



Jeffrey Sachs on the fall of Syria's Assad & Trump's call for a ceasefire in Ukraine

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Zain Raza (ZR): Thank you for tuning in, I'm your host Zain Raza. Before I begin this interview, I would like to update you on the progress of our recently launched crowdfunding campaign that aims to raise 55,000 Euros by January 10th so that we can continue our independent and non-profit journalism in 2025. In our last year's crowdfunding campaign, we raised 53,000 Euros thanks to 1,700 donors. And in this year's campaign so far, we have managed to raise 10,400 Euros thanks to 340 donors, which is around 20% of our target. This is the fastest start to any of our crowdfunding campaigns since we launched our organization in 2014. As a comparison last year, at this time we had managed to raise 3,090 Euros. So if you're watching our videos regularly and have not donated so far, please take a few moments and just donate a small amount of three to five Dollars or Euros. If all of our 155,000 subscribers just donate that amount today, we will not only be able to reach a crowdfunding target with ease, but also go much beyond that, which can improve our capacities going into 2025. Today I'll be talking to Jeffrey Sachs about the latest developments in Syria, Israel and Gaza, as well as the war in Ukraine. Jeffrey serves as the Director for the Center of Sustainable Development at Columbia University, where he holds the academic rank of University Professor, the institution's highest academic rank. He's also a world-renowned economist, best-selling author, and a global leader in sustainable development. Jeffrey, welcome back to the show.

Jeffrey Sachs (JS): Thank you very much. Good to be back with you.

ZR: I would like to start this interview with another crisis that has recently erupted in the Middle East, namely in Syria. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, also known as HTS, launched an offensive in northwestern Syria less than two weeks ago and successfully overthrew the government of Bashar al-Assad. Despite being backed by Iran and Russia, Assad was unable to repel the offensive by HTS, which in turn was backed by Turkey. As we speak, Israeli forces are conducting airstrikes throughout Syria, destroying major airports and other strategic military infrastructure, including in Damascus. Furthermore, Al Jazeera is reporting that the Israeli army has taken over territory in southern Syria to create what they call a security buffer zone. Qatar, Iraq, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have just come out and condemned Israel's dangerous land grab in the Syrian Golan Heights. Western leaders have welcomed the fall of Assad. Germany and France, for example, have expressed their willingness to work with the various Syrian groups, while the US, according to a White House official, has confirmed that it is in contact with the various groups. As for Russia, according to Al Jazeera, satellite imagery has revealed that Russian naval ships have just left their base at Tartous on Syria's coast. Can you start by giving your assessment of the fall of Assad and then talk about why the West, led by the US, broadly supported and welcomed this offensive and victory by HTS?

JS: Well, this is the culmination of an effort that goes back decades, but in practical terms, at least to 2011, of the United States to bring down Assad. And this is at the behest of Israel, so this is really a US-Israel-Turkey operation. Of course, Turkey has somewhat different aims to extend its own power and to fight the Kurds, which the US supports, so we're not at the end of that story. But this is essentially a US-Israel-Turkish operation. This isn't something that

just happened because of Turkey or something that just happened because of HTS internally or just the collapse of the Assad government. This is a longstanding effort. The reason that it occurred so rapidly, it seems clear in retrospect, is because of the weakening of Hezbollah in recent weeks, which, of course, was the target of Israel's arms in southern Lebanon. But it seems clear that the Hezbollah forces that were supporting Assad pulled out of Syria to reinforce Hezbollah in Lebanon, and that created the opening for HTS and for the Israelis from the south to move in and invade Syria. So this is, of course, interconnected with Israel's broader war, and Israel's expansion into Syria is also consistent with Israel's broader war, which is to recreate the Middle East under Israel's regional power and ultimately to defeat Iran, which has been Netanyahu's strategic aim for decades, and this is a part of that longer-term effort. So the US talking to the other side and so forth, this is not something that's just happened or the US is catching up with events. This is a coordinated US-Israel-Turkish operation, and it's a major event, but it almost surely opens the way to a wider war and to more instability and to the carving up of Syria, rather than to some new, stable, peaceful, democratic government. Dream on.

ZR: Let me dig deeper on that. Depending on which media outlet or government spokesperson one listens to, some describe HTS as an opposition force or simply as a Syrian group, while others use terms such as rebels or jihadists. In Western media, we are currently seeing round-the-clock images and videos of people on the street celebrating the fall of Assad and creating a narrative of a people-led, grassroots revolution that just successfully overthrew an authoritarian regime. What is largely missing, however, is the background of HTS's leader, Abu Mohammad Al-Jolani, who is one of the founding leaders of al-Qaeda in Syria, Al-Nusra, and a former deputy to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. According to Amnesty International, HTS was responsible for the systematic killing of entire families in Alawite areas of Latakia. Al-Jolani recently gave an exclusive interview to CNN, in which he presented himself as a modern man, and stated that he has transformed himself since the early days when he was in his 20s. Although HTS is still on the terror list of the US, the UK, Turkey, as well as the UN, they are now being welcomed and approached [by Western governments], as I mentioned earlier. Is this a similar policy that the US played, for example, in Afghanistan? And do you think this could possibly backfire, not only against Israel, but also against the United States, given that these people have come to power?

JS: What we see on social media may have absolutely no reality to it on the street. So, nothing that we're just seeing clicking on CNN, God forbid, or some other mainstream media shows us anything. We can remember the celebrations of the fall of Saddam Hussein, the celebrations of the fall of Gaddafi, and so forth. It's not hard to stage 50 people celebrating, waving flags, and maybe they are waving flags, but I would be very surprised if we don't see a lot of bloodshed and a lot of war in Syria in the days ahead. Now, the fact that Al-Jolani is part of Al-Qaeda means that he's been on the CIA payroll, that's all. This is a CIA operation. The whole attempt to bring down Assad from 2011 was Al-Qaeda. And of course, there are occasionally breakaway groups like ISIS, which may not be on CIA payroll, or actually may be on CIA payroll, we never quite know. It's not like the books are open and that there's a shred of honesty to any of it, but the CIA MO [Modus Operandi] of using radical jihadists

dates back at least to 1979. It may have been an innovation in Afghanistan with the Mujahideen. Maybe it was even before that. The Soviet Union on its southern rim is Muslim to a large extent. This means that the CIA, back to the 1940s, was working with Islamic groups and Islamic militant groups to try to destabilize the Soviet Union. Remember that the core of the CIA, going back now to its founding in 1947, is to try to destroy Russia or the Soviet Union. And that basic goal has not changed. The end of the Cold War didn't really change very much. It went from a fight against the Soviet Union to an attempt to dismantle, or as they say in Washington, decolonize Russia itself. That's why we have war in Ukraine. That's why the war in Ukraine is not disconnected from the Middle East. This has been the CIA MO for decades. Whenever you see jihadists, think CIA. This is what's going on. That's not some crazy talk. This is contracts. We know it. This is Osama bin Laden. It gets embarrassing once in a while for these people. They don't like when the American contractors turn around and blow up Americans, but that's part of the operations, actually, it turns out. Yes, Al-Jolani no doubt has been part of this US-Israel-Turkish gambit going way back. Al-Nusra, we know, was part of Turkey's operation. We know that Operation Timber Sycamore, that was an Obama-era finding to overthrow Assad, directly involved jihadists. So there's nothing new under the sun in this.

ZR: So how do you think this will look out geopolitically? Russia has lost its naval base there. Turkey has posed a threat now with this group against the Kurds. Iran has been further weakened. Do you think Western hegemony led by the United States has made significant gains here, and that would in some ways stabilize the region, or do you think we are heading for an all-out war?

JS: I think most likely we're seeing an expanding war. I don't think the long-term trends are towards Western hegemony. Russia will win in Ukraine or we will get an escalation to nuclear war, depending on how crazy the Americans are. The war in the Middle East shows no sign of camping down. Remember that all of the wars in the Middle East that we've seen since the 1990s are a Netanyahu strategy, actually. It seems weird. How can one say that? If you look at the list in Netanyahu's book in 1996, *Fighting Terrorism*, or you look at the Clean Break strategy, which was US political consultants advising or drafting Netanyahu's game plan in 1996, or you look at the list of countries that the Bush administration planned to conquer after 9/11, this is a long-standing playbook. There's a famous episode of General Wesley Clark, the former NATO commander, being shown a piece of paper just after 9/11 in 2001, when Clark was at the Pentagon, and the paper said: We're going to invade seven countries in five years. The list was Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Iran, Somalia, Libya, and Sudan. Well, low and behold, every one of those countries has been the object of a US war or a US proxy war since then, with one exception, partial exception, and that's Iran. Which is the big prize that Israel wants to pull the US into a war with Iran, which could easily become a world war. Now, what has happened with these six wars? What's the state of Libya? Ongoing civil war. What's the state of Sudan? Ongoing war and starvation. What's the state of South Sudan, which is broken apart by the CIA from Sudan? Ongoing war. What is the state of Lebanon? War. What is the state of Syria? War. What is the state of Iraq? US occupation and instability. In other words, has Netanyahu's plan solved anything? Did it create Western hegemony or did

it create a bloodbath in the region? I'd go with the bloodbath interpretation. I think Israel has rather maniacally destabilized the Middle East. The US pathetically has carried out Israeli foreign policy. So much of this is known and not talked about, but it's really an unpleasant reality. Netanyahu laid it out. We're going to keep control over Palestine. That's going to lead to resistance such as Hamas and Hezbollah, and we're going to take out all the governments that support the resistance movement. It was spelled out very clearly in 1996 onward, and that's what the US is doing. Somehow, it's not even military for rent, by the way. We fund it. Israel says: Go to war here, and we go to war there. It isn't solving a single problem, but it is killing a hell of a lot of people. And I don't believe anything is going to be solved in Syria. I could be mistaken, but it would be the first time. And again, on social media, which may or may not be true, could be fake news, could be old reruns, we're now seeing postings of people being killed in cold blood. All this morning, US time, we're seeing sites of people being shot in cold blood, ostensibly these hours, ostensibly in Syria. I can't verify it, because nothing is verifiable very easily for me on the web, but it rings true that we're entering a period of instability. And of course, with Israel invading and saying it's not invading, and the United States saying, well, they're terrorists, but they're not terrorists, it's just an ongoing idiocy where you can't find one honest word from the US government.

ZR: I would like to draw our attention to the latest developments taking place in Ukraine. Last Saturday, President-elect Donald Trump called for an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine, a day after meeting with Ukrainian President Zelensky and French President Macron in Paris. He made the following remarks on social media, and let me cite him here. Quote: "There should be an immediate ceasefire and negotiations should begin. Too many lives are being needlessly wasted, too many families destroyed", unquote. This came a day after the United States approved a \$1 billion military aid package for Ukraine that includes long-term supply of weapons. What do you make of Trump's cause for a ceasefire negotiation? Is it even realistic now, given how much political capital, credibility, and even lives Zelensky and NATO invested into this conflict?

JS: Well, if Trump were actually to follow through on the point that this Ukraine war needs to end, it can end. The way that it can end is relatively straightforward, I'd say completely straightforward, which is that Trump needs to declare NATO is not expanding to Ukraine, and on that basis, the US is committed – and that doesn't mean just now or the next five years or the next ten years, that's permanent – and on that basis, the fighting can stop because Russia's security interests are going to be recognized, and then the rest of the issues on territory, on demilitarization zones, on mutual security, on missile placements and other concerns can be addressed. But the core of this is the US attempt to grab Ukraine under the US military alliance. This is a plan that goes back to 1994 in the Clinton and White House and was spelled out by Zbig Brzezinski in 1997 in his book, *The Grand Chess Board*. I often point out that American foreign policy has not changed year to year by presidents. It's deep-seated. All these wars in the Middle East go back to the 1990s. The attempt to expand NATO goes back 30 years this year. So this is what we're playing out. If Trump is aware and acts on that awareness, to recognize that the key to ending the war is to end the reason for the war, and that is this completely misguided US hegemonic aspiration for NATO to be everywhere in the

world. I say like the board game Risk. You're trying to put your peace everywhere, this is how I characterize US foreign policy. If Trump recognizes that that doesn't serve American interests, the war can end basically immediately. If instead he says, well, we need a ceasefire and NATO is not Russia's business or part of Ukraine will join NATO, and some of his advisors peddle such plans, the war won't stop. In other words, the war will stop if the reason for the war ends. It won't stop unless the reason for the war ends. Russia's winning on the battlefield. So the question is whether the US will escalate or whether it will remove the cause of the war. But there won't be just a ceasefire. It's not Russia's interest.

ZR: Let us now look at Israel's assault in Gaza, where the death toll has exceeded 44,600. In November, Human Rights Watch published a report holding Israel responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity. And this month Amnesty International also released a report which documents how Israel is violating the Genocide Convention with specific intent to destroy Palestinians in Gaza. And let me quote their General Secretary Agnes Callamard here. Quote: "Month after month Israel has treated Palestinians in Gaza as a subhuman group unworthy of human rights and dignity, demonstrating its intent to physically destroy them", unquote. End of November, the ICC, International Criminal Court, issued arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, as well as Hamas' military commander Mohammed Deif. Regarding the arrest warrants for Netanyahu and Gallant, the ICC stated that they were responsible for the war crime of using starvation as a method of warfare, and are guilty of crimes against humanity through murder, persecution and other inhuman acts. The US fundamentally rejected these warrants, accusing the ICC of drawing a false equivalence between Israel and Hamas, as well as employing a flawed process to come to this conclusion. When the ICC issued arrest warrants for Russian President Putin for the war crimes of the illegal deportation and transfer of children during the Russian war in Ukraine, the US welcomed it. Now that the ICC has issued arrest warrants against their ally in Benjamin Netanyahu, the US is objecting, even though both the US and Germany rhetorically champion a rules-based order that the claim is continuously violated by actors such as Russia and China. Can you comment on the United States' reaction, as well as what implications this will have on international justice?

JS: The American values are that America should dominate the world. That's what the rule-based order means. It's not even anything else, because the US has never, in all of this absurd propaganda, ever defined what the rules-based order is. It's like an old jingle on a commercial. Rules-based order, rules-based order, you could put it to music. It's a joke. The US has no internal legal or ethical or moral consistency. When you're trying to rule the world, you overthrow governments, you launch wars, you assassinate people, and in the case of the war in Gaza, you are complicit in genocide. So the US is complicit in genocide. If the ICC had more power and would not be crushed, it could indict US officials the same way. The US is part of this morning till night, night till morning. It arms Israel. It provides intelligence for Israel. It provides the financing for Israel. It strategizes with Israel. It supports Israel. It vetoes resolutions in the UN. This is what it is. And yes, Israel is committing genocide. And the US is complicit in genocide. Will the US say so? Of course not. Is it a surprise that the US is duplicitous? If anyone is still surprised, sorry, you don't get it. This is the normal story of

foreign policy. And there are people who defend it. It's an anarchic world and you do what you can. It's a struggle for survival and you want to come out on top. I don't believe that that is the route to safety or security. I believe it's the route to global annihilation because it will end up in nuclear Armageddon if we continue on this path. So I'm not a fan at all of what the US is doing, but I'm not surprised by it either. What has the US done for one minute to show one iota of concern for the ruthless slaughter of tens of thousands of people? And by the way, the number of 44,000 is the count of the bodies that have been pulled from the rubble, not the estimated 10 to 15,000 whose bodies have never been recovered, nor probably another 100,000 or more of people who have died from exposure, from starvation, from lack of medical care, from lack of anesthetics for children and surgery. The scale of brutality and the scale of the loss is horrific, but it's not an accident. The government of Israel is quite straightforward, though usually in Hebrew to its own supporters, that it wants the Palestinians out of there, that it wants to make Gaza completely unlivable. It's not a secret. They don't say it in English in public when they think that someone might care what they're saying, but boy, do they say it in the rallies, do they say it on the TikTok postings, do they say it as these extremists celebrate the deaths of the Palestinians, and that's how the ICJ case is built. They've left a complete record of genocidal intentions. Not to mention the actual genocidal outcomes, but under the convention, intentions matter, and the intentions are very clear.

ZR: To my last question, I want to specifically ask you this, as you have appeared both in the mainstream media and alternative media to comment on the most breaking political issues of our times. In your view, why is it essential today for people to support media outlets such as ours that do not take any money from corporations and governments and believe in the principle of independence?

JS: Please do so. And happy to give a shout-out for you and for others trying to make real information available. I've watched the collapse of the US mainstream media. The New York Times, you read only to find out what absurdity they're claiming each day. You cannot read The New York Times for information. It's a propaganda page for the US government. Unfortunately, this is basically true of the main cable networks when it comes to these wars. It's true of the other major print publications. You can read them to find out what narrative the US government is peddling, but you will not find the truth on them. So we need to use the ability to reach out in creative ways such as you're doing to bring voices of people who see things, hear things, know things, have been engaged in things to tell more completely what is going on.

ZR: Jeffrey Sachs, world-renowned economist and bestselling author, thank you so much for your time today.

JS: Great to be with you. Thanks a lot.

ZR: And thank you for tuning in today. If you watched this video until the very end, please take a few more moments to support our crowdfunding campaign. We are an independent and non-profit journalistic media outlet that does not take any money from corporations or governments. We don't even allow advertisement, all with the goal of providing you with

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