**Thursday, Dec. 5, 2024 / Reigniting Syria's civil war**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

SCORING IN — Floating Away (BMC)

NOEL: Way back in 1982, Syria’s dictator Hafez al-Assad brutally crushed an uprising in the city of Hama. He sealed the city - cut off food, electricity. Then, his army started shelling and then he sent in troops. This was long before Twitter, so while thousands of people died / it took time for the massacre to be fully understood- only a fewjournalists were there.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8dSFeWxRnI)*> Robert Fisk: But it was a huge death toll and smoke hung over the city. It was a very frightening place. I did see it. I guess I’m sorry I saw it in many ways.*

NOEL: As dictators do, Hafez handed Syria over to his son, Bashar al-Assad. Like his dad, he crushes dissent with violence.

NOEL: But earlier TODAY - Syrian rebels entered Hama. They say they’ve taken the city back from al-Assad. In the past week, this rebel group has changed the course of a 13-year civil war and the story of how they did THAT is coming up on Today, Explained.

**[THEME]**

NOEL: Jihad Yazigi is the editor in chief of The Syria Report - an online publication. For twenty three years, he’s written about Syria, including of course, the country’s Civil War / in which rebels are fighting President Bashar al-Assad.

Jihad Yazigi: The conflict in Syria began in 2011, as initially as a popular uprising against the regime.

SCORING IN – Bubbling over

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHNzUtB_QYY)*> AL JAZEERA: they are calling it The Aleppo volcano. In Syria's second largest city protesters are determined to bring down their regime they took to the streets on Thursday defying heavily armed security forces*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hByEsBMolOU)*> AL JAZEERA: PROTEST CHANT SOUNDS…. KEEP RUNNING*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQ1lQA_HGQg)*> AP: Abo Al Huda, Lebanese protester (IN ARABIC)*

*"The message to the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria is we say to him enough of the massacre, enough killing of children and women and elderly in Syria."*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCM01HpBcD8)*> as dictators fell from Power following the fervor of the 2011 Arab Spring peaceful protesters in Syria also demanded a change in leadership*

*PROTEST CHANTS OUT*

The initial demands of the population were for, to sum it up pretty in short, was really to demand political liberalization, more political freedoms. That was met actually with very heavy violence from the regime.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHNzUtB_QYY)*>AL JAZEERA: Syrian activists say more than 1,400 people have been killed since president Bashar al-assad launched a Crackdown on protesters 4 months ago FADES UNDER THE NEXT CLIP*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoL0L_DbuQQ)*> BBC: since the very start President Assad has had one objective staying in power and he's been prepared to do pretty much anything to achieve it*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiC4w7Erz8I)*> ASSAD: when you when you shoot you aim and when you shoot when you aim you aim at terrorists in order to uh protect civilians again if you're talking about casualty that's War you cannot have War without casualty*

The opposition took up arms. And it has been evolving as a civil conflict for many, many years now.

SCORING OUT

So basically, what is happening now, what we are seeing in the past few weeks, is that one segment of the opposition, which controlled so far a very small part of Syria, and which happens also to have an ideology which is quite radical, very conservative from an Islamic conservative ideology, the organization controlling that part of Syria went on the attack and took over large parts of northern Syria, including the country's second largest city, and managed within a few days to double the size of the area under their control.

Noel: I want you to walk me through what that looked like.

Jihad Yazigi: Yes, so what we have seen actually is that group of rebel fighters, so that's not a formal army, comprised of several thousands, probably maybe the low dozens of thousands, crossing front lines very rapidly with relatively light equipment, military equipment, and taking over areas controlled formerly by the Syrian government.

So they have managed to move forward quite quickly. Everybody's assumption is that the initial attack aimed at gaining a few kilometers at enlarging a bit the area which is under their control. But what happened is actually the defense of the regime, of the government and completely collapsed.

So within a day, less than two days at least, they reached the borders of Aleppo, the second, Syria's second largest city. And it was really unexpected that they would get there that quickly. But what was even more unexpected was that they would be able to take over the city with almost no defense, no fighting within a couple of days.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yk4qW593JCg)*> THE GUARDIAN: DRIVING SOUNDS ARABIC*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWLEfkuxoNw)*> AL JAZEERA: GUNSHOTS this is the center of Aleppo the second largest city which until Friday was one of the main strongholds of the Syrian Army as a symbol of its fall the statues of the governing Assad family are taken down by the rebels amid Jubilation*

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOVFyqA5Cx8)> ARABIC CHANTS GUNSHOT

Noel: Aleppo has been fought over before in the course of this war. This is not the first battle for Aleppo. It sounds like what you're saying though is this wasn't even really a battle. As these fighters came in, the city just fell.

Jihad Yazigi: You are absolutely right. In 2016, actually, the government took over Aleppo from the opposition with the support of the Russian Air Force. That was almost exactly eight years ago in December 2016.

So the regime has been controlling the whole of the city for the past eight years. What you have seen here now is no real battle at all, actually. As I said, within 48 hours, they had control of the whole city. What seems to have happened is that the government realizing that it was too weak, decided to withdraw its forces to fall back on the city Hama, so that they can prepare a real defense. The decision was made to withdraw, to retreat very quickly, so that they could regroup and mount some form of more decent defense, which is currently happening now.

Noel: So this is a very big deal for Bashar al-Assad. This is humiliating.

Jihad Yazigi: This is not only humiliating for him, but this is changing radically the map of the country and of what will happen in the future. The conviction was only a week ago, that Bashar al-Assad had won the Syria war, that although he did not control the whole of the country, there was no chance of moving him out, and that we need to find some form of normalization with the regime. This whole discourse in the space of 24 hours, 48 hours collapsed entirely. So it's a major, major defeat for Bashar. Bashar is clearly the very big loser here.

SCORING IN – A simple revenge

Noel: This group could have done this six months ago. They could have done this six months from now. Why did they do it last weekend? And why was it so successful?

Jihad Yazigi: it the reason we have this now is for a large part due to the is a large part a consequence of, the Israeli war on Gaza and on Lebanon. This has weakened tremendously the Iranians and the militias affiliated to them, Hezbollah in Lebanon and other militias. And that has created a void, if you want. Another dimension to into account is that the Syrian government and regime has been, impoverished, crumbling very gradually, very sadly over the past few years. Soldiers are paid very low salaries. There are no job opportunities. There's no investment by the government. There's a lot of corruption. And one of the reasons the soldiers did not fight is because they don't really have any motivation to fight for the regime.

SCORING OUT

Noel: When this rebel group successfully took the city, what was the reaction in Syria?

Jihad Yazigi: Supporters of Bashar al-Assad, which are today very few, are unhappy, of course, about what happened. Supporters of the opposition, which are more numerous, have a mixed reaction. Why?

Because on the one hand, you are seeing these people, these soldiers, these armed rebels, when they entered Aleppo, opening up political prisons, freeing political prisoners, some of whom have been in prison without judgment for 10, 15 or 20 years, you can only be very happy about that.

Also, because these attacks by rebels are going to help A lot of displaced people and refugees in Turkey return home because a lot of them originally lived in the areas which were taken back in the past few days. They were expelled by Bashar al-Assad's forces and were not allowed to return back. So lot of people are very happy about that.

At the same time, the main rebel organization, HTS, that took over Aleppo, its ideology is very conservative. So it forces women to wear veils, it bans alcohol, and so on and so forth. Now what has happened in Aleppo so far in the past few days is relatively reassuring in the sense that they have not tried to impose yet their very strict rules, but there is anxiety among Syrians about what could potentially happen.

SCORING IN — Lonely Shuttle (BMC)

And beyond whose side you are on today, What is making people anxious is that we are seeing the return of large scale battles in urban areas with large number of casualties. You have had a low intensity conflict for quite a few years now. And what a lot of people fear is a return of these intense part of the conflict. In Aleppo, as I said, there were no battles. There was no battle really. It was easy to take over. But in Hama, for example, you are seeing very heavy battles. And that's really very worrying.

Noel: The real danger here is that this civil war, which for a while was being fought at a low level, is now exploding again.

Jihad Yazigi: Yes, exactly. That's a real risk.

NOEL: Coming up, Jihad comes back to tell us about the man who leads the rebels. He looks like Fidel Castro. He wants Bashar al-Assad’s job. And he’s trying to rebrand himself as a moderate.

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

NOEL: We’re back Jihad Yazigi <yah-zih-JEE> of the Syria Report. Jihad, tell us about the group that pulled off this stunning offensive in Syria. Who are they?

**JIHAD:** So the organization is called the HTS, which stands for Hayat Tahrir al-Sham or the Organization for the Liberation of the Levant, the Levant, meaning Syria and Lebanon.

[*<CLIP> DW:*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6LwwxpVmBE) *Known by their initials “HTS” they are made up of some 30 armed groups, and at least 60K well trained fighters…*

[*<CLIP REUTERS*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ng9BG0J28Mk)*: “It has long been dominant in Idlib, part of the Northwest that stayed under rebel control for the past few years…”*

[*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WmVW-vxPf4)*: [HTS FIGHTER]: “We have returned to Alleppo after ten years. We have arrived and can finally see it, thank god…”*

So HTS is actually the result of the merger of several organization that fought against the Syrian regime. One of these organization was actually an affiliate of al-Qaida. So it originates in al Qaeda. Now, gradually, as has sought to distance itself from Al Qaida, to the extent that actually they have also fought Al Qaida and expelled Al Qaida from that area. And they have steadily tried to rebrand themselves as certainly a conservative Islamic organization, but not as a Takfiri or what we would call jihadist organization such as Al Qaeda and Isis. And if you allow me, I'll just try to clarify what is the difference between these two types of organization?

**NOEL:** Yes, please. Please.

SCORING IN—BUILDING BLOCKS B

**JIHAD:** An organization such as HTS has a very Islamist radical ideology which it wants to impose on the population it rules, it governs. Isis or al-Qaida are transnational organizations. They do not only want to impose the Sharia, the Islamic rule, the Islamic law on their population, but they want to export their model around the world. They want to convert non-Muslims to Islam, and they are ready to fight for that and to kill for that. So that's a big difference. So ISIS and al-Qaida are considered, are transnational organizations; considered terrorist organizations. Now, that's just also, to be more precise: HTS technically is considered by the U.S. as a terrorist organization because it was originally affiliated with al-Qaida.

*<CLIP> MATTHEW MILLER, STATE DEPARTMENT, DEC 2 2024: “ the organization that launched this offensive over the weekend is a terrorist organization, designated as such by the United States. We certainly do not support that organization in any way, shape, or form.*

JIHAD: What it wants to do now is get de-listed. What they've been trying to do is rebrand themselves, but also that whole ideology. I mean, when you read the listen to their official statements, they are all tending towards that, towards an organization, as I said, that wants only to rule the place it is aimed, but that does not want to fight any other country. So they remain listed as a terrorist organization. But it is true that in practice they say they don't want to fight anyone outside their national borders.

SCORING OUT

**NOEL:** Okay. So from the perspective of people who are not in the region, not in Syria, HTS is a less dangerous group. Who is the leader of HTS and what does he want?

**JIHAD:** Yeah so the the the *nom du guerre* as we say of the leader of HTS is Abu Muhammad al-julani. He's a Muslim Sunni. He originates from southern Syria. He entered the the ranks of Al Qaida, established HTS and then decided to to shift, if you want his focus into a more nationalist agenda. Julani is a quite impressive figure. The area he's ruling he has been ruling that the northwestern part of Syria he has been ruling for many years is probably the best managed part of Syria. So Julani is quite impressive in terms of what he has succeeded in in doing. I do think that at the end of the day, he wants to rule the whole of Syria. And I think that this is why also he knows that if he wants to rule the whole of Syria, which has Christians, Shias, Druze, Kurds who are not Arabs, well, you have to compromise. And I think that's why also that what explains the fact that he's trying to open up and to rebrand himself to a more, if you want, mainstream Islamist organization.

**NOEL:** If he wants to rule the whole of Syria, he should compromise. He is saying he will compromise. Do you believe that he's going to compromise if he were able to take power? Is this a guy who is going to be moderate?

**JIHAD:** Whether he compromises or not is going to depend a lot on the balance of power. At this stage, he's obliged to compromise. And at a later stage you be obliged, in my opinion, to compromise for the simple reason is that not only Syria is home to a large number of communities that are not Arab Sunnis as he is, but also because Syria has a very strategic geographic location. I argue actually that currently a lot of regional players, not only the traditional supporters of the regime, but even countries in the Gulf, Jordan and to some extent the Israelis. They may prefer Bashar Assad to stay at least for a temporary period, than to allow Julani to take over. Julani, if he reads well the geopolitics of the region, he will understand that also from a geopolitical angle. He has to make compromises because otherwise he would have opposition either from the Israelis or from the Turks or from the Gulfis or from the Iraqis who are in majority Shia. So the geographic location and ~~t~~he internal composition of society will should eventually force Julani to compromise. He could think that he can take over power by sheer force, but it would be, in my opinion, very difficult for him to maintain his rule over the country for and stabilize it without compromising.

**NOEL:** All right. So this is a man who has said repeatedly that he is not a threat to the Western world.

[*<CLIP> MILES: "JULANI SPEAKING TO PBS IN 2021:*](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/interview/abu-mohammad-al-jolani/) *QUOTE "Most importantly, first and foremost, this region does not represent a threat to the security of Europe and America. This region is not a stage for executing external operations."*

That's the argument he's made for getting off of the sanctions list. “I’m not interested in what goes on in France or the United States or the UK, I’m interested in Syria.” His goal is to get rid of Bashar al-Assad. That is also what the United States wants. Right?

**JIHAD:** I'm not sure, Noel. I'm not sure that today the United States goal is to get Bashar Assad out. The United States’ stated goal is to get Bashar al-Assad out.

*<CLIP> MATTHEW MILLER, “So, look, nothing has changed with respect to our policy. Assad is a brutal dictator with blood on his hands –Ultimately, what we want to see is a political process forward that – where the Syrian people get to determine who their leaders are.”*

But the U.S. goal is to weaken Iran. To protect the borders of Israel. To prevent refugee flows or there is such a direct threat to the US, but it can be to its allies. If you want a stable country. So indeed, if you want to get Iran out and Bashar cannot distance himself from the Iranians, you would want Bashar out. But you don't want Bashar out. In any case, in any situation, unless you have an alternative. What the US wants is a guy in Damascus whom they can call. And who is capable of giving orders to an army, to an armed group. So that when the US say, I want this or I don't want that, they have a guy who can answer it and he can implement decisions. If you want. One of the weaknesses of the Syrian opposition at the very beginning of the uprising 13 years ago is that he didn't have such a leadership. The US certainly what what it wants is stability. Safe border for Israel, weaker Iran. If this is done through Bashar, so Bashar will stay. If Bashar cannot help, so Bashar... I'm not saying the Americans have the capacity or the willingness to invest into kicking him out, keeping him. But I'm just trying to answer the question of do they want him still in power or not? The official stated policy, given the massive crimes, why they documented that Bashar al Assad committed. It's very difficult for you if you are a Western liberal country to openly support him. But in practice, what they want is, you know, the least bad option if you want. So I'm not 100% sure that it is really the aim of the US to get Bashar out of power.

NOEL: You’ve been covering this horrible war since it began - 13 years. This week, there was a big change at a moment where it didn’t seem like change was coming. Are there positives here do you think?

JIHAD:Yes, of course there's something positive.

SCORING IN—VAQUERO

There's something positive in the sense, as I said, that we have seen people freed from prisons. There's something positive because I think that some IDPs and refugees would be able to return home. There is there's something positive in the sense that Bashar is weaker and Bashar is an absolutely terrible individual that needs to be himself and his whole regime need to be weakened. And maybe one more positive thing is that there is renewed focus a bit on Syria. But this, of course, has a bad aspect and a positive one. It all depends on how it turns. So, no, I think there are positives, but of course, war and conflict. Is that something you look forward to? Obviously.

NOEL: Jihad Yazighi editor in chief of The Syria Report. Syria-dash-report-dot.com

Peter Balonon-Rosen and Miles Bryan produced today’s episode. Matthew Collette edited. Patrick Boyd and Rob Byers engineered. Annouck Dussaud fact-checked. I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Explained.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**