

operations in Syria. Israel, which had long been lobbying Washington for such a covert programme against the Syrian government, took a leading role, too. It supplied weapons and dropped thousands of bombs on Syrian infrastructure to keep Assad under pressure. It supplied its own intelligence to the rebels and offered medical facilities to treat wounded fighters. In 2012, Ehud Barak, then-Israeli defense minister, explained Israel's thinking to CNN: "The toppling down of Assad will be a major blow to the radical axis, major blow to Iran... and it will weaken dramatically both Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza." After the CIA operation finally came to light in 2016, Washington formally shut it down. But the effectiveness of Operation Timber Sycamore had already been severely hampered by the Russian military entering Syria in late 2015, at Assad's invitation. Eventually, the battle fronts hardened into a stalemate.

**'We love Israel': HTS militant**

Now, years later, the battle lines have suddenly come undone. As

Washington envisioned 23 years ago, Assad is the latest Middle Eastern leader not to Israel's liking to be overthrown. HTS is eager to reassure Washington that it poses no threat to Israel — or its continuing genocide in Gaza. Interviews on Israeli TV showed rebel commanders praising Israel's air strikes on Syria, citing them as among the factors in helping the rapid advances made by HTS. Channel 12 interviewed an unnamed commander who also noted Israel's cease-fire with Hezbollah had been critical to the timing of the HTS attack on Aleppo. "We looked at the [cease-fire] agreement with Hezbollah and understood that this is the time to liberate our lands," he said, adding: "We will not let Hezbollah fight in our areas and we will not let the Iranians take root there." In a separate interview with Israel's Kan TV, a fighter said: "We love Israel and we were never its enemies." Both the US and Britain, caught by surprise by the speed of the rebels' success, are scurrying to remove the \$10m CIA bounty off Jolani's head and take HTS off their terror lists. Israel lost no time overrunning

— and effectively annexing — swaths of Syrian territory to add to the areas of the Golan it seized in violation of international law in 1967. Contrast the West's muted response to this Israeli invasion of Syria with the West's outrage at Russia's assault on Ukraine in 2022. At the same time, Israel launched hundreds of air strikes across Syria, bombing the country's military infrastructure to ensure the next government — if such a government ever emerges — will have no means to defend itself. Israel wants Syria as impotent and vulnerable as Palestine, where it is committing genocide. According to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel is "changing the face of the Middle East".

**Giant chessboard**

Rather than viewing the world in simplistic terms as a battle between good and evil — one in which the evil ones suddenly become good guys, if the BBC says so — analysts of international affairs have traditionally used a different framework. They understand world affairs as taking place on a global, geo-strategic chessboard, in which the great powers of the day try

to checkmate their rivals or avoid being checkmated. Surprises happen, as they do in chess, when a player doesn't foresee, or can't evade, the next move of its opponent. Syria, very obviously, is not a great power. It is a pawn. But a critically useful one, nonetheless. As critically useful as Ukraine. The battlefields may look separate, but they are, of course, on the same chessboard. And the players — the US, Russia, China, and to a lesser extent Iran, Israel, and Turkey — must each use these pawns wisely to advance their strategic goals.

Ordinary people have agency. But the job of great powers is to limit, tame, and recruit that agency to advance their own interests and damage the interests of rivals. Syria emerges broken from its long years of war and Western sanctions. Either it will collapse into further sectarian discord, consuming all its energies — Israel can readily meddle to inflame such tensions — or its new government will seek rehabilitation from the West. A peace accord with Israel would doubtless be the entry requirement. With Syria removed from the

"Axis of Resistance", Hezbollah in Lebanon has been severed from Iran. And in the process, Israel has opened the way to completing its genocide of the Palestinian people undisturbed. Turkey's interests in Syria do not conflict with Israel's or Washington's. It wants to return to Syria the millions of refugees it currently hosts and to eliminate any base for Kurdish factions in Syria to ally with and assist its own Kurdish resistance groups.

*The full article first appeared on the Middle East Eye.*



A convoy of US military vehicles, arriving from northern Iraq, drives along a road in the countryside of Syria's north-eastern city of Qamishli on October 26, 2019. **DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP**

**Set it off**

**How US invasion of Iraq led to chaos in Syria today**

**By Peter Van Buren**  
Retired US Foreign Service employee  
**OPINION**

*If a time traveler from 2024 landed in the Middle East of say 40 years ago, with the intent of revealing the future, he might not be believed. He'd tell how the stalwart regimes of Gaddafi, Saddam, and the Assad dynasty were gone, their former countries now embroiled in some gradation of security chaos, state failure, or chronic political dysfunction. Egypt survives as a sort of US client state, saved by American do-nothingism from the democratic possibilities of the Arab Spring. When asked how all this could have happened, he'd explain that much of it had to do with the United States and its invasion of Iraq in 2003 — the destruction of a comparatively stable (but "evil"; they're all evil) regime that turned out to be the linchpin holding most of the whole Sykes-Picot world together.*

That invasion began a process of inviting all comers to take hold of a piece of Iraq and see how far they might get with it. Many of the same ISIS and former Al-Qaeda elements that now stand athwart Syria (and will no doubt soon be fighting each other for control there) almost grabbed the entire country of Iraq after the US-trained and equipped post-Saddam Iraqi army ran from the field. The country was left for the Iranians to then take the reins, fashioning it into a client state after the US cut its losses by cooperating with Iran to wipe out most of ISIS (which was created amid the remnants of Al-Qaeda, destroyed by the US) in Iraq and abandoning the Kurds who had foolishly believed the US owed them a nation-state after all this. American hubris then led to the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. But the much ballyhooed NATO bombing and Western-backed revolt of sorts ended up doing little more than creating a failed state in the fragile region. Pundits saw it, as they will wrongly see the fall of Syria, as a blow to Russian ambitions in the region, not calculating the negative value of unleashing chaos in a region consumed by the Iranian-US/Israeli shadow war and middle power politics in the Horn of Africa. Russia, by the way, is still fussing around there, to the consternation of the West. Bashar's father and the family ran Syria since a 1970 coup. Assad initially portrayed himself as a modern reformist, but he responded to peaceful protests during the Arab Spring (a multinational uprising against despots across the Middle East that had more than not used the US "Global War on Terror" to oppress their own populations) with brutal crackdowns, sparking a war there (with ISIS and US-backed Islamist militias joining the fray to overthrow Assad) in 2011. His notorious prisons are now being emptied of political pris-

oners, many of whom have endured unspeakable torture for years. Bodies are still being discovered. As with Iraq being left open for anyone who wanted a piece of it and could find a way to hold it, Syria is going to dissolve. Israel already grabbed snippets of territory this week to round out its border and destroyed the Syrian navy, rocket, and chemical stores, and much of its air force. Unlike in 2012, when Hezbollah came to Assad's rescue against insurgents, Hezbollah today has few shock troops available to help. Turkey, which many believe is at some level behind the current Islamist takeover of the country, sees renewed opportunity to rid itself of the Kurdish independence movement over its own border in Syria, setting up violent clashes with the US-backed Syrian Defense Forces in the northeastern part of the country. Surprise, that is where all the oil is, too. Will the US abandon the Kurds yet again? So, what's left is to see what America has to say. There are 900 American soldiers on the ground today in Syria, and US warplanes are flying bombing missions ostensibly against ISIS — which actually in the near past indirectly helped Assad (strange bedfellows and all that). Had all this happened a year ago, when Joe Biden was still nominally in charge of the US military, you might have seen some sort of intervention, more of a blocking move really, to keep the Islamist factions from uniting, to limit their success or at least slow it down, and to interdict any Iranian help arriving from the east. But Joe Biden is no longer really in charge of anything. He used up his Commander-in-Chief goodwill on two ugly proxy interventions, fighting Russia to the last Ukrainian and, of course, supporting Israel in Gaza.

A year — or more realistically two or three years — ago, Joe might have made the case for either direct involvement in Syria or hitching the old bull of America more directly to another proxy, maybe the beleaguered Kurds who still want a piece of Syria for their own. As it stands, Joe lacks the political oomph to do any of that in his final days in office, and good riddance. Frankly, we are in no position (and have no wherewithal) to take advantage of the situation in a positive way. This will be in spite of mustering faith that the lead Islamist faction — HTS — has moderation on its mind. Any future expedient rehabilitation of the Syrian terrorists seems analogous to the disingenuous glow-up granted to the Ukrainian neo-Nazi

militias and risks having the same result, no doubt. Incoming president Donald Trump has made it clear he wants no part of a war in Syria (and is not too enamored with continuing the one in Ukraine, either). He tried in Term 1.0 to withdraw American forces from Syria and failed, and will likely try early on in Term 2.0 to pull them out. It would be the right thing to do and likely engender wide support. If most of that does not come true, expect another failed state in the heart of the Middle East. But it is too early to call out all of the near-future moves on the chessboard. Will HTS actually succeed in forming some sort of united, central government, to keep the wolves away? Will Turkey or its proxy in Syria move against the Kurds and

will the US protect them or cede the territory? Turkey is the current winner in this struggle, having eliminated its southern enemy in Assad. Russia appears to be out of the game, leaving its strategic naval and airbases there in question. That leaves Iran, set back on its heels with the fall of Assad but by no means no longer a player. Iran could choose a side in the militia struggle, or it could pull back to lick its wounds. Our Middle East time traveler would certainly leave his audience flummoxed, though honestly, it is Washington that would have some explaining to do.

*The full article first appeared on Responsible Statecraft.*



A US Marine watches a statue of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein topple over in 2003. **GORAN TOMASEVIC/REUTERS**