

Bases Done, Syria Not Over, Israel Desperate | Prof. Leila Hudson

We are witnessing the biggest change in West Asia since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Professor Leila Hudson, anthropologist and historian at the University of Arizona, discusses the region, water routes, the Strait of Hormuz, US decline, Israel's role, Iran's survival strategy, and the future of Gulf states. She also examines Syria after Assad, Ahmad al-Sharaa's leadership, regional neutrality, and her book on Syrian women displaced by war. Links: Lines of Flight, Assemblages of Home: Syrian Women Displaced: <https://press.syr.edu/supressbooks/8621/lines-of-flight-assemblages-of-home-syrian-women-displaced/> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Merch: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Donation: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction 00:00:53 Middle East or West Asia? 00:03:14 How to Study the Region 00:07:21 Water, Chokepoints, and Hormuz 00:10:54 US Policy and Strategic Failure 00:17:01 Empire, Suez, and Regional Change 00:19:30 Gulf States and Multipolar Order 00:27:34 Israel, the US, and Iran 00:34:39 Iran's Resistance Strategy 00:40:18 Syria, Assad, and Iran Compared 00:49:03 Ahmad al-Sharaa and Syria's Future 01:06:00 Lines of Flight, Assemblages of Home

#Pascal

Welcome back to Neutrality Studies. Today I'm speaking to Professor Leila Hudson, an anthropologist and historian, as well as chair of our faculty at the University of Arizona. Leila, welcome.

#Leila Hudson

Thank you very much. And let me just point out at the outset that, in fact, everything I say here today is my own personal, professional, and scholarly opinion and does not represent the University of Arizona, my employer, in any way.

#Pascal

Of course, of course. Everything we say on these podcasts is always our own opinions, but it's good that you are setting that record straight. You are also a scholar, of course, of West Asia, and that's what we want to discuss today. You've been looking professionally for many, many years now at what is happening in what some people still refer to as the Middle East, but a lot of us are switching terminology. Can you maybe tell me a little bit first about the terminology? Which one of the two do you prefer, Middle East or West Asia? And secondly, what is your assessment of where the entire region is moving at the moment?

#Leila Hudson

Well, of course, we were trained in the imperial conventions, right, of the Middle East, and that's still what's most recognizable to our students and our public here in the United States. But, of course, your point is well taken that thinking in a larger and less relativistic context is very appropriate, especially since the moment of transformation that we are in right now is a moment that engages with geography. It's a moment in which empire and the political status quo of the last few decades, in many ways, have been brought into stark relief by the struggle over the Strait of Hormuz and the actual geographical factors, which are so often seen as ancillary to human events. So your point is well taken.

I think West Asia is a highly appropriate way to approach the subject. And interestingly, at the University of Arizona, for all the wrong reasons, a longstanding School of Middle Eastern and North African Studies, which I've spent my career in, has currently been rolled into a School of Global Studies for, again, all the wrong reasons—financial reasons, penny-pinching reasons, etc. And yet it's a timely renaming because, of course, when we look at migration, when we look at diaspora, as well as the effects of regional geography, it's nice to frame it in a planetary or global sense so that we can see movement, trajectories, and change from a slightly removed and helpful perspective.

#Pascal

I mean, framing is very, very important, especially in academia, right? I mean, how you approach a topic will largely define what you're able to find. How did you try to approach West Asia as your subject?

#Leila Hudson

Well, I come to it with a family heritage. I am half Palestinian and half, for want of a better term, American by birth. And my family ranges far and wide across Lebanon and Palestine. I married into a Syrian family in the course of doing my dissertation research in the 1990s. And, again, as an anthropologist, as someone approaching from a linguistic perspective as well, I have spent my career and the training of my students ranging all across North Africa, you know, from Mauritania to the Mashriq to West Asia, and then also training students in that area. The inherited field of Middle Eastern studies engages with Iran, with Turkey, as well as the Arabic-speaking world. And I found that actually to be a helpful, broad canvas, not necessarily limited by language or by culture or certainly by nation-state and nationalism, but to try and elicit patterns and dynamics across the region and not simply focus, as we historians also do, on a particular national history.

#Pascal

Yeah. I mean, these national histories are particularly problematic in the case of West Asia because a lot of the nations that we have today are kind of inherited from colonialism, from imperialism. A lot

of these nations, the way that they exist today, didn't exist 150 years ago. I mean, the Ottoman Empire was very important and so on. But also this issue that you already alluded to, that you cannot really divorce West Asia from North Africa. If you divorce the experience of Lebanon from the experience of Algeria, you're kind of missing a very important point. How is it possible for you to kind of put all of that together? Because we are also kind of conditioned to view the continents separately, right?

#Leila Hudson

Yes. Well, again, you know, you can come at it from a very conventional, inherited Anglo-American perspective of the Near East and North Africa to the Middle East and North Africa. And at various times in my career, again, I've approached it with a centering of the Arabic-speaking world and the many, many different dialectical forms of Arabic. I've come at it from the perspective of the lands dominated largely, but obviously not entirely, by Islam. And so, depending on the particular question, it gives you the ability to literally reframe around culture, around religion, around language, around geography, or around the dynamics of empires, contemporary and modern nation-states. But we also need to look at non-state actors and forms of resistance, which, again, move and transfer across the entire region. So all of that is fair game, I think.

#Pascal

Hey, just a very quick note. The best way to support this channel is by signing up for my free Substack. You can also help with a paid subscription there, or you can get some of our new merch on neutralitystudies.com. Links below. See you there. How important to you is the issue of water, of the oceans? Because one of the things is, of course, that the Mediterranean connects a lot of these places, if not all of them, but also the Pacific. I was blown away when I realized that the Empire of Oman extended all the way to Madagascar. It's like... No, wait. Yeah, to Madagascar. Yeah, to Madagascar.

#Leila Hudson

No, no. Well, certainly into East Africa.

#Pascal

Sorry, to Tanzania, to Tanzania. To Zanzibar, into East Africa. Yeah, sorry, Zanzibar, not Madagascar, to Zanzibar. But it was huge. And that's, of course, a maritime connection, not so much land.

#Leila Hudson

Not so much an overland connection. Well, when I teach my introductory lecture course to American students who are, again, because of, for all the wrong reasons, of course, very innocent, I should say, of geography and world history and things like that, I actually start out with my first substantive lecture being on water, in all its different forms, as, again, the source of life, the source of agriculture, the platform on which Middle Eastern civilization appears to have taken a head start well ahead of many other parts of the globe because of the general scarcity of water.

And then within that framework, looking at the importance of river systems for irrigation, but also for trade and transport, and also those coastal and maritime systems. And that's a very helpful perspective to start not necessarily with the land, not necessarily with the people, although the people very quickly enter the picture, but to look at the geography of water and climate as an enabling, connecting, transport, and culturally empowering system. So absolutely. And I've been teaching my introductory course on the cultures of the Middle East for many years now. And as part of our geography, and I teach this every time, a quiz about the world's maritime choke points.

And I make the students who, again, approach, you know, as first-year American students by and large, but also first-year global students, including many from the Middle East, quite innocent students of the geography, which is so strategic and so defining. So we have an entire lecture that starts with the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandab, the Suez Canal, in particular also the Bosphorus Strait, and really helps the students to understand the interconnection of these historical waterways with the contemporary world economy that runs on petroleum and other hydrocarbons.

#Pascal

I suppose the current U.S. president never took your lecture, right? No, no. So what do you make out of this? I mean, one of the mind-boggling, I think, outcomes of these last three months of war, ever since the 28th of February, 2026, is that it really, really drove home the point that the Strait of Hormuz is not just this little place, and if it's closed, then you route traffic somewhere else. I mean, the fact that Donald Trump actually signed this MOU, which is largely a document of surrender, actually, the way it was formulated, shows how desperate the U.S. now is to reopen this trade route. Can you speak to that?

#Leila Hudson

Well, of course, and one of the very small consolations of this last semester was my ability to remind my many students that they were now in a position, simply understanding that maritime geography and its critical importance in the contemporary era for the petroleum-based world economy, and they were among the most educated of Americans on this particular topic. And in spite of their general low level of knowledge, I was happy to send them out into the world of their friends, their families, and their social groups with some key knowledge and understanding of the dynamics back in January and February, which would take the rest of American society by surprise when they

began to understand the impact on the price of gasoline, the price of food, the availability of fertilizer, and other chemical byproducts.

So, yes, the fact that the Trump administration and the president, in his impulsive approach, you know, presumably high on the so-called victory in Venezuela, which, of course, has now been overshadowed by the horrific earthquake tragedy in Venezuela. But Trump comes into this full of hubris, devoid of the most basic geographic, cultural, historical understanding, and has already purged his own administration of so many of the career professional diplomats and analysts who would have offered that impulsive acquiescence to the Israeli project in a way that, you know, would have saved so many lives, so much treasure, and the last shreds of American credibility in the region and in the world.

#Pascal

So what do you make out of this situation, that, you know, knowledge that is widely available—like knowledge that you have, that others have, that students have, that a lot of people, probably even in the administration have, because otherwise you wouldn't have had to purge them so much, that people in the military had, otherwise you wouldn't have had to purge them—that all of this is being purged, and that the purges then happen in pursuit of policies that, in my view, are quite self-defeating? Now, there are people, and we must say that, who interpret this as part of a grand strategic game—you know, the chessboard—and overall it was all about choking China together. I have difficulties following all of that because it seems so grand in its approach. But what does it tell you that this knowledge is being excluded for the purpose of, well, something that, at least in its current effect, didn't serve U.S. interests at all?

#Leila Hudson

Well, it's been incredibly detrimental to the U.S.-dominated status quo in the region and in the world. That is undeniable, I think, at this point, to all but the most blindered of American and perhaps Israeli advocates of war. Right, yeah. All but the most passionate ideologues. And it kind of reminds me of the principle from Sun Tzu and **The Art of War**, which I will mangle here and not be able to quote exactly. But, you know, that one of the keys to a strategic victory is not only to know yourself, not only to know the enemy.

But to know both. And of course, the current regime in the United States is problematic, arguably not knowledgeable about itself, about the historical position of the United States hegemon at this point, and having purged itself of the career diplomatic corps and policy and security analysis corps, is certainly not knowledgeable about the adversary. And that is a classic setup for strategic failure. But what's very interesting, of course, is that the backfire has brought us to a moment of transformation in the region and in the world, and not perhaps the way one would have imagined the challenging or the decline of the American empire.

#Pascal

So, two questions. Are there any historical precedents that come to your mind from your studies in the region where empires fail in the way that the United States seems to be failing forward at the moment? And secondly, the change—can you outline that?

#Leila Hudson

Well, I think there's an important parallel that should be studied and that I intend to pursue a little bit with the Suez War and the Suez Crisis in 1956, which in many ways marked the end of the British and European domination of the region. And that was, you know, in many ways—there are so many parallels, right? The victory of strategic geography and proximity and control, that the declining empire overreached and challenged and learned a lesson. And of course, Nasser at that time, in a way that parallels what perhaps we're seeing today in the rise of Iran, not only as a regional but perhaps as a super-regional power, benefits from the challenge by the hegemon that it successfully, so far, seems to have withstood.

So I think there is indeed a parallel there. And one might also draw parallels—not water-based parallels—but parallels with the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and the moment at which the great power, presumably playing the great game with the inherited strategies, operations, and tactics, realizes that it has overreached for whatever combination of internal, external, geographic, historical reasons. So I think it's a very, you know, we've come to a point that I certainly never expected to see in this timeframe or perhaps in my life.

#Pascal

You know, I think even the Chinese were surprised at the fact that the Iranians were able to withstand the onslaught. And of course, as you just outlined, if an underdog is attacked by the top dog, the underdog—just the fact that it keeps standing—actually makes it the winner, right? So, for the region, what do you think this impact now is like? I mean, the Gulf states must be quite scared at the moment because of the change. My little pet theory is that they will, in the end, be de facto neutralized—not in the sense of eradicated, but in the sense of being taken out of the US alliance orbit. How do you see that?

#Leila Hudson

Well, I think essentially, yes, you are correct that the pace, the nature of this conflict is one that allows what we're seeing right now in the aftermath and in the wake of the June 17th Memorandum of Understanding. That is a, how shall I put it, a gradual change, an ability to make smaller shifts rather than large, violent, destructive shifts that I think we all feared back in March and even well

into April when the war was kinetic and unpredictable and the missiles were flying. So because of the high costs, especially to the United States, which have manifested in the form of higher prices and future political trouble for the Trump administration.

I think we're now in a settling and testing phase where you'll see the different Gulf countries aligning themselves along a kind of spectrum of proximity to the United States or to Iran, but shifting gently, testing gently, understanding that however this comes out in the end, the initial modality of investing all your eggs in the American military base basket needs to be diversified. And there will be different flavors and ranges of diversification across the region. But I think nobody, none of these small, fragile, and precarious entities, wants to be entirely dependent on any single great power patron, especially one that failed so dramatically in the opening weeks of the war, insofar as those U. S. bases, which were always thought to be protective assets, turned out to be liabilities and weaknesses, and that on top of that, the U.S. was more concerned with protecting Israel than with actually living up to the implied and explicit security bargain made with those Gulf states.

So what I think you will see, and again, you will see it in as many different ways as entities that are continuing to be viable, of course, you'll see the development of relations first and foremost with Iran, which is not going anywhere by virtue of geography, right? So accommodations will be made, some more eager, some more reluctant, but those accommodations will be made. And other regional alliances will be solidified. The roles of Pakistan, not to mention Russia and China, are all renewed and more important than ever in an emerging multilateral world.

#Pascal

So this is very good that we're going there. What do you think the future order, or the now emerging order, in West Asia, including also North Africa, is going to be? Because the last big transition that you already spoke about was from British control of the region. Okay, let's go further back even a little bit. We first had Ottoman control of the region, Turkish control of the region. That went into basically British control of the region, and then the Brits handed over the staff to the Americans. And then we've had now almost 80 years, nearly 100 years, of American control of this region with its different proxies and whatnot. Where is it going from here?

We are seeing Pakistan now flying. I mean, we're going to have discussions with Saudi Arabia. There are all these minilateral discussions happening that actually happen without the West. But we still inherit, of course, the way the structure was made. One of these inheritances, for instance, in the Gulf states, is that a lot of the monarchies are actually Sunni monarchies governing over Shia populations and whatnot. On the other hand, we have Iran that supports very much the Palestinian cause, especially in Gaza. And Gaza is, of course, Sunni. They don't care about which kind of flavor of Islam they're following. How are you making sense of these changes?

#Leila Hudson

Well, again, I think the broad shift is towards multilateralism, towards sustainable relationships in the neighborhood, in the region, and with other extra-regional powers — you know, again, Russia, China, Pakistan, as well as, you know, the traditional role of Europe. So there are many players, and you see them mingling now in all kinds of interesting new formations. You see them coming together at the G7, and you didn't see Ahmed Al-Sharrah at this G7 meeting, but he was invited to the last one. You see the sort of nascent formation of what they're calling an Islamic NATO led by Pakistan.

You see Russia and China watching, learning, supplying, and perhaps influencing with their own historical modalities of hegemony. In the case of China, commercial-based, mineral-based, not strongly ideological. And all of these things are now moving around together in the crucible, you know, when you had what seemed to be the solid architecture of American security, when that was basically blown away. So, of course, Palestine and the actions of the Israeli Netanyahu government remain unresolved — the intractable problem, the wild card, including some very difficult scenarios as they, at least in the foreseeable future, double down into genocide. It's hard to ignore that. It's hard to wave that away.

#Pascal

That shouldn't be ignored, and it shouldn't be waved away. I think it's the crime of our times, but that crime is still being implemented at the moment.

#Leila Hudson

And that's why this is the wild card, right? So what we're watching right now, the last, or the current — I should say, the current stress point — is whether the MOU will survive Netanyahu's defiance of Trump and the movement of genocide into Lebanon. That's still the difficult and intractable problem, which renders these larger patterns and dynamics still somewhat susceptible to unpredictable outcomes.

#Pascal

There's this debate within my little podcasting world about who's wagging who. Is it the tail wagging the dog — Israel basically controlling the United States — or is it the United States controlling Israel? There are both arguments. I mean, Mearsheimer, of course, with his famous Israel Lobby on the one hand, and then Brian Berletic on the other hand, saying like, no, with "Which Path to Persia" and so on, the United States uses Israel very strategically in order to implement its hegemonic design. And it's actually not just about Iran; it's actually much more about China.

And what we're seeing is a grand illusion. Joe Biden, of course, with his famous words in the U.S. Congress that if there wasn't an Israel, we would have to invent one. It serves us very well. How do you see this connection? Is the defiance of Israel real, or is it just part of this smokescreen of this intricate connection, right? Good cop, bad cop kind of game. And Trump's like, I would love to

constrain them, but they just are unconstrained — these crazy Israelis. I mean, it's kind of a very, very self-serving narrative, isn't it?

#Leila Hudson

Yes. Well, I would say, of course, as an American, watching the internal political dynamics within the Trump administration, certainly within the U.S. Congress, I think there's no denying that, in fact, the United States has grown dependent on its junior Israeli partner in so many ways that have eroded U.S. sovereignty and the ability to do grand strategy without guidance and sometimes direction from the junior partner. I think that is undeniable, in my opinion, as we come into the Trump era and the Iran war.

But as with all things, we are now in a moment of transformation because the test, the challenge that Netanyahu — and I think we have credible evidence that this was presented to all the American administrations over the last few decades — the plan for a greater Israel, the desperation for the end fight with Iran, that was always a potentiality, that was always a looming threat, and it was always one that previous administrations, with their full complement of cynical but knowledgeable professional diplomats and security analysts, had sidestepped. But because Trump acquiesced — and again, I think there are real questions there about whether this was a joint project, whether it was led by Israel.

Certain parties are out right now basically making the case that, in fact, it was Trump who wanted to do this. I think that might be a little performative. I think it's consistent as a historical goal of Israeli governments, especially Netanyahu's governments, that it's pretty clear that the Israelis really, really pressured Trump. And who knows, as the podcasters and an increasing sector of American society firmly believe, that the leverage of the Epstein files was brought to bear in this particular case or was the permitting condition for this decision to go to war.

But when the war happened, when the stress test actually took place, rather than looming as a potentiality, the test took place. The United States encountered its economic vulnerability, its reputational vulnerability, and the hostility of the entire world was revealed. And Iran survived, and Iran has gained enormously in global prestige for its ability to stand up, to project power, and to have, over the preceding almost 50 years, developed a strategy that for the time being has worked and is going to change the region and the world.

#Pascal

Yeah, my analysis of the strategy is that it basically stood on two pillars. One, the ability to absorb at the cost of lives, including the senior leadership — Ali Khamenei, only one, but Ali Larijani and others who knew they would be targeted, were targeted, were killed — but they were willing to take that. And the other being able to re-establish reciprocity: for every target shot at in Iran, they managed to shoot back. So, a conventional second-strike capability on the other side, including, of course, a

severe and significant hurt on Israel, the favorite child in the region. So, is there something else that you would say we should also analyze in looking at Iran's ability to withstand?

#Leila Hudson

Well, Iran revealed itself – and I actually wrote about this about a decade ago – that this decapitation strategy that, in fact, the Bush and Obama administrations pioneered in their early use of drone warfare against various regional non-state actors in Yemen, Iraq, and Afghanistan – we learned something from that at the time, which seems to be applicable to nation-states as well. And that is, of course, that when you deliver unmatched power from the skies using unrivaled air power, and you engage in this strategy of decapitation, your earthbound adversaries know this, they feel this, they are the victims of this.

And they very quickly adapt to it by developing a deep leadership bench, if you will. So that, you know, we used to have sort of a cynical joke that the most dangerous position would be, you know, the so-called third in command of Al-Qaeda, because people were constantly being promoted into that role, decapitated, and then ascending to the top role and then being decapitated. But what this causes within your...

#Pascal

Organizational structure.

#Leila Hudson

Within your organizational structure, yes, exactly, is adaptability, depth of strategy and leadership qualities, unity, the expectation of what would be considered martyrdom for the cause, right? And it causes a rapid evolution, if you will, as people are tried and taken out. So you'll see Trump talking recently about how they took out the first leadership, then they took out the second leadership, and now they're dealing with the third leadership, who he, at least for his domestic audience, likes to talk about as if he has personally selected them himself.

Well, it's a complex dynamic where, of course, the third layer of leadership is the one that has seen its mentors, its heroes, its leaders, its moderates, indeed, in the form of the, you know, the supreme leader, its father and other family members, ruthlessly murdered, right? That creates both a hardening, a potential radicalization as you take out the moderates that have ascended through the non-kinetic times into power, and it promotes rapid organizational dynamics that produce new leaders, new techniques. So it's actually... it's actually invigorating or mobilizing or radicalizing or hardening to your typical resistance organization.

#Pascal

You're increasing the speed of learning, because the lower levels learn from the upper levels, and they will try to do something about it. And if they fail, then the next level will take over. I think that's one of the things the Israelis don't really get as well — that the other side is not just barbarians who just do this to the chieftain. And if you kill the chieftain, then the tribe will dissolve. No, that's just not how it works.

#Leila Hudson

Well, it's shocking that that was convincing to Trump. But a quick decapitation strike would actually, you know, cause the country to crumble. And then a few strategically placed Starlink routers or what have you, plus, you know, guns that were smuggled in by this party or that party, would result in the kind of change that I believe he was sold by Trump. The Israelis, you know, who have, from an American perspective, many American policymakers really respect Israeli strategy, military analysis, and take it without question. Right. So I think that was very shocking. And again, there should have been multiple layers of pushback. And indeed there were.

So you saw someone like Joe Kent, the counterterrorism chief, pushing back against this vision but being forced out of the structure so that in the end—and we're getting this from the excerpts of the current report, the book of the moment, **Regime Change**, which I haven't had a chance yet to read—you know, that you've got an American administration that is a very tight and uneducated circle of Trump advisors who work on ignorance, Israeli advice, political pressures, perhaps other kinds of social pressures like blackmail. And you could not imagine a worse decision-making apparatus for the test that they willingly chose to take on.

#Pascal

Yeah, I couldn't agree more. But I must say, in defense of those people who took that decision and of this Israeli strategy—and in defense, I mean, they shouldn't be defended—but just one thing that does speak for their approach is, of course, the Syrian example. Syria kind of collapsed so quickly in 2014 in a way that none of us in the commentariat had foreseen, at least not the people that I was listening to.

In hindsight, you can say, yes, it was a 10-year or 12-year kind of gradual erosion of the Syrian power structures and whatnot, but it happened so quickly in December 2014. That, I must say, when the Israelis tried to convince Trump that Iran would be a mega Syria and it would be, you know, just put enough pressure and then boom, and from below you will have all of this support from the general public. And there are people who genuinely, in Iran and outside, Iranians who really, really, really hate the current government that they have, and building on those, that this could work. But let's stick to Syria now. How do you view the development of Syria and the Syrian example and its importance on the current decisions?

#Leila Hudson

Well, first, let me say that, again, I think what was most in Trump's mind going into Iran was the Venezuelan example, in which you had a decapitation effect and you found a willing candidate, second-in-command, proxy government, and it was all over very quickly and the news cycle moved on. And I really think that that, in fact, was the premise of the Iran war. The Syrian situation is much more complicated, of course. Now, it was indeed very surprising to start noticing the advance out of Idlib in the waning days of November 2014, I guess it was, and then to watch the advance across to Aleppo and down the central core of Syria in a matter of, you know, days. Yeah. That was shocking and surprising.

And it's also very different from what happened in Iran. And it's still unclear to me, even as someone who studies Syria primarily—that's my primary focus—what combination of Turkish, American, and perhaps even Israeli influence caused that to happen. But the Syrian population, and this is a point that is missed by many, many Western analysts who find themselves, or don't even find themselves, but who enthusiastically defend the Assad regime as being part of the axis of resistance—they very seriously underestimate how loathed and hated the Assad regime was by the majority of Syrians. Yes, there were minoritarian communities that were deeply invested in the regime.

#Pascal

The Alawites?

#Leila Hudson

Yes, the Alawites. Um, and to a lesser extent, um, you know, other minority groups in Syria who had hitched their security to the regime for decades, right? Um, but I think people who don't know Syria well really underestimated how deeply, deeply ready the majority of the Syrian Sunni population was to be rid of the Assad regime. And it's hard for many analysts who don't know Syria well to avoid the reflexive position of defending the Assad regime. It was in open conflict since 2011 with the majority of its population. It caused a devastating crisis, killed hundreds of thousands, forced millions into displacement and flight, and had very few defenders or friends, even within those minoritarian communities, left who were not acting out of fear and habit.

So when this movement came sweeping out of Idlib, again, I still don't understand the extent to which—and I'm inclined to think it was primarily nurtured by Erdogan and by Turkey in a long-planned strategic move—but clearly one that had the acquiescence of the United States, and perhaps, you know, some undetermined contributions, at least of some kind, from the Israelis. It's a very different situation, where in Iran, a bigger country, differently composed, you had minority populations and a longstanding minority opposition who were vocal and ready for the fall of the Islamic regime. But the majority of the population, no. And when the war started in the appalling

way that it did, in the midst of negotiations, with a decapitation strike on the Supreme Leader, and most importantly, the unbelievably horrific crime of destroying an elementary school complex with a so-called double tap.

#Pascal

On the first day, yeah.

#Leila Hudson

Yeah, on the first day. If there were populations, as surely there were, who would have liked to be part of a regime change in Iran, and some who, of course, had come out of these demonstrations and these attempts to fortify them with data links and arms, that was swept away by the appalling surprise attack at the behest of Israel. And I did some early interviews in the first days of March to say that, based on everything we know about organizational dynamics, national dynamics, people will rally around the flag. In that particular combination of a large majoritarian population outraged and hurt and distraught, the arming of a small minority was not going to be able to overturn that. And again, very different dynamics. Right.

#Pascal

Okay. I mean, fair enough that you have a completely different political composition, right? That then leads to either rallying around the flag versus, as in Syria, obviously an abandonment, right? Even in the military forces of the government at the time. What about Syria now? We've also seen in the meantime how Israel is not stopping its bombing of Syria. Whenever it wants to take out any kind of infrastructure, it will. It calls it a security parameter, which is, of course, just like Israeli jargon for additional occupation. Because every security parameter it creates, it eventually starts putting settlements there, which then creates the need for more security parameters, which then creates more settlements, and so on and so forth. I mean, it's basically just spreading. Where do you see Syria under al-Julani, the former al-Qaeda leader?

#Leila Hudson

Well, al-Julani doesn't like to be called a pragmatist. He made that point in a couple of interviews where interviewers suggested that he was, you know, adaptable and pragmatic. And he pushed back hard at that idea that he was, in fact, a pragmatist. But, you know, he has incredible popularity still, in spite of his inability to turn the economy around in the 18 months or whatever it has been.

#Pascal

Does he hold actual popularity among a good part of the Syrian people? Because, I mean, a lot of people in my world depict him as just a CIA cutout that went from terrorist into a suit and tie and so on.

#Leila Hudson

That is a dominant discourse, right, among analysts who don't know Syria well. And it's very tempting to sort of take an Assadist position, you know, for people on the European and American left that, in fact, underestimates how incredibly popular Ahmad al-Julani was as people got to know him in the first months and year of his, you know, basically revolution.

#Pascal

Of the takeover after 2024.

#Leila Hudson

He enjoys enormous popularity and respect. Now...

#Leila Hudson

What he has shown, and again, if you take him at his word and he doesn't like to be called pragmatic, what he has shown is discipline, right? It was very surprising, again, to see the military discipline, operations, the development of his Idlib outpost into a pretty comparatively thriving pocket of Syria. Most people think of Idlib as a fourth- or fifth-ranked city within Syria. No one was paying much attention to it except as that refuge of the last remnants of the various resistance forces. So to see that being the basis of a well-organized, disciplined military campaign that sees the Assad, you know, the degraded and tired and despised Assad forces vanishing in front of it, that was, you know, people didn't believe it at first.

They were fearing violence in the streets. And when that didn't happen, and when order was maintained, that was a very big development. The other place where he has demonstrated unusual discipline is actually in refraining from addressing those Israeli bombings and incursions in the moment, right? And that has resulted in this skepticism as to whether he is some kind of Israeli puppet or CIA cutout or what have you. But again, very recently in the discussions that we've seen—I don't know if you followed this—as Trump was performing his, or at least showing, either performing or showing the world his differences with Netanyahu.

And we've heard many accounts of their angry phone calls over the last few days as Netanyahu undermines the Memorandum of Understanding. One of the things that Trump suggested is, oh, I'm going to have Ahmad al-Shar'a fight Hezbollah in Lebanon rather than the Israelis. Netanyahu is killing too many people. I'm going to bring in Syria. And Ahmad al-Shar'a, he knows how to fight

Hezbollah, which in fact is reflective of the actual case that Hezbollah is the enemy of the Sunni forces which now govern Syria. Hezbollah propped up the Assad regime for, you know, the majority of the decade and a half of war. There's no love lost.

There is no natural affinity between those Sunni resistance fighters and the Shiite resistance fighters of Hezbollah. They are enemies. So Trump tapped into this, and he said, oh, I'll get Ahmad al-Shar'a, who he seems to have a weird kind of bro crush on, I'll get them to fight Hezbollah. Ahmad al-Shar'a's response to that, again, was one of discipline and moderation. He needed to very quickly dispel, for his own internal and regional status, the notion that he was going to fight Trump's wars, even with his historical enemy, Hezbollah in Lebanon. And he said, we are in no position right now to go into Lebanon.

And furthermore, our character is such that if we did want to fight Hezbollah or go into Lebanon, we would announce it to the world. We're not doing that. That's not on our agenda now. That's not how we're going to be. He has managed to maintain a lot, a lot of popularity with his own Syrian population by doing something that we talked about at the beginning of this conversation—maintaining polite relations with everyone, including Trump—and not seizing the opportunity or succumbing to the pressure from the Americans to go at his traditional, and Syria's, the majority of the Syrian population's traditional enemy, Hezbollah.

So I think in that way, we see the template for leaders across the region, which is to say, I'm not going to be anyone's mercenary. I'm not going to be anyone's attack force. I'm not going to, especially in the wake of a brutal war that we've just come out of, plunge into another war. He doesn't have the military for it. He doesn't have the appetite for it. And he's got the discipline not to do it. So he's not going to do that. And that's the kind of template of leadership that this realignment of all the local players in the West Asian region could bring forth.

#Pascal

Mm-hmm.

#Leila Hudson

And that would be one kind of feature of multipolarity. We've got good relations with the Chinese. We haven't cut off relations with our old enemies, the Russians, because they could be useful as a counterweight to the Americans. We're going to resist the opportunity that someone like Saddam Hussein would have taken to rush in and commit to a Syrian invasion and war with Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. No, no, no, no, no, we're not going to do that. So just a very cautious, careful development of communicative relations between, and not jumping into the plans and the plots of a declining hegemon or any other hegemon, I would hope.

#Pascal

It's very interesting how you're putting this. I mean, maintaining a friendship with all sides is, of course, what I call neutrality. So you would interpret even Syria under al-Assad as such. And if I understand you correctly, you also would argue that al-Assad is probably misunderstood, even within the commentariat, which largely sees him—and I must say they see him—as a CIA cutout and somebody who was put there in order to be in charge, in favor of the US and Israel. But you see this much more nuanced, as somebody who understands the strategic vulnerability and the weakness, so in a sense knows the weakness of Syria, and out of this knowledge then reacts with all of this constraint, but actually constrained to all sides. And while the head-chopping of the past is part of that person, it's not necessarily part of the future, or he's a different kind of type as a political animal than what he was before, as a... as a...

#Leila Hudson

Yes, I think you're getting my point exactly. And I think Syria is one of the points that the commentariat, as you put it, is most wrong about, because it tends to plug Syria into this black and white, you know. And in fact, it is much more nuanced, much more learning. And if you watch Syria closely, as I do—I watch it very closely—you will see Ahmed al-Sharaa, when he makes some mistakes, and there have been absolutely mistakes in letting some of his al-Qaeda non-Syrian cohorts in, wreak havoc and carry out atrocious massacres in some of the coastal regions and minority strongholds, including in the chaos that happened in southern Syria.

That was, of course, tragic, dangerous. But he learns from that, pulls back, and moves on. We recently had an incident in Syria, which probably the Western commentariat didn't see, in which someone who had been an opponent of the Assad regime and who had spent time in Assad's dungeons exercised the newfound freedom of social media under Ahmad al-Sharaa and called out some of the Syrian businessmen who had made promises about reconstruction and then failed to put their money where their mouth was. He was arrested. That dissident was arrested. Well, social media, the Syrian social media, picked this up.

They said, no, Ahmad al-Sharaa, you do not treat dissidents the way that Assad treated them. And within a week, the guy was released from custody. So he is responsive to this socially mediated advice that he gets from the world's cosmopolitan Syrians, from Syrians in exile, from Syrians who are really wrestling with the potential and the possibility of some kind of Sunni extremism that everyone is waiting to see emerge in Syria. I'll give you one other example. I watch a lot of Syrian drama and television, and over the last couple of decades, Syria became a regional exporter of television drama and comedy and all these things.

Under Ahmad al-Sharaa, and this is quite surprising, the cultural standards of what you're seeing in Syrian-produced dramas include rather risqué sexual encounters or allusions to sexual encounters that we never saw in Syrian drama under the Assad regime. So it's very surprising that when the Islamist forces come to power, the television standards of what is permissible to show—for example, a man and a woman sitting in bed together, or women dancing provocatively in a nightclub, or drug

use, things that you would never see in the long and distinguished history of social drama under the Baathists—are suddenly being shown in Syrian drama.

And it's quite interesting. We're like, is this a pushback from the artistic community against the potential uptightness of the Islamist regime? Whatever it is, it's happening, right? And it's not being cracked down on. So there are missteps, there are moments, but in general, what you see is a negotiation between some of the more cosmopolitan elements and the secular and laic elements of Syrian society, and a new regime that certainly has an Islamist pedigree but is also quite responsive to this idea of a multi-religious, multi-ethnic Syria for all. And, you know, the incorporation of the Kurdish paramilitaries would also tend to promote that perception. And we will see.

#Pascal

We will see. I mean, it's very good that you're calling attention to this. I wouldn't have known about it, and I wouldn't have looked at it under this lens. One might be tempted to say, like, okay, this might be some form—I mean, the last example you gave might be some form of concession to the liberal ideals of the West if he is, in fact, being controlled by whatnot. But we don't have to go there, and we don't have to allude to that.

#Leila Hudson

But this is art that's produced for a local and regional audience. So it's certainly not some, you know—it's in strong Syrian dialect and very reflective of those local television and film traditions. It's really quite interesting. And again, it gives me hope, right? And who knows what will happen tomorrow or any other day.

But my hope is that whether or not Middle Eastern power players like to be described as pragmatic, they're strongly infused with, you know, traditional values, but they are also realizing in new ways, because of this conflict, that their future economic stability and potential prosperity depend on what you described as that multilateral neutrality—not putting all your eggs in the basket of radicalism or sectarianism, not putting all your eggs in the basket of a single hegemon, as, of course, the American domination of the Middle East has accustomed us to, or any other hegemon—but having kind of negotiated relationships, open lines of communication with everybody so that you are less and less inclined to be somebody's puppet. Always invoke another friendship, another relationship or series of relationships to counterbalance when a wannabe superpower or unipower or whatever tells you what to do. Again, Israel and the American-Israeli relationship are still the wild card in all this. But when you look at the Gulf, when you look at Iraq, when you look at Iran, you see a certain amount of pragmatism that has as its end goal economic prosperity rather than ideological dominance.

#Pascal

Well, that would be a very good end goal for everybody. And this is where we have to wrap up our conversation. But I would really like to point out that you also published a book relatively recently, also about Syria: **Lines of Flight: Assemblages of Home, Syrian Women Displaced.** And I know you have it next to you. Can you show it for just a second?

#Leila Hudson

Yes, I will show it. This was a labor of love. It's also a women-centric perspective on the Syrian displacement, war, and migration, and it follows the stories of five middle-aged Syrian traditional Sunni wives and mothers who made the very difficult decisions to flee the civil war in Syria around 2012, when their lives became unsustainable and this dreadful violence initiated by the Assad regime crept closer to them. It tells the story of how each one of these women and their families made the decision to leave Syria, move into refuge in nearby Arab states in Lebanon and Jordan, then how they made the move to Turkey, and then how some of them took the perilous Mediterranean water routes to Europe over the course of five or six years. So that's the book.

#Pascal

A very big story, and one that I'm glad you're telling everybody. And we will certainly have you back in the future to talk about this region again. Dr. Leila Hudson, thank you.

#Leila Hudson

Thank you so much. It was fun.