Africa as well, where it has conducted a number of military operations and created, at least from the vantagepoint of the Europeans, a lot of instability.

The other aspect is that this intervention made Russia a real player in the Middle East again. That gave it, I think, much more credibility with a number of Gulf states. It was working along and with the Iranians. And it also meant that Israelis had to take Russia very seriously, which had – which really, I think, negatively impacted Israel's willingness to provide significant support

to Ukraine in the first few years of the war, in part because Israel had to deal with the fact that Russia was in the Middle East, and in a neighboring country, militarily.

So if Russia is evicted from these bases, and therefore sort of pushed out militarily from the region, I think it has real potentially negatively impacts, not only with the Israelis who may be willing to then perhaps to do more with Ukraine because there's less to lose vis-à-vis Russia, also with the Gulf states where Russia had, I think, really built fairly strong ties. Russia, of course, being connected with OPEC+. And I think there's a potential weakening of Russia's broader relationship with the region.

Maybe to talk lastly a bit about Europe, where – because I think this is somewhat overlooked in a lot of the discussion. The Syrian Civil War ended up having, I think, a tremendous political impact on Europe, where after the 2008 financial crisis and the Greek debt crisis, and other – the spread of that, really began – gave rise to populist parties inside of Europe. But they were really fueled by the migration crisis that was, in some ways, instigated by the Syrian Civil War. And that is – has really roiled European politics for the last decade.

Already, in response to the collapse of Assad, we've seen the Italian foreign minister and others sort of quickly highlight that now's the time for Syrians to return. I'm not sure if that will be followed by other European leaders. But I think there is a sense in Europe that perhaps this creates an opportunity to maybe not resolve, but at least alleviate some of the political pressures brought on by what we were real intense waves of migration that have put real pressure on European societies to figure out – to figure out how to assimilate people into their countries.

So I think for Europe this is seen as also a real opportunity to perhaps create some greater stability that then limits refugee flows. And I would expect to see Europe really, I think, lean forward in its engagement with the new Syrian government structures, and hope to really help provide a lot of aid and to sort of further stability, such that a number of Syrian refugees that have come to Europe would be – would be wanting to return on their own volition. And I think that's something that a lot of European press is currently focused on.

And maybe I'll leave it at that.

Mr. Cestari: Thank you so much, Max. And a quick note here that Max has to run to another commitment before our Q&A session. So if you have any questions for him, feel free to send them to me over email and I'd be happy to connect you. I'd also like to quickly mention at this time that after our next speaker we'll turn to your questions. So if you want to ask a question, you can type it in the Q&A window or raise your hand to ask it verbally. If you'd prefer the

latter and are on a mobile phone, you can press star-nine to raise your hand. And once it's your turn to speak you can press star-six to unmute.

Next, we have Colonel Mark Cancian, senior advisor with the CSIS Defense and Security Department. Mark, over to you.

Mark F. Cancian: Thanks, Sam.

I'll be quick so we can get to the questions. But I'm going to talk about how this effects U.S. military operations. And, as we've heard, the U.S. has an estimated 900 troops in Syria, plus contractors. U.S. budget documents acknowledge 5,000 in Syria, in Iraq, and there are about 900 in Syria. We're spending about $150 million in support of Syrian allies, Kurds, and others. And we have been doing that since, I think, practically the beginning of the civil war.

And those troops are there for two purposes. One is to support the Kurds, who have become a U.S. ally, but also to keep ISIS suppressed. What we're doing is essentially mowing the lawn; that is, making sure that ISIS isn't able to regroup in any large way. They've, of course, been driven out of the major cities. The caliphate was destroyed. But they're still there. The last couple of days we've seen a lot of U.S. airstrikes going in against ISIS. We've been able to do that now because we're not facing any potential opposition from Syrian air defenses or Russian air defenses.

So it's also important to note that the U.S. forces are in the northeast part of the country. That's not where the fighting has been. The fighting has been in the western and southwestern part of the country. So it hasn't affected the United States. But, of course, at some point HTS will probably try to – will try to consolidate its governance, and then they're going to bump into these U.S. forces. So at some point there's going to be some interaction here between HTS and U.S. forces.

And that sort of raises the second issue, which is about, you know, what kind of state are we going to be dealing with here? We've been hearing about that. You know, HTS has apparently, you know, said all the right things, made the right gestures. We all hope that that works. But, of course, they began their existence as ISIS-adjacent. And we could have a regime that looks a lot like Afghanistan – a fundamentalist Islamic regime.

We could have a failed state as HTS fails to secure the whole country and the country descends into civil war. And in either of those situations, then you could have a very messy situation where they're affecting Israel and Lebanon, of course, where there's now this very unstable armistice; Jordan, where the United States has some troops, and, of course, Jordan is close to the United States; and Iraq, where the United States still has a lot of interest.

So if Syria turns into a failed state, then all of these adjacent countries are going to be affected. Now, you know, what will the Trump administration do about that? Of course, President-elect Trump has said that, you know, this is not our fight. And it's not. But we do have a fight with ISIS. We do have alliances with the Kurds, and we've got lots of connections to other countries.

I think Trump may not be as strong a supporter of some of the other connections, but he is a strong supporter of Israel. And I think that if the Israelis become concerned, then that may strengthen the Trump administration's inclinations to help out some of the other countries that would be affected if, as I say, Syria turns out to be a regional problem.

And I will stop there and turn the floor over to Sam and your questions.

Mr. Cestari: Perfect. Thank you, Mark; really appreciate it. And thank you to all of our speakers for the insights that you've shared so far here today.

So at this time we're going to go ahead and open it up to your questions.

(Gives queueing instructions.)

So at this time, please let us know if you have any questions. I'll give everyone a chance to put their hand up if they have one.

OK, we have a question from Hamzeh Hadad. Hamzeh, I'll open the line for you. Please go ahead.

Q: Thank you. And thanks, everyone, for the great debrief.

I just had a question about if we can kind of get more thoughts from you guys about the potential of conflict between Kurds and Arabs in Syria, just because, you know, the Kurds in Syria are Kurmanji Kurds like those in Turkey. It's different than the case in Iraq, where there's Sorani and, you know, Ankara could kind of swallow the reality that semi-autonomy is allowed there. But we all know the situation is much closer to home for Turkey. Any more thoughts on that? Thank you.

Mr. Cestari: Thank you, Hamzeh. Jon or – yeah, go ahead, Natasha.

Ms. Hall: Yeah. I can jump in. Actually, just before joining CSIS I was working on mediation between the Arab tribes and Kurdish communities.

No, there's a – there's a significant concern for that. We've seen clashes and we've seen tensions between the Deir ez-Zor military council, which is technically under the Syrian Democratic Forces, and the Syrian Democratic

Forces. They're, you know, wanting to be a bit more independent from these Kurdish-dominated forces. So we could see that potentially happening again.

The other thing to look out for which I'm quite concerned about is whether or not Turkey sends the SNA – so this is the – sort of the Turkish-backed hodgepodge of armed groups in the north – further south to also sort of instigate clashes there and further weaken Kurdish forces.

So I would say it's actually quite a significant concern here because there is a history of tensions between the two. Most significantly, I would say, related to resources, many of the Arab communities had long taken issue with what they saw as corruption within this Kurdish-dominated government within, you know, revenue streams streaming to Kurdish leaders and communities and not – and not Arab communities. There's also quite a lot of tension because of the anti-ISIS campaign in which, you know, predominantly Kurdish forces would go into places like Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa – these are, you know, Arab – predominantly Arab communities – arrest people, detain people, and sometimes either without cause or with dubious evidence, and so this has also created quite a bit of tensions between the communities. So this is definitely something to – a flashpoint to look out for.

Thank you for the question.

Dr. Alterman: And Hamzeh, just as you know, there's the Turkish government's concern about the SDF being a front for the Kurdistan Workers Party, and I could imagine that forces aligned with Turkey in Syria could advance Turkish interests against Kurdish forces in Syria not because of some fine-grain local issue, but because of the – because Turkish security concerns in the east.

Mr. Cestari: Perfect. Thank you, Natasha and Jon. And thank you, Hamzeh, for the question.

We have a couple of questions typed out here in the question-and-answer section. First we'll go to a question from Anna Grobe with the Christian Science Monitor. This is for Mark Cancian. Mark, what might it look like when U.S. troops in Syria, quote, "bump into" HTS forces?

Col. (ret.) Cancian: Yes. Well, we certainly hope that that – when that happens, you know, it's the – you know, the meeting of the forces is accompanied by diplomacy so they don't start shooting at each other. You know, it would be – but keep in mind also that, you know, the U.S. is there with its allies – Kurdish forces, for example – so it's not just the U.S. But it's – you know, it's a very complicated situation, and you know, there – it's fraught with possibilities for – you know, for conflict and civil war.

Now, I will say that the United States has been quite emphatic that it will defend its forces. You know, so if HTS was foolish enough to attack the Americans, the Americans would shoot back and – you know, as we did with the Russians. You know, when Wagner attacked or threatened to attack U.S. forces a couple years ago, you know, the United States was not shy about hammering them. So the United States will defend itself, but it's going to be very messy.

Mr. Cestari: Natasha, did you have something to add there?

Ms. Hall: Yeah. I just want to jump in and say, I mean, there's no significant HTS presence in the areas where there are U.S. troops. So I don't think that that's really an immediate concern. I'd also say that we heard ISIS adjacent at one point. Actually, so HTS, you know, 1.0 Jabhat al-Nusra, actually fought – actually fought ISIS in a lot of clashes in eastern Syria earlier on in the conflict. And while there is a $10 million bounty on al-Julani's head – so this is the leader of HTS – there has undoubtedly been some kind of coordination, because HTS has routed out a lot of potential ISIS cells in the northwest, as well as other more extreme groups than HTS. So there is some coordination there between sort of outside forces that want to curb any kind of ISIS-like threat. And that's been going on for years.

Mr. Cestari: Perfect. Thank you, Natasha.

Another question here: How does the fall of the Syrian regime leave way for Israel to potentially try to expand its territory? And what can this mean for other interests in the Middle East, and perhaps further instability? Is anyone interested in taking that?

Dr. Alterman: I don't see Israel having sort of permanent territorial ambitions. I think Israel is interested in having leverage over both Syrian parties but also international parties. So when the decisions are made, Israel feels its equities are respected. I don't see this in any way, at least initially, being akin to Israel's occupying and annexing the Golan Heights, which, after all, took place over decades, and after a period of repeated military use of the Golan Heights against Israeli communities. But instead, I see this as Israel feeling like when everybody comes together, Israel wants to make sure that they both have a seat at the table and leverage to ensure people take care of their needs.

Mr. Cestari: Thank you, Jon.

Natasha, did you have something to add?

Ms. Hall: Yeah. I mean, just really quick. I mean, for the audience, I mean, I would just say to pay attention to this, because I am hearing quite concerning reports from Israel's entrance into Syria and evacuating areas. The last thing that

Syria needs is sort of another humanitarian crisis. The other thing that they have been doing is hitting sort of strategic weapons depots. So we saw this earlier on last week with Safira in Aleppo, and there's been other recent attacks. So I think Israel is sort of meeting its interests on the ground, primarily through air power. And, you know, so far limited, but we will see how that goes.

I would say, as a recommendation, I think on the chemical weapons file it probably makes more sense to work with HTS and others to finally address this, since the Assad regime had also remained fairly intransigent with the OPCW on its promises. And this is really an opportunity to finally truly eliminate these weapons from Syria in a peaceful, and I think probably more effective, manner.

Mr. Cestari: Thank you, Natasha.

And we have another question here from Lauren Morganbesser with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, for Natasha: Natasha, can you talk more on the links between the SNA and HTS, and how aligned their goals and interests are, and how will power-sharing work between them?

Ms. Hall: That's a great question. So, just a reminder, that HTS and the SNA are essentially sort of umbrella groupings for the many rebel factions that had previously lived, many of them, all over Syria, and then had been forcibly displaced to northern and northwest Syria. And so we've actually seen clashes and power struggles between these different groups in this area as they sort of fight for checkpoints and power and sort of revenues as well.

I would say that they have been fairly separate in this – in this particular offensive. HTS, very much with its eye on the prize for regime downfall and the SNA, unfortunately, I think, doing primarily Ankara's bidding. And, as I said, sort of fighting Kurdish forces in the Manbij area and surrounding areas, like Tell Rifaat. And so, you know, somewhat different goals there. I should also say, SNA fighters have been taken to places like Nagorno, Karabakh and Libya on behalf of Turkey as mercenaries. So it's unclear, really, if HTS has any control over these groups. I would say the chain of command is far more disciplined within HTS. HTS also absorbs some of these – some of these members of these other armed groups as well. But their interests, at least to date, are not as well aligned.

But these are rebel groups that had previously in the past all been essentially fighting the regime. So I think power sharing is going to be difficult here without really sort of addressing, I think, Turkey's security interests and really putting to bed sort of the conflict that really keeps erupting along Syria's northern border, as a result of that really decades-long conflict between Kurdish armed forces and the Turks. I hope I answered the question.

Mr. Cestari: Thank you, Natasha.

Unless anyone has anything to add there, that seems to be all of our questions right now. So I want to thank all of our speakers and participants for joining us for this timely call. Please feel free to reach out for anything we can do to help be a resource on this issue. We're here to help, so don't hesitate to reach out. As mentioned at the top of the call, we'll have a transcript distributed to you all and it will be available on CSIS.org as well. So with that, I hope everyone has a great rest of your day, and thanks for joining us.

(END.)