



**The Brookings Institution
The Current podcast**

“Syria at a crossroads”

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Episode Summary:

After years of war, Syria is attempting to rebuild under a new government. Brookings Fellow and Director of the Turkey Project Aslı Aydıntaşbaş is joined by Visiting Fellow Mara Karlin, a former assistant secretary of defense, who recently visited Syria. They discuss the country's "plastic moment" of transformation, analyzing the realities on the ground, the complex new leadership, the challenge of lifting U.S. sanctions for reconstruction, and the tough diplomatic balancing act with regional players like Turkey and Israel.

KARLIN: After decades and decades of Assad rule, after 14 years of a horrific civil war, the country is slowly trying to figure out what does it mean to rebuild, and the region is as well. And what happens will be very much based on the agency and actions of those in Syria, in leadership, and also the agency and actions of those around the region and here in Washington.

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AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Welcome to *The Current*. My name is Aslı Aydıntaşbaş. I'm a fellow at the Foreign Policy Program at the Brookings Institution and the director of the Turkey Project. I'm here with a great colleague, Mara Karlin. She is actually a visiting fellow at Brookings right now. Mara has had an outstanding career in national security, in academia, and in government. She has advised six secretaries of defense, and when I met Mara a few years ago, she was serving as the assistant secretary of defense for strategy, plans and capabilities, a huge title. I should also add that Mara is a really fun person to hang out with. Mara, welcome to the show.

KARLIN: Thank you so much. It's a real treat to be here with you.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Great. So, we are here to talk about Syria because you were just there. It's an unusual spot for a visit for tourism for sure. Tell us why you went and what you saw there.

KARLIN: Absolutely. So I went as part of a mission pulled together by the UN High Commission for Refugees. They've been working very closely with the Syrians, particularly since this pretty horrific war started in about 2011 or so. It's spun into this awful civil war, and it resulted in probably close to half a million or so deaths and more than 10 million or so people who were displaced either internally or who became refugees. So the UN High Commission for Refugees has been giving them all sorts of kind of humanitarian support.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Much of the country needs humanitarian assistance, right?

KARLIN: Massively.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: They live below the poverty level, and across the country, throughout the Civil War, the UN kept engaged.

KARLIN: Absolutely. They did indeed. And right now, the poverty levels are probably around 90 percent or so for Syria, pretty dramatic.

So I went to Lebanon and then we drove across the border to Syria. We drove all the way to Damascus and spent some time meeting with refugees who had returned, meeting with government officials and getting an understanding of what's changed since Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was pushed out just last December.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Very few of us have been to Syria since December 9th, I think, when the regime was toppled. So tell me what you saw.

KARLIN: On the drive from Lebanon to Damascus, I didn't really see much in the way of remnants of the war. There were some billboards with Bashar al-Assad's —

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Still?

KARLIN: — face scratched out, as you can imagine. Yes, absolutely. And then when you get to Damascus, it's a little bit surreal frankly. Damascus is bustling. The shops are open, the restaurants are busy, and you don't see much of the civil war there. But 10 minutes outside of Damascus as we drove away to say, a place like Ghouta, which you might remember, was where Assad used chemical weapons.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Eastern Ghouta. Right?

KARLIN: Exactly. In Eastern Ghouta.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: It was a devastating scene. The photos were harrowing.

KARLIN: Totally harrowing and horrific. So we went there and, you know, Assad used chemical weapons there. He used barrel bombs there. There's kind of no shortage of really, really horrible, weapons that, that he used there.

And driving there, again, only about a 10, 15-minute drive from Damascus, it's just devastation as far as the eye can see. Just crumbled buildings after crumbled buildings. And simultaneously, bits of renewal. Families who are returning school kids with their backpacks starting to run around.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Returning from abroad?

KARLIN: A lot of them are returning from abroad. They've spent, you know, a decade plus, many of them living in places like Lebanon or Jordan or Turkey. And some of them have also been internally displaced as well. So going to live in different parts of, of Syria.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Idlib, for example.

KARLIN: Mm-hmm.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: 1 million, 2 million people lived in Idlib province. These were mostly people who fled up north.

KARLIN: Mm-hmm.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: In order to escape the regime.

KARLIN: Absolutely. Absolutely. So you could be in Damascus and feel a little bit of a bubble and not necessarily look around and see that there had been this war for 14 years. Then you go not very far at all, and it is so loud and so, so profound.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: The scars are still there.

KARLIN: The scars are really deep, and frankly, even today, look, the further you get from Damascus, the less likely you're going to have great services, your security situation's going to be sportier, the less you'll feel, kind of the control of the governments that come in over the last year. There, you know, the sort of the

dynamic between the sort of headquarters and the periphery, if you will, is pretty, pretty robust.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: So, in a previous life, I was a journalist, and I did go into Syria except only the North after the start of the civil war to interview the opposition. At the time, this was early in this, after the start of the civil war, I think 2011 or 2012, at the time, it was sort of this mishmash group of locals, the butcher from the town next door, and the teacher from there, a university grad, and a number of foreign fighters that were coming in.

KARLIN: Mm-hmm.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: And this was before the emergence of ISIS. There was sort of this organic Revolution of sorts.

KARLIN: Yes.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: But even when I was there, there would be like trickling in of, oh, these guys are from Bosnia. These guys are actually Chechens.

KARLIN: Mm-hmm.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: And luckily my photographer at the time, his wife was pregnant, so we couldn't stay for any meaningful time, I say luckily, because then all of those areas became very, very dangerous.

KARLIN: Yes.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: The reason I'm throwing this in was, you know, tell us who the people in Damascus are, who you interviewed, and the sort of strange makeup of the new regime.

KARLIN: It is a fascinating and somewhat curious mix in terms of the makeup. You've got former jihadi types, right –

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Including?

KARLIN: Including the president, right?

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: President Al-Sharaa.

KARLIN: Perfect example right there. You know, he sort of started his career, um, fighting against the U.S. in Iraq, for instance.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: So a resume that includes al-Qaida, later on, brief stint at the ISIS, and then fighting ISIS and establishing his own group HTS, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

KARLIN: Indeed. Which ends up being a pretty powerful and capable group that kind of leads the way of pushing out Bashar al-Assad last December. So, you've got folks with that background in the government, you've got a bunch of civil society activists, right? The type who, back when this all first started in 2011, 2012, were a part of that, that uprising.

You've got returning refugees, right? People who were pretty young, went overseas, got educated, and then have come back and are trying to, you know, build the new Syria. And then you've got a whole bunch of folks who served in the government previously. So you'll remember, during the Iraq war, the approach was if you served Saddam's regime in any way, we're getting rid of you. And that's not what's happened here.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: This is the famous De-Baathification after —

KARLIN: Absolutely.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: — you know, the second Gulf War, Iraq war, I guess we call it. But people, whoever was in government was purged. So that wasn't the case here, right?

KARLIN: It wasn't the case at all, which means that you've got a bunch of like technocratic expertise that is helping a bunch of folks who are pretty new to serving in a formal government as they try to figure out how to deal with, frankly, some very, very big challenges ahead of them.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: But you know, I think your perspective would be — is unique, as in, you also know how these things are understood inside U.S. government, inside the bureaucracy. What does it mean for the Trump administration to actually, when they look at Syria, to say, okay, we're lifting sanctions. What are the challenges that a president faces? Because while President Trump has said, okay, I'm going to shake hands with this regime, he seems like a strong guy.

KARLIN: Mm-hmm.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: He's, that's what he said, right?

KARLIN: Yeah.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Strong, strong man.

KARLIN: Yes.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Strong background or something like that. But then he also said, I'm lifting sanctions, but that's not so easy from everything that I read that. What, how do things look from —

KARLIN: What does this look like? Yeah, absolutely.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Inside the government.

KARLIN: So you know, when, when I was first working Syria issues inside the U.S. government, I was the Levant director in the Bush administration. And frankly, there was no love lost for Bashar al-Assad and his team. They were running a whole pipeline of foreign fighters right into Iraq to help kill American service members.

And even back then there was a little debate, particularly with folks across Congress, about how best to convince them to stop doing that. And then, you know, fast

forward to when this uprising started, and as you no doubt recall, there was a lot of euphoria and celebration when everything first started. I remember testifying before Congress, not long after it kicked off and saying, look, I don't know how this is going to turn out. But it's going to be very long and very bloody. And I had no idea how truly horrific it could be.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Fast forward 13 years, nearly 1 million, they're talking about, you know, with sort of, unaccounted, personnel?

KARLIN: Right. The numbers are mind boggling —

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Massive.

KARLIN: Right? A massive humanitarian disaster. And so now there are some really big dilemmas ahead. I think the very first one is, what level of faith do you have in this new government? Right? Particularly given the president's past. So President Trump, I think took a pretty bold move a couple months ago where he said, look, let's lift all the sanctions, recognizing that that will unlock the really critical economic funding for reconstruction and, and stabilization that's, that's just so necessary.

The thing is, it's not totally in his power. So, he was able to lift some sanctions. He suspended some sanctions, but it's actually the Congress now that needs to finish doing that. And you can imagine if you're a businessperson and you're debating whether or not to do some investments, you really want these sanctions totally lifted, not even just suspended and not just, just partial.

So the Congress right now is trying to figure out, okay, do we take this bet? Do we try to work with, in a kind of deep and collaborative way, with this new team in Damascus? Do we put some conditions on them? Like, hey, join the Defeat ISIS coalition, for example. How do we monitor what they're doing?

The thing is that just takes a whole lot of time, right? I mean, we're actually almost a year into the new government. They have been able to welcome back about a million Syrian refugees and a couple million or so or more of the internally displaced folks. But there's still not a lot in the way of services.

You still have security problems and until you're able to get investment in, there's not going to be this massive change.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: So the new government has been pragmatic. They've reached out to every country, including Israel, it seems.

KARLIN: Absolutely.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: And they've been saying all the right things since Saudi Arabia and Turkey back, clearly back the new regime.

KARLIN: Indeed.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Trump has given them a huge, sort of, legitimacy, sense of legitimacy —

KARLIN: Absolutely.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: — by meeting with President al-Sharaa in Riyadh, but of course there are two important tests. Are they likely to be part of the global coalition, the anti-terrorism structure? And secondly, what do they do about relations with Israel?

KARLIN: I think you are spot on that those are two huge dilemmas that they have to figure out. In terms of whether or not to join the Global Coalition, look, ISIS is much less of a threat than it was five years ago, 10 years ago. So even merely for optics, it actually makes a lot of sense to join this coalition, right?

If you're worried about the background of some of the folks in leadership, like the president in Syria and their ties to groups like that, the best thing one could do is actually show, no, I'm part of the team that wants to help defeat, defeat these guys. And so that, that would make sense. There is a little bit of hesitancy, um, and it's kind of fascinating.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Tell, tell us what the hesitancy is as far as the current Syrian decision makers are. Is it their ideological background? Is it the coalition of sort of foreign fighters that they have on their ranks?

KARLIN: So it seems like it's actually less their ideological background and there's a little bit of public nervousness inside Syria. And that's because, look, while a whole lot of people in Syria didn't like ISIS, as you know, the actions of the Defeat ISIS coalition involved having pretty major airstrikes, a pretty big impact on a whole bunch of spots across Syria. And so, when some in Syria among the public, think of the Defeat ISIS coalition, yes they're pleased ISIS was defeated, and they also realize that that coalition played a role in, uh, you know, really destroying some of their towns.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Especially in Mosul, in Raqqah, and so on.

KARLIN: Raqqah is a perfect example.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: So things look very different from the bottom up. Like, constituencies.

KARLIN: Yeah, it's a little bit more complicated in that regard. But that said, I think both Congress and I think the Trump administration will want to see that willingness to kind of stand up and say, we are not supporters of ISIS, and in fact we want to be part of the coalition.

Your next question, I think, is exactly spot on as well. What about Israel? Look, the last time the Israelis and the Syrians signed any sort of deal was like 1974, following the big conflict in '73. And it effectively said, hey, we're just going to separate, separate ourselves, you know, throwing this kind of, one of many temporary UN forces in the region.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: With Golan Heights remaining on the Israeli side. And sort of an issue that hasn't at least legally been resolved.

KARLIN: Oh, absolutely, absolutely not. But we have seen a willingness by this government inside Damascus to engage the Syrians. I think that's been a big piece that the Trump administration has been pushing as well.

I think there's an interesting dilemma here for the Israelis, who traditionally felt like having an authoritarian strongman in Syria was better for their security. And now they're not exactly sure like many others, what to make of this new leadership.

And so they've got to figure out, do they want to encourage fragmentation inside Syria? And we've seen a little of that in terms of the —

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Some sort of decentralization of Syria.

KARLIN: Absolutely. Do they want that, or do you know, are they comfortable trying to support and work with this new government? Uh, my impression from Damascus is there's a desire to at least have some sort of conversation and try to think through things like security. But you know, it's sort of anyone's guess what each party will want to do here.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: They're talking to the Israelis and there's sort of all this talk out there on a security agreement, potentially a security agreement between Israel and Syria, but they're also sandwiched, right, between Turkey and Israel. Two countries that increasingly see each other as regional rivals.

KARLIN: I mean, look, you know this topic better than anyone, so we need to turn to you. The one thing I would, I would just note is when we turn to a different part of the region, if we look at Gaza, for example, the Israelis have made it clear that there's effectively one country they don't want touching that —

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: One country.

KARLIN: Just one country. And it is Turkey. But I'd be really curious to hear your thoughts on, what does that dynamic look like?

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Well, it's going to be a very tough juggling act for Ahmed al-Sharaa because clearly both Turkey and Israel want a sphere of influence inside Syria. I think, Ahmed al-Sharaa wants, he's trying to manage this rivalry, but also try to develop an autonomous sovereignty of sorts by sort of making sure that they don't fight over Syrian's territory. And, you know, he seems to be trying to do his own balancing act. I saw that he went out to Russia, he's going to Saudi Arabia. You know? He doesn't just want to be beholden to Turkey.

KARLIN: Exactly. If you're trying to run Syria right now, all you want are friends. You want friends everywhere, and ideally friends who can inject money into your system because this new Syrian government is just juggling so many things.

Look, there's a lot of enthusiasm from the refugees who are returning. I met a number of them at the border. And then they try to get home, and home may or may not exist. Home may or may not have school or services. They may be really dependent on others. Add that to the many spoilers that we've started to talk about: ISIS, the Israelis, the Iranians, the Russians, the Turks. And so it's clear they need

as many friends as possible while also figuring out, as you noted, what does it mean to run a new Syria?

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Well, I mean, that seems like a great place to end this conversation but just want to get your quick take on the sort of feelings you left with when you left Syria. Optimism? Pessimism? Is this doable?

KARLIN: So look, it's a little hard for any of us who've spent decades on this region to have optimism and butterflies and unicorns. But, I would say this. It is a plastic moment right now.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Plastic moment in the Middle East.

KARLIN: A plastic moment in the Middle East. It is a moment of transformation. It can go a couple different ways. There are a whole bunch of spoilers that can want to drag it deep into violence, and there has been some worrisome violence over these last few months, particularly against minority groups.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: The Druze and, and the Alawites in this case.

KARLIN: Exactly. But there hasn't been massive, widespread violence, right? There have been, as one Syrian put it to me so well look, we've got to learn how to get to know one another again. After decades and decades of Assad rule, after 14 years of a horrific civil war, the country is slowly trying to figure out, what does it mean to rebuild, and the region is as well.

And what happens will be very much based on the agency and actions of those in Syria, in leadership, and also the agency and actions of those around the region and here in Washington.

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AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Thank you, Mara. This has been a fascinating conversation. I cannot wait to read your stuff at Brookings.edu where I hope you'll be sharing some of your observations with us, and let's hope Syrians do have a chance to rebuild their country.

KARLIN: Indeed. Thank you so much for having me.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Thank you.