Syria's Transactional State
How the Conflict Changed the Syrian State's Exercise of Power

CHATHAM HOUSE
The Royal Institute of
International Affairs

Contents

Summary

- The Syrian conflict has changed the functions, capacity and agency of the principal institutions through which the state exercises control, namely the security agencies and the army. This has transformed Syria from a 'shadow state' dominated by the security apparatus into a 'transactional state' dominated by regime-aligned profiteers.

- President Bashar al-Assad's rise to power weakened the system of control that had been installed by his late father, Hafez al-Assad. The system had been reliant on a network of power brokers – both inside and outside state institutions – who would compete with one another to show regime loyalty. The Syrian conflict has further weakened this system, as the regime has become increasingly reliant on profiteers and external actors – specifically, Russia and Iran – pursuing their own interests.

- The conflict has caused the Syrian army to become fragmented and even more corrupt than before, and the security apparatus to lose its centralized command. It has also led to the rise of pro-regime militias, both Syrian and foreign, all of which are pursuing their own agendas. These armed groups are unlikely to cease operating once the conflict ends, and indeed will continue to exercise influence for as long as the current regime is in power. The conflict has given rise to profiteers from the army, the security services and militias, as well as to civilian profiteers. These interest groups have a stake in the conflict continuing. At the same time, the Syrian state lacks the capacity to rein them in.

- Russia and Iran have turned the Syrian regime into a client. Russia is shaping Syrian state institutions according to its own interests, while Iran is implanting influence both through Syrian state institutions and from outside them. Both Russia and Iran have also made Syria into an arena for their own military and economic competition. Russia is asserting itself as the main power broker in Syria, but is unable to completely restrain Iran.

- All these factors mean that the regime of Bashar al-Assad cannot be a partner for the international community in terms of providing peace and stability in Syria. Any plan by the international community to support reconstruction, stabilization and resilience in Syria must start with the Geneva process, in order to safeguard against undue accommodation of Russia, the Assad regime and its profiteers.

1. Introduction

The Syrian conflict has evolved over the past few years in favour of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The regime is making military gains while various opposition groups, both armed and political, are weakening. At the same time, a wide variety of regime-aligned non-state actors, including paramilitary groups and profiteers, have gained in influence. The situation has given rise to a number of interpretations, none of which entirely captures the complexity of the dynamics on the ground and the relationships between multiple domestic and external actors.

At one end of the spectrum, some Syria analysts identify fragmentation of the country as the main feature of the conflict. Scholars such as Raymond Hinnebusch have characterized Syria today as a failed state – citing the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and external interventions as both causes and consequences of a power vacuum that exists despite Assad remaining president.[1] Although these readings of the conflict cite the regime's behaviour as the cause of the Syrian revolt, they largely avoid attributing aspects of state failure specifically to the regime. Where analysts have accorded some responsibility to the Assad regime, they have characterized Syria as 'a broken, fragmented, divided state'.[2] This judgment is derived from observing how different parts of Syria have come to be ruled by competing entities, including the regime itself, ISIS, Kurdish forces and anti-regime armed groups.[3] In these readings, the regime is only one component of state weakness, not its main driver.

At the other end of the spectrum, Assad's military wins have led to a perception in some quarters that the Syrian regime is 'winning' the war.[4] Some have seen in the resilience of Assad proof that the state model set by his late father, Hafez al-Assad, is indeed 'coup-proof'.[5] This perception indirectly conflates the regime with the state. It implies that the way in which the state exercises power in Syria, including in regime-held areas, has largely remained as it was before the conflict started in 2011.[6] This ignores important aspects of the conflict's dynamics. If Assad is seemingly winning the war militarily, it is only because of the assistance to the regime that Russia and Iran have provided. Meanwhile, the key pillars of state control have been significantly weakened.

In the context of these contrasting accounts of state power, this paper seeks to address a gap in the analysis of the situation in Syria: it explores how the conflict has affected the functions, capacity and agency of the institutions through which the state controls Syria; and how the hostilities have transformed the *nature* of the state's exercise of power. Whereas previously the country operated as what can be termed a 'shadow state' – in which the institutions nominally associated with governance were subordinate to the security apparatus, and to a related network of power

[1] Hinnebusch, R. (2016), 'State De-Construction in Iraq and Syria', *PVS Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, Vol. 57, No. 4 , pp. 560–85.

[2] Shaikh, S. (2015), 'Syria is a Fragmented, Broken, Divided Country', Salman Shaikh interview with Katarina Montgomery, Syria Deeply, 6 January 2015, https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2015/01/06/salman-shaikh-syria-is-a-broken-fragmented-divided-state (accessed 27 Aug. 2018).

[3] Cahl, C. H., Goldenberg, I. and Heras, N. (2017), 'A Strategy for Ending the Syrian Civil War', Center for a New American Security, 7 June 2017, https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/a-strategy-for-ending-the-syrian-civil-war (accessed 27 Aug. 2018).

[4] For example, see Karlin, M. (2018), 'Order From Chaos: After 7 Years of War, Assad Has Won in Syria. What's Next for Washington?', Brookings Institution, 13 February 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/02/13/after-7-years-of-war-assad-has-won-in-syria-whats-next-for-washington/ (accessed 27 Aug. 2018).

[5] Quinlivan, J. T. (1999), 'Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East', *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 131–65.

[6] Heydemann, S. (2018), *Beyond Fragility: Syria and the Challenge of Reconstruction in Fierce States*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, June 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/FP_20180626_beyond_fragility.pdf (accessed 29 Jul. 2018).

brokers, interest groups and cronies – it is now better described as a 'transactional state'. This characterization is based on the analysis that Syria as a state was captured by the regime before 2011, but that its situation now goes beyond state capture.

It should be noted from the outset that the regime's ascendancy in the war does not mean that the state will be able to sustain peace and stability once major hostilities cease (assuming that the current regime remains in power). Even if the main institutions of state control have survived in *form* during the conflict, their function, capacity and agency have changed. In some cases, their structure has adapted to the circumstances of conflict. These institutions have also been joined – and sometimes undermined – by new actors that have entered the economic and security scene as conflict profiteers.

Comparison with the historical experience underlines the point. Since the 1970s, when Hafez al-Assad came to power, the levers nominally associated with state power have been subordinated to a security apparatus that – at least, until recently – has provided the main mechanism of real control. By comparison, the judiciary, army, police and other public institutions had relatively limited authority. However, since 2011, the centrality of the shadow state in Syrian politics has increasingly been challenged. The rise of opportunistic actors with a transactional relationship with the authorities has rendered the security apparatus less dominant, reducing the state's direct control in Syria. At the same time, Russia's growing hold over the country and Iran's efforts at influence – both through the Syrian state and outside it – have further eroded Syrian sovereignty.

This paper explores the drivers and dynamics of this shift to a 'transactional state'. It argues that the conflict has weakened the Syrian unitary state. It examines how the functions, capacity and agency of different elements of the state have been disrupted by conflict, with a particular focus on changes affecting the power and influence of the security apparatus. An understanding of these dynamics, and how they have been shaped by the conflict, is important for any post-conflict plans for reconstruction and stabilization.

With the Assad regime seemingly closing in on military 'victory', Western policymakers are beginning to seek ways to achieve post-conflict stabilization in Syria. Prospects for a durable settlement are complicated by several factors. The literature shows that negotiated peace settlements are more successful at resolving civil wars where politics and economics are the driving factors. Where conflict has been driven primarily by identity-based factors, negotiated settlements have been less effective. Moreover, military victories in identity-based civil wars are often followed by genocide.[7] The more pertinent stabilization dilemma presented by the Syrian conflict is that it does not fall neatly into either category. Not only is it more than a civil war – and thus arguably too wide in scope to fit common analytical narratives – but it is also about both politics *and* identity. An additional complication is that the military victory of the regime is unlikely to be absolute. All this presents challenges in terms of how the West might approach the conflict under the current circumstances. At the same time, the conflict's distinctive features may present opportunities for policy solutions, which this paper explores.

Considerable policy attention today is devoted to the role of 'elite bargaining' – how different elite actors compete for and negotiate influence – in conflict settlement and stabilization. This is evident, for instance, in a recent report published by the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office's Stabilisation Unit. The report argues that it is important to lay out the patterns of development of elites, the

---

[7] Licklider, R. (1995), 'The Consequences of Negotiated Settlements in Civil Wars, 1945-1993', *The American Political Science Review*, 89(3), pp. 681–90.

regional influences on those patterns, and the way in which conflict transforms their structure and processes of formation. In the case of Syria, all these factors have had a significant impact on the state, and demand careful consideration by Western policymakers interested in achieving stabilization in the country.[8] Yet a pragmatic accommodation of transactional actors carries risks of its own: Western policymakers must guard against empowering war profiteers, be these external actors, regime-affiliated actors or non-state actors.

This paper is based on fieldwork in Syria and interviews with a wide range of actors – including regime-affiliated figures, armed groups and civilians – between the start of the Syrian conflict and September 2018. The fieldwork and interviews have been supplemented by secondary sources. For the sake of security, all interviews have been anonymized.

[8] Stabilisation Unit (2018), 'Elite Bargains and Political Deals', UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, June 2018, http://www.sclr.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/publications/elite-bargains-and-political-deals (accessed 31 Jul. 2018).

2. The Origins and Evolution of Syria's Shadow State

Circles of power during the rule of Hafez al-Assad

To fully understand the changes in the Syrian state's methods of – and capacity for – control today, it is important to examine the origins of the current regime's power model. When Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1971, he created a new security-based state structure in which loyalty was often more important than capacity or official powers. This 'shadow state' – so named because the real levers of power operated behind the scenes – was effective enough to keep the president in power for 30 years. James T. Quinlivan argues that the purpose of the shadow state model was to render a regime 'coup-proof'. In particular, Quinlivan lists three characteristics of coup-proofing in Syria under Hafez al-Assad. These were:

> (1) the effective exploitation of family, ethnic, and religious loyalties for coup-critical positions balanced with wider participation and less restrictive loyalty standards for the regime as a whole; (2) the creation of an armed force parallel to the regular military; (3) the development of multiple internal security agencies with overlapping jurisdiction that constantly monitor the loyalty of the military and one another with independent paths of communication to critical leaders.[9]

Not only were favouritism and nepotism key in deciding who got what in the state system, but Assad also maintained his authority by ensuring that loyalists infiltrated business, religious, social and tribal circles.[10] The power structure that he designed was not a simple hierarchy that can easily be represented in an organizational chart, but rather a complex matrix of circles of influence that sometimes interconnected and at other times competed.

Assad had inherited the basics of the state, and what came to be his regime, from the Baath Party's early years between 1963 and 1970. He then structured the levers of power in accordance with local factors.[11] He was highly knowledgeable about the tribal, sectarian, regional and socio-economic layers of Syrian society, and he used this knowledge to divide and conquer – not only spreading fear in society, but also instilling mutual suspicion among competing actors. As a result, no single interest group gained ascendancy. Each group monitored other groups, reporting on their activities to the highest point in the chain of command – Assad himself.

In securing his own power in this way, Assad planted the seeds of transactionalism as a characteristic of the Syrian state. Following his promise to overthrow the ruling post-colonial oligarchy, his 'correctionist movement' in 1973 created syndicates to promote labourers' rights (such as the Peasants' Syndicate and Merchants' Syndicate). He also both appealed to the traditional bourgeois families and enabled the rise of a nouveau riche. These actors and others became part of Assad's power network.

Superficially, the structure of the state in Syria included the typical pillars of representative government that one might expect to find in an election-based republic.[12] But these institutions

---

[9] Quinlivan (1999), 'Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East', pp. 131–65, p. 133.
[10] Wedeen, L. (1999), *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
[11] Batatu, H. (1999), *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
[12] Abboud, S. (2016), *Syria*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

were largely a façade, existing in name only. In reality, the only meaningful control of the state – at least, until the current conflict changed the picture – was principally exerted by a ruling elite abetted by compliant security agencies. Presidential elections were invariably rigged.[13] State institutions, judicial, parliamentary and political bodies, and the security services and army all gave the *appearance* of being functioning independent authorities that conducted their duties in accordance with the law and the constitution. However, a closer look reveals that a great imbalance existed between them.

Among the above-mentioned institutions, the state security apparatus and, behind it, the army were the key bodies ensuring the power system remained secure and solid. Their method of rule was based on brutality and spreading fear among the population. The security apparatus, in particular, directed the functions of all other state institutions.

The structure of state institutions built by Hafez al-Assad exists to this day. It consists of four main security agencies: the General (formerly State) Intelligence Directorate, the Political Security Directorate, the Military Intelligence Directorate and the Air Force Intelligence Directorate. The first two nominally fall under the control of the Ministry of Interior (though in reality they are stronger than it); similarly, the latter two are theoretically subordinate to the Ministry of Defence. All four agencies nominally report to the Bureau of National Security of the Baath Party. In addition, Syria has a military police force, a military security force, and a presidential security force. Each of the security agencies has a head who coordinates closely with the president. Each main agency, in turn, has several branches with sub-branches clustered around cities, towns and villages. The president defines the role of each body. Their roles rarely overlap, but they are often in competition with each other.

Table 1: Major security agencies in Syria

Agency	Branches	Character
Bureau of National Security of the Baath Party	–	Civilian
General Intelligence Directorate	Internal branch External security Counter-espionage	Civilian
Political Security Directorate	Political party Students and student activities Surveillance and pursuit City	Civilian
Military Intelligence Directorate	Palestine Commando police Military interrogation Military intelligence in Lebanon	Military
Air Force Intelligence Directorate	–	Military
Military Police	–	Military
Military Security	–	Military
Presidential Security	–	–

Source: Taken from Quinlivan (1999), 'Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East', pp. 131–65, p. 152.

[13] *The Economist* (2014), 'A Bit of Theatre: An Election in Syria', 24 April 2014, https://www.economist.com/pomegranate/2014/04/24/a-bit-of-theatre (accessed 27 Aug. 2018).

As originally conceived by Hafez al-Assad, this power structure was designed so that the agencies monitored not only the public but also each other, the aim being to keep the balance of power in the hands of the president. So if one agency or branch got more power than another, the president could intervene, remove its head, or shift heads' roles.

The chain of command in these institutions consisted of carefully selected loyalists (for example, the defence minister, Moustafa Tlas, a Sunni, remained in office for three decades). However, the security apparatus was always ultimately dominated by Alawites – the minority sect of the Assad dynasty – and some members of other minorities. Apart from sensitive senior positions, appointments in the security services and the army were generally based on nepotism, favouritism and familial relations rather than on ability and professionalism. Privileges were also granted on the basis of membership of favoured minorities (above all, the Alawites), rather than according to ideological orientation. This created a system in which recipients were motivated mainly by the desire to preserve their position and benefits.

> As originally conceived by Hafez al-Assad, this power structure was designed so that the agencies monitored not only the public but also each other, the aim being to keep the balance of power in the hands of the president.

While token political plurality existed in the form of parties such as the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party, the Socialist Unionists Party, the Communist Labour Party and others, the dominant political force since 1971 has been the Arab Socialist Baath Party. Power and privileges were granted to personnel approved and supported by the security apparatus. Thus, even though the country would go through the democratic motions, holding party and parliamentary elections, anyone running for election – whether at party or parliamentary level – would have to be vetted by state security.

This operation was replicated in all syndicates in the country – for doctors, teachers, artists, engineers, peasants and so on. All vetting was done behind closed doors. The security apparatus controlled almost all aspects of society. Almost any activity needed a security clearance at some stage, even a wedding party if it was held in a public place. This process was not purely sectarian – i.e. consisting of favouritism towards Alawites in government institutions – but was also based on loyalty and influence on the ground. Some Sunni businessmen and Christians were also given privileges in different parts of the country, in order to maintain a balance between competing interests.[14] Assad drew on his deep study of Syrian society to structure the provision of power in accordance with local factors.[15] For example, the power template implemented in Damascus could be adapted to other governorates such as Aleppo or Latakia by localizing particular political and bureaucratic functions. Equally, power was allocated in a certain way in the suburbs of Damascus and differently in the city itself.

The leadership in effect created a social map of its constituents, monitored and observed to ensure loyalty at every level. Assad managed to infiltrate and erode the social structure by selectively building alliances with business communities for certain purposes, and with religious or tribal ones for others.[16] Economic neglect of peripheral districts and regions often meant that the more distant the governorate was from the central command in Damascus, the less privileged it was in terms of access

[14] Hinnebusch, R. (2001), *Syria: Revolution from Above*, New York: Routledge.
[15] Quinlivan (1999), 'Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East'.
[16] Perthes, V. (1997), *The Political Economy of Syria under Assad*, London: I.B. Tauris.

to services for its residents. But the chain of command was always designed to fit the local structure while ensuring that the network of loyalty remained functional. For example, in distant governorates and rural areas power was exercised through tribal and patriarchal networks, whereas in key cities and governorates – especially industrial cities such as Aleppo and the capital, Damascus – control was exerted through social, business and religious networks.

Circles of power would differ in size and influence. Smaller interest groups sometimes allied to form bigger groups, which in turn might seek to consolidate their position by connecting with more powerful circles. All the while they were monitored by the top command. If one circle or entity grew bigger than the regime allowed, the alliances around it would be withdrawn. In this way, perceived threats to the primacy of Assad's regime could be dismantled with minimal disruption to the running of the state: the void would swiftly be filled by a new circle or entity, and the overall network would continue to function. The rule of the game was: One mistake and you are out. Implementing this rule depended on maintaining the chain of command and levering the particular part of the structure to which each actor belonged. Minorities – with Alawites at the top of the chain – were given more chances to progress in this system than the majority Sunnis.[17]

In religious circles, power was not based along lines of religious authority (Syria does not have an equivalent to Egypt's al-Azhar, for example). Rather, it came from the granting of approval by the security apparatus to religious figures to head mosques and religious schools, on the understanding that preachers would show loyalty to the state and not spread messages that could jeopardize the overall power system. Despite the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood following the Hama massacre in 1982, Assad gave permission for the construction of hundreds of mosques and religious schools across the country – these were all controlled by the security apparatus.[18] The security apparatus also undermined the position of the Grand Mufti and nationalized religious funds.

Notable figures and families related to Assad relied on the 'Shabiha' – a group of thugs that engaged in intimidation, extortion and other illegal activities – to maintain and extend their authority, even as ultimate power remained in the hands of Assad and was exercised through the shadow state.[19] And while state institutions gave the appearance of functioning in Syria, the shadow state in fact was pulling the strings at Assad's direction.

The shadow state under Bashar al-Assad before 2011: continuation and seeds of weakness

The shadow state continued to control Syria when Bashar al-Assad succeeded Hafez al-Assad in 2000. The new president kept the power structure installed by his father. At the beginning of Bashar al-Assad's rule, the young, Western-educated ophthalmologist offered some hope for political and societal liberalization and reform. The internet was introduced, mobile phones became available, and other superficial trappings of modernity started to appear. But the state's underlying intolerance of dissent did not change. In 2000, the Damascus Spring started with some opposition figures gathering and discussing issues of public interest away from state-controlled and -authorized venues. This

[17] Van Dam, N. (1979), *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Sectarianism, Regionalism, and Tribalism in Politics, 1961–1978*, New York: St. Martin's Press.
[18] Lefèvre, R. (2013), *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[19] Al-Warraq, S. (2013). 'The Shabiha in Syria: From Mafia to Militia', As-Safir al-Arabi, 2 January 2013, http://assafirarabi.com/ar/02/01/2013/3312/الشبيحـة-فـي-سـوريا-مـ/ (accessed 5 Sep. 2018).

initially went unchallenged by the state. But when a lecture critical of business monopolies and an email with a cartoon mocking Assad came to the attention of the authorities, the two people behind these commentaries – an Alawite and a Christian – received lengthy prison terms. Later on, key members of the Damascus Spring movement were also imprisoned, some for several years.[20]

Despite similar authoritarian instincts, the approach of Bashar al-Assad differed from that of his father in one key respect: its lack of continuity. Hafez al-Assad had kept favoured commanders in their respective circles of power for long periods, ensuring that they gained knowledge, expertise and privileges. He had also allowed somewhat decentralized decision-making, allocating power to trusted (though closely watched) people around him. In contrast, Bashar al-Assad shuffled people in and out of his power network so often that he caused a cumulative disturbance in the system.[21] As a key opposition figure observed, commenting on the weakness and inexperience of Bashar al-Assad compared to his father, Syria under the son became a dictatorship without a dictator.[22] While this did not fundamentally alter the shadow state, it meant that the 'coup-proof' system was not as resilient as it once was.

Bashar al-Assad wanted to bring in his own people and inject new blood into the system, but he did not trust them enough to provide the support they needed to be effective. He replaced some faces in the old guard with new personnel, and switched from his father's decentralized system of control to centralized decision-making reliant on him alone. He brought in members of his family, as well as younger personnel from the security agencies and the army, to form a close circle around him. These figures included his uncle, Mohammad Makhlouf; and Makhlouf's sons Rami (responsible for running the family's business affairs) and Hafez (head of one of the state security agencies). Despite their privileged position in his inner circle, however, the final decision was always Bashar al-Assad's.

A further change was the president's focus on economic liberalization, which increased inequality between the periphery and the centre and created opportunities for the privileged at the expense of the poor. Although prosperity appeared to spread more widely across society, the gains remained limited to the president's inner circle and those with connections to it.[23] Assad's cousin, Rami Makhlouf, surfaced as the new face of economic modernization in the 2000s, with some privileges also granted to people associated with him, such as Muhammad Hamsho, a Sunni from Damascus and a member of Syria's upcoming generation of young businessmen. In short, the 'modernization' introduced by Assad was tailored to the prosperity of a certain class of society. It presented an image of change and modernity rather than offering real reform in itself.[24]

This situation was in marked contrast to the practice of patronage in the days of Assad's father. Under Hafez al-Assad, the Sunni bourgeoisie of Damascus – though very much under the thumb of a coercive system – still enjoyed some real privileges. Favours were offered to members of this cohort on the understanding that if they showed loyalty and paid their dues, their businesses would be spared. In short, it was a system of give and take that accommodated interests outside the regime's immediate circle. However, once Bashar al-Assad came to power, the existing patronage networks were partially reconfigured, as the privileges long granted to select groups now *also* went to members of newly established elites acting as fronts for regime players. This shift caused significant disruption to the

[20] Human Rights Watch (2009), 'The Forgotten Damascus Spring', 23 February 2009, https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/02/23/forgotten-damascus-spring (accessed 5 Sep. 2018).

[21] Leverett, F. L. (2005), *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

[22] Interview with one of the authors, Istanbul, spring 2017.

[23] Haddad, B. (2012), *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

[24] Cooke, M. (2016), *Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience, and the Syrian Revolution*, London: Routledge.

economic status quo. Many court cases were lost, businesses closed and companies taken over simply because owners refused to give a significant percentage of their assets or earnings to Rami Makhlouf.[25]

Of the changes to the Syrian state, those affecting the security apparatus would prove among the most consequential. Although the new president did not fully purge the system, the removal of some members of the old guard who had protected his father's interests[26] reduced its effectiveness. In some cases, the new recruits were too inexperienced to run things as before, seldom remaining in position for long enough to achieve the regime's agenda. The security agencies continued to act as important mechanisms of state control, stronger than the army or the Ministry of Interior. But while the shadow state persisted in outward form, Assad had planted the seeds of weakness. The extent to which the system was now fundamentally compromised would be exposed as the Syrian conflict unfolded from 2011 onwards.

Assad's response to the regional context further undermined the shadow state by damaging relations with the US. Assad had opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Syrian regime was later linked with the assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister, Rafik Hariri, an event that led the US to withdraw its ambassador from Damascus in 2005. Assad briefly came in from the cold in July 2008 after the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, invited the Assads to Paris in an effort to restore a measure of diplomatic respectability to Syria. However, Bashar al-Assad's rehabilitation in the eyes of the international community was halted by the regime's hard-line response to the outbreak of the Syrian uprising.

'Keep it in the family': state control at the outbreak of the Syrian uprising

The Arab Spring had a major impact on Syria's shadow state. Syrians were closely watching as events unfolded in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen, and were debating what would happen at home. Early on during the anti-government protests, Assad seemed relatively receptive to popular criticism: he opened up internet and social media channels, hitherto restricted, and promised the release of political prisoners and the writing of a new constitution. These actions and statements were taken by some as reassurance that the unrest erupting elsewhere in the region would be avoided in Syria.

Yet despite Assad's public declaration that Syria was 'different' from other Arab countries in turmoil, protests did take place.[27] Assad's response to the protests in the city of Deraa – where the uprising originated – was to order his military to encircle the city and to send members of the security services to shoot protesters. As the civilian death toll in Deraa mounted, members of Assad's inner circle and some of his advisers took a hawkish position, advocating further crackdowns and that anyone proposing reconciliation should be punished. While a few advocates of a more dovish approach tried to find a middle ground and bring calm to the streets, within weeks it was clear which camp had prevailed.

The crackdown was managed by the president's office. Assad himself commanded the operation, with Mohammad Makhlouf and Rami Makhlouf managing at least 500 military and security personnel. Mohammad Dib Daaboul, known as Abou Salim, was in charge of the president's office and liaised

[25] Holmes, O. and Al-Khalidi, S. (2012), 'Syria moneyman is target of anti-Assad hatred', Reuters, 18 July 2012, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-assad-moneyman/syria-moneyman-is-target-of-anti-assad-hatred-idUSBRE86H0ON20120718 (accessed 29 Jul. 2018).

[26] Eyal, Z. (2007), *Commanding Syria: Bashar Al-Asad and the First Years in Power*, London: I.B. Tauris.

[27] *Wall Street Journal* (2011), 'Interview With Syrian President Bashar al-Assad', 31 January 2011, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894 (accessed 29 Jul. 2018).

with military and security personnel, taking orders directly from the president. The minister of presidential affairs, Mansour Azzam, managed a further network of up to 1,500 people distributed between various government institutions. Assad and his brother, Maher al-Assad (the head of both the elite Fourth Armoured Division and the Republican Guard), managed brutal army operations that evolved, as the conflict progressed, into tactics such as barrel-bombing of opposition areas.

Table 2: Main Syrian armed land forces

Corps	Divisions	Brigades	Republican Guard
• First Corps: leadership in Damascus • Second Corps: leadership in Zabadani • Third Corps: leadership in Aleppo • Fourth Corps (est. 2015): leadership in Hama • Fifth Corps (est. 2017): leadership in Damascus	14 divisions (Armoured, Mechanized)	40+ brigades	

Source: Based on information from Holliday, J. (2013), *The Syrian Army: Doctrinal Order of Battle*, Institute for the Study of War, published February 2013 and updated in 2018, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/SyrianArmy-DocOOB.pdf (accessed 6 Sep. 2018).

In May 2011, Rami Makhlouf gave an interview to the *New York Times* implying that the Assad family and the ruling elite had become closer as a result of the conflict. He intimated that policy decision-making was a 'joint' process, albeit conceding that Assad still had the final say. Makhlouf added: 'As a person, each one of us knows that we cannot continue without staying united together.'[28] In effect, the security apparatus still had a largely free hand, under the president's supervision. However, this arrangement – a legacy of Hafez al-Assad's rule – had not been tested by the political and social conditions that confronted his son. As his father had done in suppressing any organized movement against him, Bashar al-Assad sought to rely on competition between the security agencies to handle the uprising he was facing. His measure of success was the number of demonstrations taking place. If one security agency did not quell demonstrations, he would hand leadership of the crackdown to another.

As the conflict escalated and spread across the country, different actors rose and fell in prominence. One day Ali Mamlouk, head of the General Intelligence Directorate, would be the one in charge. The next, it would be Jamil Hassan, head of the feared Air Force Intelligence Directorate. Members of the old guard who did not show complete obedience to the regime were sidelined or lost privileges. They included Ali Habib, dismissed as defence minister in August 2011. Meanwhile, some old-guard retirees – such as Ali Douba, the former head of Military Intelligence, and Bahjat Suleiman, Syria's former ambassador to Jordan – were reappointed as advisers.[29]

---

[28] Shadid, A. (2011), 'Syrian Elite to Fight Protests to 'the End'', *New York Times*, 10 May 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/11/world/middleeast/11makhlouf.html (accessed 29 Jul. 2018). In the same interview, Makhlouf said: 'If there is no stability here, there is no way there will be stability in Israel.' At the time, many outside Syria dismissed his comments as bravado, but his words were proven right almost eight years into the conflict. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared this year that Israel has no problem with Assad remaining in power and regaining control over all of Syria. In the same month that Makhlouf gave the interview to the *New York Times* in 2011, he was put on the European sanctions list for his role in funding the regime's violence against demonstrators.
[29] Ali Douba was added to the European sanctions list in 2011 with the note: 'Responsible for killings in Hama in 1980, has been called back to Damascus as special advisor to President Bashar Al-Assad.' See Official Journal of the European Union (2012), 'COUNCIL REGULATION (EU) No 36/2012 of 18 January 2012 concerning restrictive measures in view of the situation in Syria and repealing Regulation (EU) No 442/2011', 19 January 2012, p. 15, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2012:016:0001:0032:EN:PDF (accessed 6 Sep. 2018).

Despite all its efforts, the security apparatus was unable to stop the demonstrations, as the shadow state model inherited and modified by Bashar al-Assad proved much less effective than it had been pre-2011. Army officers began to defect to the opposition. They established what came to be known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which would later include former civilians who had taken up arms. The effect on government forces was significant: although the continued presence of key decision-makers ensured that the army did not break down,[30] it was weakened by the loss of personnel.

The hollowing out of the shadow state's security and military capacity

As the conflict unfolded, the army became increasingly fragmented and the security apparatus lost the ability to maintain centralized command. As a result, the shadow state that had enabled Hafez al-Assad to exercise and maintain power became less effective. The consequences of this continue to be felt, even as the conflict has entered a more recent stage in which the regime once again has the military advantage. The Syrian army's combat capacity – already weak before 2011,[31] its ranks plagued by corruption and nepotism[32] – has been significantly diminished since the start of the conflict. Moreover, the regime's forces today must contend with the effects of recent further reductions in capacity[33] – due in part to defections and battle losses, but also reflecting the large numbers of soldiers who have refused to fight (and who, in many such cases, have been executed).[34]

The army is trying to increase its numbers. It has raised the maximum age for voluntary conscription to 42, and is conducting forced conscription.[35] As government forces have retaken rebel-held areas, the regime has used what it calls 'reconciliation treaties' to recruit people into the Fourth or Fifth Corps established by Russia to boost army capacity. In reality, the 'treaties' are coerced agreements. The regime uses siege tactics to starve residents to the point of surrender, sometimes bombarding neighbourhoods or using chemical weapons to force compliance. Former rebels who choose to stay in areas recaptured by government forces are left with one choice: renounce the opposition, pledge allegiance to Assad, settle their security status, and then join government forces to fight against the very rebel groups they used to belong to.[36]

The army is also sometimes refusing to discharge reservists upon completion of their legal term of service.[37] Prior to 2011 – both during the Hafez al-Assad era and after Bashar al-Assad took power – reserve service was uncommon. Upon completion of military service, men were discharged and provided with an ID for the reserve service, to be kept in case of recall. Very rarely, men with

[30] Phillips, C. (2018), 'The World Abetted Assad's Victory in Syria', *The Atlantic*, 4 August 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/08/assad-victory-syria/566522/ (accessed 6 Sep. 2018).

[31] Kaplan, F. (2003), 'Assad's Situation: Syria's Military Machine May be Hollow—but It Isn't Harmless', *Slate*, 14 April 2003, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/war_stories/2003/04/assads_situation.html?via=gdpr-consent (accessed 5 Sep. 2018).

[32] Khaddour, K. (2017), 'Despite its Weakness, the Syrian Army Remains Central to the Regime's Survival – Syrian Expert', The Syrian Observer, 13 February 2017, http://syrianobserver.com/EN/Interviews/32329/Despite_Weakness_the_Syrian_Army_Remains_Central_the_Regime_Survival_Syrian_Expert (accessed 29 Jul. 2018). See also Khaddour, K. (2016), 'Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 14 March 2016, http://carnegie-mec.org/2016/03/14/strength-in-weakness-syrian-army-s-accidental-resilience-pub-62968 (accessed 27 Aug. 2018).

[33] For an overview of the structure of the army pre-2011, see Holliday, J. (2013), *The Syrian Army: Doctrinal Order of Battle*, Institute of the Study of War, February 2013, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/SyrianArmy-DocOOB.pdf (accessed 29 Jul. 2018).

[34] For an account of losses of armoured vehicles, see Janovský, J. (2018), 'Seven Years of War — Documenting Syrian Arab Army's Armoured Vehicles Losses', Bellingcat, 27 March 2018, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/03/27/saa-vehicle-losses-2011-2017/ (accessed 5 Sep. 2018).

[35] Forced conscription is frequently cited by male refugees as a reason for fleeing the country. See Fabbe, K., Hazlett, C. and Sinmazdemir, T. (2018), 'Persuasive Peace: Syrian Refugees' Attitudes Towards Compromise and Civil War Termination', *Harvard Business School BGIE Unit Working Paper No. 18-049*, 30 April 2018, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3182484 (accessed 27 Aug. 2018).

[36] Haid, H. (2018), 'Joining the Enemy: How the Syrian Regime Reintegrates Former Rebel Fighters', Chatham House, July 2018, https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/joining-the-enemy-how-the-syrian-regime-reintegrates-former-rebel-fighters (accessed 29 Jul. 2018).

[37] Interviews with army recruits, Damascus countryside, May 2018.

specialized military skills were called for service in the reserves for a period of between six months and one year. Since 2011, however, some reservists have been kept on active duty for several years.

The regime's efforts to increase military manpower have had mixed results. Recruitment has had been of limited benefit because most new recruits lack military experience and have thus contributed minimally to the army's combat capacity.[38] Sectarianism is also a major challenge. A large number of Syrian army conscripts hail from the majority Sunni population. Conditions in the army are not ideal. Soldiers are poorly paid, and during seven years of war many Sunni soldiers have remained in front-line areas for months – sometimes years – under harsh conditions without adequate supplies. This is stoking sectarian tension as Alawi soldiers (belonging to the same minority sect as the Assad family) are now mainly kept away from the front lines and are thus perceived as the beneficiaries of preferential treatment. The situation is not helped by the fact that corruption in the army has become even more widespread than before the war: soldiers with connections to high-level officers, or with financial means, are able to bribe their way out of front-line duties.

The conflict has also put a strain on the shadow state's model of relying on branches of the security agencies in different areas of Syria. The agencies have lost a good number of their own members during the war, which has weakened their capacity. Just as importantly, the conflict has severed the top-down lines of command between the president's inner circle and many of the local sub-branches of security agencies. As a consequence, these sub-branches have come to operate almost independently. In Damascus and elsewhere, different districts are controlled by different security sub-branches. These actors enforce their authority through brutal treatment of the resident population.

In this way, the challenges encountered by the army and the security apparatus have altered the country's power dynamics. Military losses and capacity constraints have paved the way for the rise of state-sponsored and state-aligned militias. These new actors have been tolerated or encouraged by the regime on the understanding that their role is to help the regular army and security agencies, with the army coordinating militia operations.[39] But what was meant in effect to be a solution to a resourcing problem has merely depleted the shadow state's military and security capacity further, in turn obliging the regime to rely on propaganda to cover up for its weaknesses. There have also been some structural and functional changes as state institutions have had to accommodate the new actors.

The rise of pro-regime militias can be traced to the government's engagement with the Shabiha, a network of criminal gangs initially mobilized by the regime to go down to protest areas and beat up demonstrators.[40] Later on, the Shabiha became more organized and gained more power as they were integrated into what came to be known as 'popular committees'. Popular committees were mainly formed from the minorities loyal to President Assad: Alawites, Christians, Shia and Druze. These groups started popping up in neighbourhoods, towns and cities around the country. Under the pretext of providing local protection, the popular committees were armed from the early days of the uprising. Their demographic composition reflected the regime's tactic of spreading fear among minorities by warning of the danger from 'Sunni jihadist' (as the regime described them) protesters.[41] As the protests

[38] Danish Immigration Service (2017), *Syria: Recruitment Practices in Government-controlled Areas and in Areas under Opposition Control, Involvement of Public Servants and Civilians in the Armed Conflict and Issues Related to Exiting Syria*, August 2017, https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/995176/download (accessed 5 Sep. 2018).

[39] Interview with Kheder Khaddour by Jihad Yazigi. The Syrian Observer (2017), 'Despite its Weakness, the Syrian Army Remains Central to the Regime's Survival – Syrian Expert', The Syrian Observer, 13 February 2017, http://syrianobserver.com/EN/Interviews/32329/Despite_Weakness_the_Syrian_Army_Remains_Central_the_Regime_Survival_Syrian_Expert (accessed 29 Jul. 2018).

[40] BBC (2012), 'Syria Unrest: Who Are the Shabiha?', 29 May 2012, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14482968 (accessed 29 Jul. 2018).

[41] Stolleis, F. (ed.) (2015), *Playing the Sectarian Card: Identities and Affiliations of Local Communities in Syria*, Beirut: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/12320.pdf (accessed 5 Sep. 2018).

expanded, the violence increased and more personnel were needed to support the regime's official forces. The popular committees were thus recruited to accompany the forces of the security agencies tasked with going to beat up and/or shoot protesters.

An additional consequence of the hollowing out of the shadow state was the room it created for Iranian-backed paramilitary groups to enter the Syrian theatre (Iran's wider foreign policy agenda in the country is covered in Chapters 4 and 5). Iran saw that the Syrian regime was incapable on its own of winning the war militarily or regaining control over cities and towns taken by the opposition.[42] After initially sending its advisers to help with cyber crackdowns on demonstrators at the start of the uprising, Iran dispatched military advisers to Syria to draw up the war strategy in 2011. These were followed in 2012 by Shia fighters sent to support the regime's forces.[43] The first arrivals were from Hezbollah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Mercenaries followed from 2013 onwards,[44] including fighters from al-Nujaba' and the Abou'l Fadl al-Abbas Brigade – both militias from the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) in Iraq.

Iran's response also took advantage of Article 10 of the Syrian Military Service Law of 2003, which permits the creation of 'other forces as obligated by necessity' to supplement the regular army.[45] As the numbers of Syrian army and security personnel continued to decrease, this article was put into action around 2013, when Iran decided to build a paramilitary force from minorities loyal to Tehran, using a model similar to that associated with the PMU.

Members of this new auxiliary militia, known as the National Defence Forces (NDF), fought alongside Syrian government troops. Funded by Rami Makhlouf, and trained and overseen by Iran, the NDF was conceived as an entity that could grow into a cell in Syria, deriving state legitimacy from a token mandate of providing defence. In this way, Iran hoped that the NDF would acquire a status similar to that of Hezbollah in Lebanon.[46] Although, under Syrian law, the army, internal security forces and 'additional forces' such as militias are all treated as part of the regular armed forces, the NDF differentiated itself by paying recruits much higher salaries. NDF salaries ranged between US$100 and US$400 a month in 2018, compared with an average of around US$50 a month for regular soldiers in the Syrian army.[47]

Iran continued to boost the numbers of Shia militias in Syria, later sending personnel from Afghanistan (the Fatimiyoun militia), Yemen and Pakistan (the Zeinabiyoun) to fight for the regime.[48] At times, the increased role of irregular militias in the conflict created complications for the regime's relationships with allied combatants. For example, in some battles, state-aligned militias

[42] See Bassiri Tabrizi, A. and Pantucci, R. (eds) (2016), *Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict*, Occasional Paper, London: Royal United Services Institute, August 2016, https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201608_op_understanding_irans_role_in_the_syrian_conflict_0.pdf (accessed 6 Sep. 2018).

[43] See Constable, P. (2018), 'Recruited by Iran to fight for Syrian regime, young Afghans bring home cash and scars', *Washington Post*, 29 July 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/recruited-by-iran-to-fight-for-syrian-regime-young-afghans-bring-home-cash-and-scars/2018/07/29/ecf9e34c-64e0-11e8-81ca-bb14593acaa6_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.6947a47a1034 (accessed 30 Jul. 2018).

[44] Al-Sharq al-Awsat published a list of the main Iran-supported militias in Syria in 2017: 'Mapping Iranian Militias in Syria', 23 August 2017, https://aawsat.com/home/article/1006036/%D8%AE%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%82-%C2%AB%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B6%C2%BB (accessed 30 Jul. 2018).

[45] The full text of the Syrian Military Service Law of 2003 can be found on the Syrian parliament's website, http://www.parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=5571&cat=16006 (accessed 30 Jul. 2018).

[46] Iran later set up small localized militias, in Sweida and Damascus, known as the Local Defence Forces, which report to the 15th Division and the Republican Guard, respectively.

[47] Interview with Syrian military expert, Damascus, May 2018.

[48] Dehghanpisheh, B. (2015), 'Iran recruits Pakistani Shi'ites for combat in Syria', Reuters, 10 December 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-pakistan-iran-idUSKBN0TT22S20151210 (accessed 6 Sep. 2018).

made key military gains only to see the credit go to the Syrian army. In 2014, controversy was caused when presidential adviser Buthaina Shaaban expressed anger that 'friendly media' were claiming victory for Syria's allies and denying the Syrian army's role. She soon withdrew her statement, and it was erased from the internet. The reference was to coverage of battles in which gains had been made by Hezbollah, as journalists from the Hezbollah media outlets al-Manar and al-Mayadeen had been allowed into battle towns to broadcast the news while the Syrian army and its media had been left behind. On other occasions, al-Manar and al-Mayadeen would broadcast Hezbollah's victories live, but although it was obvious that the Syrian army was not present, credit for the victories would later be given to the Syrian army.[49] One reporter claimed that, at some battles, journalists had to wait for several days until Syrian army battalions and media had arrived before they could cover the hostilities. At that point, moreover, regime propaganda would start to appear claiming that the Syrian army had cleared towns of opposition or ISIS forces.[50]

A final factor contributing to the diminishment of the shadow state's military and security capacity was its military tactics. As cities and towns had fallen to the rebels earlier in the conflict, the regime relied on the tactic of pulling out its forces and encircling and bombing these areas. The removal of state security and military institutions from inside towns and cities left a void that was subsequently filled by armed opposition groups or Islamists.[51] Today, with the regime having taken back many of these areas from the rebels, the Syrian state does not have the capacity to exercise full military and security control over them. A similar phenomenon is even occurring in areas that have remained under regime authority throughout the conflict, due to the reduction in state technical military capacity and the snowballing influence of pro-regime militias and branches of the security agencies described above.

Today, the pro-regime actors in the conflict all have different interests and are vying to maintain their power. This contest not only involves battalions and brigades within the Syrian army, pro-regime Syrian militias, and branches of the security agencies. It also encompasses Iranian-backed foreign militias with an agenda to maintain their presence in the country, keep control of key areas in the hands of Shia, and push the Sunni opposition out of Sunni-held areas. Evidence that this rivalry between myriad actors is hollowing out the shadow state can be seen, for instance, in the occasions when Iranian-backed militias (mainly Hezbollah) have denied Syrian army officers access to towns and villages without the militias' consent. Among these locations have been towns such as Zabadani and Madaya, bordering Lebanon, which Hezbollah considers of strategic importance. Residents and opposition fighters recall Hezbollah and Iran exercising full control in both towns. For example, when negotiations were under way over a deal that would allow fighters and civilians to leave Zabadani and Madaya, the regime approached civilians in an attempt to persuade them to stay (in an effort to prevent Hezbollah from controlling the area). However, the Syrian army was unable to prevent the population-exchange deal from taking place.[52]

---

[49] See various news items about tensions related to Shaaban, al-Manar and al-Mayadeen on Asharq al-Arabi's website: http://www.asharqalarabi.org.uk/%D9%82%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AD%D8%A8-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%82--%D9%88%D8%AE%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%85-%D8%AB%D9%85-%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%8A-1442014_ad-id!70072.ks (accessed 29 Jul. 2018).

[50] Interview with a Syrian journalist, Damascus, April 2018.

[51] Sometimes this was deliberate, as the regime released 1,500 jihadists from Seydnaya and other prisons in 2011 to help prove to the world that it was fighting Islamist terrorism and not cracking down on an uprising. See, for example, Kassab, R. Y. and Al-Shami, L. (2018), *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, London: Pluto Press. But the regime for the most part continued to pay salaries to civil servants in areas it had vacated on the security level, such as in Raqqa during the rule of ISIS.

[52] Interview in Zabadani, March 2018.

3. The Rise of the Transactional State

As the state's military and security capacity has diminished, Syria has been transformed from a shadow state into a 'transactional state' – that is, one essentially underpinned by transactional relationships. Such modes of interaction are not in themselves new to Syria. Even before the uprising, the regime's network of elites had operated on a transactional basis. However, this always occurred without changing or impinging upon the basic parameters of state control. Now, the network has grown to include profiteers who were not part of the original power system. These opportunistic new actors perform some of the functions of the state, but from outside state institutions. Their power has grown to the extent that the government can no longer control them.

The system of circles of power created by Hafez Al-Assad and modified by Bashar al-Assad is being rearranged. The smaller 'circles' are becoming larger and more influential, outgrowing their pre-assigned role in the system. In the past, profiteers would primarily defend the interests of state and regime as this guaranteed their own interests. Today, the new profiteers are mainly pursuing their own interests and acting independently of the interests of the state and regime.

The rise of profiteers has been facilitated by several factors. First, the need to circumvent sanctions on businessmen close to the regime has obliged it to recruit new faces to act on its behalf. These players are becoming increasingly active in business, and have been involved in transactions cumulatively worth billions of dollars. Recognizing the regime's need for them, they have grown in ambition and are more influential than regular regime cronies.

The second factor is that many areas have fallen outside the regime's direct control. This has required the regime to find new partners on the ground who can operate on its behalf and facilitate business and services in areas beyond the reach of government.[53] Again, these local partners are taking advantage of the regime's dependence on them.

A third, related factor is the state's loss of institutional capacity as a result of the war. Many institutions – such as those handling customs, water supply, agriculture, and the production and distribution of oil – have ceased to be fully functional. This has forced the regime to rely on the capacity of non-state actors. As towns and cities have slipped out of central government control, the regime has relied on local groups and individuals in various parts of the country to manage state affairs. In certain cases, as in the selling and buying of oil and the transport of goods, this has involved negotiating with ISIS commanders and Islamist groups such Jabhat al-Nusra, as these actors controlled supply routes.[54]

New warlords have risen to prominence as the country's economic and security dynamics have changed. Moheddine al-Manfoush took control of the smuggling of goods in and out of Eastern Ghouta. George Hasswani emerged as the regime's main negotiator with Jabhat al-Nusra, working on everything from oil transactions to an agreement to secure the release of captured nuns in Deir Attieh. Samer al-Foz is the new front for Rami Makhlouf (the latter is targeted by sanctions), and

---

[53] Abboud, S. (2017), 'The Economics of War and Peace in Syria: Stratification and Factionalization in the Business Community', The Century Foundation, 31 January 2017, https://tcf.org/content/report/economics-war-peace-syria/?agreed=1 (accessed 29 Jul. 2018).
[54] Borger, J. and Mahmood, M. (2013), 'EU decision to lift Syrian oil sanctions boosts jihadist groups', *Guardian*, 19 May 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/19/eu-syria-oil-jihadist-al-qaida (accessed 6 Sep. 2018).

has been involved in a variety of lucrative deals, from reconstruction projects to the purchase of large plots of land and hotels (including a major share in the Four Seasons hotel in Damascus, bought from Saudi Prince Al-Walid Bin Talal).[55]

A variety of other names have surfaced in recent years, acting on behalf of the government and running businesses around the country. Some control the oil sector, some aviation, and others – depending on their location, influence over the local community, and links with armed opposition groups – iron and reconstruction. Some figures, such as Ayman Jaber, a business mogul connected to the Assad family in Latakia, have formed their own militias to support the regime. Jaber's fighters helped in the battle for Palmyra.

Reliance on profiteers has created a vicious circle for the Syrian state. The profiteers have come to recognize the regime's growing dependence on them, and consequently expect ever greater support from the state in exchange for their services. This is further eroding state capacity and altering institutional functionality. In short, the transactionalism that used to be just *one* tool (of many) used by the shadow state has now become the defining characteristic of the Syrian state.

The rise of army, security and militia profiteers

Beyond the rise of warlords and economic actors, state power in Syria is challenged by the rise of profiteers from within state institutions and affiliated militias. Far from being driven by state interest, those in the army, the security apparatus or militias often use their positions for economic gain. The regime has given leaders of armed groups such as the NDF shares in businesses, in an effort to retain their military support. Certain petrol stations in Damascus that used to be publicly owned have been privatized and awarded to the same individual.

Most of the NDF warlords come from impoverished minority sects and earned relatively low incomes before the conflict. However, the war has made them rich. Many have gone from earning £S10,000 a month (equivalent to US$200 before the war) to earning nearly £S2 million a month (nearly US$4,000 at today's rates). They appear to have no qualms about displaying their newfound affluence, and in Damascus can be seen driving fancy cars and sitting in expensive cafes. Their success in effect has created a new socio-economic class in Syria.[56] If the experience of Lebanon is any indication, it will be difficult for the Syrian state to rein in this new class once the conflict is over.

As the regime continues to devise new mechanisms to channel state funding to these groups, the functions of some state institutions have changed accordingly. For example, the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has set up a bureau to regulate the registration and funding of NGOs. As a number of pro-regime militias (including the NDF) are funded by figures such as Rami Makhlouf through his NGO al-Bustan, the bureau has become a route for the funding of al-Bustan and others – all ostensibly on the basis of supporting civil society. Some militia leaders have even set up their own NGOs for the specific purpose of obtaining state funding.

Before the uprising, when the state was comparably more solid (under both Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad), the security branches competed to show loyalty to the regime. This allowed the regime to

[55] The Syria Report (2018), 'Factsheet: Samer Foz, Syria's Most Powerful Businessman', 19 April 2018, http://www.syria-report.com/library/economic-data/factsheet-samer-foz-syria%E2%80%99s-most-powerful-businessman (accessed 30 Jul. 2018).

[56] Sinjab, L. (2017), 'How Syria's War Economy Propels the Conflict', Chatham House, July 2017, https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/how-syrias-war-economy-propels-the-conflict (accessed 29 Jul. 2018).

ensure stability through a divide-and-rule approach. Today, competition is over power, benefits and financial gain. The conflict has enabled each branch or sub-branch of the security agencies to expand its power, and has encouraged each to carve out a share of the war economy for itself. As a result, the security branches are increasingly acting in their own interests rather than those of the state.[57]

One example is the setting up of checkpoints. Just as some rebel groups have done, pro-regime militias, the army and branches of the security agencies have all set up checkpoints for the sole purpose of extorting money. Some have gone as far as to rent out checkpoints to private individuals or groups, thereby guaranteeing a regular income without having to man the checkpoints themselves.[58] The regime tolerates this activity not only because it does not have the financial means to pay all of its affiliates, but also because allowing such groups to profiteer from the war is a way of keeping them on its side.

> Bribery is rampant in respect of people-smuggling, with army officers often paid thousands of dollars to facilitate the transport of individuals to Turkey or Lebanon to escape military service or avoid arrest by the regime.

Outside Eastern Ghouta near Damascus, pro-regime checkpoints are charging £S50 per kilogramme for building materials that residents want to bring into the district to renovate properties (only minor renovations are permitted). Checkpoints in the area not only impose taxes on the transport of commercial goods but also on the passage of people travelling to Eastern Ghouta or Yarmouk. In one reported case, a woman paid a total of £S20,000 at a series of checkpoints, each charging £S2,000–3,000, to be able to reach her house in Eastern Ghouta. The checkpoints also sometimes charge a fee (reportedly up to £S200,000 per truck) to ensure the safe passage of trucks carrying goods in regime-held or regime-acquired areas, with local forces accompanying each truck to its destination. This has pushed tradespeople to add the cost of 'accompaniment' to the selling price of goods.[59]

Army officers are also accepting bribes in exchange for helping people to avoid reserve conscription. Officers are making up to US$300 a month for each person who would normally be conscripted from the districts that they oversee – the fee ensures the person's name is deleted from the conscripts' register or that their absence from service is ignored. Bribery is also rampant in respect of people-smuggling, with army officers often paid thousands of dollars to facilitate the transport of individuals to Turkey or Lebanon to escape military service or avoid arrest by the regime. In such cases, individuals are typically provided with 'security identity cards' showing military affiliation under a different name, and their exit from Syria is arranged using military vehicles to avoid being stopped at regime checkpoints.[60]

Unregistered and fake security identity cards have offered a way for people to avoid military service ever since the Syrian state announced that NDF membership was permitted in lieu of being in the army. Some people have registered as NDF members without being active in its combat units, while others have simply purchased fake security identity cards on the black market, paying anything

[57] Jassem, A. (2016), خبث السلطة: الاعتقالات في سوريا كجزء من منطق سياسي وإقتصادي [The wiliness of the authorities: Detentions in Syria as part of a political and economic logic], Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 12 January 2016, https://lb.boell.org/ar/12/01/2016/khbth-lslt-ltqlt-fy-swry-kjz-mn-mntq-sysy-wqtsdy (accessed 5 Sep. 2018).
[58] Interviews with checkpoint personnel, Eastern Ghouta, May 2018.
[59] Interviews with Ghouta residents, Eastern Ghouta, May 2018.
[60] Interviews with military personnel in Damascus, May 2018.

from £S500,000 to £S2 million for them. The rise of this phenomenon has since led the Syrian government to announce that only the Bureau of National Security can issue these cards.[61]

Detention has provided a lucrative business for many regime-affiliated entities. A number of groups have become brokers for detainees, with each outfit having its own method and price for performing certain services. The brokering services are headed by army officers, members of the security branches, lawyers and, in some cases, simply individuals who claim to have links to persons with authority and influence. The services include supplying information (not necessarily always of a reliable nature) to family members about the whereabouts and fate of detainees; delivering objects to detainees inside the security facilities in which they are held; and accelerating investigation processes to speed up the release of detainees. Without the latter service, detainees can often expect to be held for months.[62]

The sums paid to such brokers can range from hundreds to many thousands of dollars: reportedly up to US$20,000 to retrieve someone from detention, arrange for their case to be transferred to a court (usually a terrorism court), and finally secure their acquittal. The sums depend on the severity of the charges against the detainee, and the locality that he or she comes from. Fees for women are lower than those for men, and the price paid for someone from an opposition-controlled area will differ from that paid if the detainee is from an area under regime control. In many cases, charges against detainees are exaggerated so that more money can be extorted from their families. This grim trade extends to the terrorism court, to which a large number of detainee cases are transferred, and where large sums are paid to lawyers and judges in order to expedite trials and secure defendants' release.[63]

Detention rackets are also associated with rampant theft. Detainees often have their personal belongings confiscated or stolen by officers at detention facilities. Some criminal gangs or thieves have connections with corrupt military officers, judges or branches of the security agencies. If arrested, the thieves simply surrender a share of the stolen goods to the authorities to ensure prompt release.[64]

Looting has also become systemic. In Eastern Ghouta, NDF members and other militiamen or thugs – accompanied by people in military uniform from the security apparatus – engage in the looting of entire buildings. The practice typically takes two forms: either the building is ransacked and its contents loaded on to trucks to be sold wholesale (one truckload reportedly sold for £S200,000); or the 'right' to loot a building is sold to a buyer for an agreed fee that can reach millions of Syrian pounds. (In the latter case, the buyer has typically 'purchased' the building's contents blind.) Completing the process, army checkpoints then accept bribes in return for allowing trucks loaded with looted goods to pass. Where buildings have been destroyed in the fighting, the steel, aluminium and copper scrap from them is often collected and sold to businesses owned by warlords such as Muhammad Hamsho.[65]

The various entities involved in these activities sometimes compete over resources and sometimes cooperate, depending on their relative military clout, local connections and logistical need. This creates a 'war economy' ecosystem in which armed and security entities are incentivized to perpetuate violence, even at the expense of the interests of the state. As a result, the state's ability to exert authority is further weakened.

---

[61] Interviews with residents in Damascus, May 2018.
[62] Interviews with residents in Damascus, May 2018.
[63] Interviews with residents in Damascus, May 2018.
[64] Interviews with residents in Damascus, May 2018.
[65] Interviews with residents in Damascus, May 2018.

4. External Actors: Russian–Iranian Competition in Syria

In addition to the domestic factors that have eroded its authority, the Syrian state has become hostage to the regime's external patrons, Iran and Russia. While the state publicly asserts its authority and sovereignty, the need to keep Iran and Russia politically and economically satisfied has depleted Syria's agency in its external relations with both countries. Iran is working to establish long-term influence in Syria at the grassroots level, while Russia is seeking to reshape Syrian state institutions to guarantee long-lasting loyalty to Moscow. Russia, in particular, has the upper hand in its relationship with Syria: without its intervention since 2015, Assad would not have been able to regain the military ascendancy, even with Iran's help.

Both Iran and Russia have increasingly visible military and security presences in Syria. In addition to backing several local militias, Iran is using its own IRGC forces and foreign Shia militias to retake rebel-controlled districts. Russian military intervention in support of the Syrian regime was initially limited to air campaigns, directing operations from military bases and engaging on the ground in an advisory capacity. But its role has since expanded to include combat. Russia has deployed (mainly Chechen) soldiers and military police to hold strategic areas, first in Aleppo in 2017 and later in the Eastern Ghouta suburb of Damascus in 2018, and to reshape some Syrian public institutions.[66]

Russia and Iran have historically extensive ties with Syria, but in both cases the relationship has now evolved into one of patron and client. Russia's ties stretch back to before the days of Hafez al-Assad. In the 1950s, the Soviet Union helped with the training of the Syrian army. Bilateral relations subsequently deepened during the rule of Hafez al-Assad, with a wide variety of cooperation taking place in the military, educational and economic spheres. Many of Syria's current army personnel, as well as other public officials, ministers and bureaucrats, were educated and trained in Russia.

Russia's active military involvement in the current conflict was prompted by the decline in international support for the Assad regime at a time when calls in the West for his departure were mounting. Moscow's support for Assad evolved from political and non-combat measures – such as vetoing 11 UN Security Council resolutions that would have damaged the regime, and supplying the Syrian army with weapons, warplanes and tanks – to the crucial commencement in 2015 of a large-scale military operation.[67] This has bound Syria closely to Moscow's agenda: while the Assad regime may not always obey Russian orders, it is in no position to roll back Russia's increasing military influence over the Syrian state.

Hafez al-Assad also strengthened ties with Iran after that country's Islamic revolution. At the time, bilateral cooperation did not entail Syria sacrificing its control over Iran's presence, interests and influence in Syria. Decision-making on Syrian affairs remained squarely in Assad's hands. This was not to be the case after 2011. Bashar al-Assad's dependence on Iranian support in the conflict meant

[66] Hauer, N. (2017), 'A War Within a War: Chechnya's Expanding Role in Syria', News Deeply, 30 November 2017, https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2017/11/30/a-war-within-a-war-chechnyas-expanding-role-in-syria (accessed 30 Jul. 2018).
[67] Sinjab, L. (2015), 'Syria conflict: The close ties behind Russia's intervention', BBC News, 5 October 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34422209 (accessed 30 Jul. 2018).

that Iran grew in influence in Syria. Iran used the promotion of Shiism as a tool to buy loyalty among Syrians from poor areas. This had become visible in the 1980s and 1990s, but intensified in post-2011 Syria. Public expressions of Shia practices, which were limited during the time of Hafez al-Assad, are now prevalent, including in the Sunni Omawi Mosque in Damascus.[68]

Iran is now focused on building alliances and implanting loyalists in areas that it sees as strategic for its long-term presence in Syria.[69] This embedding of Iranian forces and loyal local and regional allies, such as Hezbollah and the Iraqi PMU, extends from the military and economic spheres to religious ones. Iran is now occupying almost every shrine that it claims has a Shia link, and implanting loyalist Shia to reside around each one.[70] This is evident in the Old City of Damascus, which, despite the presence of the Sayyida Ruqqayya Shia shrine, is predominantly Sunni. Iran's increasing influence in the Old City is inflaming sectarian resentment among the Damascus Sunni community.[71] Iran is also responsible for the design and implementation of the siege tactics used by pro-regime forces against opposition-held cities and towns in an effort to impose terms of surrender. In a few cases, Sunni populations in such areas have reportedly been forcibly evacuated as part of surrender agreements – effectively enabling a process of demographic change aimed at replacing Sunnis with loyalist Shia.[72] As with Russia, the Syrian state is unable to stem Iran's growing influence.

Although Iran- and Russia-backed forces are helping the Syrian army in its military campaigns, the relationship between the three sides is uneven, with the Syrian army subservient to both its foreign counterparts. This unevenness is reflected, for instance, in the fact that Russia is shaping the Syrian military to suit its own interests. Shortly after its intervention began in 2015, Russia established the Syrian army's Fourth Corps. The new entity encompassed most of the country's pro-regime militias, including most NDF units and other Syrian militias like Kataeb al-Baath. Fourth Corps members were paid monthly salaries but retained the right to return to their civil jobs. In time, Russia's relationship with the army's Fourth Corps was strained by the latter's unruly behaviour, which included refusing to abide by international agreements to allow humanitarian aid to enter the then-besieged city of Daraya.

With the Fourth Corps proving to be an unreliable partner,[73] Russia's response was to set up the Fifth Corps. This was an attempt to restructure the Syrian army around personnel who were both reliable and loyal to Russia – and also to roll back some of the influence of militias favoured by Iran. The Fifth Corps included the NDF and other pro-regime militias, as well as former opposition fighters who had been reconciled with the regime.

The Tiger Forces, led by Suheil Hassan, are now the only state-affiliated militia not yet fully integrated into the state military structure. Although Hassan originally came from the security apparatus and joined the army, he has been allowed to recruit fighters from outside the security apparatus and army, and works autonomously but in coordination with the Syrian army. He was involved, in the presence of Bashar al-Assad, in a direct discussion with Russia's President Vladimir Putin during the latter's surprise visit to the Hmeimim military base in Tartous in late 2017.

---

[68] Field trip to Damascus, spring 2017.

[69] Al-Khalidi, S. (2017), 'Syrian, Iranian-backed forces advance in border area near Israel', Reuters, 25 December 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-israel/syrian-iranian-backed-forces-advance-in-border-area-near-israel-idUSKBN1EJ024 (accessed 6 Sep. 2018).

[70] See, for example, Al-Quds Al-Arabi (2013), مقام الصحابي عمار بن ياسر في الرقة: في صراع الطوائف والطائفية [The shrine of Ammar bin Yasser in Raqqa: In the battle of sects and sectarianism], 12 August 2013, http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=72519 (accessed 6 Sep. 2018).

[71] Interviews with residents in Damascus, April 2017. See also The Syria Report (2018), 'Iran, Russia Also Pushing for Influence in Syrian Education Sector', 23 January 2018, http://www.syria-report.com/news/education/iran-russia-also-pushing-influence-syrian-education-sector (accessed 31 Jul. 2018).

[72] Chulov, M. (2017), 'Iran repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime's control', Guardian, 14 January 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/13/irans-syria-project-pushing-population-shifts-to-increase-influence (accessed 30 Jul. 2018).

[73] Telephone interview with military expert in Damascus, September 2018.

Iran's military support to Syria operates through a hierarchy that subordinates the Syrian army and its affiliates. NDF members have complained that non-Syrian militias such as Hezbollah are getting favourable treatment.[74] The salaries of some NDF fighters were delayed for several months pending presidential approval for the release of funds, while members of non-Syrian militias were getting higher salaries directly from Iran. This has driven even some non-Shia Syrians to seek to join predominantly Shia militias (such as the Syrian branch of Hezbollah). In addition, many prisoner-exchange deals have prioritized the release of non-Syrian militiamen held by the opposition.[75]

The dynamics outlined above show that while Iran and Russia differ in their methods of influence in Syria, the end result in both cases is the hollowing out of the Syrian state. Iran's long-term strategy for influence in Syria is built on creating bottom-up support and institutions parallel to those of the state, as well as on infiltrating the state. In this way, the weakening of state institutions can be used to justify the need for Iranian-supported ones. Conversely, Russia's strategy in Syria is built on keeping state institutions strong but loyal to it, even if this means reshaping those institutions.

Russia and Iran have an alliance of convenience in Syria that is driven both by their interests and by developments on the ground, at the expense of Syria's sovereignty. Both Russia and Iran see in Syria a platform for a strategic long-term presence in the Levant. But despite being pragmatic allies, these two patrons are also rivals for resources and power inside Syria. This is manifest in, among other things, their contestation of geographical control. In 2017, Iran attempted to persuade the Syrian government to grant it land around Damascus Airport, extending to the Shia shrine of Sayyida Zeinab in Damascus, using agricultural development as a pretext. Having a permanent presence in that region would give Iran a strategic advantage as well as safeguard its interests by facilitating the transport of weapons and fighters from Hezbollah and other Iran-backed militias across the Syria–Lebanon border. However, Russia objected to this request. It pushed the Syrian government instead to grant Iran land near Raqqa, in the north-east of the country, in the hope of preventing Iranian consolidation of power in strategic areas.[76]

Russia's growing military influence in Syria is creating competition with Iran on the ground. Syrian army movements are tactically exploited by Russia to demonstrate to Iran that Russia has the upper hand. In the south-west of the country, along the Israeli border, Russia is seeking – in agreement with Israel – to contain the Iranian presence by using its own troops in the area. These troops, along with Syrian army soldiers, retake territory from rebel groups. But the Russian presence ensures that Iran-backed armed groups, which have aided in the fight against the rebels, are denied a long-term role in recaptured towns and districts.[77]

In other examples, Iran had its sights on taking control of Daraya after its militias drove the town's residents out. It planned to expand the Sayyida Sukayna shrine there to create a religious hub, and also to build a highway extending through Deraa to the Sayyida Zeinab shrine in Damascus. But Russia, concerned that Iran might take advantage of the inhabitant vacuum in Daraya, derailed the plan and is now pressuring the Damascus governorate to work for the return of the town's original residents. Earlier, during the battle to retake eastern Aleppo in 2016, Russia conducted air raids on the towns of Foua and Kefraya, both strategic locations for Iran, in order to force Iran-sponsored militias to lift

[74] Interviews with NDF members, Damascus, May 2018.
[75] Interviews with NDF members, Damascus, May 2018.
[76] Interviews with military personnel in Damascus, June 2018.
[77] Bassam, L. and Perry, T. (2018), 'Exclusive: In Syria, a Russian move causes friction with Iran-backed forces – officials', Reuters, 5 June 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-deploymen/exclusive-in-syria-a-russian-move-causes-friction-with-iran-backed-forces-officials-idUSKCN1J125S (accessed 30 Jul. 2018).

their blockade of the evacuation of Aleppo. Later, in 2017, according to witnesses, Hezbollah fighters prevented Russian soldiers from entering Wadi Barada during the siege of that town.[78]

The sidelining of the Syrian state is also seen in the competition between Iran and Russia to cultivate support in Syrian communities. Iran's religious influence in Syria has become more evident than before. It is imposing conservative religious practices and rules even in areas where neither the Sunni community nor Alawites loyal to the regime would welcome such customs.[79] Russia is taking advantage of the tensions this creates, presenting itself as more considerate of local circumstances and preferences. In particular, Moscow is pandering to Sunni resentment in an attempt to limit Iranian control. For example, it has installed (Sunni) Chechen military police to provide security in areas recently brought back under government control. Iran is trying to counter such efforts by appealing directly to Sunni regime loyalists, rather than by trying to reach them through Syrian state institutions.

A further complication for the Syrian regime is that it lacks the capacity to fully deliver on economic promises to its external patrons. Although both Russia and Iran have signed economic contracts with the Syrian government, Russia is putting pressure on the Syrian government to secure preferential treatment. In October 2017, a Russian business publication, RVB, quoted a Syrian government official as saying that a contract for phosphate mining 'was really going to be given to Iran, but in the end the choice was in favour of Russia'.[80] Two months later, following reports of Iranian interest in signing energy deals with the Syrian government, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin said after a meeting with President Assad in Damascus that Russia had 'a moral right to expect financial returns from its efforts to liberate Syria from terrorists', adding that 'the Syrian authorities want to work with Russia, and Russia alone, to re-establish all of the country's energy capacities'.[81]

> It is Russia – not the Syrian state – that is exhibiting the ability to wield power over profiteers associated with the regime.

Two factors aid Russia's increasing influence over the Syrian state. First, Russia has come to be regarded as something of a lesser evil by the opposition, thanks to its (limited) efforts to win local hearts and minds. In Eastern Ghouta, although Russian forces were partially responsible for the heavy bombardment of the area and the displacement of its residents, they also provided safe passage to those who surrendered; in some areas, Russian troops prevented Syrian pro-regime forces from looting. Russian military police were deployed to Douma to maintain order, presenting themselves as professionals who could protect residents and prevent violence and other transgressions by the Syrian army and Iran-backed pro-regime militias. Russian military police were publicly seen punishing Syrian soldiers and militiamen who had engaged in looting in a southern suburb of Damascus, following its capture by pro-regime forces.

Russia is stretching its power beyond the military sphere. It is now working to enforce order in Syria, turning its back on powerful warlords whom it once supported on the battlefield. Ayman Jaber was one of the first names to be targeted, with Russian forces confiscating his property and dismantling

[78] Sinjab, L. (2018), 'Russia and Iran are increasingly competitive in Syria', Chatham House, February 2018, https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/russia-and-iran-are-increasingly-competitive-in-syria (accessed 30 Jul. 2018).
[79] Ibid.
[80] The Syria Report (2017), 'Phosphate Exports Restart but Low Prices, Russian Stake, Will Limit Revenues', 24 October 2017, http://www.syria-report.com/news/oil-gas-mining/phosphate-exports-restart-low-prices-russian-stake-will-limit-revenues (accessed 30 Jul. 2018).
[81] The Syria Report (2017), 'Russia Lays Claims Over Syria's Energy Resources', 19 December 2017, http://www.syria-report.com/news/economy/russia-lays-claims-over-syria%E2%80%99s-energy-resources (accessed 30 Jul. 2018).

his private militia.[82] As such, it is Russia – not the Syrian state – that is exhibiting the ability to wield power over profiteers associated with the regime. In the security sphere, Russia regards the General Intelligence Directorate as its most trusted branch of the security apparatus in Syria, and also works closely with the Military Intelligence Directorate and Military Police.

Second, Russia is the more important actor internationally. While both Iran and Russia are pursuing their own interests in Syria, often employing brutal military tactics, Russia is also presenting itself as the future broker of Syria's peace at the international level. Here, it should be noted that the Russian definition of 'peace' differs from the internationally recognized one. For example, the regime's provision of basic services to the population favours loyalist areas and often punishes areas recaptured from the opposition. This approach has Russia's blessing. Above all, what is notable in Syria today is how the much the agency of the Syrian state in general – even given the effects of its discriminatory tactics – has been reduced in discussions about reaching peace.

[82] Interviews with businessman in Damascus, July 2018.

5. The Future Trajectory of the Transactional State

Although the Syrian state and its institutions have been depleted both economically and in terms of human resources over the past seven years, they have not collapsed. The state has malfunctioned, but it has managed to maintain ties with public institutions even in places such as Raqqa and Deir Ezzor while these were under the control of ISIS, as well as in Kurdish-controlled areas. The regime has maintained a pragmatic relationship with the Kurds in the north-east, tolerating their efforts to establish a self-governed region without indicating that this tolerance would extend to recognition by the Syrian state.[83]

This resilience stands in sharp contrast to assessments of Syria as a fragile state. Steven Heydemann argues that Syria is instead a 'fierce state', where governance 'is managed as an expression of a zero-sum existential struggle in which conflict reinforces the determination of a ruling elite to defend existing institutional arrangements by force'.[84]

This paper has shown that Syria's case is even more complicated. State institutional arrangements may have survived, and transactionalism may have been a feature of the Syrian state throughout both Assad eras, but the way in which the state wields power has changed. This has implications for the state's power to ensure stability, even if the regime wins the war militarily. In particular, while the army and the security apparatus are delivering limited essential services, the restoration of such services has not occurred on the national scale the regime claims. Transactionalism and a lack of agency have undermined the shadow state.

The organized chaos created by the regime has spread. It is not certain that the state will be able to control the country under any future post-settlement scenario while the current regime remains in place, given that its agency has been compromised and that it has come to rely on transactional relationships to exert power.

Several factors will impede state agency in the long run. The first is the presence of thousands of foreign militiamen, brought into the country by Iran. It is unlikely that these fighters will readily leave. Many are now entrenched in Syria, having taken over property and settled their families there.[85] Just as Hezbollah managed to maintain its special status in Lebanon after the withdrawal of Israel in 2000, Iraqi, Iranian and Lebanese militiamen in particular are likely to remain in Syria once the war is over for as long as the current regime is in power.

If the post-2003 Iraq experience is viewed as a comparative model, guerrilla warfare tactics – though often publicly blamed on Sunni jihadists – are often used by Iran if it feels pressured. With such pressure mounting in Washington as well as in Tel Aviv, efforts to contain Iran may push it to use its proxies in Syria to foment instability.

---

[83] *The Economist* (2018), 'Can Syria's Kurds keep control of their territory?', 25 January 2018, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/01/25/can-syrias-kurds-keep-control-of-their-territory (accessed 6 Sep. 2018).
[84] Heydemann (2018), *Beyond Fragility: Syria and the Challenge of Reconstruction in Fierce States*, p. 2.
[85] Examples are the Fatimiyoun and Zeinabiyoun.

Moreover, the recent agreement between Israel and Russia over securing Israel's border with Syria and clearing it of any Iranian militias – as well as the Israeli–Russian coordination over airstrikes in Syria – does not mean that Moscow is in a position to limit Iran's power and influence on the ground. The Assad regime is also incapable of restraining Iran. Iran considers Assad a client and will not tolerate regime attempts to contain it.[86]

The second factor impeding Syrian state power is Iran's agenda of cultivating grassroots support. Iran has been working to boost such influence since the 1980s, and has used social networks and institutions as well as its main cultural centre in Damascus to implement projects aimed at buying the loyalty of the populace. Iran's involvement in creating Syrian militias, as well as its establishment of civil initiatives, shows that its model of influence in Syria relies not only on installing institutions parallel to the state but also on *infiltrating* the state.

In this regard, Iran's militias and many of its non-military institutions in Syria have state legitimacy akin to that granted to Hezbollah in Lebanon and to the PMU in Iraq. This paves the way for their long-term presence. With NDF fighters the recipients of higher salaries and more privileges than their counterparts in the Syrian army, it is difficult to envisage the former agreeing to integrate into the regular forces once the conflict ends. The regime is also facing a degree of local resentment from loyalists uncomfortable with Iran's grassroots efforts to promote a religious and cultural agenda that many Syrians – Alawites included – see as alien to Syrian society.[87]

> The future Syrian state will likely become more dependent on Iran-, China- and Russia-supplied specialist workers in fields such as architecture, medicine and service delivery.

A third factor affecting Syrian state power is the extent of Iranian and Russian economic influence in the country. Iran transferred US$3.6 billion to the Syrian government in connection with the war in 2013, and US$1 billion in 2015.[88] It has set up business institutions and companies acting on its behalf, to allow it to maintain a long-lasting presence in Syria. Russia, meanwhile, is looking to benefit from Syria's reconstruction. The Russian government is inviting Russian businessmen and companies to strike deals with the Syrian government. The war has also meant that Syria suffers from a significant shortage of skilled labour,[89] posing a challenge for post-war redevelopment.[90] The future Syrian state will therefore likely become more dependent on Iran-, China- and Russia-supplied specialist workers in fields such as architecture, medicine and service delivery.

A fourth factor is Iran's work to secure its long-term influence geographically and demographically. While the majority of the Syrian population is Sunni, Hafez al-Assad managed to construct a system in which minority Alawites controlled the country. In the 1980s, he brought Alawites from the

---

[86] During the third Mediterranean conference in Rome, Iran's foreign minister, Javad Zarif, said 'we are going nowhere' when asked if Iranian troops were going to leave Syria. 'The aim of the US administration is to get Iran out of Syria,' Zarif said. 'The US and Russia cannot decide for Iran. We are there at the request of the Syrian government. It's our region; it's the Persian Gulf not the Gulf of Mexico. We are going nowhere. We are in the region. We will never leave. We cannot leave our home.'

[87] The Syria Report (2018), 'Iran, Russia Also Pushing for Influence in Syrian Education Sector', 23 January 2018, http://www.syria-report.com/news/education/iran-russia-also-pushing-influence-syrian-education-sector (accessed 31 Jul. 2018).

[88] Westall, S. and Al-Khalidi, S. (2015), 'Syria ratifies fresh $1 billion credit line from Iran', Reuters, 8 July 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iran-idUSKCN0PI1RD20150708 (accessed 6 Sep. 2018).

[89] Synaps (2018), 'Picking Up the Pieces: How Syrian Society Has Changed', http://www.synaps.network/picking-up-the-pieces (accessed 6 Sep. 2018).

[90] Figures from 2017 estimate that there has been a 30 per cent permanent loss of human capital stock since 2010. See World Bank Group (2017), *The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria*, 10 July 2017, p. 53, http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-toll-of-war-the-economic-and-social-consequences-of-the-conflict-in-syria (accessed 6 Sep. 2018).

mountains and installed them in slums in the Mount Qassioun area surrounding Damascus, including in Eish Al-Warwar, Jabal Al-Riz and Mezzeh 86. Many of the inhabitants of these areas are now members of the security apparatus and the NDF, and they were pivotal in the crackdown on the mostly Sunni opposition.

Iran is now applying a similar model by implanting Shia newcomers from elsewhere in the region (namely from Lebanon and Iraq) in sensitive areas in Damascus. Many such arrivals have been granted Syrian citizenship.[91] Their numbers are small, but their strategic location would facilitate efforts to control the capital were political and economic conditions to turn against them – this is similar to the case of Hezbollah in Lebanon, where the group's strategic buying of property all over the country aided its rapid takeover of Beirut in May 2008.

Although Iran does not enjoy the same large Shia constituency in Syria that it has in Lebanon or Iraq, it does not need many fighters or loyalists to maintain its influence. In Iraq and Lebanon, it created political alliances with Sunnis and Christians. The pro-Iran political coalitions in Iraq and Lebanon, which can block any national deal they disapprove of, are a strong reminder of how Iran is capable of destabilizing Syria's future regardless of Bashar al-Assad's agenda.

Iran's influence in Syria can be minimized, but it is difficult to foresee its eradication. As demonstrated in Lebanon and Iraq, Iran plays the long game. Its strategies are conceived in terms of generation-long timelines. This means that Syrian sovereignty is likely to continue to be compromised for the foreseeable future.

The post-war Syrian state will also need to accommodate the growing ambitions of profiteers. Pro-regime militias are unlikely to limit their role to military and security matters in the future. In Iraq, the PMU evolved from militias to political actors that openly contest parliamentary elections (indeed, they came second in the last national election, in 2018). Before that, Lebanese Hezbollah had also transformed itself from a militia into the strongest political party in Lebanon today. The difference in both Iraq and Lebanon was that the rise of pro-Iran paramilitary groups did not happen in the context of an existing authoritarian regime, as has been the case in Syria. However, the weakening of the regime's hold over the country may allow the rise of new political actors that will make increasing demands of the state. Regime profiteers from the business community also have the potential to evolve into political actors, further blurring the line between political and economic elites and exacerbating the wealth gap.

The lucrative nature of the conflict ensures that some warlords – from both militia and non-militia backgrounds – have a stake in maintaining instability. In this, their interests coincide with those of the country's much-depleted rebel groups, the remnants of which will not cease fighting even assuming the regime wins the war militarily. Their reasons for revolt and revenge have intensified after more than seven years of conflict. As a result, even if a settlement to the conflict is achieved, Syria is likely to suffer waves of insurgency attacks similar to those in Iraq after 2003. Meanwhile, the brutality of the regime will continue, creating a new cycle of grievances that are not exactly optimal for long-term peace and stability.

---

91 Martin Chulov reported in January 2017 that 'in Darayya, south-west of Damascus, more than 300 Iraqi Shia families moved into neighbourhoods abandoned by rebels last August [2016] as part of a surrender deal'. See Chulov, M. (2017), 'Iran repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime's control', *Guardian*, 14 January 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/13/irans-syria-project-pushing-population-shifts-to-increase-influence (accessed 6 Sep. 2018).

Russia is anticipating these challenges. It continues to seek to install new institutions and/or reshape existing ones by appointing personnel whom it sees as capable and reliable (as it did with the creation of the Fifth Corps). This indicates that it envisages having a long-term influence in Syria, whether in terms of a military presence or through diplomatic and economic means. Russia is trying to assert its dominance in order to present itself as the agenda-setter in the country, and to show the world that it is able to get the Syrian state back on its feet (though any 'rehabilitation' would naturally be on Moscow's terms). The irony is that Russia, though partly responsible for the war and destruction in Syria, is positioning itself as the party best able to impose stability and restore order. However, Iran may block the realization of this agenda.

In short, a combination of factors – including the Syrian state's lack of agency; the suboptimal situation on the ground; Iran's potential to act as a spoiler *vis-à-vis* Russia's stabilization plans; rising international pressure on Iran; and popular resentment of Iran among Syria's Sunnis and Alawites – means that Syria is likely to enter a lengthy period of precarious post-conflict equilibrium in which all pro-regime stakeholders coexist uncomfortably.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The state security apparatus still rules Syria with an iron fist, but the regime no longer exercises control of the country as it once did. It lacks both the resources and the legitimacy to provide peace and stability. The conflict has created new informal economic and security networks, which are eroding Syria's security. Rampant corruption among these networks is also transforming Syria from a 'shadow' state into a 'transactional' state. This makes it unrealistic to expect the regime to be an economic and security partner for the international community.

The regime's external patrons, Iran and Russia, seek long-term influence in the country. Although they cooperate in some respects, their increasing competition over power is further eroding Syria's sovereignty. None of this bodes well for the prospect of refugees returning to Syria. Nor does it suggest that the country is likely to return to the pre-2011 status quo of rule by a shadow state. Syria today is neither a sovereign state nor a civil state, but a mafia-like dictatorship ruled under a Russian mandate and influenced by Iran.

The crisis is not contained within Syria's borders. Just as the Syrian war has affected Europe in particular, and the West in general, the instability and insecurity created by the cocktail of problems highlighted in this paper will create further challenges for the international community.

What the West can do now: recommendations

As things stand in Syria, the implementation of any stabilization plan will be on Russian terms. Russia is increasing the scope of its influence despite Iranian pushback. The US's de facto inaction on Syria has paved the way for Russia to effectively 'own' the Syrian conflict – in the sense of determining its intensity and trajectory. Only the US can change this formula and prevent Russia from controlling outcomes in post-conflict Syria. Under the current circumstances, there are no incentives for Russia to change its Syria strategy. Washington needs to engage Moscow diplomatically as a partner; otherwise, the US will be handing control of Syria and the Levant wholesale to Russia, and permitting the implementation of Russia's problematic version of 'peace'. The US must counterbalance Russia and not let a unilateral power set the agenda in Syria.

The administration of President Donald Trump is determined to combat Iran's influence in the Middle East. However, Iran's involvement in Syria cannot be fought through military might. Economic sanctions and diplomacy, in liaison with Russia, could offer more traction. Such efforts could push some of the non-Syrian, Iran-supported militias out of Syria, although this will still not end Iran's presence in the country. At the same time, the increasing resentment among local communities – whether loyalist or opposition – towards Iran's grassroots attempts to change Syria's identity could be an important factor in combating Iranian influence.

It is worth noting that even among loyalists, many people merely tolerate the regime rather than support it wholeheartedly. Recognizing the difference between the regime and the state is crucial in this regard. The regime has actively worked to blur the line between the state and itself. The US and its allies need to devise strategies to counter this tactic.

One component of such a strategy must be the issue of refugee return. Russia is pressing for the return of refugees, but proactively suppressing matters of accountability. For example, Moscow ordered the regime to release files on detainees who have died during imprisonment, so that the matter can be closed and not come up in future negotiations over peace. However, there is no guarantee that there will not be new detainees from those already inside Syria or from returnees. The West needs to acknowledge that refugees cannot return to Syria under the current circumstances when they have no rights or security, would be at risk of revenge attacks by local communities, and would face dire living conditions. Western countries need to insist that international human rights law applies in any negotiation with Russia over refugees, and that such law applies not just to returnees but also to those who have stayed inside Syria.

Another component is reconstruction and stabilization, also promoted by Russia because it stands to benefit from these processes. Amid further military gains by the Syrian regime – and despite public declarations by the EU, Western countries and international entities that there cannot be reconstruction in Syria without a political process taking place first – debate is ongoing about the possibility of stabilization as a short-term step. Yet any debate on stabilization or 'resilience' must take into consideration the pitfalls of engagement in the absence of plans for brokering and implementing a political deal. Such a deal is an essential component for any process of elite bargaining via which the West may wish to engage in the Syrian context.

Any engagement with Russia about reconstruction or stabilization should be conditional on a political deal and a transparent process – with international monitoring to prevent the empowerment of militias and warlords, and to ensure that goods and services reach communities in need. Even supporting infrastructure in Syria – currently the focus of work by the UN and others – has a political price. There must be transparency about procurement and the choice of local implementing bodies for any reconstruction projects, including those relating to the delivery of services such as electricity and water. There must be conditionality in all projects meant to help the Syrian community, with an insistence that projects are implemented in former opposition areas as well as loyalist ones. Otherwise, stabilization projects will end up empowering the regime (and those connected to it) at the expense of the community at large. Western engagement with communities in former rebel-held areas is important because the regime is exhibiting signs of wanting to punish these areas by keeping displaced residents out and limiting the provision of essential services. This engagement should not be done in a way that gives the regime control over the distribution of provisions. Any projects on community resilience, including in areas retaken from rebels, must be alert to the risk of the regime closing the space for independent NGOs to operate and discriminating in favour of loyalist NGOs.

All this emphasizes the necessity of reviving the Geneva process, with the US taking the lead on reactivating it. UN Resolution 2254 must be the first step towards stabilization in Syria, not the final or interim step. Once a political settlement is reached, Syria can then work on tackling endemic corruption in its security institutions; on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) for armed groups outside the regular army; on paths to settle the status of current members of pro-regime militias; on measures to counter the phenomenon of warlordism; and on transitional justice in respect of war crimes. All these are issues that, if not addressed transparently as part of the peace process, will continue to weaken the Syrian state's ability to exercise power.

About the Authors

Lina Khatib is head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House, where she also leads the project 'Syria From Within' (syria.chathamhouse.org). She was formerly director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, and co-founding head of the Program on Arab Reform and Democracy at Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law. Her research focuses on the international relations of the Middle East, Islamist groups, security, political transitions and foreign policy, with special attention to the Syrian conflict. She is a research associate at SOAS, University of London, was a senior research associate at the Arab Reform Initiative, and lectured at Royal Holloway, University of London. She has published seven books and also written widely on public diplomacy, political communication and political participation in the Middle East. She is a frequent commentator on politics and security in the Middle East and North Africa, both at events around the world and in the media.

Lina Sinjab is a BBC correspondent based in Beirut. She also contributes to several international media outlets and is a consulting senior fellow with Chatham House's 'Syria From Within' project. She recently served as Middle East regional editor at the BBC World Service. Lina has extensively covered the Syrian uprising since its beginnings in 2011, and continues to follow developments in Syria and the region. In 2014 and 2016 she covered the Syria peace talks in Geneva as the BBC's world affairs reporter; before that, from 2007, she was the BBC's Damascus-based correspondent. Prior to joining the BBC, Lina was a contributor to many media outlets, including *Newsweek* and the *New York Times*. She holds a degree in English from Damascus University, read law at the Beirut Arab University, and holds an MA in international politics from SOAS, University of London. In May 2013, she won the International Media Cutting Edge Award for her coverage of Syria.

Acknowledgments

Independent thinking since 1920

Cover image: Members of the Russian military police hand out food aid to displaced Syrians returning into government-controlled territory at a checkpoint in Idlib province, 1 June 2018. A banner shows portraits of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Photo credit: Copyright © George Ourfalian/AFP/Getty Images