



## Syria and the missing context in the Media - Vijay Prashad

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**Zain Raza (ZR):** Thank you for tuning in. I'm your host, Zain Raza. Before we begin this video, I would like to provide you with the 6th update to our crowdfunding campaign that we launched last month with the aim of raising €55,000 by January 10th, so that we can continue with our independent and non-profit journalism in 2025. In last year's campaign, we managed to raise €53,000 thanks to 1710 donors. And in this year's campaign so far, we've managed to raise €50,700 thanks to 1805 donors, which makes around 92 % of our target achieved. There are only around €4,000 remaining and three days left, so if you're watching our videos regularly and have not donated so far, please just take a few moments and donate any amount that is feasible for you. If all of our 155,000 subscribers or just the amount of people watching this video donate an amount today, we'll be able to reach our crowdfunding target collectively with ease. You will find the links to all of the donation platforms in the description of this video below. I thank you for your generosity and your support.

Today I'll be talking to Vijay Prashad, historian and journalist. Vijay is also the author of more than 30 books, one of them being *The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and the fragility of US power*. Vijay, welcome back to the show.

**Vijay Prashad (VP):** Nice to be with you.

**ZR:** I would like to start with some history about Syria. The Assad family ruled Syria for around 5 decades. Hafez al-Assad – who represented the Ba 'ath party – took power in 1971 and ruled until his death in 2000. And that is when his son Bashar al-Assad came to power and he ruled until December 8th, 2024, overthrown by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (also known as HTS), which was led by Abu Mohammad al-Julani, who recently changed his name to Ahmed al-Sharaa. Assad's rule in Syria has been described by and large by Western media and politicians as totalitarian and dictatorial. Can you provide our viewers with some historical context of the Assad's family's rule domestically and also talk about their political stance towards the West and Russia during this period?

**VP:** Firstly, let's take this a little in context. After the 1950s, most of the Arab countries, which were trying to establish some sort of sovereign path between on the one side the old monarchies, which had capitulated to imperialism of different kinds, on the other side, you had the pathway provided by countries like Turkey, maybe even Lebanon to some extent, which had also capitulated to the West in different ways. Turkey became a member of NATO – the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. There were very limited parts available. At the time, Gamal Abdel Nasser and some of his friends and comrades in the Egyptian military conducted a coup d'état against the government of King Faisal. They sent him off in a ship into the Mediterranean and they said, look, we want a different kind of pan-Arabism for the Arab world. Nasser was revered as a great hero in the Arab world. He was hated by the monarchies and so on. Well, the example of Nasser was infectious. In the late 1950s, 1958, there was an overthrow of the pro-Western government. A military officer, who was to some extent influenced by the communists, also by Iraqi nationalism, he came to power, leading a revolutionary government in Iraq. And then across the border in Syria, similar currents of Arab nationalism, pan-Arabism and so on prevailed. It wasn't just the Assad family or even

the Ba'ath Party, which became the party or the instrument of the Assad family – a party with a kind of Arab nationalist but non-communist direction, an ideology created by Michel Aflaq. This was a very strong kind of pan-Arabism at the heart of it.

So within, let's say, 20 years, from 1952 in Egypt to 1971 or 1972 in Syria, you had this resurgence of pan-Arabism, in Egypt, Iraq and then in Syria. In fact, the situation was such that for a point, the Egyptian and Syrian governments united and created the United Arab Republic. This fell apart because there were too many differences between these two countries. It's important to bear in mind that this is part of a big process. One of the resounding, I would say, issues that confronted the various Arab national governments in Egypt, Iraq and in Syria was the question of a multi-party democracy, was the question of the role of imperialism and so on. Nasser, for instance, was not immune to the problem of having a one-party state. I mean, he himself, a very great hero of the Egyptian people, had decided, look, if we're going to have multi-parties, you open yourself up to imperialism. In that debate or in that context, there can be some problems. So, for instance, in Iraq, this did pose a challenge because Saddam Hussein then emerges as not only the Ba'ath being the only party but Saddam being the only leader of the Ba'ath. Similar tendencies were present in Syria – not only was the Ba'ath the only party, but the Ba'ath party then was an instrument of Hafez al-Assad, who then sort of bequeathed it to his son Bashar al-Assad, the reluctant leader of Syria.

This issue of Arab nationalism and its relationship to one-party states is something that will need to be much more closely studied. You know, one-party states can pose a challenge and problem. You know, this was the direction in Algeria as well, where the FLN [National Liberation Front] decided, having defeated the French, that there's no point in having multi-party democracy because this opens the door to imperialism. You know, we've got to study and debate this issue, but certainly it has its limitations because then you effectively become the judge, jury and executioner in a country and anybody who dissents against you is therefore not only your enemy politically, enemy of the state and then, of course, the enemy of the country becomes anti-national. And so, this produces its own limitations and problems and certainly with Syria, it did produce its limitations. On the other hand, this was the direction of Arab nationalism across the Arab world. Arab nationalism had a progressive content, which was anti-imperialist, trying to establish the sovereignty of the Arab people in the Arab world, confronting the atrocities meted upon the Palestinian people by Israel. This was the positive content of Arab nationalism. And the negative content was, you know, this idea that the state is the leader, that leads to an inflation of prisons. But even here, let's not exaggerate things because the United States is still the world's largest – has the world's highest percentage of population in prison. A lot of them are quote-unquote political prisoners, you know, they are class prisoners. The war on drugs was a war against black and brown people in the US. So, let's not say, oh my God, you know, Syria is a state of prisons. The United States has the highest percentage of its population in jail. You can't point the finger at Syria and say that's authoritarian. What about this? So there are limitations. But in time we will need to have, as the evidence becomes clearer and clearer, a full discussion and

debate not only about Syria, but about the Arab nationalism and the tendency to the one-party and then eventually one-leader-state.

**ZR:** You mentioned prisons. Whenever I come across reports in German mainstream media about Syria, the brutality of the Assad government's use of torture is repeatedly emphasized. For example, Die Tagesschau, Germany's leading primetime news channel, in its January 3rd, 2025 segment showed how German Foreign Minister Analena Baerbock, while visiting Damascus, recently was accompanied by the White Helmets, a Western funded Syrian civil defense organization. And she visited torture centers previously administered by the Assad government to establish a full picture of the human rights violations that took place during its rule.

What is not mentioned in these reports, however, is the role that the torture centers played for the United States after the 9/11 attacks. Award-winning journalist Seymour Hersh, who in 2004 exposed the torture and abuse of prisoners by the US military in Abu Ghraib, Iraq, also exposed these torture centers in Syria. In an article in The New Yorker in 2003, Seymour writes – and let me quote a few passages from his article – quote, "Syria had emerged as one of CIA's most effective allies in the fight against al-Qaeda, with the quality and quantity of intelligence from Syria exceeding the agency's expectations. Syrian prisons were a major site for the CIA's extraordinary rendition for alleged al-Qaeda members. However, they were tortured by Syrian interrogators on behalf of the CIA." In many ways, it can be argued that the same torture centers that we are repeatedly shown in the media were funded if not developed by the CIA, and perhaps some of those that were tortured were the same al-Qaeda operatives that now make up large parts of the HTS group. Can you comment on Assad's torture regime and also talk about how countries such as Syria were in some part part of the imperialist structure of the United States?

**VP:** Yeah, I mean, so this is a very important issue and I think we should spend a little time going over the context of it again. After 9 /11, let's focus on this period because it's a key period. After 9 /11, September 11th, 2001, the United States inaugurated a war on terror, went into Afghanistan, all guns blazing, and also sought to find leadership of al-Qaeda in different countries. Now, once you find a leader of al-Qaeda in Italy, let's say, what do you do? So, what the United States started to do was to go into these countries, the CIA would show up in Italy, famous case, grab a fellow off the street, drug the person, throw them in a van, basically abduct them, take them to an airfield, fly them in a CIA jet to a third country where there was a program, Operation Greystone, which was revealed in 2005 for the first time, taken to these places in Poland or in Syria or a whole range of what were known as black sites, in Egypt as well, and then tortured on behalf of the CIA. During the torture session, Western intelligence agents would either participate in the torture or observe and then ask questions. In fact, it was as a consequence of this operation, Greystone and the use of black sites, that the Central Intelligence Agency of the US and likely other intelligence agencies operated on people from Iraq, tortured them and had one of them – a so-called "Curveball", this was his code name – say that Saddam Hussein was somehow involved with al-Qaeda. And therefore provide the false information that led to the illegal war against Iraq.

Now, all of this is happening on so-called black sites. Syria was at the time a leading black site. It's important to recognize that Syria has not always had an anti-Western approach. In 1990, when Saddam Hussein, in August 1990, invaded Kuwait to settle a debt over the oil revenues that it said it was promised in the Rumaila oil fields and so on, the government of Hafez al-Assad took a position against Iraq. And indeed, when the United States attacked Iraq in 1991, the Syrian military joined in the attack against Iraq. So, there have been several periods in this 53-year history of the Assad family where the Assad government has collaborated with the West. And one of them is after 9/11, when Bashar al-Assad effectively opened up his apparatus of prisons to the Central Intelligence Agency.

Now, of course, there was terrible torture and so on happening in these prisons. This is not uncommon. Does the German foreign minister, who I noticed was quite happy not to shake the hand of the new head of government in Syria, quite happy to respect the culture of this new Syria, not something that Ms. Baerbock has mentioned with all her talk of feminist foreign policy. One would have thought she would have insisted on saying, you know, shake my hand, after all, we're going to pay for your new government. But anyway, let's leave that aside. Ms. Baerbock tours all these sites – it would be interesting for the German government to comment on its relationship with the prisons in, let's say, Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, where the United States maintains an archipelago of torture chambers. The German government participated in Afghanistan in the overthrow, initially of the Taliban and they came back. But during that period, the United States ran a torture center in Jalalabad. I didn't hear anything from Annalena Baerbock about the US torture centers in Afghanistan. It bears investigation, the role that the Germans played in some of this. I don't know. We don't have enough information. You know, there was always the belief that within Germany, the German government was randomly picking up, you know, people who demonstrated sympathy for one or other form of Islamism and was either deporting them or throwing them in prison. It would be very interesting again to have an open investigation of the German government's complicity in all of this. It's very easy for Germany now to say, well, we stand against torture and say that torture happened under Bashar al-Assad on behalf of the United States and the West. But what about the torture centers in Arabia or in these other countries? You know, like, what about that? Like, what about us trying to understand the role of some of these states, which the German government is pretty happy to be operating alongside? No comment, really, from these people. Yeah.

**ZR:** In 2011, the Arab Spring was underway and had also reached Syria, where it sparked pro-democracy protests that were violently suppressed by the Assad government. This led to the formation of rebel forces that were determined to overthrow Assad. Foreign actors such as the United States, the Gulf Cooperation Council and Turkey supported different factions, while the Assad government was supported by Iran and Russia. Amidst the civil war, major players such as Russia and the US were also fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, also known as ISIS, which was defeated and expelled from Syria by 2015. By 2020, the Assad government managed to defeat, if not push back, most rebel groups. However, this was not the case last month. Within days, the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) and Tahrir

al-Sham (HTS) managed to topple the government of Bashar al-Assad, which was quite surprising as it seemed there was little to no resistance from Assad's forces. Some even speculate that Russia and the Assad government had met some sort of agreement to let this happen. Could you explain to us what the difference is, why the Assad government was able to contain these forces so successfully throughout the 2010s, but was not able to do the same in 2024? What were the main factors and differences in your view?

**VP:** Well, this is a very, very interesting and complicated issue. Firstly, it is true that after 2012, it looked like there was a burst of energy among various rebel factions. It's important to bear in mind that Turkey initially concocted a military force in northern Syria. And Turkey then basically backed the Muslim Brotherhood that was in exile in Turkey anyway, created a government in exile and so on. But this Muslim Brotherhood-backed group in northern Syria was not sufficient. There were actually various points in which Turkey invaded northern Syria. It's important to bear in mind that Turkey has never ever forgotten that there are sections of northern Syria that are quite important to the Ottoman Empire. In fact, the founder of the Ottoman Empire, Suleyman Shah, is buried inside Syrian soil and Turkey claims the burial site of Suleyman Shah. So, there's a very long -standing tension about this and Turkey invaded several times. Well, in fact, right after 2012, Syria was already totally balkanized. I mean, it has been balkanized for effectively over a decade. The north, this part that I'm talking about from, let's say, Suleyman Shah's grave all the way out almost to the Mediterranean Sea, is controlled by Turkish forces and Turkish militias. They backed some of these rebellious groups. Then, to the east, various Kurdish militia outfits largely led by the YPG, which is a protection group trained by the Kurdish Workers' Party, the PKK, which is a Turkish-based military outfit – the PKK. So, they have taken a slice of northern Syria. Then, to their east, the United States controls the Syrian oil fields and that's along the border with Iraq.

Let's go south now, south towards the line with Israel. Israel has occupied since 1973 the Golan Heights. So, that has already occupied that area. And then, just inside that region in the town of Daraa and other cities in southern Syria, the Syrian government made a deal with the rebel groups and said, look, you can manage the municipal affairs, just don't do uprisings. And so, they sort of devolved power and controlled Damascus and the roads up to the city of Aleppo. The rebel armies, again with the heavy military force of the Syrian army against them, took refuge in the city of Idlib. And, in fact, the Turkish government invaded Syria twice to tell the Syrian forces and the Russians not to attack Idlib. In fact, they cut a deal directly with the Russians. The Syrians didn't play a role in this. So, from about 2013, Syria was already balkanized. There was no singular authority in Syria. Now, from 2013, there was an opportunity for Mr. Assad to try to revitalize his military. Unfortunately, under immense sanctions from the west and also lack of imagination by the Assad government, they basically let things atrophy. And the military, you know, was losing morale, the economy was in bad shape, and so on. And the Assad government was relying on Iran and Russia to help them hold things together.

Well, here we come to 2022. Russia, in a conflict with Ukraine, is occupied up there. There's no space for Russia to think about its position in Syria. When the genocide against the Palestinians begins, Israel sees this as an enormous opportunity. They feel they can get rid of Hamas, they can get rid of Hezbollah, they can get rid of the government in Syria. Effectively, they can get rid of all their adversaries, control all their borders, and weaken Iran. That was, actually, that was Netanyahu's plan. He said it directly. Yes, through the genocidal bombardment of Gaza, they severely weakened Hamas through the bombing, invasion, and eventually assassination of Hassan Nasrallah, they have weakened Hezbollah, and through this entire period, without much reporting in the West, Israel was flying sorties against both Syrian targets and in Iran. They bombed Iranian logistical supply places in Syria. They bombed bases of the Syrian military. They bombed the intelligence office in Damascus of the Syrian government, the headquarters of the Syrian intelligence services. They were bombing and atrophying the political power in Syria for almost a year. Then they bombed military and research sites in Iran in October of last year, 2024. Again, very little of this is reported. This weakened the Syrian state, opened the door for Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which is heavily backed by the Turks, provided logistical assistance by the United States, and air cover by the Israelis.

Now, Mr. Julani, the al-Qaeda leader of Tahrir al-Sham, was given a makeover. He suddenly removed his al-Qaeda clothes, trimmed his beard, got into a suit, went to what seemed to me like a public relations school, where he was put into a studio with CNN, and they asked him really softball questions. One of them was: you used to be a brutal guy, and he said, yes, I was young and now I'm different and older and mature. These are all questions that he had been fed. You know, I went back and I looked at four or five reports written by Israeli think tanks over the course of the last half decade about the question of Syria. And interestingly, in the footnotes of these Israeli think tank reports, all of these researchers that went to Idlib, interviewed Mr. Julani. In other words, Mr. Julani was open for business to talk to Israeli think tanks about the ideas – that means the Israelis were in and out of Idlib. You know, Israeli researchers are showing up in Idlib. That means Israeli intelligence was there – in and out of Idlib. So I'm not telling you I know exactly what happened. Yeah, but these are all bits of evidence. Mr. Julani was given this remarkable makeover. And then, you know, they just drove into Damascus because the kind of resilience of the Syrian military was just not there. And Mr. Assad, I would say, did something quite shocking. No Arab leader, neither Gaddafi nor Saddam – again, whatever you think of them – till the very end, they were defiant. They stood up and said, we will never give up. Mr. Assad left Damascus for Latakia in the cover of darkness. From Latakia, he got on a Russian plane and went to Moscow. I mean, in Damascus, he could have made a speech to his people, encouraging his people. Okay, maybe he thought, I got to leave Damascus, and go to Latakia. From Latakia, Mr. Assad could have given a speech to his people: Hey, my people, I'm with you, be resilient, be brave, we have to now accept our defeat, but we will be back. And so on. No! When he got to Moscow, he released a statement which was meaningless. He didn't even give a televised address in Moscow to the Syrian people saying: be courageous, you people of Syria, the brave Syrian nation, blah, blah, blah, we will be back. Nothing! It tells you a little bit about the character of the Bashar al-Assad government, which was a reluctant government. You know, he's an

eye doctor. He didn't want to do this. His elder brother died. He was forced into taking the reins. Why? Why should a country have a dynasty? Why not somebody else? These are failings of the Arab nationalists sort of move inside Syria. And I think we shouldn't underestimate the power of this. It demoralized the population. Saddam, again, till the end, defiant. And what happened? Ten days after the overthrow of the Iraqi government, the Iraqi soldiers reconstituted themselves as a rebellion and returned. They took off their uniforms, put on camouflage and came back to fight the Americans. In Syria, we're not seeing that. Why? This is an interesting story.

**ZR:** In Western countries, a re-assessment of policy towards Syria is taking place, given HTS's past affiliation with al-Qaeda. In December, the US State Department sent a diplomatic team to Damascus and expressed its willingness to work with the government. Just today, the US announced that it will pause certain sanctions on Syria to allow transactions to take place that are necessary for the provisions of public services or humanitarian assistance and is being viewed as the first step of a complete lifting of Western sanctions. A few days ago, as I mentioned, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot were the first diplomats from the European Union to meet with Syrian de facto leader Ahmad al-Sharaa or, as we've called him, Abu Mohammad al-Julani in Damascus. According to Baerbock, the aim of the meeting was to determine whether the new government will ensure that all ethnic and religious beliefs would be protected. And let me cite her here, quote: "We want to discuss whether such an inclusive political process is possible and whether human rights can truly be guaranteed. The entire question of lifting sanctions is tied to this," unquote. The European Union and the United States have also reached a consensus that Iran and Russia should have no place in Syria's future, including any military bases and activities. How do you assess the West's policy since the fall of Assad? And do you think the West is really concerned about the protection of minorities or is there something else driving their policies?

**VP:** Look, right now, I'll tell you something quite chilling. And I know that you and I will talk about this in the weeks to come. Something quite chilling is happening. You see, you've got to understand that in 1978-79, the United States and the Israelis had an enormous breakthrough when they got Egypt under Anwar El-Sadat to sign a peace agreement with the Israelis. This was the first border of the Israelis that went through the process of delimitation and peace. Israel – which borders or has lines with Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt; and then, of course, a tiny sliver with the Red Sea, the port of Eilat – had no borders that were accepted by any of its neighbors. So, in 1978-79, the first border to be delimited and accepted was with Egypt, a peace deal. Then you have to wait till 1994 when Jordan, the king of Jordan, this particular king's father, King Hussein of Jordan, cuts a deal with the Israelis. And that's the second very large border that's accepted and a peace deal was signed in 1994. Two countries down. In 1973, the Israelis entered the Golan Heights and held it and refused to leave. And de facto, they are controlling the Golan. And now, they have, in fact, taken a very large swath, including the 1974 United Nations Demilitarized Zone, all under Israeli hands. It's very likely that Mr. Julani and the Syrian government, under pressure from the Germans, the French, the United States and others – Qatar has resumed Qatar Airways flights to



Damascus. First flights over the last 13 years, very important. You know, Syria's back in that sense. But there'll be a lot of pressure on Mr. Julani to conduct a peace deal with the Israelis. This is the goal. No, it's not no Iran. It's no Iraqi proxy groups that should be allowed there. And I'm going to come back to the second point. Point one is to get as many of these countries to conduct a peace agreement with the Israelis. There's a lot of pressure on Lebanon with a weakened Hezbollah. A lot of pressure for Lebanon to accept either the blue line or, in fact, another line further north as Israel's border, to accept the border and to say that, OK, there's a peace deal with Israel. So there is a lot of pressure on Lebanon. And I won't be surprised if, in fact, the end of the day, they move the border further north. Metula's finger, which is the water supply, is already part of Israel. They've already taken it and garrisoned it. This has been there for decades. But they may move further north, up to the edge of Nabatieh maybe. I don't know. But I know there's a lot of pressure on the Lebanese government. Point one is that the West has put pressure on this particular creature of the West in Damascus, Mr. Julani, they're putting a lot of pressure to make a deal with the Israelis. This is not impossible, OK? If that happens, almost all of Israel's borders are secure. Now, short of that, any violent attack on Israel from Syria is not going to happen. This Julani government is not going to permit Palestinian factions or Iraqi or Iranian factions or Hezbollah to attack Israel from inside Syria. By cleaning up the southern part of Lebanon of Hezbollah fighters and other fighters, moving them north of the Litani River, in fact largely erasing the possibility right now of Hezbollah to strike Israel hard. Israel has immunized itself. The only force that is hitting Israel is the Yemeni Ansarallah government. And you will notice that in the last week or so, Israel and the United States have been battering Yemen. Again, little reported.

Why is all this happening? Because in a sense, Israel is preparing to strike Iran very hard. Netanyahu made a statement recently saying that a year ago I said I will give you a new Middle East, I've given you a new Middle East. Lebanon is not what it was. Hamas is not what it was. Syria is not what it was. And Iran is not what it was. And we are going to show Iran it cannot do blah, blah, blah. The foreign minister of Israel made a statement saying, Iran better watch out. So, on the one side, what this government in Damascus has already done is that it's already said that in case Israel strikes Iran, a full attack on Iran, there will be no retaliation by any faction inside Syrian soil against Israel. Same in Lebanon, same in Jordan, same in Egypt. The only people who are going to fire rockets will be from Yemen if they withstand this barrage against them. So they've opened the door for an attack on Iran. You know, the deterrent to the attack on Iran had been built by Qasem Soleimani. General Qasem Soleimani was assassinated by the United States. And that were these little militia groups all across Western Asia, which had the capacity to hit Israel if Israel tried to strike Iran. So what's been happening now is a kind of cleanup operation, opening the door to a potential much bigger spectrum attack on Iran. And that's why I say, you know, you and I in the next few weeks, hopefully we'll be talking about this more to warn people against being complacent about this march to a full on attack on Iran, because that actually is going to be catastrophic for everybody. In fact, the prime minister of Iraq, Mr. Sudani, just flew to Tehran to have a conversation with the Iranians about how Iran and Iraq have a kind of security understanding and that if Iran is attacked, Iraq will retaliate. Well, that's interesting. And that is some comfort to the Iranians. But at the same time, the leadership of Hezbollah has said

we've lost our lifeline to Iran. I mean, there is a real weakness in the ranks of Hamas, Hezbollah and so on. Israel has scored an immense strategic victory by overthrowing the Assad government in Syria. And again, I don't want people to start moaning and writing comments and saying these are Assadists. I mean, listen to what you and I had been saying earlier in the conversation. You know, you have to have a dialectical or multifaceted understanding of what's happening. Many things can be true at the same time. One has to understand that this is a historical victory for Israel, regardless of whether Syrians see this as a good thing or not. It is objectively an enormous victory for Israel.

**ZR:** It is quite noteworthy that Julani has not condemned Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights and further taking of the territory, nor has he come out and spoken against the destruction of his own military after he took power that the Israeli airstrikes conducted. It's estimated 80% of the capacity of the Syrian military has been destroyed by Israeli airstrikes. However, don't you think there's a contradiction here? The forces that HTS controls are by and large Muslim, and they're supported by Turkey. And we know the Turkish sentiment towards Palestinians – 90% of people support Palestinians. We know it across the Arab world. How can Julani and the leadership of the HTS group keep their own forces and keep the issue of Palestinians under wrap at some point if the genocide in Gaza continues? This whole secret alliance – let's just call it that way – between the HTS group and Israel will fall apart. People will demand justice in Palestine, especially all of these Muslims that support Julani and the various factions that control Damascus. What do you think about this assessment?

**VP:** Well, firstly, you know, Turkey is a complicated country, because on the one side, it's still a NATO member, it still participates in the NATO War Council. And it also has independent relations with other countries. It has ambitions, amongst the Turkic people all the way out to the border of China, it has Ottomanist ambitions in the whole of the Mediterranean region and so on. It's a very complicated country. Mr Erdogan, one minute is super popular in his country. The next minute he's a guy that everybody hates. It's a very, very complex country. It is also true that the popular sentiment in Turkey is overwhelmingly for the Palestinians. But meanwhile, the Turkish government continues to have relations with Israel, continues to have trade and other close ties with the Israelis. I actually believe – we haven't had all of this fully confirmed – but I actually believe that Israel and the Turks collaborated, they coordinated in the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham blitzkrieg into Damascus. This was coordinated. That means at some high level, Turkey and Israel are in very close communication. So, there's that.

And I think from Turkey's standpoint, having a beholden government in Syria is more important than any settlement for the Palestinians. I mean, what does a friendly government in Syria enable for Turkey? One is Turkey is going to just take parts of northern Syria. Mr Julani is going to throw up his hands and say, it's a price I have to pay for being in Damascus. Eventually – and I think the Turks are going to be smart about this – they have already basically squeezed the Kurdish resistance in northern Syria, and they are going to move on them. They are going to make sure that weapons don't come in there. They're going to

squeeze them out. There was a point in about a decade ago, in the town of Rojava, when Rojava was surrounded by ISIS, and ISIS was getting ready to basically garrotte and throttle the Kurdish resistance forces, and at the time, the United States made a strategic calculation and bombed ISIS and pushed them back and protected Rojava. Kurdish forces have a very close relationship with the United States. People who have a fantasy about the Kurdish resistance need to really study the situation a little more. Don't be idealistic about that either. But I think, you know, Mr Erdogan is going to get basically the evisceration of northern Syria as a free base for anti-Turkish Kurdish forces. Already they've lost the Iraqi area. The Iraqi Kurdish autonomous region doesn't allow the Kurdish factions to operate militarily. Just as, you know, the Palestinian factions can no longer operate from Jordan or from Egypt, it's very hard to operate from Lebanon. And I think the Syrians are going to say no. Similarly, the anti-Turkish Kurdish factions have lost their bases in Iraq and they will lose their bases in Syria. So Mr Erdogan will make a strategic calculation. It's more important for Turkish foreign policy to, in a sense, squeeze the anti-Turkish Kurdish resistance than it is to stand up for the Palestinians. That's going to be the deal that they are going to cut. So despite 70% of the population or even more being very much pro-Palestinian – 70% very pro -Palestinian, that doesn't mean 30% is pro-Israeli, they are in different shades pro-Palestinian, basically 100%. In Turkey you're not going to find very many Turks on the street, who are going to say to a reporter, I'm pro-Israel. You're not going to see that. But despite that, the Erdogan government will make a strategic assessment saying, listen, we have a lot to gain, we're going to gain Suleyman Shah's tomb, we're going to gain the end of Kurdish resistance. And that's a big victory for them, for their politics.

**ZR:** Let us now switch to the war in Ukraine. Since Donald Trump won the US elections in a landslide victory over Kamala Harris in November 2024, Ukraine has intensified its attacks on Russia. A week following the election, after receiving a green light from President Biden, Ukraine fired British Storm Shadow Cruise missiles and the US ATACMS cruise missiles at Russian territory for the first time since the war began. Russia responded by launching hypersonic ballistic missiles at the Ukrainian city of Dnipro and also updated its nuclear doctrine to allow the use of nuclear weapons against countries that are supported by a nuclear power. Although US president-elect Donald Trump met with Ukrainian President Zelensky and French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris on December 7th and called for an immediate ceasefire, ten days later Ukraine assassinated Russian General Igor Kirilov, the head of nuclear, biological and chemical defense forces, with a hidden bomb in a scooter. On December 30th, US President Biden approved a \$2.5 billion military aid package for Ukraine. And on January 5th, Russia's Defense Ministry confirmed that the Ukrainian forces launched a new attack in Kursk— a region taken in a surprise attack by Ukraine last August. How do you assess Ukraine's current war strategy? Will it lead to a positive outcome for the country in the future? The argument that we hear here in the German media is that it would improve Ukraine's bargaining position once negotiations begin.

**VP:** I mean, the first question is, Ukraine's bargaining position against whom? Against whom is Ukraine trying to improve its bargaining position? Is it trying to improve its bargaining position against Russia, which is a neighbor of Ukraine and which Ukraine is going to have

to live next to forever? Ukraine is a tiny country. It has not been able to take the war to Russia. Russia is still inside Ukraine. There is no possibility for Ukraine to get the upper hand in this. So, is that what they are trying to do to improve their bargaining position against Russia? I don't think so. I actually think this level of attack is to improve Ukraine's bargaining position in Brussels, in Washington DC, so that Ukraine or Zelensky can go to the Europeans and say it's not a futile conflict. It can go to the Americans and say, keep supporting us. They are trying to bargain with Europe, not with the Russians. When they sit down with the Russians and actually talk about eventually a settlement, they are going to have to, on both sides, that is the Ukrainians and the Russians, they are going to have to figure out that both the Russians and the Ukrainians have anxieties and needs which have to be sorted out. That both have to figure out a collective security on their border and on the region. That's a whole different issue than territorial gains. I doubt very much that anybody of intelligence in Kiev believes that making marginal battlefield gains is going to win them Crimea back. Or some marginal battlefield gains here and there in Northern Ukraine is going to change the balance of forces in the Donbas. They would have to be extremely naive to believe that. What Russia has taken in Crimea and the Donbas is not going to be up for debate. That is going to now be part of Russia. That is not up for debate. I think the Ukrainians will have to understand that. This is not a decision you and I are making. This is a decision that history has made in the war. So, what the Ukrainians are trying to do now is to actually bargain with the West, saying don't abandon us. Oskar La Fontaine in Germany made a very interesting comment saying, hey listen, what are we doing buying liquefied natural gas from the United States? We should be thinking about reconsidering our relations with Russia. It makes more sense for Germany to be importing energy from Russia than from the United States. US gas is from fracking, which is terrible for the environment. US gas has to come across the Atlantic oceans – it is basically ecological madness. And it is expensive. So, somebody with the statue of Oskar La Fontaine and others talking like this, that is interesting. That means that there are big cracks and fissures opening up even in Germany. And if those cracks and fissures widen, Mr. Zelensky needs to bargain with the Europeans. So, when you say that in Germany people are saying, you know, this is all about improving the bargaining condition, I agree. But they are mistaken. Ukraine is not trying to improve its bargaining position against Russia. It is trying to improve its bargaining position against Berlin and Brussels.

**ZR:** Vijay Prashad, author and historian, thank you so much for your time today.

**VP:** Thanks a lot. Nice to be with you.

**ZR:** And thank you for tuning in today. If you watch this video until the very end, please take a few moments and visit the description of this video to find out how you can support our crowdfunding. There are less than three days left and we still need 4,000 Euros. And once we achieve this target, we will be able to continue our independent and non-profit journalism this year – journalism that provides you with facts and analysis that you just won't hear in the corporate media. I thank you for your support and for tuning in. I'm your host, Zain Raza. See you next time!

**END**