

THE *Final Straw*

A WEEKLY ANARCHIST SHOW



The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world.

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WE WILL NEED TIME: TWO LIBERTARIAN COMMUNIST PERSPECTIVES ON EVENTS AND POSSIBILITY IN SYRIA

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and any other projects that you think listeners would do well to educate themselves from, moving forward on the situation in Syria?

H: Yeah, our blog is interstices-fajawat.org. We have our social media, active mostly on Instagram and Twitter. We also have Facebook and our own website, and this is the project we've been working on for more than a year now. And also, there are other resources where people can go. There are also some articles in English. There's a website called aljumhuriya.net.

TFSR: But there was an essay about how the Western left had failed the Syrian revolution. And that has a lot of different authors, a lot of different moments, and a lot of different titles that people could research from—book titles and articles.

C: The tone is a bit aggressive, but we needed it. Self-critique is very important.

TFSR: Thank you both so much for having the conversation in English. I really appreciate it. And I look forward to reading more on your blog.

H: Thank you for hosting us also, for giving us the platform. We appreciate this a lot.

TFSR: My pleasure. Bye.

now they are pretending to be something they're not. This hypocrisy needs to be faced, because it cannot happen again. If all these people had not cooperated with the regime, the regime would never have lasted until now, especially in the media. Especially these small reporters who were writing about everything. I even found my name on one page, on one list, in the university—they were everywhere, watching everything. So, this cannot happen again. This is why people need to be held accountable for what they did.

C: There are several challenges around this secularity issue...

H: ...minority gender issues, the LGBTQ community issues, and women's issues. These are all questions that need to be put on the table.

C: And probably the main blind spot will be the savage capitalism that will come with this liberation. Because now, you have all these delegations coming from Europe. Their main interest is private interest, investments. And they are already speaking about this, and HTS is already guaranteeing—which is totally in contradiction with their conservative views—what Hezbollah was doing in Lebanon: free market. They are promising already that it will be a free market and that investors will be welcome in Syria. And this will be the blind spot because it's too much to oppose.

H: But this is the thing, what we said also: we need to take time. People need time to realize, to understand, because now people are in this euphoria. They need time to step back and think clearly and strongly about these questions that are very fundamental and very important. These are the main questions because you cannot introduce a brutal capitalist economy where you will make the division between the poor and the wealthy people even harsher, and people will have much poorer lives. So the economic question is also something else.

C: Deir ez-Zor will be a very, very sensitive area, because this is where all the oil is being fought over. And before the war, before the revolution in 2011, the main beneficiaries of Syrian oil were Germany, Italy, France, and the Netherlands, and now they are coming because they want to get back to their oil fields, especially because now they are facing Russia for the other part of their incomes.

TFSR: I've never heard of a situation where people are really happy about the outcome, where there isn't criticism or critique, but I hope that there can be some sort of truth and reconciliation. Thank you very much, both of you, for taking the time to have this conversation. Could name your blog

In this episode, you'll hear Cedric and Khuzama, two libertarian communists with connections to Syria and editor contributors to the blog **interstices-fajawat.org**, speaking about their observations of what's been going on leading up to and through the ouster of Bashar Al-Assad, as well as complications among various factions on the ground and the view from the Syrian diaspora. The situation on the ground is changing fast.

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Huzama: My name is Huzama. I come from a city called Suwayda in the southern part of Syria. I have lived in Europe for four years, and I co-created the collective Interstices Fajawat with my partner. When I was in Syria, I did not consider myself to be a political activist; I considered myself someone who was trying to transfer the voice of the cases I believe in. I was participating in the revolution in Syria, and for the moment, I can describe myself as a libertarian communist.

Cedric: I'm Cedric. I was born in France and still living in Europe. I have been partners with Huzama since 2019. I was involved in the anarchist and libertarian communist movement. I would also define myself as a libertarian communist, but more in France and Europe, on international anti-racist, decolonial questions and against police brutality. We can speak more about our links to Syria in the next question.

TFSR: Awesome. Thank you very much. Would you please speak about your relationships with Syria a little bit more and its peoples? You've already given a name to some of your political perspectives. I don't know if you want to go into more detail about how that developed. Separately, are you in touch with people currently in Syria? I imagine Huzama, at least, maybe.

H: I was born in Suwayda city. For the last 10 years before 2020, from 2009 to 2020, I lived in Damascus. When the revolution started in 2011, I participated in the protest that was going on between Suwayda and Damascus. My family, nuclear and extended, are still in Syria. So I'm in daily contact with them and with all the developments that are taking place. I also have friends who live in different parts of Syria, from all the regions. This also helped me take the point of view of the people who are doing their daily activities in Syria.

C: My link with the region is I was more in Palestine. From 2013-14, I was there experiencing the uprising in the West Bank during the war in Gaza. This led me to be much more involved and interested in this region, to learn Arabic. And this is also the reason why we met with Huzama. In 2020, we met in Lebanon. I went to Lebanon and Syria in 2022. Also, through the internationalist movement, I was in touch with many people from the whole region, not only Syrians but also Palestinians, Lebanese, and people in the two parts of Syria, the East of the Euphrates and west of the Euphrates.

TFSR: Great. Thank you for that. Could you talk a bit about what life was like under the Baathist party of the Assads? What sparked the revolution 13 years ago?

still gathering, protesting in the streets. Yesterday, for example, there was a protest where people were demanding a secular state, a democratic state, respecting the rights of women, and the people were free to demand this.

C: On this aspect, we have to say that there were a lot of discussions since yesterday because there were several protests called by different secularist movements. It's not really movements; it's more like groups and individuals. They were gathering in different places. For example, in Homs, it was mainly focused on freedom for women, and it was very grassroots, with people who were more left-leaning as well. So, it was much nicer than in Damascus, which was met with criticism. Some people, whom we can call shabiha, who were defending the regime before, worked in TV, show business, and as artists, and were complicit with the regime. Now, they are trying to clean their faces and so they come out to these protests in the name of secularism, speaking with a lot of confidence, as if they hadn't supported the regime. So, now there is this new challenge for us, where it's already difficult for secular movements to have a place in all these discussions that are going on now. And nowadays, a part of the secularist movement that has to deal with the former Assad supporters and kick them out, name them and say, "Name and shame, get out, or be prosecuted, but don't speak in the name of the movement," because it's also discrediting the whole secular movement, which is, at this moment, very, very dangerous. If they want to deal fairly with all the minorities, we still have no clear statement, no guarantee that people who are non-believers—meaning people not from any religious community or a community of non-believers—are included in the discussion. They shouldn't exist because this is kuffar, this is bad. You have to believe; you are Muslim, or if you're not Muslim, you're Christian. If you're not Christian, you are something else. So, this secularist movement has to be listened to; it has to be part of the discussion, also at the high level. This is the whole issue.

H: All these former supporters of Assad, who say, "We did not know," or "We were forced," but many people chose at least not to participate in glorifying the Assad regime and not to put themselves at risk of being detained. Because no one wants that experience. This is a challenge because there are a lot of people, especially those I spoke about before—the ones who were writing reports against others. It is scary. And I don't know if what happens now will change the mentality of the people, if they will really have this fundamental change inside themselves, or if they will keep this mindset to glorify whoever comes to power, to keep their position and easy life. So this is something, I think, as a Syrian community, we should know how to deal with because it should not be on a revenge basis, but rather based on a just position. These people need to be persecuted, and they need to be held responsible for the things and the stance they did not take beside their brothers and sisters. Because

their position is with regard to the regime. We were trying to see if we could make links between the autonomous administration and the movement taking place in Suwayda, but it did not seem that simple.

C: People just ignore each other.

TFSR: What do you think comes next for Syria? Who has a say in the transitional government? Do you get the sense of how things will move forward? What do you think needs to happen for the dreams of the Syrian revolution to be built? And also, in what happens next you see a situation over and over again where the regime changes, but elements of the infrastructure stay in place. This happens all the time, where the people that “know how things work” — sometimes low-level or mid-level bureaucrats get to stay in positions of power, or military operatives. What do you think is going to happen with the remnants of the Baath regime?

H: To start from the end, for all the ex-military officers, this transitional government has said that they want to persecute these people, and this is also the demand of the population: that these officers will be followed and persecuted. I think two big officers in the army have already been captured. But of course, there is still no transparency about what will happen to them, or how they will be judged. Because this government is still not fulfilling all the duties of the Ministry of Justice or something. So, it's something that will be worked on. Because also now the United Nations, for example, are trying to form a special commission to deal with the question of the detainees in Syria. They will examine all the documents and the prisons, and also all these mass graves that are being discovered. So, I think this will lead to many names being uncovered because the people are not only demanding accountability from the officers but for all the people who are affiliated with them. These people are the ones who gave power to these officers to practice their authority and oppression.

Regarding the infrastructure, it's a priority now in Syria because the infrastructure is destroyed. Now, Iran has decided to cut off oil from Syria, so there should be an alternative. And the oil fields are not being exploited for the benefit of the Syrian people, and all the electricity stations need to be reconstructed and modernized. Even what's related to water distribution. There are many huge, huge issues. There's a lot of reconstruction work to be done. But at least now, the foreign press can enter Syria. They're meeting with delegations coming from several countries. A delegation from America will come soon to meet, and the French delegation met with civil society organizations in Damascus last week. There is also an open door to investigate all the crimes made by the Assad regime. The people are

H: Living under this very genocidal, this very sectarian regime, it was very difficult. Until now, it's hard for many people to even imagine when you speak about it. From the time of Hafez Assad, the father of Bashar, he imposed an ultra-authoritarian regime. There was not any political diversity. You could not criticize the regime in any way. It was a mafia or a family clan kind of regime. Because all the people who were in power had very elite positions in the government, it was from the very close family of Hafez Assad. They changed the constitution so Bashar Assad could become president at a young age in 2000.

A very good example for reference is the book of Michel Seurat. It's called The State of Barbarism. This writer was kidnapped in Lebanon in 1986, and we recommend reading it. He was kidnapped by Hezbollah, of course, on the order of Hafez al-Assad. And all the progressive left, anyone who had any ideas or directions that were not going with the Baath party, all these people, thinkers, were all imprisoned, or they were forced to leave the country. Or they left the country because they could not even have a normal life there.

There's also a writer called Yassin al-Haj Saleh. He's from the Syrian Communist Party. He was imprisoned for 16 years under the Assad regime. He wrote very interesting, comprehensive articles about Syria and the situation in the whole region. There was a huge corruption. It was unbelievable, and there was a huge classification between the wealthy and the impoverished. It's not also only the Islamists or the Islamic religious people that were oppressed. Everyone was oppressed. He's saying that he's the protector of the minorities, this regime, but it has nothing to do with this. He was oppressing anyone who was not going along with what this regime wanted. And even Christians, even Alawites, even Druze. There's nothing related; it was very sectarian. He also created a very big mistrust among people because there were lots of people called mukhbireen [informants] because they were related to the secret intelligence. These people were writing reports against anyone, against their family, against their neighbors, and they gave them to any Baath party member next to them or in the region, in their neighborhood. And many people went to prison. Many people were killed because of these reports. So this created a huge mistrust among the Syrian community, and this is what the regime wanted. They divided the population. In 2011, the people went to the streets. It was from the first big protest that happened immediately because the people immediately got en masse in the street, they were shot with live bullets and they were kidnapped. They were kicked. They were taken to prisons in the hundreds. Very soon, the regime attacked with tanks and even planes in Daraa, the first region in which the first mass protest took place. Over the years, in the spring of 2011, many defectors from the army created the Free Syrian Army. Also, after Assad released a large part of radical Islamists from prisons, we'll speak about later how it radically changed the path of the revolution that started in 2011.

C: Do you want us to also speak about the first years of the revolution or after the Civil War?

TFSR: Yeah, that would be great. And I think it's also good to mention it from an international but regional perspective. This was a time when there had been uprisings in Tunisia. Uprisings occurred in Egypt and many other countries in the area. From the outside, it seemed there was an inspiration and hopefulness of ending authoritarian dictatorships that had existed since the decolonial movement started. I'm sure this influenced people taking the streets, saying, "We see our neighbors doing something similar. Maybe we can do it too." Is that correct?

H: Sure, it was. I remember how we were sitting in front of the TV, and we were saying, "It's time. It's coming here." The people were unable to hold themselves. Because it started when these children in Daraa, the southern governorate, wrote on the walls, "It's your time now, doctor." Because Bashar is a doctor and ophthalmologist. It was this spark that created this mass protest. After these kids were kidnapped and tortured in the Assad prisons. And even in Damascus, two or three days prior, a small protest happened in the middle of Damascus in a very crowded neighborhood. So, the people wished this was coming, and they could not believe this was happening anyway. I was inspiring, of course.

C: And then I think it's also important to realize that from the moment he released all the Islamists from the prison, it was an attempt for him because he was very confident before. He even came to southern Syria to say, "I'm the protector of the minorities," and to reassure the people that there's no reason for them to topple the regime because the Syrian people like him.

H: Yeah, because he thought that if there is an uprising, it will start from this region because it has a bit of a specific situation, the southern region and Suwayda.

C: Because there's a big minority group, the Druze. It's a governorate where 95% of the people living there are Druze, and they are considered a brother minority to the Alawi, which Assad is part of. And he really came to Suwayda because it's a big threat. If Suwayda opposes him, it was a big threat for him, and he knew it. That's why he came to say, "I will never betray you." He was beginning to say in this speech that the main threat was coming from the Sunni Muslim majority. When he released all the Islamists, it was also the idea to put the blame on the Islamists, on the Muslim Brotherhood, and so on. And he played this game for many years. Until recently, Bashar was playing with the Islamists, moving them from one place to the

hear what they have to say. One example: when I mentioned earlier that we met the former mayor of eastern Aleppo, who was imprisoned by the Kurdish forces when Aleppo was freed. We also know another person, but I won't name anyone now, because it's not the point, and I don't want to speak instead of them. But we also know someone from the Druze community, who is very secular and progressive. He is speaking a lot against the Kurdish movement, because there is a lot of misunderstanding. Until there is no meeting between the two sides of the river, it cannot work.

H: There's a big lack of this.

C: The Kurdish community, and I don't speak now about the socialist movement, but the Kurdish community, they are under huge threat if this effort is not made in their name by their own representatives and political parties or movements from the left.

TFSR: As *Burning Country*, which is one book I've read about the Syrian revolution and civil war, points out — and I guess you've already named this — and to not directly put revolutionary fervor into challenging the Assad administration meant that they were able to coexist with the dictatorship for the last 13 years, while others lived in exile or were tortured, killed, or lived under the thumb of the Assad regime. And that's a hard thing to heal from and to build trust back from. It's complicated.

C: But the Druze community was also always accused of being loyal to the regime because they had some kind of, not autonomy...they were always considered as an area under regime control, but they were always opposing it. For example, the 50,000 young people from Suwayda who refused to join the army and were protected by militias. There were many confrontations with the armed forces of the regime, and Suwayda was never touched. They benefited from the fact that they are a strong minority, and Assad could not attack them frontally because this would not be understood and would break his own propaganda.

H: He acted as minorities' protector.

C: But they were also accused of being loyal to the regime, and this is totally unfair.

H: There is part of the community that supports the regime, but they are not representative. In every community, not everyone agrees, of course. But for the last year and a half, the people have been declaring very clearly what their stance is, what

The Syrians can decide between themselves if they continue to oppose this Turkish expansionism in the north.

C: I think there's a huge question and even a huge divide that we try to address on our very small level when we meet Kurdish friends and get involved with what's happening. There is a social movement, there is a revolution, there is a progressive movement in Rojava that cannot be contested, and we support this movement. And this project should not only be supported, but also defended, but what we say and the advice we have given for years is that the Kurdish movement should make huge efforts to connect with secular movements, leftist movements, and minorities in the rest of Syria, such as the Druze. They have to engage in negotiations with HTS, but they also need to be involved in the power balance with the minorities, who will have to challenge the HTS government now. So, the most important thing now to preserve what is happening in the east of the country is to make connections and stop being always separated from the fate of Syria. This is the big mistake of the Kurdish movement.

They have been so focused on their ethnicity. Even when we say "Kurdish movement," why do we say that? We don't speak about democratic socialist or feminist movements. Actually, we always speak about the Kurds, the Kurdish movement, and they have excluded themselves. They have excluded themselves from the Syrian community. In other places, like in Suwayda, the Druze said, "We are not Druze. It's not our Druze community. It's not Suwayda that we want. We don't want autonomy." When there were questions about whether they agreed with the confederalism in Kurdistan, they said "No, because we consider this as separatism. We are part of the Syrian people, and we want to build a community with all Syrians. We will not separate from the people in Idlib, Homs, and Aleppo. We are all the same. We are one community." The problem is that the Kurdish movement didn't do this, and now they are in a very dangerous situation, where the rest of Syria doesn't necessarily not care, but they say, "You wanted to be apart, and now you are..."

So, there needs to be very, very strong political and diplomatic efforts to regain trust and rebuild connections with the rest of the Syrian community. This is the only way to oppose Turkey and US interests in the region. I don't know if this makes sense, but from a revolutionary perspective, it's the only way we can really move forward. Right now, we are supporting the secular movement in Syria among the Arab communities, but there are no links. We hear a lot of things, and we see a lot of self-persuasion and belief in ideology and propaganda from the Kurdish side, by all the comrades in the internationalist movement. But it's also campist — you cannot say, "Oh, my side only does good," because that's not the reality.

So, you have to be more humble and meet the other communities, and

other, making agreements with them to remove them from one region to another, so he could play with them where he needed them to change the balance of power.

H: But he was saying, "Either you choose me, or you choose Islamists, what do you want?" He was making people make this choice that is totally not valid. He was imposing this because he gave the possibility for all these radical extremists to exist and to be in a very powerful position. These Islamist extremists were not fighting the regime; they were fighting the people themselves. Their victims were the Muslims themselves.

C: He also knew that this would change the opinion, the way the West and the international community would look at him, the revolution, and the situation in Syria, because he knew that if the Islamists were developing and empowered, everyone would focus on the Islamists: first al-Qaeda and then ISIS. And this is exactly what happened from 2013 to 2015. The main focus came on ISIS on one side. The only limit put on Assad was the use of chemical weapons. It was the main condition. They basically sent a message to him: you can repress, you can kill, you can kidnap, you can make counterrevolution, but don't use these chemical weapons. This is the only red line that was put by America, for example, on the Assad regime. When he used chemical weapons in 2013 in Ghouta, which is very close to Damascus, it brought the US to come into negotiations with him first.

People rewrite history and say that the US used this as a pretext to bomb and participate in the war. But actually, they didn't. The US came to negotiate with Assad and to settle the situation by sending a delegation who would work hand in hand with the regime to agree on removing all chemical weapons. And this is how the US intervened first in the situation there. And in 2015, Russia also added to the intervention. But they had the same excuse as the US—the main motivation was to fight ISIS. The official reason was to fight ISIS. Russia and the US, in this period, agreed on sharing the sky, for example, to fight ISIS. So they were basically collaborating and sending messages to each other to say, "I'm using the sky to attack this place," so the airplanes would not crash into each other.

So on the one hand, this deal was made with the Assad regime about the chemical weapons. Obama, in this period, threatened Assad. He threatened him with bombing, but actually, he never intervened against Assad. He was really happy to find a settlement. There was also this period from 2015 when the US decided to create the SDF and back them, with the main aim to fight ISIS. The SDF, the Syrian Democratic Forces, are often believed to be the majority Kurdish. But that's not the case. The majority, 50 to 70% of the SDF, are Arab communities. Meanwhile, the US and Qatar, for example, were funding Al Nusra groups related to Al Qaeda, because it was a whole game about how to deal with the balance of power inside

Syria. So the Syrian people at this moment were left alone in their protest against the regime, and no one was looking at the regime as barbaric anymore. Because actually, what we are trying to say always in our intervention is that the Syrian state, the Assad regime, was much more bloody than ISIS, in scale. Of course, it's horrifying what ISIS did, but in scale, the Syrian regime was much more horrifying. The people at this moment were basically left alone, and the country began receiving offers from all the imperialist powers of the region and from the West - we consider Iran, Russia, and Turkey to be imperialist powers here - because we also struggle a lot with some campist point of view that consider only the US and Israel, for example, as imperialist. But Iran, Russia, Turkey, the US, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia all have imperialist policies, and each of them has their proxies inside Syria since 2013-15.

Basically, they created the civil war inside Syria, cutting Syria into pieces to struggle for their own interests, and Assad was free to repress and kill thousands and hundreds of thousands of people, and he kidnapped many people en masse. Many people disappeared. Today, with the regime fallen, we know that it's probably up to 150,000 people who disappeared and were killed and buried somewhere. So it's a huge prison complex, and we are not even sure that all the prisons have been found today. So since 2020, it's also the thing that brought us to the actual situation, is that everyone looted so much from this country that, at the end, more than 90% of the Syrians were under the poverty line this year, and they still are now, because the situation is still the same with the sanctions and everything. Basically, everyone looted the country, Assad included. That's the situation now. The regions of Idlib and Afrin provinces are ruled by Turkish support, by HTS and SNA, but we will speak about this later.

TFSR: According to Leila al Shami's blog, which is where I read it, in August of 2023, there were demonstrations and dozens of protests against the regime across many parts of Syria, echoing the chants and dreams of 2011. Despite this, from the outside, it appeared to many that the regime was pretty stable. But we recently had the joyous news of the fall of the Assad regime as he went into political exile in Russia. Can you talk a bit about, maybe, since you've talked about some of the different forces that were involved in what became the Civil War, how it went from what appeared to be a stable dictatorship into this new situation that we see now?

H: The regime was rotten from the inside after all these years of oppression and after all its corruption, the policy of corruption, even in its internal affairs. And when the opposition factions, the armed forces, were taking the cities, liberating them, you saw everywhere that the army was fleeing, or they were defecting to join

Turkish nationalism is focused on rebuilding the Ottoman Empire, and Erdoğan wants to represent the Muslim ummah. Speaking in the name of Muslims, even if he is just doing everything against the Muslim community. He is a threat, but his territorial expansion will likely be limited to the northern region, which is already concerning. We don't say, "Okay, it's fine. We can agree with him taking the territories in the north." It's not what we're saying. But we don't think he wants to invade and control the whole Syria. We think he is mainly focused on removing the Kurdish movement, and he will have a huge resistance, and it will not work better than the last years. We don't think so.

The role of the US will also be crucial here. The US and Turkey are allies within NATO, which is contradictory given their conflicting interests. There were some agreements in the past around Kobani, when US forces didn't back the Kurdish forces when Turkey attacked northern Syria. Trump, for example, will be the next president, and he said, "I don't care about Syria." He is stupid, and we cannot trust him for a second, but he repeatedly said this, and he's also under pressure from the American people and American society. Obama promised to get out of Iraq. There's also trauma in American society after Iraq, and they will not reproduce the same mistakes as in Iraq. Obama said, "We should get out of the Middle East," and I think Trump is also in this mentality, saying "We should get out." That doesn't mean he won't try to push American interests, and that's why they will keep supporting the SDF, because they keep control of the oil fields, especially in Deir ez-Zor, which holds 70% of the Syrian oil. If Americans keep control of this region, they keep control of the oil. When Trump was president before, he said, "We will not leave Syria because we need to benefit from this 70% of the Syrian oil." So, there are all these questions that are embedded in the same diplomatic negotiations going on now, and the position of the US will also play a role. But the fear we have is that they will negotiate. They will all negotiate so that Erdoğan can keep the northern part of the country.

H: I think that's what should happen — it's the negotiation. But between the autonomous administration and whatever government will happen to be in Damascus, because the enemy is the same for both. The SNA (Syrian National Army), which is backed by Turkey and mostly fights with the Kurdish forces, does not represent the Syrian people. They do not represent the Syrian community. If you ask the Syrian people about the situation in the East, they consider themselves as one. They are their community, their families, their friends. So, there should be a negotiation between the Kurdish forces and whatever government will be in Damascus. This should happen when there is the national conference, and the autonomous administration should be there, and will be there, I suppose. There should be an agreement reached to solve this issue, and HTS should play a card with Turkey.

C: There is no guarantee for Syrians returning that they will be able to rebuild their lives in the coming three years.

TFSR: Particularly if the administration had been milking the population and the economy deteriorating during this many years of civil war and repression, it's not going to be a thriving situation that people are returning to. Syria has had complicated rows with various regional powers, some of these examples you're bringing up right now, and the last five years, you've seen conflicts with Turkey in their fight against Kurdish forces versus neo-Ottomanist visions from Turkey's border, and Kurdish visions of an eventual Kurdistan, including portions of what is now Syria, the US support at various times of the Syrian Defense Forces in regions hosting oil fields, and the recent expansion into the Golan Heights by Israel, with claims that they're going to be making permanent settlements there.

Can you talk a little bit more about some of the foreign powers that are jockeying to change borders, to stabilize or to destabilize Syria? And one thing that pops into my head is the tomb of Suleyman Shah in relation to Turkey, which I think is interesting. I don't know if that's the thing you can speak of. Suleyman Shah was viewed as the father of the founder of the Ottoman Empire, and his home was within the borders of modern-day Syria, and so Turkey has been attempting to claim that as a Turkish spot within the border, which would be a foothold within the borders of Syria- We don't have to get into that, if that doesn't make sense for this conversation, but there's a lot to talk about anyway in terms of other countries that have been mentioned.

C: We agree that Turkey is currently the main threat in Syria. Turkey wants to keep and gain control over the northern part of Syria, particularly north of the M4 road, a critical area that cuts through Syria. Turkey is interested in controlling this entire region, often referring to it as a "buffer zone," a term which is horrible. Erdoğan will do everything to get what he wants, especially now that he is in a strong position. On the other hand, when people say he wants to gain control over political life in Syria and over what's going on with HTS and the government, we are not sure. We think he needed this offensive to be launched, it's like a deal saying "HTS, you help us launch the SNA offensive against the Kurds in the north, and you can do whatever you want in the south." I don't think Erdoğan even believed that it would work so well, that they will conquer the whole Syria in 10 days. But he didn't really care. He's mainly focused on the north, and this is why also he's bombing in the north and he's attacking Kobani now.

This is, of course, going in line with his very Ottomanic way of thinking.

them, or they were throwing their arms and going back to their families because even the soldiers in the army had no purpose for why were they there. No one knew. They were all doing compulsory military service. So no one wanted to be there. This regime is built on nothing. It's a clan. They destroyed the whole community, and their only support was Iran and Russia. They were the reason why the regime stayed, especially in 2015 when Russia helped the Assad regime bomb Aleppo and Idlib. There was a huge bombing where they were trying to kill as many people as possible because Idlib is the place where the regime gave the possibility for all the fighters from Damascus to leave. So he said, "Either you surrender here, and you give your weapons, and we see what we do with you, and possibly throw everyone in prison or kill you, or you all go to Aleppo and Idlib." And they were all sent to Idlib.

After gathering everyone there, he and Russia bombed them, and the Iranian militia with Hezbollah, were doing all the other jobs everywhere else. And in these last two years, especially after the protest that broke out, the uprising in Suwayda, since more than a year and a half, the people had enough. They had nothing to lose anymore. The situation is very, very bad. You could hear in the streets of many cities in Syria, the people were starting to say things. The people were so fed up, they couldn't take it anymore because it's, it's not life. The protests that took place in Suwayda also because it was led by this minority group that was always wrongly linked to the regime, which is not true. But it was seen as such. Everyone was on the street, and it was happening, if not daily, then weekly for 18 months. And there was this local armed faction that appeared in this region to protect all the men who did not want to join the army. They said, "Okay, anyone who does not want to join, we will protect them." There were about 50,000 men who did not join the army, and they stayed in Suwayda. Of course, they couldn't leave this place. But this was the choice, and they chose to defend their position.

Another thing, the Astana process, a conference that happened between Turkey, Russia, Iran, and the United Nations with the HTS, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Turkey was sending a lot of messages to Assad that they wanted to normalize with him, and Assad refused to listen to their demands because they wanted also to keep the northern region. They wanted to negotiate something anyway, but the Assad regime refused. And in this Astana process a deal was reached to handle the power. Assad left, and he was granted asylum, and he had time to leave, and many officers had time to leave. Probably all his family had time to leave. His allies, Iran was weakened by the Lebanon War, and Russia was weakened by the Ukraine war. Both these countries were also losing lots of money supporting the Assad regime, which had huge debts since the 80s, even toward Russia and Iran. And he started this mega empire for Captagon trafficking to pay back [his debts]. This Captagon empire also affected his relations with the Arab surrounding countries. So all these

factors contributed to weakening the Assad regime. And if you see in all the cities in Syria now, everyone is crying from happiness. No one wanted this regime. No one. Not a single person. I think this speaks a bit about how it came to collapse of this regime in 12 days.

TFSR: Could you talk a bit about the Captagon, what it is, and the economic role it played for the regime, as well as what it did to the region or the country?

H: Yeah, sure. Captagon was something enormous. More than 80% of the Captagon around the world is distributed by the Assad manufacturers.

TFSR: It's a stimulant drug?

H: Yeah, it creates hallucinations, also. It's dangerous, and it's not very expensive. It's in small pills. They were very creative in how to send it all over the world. They created gangs that were affiliated with its intelligence services to manufacture these drugs in many cities in Syria. These gangs were even spreading this drug inside the cities themselves, destroying the youth, destroying the people in the region.

C: It was also used a lot by the fighters. It's a very cheap drug. One pill is very cheap, and everyone can afford it. It was used to help fighters, but also to impose violence on others, and they were subjected to it too. Saudi Arabia was one of the main target countries overwhelmed by the Captagon pills. I think what they say is 50 million pills a year they were finding imported through Jordan.

H: The city I come from is on the border of Jordan. So, Jordan bombed at some point in the southern Suwayda governorate because they were targeting the drug dealers. Of course, they failed, but they were trying to fight this trafficking. They also refused the call from local factions to cooperate with them by saying, "Give us the name of the dealers, and we can help." But the Jordanian authorities said, "No, we deal only with the government, the Syrian government." Anyway, everyone knows that the government itself is producing the Captagon. But it created huge problems. Even in Suwayda, there was a huge gang. When they dismantled it, these local factions captured their place. They found the equipment, they found the pills, and they were all affiliated with the military intelligence service. They had the facilitation to pass through the checkpoints. They had military cards so they could do whatever. It was given by Assad's brother himself, Maher al-Assad. He was the king of all this trafficking and criminality of the regime.

countries, their refugee status will be overturned, if Syria is considered stabilized, though we don't think this will happen soon.

H: The issue is that many Syrians do not have passports, nor will they be able to obtain European passports. This means they cannot leave the European country where they are staying. They only have a travel document, and for now, it is likely that this document cannot be used to enter Syria, even from Jordan, Lebanon, or Turkey. This travel document does not allow Syrians who do not have Syrian or foreign passports to enter.

C: There's also the rule that if you return to the country you fled from and you have asylum status in Europe, there is no guarantee that upon your return, if you come back spontaneously, they won't say, "Oh, you came back, so you no longer need refugee status." This is a huge fear. People wonder what will happen if they go back, even if it's just to visit their families. When they try to come back to Europe, they might be told, "But you returned, so it's fine, you can live there."

H: Immediately, the second day, they started talking about removing refugee status or stopping asylum. However, there are people who have been waiting for this for years.

C: Also, you see Ursula von der Leyen, representing Germany and Europe, who immediately went to Erdoğan and called him "our best partner" regarding immigration issues. This is very worrying. Erdoğan is not our friend.

H: The issue is that Erdoğan now presents himself as the sponsor or guardian of the Syrian people, which is very awkward and bad. Erdoğan has had very harsh policies towards Syrians, both those trying to go from Turkey to Europe and those who did not receive refugee status in Turkey. Erdoğan also participated in opening roads for extremists to come from Turkey to Syria to join ISIS, for example. Many European countries are now speaking to Erdoğan as if he represents something positive...

C: And he fuels genocide. Erdoğan is clearly supporting HTS from behind, preventing them from entering any conflict with Israel, likely as part of some agreement that avoids touching Israel. Now, no one dares to challenge Israel, and they do as they please, already invading parts of villages in the south. HTS claims that Israel is not the enemy, and Turkey provides 30% of Israel's oil.

H: All these things do not represent what the Syrian community would say. This is part of the cautious side we were speaking about.

down, understand the coming period, and begin implementing civil actions and organizations. In one or two years, discussions on the constitution and major decisions can start. For now, many questions remain without clear answers. The Syrian people went through a lot, it was so horrible that now they just want to take a breath. Syrians outside the country want to return and experience living in Syria without being under Assad's control. It's something that takes time to work on and to understand how things are. Because things are moving fast. I can see a lot of hope for the coming period.

TFSR: According to Wikipedia, some 6.7 million Syrians fled the country between the start of the Civil War and 2022 and now the EU and other governing bodies hosting refugees have started changing their relationship claims of asylum from Syrians since Assad vacated the country. Obviously, this is very complicated issue, but can you talk about what many in the diaspora are going through? What are you hearing from people that are returning?

H: A big part of Syrian people who were displaced and who had to leave Syria was in Lebanon and in Turkey, and in Jordan. And also, another part is in Europe. Many have already started coming back, mostly from Lebanon, Turkey. They are crossing the borders and wanting to return to their homes because their situation is bad where they are living. The majority of them, including those in Jordan, are living in camps under very poor conditions. Most of them want to come back to participate in rebuilding their country. They want to see what has happened to their places. Many areas are in ruins, but at least they would be in a place where they know their rights, rather than being elsewhere where they are manipulated and oppressed also by the people themselves, especially in Turkey and Lebanon. Syrians there were harassed, and many incidents of killings by the Turkish community occurred. It was a very bad situation. Many people, including internally displaced persons who were moving from one city to another, are returning. There are also people in Europe, and from what I can see from my friends, everyone wants to go back. They want to have the life they have here, but in their own home, next to their relatives and families. Of course, Syrians who have families there, or those who started families here and have children who have been in school and working for years, will not have the same situation, they cannot come back immediately. However, many people, especially the youth, are already returning, even from Europe.

C: There is also the risk that after the regime falls, some countries like Germany will stop accepting new asylum cases. There's a risk that those who were granted asylum may lose their refugee status, if they didn't get citizenship from one of the

H: And actually, we don't know what happened to him, but his wife and son left through Beirut airport on 9th of December.

TFSR: That's crazy. I had no idea. Reading the description on Wikipedia, I've seen mentions of Captagon before, but it's not a thing that had come across until now. During the Civil War, an autonomous region was established, associated with the YPG and YPJ—a feminist, libertarian, eco-socialist administration in the northeast—accused of having links with the Kurdish Workers' Party of Abdullah Öcalan in Turkey [PKK]. Listeners may be familiar with this as the Rojava Revolution under what's known as the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) and their participation in the Syrian Defense Forces. Can you talk about Rojava and the complicated relationship that this project has with various actors and communities from the Syrian Civil War time?

C: Yeah, of course. We had a lot of discussions in the last years with people living in civil society in Rojava, people who went to fight there, and also people living in cities like Raqqa under the authority of the autonomous region. It's very complex. The relationship between both sides of the river is not easy at all, and there's a lot to solve. I think some mistakes were made by the Western left in believing the whole story—the whole storytelling of this socialist movement in Rojava. Taking it to the basics, Rojava should be defined as the three cantons of Afrin, Kobani, and Jazeera, because these are the places where Kurdish people live. So, if you speak about Syrian Kurdistan, or the Western Kurdistan, Rojava, you should include Afrin, Kobani, and Jazeera.

But since 2015, it has defined a much larger region, including mostly Arab areas and communities. This was the beginning of the problem for other Syrians—non-Kurdish Syrians—to understand and accept what was going on in Rojava. The PYD has its socialist agenda, which is not necessarily shared by the Arab communities. The autonomous administration was never transparent about its compromises and arrangements with the Assad regime. This is a fact, and many Syrians know it and have witnessed it—not only those living under the regime's control but also those in places like Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Manbij. They saw and they understood that there were necessary arrangements and compromises with the Assad regime for the survival of the Kurdish community and the socialist project, as well as for counterterrorism efforts to fight ISIS. These are facts. We also know people living in Aleppo who were active in the revolution and are secular. They cannot be accused of being Islamists. They were secular democrats, yet they were imprisoned by the SDF. So, it's very complicated.

The SDF was created with U.S. support to fight ISIS. The majority are

Arab fighters—50 to 70% in the SDF—do not necessarily support the autonomy project. They were recruited to defend their communities, happy to help fight ISIS in efforts unrelated to the regime, because there were no regime efforts to fight ISIS. But the majority of Arab fighters in the SDF did not necessarily align with the socialist project. I don't know if they were really asked about this. Many defected to the Free Syrian Army over the 10 years, especially during conflicts like the one in Deir ez-Zor Province last year. There were conflicts inside the community. It's very hard to distinguish who was to blame.

The SDF had good reasons to arrest a commander involved in corruption, for instance, but the incident reflected deeper problems between the socialist movement. I call it the socialist movement because this is how we see it, it is more socialist than libertarian.

Many people defected from the SDF after the regime fell in the last two weeks. Because they saw that their communities are finally freed from the regime, and they wanted to be part of the liberation of the country. Also, there was an incident in Manbij, where the Arab communities contested the new education curriculum imposed by Kurdish authorities. The curriculum was imposed rather than discussed with Arab communities, who saw themselves as occupied by the SDF. Arab communities saw a force in a context where you cannot really choose a side freely and choose your political involvement and so on. So they were occupied by the SDF in a way. It's very complicated. We are quite critical of it, and the authority of the Kurds and the US-backed SDF in Manbij, Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor especially, is considered by many local tribes and Arab communities as illegitimate. And it's not because they are backwards or Islamist. It's because they were not considered in their Arab identity. The focus on Kurdish ethnicity and the inability to listen to and include Arab communities in effective democratic changes under this DAANES administration broke trust. This is even more apparent now that the regime has fallen in some areas. Many Arabs say they are leaving this autonomous administration, because they don't really believe in it.

TFSR: Because you had mentioned campism before and perspectives from the West or from the outside of what was going on inside of the whole of the country, and speaking about critiques of the way that parts of the Western left also engaged with the Rojava project, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about different ways that you've seen, whether in Europe or elsewhere, the international left deal with different sides or approaches to Syria over the years, whether it be conspiracy theories about white helmets or the anti-imperialist lying around Assad.

H: The Western left's position is controversial and campist, especially concerning

keep an eye on HTS, but the real problem is the SNA." We have to stop the SNA and Turkey because the SNA is gathering the most radicals, including former ISIS fighters who still believe in this ideology. Now, HTS is having meetings with the SNA, which shows a willingness for HTS to become legitimate in everyone's eyes, including the SNA, even though they were in conflict before. At some point, they hated each other and were in competition.

H: Ahmed al-Sharaa, in this new transitional government, has also considered granting citizenship to many foreign fighters who joined and fought with them. This is problematic because these decisions are being made arbitrarily. These foreign fighters—what is their background, their ideology? If they gain citizenship, they could vote eventually. Most probably, these foreign fighters have a conservative mindset, which is worrying.

C: HTS and other Islamists who committed crimes before are still dangerous. Jolani, for example, also committed crimes. We are not saying they have become good; they remain conservative and dangerous. However, we believe there can be a balance of power so they cannot do whatever they want. They are also under the control of imperialist forces that want to maintain control of the situation. Now, we see the transitional government making efforts to grant amnesty to themselves and all the foreign fighters, even thanking them for their efforts, although they never came to Syria to liberate people but to wage jihad and establish a caliphate. For example, we saw Uyghur fighters coming to Syria. This is a real issue because you cannot tell them to go home due to the repression they face in China. They need protection, but they also need to be disarmed and deradicalized. Whether this is possible is unclear. I don't like the term, too. But they are now in Damascus. Similarly, we have seen French fighters who were part of ISIS and came to Syria seven years ago to kill and slaughter people.

However, the focus should not only be on Islamists. There is such diversity among the groups that even Syrians struggle to understand them all. For example, the Druze militias from Suwayda cannot be accused of favoring Islamism. They would be the first victims of Islamism. They were strong participants in the liberation movement, coming from the south. There was a group coming from the Southern Command. A significant part of these militias is the Rijal al-Karamah militia and other groups from Suwayda. They will not let HTS do whatever it wants because they were part of the liberation movement. Many meetings are happening between communities, representatives of the transitional government, and calls for a national conference. Progressive Syrian leftists are also advocating for this but emphasize that these changes cannot be implemented in a short period.

The Syrian experience was brutal and hard, and people need time to settle

questioning women's ability to hold high-ranking positions in government. But the thing is that the people are immediately reacting and opposing to what's happening. And also, the people are able now to go to the streets, and they are demonstrating. There is no repression. The people have a say now, and this transitional government has to take it into account.

Ahmed al-Sharaa [Jolani] is also inviting people to have this national conference at the end of this period until March. So they are trying to absorb. But anyway, now, you hear also many progressive left voices that are saying that we should be careful and we should come to this table together to speak. The people are aware, and they are not being naive. Because they passed through a very diverse, hard, brutal experience. So this also is shaping the way that HTS is dealing with the people because they also passed through these changes. And the people know more about their rights and they know how to demand them. And they are ready to go into another revolution if things turn very bad.

TFSR: So there are many other groups and communities across Syria who have played various roles in upholding or resisting the Baathist Assad regime. Can you speak a bit about the SNA or ISIS or other forces that are participating on the ground? Even if, in many cases, those structures aren't currently built up of just Syrians, obviously, they could include a lot of people from abroad or from Turkey or what have you. How do these groups or other formations relate to various ethnic and religious groups in Syria?

C: The main worry is coming from there—how people who have no power, who have no militias, who have no real means to resist with arms would resist if they are now targeted. It's the main worry. And the only problem is, the whole West is questioning the Syrians in a period where they just need to breathe. And this is very hard because we see this now. Everyone, even in our families, everyone is like, "Oh, we are very happy. But..." There are many groups. It's just 10 groups. You cannot say the SNA is 10 groups, and HTS is 20 groups. At some point in the Syrian Civil War, there were between 200 and 400 groups. Now, of course, there are much fewer. But anyway, there were many fighters. They were absorbed, and sometimes one or two individuals represented a group.

So the main worry, I would say, and we agree on this, is that the main worry is the SNA, the Syrian National Army, because they are obviously still a proxy of Turkey, and their agenda has nothing to do with the liberation of Syria. Their agenda is different. Their agenda includes the ethnic cleansing of Kurdish people, and not only Kurdish people. Their agenda is to clean up the whole area along the Syria-Turkey border. This is very worrying, and instead of focusing on Islamists, ultra-Islamists, or ISIS fighters within HTS, everyone should say, "Okay, we

Russian imperialism. First you have the Russian imperialism and how they see that Assad is not in the camp with the Americans. So he's necessarily anti-capitalist, and he's a socialist and a communist. So he's either this or that. And another affiliation assigned to him is the Axis of Resistance, especially with the Palestinian struggle, and what happened recently with Hezbollah, with Iran. He's considered also the defender of the liberation of the Palestinian people. But this is lies. There is nothing called Axis of Resistance. Assad bombed Yarmouk Camp, the largest Palestinian refugee camp, where more than 600,000 people lived. He arrested many Palestinians, so he cannot claim to support their cause.

Iran's intervention in the region, alongside Russia, is imperialist. It has nothing to do with leftist or anti-capitalist values, or being against American imperialism. It's about his interests, and he just did everything that kept him staying in his position.

C: I think it's very important to focus on the specific role of Hezbollah, for example, because it is seen as part of this Axis of Resistance with Hamas. All the discussion around what's happening in Gaza was always focused on "we cannot prevent Hezbollah from getting the weapons through the Syrian territory." Because, actually, Hezbollah and Iran were controlling all the roads from the east to the west of Syria, because this is the way they could provide their militias with weapons to Lebanon and the western part of Syria. But this was not to support the Palestinian resistance, because these weapons were not really used against Israel to support the Palestinians. It was always making the situation of Palestinians even worse. Because, first of all, the Palestinians, for more than 30–40 years, in Syria and in Lebanon, have had no political rights. They never had any political rights, and the Syrian regime was participating in depriving the Palestinian communities of these political rights. They had no representation. They were only represented by some factions that were coming from Fatah and the PFLP. But they were dissenters. They were not from the main branches. These groups were supporting the regime.

When the Palestinians took part in the Revolution in 2011, these Palestinian militias were shooting at their own people. In Yarmouk especially, they were shooting at their own people. And we have also other stories. When the Syrian regime, the father of Bashar, during the civil war in Lebanon, allowed the Christian militias to kill 2000 Palestinian people in the camp of Tel al-Zaatar.

H: And Sabra and Shatila.

C: In Sabra and Shatila, it was Israel committing the crimes, Israel supporting the Christian militias. And in this specific camp in Tel al-Zaatar, it was Syria supporting the Christian militias in the massacre. So all this is wrong. The last argument—and I will not go much more on this—Hezbollah was the main trafficker of Captagon

in Syria. They were the main militia involved in killing the opposition, especially the secular progressive forces, the communists, and the democrats. They were destroyed by Hezbollah forces. Hezbollah was implanted everywhere in Syria and controlled the territory.

At the end, when you say that Hezbollah is resisting Israel, it's also nonsense. What Iran and Hezbollah did last year, during the worst time for the Palestinian situation, with this genocide going on, was throw firecrackers. They spent years sending firecrackers on Israel, knowing that the Iron Dome cannot be destroyed by this. So they were never really a problem.

To finish, two things that we realize now during the liberation of the country, the fall of the regime, there is one founder of Hezbollah who spoke on TV and said very clearly: Hezbollah was never involved in Syria for any other reason than to fight civilians in Syria. This is the reality. And now Israel is bombing everywhere in Syria because Assad was the protection for the northern border. It was a guarantee that the Golan would never be touched anymore. And when Assad is falling, immediately Israel is bombing everywhere in Syria because suddenly it becomes a threat. So where is the Axis of Resistance? It's a real question.

H: And many known figure fell into this campism. Even Noam Chomsky was also saying, not defending but somehow that... the Assad regime is affiliated with the Russians and not with America and somehow that's good. Even this very famous singer from the Pink Floyd band was attacking the White Helmets and saying it's a movie, a movie made in some studios. It's very strange to see that these people, who support the Palestinian movement and liberation, are lacking in understanding the complexities of the area. It's not about choosing a side. Maybe you don't choose any side, just try to understand what's going on.

C: And this is what the people in Suwayda did. During all the protests, they were protesting all imperialisms. They were criticizing all the surrounding powers, and they were supporting Palestinians. So if the people can do this, you don't need to side with one regime or one state. You can side with the people who are in solidarity, with their brothers and sisters in the neighboring country.

TFSR: Yeah, I think that's a clear lesson to take away from this, for sure. And thank you for stating it so clearly. So, an area of concern for many has been Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, which grew out of Al Qaeda, capturing territory, but at this point, you don't express much concern that they'll act. My reading of your blog is that you don't express a lot of concern that they'll act similarly to ISIS, which they've been in conflict with for a bunch of years. What do you see HTS acting as? What do you see the role that they

might play moving forward? How should people think about them?

H: Of course, we look at the whole situation cautiously. But what happened already is amazing, that this regime fell. We are careful and cautious. On the other hand, there are no daring actions that took place from these HTS fighters and the other groups that were affiliated with them. They changed their discourse since they first became a group.

So, for example, they were in open conflict with the Syrian National Army that was created by Turkey in 2017. The HTS were not in agreement with Al Nusra before and later with ISIS. They were even jailing many ISIS militants. They are against this extremism. And also, when the Turkistan fighters, for example, in Idlib, in the northern province, killed members of the Druze minority there, the HTS arrested these fighters. The SNA, the Syrian National Army supported by Turkey, gathered most of the foreign fighters, including the former ISIS fighters.

ISIS was not at all participating in this last liberation of all the cities in Syria, because SNA is in conflict with HTS. And they're under total Turkish control. ISIS is now maybe gaining more control over more areas in Syria because they are using the situation that is not yet settled and not organized. There's chaos still in Syria. But, the only few remnants of ISIS are trying to survive now in the desert. But they might try to gain territory in Iraq. But this is still not clear. And especially now, the situation can be positive for them because of the chaos. And also, I think why they were [seen as] affiliated with ISIS—because some fighters from these factions, the liberating factions, were seen with armband badges with the shahada symbol. And this was wrongly considered to be an ISIS symbol. But the ISIS symbol is something totally different.

It's Islamic, but it's not related to ISIS. Because, of course, we are not denying that HTS has a conservative Muslim direction. They have many individuals who can be very conservative Muslims who still dream of an Islamic state. But we don't think that this is the agenda of HTS. And it's hard to be implemented inside the Syrian community. The Syrian community has many ethnic groups, religious groups, and it's very diverse. And also, the people, through all these years, gained big experience. They saw also the experience of the HTS in Idlib, how it happened. So everyone learned their lessons. And since they took power, they did not really make decisions that were very horrifying or conservative. When they entered other regions, it was a very cooperative interaction with all the communities living there, whatever they are.

So, this is something that people were very afraid of—that they would come and would be harassing people. But they are not harassing them. Some ministers appointed to this transitional government, which will remain in power until March, have reportedly made statements about amending the constitution or