

Patrick Lawrence

## **Lipstick on a pig': The U.S. reinvents Syria's terrorists.**

Americans have been routinely subjected to official disinformation and misrepresentations over the past eight decades of U.S. foreign policy—the coups, interventions, assassinations, and so on down a long list of unlawful conduct and the deceptions that obscure it. Jacobo Árbenz, deposed as Guatemala's president in 1954, was a Communist threat to American security. So was Salvador Allende of Chile, 16 years later. Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and the “contras” in Nicaragua: These were “freedom fighters.” Sadaam Hussein—this a famous case—stockpiled weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Ukraine under the Zelensky regime in Kiev is a democracy waging war in the free world's behalf.

You get used to this kind of thing if you are an American. And if you are a paying-attention American, you occasionally think of Arendt's many ruminations on the prevalence of lying in America's public discourse. “The sense by which we take our bearings in the real world,” she once remarked, “is being destroyed.”

It is tempting to conclude the policy cliques in Washington and the media serving them have sunk to a new level of dereliction since Sunni fundamentalists led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, HTS, swept through Syria earlier this month and, in two weeks' time, took Damascus. Official accounts of these events, and the reams of coverage in corporate and state-funded media, make it impossible to understand what has happened in Syria so long as one relies upon them. The distance between the presented “reality” and reality must surely be without precedent.

To draw any such conclusion would not be right. Bearing the American record well in mind, the thick wall of deception that keeps the truth of the Syria crisis so well hidden is merely a reminder of the long, long darkness, the darkness of ignorance, in which Americans have lived since the 1945 victories set in motion the policy cliques' quest for global primacy. The lies of the past are usually exposed and in retrospect seem remarkably crude. The owl of Minerva never fails to fly, this is to say, but it flies only when the events in question no longer matter.

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Antony Blinken flew to Aqaba, Jordan, last weekend for talks with diplomats from Turkey, the European powers, and various Arab nations on the future of Syria under an HTS regime. Here are some of [the secretary of state's remarks](#) at a press conference afterward:

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Today, the United States and our partners in the region have agreed on a set of shared principles to guide our support for Syria and its people going forward. America and our partners have an important stake in helping the Syrian people chart this new path....

The Syrian population has been traumatized by decades of repression. Throughout its rule, the Assad regime stoked tensions among ethnic and religious lines to divide the Syrian people. After more than a decade of conflict and many decades of corruption, humanitarian needs of the people are massive....

Look at what we've seen over the past few days, what the world has seen—so many demonstrations of Syrians' commitment to build a different kind of nation, to embrace their newfound freedom, to choose national unity over narrow sectarian or ethnic interests....

There are some immediate needs that I think have to be addressed—for example, a shortage of fuel—so that the lights can be turned on, so that stores can be opened, so people can get around. That's something we talked about today. We'll be focused on that near-term need. Wheat—also in urgent need. So those are some of the immediate tasks....

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What we have here is a daisy chain of lies, woven by an ideologue of near-fanatical temperament, a man dedicated equally to advancing America's hegemonic power and to obscuring it behind a curtain of beneficent intent that has hung in place since the U.S. first developed a foreign policy toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

“Syria and its people,” “the Syrian people,” “the Syrian population,” “their newfound freedom,” “national unity over narrow sectarian interests”: These phrases locate the events of the past two weeks well along the spectrum of positive developments—steps in the right direction, as Americans say. Nothing in this is remotely truthful.

The Assad regime has fallen, Islamic militias dedicated to rule according to Sharia law will take its place. The Syrian people, far from “rising up,” as Blinken's

imagery suggests, had little to do with this: They were and remain powerless witnesses to a violent coup and are now profoundly uncertain of their future. The Assad regime, for all its apparent repression, was a secular state now to be replaced by a theocratic state.

Syrians need fuel, Syrians need wheat. No mention on this point of the viciously inhumane sanctions the U.S. and its allies have long imposed on Syria—2,900 of them to date, according to Guy Mettan, the distinguished Swiss journalist. The U.S. has routinely stolen Syrian oil since the Trump presidency—this a matter of record providing one can find the record—and burned its wheat fields. No mention of this, either.

Now the U.S. wishes to help, as Blinken vigorously stressed at his press conference. Now the U.S. is openly supporting Salafist ideologues with a long record of extremist violence. If you read the transcript of Blinken's remarks, he said as much this without once mentioning HTS. After the talks in Aqaba, we must note, [Blinken acknowledged direct contact with HTS leaders](#) even as—a contradiction the size of a mountain here—the group remains on the State Department's list of "FTOs," foreign terrorist organizations.

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It may be unprecedented, or nearly, that the U.S. now openly backs an organization it classifies as terrorist and appears prepared to cooperate as these radical militias assume power with no suggestion of democratic process and many indications it will rule according to religious law. This leaves the press in a difficult position, given its obvious subservience to power. How should media report on these developments while preserving the appearance of America as ever the benign evangelist of emancipatory democracy?

The answer is found in all the major American dailies and the reports of all the network broadcasters. As Americans are fond of saying, the imperative is to put lipstick on a pig.

Over the course of a half-century in my profession, I have never seen coverage so transparently derelict, so willfully irresponsible, so intentionally dedicated to misinforming and disinforming readers and viewers. From an inventory of innumerable examples, I select two. [Here](#) is a piece by Neil MacFarquhar, a veteran of *The New York Times*'s notoriously unprofessional Moscow bureau. It appeared in the paper's Sunday editions under the headline "How Will the Rebels Rule Syria? Their Past Offers Clues." And [here](#) is one by three *Times* reporters of lesser note, none of whom reported from anywhere near Syria. It appeared just as HTS other jihadist groups began their offensive earlier this month. Its headline asked, "Who Are the Rebels Leading the Offensive in Syria?"

The running theme in these pieces and the hundreds of reports they exemplify is that HTS began, yes, as a violent group of fundamentalist fanatics whose leaders and militias descended from the Islamic State and its infamously brutal offspring, Jabhat al-Nusra, which, after several shape shifts and name changes, now calls itself al-Nusra Front. But all the gruesome conduct—the murders, sexual abuses, kidnappings, and on down the list—is over now. So are the old dreams of a caliphate. HTS now plans to form "a salvation government" in Syria.

To their credit, the three journalists who reported and wrote "Who Are the Rebels," all of whom are women, did not gloss HTS's terrorist history. Then—inevitably, for this is the job—comes the smear of lipstick:

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Abandoning its rhetoric about an Islamic caliphate, the group's leadership said it

wanted to replace the Assad government with one inspired by Islamic principles. Though the distinction may seem subtle, analysts say the group's rule—while still deeply conservative, intolerant and authoritarian—has been less brutal and dogmatic than that of the Islamic State, which established a bloody regime in territory it controlled in Iraq and another part of Syria.

[end indent.]

Still intolerant, still authoritarian, but less brutal—and so, we are to infer, not so bad for the people of Syria. I have never envied journalists who, since Western media abandoned their independence from power after the attacks of September 2001, have to write sentences such as these. It is an ignoble task, but one must do the necessary if one wishes to draw checks from corporate-owned publications.

The Macfarquhar piece is in same line but far worse.

It begins by recounting how, when HTS ruled its stronghold in the Idlib governate, it taxed olive growers 5 percent or more, no exceptions, during the autumn harvests, stationing collectors at each olive press to gather the takings. This is how HTS financed itself—apart, of course, from what funds it received as part of Washington's now-infamous covert operation (which MacFarquhar does not mention). Later in the piece MacFarquhar elaborates:

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It levied fees on all kinds of goods and enterprises, including crops, border crossings, construction, trade, shopkeeping and craftwork. In addition, companies linked to the group enjoyed a monopoly on providing fuel, electricity, water and garbage collection.

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As is easily discernible even from this brief account, HTS relied on extortion, with the obvious threat of violent retribution, given the olive growers, shopkeepers, traders, and all other residents of Idlib knew firsthand of the group's record of violence. But this is not how MacFarquhar reports on the HTS way of ruling. Instead we hear from a consultant of no evident qualifications in these matters, who informs MacFarquhar, "HTS exemplifies adaptability in conflict economics."

Adaptability in conflict economics.

Gleaning lessons from the HTS governing method in Idlib and suggesting it will carry this method over to national rule from Damascus, MacFarquhar writes later in his piece:

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Since 2017, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its affiliated organizations, driven by a hunger for broader power, created a certain level of stability in Idlib, governing with pragmatism and discipline. While the group retained overall control, it governed through a civilian authority with 11 ministries, which allowed it to concentrate on rebuilding its militia as a more structured force.

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Stability, pragmatism, civilian authority, governing as against ruling. You find no mention of democratic process of any kind in any of the Western reporting. You find instead the language of apologists, as in this passage, again from MacFarquhar:

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In Idlib, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham maintained a robust internal security force to

confront other military factions and domestic critics, prompting regular protests against what were seen as authoritarian methods and against harsh jail conditions.

[end indent.]

A robust internal security force: vigorously repressive police. What were seen as authoritarian methods: authoritarian methods. Harsh jail conditions: a gloss on the torture and brutality for which Western media have long condemned the Assad regime.

Language, as these two pieces make clear, is a powerfully effective instrument in what we now call perception management. Terrorists are “rebels,” just as the Nicaraguan “contras” of decades back were “freedom fighters.” HTS will impose Sharia law (and Sharia punishments) but it is pragmatic and will bring—the holy grail in this degraded discourse—stability.

This is not merely how America explains its intentions and conduct to the rest of the world. It is, just as significantly for its consequences, how America explains its intentions and conduct to itself. Myth triumphs over reality, as it always has in the American story. People lose their bearings, as Arendt put it. Ever vivid on these questions, she once elaborated, “Consistent lying, metaphorically speaking, pulls the ground from under our feet and provides no other ground on which to stand.” The enduring sensation is “a trembling wobbling motion of everything we rely on for our sense of direction and reality.”

And the enduring consequence, she observed elsewhere, is that those in power are free to do whatever they want.

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