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## Syrian Arab Republic

*Thomas Pierret*

Syria's modern history is a tale of continuity and upheavals at once. By 2011, the country had been ruled by the same party, the Ba'ath, and the same family, the Asads, for more than four decades. Yet, this period was far from stable as the country witnessed a socialist "revolution from above", internal coups and factional struggles, multiple crackdowns against the opposition, local uprisings and a nationwide Islamist insurgency (1979-82), in addition to direct military confrontations and proxy wars with all of the country's neighbors and the United States.

The devastating civil war that followed the 2011 uprising was the most significant break in Syrian history since independence. Although the regime was still in place at the end of the decade, the country had changed beyond recognition. Above a quarter of its prewar population were now refugees abroad, while economy had made a giant leap backwards as a result of large-scale destruction of infrastructure. Once a major player in Middle Eastern politics, Syria had turned into the region's battlefield, before non-state actors—the rebels, the Islamic State and the Kurdish YPG, then foreign states, carved out zones of influence. By early 2019, Syria was best described as the juxtaposition of three protectorates—a Russian-Iranian one, a Turkish one, and a US one—than as a sovereign state.

### **I. Historical Background**

Damascus was the center of the vast Umayyad caliphate founded in 661. Subsequently, Syria (known back then as the broader *Bilad al-Sham*) became a province of successive Muslim empires ruled from Baghdad or Cairo and, after the Ottoman conquest in the sixteenth century, from Istanbul. As Ottoman power began to decline in the eighteenth century, a new class emerged in Syria of urban notables who functioned as intermediaries with Ottoman officials and who would remain political players in Syria well into the twentieth century. In the second half of the 1800s, European encroachment in the Levant contributed in sparking the "Arab renaissance" (*nahda*). This cultural movement gradually turned into a nationalist one in reaction to Turkish policies such as the "Turkification" implemented after the Young Turk revolution of 1908, which generated in Syria a desire for more representative government and Arab autonomy within the empire.

#### ***From World War I to the Rise of the Ba'ath Party***

The Ottoman Empire's decision to join the Central Powers in World War I was met with British support for an Arab revolt led from the Hijaz by Sharif Hussein and his son Faisal. The revolt was launched in 1916 in return for vague British promises of Arab independence, but London made contrary promises to its French allies in the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Consequently, the Syrian kingdom ruled by Faysal following the 1918 Ottoman withdrawal was occupied by French troops two years later.

The "Mandates" granted over the region to France and Britain by the Society of Nations resulted in international borders that were perceived as arbitrary among Syrians, thereby sowing

the seeds of irredentist movements. Colonial borders cut off the country from mercantile and cultural links in neighboring areas: Damascus was isolated from what were now Lebanon, Palestine, and Transjordan; Aleppo's northern hinterland (Antep) and closest access to the sea (Sanjak of Alexandretta, or Hatay) were included in the Republic of Turkey; in the east, the tribes of the Euphrates were separated from the lower, Iraqi part of the valley in spite of kinship ties and similarity of dialect.

Inside Syria, French divide-and-rule policies translated into the establishment of five statelets: Alexandretta (before its cession to Turkey in 1939) was carved out for the Turks; the remainder of the coast for the Alawites; the region of Suweida in the south for the Druzes; and the rest of the country was divided between the predominantly Sunni states of Damascus and Aleppo. This division along sectarian or ethnic lines gave particular salience to the concepts of "minorities" and "majorities" that were emerging in the context of nation/state-building and representative politics. Although the major anti-French rebellion that began in 1925 was defeated, unrest convinced Paris to rule indirectly through a parliamentary Syrian republic. In 1936, the Franco-Syrian Treaty recognized the country's independence and re-unification, but it was only after the Second World War, in 1946, that the last French soldiers withdrew under British pressure.

After independence, Syria's parliamentary system was dominated by politicians who, like President Shukri al-Quwwatli, hailed from the great landed or merchant families that had held local power under the Ottomans and gained nationalist legitimacy from their struggle against the French. These notables coalesced into the rival National Party in Damascus and People's Party in Aleppo. However, this older generation of leaders came to be regarded by the younger generation as corrupt and unable to deliver on matters of social progress. Humiliating defeat in the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948 struck a first blow to the ruling elite. The following year, a series of three successive military coups eventually brought to power Colonel Adib al-Shishakli, who ruled in an increasingly authoritarian way until another putsch restored the parliamentary system in 1954.

In the 1950s, new political forces were rising that distinguished themselves from the notables' parties by their middle-class leadership, radical ideology, and ambitions to mobilize the masses. Among them was the fascist-leaning Syrian Social National Party (SSNP), which advocated the union of Syria and its neighbors into a "Greater Syria". The SSNP was banned in 1955 for ordering a political assassination, but it survived and formally reappeared as a regime ally under Bashar al-Asad. On the radical Left, the Communist Party's popularity benefited the USSR's denunciation of Western imperialism. Yet, the most successful of the new political forces was the Ba'ath Party, a pan-Arab group established in 1947 by Damascene schoolteachers Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar. Alliance with agrarian MP Akram al-Hawrani provided the party with a socialist ideology and close ties with the Syrian military, which would soon become the final political arbiter in the country. The Ba'ath steadily increased its share of seats in parliament and influenced the country's foreign policy, a trend that culminated in 1958 when Syria merged with Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt to form the United Arab Republic (UAR). However, Cairo's centralist, authoritarian and socialist policies alienated both Ba'athist leaders and traditional elites, pushing Syria to secede from the UAR in 1961.

After one last parliamentary interlude, the Ba‘th came to power through a military coup carried out on March 8, 1963. Built on a narrow base, the regime faced opposition across the whole spectrum of political society, from Nasserites to Islamists to liberals. In order to break out of its isolation, the Ba‘th carried out a “revolution from above” that broke the economic hold of the oligarchy through nationalizations, won the support of peasants with land reform, and created a public sector employing major segments of the middle and working classes.

Within the regime, civilian party members were subjugated by their military counterparts, who were themselves divided by power struggles over ideology and personal ambition. Since sectarian affiliations played a prominent role in the construction of rival coalitions, Alawite officers emerged as the strongest contenders. Like members of other rural minorities, Alawite used military careers as a means of social advancement, but they were more numerous than the Druzes and Ismailis. They were also more cohesive than their Sunni counterparts, who were divided along class and regional lines.

In 1966, an intra-Ba‘th coup brought to power the radical leftist wing of the party led by Alawite General Salah Jadid, whose stridently anti-Israeli stance backlashed as Syria lost the Golan Heights during the 1967 Six-Day war. Three years later, Jadid was toppled by his Minister of Defense Hafiz al-Asad, who carried out a “Corrective Movement” by placating the Sunni bourgeoisie through limited economic and political liberalization, as well as by toning down the regime’s secularist ambitions. External resources provided by the Soviet Union and Arab Gulf monarchies allowed for the expansion of the state bureaucracy and army, security apparatus (*mukhabarat*). Asad’s appointment of relatives and largely Alawite personal followers to key positions resulted in the construction of a “presidential monarchy” that concentrated power in the president’s own hands. Decent military showing in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War provided the legitimacy to entrench his leadership.

Despite such initially favorable circumstances, Asad soon faced a formidable challenge from the Islamic opposition. Rooted in the traditional urban middle class and at ease in the defunct parliamentary system, the now outlawed Muslim Brotherhood were radically at odds with the country’s new rulers because of their authoritarian, secularist and socialist policies. A brief Islamist-led uprising was crushed by the army in Hama in 1964, and in 1973 riots responded to a secular draft constitution. Resentment increased in the late 1970s over growing corruption, the “Alawitisation” of the regime, and Asad’s 1976 decision to intervene against the Palestinians in the Lebanese civil war. In 1979, the proto-Jihadi Fighting Vanguard launched an armed insurgency that dragged more mainstream Islamic groups like the Muslim Brotherhood into a deadly confrontation with the regime. The revolt ended in 1982, when regime forces killed tens thousands in Hama. Afterwards, Islamist networks were eradicated through mass executions, internment in the infamous Palmyra prison, and exile. In parallel, Asad had to tolerate a degree of social Islamization under the supervision of conservative but politically submissive ulema like Grand Mufti Ahmad Kaftaro and Sa‘id Ramadan al-Buti.

### ***Presidential Succession, Stalled Democratization, and “Authoritarian Upgrading”***

The Islamist insurgency further entrenched the personalization of power, a trend illustrated by the state-organized cult of the Asads. Because Hafiz’s brother Rif‘at was exiled following a coup attempt in 1984, state propaganda prepared Syrians for the ascent to power of the president’s

eldest son Basil then, after his death in a car accident in 1994, of his ophthalmologist brother Bashar. The latter was 34 when he succeeded his father to the presidency in 2000, thereby turning Syria into a *jumlukiyya*, an Arabic portmanteau for “republic” and “monarchy.” The advent of a young leader portrayed as a modernizer raised expectations among the remainders of the domestic opposition, which set up forums and released petitions asking for reforms. By early 2001, however, this “Damascus Spring” ended with the arrest of MP Riyad Seif, who had denounced the awarding of a mobile-telecommunications monopoly to Asad’s cousin and crony, Rami Makhlouf.

In the middle of the decade, domestic dissent surged in a more forceful way as the US occupation of Iraq made the regime appear vulnerable. The jihadi networks that emerged across the country to send fighters across the border were neutralized, from the time being, through a combination of benign neglect, deflection toward Lebanon, and selective repression. In Kurdish-majority regions, however, several hundreds were killed in 2004 in the suppression of riots inspired by the post-Saddam emancipation of Iraqi Kurds. (On the eve of the Ba‘thist coup of 1963, part of the Kurdish population had been deprived of Syrian citizenship, and in the following decade, Arabization policies meant the creation of an “Arab belt” along the Turkish border through the settlement of Bedouin tribes. In the 1980s, Hafiz al-Asad had neutralized Kurdish dissent by allying with the anti-Turkish Kurdistan Workers’ Party [PKK], but the alliance unraveled following the 1998 reconciliation between Syria and Turkey).

In 2005, the regime was further shaken by a combination of Western pressures over Syrian military presence in Lebanon, and internal factional struggles. A feud between the Assad clan, on the one hand, and a nexus composed of vice-president ‘Abd al-Halim Khaddam, interior minister Ghazi Kana’an, and Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, on the other hand, came to an end as Hariri was assassinated, Kana’an committed suicide, and Khaddam fled to France. Following the killing of Hariri, Western pressures and mass protests in Beirut known as the “Cedar Revolution” forced Syrian troops out of Lebanon, while UN investigation into the Hariri case alluded to the responsibility of the Syrian regime.

Seizing a seemingly favorable context, the exiled Muslim Brotherhood joined forces with a broad array of domestic opponents within the Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change, then with former vice-president Khaddam within the National Salvation Front. Yet, the regime dodged the bullet by arresting dissidents and bombarding the population with nationalist, anti-Western propaganda.

Bashar was all the less eager to democratize that his neoliberal economic reforms entailed a rollback in the populist social contract, thereby debilitating the regime’s former cross-sectarian base, reinforcing its sectarian-family nature, and limiting its vote-getting capacity. Peasants simultaneously suffered from a reduction in state support for the agricultural sector, and from the terrible drought of 2007–2009. Poor neighborhoods around the cities burgeoned with an influx of drought victims and Iraqi refugees. In addition, urban real-estate speculation unleashed by the influx of Gulf capital, together with an end to rent controls, drove the cost of housing beyond the means of the middle class. The conspicuous consumption of the new urban rich alienated those in the suburbs, and free trade agreements ending tariff protection devastated small manufacturers, also located in the suburbs. In addition, Bashar debilitated the party apparatus and the worker and peasant unions, seeing them as obstacles to economic reform. Rural discontent

was further fueled by attempts to crack down on smuggling networks that provided revenues to communities living along the borders of the country.

Alternative constituencies cultivated by the regime as part of its policy of “authoritarian upgrading” only partly made up for the estrangement of the working class. These new constituencies include reformist technocrats, the bourgeoisie and formerly hostile Islamic circles like Sheikh Usama al-Rifa’i’s Zayd movement. Sunni ulema and their businessmen allies were allowed to set up schools and well-funded charities that filled part of the void left by a shrinking welfare state. In long-marginalized Aleppo, the regime’s relationship with the interlocked business and religious elites greatly improved as a result of economic opening to Turkey. Yet, the honeymoon with the Sunni ulema was short-lived, as the latter’s empowerment unnerved the regime, which by 2008 curtailed both the influence of religious scholars in the charitable sector and expressions of religious identity in the public sphere.

### *Uprising and civil war, 2011-2019*

Inspired by the Tunisian, Egyptian, and Libyan revolutions, the Syrian uprising spread from the southern city of Der‘a from March 2011 on. While demonstrators at first called for political reform, demands radicalized under the brutality of the repression. Two weeks into the uprising, Asad gave a defiant speech in front of the parliament, branding the protest movement as a foreign conspiracy. More than ever, the minority character of the regime made it too risky to appease the opposition through democratic concessions. It also made Syria different from Tunisia and Egypt, whose respective dictators had fallen in a matter of weeks because they were abandoned by the military elite. Asad, on the contrary, could rely on a cohesive Alawite military elite that was wedded to the ruling clan and was ready to defeat the Sunni-dominated revolt by any means necessary. Even before the uprising turned into civil war, thousands of demonstrators were killed, and dozens of thousands were arrested, at least 15.000 of which eventually died in custody.

Despite repression, the uprising continued because there were enough grievances to fuel it among a plurality of the population. The protests initially spread in rural provinces (Der‘a and Idlib), suburbs of Damascus (Duma, Daraya), mixed Sunni-Alawite areas (Homs, Baniyas, Latakia), and for obvious historical reasons, Hama. Tellingly, three of the uprising’s first hotbeds (Baniyas, Der‘a and Rastan near Homs) were the birthplaces of the foremost Sunni partners of Hafez Al-Asad (respectively Khaddam, Faruq al-Shara and Mustafa Tlass), all of which had been marginalized under Bashar.

Demonstrations occasionally took place in central Damascus, but the protest movement failed to establish a durable foothold in such areas. This resulted from a concentration of repressive means by the regime, but also from weaker grassroots support. Although networks of activists included a significant middle-class, trans-sectarian contingent from the capital, members of that contingent often lacked support from their social milieu. Many among religious minorities (in particular Alawite and Christians) opposed the uprising out of fear of a takeover by the Sunni majority; since unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, the army was unwilling to take the rein of a political transition, the well-off feared that that any revolution would come only at the price of great violence and social upheaval. The regime played on these sectarian and class fears by portraying protesters as Salafi extremists and peasant riffraff.

Peaceful protests continued to spread and culminated with the mass demonstrations that filled Hama's Orontes Square in July 2011. As regime tanks entered Hama, Homs and Deir ez-Zor in the following month, demonstrations decreased markedly while the militarization of the uprising accelerated. Subaltern Sunni officers had started to defect in June and, over the summer, proclaimed the establishment of a "Free Syrian Army" (FSA), then a mere label for autonomous local units. Although small in numbers and poorly equipped, military defectors and civilian volunteers grew increasingly successful in the last months of 2011. The regime lacked manpower to durably pacify rebel strongholds because it did not trust its Sunni soldiers and was over reliant on Alawite-heavy units. During the first two years of the uprising, a mere third of the army's order of battle was deployed in combat operations. In parallel, defections and losses gradually deprived the military of more than half of its 300,000 men. As a means to compensate for personnel shortage, the regime increased its firepower throughout 2012 by resorting to artillery, aircrafts, ballistic missiles and chemical weapons. The spring of 2012 also witnessed massacres of hundreds of Sunni civilians at the hands of pro-regime paramilitaries on the fringes of the Alawite heartlands, most famously in al-Hula near Homs.

Military escalation did not prevent the spread of the insurgency, which by the end of the winter started to receive logistical support from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey. In July 2012, the regime seemed on the verge of collapse when rebels seized most of the province of Aleppo, including half of its capital, as well as the main border crossings with Turkey and Iraq. Vast parts of the country were now administered by an archipelago of self-standing courts, committees and local councils run by insurgent groups and civilians. In the north, the authorities of Damascus abandoned most of Kurdish-majority areas to the Democratic Union Party, or PYD (PKK's Syrian branch), which established the so-called Autonomous Administration of Rojava and battled anti-Assad insurgents over oil fields and border crossings. At the same time, the ruling elite was shaken by a bomb attack that killed four high-ranking officials, including Asad's brother-in-law Asef Shawkat, and by the defection of incumbent prime minister Riyad Hijab. Concomitant rebel incursions into central Damascus were quickly repelled, following which, regime forces carried out a string of retaliatory massacres in the suburbs of the capital. By the end of the year, however, insurgents had regained strength and were closing in on Damascus's beltway, even cutting off the city from the international airport for a few days.

In 2013, regime forces turned the tide and stabilized their defense lines, secured strategic roads along the Damascus-Aleppo axis, and gradually encircled the rebels in Aleppo and the suburbs of Damascus. The following year, insurgents were expelled from most of the province of Homs and Qalamun mountains, north of Damascus. The cause of this success was twofold. First, manpower shortage was alleviated by focusing on the protection of select strategic positions, by recruiting civilian fighters (mostly among religious minorities and loyal Sunni tribes) within the newly created National Defense Forces (NDF) and other paramilitary units, and by inviting in foreign Shi'a militias recruited by Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in Lebanon (Hezbollah), Iraq, and Afghanistan. Second, the lack of international reaction left Asad unhindered in implementing a strategy aimed at emptying rebel-held areas and forcing them into submission through the targeting of civilians with makeshift barrel-bombs, destruction of vital infrastructures, and forced starvation. By 2014, an estimated half of the population had been forced to leave their homes.

On the opposition side, long-standing exiles, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and recent fugitives set up the Syrian National Council in Istanbul in 2011. The following year, Western and Saudi concerns about Islamist influence within the council led to its integration into a broader Syrian National Coalition. Originally chaired by moderate Islamist Moaz al-Khatib, the Coalition became the chief representative of the Syrian opposition for the international community. In 2013, it established an Interim Government based in Gaziantep, Turkey. The Coalition had stronger ties with civilian activists and rebel groups inside Syria than Western common wisdom held, but it lacked the means to establish authority over them. Moreover, it suffered from factional struggles heightened by rivalries between its Saudi and Qatari patrons.

By mid-2012, two partly overlapping strands had emerged among rebel factions. On one side were “nationalist” groups run by defected officers such as Gen Salim Idriss, the head of the FSA’s Supreme Military Council established at the same time as the Syrian National Coalition. Although ostensibly supportive of the Council, state sponsors undermined its authority by dealing directly with their favorite member factions. On the other side were Islamist groups led by civilians, many of whom were released from the Seydnaya prison by the regime in the months following the 2011 uprising. Due to their leaders’ background of militant or religious activism, Islamist factions often displayed better organization than their nationalist counterparts. Islamist rebels ranged from moderates linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, like the Sham Legion, to hardline, transnational Jihadis like the Nusra Front. In order to bolster their credibility in the eyes of foreign states and private financiers from the Gulf, mainstream Islamist factions formed rival coalitions such as the Salafi-dominated Islamic Front (2013-2014), whose leading components were the Idlib-centered Ahrar al-Sham Movement and Damascus-based Army of Islam.

In 2013, the insurgency underwent a process of radicalization as a result of several factors. First was disappointment with the West, as hopes for a Libya-style intervention waned. Second was the turn of some insurgents towards banditry, which discredited moderate factions. Third was the intervention of the Lebanese Hezbollah in the battle of al-Qusayr (Homs), which vindicated the Islamists’ framing of the conflict as a Sunni-Shi’a struggle. Fourth was the arrival of thousands of Sunni foreign fighters, thanks to the collapse of state authority in northern Syria, and lax border control by Turkey. Fifth was the Islamist overbidding sparked by the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS), which emerged after a failed attempt at merging the Islamic State in Iraq with the Nusra Front, its Syrian franchise that ultimately established itself as a rival organization loyal to al-Qaida’s leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

In early 2014, ISIS’s repeated aggressions against other rebels sparked a counter-attack that forced the group to abandon western Syria. In the East, however, ISIS gained exclusive control of most of the Euphrates and Khabur valleys after ruthlessly suppressing local resistances, notably by decimating the Shu‘aytat tribe. In June, after its seizure of western Iraq and proclamation of the Caliphate under the authority of its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS, now renamed Islamic State (IS), established its de facto capital in Raqqa.

Although chiefly detrimental to the rebels at the onset, the rise of IS eventually weakened the regime as well: indirectly, because Iran-backed Iraqi militias were repatriated home to counter Baghdadi’s group, thereby aggravating the regime’s manpower shortage; directly, because in the spring of 2015, IS’ capture of the gas-rich region of Palmyra in the central desert coincided with simultaneous rebel advances in Western Syria. Ahrar al-Sham and the Nusra



Front allied in an “Army of Conquest” (*jaysh al-fath*) that seized Idlib and Jisr al-Shughur before threatening the Alawites’ heartlands, while in the province of Der‘a, the FSA-banner Southern Front captured the regime’s last border crossing with Jordan.

By the summer of 2015, regime setbacks translated into internal instability, as factional struggles revived (most spectacularly when security baron Rostom Ghazale was murdered by the bodyguards of a rival officer), while Alawites demonstrated against the unbearable human cost of the regime’s war effort for their community. Asad, however, avoided defeat thanks to the dispatch of around fifty Russian aircrafts to the coastal airbase of Hmeimim in September 2015. As IS weakened in Iraq, Iran was also able to send back its local affiliates to Syria. Within a few months, the combination of Russian airpower and Iranian foot soldiers reversed the course of the war: by March 2016, the rebels were expelled from the coastal mountains; at the end of the year, they left the eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo; pro-regime troops then filled the void left in the central desert by IS following the latter’s debilitation by the US-led coalition, and fully recaptured Deir ez-Zor city in December 2017; in the first half of 2018, loyalists dealt the rebels a fatal blow by retaking the suburbs of Damascus, the southern provinces of Der‘a and Qunaytra, and the northern countryside of Homs. In all cases, evacuation deals provided for the bussing out of those rebel fighters who refused “reconciliation”, that is, switching sides, and of the civilians who feared for their lives under Asad’s restored rule.

By 2019, the parts of the country that were still escaping Damascus’ authority owed their situation to foreign protection. In September 2014, the US-led international coalition had started providing air support to the YPG (the PYD’s armed branch) to foil IS’ assault on the town of Kobane on the Turkish border. From its Kurdish-majority strongholds in the North, the YPG subsequently expanded southward, seizing Raqqa in October 2017. The conquest of the entire eastern bank of the Euphrates was complete with IS’ final defeat in Baghuz in March 2019. As large Arab communities (and to a lesser extent Turkmens and Assyrian Christians) fell under the control of the Kurdish movement, the latter restyled itself in a multi-ethnic fashion: the YPG now led a military coalition called “Syrian Democratic Forces” (SDF) in 2015, while its autonomous administration was renamed Democratic Federation of Northern Syria the following year.

Finally, the northwestern part of the country was a Turkish zone of influence. It chiefly consisted of two areas directly controlled by Ankara’s army since their capture from IS in early 2017, in the case of al-Bab, and from the YPG a year later, for Afrin. In the meantime, Turkey had established military outposts around the remaining rebel stronghold of Idlib to protect it from regime ground assaults.

## II. Social and Economic Environment

### *Demography and Society*

The eastern four-fifths of Syria constitute a large, mostly semiarid and desert plain—in essence the northern extension of the Arabian Desert. Consequently, nearly 80 percent of all Syrians live in the western 20 percent of the country, with the majority of inhabitants residing in a north-south line of cities—Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Damascus—that separates the more fertile western areas of the country from the semiarid and desert plain (see Map 2.1). By 2011, the

population of Syria numbered a little over 22 million, 35 percent of which were below the age of 14. Almost half of the population was living in the two metropolitan provinces of Damascus and Aleppo.

The war brought about cataclysmic demographic change. Half a million Syrians died in the conflict, and life expectancy fell down by 20 years (to an estimated 55.7 years) at the height of the war. 12 to 13 million people (about 55 percent of the population) were displaced, nearly half of which sought refuge abroad, mostly in Turkey, which hosted over 3 millions Syrians, and in Lebanon, Jordan, and Germany. As of 2019, the population residing inside Syria had fallen below 20 millions.

**[INSERT Map 2.1 “Syrian Arab Republic” HERE]**

***Ethnic and religious groups***

Available data on the ethnic and sectarian complexion of Syrian society are mere estimates given the ban on the collection of such data. Yet statistics released by the Syrian government before 2011 suggest significantly different birth rates among religious sects. Indeed, the population of the predominantly Sunni provinces was increasing up to twice as quickly as populations of provinces that were home to large non-Sunni communities (Latakia, Tartous, Suwayda). Overlooking this trend often resulted in overestimating the proportion of religious minorities in the Syrian population. Demographic imbalance between sects was probably a crucial factor in the regime’s ability to play on the fears of minorities.

Arabic is the most widely spoken and only official language in the Syrian Arab Republic. The Kurds, who make up between 8 and 15 percent of the population, are concentrated along the Turkish border and in Damascus and Aleppo. Small ethnic minorities include the Turkmen, Circassians, Armenians and Assyrians. Sunni Muslims (including Kurds) probably account for 80 percent of the population. Arab Bedouin tribes, mostly sedentarized under the Ba‘th, account for an estimated 15 percent of the population and are particularly widespread in the Euphrates valley. Before the 2011 uprising, the vast majority of Sunni Muslims subscribed to a traditionalist, often Sufi-leaning brand of Islam, as both quietist and militant Salafis were ruthlessly suppressed. The rise of Salafi rebel factions throughout the civil war was not so much function of a broad, preexisting social base but rather a consequence of superior organizational skills and funding.

The second largest religious group in Syria is the Alawites, at most 10 percent of the population. Alawitism is an offshoot of Shi’a Islam that puts particular emphasis on the veneration of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin of Muhammad. Considered heretical by Sunni Muslims and even by most Shi’a Muslims, Alawites were marginalized for centuries before becoming the ruling elite under the Ba‘th. The Alawites originated in the Latakia mountains, but in the twentieth century many of them migrated to the cities of the coast, Homs and Damascus. Other non-Sunni Muslim minorities include the Druzes at 3 percent (mostly located in the southwestern province of Suwayda), as well as small communities of Ismailis (in the province of Hama) and Twelver Shi’a. Christians are divided among almost two dozen denominations, the largest of which is Greek Orthodox. Due to low birth and high emigration rates, Christian Syrians had probably fallen below 5 percent of the population by 2011. The formerly several-

thousand-strong Jewish community fell into insignificance after its members were allowed to leave the country in the 1990s.

### *Women*

Like all other “popular organizations,” the Syrian General Union of Women is entirely subordinate to the regime and serves its strategy of political control. At the top of the state hierarchy, women like Vice President for Cultural Affairs Najah al-’Attar and Bashar’s media adviser Buthayna Sha’aban have played a role of representation rather than of decision. State feminism in Syria has at times taken radical forms, as illustrated by the forced unveiling of Damascene women at the hands of proregime female militias in the early 1980s. Subsequently, however, the regime was forced to show increasingly tolerant towards female Islamic garments as they spread even among Sunni elites.

Prewar Syria was characterized by regional disparities in terms of female human development, most significantly between Sunni-majority, heavily rural and tribal governorates (Aleppo, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor), on the one hand, and Alawite, Druze, or heavily urbanized governorates (Latakia, Tartus, Suwayda and Damascus), on the other hand: female literacy ranged from 50 to 90 percent, and the share of women in the non-agricultural workforce ranged from 3 to 30 percent. Nationwide proportion of endogamous marriages (i.e. marrying among paternal cousins) was 40 percent. So-called “honor killings” of women existed among all sects, and women’s rights associations faced significant social backlash in their call for stricter penalties against perpetrators.

The war adversely impacted women’s status and rights in several ways. Many were raped by regime forces, which often alienated relatives who considered that the family’s honor had been sullied. The loss of male relatives, destruction of properties, and displacement, increased economic precariousness, depriving girls from education opportunities and favoring early marriage. Within Syria, the lack of men as a result of death, imprisonment, conscription and migration entailed increased rates of polygamy and (socially-stigmatized) prolonged female celibacy. Insecurity and, in areas controlled by Jihadi groups, the enforcement of strict Islamic regulations on female modesty, curtailed women’s presence in the public space.

War also forced women to endorse new roles. The regime and the YPG recruited female fighters, in order to fill their ranks but also to score points among international audiences (the YPG’s feminist ideology also provided for a formal ban on polygamy, and the appointment of male-female duumvirates to front political and military positions). In regime-held areas, where job opportunities were more numerous and mores less conservative, women increasingly made up for the lack of male workforce in cafes, restaurants, and retail stores. In the diaspora, particularly in Western countries, an unprecedentedly high rate of Syrian women were enabled to ask for divorce because of loosening family structures, and the availability of alternative revenues from work and state allocations.

**[INSERT Box 2.1 “Syrian Arab Republic” NEAR HERE.]**

### *Economic Development*

By 2011, agriculture accounted for a greater share of the GDP in Syria (18 percent) than in any other Middle Eastern country. Yet, of Syria's 71,504 square miles (185,170 square kilometers), arable land amounts to only about one-quarter of the total, the rest consisting of a semiarid steppe and desert. Rainfall is seasonal, most of it coming in the winter months and falling in the northern and westernmost parts of the country. In the late 1980s, the government invested heavily in irrigation systems to achieve self-sufficiency and to alleviate a severe fiscal crisis by acquiring hard currency through export, notably cotton.

After it seized power, the Ba'ath considered that state intervention was necessary to overcome economic dependency, push forward industrialization, and effect a more equitable distribution of national wealth, which was monopolized by the landed oligarchy. As a consequence, the 1963–1966 period was characterized by nationalizations of banks and large industry and a land reform that limited the size of the great estates and redistributed the surplus to landless peasants.

The path of state capitalism in Syria, however, resulted in a bloated and inefficient public sector which was used as a source of patronage to ensure regime survival. Arbitrary implementation of laws on “economic crimes” allowed for keeping in check the remaining private sector. After a modest *infatih* (“opening”) in the early 1970s, economic liberalization really started following the severe fiscal crisis faced by the country in 1986. Investment Law No. 10 of 1991 aimed to boost a private sector made apathetic by socialist governance and legal insecurity. However, liberalization remained selective to preserve the public-sector patronage system, and further measures were suspended until the conclusion of ongoing peace talks with Israel.

The economic challenges facing the country when Bashar al-Asad came to power in 2000 were manifold. Syria had not managed to advance beyond the group of lower-middle-income countries, with purchasing power parity income per capita of only \$5,100 by 2011. The country also needed to rapidly expand its labor market to absorb a projected annual labor force increase of 4 percent, due primarily to high population growth. Oil exports had started in the 1980s, but production fell from a million barrels per day to 385,000 by 2011 from lack of new discoveries. Gas production essentially catered for domestic consumption.

At the Ba'ath Party regional congress in June 2005, President Asad proposed the adoption of a “social market economy” combining market economy with social safety nets. In this transition, Syrian officials wanted to emulate the Chinese model, that is, economic liberalization under continued authoritarian rule. Private banks and a stock market were approved, holding companies were established under the aegis of Asad's crony businessmen, and tariffs with Turkey and the Arab countries were slashed. More structural reform, however, was retarded by the fear, which eventually materialized, that the growing income inequalities associated with liberalization would engender political instability.

The civil war that followed the 2011 uprising had a devastating effect upon Syrian economy. By 2018, the cost of destructions (including that of one-third of the housing stock) was estimated to nearly 400 billion dollars, the GDP had fallen by more than 70 percent, the Syrian pound was depreciated to one-tenth of its pre-war value, and an estimated two-third of the population lived in extreme poverty. Food production decreased, but the relative importance of

agriculture in the country's economy increased as a result of severe contraction of the manufacturing sector, which particularly suffered from destruction and looting in Aleppo, and of oil production, the remnants of which (a mere 24,000 barrels per day) were largely controlled by IS then by the SDF. The Syrian regime nevertheless managed to avert economic collapse thanks to financial aid from Iran, but also because the loss of large parts of its territory decreased state expenditures. Nevertheless, all parts of Syria witnessed the growth of a war economy benefitting armed groups on both sides, as well as various kinds of war profiteers. The war economy was fed in particular by territorial fragmentation, and the consequent emergence of myriad opportunities of tolling, smuggling, and brokerage.

By 2019, the regime's apparent military victory had not brought much economic relief besides the expected reopening of border crossings with Iraq and Jordan. A severe fuel shortage hit the country during the winter as a result of new US sanctions deterring transport and insurance companies from getting involved in Iranian oil shipments to Syria. Beyond the latter, and lines of credit, Iran contributed little to reconstruction, as it was merely competing with Russia for the control of the country's most lucrative economic sectors, that is, the hydrocarbon industry, phosphate mines, and mobile phone networks. Teheran's investments in real estate were dictated by a drive to further enshrine its influence in select neighborhoods of Damascus, and Moscow's were non-existent.

### III. Political Structures

Despite formal similarities, Syria's political system is not a single-party regime nor a military dictatorship, because neither the Ba'ath Party nor the army possesses any power of its own. In fact, all institutions are subordinate to the ruling family through informal networks based on kinship and (Alawite) sect. The Asad family's control over the military is best illustrated by the unwritten rule according to which the brother of the president (Rifa'at under Hafiz; Maher under Bashar) is the most powerful figure in the military. Other president's relatives and numerous Alawites were appointed to key positions in the military and the *mukhabarat*. Atef Najib, the local head of intelligence whose ruthless behavior sparked the 2011 uprising in Der'a, was a cousin of Bashar al-Asad. After 2011, the symbiosis between the ruling family and coercive institutions constituted a major obstacle to political transition, because transition would precisely have required a dissociation of these institutions from the ruling family.

During his reign, Hafiz al-Asad concentrated personal power in a "presidential monarchy". Unopposed referenda were held at the end of each renewable seven-year presidential term until Bashar al-Asad won the first pseudo-pluralistic election in 2014. After 2000, extensive presidential prerogatives in matters of appointment and public policy were key to Bashar's ability to overcome resistance to his personal leadership and economic reforms from among state elites.

The president's coercive power relies, first, on the heads of the four main intelligence agencies (Military Intelligence, Airforce Intelligence, State Security, Political Security) and of the National Security Bureau that coordinates between them. Endowed with extensive extralegal power, the dreaded *mukhabarat* surveil, and suppress, possible threats from external enemies, the domestic opposition, the army, the bureaucracy, and each other. They vet candidates for office and promotion, and act as powerful brokers whose support ambitious politicians and prominent

businessmen seek. They control large parts of society via networks of informers and the dispensing of semi-illicit privileges. After 2011, their influence further increased as they were tasked with recruiting paramilitaries such as the Tiger Forces of Airforce Intelligence's Brigadier Suheil al-Hassan.

The military, officially known as the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), was called upon in order to quell the most significant threats to the regime, such as the Hama uprising in 1964, the 1979–1982 insurgency, and of course the 2011 revolt. To ensure the army's loyalty in such situations, and to shield himself from military coups, Hafiz al-Asad adopted a two-pronged strategy. First, sectarian stacking brought the proportion of Alawites within the officer corps above 80 percent, a situation that was hardly concealed by the occasional appointment of Sunnis to front positions such as Minister of Defense and Chief of Staff. Second, because the rank-and-file still predominantly consisted of Sunni conscripts, Hafiz al-Asad created praetorian units such as the Republican Guard and Rif'at al-Asad's Defense Companies which, after their commander's coup attempt, were turned into the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division (led during the civil war by Bashar's own brother Mahir). Recruited from the Alawite population and, to a lesser degree, loyal (Sunnī) Bedouin clans, praetorian units were endowed with the most advanced equipment. During the civil war, combat losses and defections deprived the SAA of perhaps as much as half of its manpower, but they were partly compensated by extending the duration of conscription, by entrusting the SAA with the chaperoning of paramilitaries, and later in the conflict, by absorbing a number of defeated rebels who were spared prosecution in exchange for their rallying.

Although the Ba'ath ceased to be the "leading party in society and state" after the 1973 constitution was replaced by a new one in 2012, it has remained a major pillar of the regime—not as a power center of its own, but as an instrument of control and patronage. The party lost any autonomy since the late 1970s as remains of internal democracy made place for designation by the president and *mukhabarat*. Although the party's Regional Congress is supposed to be held every fourth year, Hafiz al-Asad ceased to convene it in 1985, and Bashar did it only once, to eliminate rivals among party leaders.

The Ba'ath's top collegial body is the 14-members Central Command (Regional Command until 2018), which is roughly divided between senior military commanders, senior cabinet ministers, and top party officials. It is theoretically answerable to the 80-members Central Committee, a body comprising senior regime elite—party functionaries, ministers, generals, security chiefs, governors, heads of syndicates, and university presidents. By 2011, the Ba'ath had over 11,000 cells grouped into 154 subbranches at the district or town level, which were combined into 18 branches in the provinces and major institutions such as the military, bureaucracy and universities. Before the war, active party membership numbered nearly one million, for a total of three and a half million registered members.

The party controlled "popular organizations" such as sector-specific unions (for workers, peasants, professionals, students, etc.) and youth movements that initially gave the regime new roots in society and bridged sectarian and urban-rural gaps. The party's debilitation in the 2000s, when it was an obstacle to economic reforms, helps account for the antiregime mobilization of 2011. Der'a, the birthplace of the uprising, had long been a Ba'athist stronghold. The party suffered devastating blows during the civil war, losing perhaps half of its membership as vast swathes of the country fell to the rebels. Yet, the Ba'ath remained relevant as a pool of regime

loyalists, who set up their own paramilitary group, the Ba‘th Battalions. In the 2018 local elections, the Ba‘th was rewarded with an increase in its share of town councilors at the expense of other pro-regime candidates.

Civilian executive power is represented by the Council of Ministers and the province governors (*muhafiz*), all of which are appointed by the president. The parliament (People’s Assembly) merely responds to government initiatives. Deputies act as brokers between officials and their constituents—notably those seeking favors. Two-thirds of seats are reserved for candidates appointed by the National Progressive Front, an alliance of the Ba‘th Party and several small leftist and nationalist parties, while the rest is left for “independent” candidates who stem mostly from the urban bourgeoisie. The bureaucracy plays a key redistributive role through the payment of salaries and provision of services. During the civil war, some civil servants living in rebel-held areas kept on receiving their pay as part of the regime’s quest for loyalty.

The judiciary is politicized through party control of appointments. The legal process suffers from corruption and fails to guarantee civil liberties and property rights. Redress of grievances typically rests on access to informal clientelistic connections with the *mukhabarat*. The rule of law has been further undermined by extra-constitutional measures such the emergency law promulgated in 1963. The latter was formally lifted in April 2011, yet this did not prevent the regime from simultaneously engaging in the perpetration of some of the worst human rights violations in Syria’s modern history.

By 2019, the regions still escaping Damascus’ authority were subjected to three types of governing structures. The US-protected Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria was ethnically and religiously pluralistic, but real power was monopolized by the Kurdish PYD and, behind it, its military branch the YPG. In the northern countryside of Aleppo, Turkish authorities governed through a combination of direct rule and administration by local councils. As for Idlib, it was predominantly administered by Syrian Salvation Government, a civilian front for Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, the ex-Nusra Front, which had broken ties with al-Qaida in 2016 before militarily subduing rival rebel factions like Ahrar al-Sham.

### **Political Dynamics**

Syria’s politics is presently dominated by the three R’s of reconquest, restoration, and reconstruction. Reconquest concerns the regions that continue to escape regime control. The Turkish-controlled North seems off-limits given Ankara’s rampant annexation of a region it considers as a forward defense line against the PKK. Damascus’ ambitions thus focus on the province of Idlib, which lies on strategic highways linking Aleppo to Damascus and the coast, is only protected by small Turkish military outposts, and is dominated by an internationally blacklisted Jihadi organization, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham. Although the 2018 Russian-Turkish Sochi agreement provides a framework for a compromise through partial demilitarization of the frontline and the reopening of highways to civilian traffic, it is vulnerable to spoiler moves from the Syrian regime and ultra-Jihadi factions like the al-Qaida-affiliated Hurras al-Din.

East of the Euphrates, the fate of the YPG’s autonomous administration is largely dependent on US determination to extend their military protection past the defeat of IS. President

Trump's announcement of a full withdrawal in December 2018 generated considerable anxiety among YPG leaders. In case the US were to implement that decision, and in order to shield itself from a consequent Turkish military assault, the Kurdish group approached the regime to negotiate the contours of a deal that would bring back eastern oil resources and Arab-majority regions under Damascus' control in exchange for a modicum of local autonomy in Kurdish-majority areas.

Political restoration has most obviously taken place in the regions that were retaken from the rebels since 2016. Following systematic looting, it has consisted in arrests and occasional assassinations, conscription of fighting-age men, re-erection of statues of Hafiz al-Asad, and the dissolution of opposition-era local councils in favor of municipalities "elected" in 2018. At a psychological level, the return of the regime has translated into the rebuilding of the "wall of fear" that revolutionaries had broken in 2011. The southern province of Der'a is a particular case in that respect, because the surrender agreements brokered by Russia in 2018 provided for the non-entry of regime soldiers into certain towns or neighborhoods, and the maintaining of former rebel units as law enforcement forces there. This scheme temporarily preserved some breathing space for anti-regime activism as illustrated by small demonstrations in early 2019.

The reassertion of the regime's authority has not only targeted former opponents, but also pro-regime militias. Some of them had acquired considerable autonomy when the regime was at its weakest, that is, before the Russian intervention, as they funded themselves through predatory and criminal activities such as ransoming, tolling and trafficking. Russia, in particular, has pushed for the absorption of paramilitaries into the SAA's order of battle through the creation of the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps, which was Moscow's primary tool to co-opt "reconciled" rebels. In Der'a, the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps has competed for the loyalty of former insurgents with Mahir al-Asad's 4<sup>th</sup> Division. The latter is backed by Iran and has formally integrated foreign IRGC affiliates whose withdrawal from Syria is requested by Israel and the US. Rather than to a consolidation of the SAA, thus, the regularization of paramilitaries seems to translate into further "militiafication" and fragmentation of the country's military.

Although reconstruction is principally an economic issue, it has obvious political aspects. First, a property law issued in 2018 (Decree No. 10) suggested that the regime was willing to use so-called "urban renewal" to seize real estate in former rebel neighborhoods, turn them into upscale developments, and permanently prevent the return of property owners. The thirty-day limit given to the latter to prove ownership was extended to one year under pressure from the Lebanese government, which was concerned that the law would hinder the return of Syrian refugees to their country. Yet, public threats against refugees by Syrian officials indicated that the regime would continue to seek ways to indefinitely keep what it sees as troublemaker-communities out of the country.

Reconstruction is also political to the extent that its funding depends on the regime's ability to normalize relations with the international community. Asad's main sponsors, Iran and Russia, do not have the necessary financial means. China does, but resource-poor, war-stricken Syria offers few prospects of return on investment for a country whose Middle Eastern policies remain dictated by economic, as opposed to strategic, considerations. As a result, the regime eyes capital from two groups of countries with which it has a fraught relationship during the war, namely, Gulf monarchies and Western states.



Among Gulf monarchies, the drive for normalization with Asad was spearheaded by the United Arab Emirates, which had never completely cut ties to Damascus. In 2018, Abu Dhabi facilitated the regime's southern offensive by pressuring its chief rebel client in the region, Shabab al-Sunna's Ahmad al-'Awde, to sign a "reconciliation" deal with Russia. In December of that year, Abu Dhabi was the first Gulf country to reopen its embassy in Damascus, followed by Bahrain. Yet, follow-up investments in the Syrian economy were deterred by threats of US sanctions, and Saudi Arabia still seemed reluctant to follow suit due to its anxiety towards Iran's influence in Syria.

This context explains why, in spite of the regime's vengeful rhetoric towards the Western countries that have supported the opposition, Russia lobbied the same countries for normalization with Damascus. The European Union should fund Syria's reconstruction, Moscow argued, because it is the only means, if not to allow for the return of most refugees, at least to prevent further outflows of population from Syria by preventing further instability and offering economic opportunities to its population. Yet, even though Italy and Eastern countries seem open to a rapprochement with the Asad regime, France, the United Kingdom and Germany see major obstacles to it. First, they keep conditioning the granting of reconstruction funds on significant progress in the UN-led peace process, which the regime strongly opposes. Second, in the name of human rights violations committed by the regime, the Syrian opposition has lobbied Western governments for a reinforcement of economic sanctions against the regime and its economic partners (by early 2019, as the EU was sanctioning Asad's new chief crony businessman Samer Foz, and the US Senate was discussing the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, a sanction bill named after a whistleblower who leaked tens of thousands of photos of detainees tortured to death in the regime's prison), and filed criminal complaint against high-ranking Syrian officials with Western courts (in 2018, a German judge issued an arrest warrant against Major General Jamil Hassan, the powerful head of the Airforce Intelligence).

## **Foreign Policy**

After independence, Syria's pluralistic polity allowed for competing foreign influences such as that of pro-Western Iraq, which sought to bring the Arabs into the anti-Soviet Baghdad Pact, and Arab nationalist Egypt, which advocated Cold War neutrality. Insecure Syrian political elites regularly tried to bolster their legitimacy by sacrificing realist conceptions of national interest to pan-Arab ideals. This trend was best illustrated by the 1958 merger with Egypt as well as the regime's firebrand posture toward Israel on the eve of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. The Syrian army was poorly prepared for the latter and lost the Golan Heights and Mount Hermon, two strategic locations only a short distance from Damascus. (The Golan Heights is also a major water source, as spring-fed tributaries on the slopes of Mount Hermon run into the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River.) Ideology also drove a failed Syrian military intervention in support of the Palestine Liberation Organization against the Jordanian army in 1970. The further consolidation of Ba'thist rule under Hafiz al-Asad allowed the regime to strike a balance between rejectionist policies aimed at maintaining nationalist legitimacy and a realist, Syrian-centered approach sometimes at odds with popular sentiments.

### ***Hafiz al-Asad and the Struggle with Israel: From War to Failed Peace***

After Asad came to power in 1970, Syria's foreign policy was revised to prepare for war against Israel: it maintained close ties with the Soviet Union to secure state-of-the-art weapons, reconciled with the oil-rich conservative Arab Gulf monarchies to obtain financing, and struck a strategic alliance with Anwar Sadat's Egypt, the most militarily powerful of the Arab states. In 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack on the Israel-occupied Golan Heights and Sinai Peninsula, thereby initiating a war known as the October War in Syria and the Yom Kippur War in Israel. Despite spectacular initial advances that were hailed as "victories" in Damascus and Cairo, Arab armies were eventually defeated. However, their brief show of force as well as the Arab oil embargo gave Syria and Egypt enhanced political leverage. In 1974, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's mediation led to a disengagement agreement according to which Israel evacuated a small portion of the Golan Heights.

The Syrian-Egyptian alliance subsequently came to an end as Sadat engaged in the negotiations that eventually led to 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. As Cairo withdrew from the Arab-Israeli conflict, both Syria and Israel redirected their attention towards the civil war that began in Lebanon in 1975. The following year, Asad ordered an unpopular military intervention against the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to prevent its victory over the right-wing Maronite Christians militias, before switching sides in 1978 as Israel moved against the PLO in South Lebanon and allied with the Maronites. By inserting itself as the civil war's arbiter, Syria achieved several objectives: first, it secured direct influence over a country whose independence had always been contested by Syrian ruling elites—it would take until 2009 for Damascus to open an embassy in Beirut; second, it acquired forward defense bases against the Israeli army; third, Lebanon's open, comparatively prosperous economy provided Syrian officers with countless opportunities of personal enrichment.

In 1982, Beirut fell into Israel's orbit as Tsahal besieged the city and expelled the PLO after a brief confrontation with Syrian troops. Thereafter, Syria backed various Lebanese proxies, including what was to become Hezbollah, against the Israelis and the American-French contingent that was deployed to support the government of President Amin Gemayyel. Following the Western withdrawal in 1984, Syria forced Gemayyel to renege on the Lebanese-Israeli accord signed the year before. Asad's drive for hegemony in Lebanon also translated into a second war against PLO leader Yasser Arafat, who left Tripoli (and Lebanon, for good) in 1984.

In parallel, Syria compensated for the loss of Egypt's alliance by establishing a long-term strategic partnership with Iran, which had turned into a fierce enemy of Israel after the Islamic revolution. Asad and the new Iranian regime had another common enemy, namely, Saddam Hussein's Iraq. In 1980, Damascus condemned the latter's attack against Iran while in return, Tehran unexpectedly supported Asad against the Islamists who were trying to carry out their own Islamic revolution in Syria. Syria also benefited from the military effectiveness of the Iran-sponsored Hezbollah that fought the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon until 2000.

After the Iran-Iraq War ended in 1988, a vengeful Saddam Hussein supported Syria's chief opponent in Lebanon, General Michel Aoun. By joining the US-led military coalition formed in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Asad obtained Washington's tacit support to destroy this one last obstacle to "Pax Syriana" in Lebanon. Standing with Saudi Arabia against Iraq enabled Syria to break out of Arab isolation due to its alignment with Iran:

economically, the resumption of subsidies from the Gulf oil states brought much-needed relief to a country that had refused to seek loans from the International Monetary Fund after the 1986 fiscal crisis; diplomatically, the Kuwait war put Syria back at the heart of a renewed Cairo-Damascus-Riyadh axis.

Ultimately, however, Syria's decision to join the anti-Iraq coalition was shaped by the weakening of the Soviet ally, which left the US as the sole superpower. Syria's submission to the new world order resulted in two rounds (in 1995 and 1999) of unprecedented direct bilateral negotiations with Israel over the Golan, which the Hebrew state had unilaterally annexed in 1981. The two sides came very close to a settlement, but the talks hit a snag over Israel's demands to keep its surveillance station on Mount Hermon as well as 5 percent of the Golan's territory adjoining Lake Tiberias.

### *Foreign Policy under Bashar al-Asad*

Following the collapse of Syria's peace negotiations with Israel, another strategic challenge emerged in 2000 with Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon. For a growing number of Lebanese, this development removed the main justification for Syrian military presence in the country. Moreover, Israel now directly targeted Syrian military positions in Lebanon in response to Hezbollah's attacks on the Shebaa Farms, a hamlet which the Iran-backed militia described as Lebanese territory still occupied by Israel, whereas the latter claimed it as part of what it considered as the formerly Syrian Golan.

The 9/11 attacks initially had an ambivalent impact on bilateral relations with the United States. On the one hand, Syria objected when some of its allies—which Syria regarded as national liberation movements (e.g., Palestinian militants and Hezbollah)—were included among the targets of the global war on terror. On the other hand, Damascus provided Washington with intelligence in the struggle against al-Qaida.

A far more dramatic deterioration of US-Syrian relations occurred when Syria opposed the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, most spectacularly by allowing volunteer fighters to move across Syria's border into Iraq and giving refuge to Iraqi Ba'ath officials. Whereas in 1991 Syria could justify its participation in the Kuwait war on the basis that the operation's goals were limited to restoring the emirate's sovereignty, Bashar was wary of a war aimed at toppling another Ba'athist regime as part of a broader US strategy of promoting democracy and weakening Israel's strategic foes. Moreover, relations with Saddam Hussein had recently improved with the 2001 reopening of the oil pipeline between the two states, which gained the Syrian treasury a badly needed billion-dollar annual windfall and enabled Iraq to evade UN sanctions. Finally, Syrian public opinion was so inflamed against the US invasion that the regime's legitimacy dictated opposition.

Fears that US troops would attack Syria following their triumph over Saddam Hussein were rapidly dissipated by growing US difficulties in the face of the Iraqi insurgency, which Damascus continued to support, though more discreetly than before the fall of Baghdad. However, the deterioration of Syria's strategic position resulted in the first Israeli airstrikes inside Syrian territory since the 1973 war: in 2003 against a Palestinian military facility, and in 2007 against a secret nuclear plant under construction near Deir ez-Zor. As for the George W.

Bush administration, it presented Damascus with a list of nonnegotiable demands that threatened Syria's regional influence, including ending support for Palestinian militants and Hezbollah, withdrawing from Lebanon, and cooperating with the occupation of Iraq. The cost of defiance was the Syria Accountability Act, a set of US economic sanctions that discouraged Western companies from doing business with Syria and consequently pushed Syria to strengthen ties with the (then booming) Turkish and Gulf economies.

In 2004, the United States and France challenged Syria's role in Lebanon through UN Security Council Resolution 1559 that called for Syria to withdraw its military forces from that country. Paris joined Washington's anti-Syrian strategy because it was siding with pro-Saudi Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri in his bid to prevent the widely unpopular extension of the tenure of pro-Syrian president Émile Lahoud. Asad was all the more suspicious of Hariri that, in addition to his ties to the West, the Lebanese politician was close to two major rivals of the ruling family within the regime, namely, vice president 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam and minister of Interior Ghazi Kana'an.

In February 2005, the assassination of Hariri in a massive car bombing sparked the Cedar Revolution, a large-scale anti-Syrian protest movement led by the main Sunni, Maronite Christian, and Druze political forces which, combined with covert Western military threats, forced Syria to withdraw. However, Damascus later managed to reconstitute its influence in Lebanon thanks to its Shi'a allies Hezbollah and Amal, and, owing to intra-Maronite rivalries, former enemy Michel Aoun. Syria's standing in Lebanon was further consolidated by two developments: the July 2006 war, that saw Hezbollah withstand a month-long Israeli military offensive thanks in part to Syrian logistical support; the May 2008 seizure of West Beirut by pro-Syrian militias following brief clashes with their pro-Western rivals, and subsequent formation of a national unity government in which Hezbollah held veto power.

Syria's struggle with the Saudi-backed Hariri family over Lebanon shattered the partnership Syria had established with the kingdom after the Kuwait war, and Damascus's relations with Egypt and Jordan—Riyadh's key Arab partners—suffered accordingly. Meanwhile, the deepening of the long-standing strategic alliance between Syrian, Iran, and Hezbollah formed the backbone of the so-called "resistance axis," formalized in 2006 by a Syrian-Iranian mutual defense pact. A portion of the Syrian Sunni opinion resented this alliance, because of Iran's support for the regime during the 1979–1982 insurgency, and because of suspected Shia proselyte efforts emanating from holy sites such as the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab near Damascus, which had been rebuilt in a Persian architectural style and attracted a growing number of foreign Shia pilgrims and religious students.

It remains to be said that regional alignments after the invasion of Iraq were not necessarily determined by sectarian affinities. First, the "axis of resistance" also included the Palestinian Hamas, which gave the Syrian regime significant nationalist legitimacy, in particular during the Gaza war of late 2008. Second, although not a member of the axis, Qatar was close to it and provided sympathetic media coverage through its widely popular information channel Al Jazeera. Third, both Syria and Iran reconciled with Turkey following the advent of the Justice and Development Party (AKP).

In the 1990s Syria had supported the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) against Turkey to pressure Ankara into giving it a greater share of Euphrates River water controlled upstream by new Turkish dams. Turkey and Israel also had cooperated closely to oppose Syria and Iran. Military threats by Turkey in 1998 led to the signature of the Adana agreement that formalized Syria's abandonment of its support for the PKK. The empowerment of Iraqi Kurds following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 gradually drove Ankara, Damascus, and Tehran closer over the shared threat of Kurdish separatism. Turkey refused US demands to isolate Syria and even tried to broker Syria-Israel peace negotiations in defiance of the United States. Although military cooperation between the two countries remained minimal, Syria's exchanges with the rapidly expanding Turkish economy largely overshadowed those with Iran.

In 2008, US commandos carried out an unprecedented cross-border attack against jihadi militants using the province of Deir ez-Zor as a safe haven for their operations in Iraq. By that time, however, relations with the West had already started to improve. Asad was invited in Paris to celebrate Bastille Day besides President Nicolas Sarkozy, and in 2009, better-meaning Barack Obama succeeded George W. Bush as US president. Thus, despite ongoing tensions with the Saudi-led bloc, Asad had few dedicated foreign enemies by 2011. The uprising, however, reshuffled the cards and unleashed a struggle for Syria.

### *The war for Syria*

Although Asad portrayed hostile foreign powers as a driving force behind the uprising, in reality, it was the deterioration of the situation on the ground that led foreign states to adopt an increasingly tough stance towards the regime. Turkey and Qatar initially used their close ties to Damascus to try brokering a deal with the opposition, but they eventually broke with the regime over the August 2011 military crackdown. Saudi Arabia was equally slow to turn against Asad, as its hostility to revolutionary change across the region temporarily trumped its animosity toward the regime. Riyadh waited until early 2012 to formally voice (through an Arab League resolution) its desire to see the Syrian president step down. The United Arab Emirates, although a member of the anti-Assad Friends of Syria Group established at the same time, never completely forsook "authoritarian solidarity" with Asad and kept on hosting relatives and assets of regime officials.

Although quantitatively significant, foreign logistical support for the rebels was late, gradual, divisive, qualitatively limited, and reactive rather than proactive. It only materialized one year into the uprising, after the deadly siege of Homs in February 2012 which sparked such a moral shock among public opinions across the region that not responding would have put the domestic legitimacy of Gulf monarchies at risk. By backing select FSA factions, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Jordan also aimed to counter the rise of (notably Islamist) groups supported by Turkey and Qatar. Guided missiles, which the rebels badly needed against the regime's armors, were only supplied in significant numbers as of mid-2013, in reaction to an Iranian military intervention which, by that time, had already turned the tide of the conflict. As for the provision of surface-to-air missiles by Qatar, they were rapidly interrupted by the US out of proliferation concerns.

The US organized and monitored arms deliveries initiated by regional states through its CIA-run, covert Timber Sycamore operation, whose multinational "Military Operation Centers"

based in Turkey and Jordan vetted recipient factions on an ideological basis, that is, to the exclusion of Islamists. An initially reluctant Obama signed off on Timber Sycamore to appease Middle Eastern allies and hawkish elements within his administration, but he never supported forcible regime-change in Syria. Unlike in Cairo or Tunis, Washington had no long-standing partners among the Syrian military that could supervise a transition while preserving US interests—in 2011, it had taken Obama five months to call for Asad to step down, as opposed to two weeks for Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. Subsequently, the rise of Jihadi insurgents convinced the White House that military stalemate was preferable to outright rebel victory. Direct military action against Asad was further inhibited by Obama's concern not to jeopardize the secret negotiations that eventually led to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

Rather than by a drive for regime change or the “responsibility to protect” (civilians), thus, direct US intervention in Syria was eventually sparked by two issues that had dominated Washington's post-Cold War security agenda in the Middle East, namely, weapons of mass destruction and Jihadi terrorism. In August 2013, one year after Obama had warned that the use of chemical weapons was a “red line”, he reluctantly threatened military retaliation against the regime following a sarin nerve agent attack that killed about a thousand people in the suburbs of Damascus. However, the British Parliament opposed participation in the operation, giving Washington the opportunity to abandon the planned airstrikes in favor of a Russian initiative to dismantle the Syrian chemical arsenal by way of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Yet, the regime remained able to use sarin stockpiles it had hidden from international inspectors as well as dual-use (i.e. non-prohibited) chlorine. In 2017 and 2018, smaller-scale chemical attacks in Khan Sheykhun (Idlib) and the eastern suburbs of Damascus prompted the Trump administration to launch limited missile strikes against regime military facilities.

As for game-changing action by the US, it was reserved for the struggle against Jihadis. In September 2014, airstrikes against the Islamic State were extended from Iraq to Syria, where they also occasionally targeted the Nusra Front and its allies. Additionally, a Pentagon-run, overt Train and Equip Program was established to support the SDF and rebel factions operating against IS from the northern countryside of Aleppo and the desert base of al-Tanaf on the Jordanian border. Partners on the ground were supplemented with small contingents of Western special forces and artillery units which, by end 2018, included 2000 US soldiers.

Within the European Union, the United Kingdom and, especially, France, were Asad's most dedicated enemies. Due to a lack of military capabilities, however, they were unable to play more than a support role for US operations. Europe's most potent weapon against the regime was economy, in the form of a ban on Syrian oil imports and targeted sanctions against regime officials.

Western policies contrasted with those of Israel, which focused on the growing military footprint of Iran in Syria. From 2013 on, the Israeli air force carried out dozens of attacks on facilities run by the IRGC and/or suspected of sheltering advanced weaponry destined for Hezbollah. To keep loyalists away from the Golan cease-fire line, Israel also provided fire and logistical support to a handful of FSA factions in the area. Israel's policy was little affected by the Russian intervention: owing to a tacit understanding with Moscow, bombing raids even

intensified and led to major incidents in 2018 as Syrian air defense successively shot down an Israeli fighter jet and, by mistake, a Russian reconnaissance aircraft.

Among regime allies, Iran was the most unhesitant in providing full on assistance. Teheran immediately gave Damascus several billion dollars a year in economic aid. From 2012 onwards, Iranian military advisors supervised the dispatch of tens of thousands of Shia foreign fighters recruited among IRGC affiliates from Lebanon (Hezbollah), Iraq (notably Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq), and Afghanistan (Fatimid Brigade). The scale of Iranian support to the regime was function of the latter's importance as the strategic depth of Hezbollah, hence as the key the Islamic Republic's military relevance in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Iran's involvement in the Syrian war provided it with the opportunity to entrench itself further in the country, by securing direct control over strategic military facilities, and by establishing a "Syrian Hezbollah" consisting of a network of local Twever Shia militias responding directly to the IRGC's orders.

Russia's approach to the conflict was initially more careful. By 2012, Moscow was granting Asad economic assistance and vetoing even verbal condemnations of the regime by the UN Security Council, but the 2015 military intervention finally came as the result of unanticipated developments: Obama's climb-down on the 2013 chemical attack, the Ukraine crisis the following year, and finally the regime's disarray in mid-2015. Putin had no vital interest to defend in Syria at the start of the war: the country was a loyal, but insolvent customer of Russia's military industry, and the military facility leased by Moscow in the port of Tartus since the 1970s was a modest technical support point for medium-sized vessels. Russia's eventual decision to step into the conflict is thus better understood as an example of "offensive realism", in the sense that Russia filled a void left by Obama's hands-off approach to the conflict in order to retrieve a major role in Middle Eastern, and by extension, global politics.

Russia's new status as a regional hegemon was illustrated by the realignments that ensued from its intervention. Jordan promptly ceased to support anti-regime operations by Southern Front rebels. Saudi Arabia and the UAE all the more easily lost interest in the rebel cause since they were now mostly absorbed by their own campaign in Yemen.

Turkey initially counter-escalated, even shooting down a Russian bomber over its border, but concerns over territorial gains by the US-backed YPG later convinced Ankara to mend fences with Moscow. In the summer of 2016, the YPG captured Manbij from IS, thereby contravening Turkey's demand to the US that the Western bank of the Euphrates be cleared by Ankara's Syrian rebel allies. In response, Turkey's Euphrates Shield operation targeted adjacent IS-controlled areas, and achieved its main objective with the conquest of al-Bab in February 2017. Russian acquiescence allowed for subsequent Turkish operations against the YPG-held, Kurdish-majority region of Afrin, and the deployment of a Turkish peacekeeping force around Idlib as a part of stabilization efforts that culminated with the signature of the Sotchi agreement between Putin and Erdogan in September 2018.

US reaction to the Russian intervention was somewhat confused, due to conflicting views between government agencies. On the one hand, both the Obama and Trump administration kept on prioritizing the anti-IS campaign and deterrence against the use of chemical weapons by the regime. Accordingly, Washington implemented deconfliction measures with Russia and even discussed military cooperation with Moscow against Jihadi groups in 2016. On the other hand,

the CIA escalated cover support for select rebel units until Timber Sycamore was suddenly put to and end by Trump in July 2017; in December 2018, Trump's announcement of an impending US withdrawal from Syria generated considerable backlash from military and diplomatic circles, to the extent that full withdrawal was at least temporarily postponed.

As the conflict seemed to be winding down, multilateral diplomatic efforts carried on. Following the dispatch of Arab League observers during the winter of 2011-2012, a joint mission of the United Nations and Arab League had been established under the aegis of former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan. Annan deployed unarmed observers inside Syria and organized the June 2012 Geneva I conference, whose communiqué called for establishing a transitional governing body with full executive powers. However, this statement did not translate into actual pressure on the regime because Russia refused to interpret it as a call for Assad's resignation. The Annan mission collapsed a few weeks later, as spectacular rebel advances suggested that the regime might not survive into the next year. Diplomatic efforts were only revived after the agreement on Syrian chemical weapons, which paved the way for the January 2014 Geneva II conference held under the supervision of Annan's successor, Lakhdar Brahimi. Whereas Geneva I was attended only by non-Syrian state parties, Geneva II witnessed the first direct negotiations between regime officials and the Syrian National Coalition. Talks rapidly stalled as the regime rejected the opposition's and Brahimi's request for power-sharing.

The failure of Geneva II sparked the replacement of Brahimi by Staffan de Mistura, who downplayed ambitions of a political transition and instead encouraged local ceasefires. The latter being favored by the regime as a means to optimize the allocation of its scarce manpower, they were unsurprisingly rejected by the opposition. Following the Russian intervention, diplomatic initiatives resumed along two main patterns. First, the revived Geneva process (no less than six additional rounds of talks took place in 2016 and 2017) reflected the new military balance: at meetings held in Riyadh, the Syrian National Coalition was forced to form a High Negotiation Committee in partnership with dovish and even Russian-sponsored "opponents"; content-wise, discussions (headed by de Mistura's successor Geir Pedersen as of 2019) shifted from transition towards constitutional reform. Second, Russia initiated parallel ceasefire schemes designed to assist in the loyalist camp's war effort: the "Cessation of Hostilities" negotiated with the US in 2016 allowed the regime to retake Palmyra from IS; in 2017, four "de-escalation zones" (Greater Idlib, Northern Homs countryside, Eastern Damascus Countryside, and Der'a-Qunaytra) were agreed upon with Turkey (as part of the Astana process led by Moscow, Teheran and Ankara), the US and Jordan, only to be retaken one by one (except for Idlib) by pro-regime forces the following year.

### **Future Prospects**

Regardless of the fate of Idlib and eastern Syria, which might witness destructive confrontations if the regime, or Turkey, attempts to seize them, Syria is poised to remain the Sick Man of the Middle East. The country's economy will long remain plagued by the consequences of the civil war, all the more so that foreign funding for reconstruction will probably remain minimal. The lack of economic opportunities will provide little incentives for return, even among those refugees who feel safe enough to go back under regime rule. Scarce state resources will be predominantly distributed among loyalist constituencies that expect long-term rewards for their sacrifices during the war. Combined with the regime's abysmal legitimacy among the



communities that were the target of its brutal counter-insurgency campaign, this situation will preclude even modest political liberalization in the medium term. Syria's Sunni question, itself a consequence of Alawite domination over the state, will reemerge sooner or later.

Tensions among foreign tutelary powers are also likely to define Syria's politics for the foreseeable future. They risk opposing Russia and Iran, on the one hand, to Turkey, on the other hand, especially if they are deprived of a common cause by the withdrawal of US protection for the YPG. Even Moscow and Teheran might not indefinitely see eye to eye. Although both partners share a same strategic goal, that is, Asad's survival, tensions have already appeared over, first, the division of Syria's meagre economic resources; second, the sponsoring of rival military and paramilitary factions as part of Russia and Iran's attempts at enshrining their respective influences over loyalist forces; third, the contrast between Russia's willingness to appease Israel, and Iran's eagerness to perpetuate low-key confrontation with the Hebrew state as part of the Islamic Republic's quest for anti-Zionist legitimacy.

Finally, much of Syria's future will happen among the country's huge diaspora, whose role in the coming decades is likely to resemble that of the Palestinian one in the past decades. Whereas many refugees live in miserable conditions, other exiles have the ability to mobilise organizational resources (political organizations and NGOs, informal networks, connections to foreign governments) that Syrians living inside the country are sorely lacking. If, and when, the Bashar (or perhaps, one day, his son Hafiz, aged 17 in 2019) face a new major challenge to his rule, Syrian expatriates are likely to exert outsized influence over the course of events.

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