LUISS

Degree Program in International Relations
Major in Mediterranean Governance

Course of Social and Economic Development of the Mediterranean Countries

The Rise, Rule, and Ruin of a Regime: Syria's Political Evolution from Independence to Civil War.

Prof. Michele Petrone

SUPERVISOR

Prof. Francesca Maria Corrao

CO-SUPERVISOR

Irene Brunetti (656102)

CANDIDATE

Academic Year 2024/2025

تصل عارية الحرية
إلى قمم جبال سوريا
و سفوحها
وفي مخيّمات اللاجئين
أقدامها تُغرس في الوحل
أيديها تتشقق من البرد
والتعذيب
لكنها تتقدم.

مرام المصري. الحرية تمشي عارية.

Liberty walks naked,
out of the mountains of Syria,
into the refugee camps.
Her feet sink in the mud
and her hands are chapped from the cold,
from the pain.
But she advances.

Maram al-Masri. Freedom Walks Naked.

Tables of Contents

Introduction

Syria's modern political trajectory is often narrated through the drama of its recent civil war, yet the forces that made the Syrian regime both highly durable and structurally fragile long predated 2011. The Syrian Republic emerged from the post-Ottoman reordering of Bilad al-Sham and the mandate experience, in a regional space where borders, identities, and political imaginaries remained unsettled. Formal independence did not resolve these underlying tensions; rather, it opened a period marked by weak institutions, intense competition over what "Syria" should be – either a sovereign nation-state or part of a pan-Arab project – and recurrent military intervention in politics, a combination that fuelled early instability and gradually normalised the army's central role in governing.

The following chapters reconstruct Syria's political evolution from independence to civil war through the lens suggested in the thesis's title, *the rise, rule, and ruin of a regime*, framed not as three separate arcs, but as a connected sequence. The core claim is that the very mechanisms that enabled authoritarian durability over decades – above all, the securitisation of politics, the systematic repression of dissent, the expansion of intelligence services, coercive governance, cronyism and patronage, selective exclusion, and reliance on external patrons – also progressively hollowed out institutional legitimacy and state resilience, making the system vulnerable to shocks it could no longer absorb. In this sense, the order established by the Assads was not simply a system that appeared stable until it eventually crumbled; it was stabilised through practices that steadily undermined the foundations of sustainable rule.

Two related questions guide the analysis. First: how did Syria move from early post-independence volatility to a consolidated authoritarian order under the Baʿth Party and, later, the Assad family? Second: why did that order, despite its reputation for durability, prove unable to prevent the descent into civil war in 2011 and, ultimately, its collapse in late 2024? Answering these questions requires treating domestic power structures and regional and international politics as mutually constitutive rather than separate arenas. From the outset, Syria's internal struggles over authority unfolded alongside Arab nationalism, Cold War alignments, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and, later, the post-2003 regional configuration, the global "war on terror", the Arab uprisings, among other dynamics that progressively reshaped the domestic order.

The thesis is articulated in four parts. The first chapter introduces the historical and ideological landscape inherited from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the mandate era; it follows

the early republic through coups, pan-Arab aspirations, and the rise of Baʿthism. It outlines how competing visions of identity and statehood shaped the new Syrian Republic, including debates between Syrian nationalism and wider pan-Arab projects, and traces the early parliamentary period and the rapid normalisation of military intervention, showing how repeated coups weakened institutions and entrenched the armed forces as arbiters of politics. The first chapter also traces how the 1948 Arab-Israeli war affected Syrian domestic affairs and how the appeal of pan-Arabism culminated in the short-lived United Arab Republic. Finally, it charts the rise of the Baʿth Party and how it moved from an ideological movement into the main governing force. It then outlines the Baʿth's intra-party struggle (1963-1966) and shows how domestic fractures and regional pressures eventually paved the way for Hafez al-Assad's ascent, marking the end of the post-independence cycle of coups and the beginning of a more durable order.

The second chapter analyses the consolidation of authoritarian rule under Hafez al-Assad, focusing on the security apparatus, the cult of personality, the clientelist political economy, and the regime's handling of internal opposition, culminating in the violent crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s. It shows how the "Corrective Movement"[1] reorganised power around the presidency, creating an order in which formal institutions remained in place but real authority operated through security coordination, patronage networks, and tightly controlled political participation. It then examines how the regime manufactured legitimacy through the Assad cult of personality and the symbolic fusion of leader, nation, and state, while securing loyalty through selective inclusion and patronage. The section closes with the escalation of confrontation with internal opposition, arguing that the violence of 1979-1982, culminating in Hama, marked a decisive moment in regime consolidation and entrenched coercion and impunity as core features of Syrian governance.

The third chapter, instead, revolves around the figure of Bashar al-Assad, his succession and the politics of inheritance. It first examines how the transition initially generated popular expectations of change, modernisation, and limited opening, and then explains how these hopes were quickly contained as the security-centred logic of rule reasserted itself. The chapter analyses the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's rule, showing how it ultimately reaffirmed the system's core continuities: controlled economic opening and selective reform on the one hand,

[1] The "Corrective Movement" (*al-harakat at-tashihiyya*) refers to Hafez al-Assad's 1970 takeover, presented as an effort to restore the Baʿth intended political line and reassert party discipline under his leadership. See 1.6 Hafez al-Assad's rise to power: the last coup and the Corrective Movement.

and firm political closure and repression on the other. It shows how structural socio-economic grievances remained unaddressed, and it highlights how surveillance, coercion, and managed participation endured as the system's stabilising core, limiting the space for organised opposition and containing dissent before it could become collective mobilisation. The chapter concludes by arguing that this combination of limited reforms and enduring repression generated a deceptive sense of stability, while deepening the structural grievances and institutional fragility that would surface dramatically in 2011.

The last chapter traces the transformation of the 2011 protests from largely peaceful mobilisation into a militarised and increasingly internationalised civil war, and explains how the post-2016 phase became a managed equilibrium rather than a genuine settlement. It examines how militarisation, opposition fragmentation, and the growing role of external actors progressively reshaped the conflict's aims and dynamics, turning Syria into a multi-layered battleground with competing domestic and regional agendas. It also highlights how jihadist mobilisation altered international priorities and affected both the balance of power and the prospects for a negotiated outcome. It also assesses the war's outcome beyond the battlefield: the fragmentation of territory into shifting zones of control, the consolidation of parallel governance structures, and the social and economic devastation produced by displacement, sanctions, and institutional breakdown. This dramatic aftermath set the context for the regime's final years, as survival increasingly depended on managing fragmentation rather than restoring a coherent political order. The chapter's final section briefly explores the regime's fall in December 2024, linking the end of decades of Assad rule to the structural vulnerabilities produced by its own survival strategies.

In doing so, the thesis seeks to examine together dynamics that are often analysed separately, bringing into one long-term perspective the early fragility of the Syrian state, the gradual consolidation of authoritarian rule, and the later internationalisation of the civil war. By reading the 2011-2024 arc in continuity with earlier decades, rather than as a fully detached rupture, the following pages highlight how long-standing tensions and governance practices helped shape the trajectory of the uprising, the war, and, ultimately, the regime's collapse.

Methodology

Methodologically, this thesis adopts a qualitative historical-analytical approach to explain Syria's political evolution from independence to civil war and its longer-term aftermath. The research questions are best addressed through a qualitative, historical, and interpretative analysis rather than through quantitative, statistical methods. The following chapters examine how authoritarian consolidation, institutional change, and coercive rule unfolded through leadership decisions and shifting alliances, and how these longer-term patterns helped drive the escalation from protest to a multi-level war. For this reason, the methodology focuses on reconstructing how political structures were built and maintained, identifying key turning points in Syria's political trajectory, and examining how domestic strategies of rule interacted with changing regional and international contexts. The analysis broadly follows the chronology of events, using historical sequencing to connect major phases and to show how earlier institutional and political choices shaped later outcomes.

Beyond reconstructing causality, a historical approach is also relevant to the analysis of present political dynamics. By tracing how institutions were built, repurposed, and over time deprived of substantive authority, it becomes possible to identify durable mechanisms such as the securitisation of rule, patterns of elite cohesion and fragmentation, and the recurring use of coercion and selective co-optation. In this sense, historical sequencing provides more than background: it clarifies how strategies that guaranteed regime survival for decades eventually generated long-run vulnerabilities in state capacity and legitimacy, and why moments of apparent stability can obscure the cumulative erosion of the institutional foundations of legitimacy and the governing system's ability to generate consent through representation, accountability, and the provision of basic public services and welfare. This perspective is particularly useful in transitional settings, where leadership change does not automatically transform how power is exercised, and new actors often inherit governing and security repertoires, as well as administrative and institutional legacies. While the thesis does not aim to predict Syria's political future, it uses historically grounded interpretation to assess constraints and continuities likely to shape post-conflict state-building, institutional recovery, and the prospects for a sustainable political order.

To apply this approach, the thesis relies on a layered set of sources, combining academic literature with policy reports and documentary materials to support both long-term historical reconstruction and the analysis of wartime and post-war developments. The thesis is designed

as a single case study focused on Syria and, building on this choice, the four chapters are primarily based on secondary academic literature, which constitutes the core foundation of the analysis and draws on established authors such as Hinnebusch[2], Heydemann[3], Droz-Vincent[4], Lesch[5], McHugo[6], and Waardenburg[7], among others, whose works provide both empirical reconstruction and interpretive leverage. This base is complemented by policy reports and research-centre outputs, used especially to frame the evolving conflict environment and to track more recent developments, including armed actor landscapes, external involvement, military-political shifts, and governance under war. In this respect, the thesis engages with analyses produced by institutions such as Chatham House (the Royal Institute of International Affairs), the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the Institute for the Study of War, and the Brookings Institution, which are employed for mapping up-to-date detail. Additionally, the thesis incorporates public documentary primary sources, chiefly United Nations documents and reports, in order to anchor chronology and provide systematic and publicly accessible documentation, particularly on conflict-related issues and the international legal framework. These include United Nations

---

[2] For Hinnebusch, see Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria: From 'authoritarian Upgrading' to Revolution?" *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 88, no. 1 (2012): 95–113; Raymond Hinnebusch and Omar Imady. "Syria's Reconciliation Agreements," Report. *St. Andrews Research Repository*, July 30, 2017; Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria Under the Ba'th: State Formation in a Fragmented Society," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (1982): 177–99; Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Political Economy of Economic Liberalization in Syria," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27, no. 3 (1995): 305–20; Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Role of Syria in the Post-Iraq War Middle East," *European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed)*, 2005.

[3] For Heydemann, see Steven Heydemann, "Syria's Adaptive Authoritarianism," in *The Political Science of Syria's War*. (Washington, DC: Project on Middle East Political Science, 2013), 54-58.

[4] For Droz-Vincent, see Philippe Droz-Vincent, "Fighting for a Monopoly on Governance: How the Asad State 'Won' the Syrian War and to What Extent," *Middle East Journal* 75, no. 1 (2021): 33–54; Philippe Droz-Vincent, "'State of Barbary' (Take Two): From the Arab Spring to the Return of Violence in Syria," *Middle East Journal* 68, no. 1 (2014): 33–58.

[5] For Lesch, see David W. Lesch, *Syria: A Modern History*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

[6] For McHugo, see John McHugo, *Syria: A Recent History*, 2nd ed. (London: Saqi Books, 2017).

[7] For Waardenburg, see Johannes S. T. Waardenburg, *La Siria Contemporanea: Ridisegnando la carta del Vicino Oriente*, vol. 1 (Rome: Istituto per l'Oriente C.A. Nallino, 2021).

Security Council resolutions relevant to Syria's regional setting and foreign presence, as well as United Nations Human Rights Council reporting and Commission of Inquiry outputs on patterns of violence and human rights violations. Socio-economic primary documentation is also drawn from international organisations, including the United Nations Development Programme publications and assessments, and, where relevant, international financial institutions, such as International Monetary Fund country reporting. Finally, to complement evidence on repression, detention, and human rights abuses, the thesis makes selective use of documentation produced by human rights organisations and monitoring groups, including Human Rights Watch, as well as Syrian-focused documentation initiatives such as the Syrian Network for Human Rights. These materials are used primarily for corroboration rather than as independent evidence, particularly in an information environment marked by limited access and competing narratives.

As a final point, the thesis' overall methodological orientation and style of historically grounded reconstruction are shaped in particular by four key reference works: McHugo's *Syria: A Recent History*, Waardenburg's *La Siria Contemporanea*, Lesch's *Syria: A Modern History*, and al-Haj Saleh's *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*, which provide models for structuring long-run political analysis around major turning points while integrating domestic political developments with broader regional and international dynamics.

1 From independence to Baʿthism

The nation known today as Syria is, in historical terms, an artificial construct born of the territorial fragmentation imposed after the Great War, when the victorious European powers carved up *Bilad al-Sham* (بلاد الشام), the Levantine expanse lying between Anatolia, Iraq, and Egypt. In the following pages, the term *Bilad al-Sham*, often referred in Western writings as Greater Syria, is used in a geographical sense, to denote the pre-1918 Ottoman provinces rather than a fixed national entity. Both labels, *Bilad al-Sham* and Greater Syria, have been reinterpreted by different actors over time[8], such as Antoun Saʿadeh (1904-1949).
As one of the first historians writing in Western languages of Arab nationalism, George Antonius (1891-1942), defined it:

> *Historically speaking, the term was used to denote that rectangle of land which forms the eastern boundary of the Mediterranean Sea, and is bounded on the north by the Taurus Mountains, on the east by the Syrian Desert, on the south by the Sinai Desert and Peninsula, and on the west by the Mediterranean Sea. The first thing about Syria (in the historical sense) to which I should like to call your attention is what a remarkably compact geographical unit it forms. A formidable barrier of mountains on the north, desert along its eastern and southern boundaries, and sea on the west – an almost perfect geographical rectangle. The second thing of interest about its geographical position is that it lies at the meeting-point of three continents, south from Europe, west from Asia and east from Africa. That is why the history of Syria has been the history of a battle-ground between great empires fighting for mastery in that part of the world – the empires of Sargon or Alexander, Thotmes III or Rameses or Napoleon, and more recently the modern French and British Empires. Thirdly, still in the geographical domain, is its position as a highway, the highway between West and East for trade and for culture, culture coming from the East across the Mediterranean to Europe in the*

[8] On Antoun Saʿadeh's idea of Greater Syria and his territorial and political project, see section 1.1.1 Greater Syria: Antoun Saʿadeh and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party.

Middle Ages and, in recent generations, culture and trade going from Europe across Syria to the East[9].

Earlier, under Ottoman rule, the same region had already been divided into several provinces, yet its economy, society and cultural networks still functioned as a single system, preserving its integrity. In contrast, the post-First World War settlement, made up by Britain and France, carved the region into separate and competing political entities whose newly drawn frontiers severed long-standing networks of exchange and interdependence rooted in centuries of shared history. The result was a sectarian map-making of imperialist engineering. The post-war settlements broke geographic Syria into "meaningless fragments" and placed them under foreign occupation[10]. The dismemberment of *Bilad Al-Sham* heavily impacted the nation's destiny and it undermined regional autonomy, imposing profound hardship on the local population while serving European strategic interests. These new frontiers obscured a far older story.

For millennia, the Levant had been one of the Middle East's richest crossroads, an authentic melting pot of peoples, faiths and trades. But the very heterogeneity which made the region a dazzling mosaic of arts, beliefs, and cultures, also planted the seeds of profound internal fractures that overtime turned into sectarian tensions and civil conflicts. With the advent of Islam, Syria entered a new historical phase. Initially a minority, Islam spread rapidly in the 7th century in a still strongly Judeo-Christian context under Byzantine influence, and, by 661, the Umayyad dynasty had set its capital in Damascus. For almost a century the city was the beating heart of the empire and Syria became the centre of the Umayyad Caliphate. When the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyads in 750 and moved the caliphal capital to Baghdad, Damascus lost its political centrality and became a provincial territory within the Islamic Empire. However, it retained significant cultural influence, and the Umayyad period proved decisive in shaping Syria's Islamic and Arab identity[11].

Later, a series of invaders from the West arrived in Greater Syria: inspired by the ideal of Holy War approved by the Pope, the Crusaders had hoped to reconquer the biblical lands lost to Muslim rulers. After ruthless battles in the name of faith, the Crusaders were eventually crushed

---

[9] George Antonius, "Syria and the French Mandate," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1931-1939)* 13, no. 4 (1934), 523-24.

[10] Tabitha Petran, "Syria," in *Nations of the modern world,* (London, Ernest Benn: 1972): 61.

[11] David W. Lesch, "What is Syria?", *Syria: A Modern History.* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 15.

by the Mamluks, a cast of slave soldiers that had fought in Abbasid armies[12]. Under the sultanate, Mamluk generals gained enough power overtime to establish their own dynasty (1250-1517) in a territory that stretched from Egypt to Syria. During their 250-year rule, the Mamluk dynasty fought a number of invasions and it achieved crucial victories: firstly, with the expulsion on the latest Crusaders from the Levant; secondly, when they reasserted their power in the region after the Mongols' sack of Baghdad in 1258 and consequent conquest of Aleppo and Damascus. But the one invader Mamluks could not defeat was a new unstoppable force coming from the north, the Ottoman Turks[13].

As a matter of fact, in 1516-1517, after the Mamluks' defeat, Syria was soon absorbed into the vast Ottoman territory, which was subdivided into provinces (*vilayets*) and districts (*sanjaks*), all under the central Ottoman rule, yet retaining a certain autonomy. The Ottoman system was structured both vertically (with the sultan and his council at the top) and horizontally, through the *millet system*, which granted religious autonomy to the various confessional groups, fostering a climate of relative tolerance and pluralism, still visible today in Syria's religious composition[14].

During the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire found itself under increasing pressure from European powers, thus in 1839 the period of reforms (*tanzimat*), that aimed at modernising the state and countering Western interference, officially began[15]. However, these reforms produced ambivalent effects: on the one hand, they modernised the administration and improved relations with certain minority groups (especially Christians and Jews); on the other hand, they generated strong social and economic tensions due to the increasing dependence on European markets. In the context of Ottoman modernisation, new intellectual and political movements, critical of Ottoman centralisation and of European interference, developed in Syria: Arab proto-nationalism emerged, fuelled by the rediscovery of Arab-Islamic cultural heritage, Pan-Islamism and a lively literary ferment. Syria thus became a driving centre of the Arab awakening, while European pressure on the Ottoman Empire continued to increase.

---

[12] John McHugo, "The Land that Once was Known as Shaam," *Syria: A Recent History*, 2nd ed. (London: Saqi Books, 2017), 37.

[13] *Ivi*, 38.

[14] Lesch, "What is Syria?", 16.

[15] Francesca Corrao, "Islam moderno e contemporaneo," *Islam, religione e politica*, (Rome: LUISS University Press, 2015), 93.

Fuelled by nationalist pride and colonialist ideals, European countries started competing against each other to acquire colonies in Africa and Asia, building a rivalry that would lay the groundwork leading to the run-up to the Great War. In this context of competition among neighbours, Ottoman Turkey had always been a specific focus in European ambitions. For many Christian Westerners, the Levant was perceived as the "land of the Bible", and it had attracted pilgrims for centuries; at the same time, Europeans had long been connected to the region through maritime and caravan routes, as it had been a major commercial hub of tobacco, cotton, silk, raw materials, and grain throughout history, which attracted for centuries Western interest[16].

The Ottoman Empire was too weak to counter all the clear foreign ambitions coming from Europe, consequently it had to grant commercial privileges to the different powers, which mostly benefited local Jewish and Christian communities. Moreover, the Great Powers, namely France, Britain, Russia and Germany, promptly exploited divisions within people in the Empire for their own ends, complicating an already fragile scenario of co-existence[17]. Over the course of time, in the late nineteenth century, those privileged links between some handpicked communities and Europe built resentment in the Muslim population, especially at the very moment when people feared that Greater Syria might face a fate similar to that of Algeria, which had recently been invaded by France[18].

These tensions eventually turned into full-scale wars and widespread violence between Muslim, Maronite Christian and Druze communities. These catastrophic events led to the creation, in 1861, of a separate province with a large degree of autonomy destined to Maronites under a Christian governor in the Sanjak of Lebanon. Amidst these growing tensions and the gradual weakening of the Ottoman authority, the late nineteenth century also witnessed the emergence of the *Nahda*, the Arab cultural and intellectual renaissance that spread from Egypt and Greater Syria across the Arab world[19].

---

[16] McHugo, "The Land that Once was Known as Shaam," 38.

[17] *Ivi,* 39-40.

[18] *Ivi*, 47.

[19] Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *"The First Modern Arab Cultural Renaissance or Nahda, From the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Mid-Twenty Century,"* Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 19.

In this climate of reform, local thinkers and writers began to reflect on concepts such as identity and belonging; debates arose around the meaning of *umma*, the Islamic community of believers, and the idea of *wataniyya*, nationalism or patriotism, sowing the first seeds of Arab nationalism, that would later intertwine with the growing disillusionment towards Ottoman rule.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the authoritarianism of the Young Turk government and the economic and military difficulties caused by the First World War accentuated discontent. Although not initially demanding independence, Syrian nationalists began to demand greater autonomy[20]. The Great War eventually marked a turning point for the political transformation of the Middle East. Although the centre of the conflict was Europe, the repercussions for the region were profound and lasting.

With the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the encroachment of European powers led to the redefinition of borders, the birth of new states and the emergence of new tensions between Arab, Zionist and European interests. At the end of the war, a new political order took shape in the Middle East, based on the European model of nation-states, of which Syria would soon be a part. Although initially interested in maintaining the integrity of the Ottoman Empire as a buffer zone against Russian expansion, Great Britain and France quickly changed their position once the Ottomans allied with the Central Powers, consequently the Middle East became a strategic pawn[21].

Collaborating with France, London began to plan the partitioning of Ottoman territories in the Middle East, to avoid conflicts between allies, and this resulted in crucial documents such as the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916), which divided the region into spheres of influence: the Syrian coast would have gone to France, while the interior would have been under British influence. Palestine, on the other hand, would have had international status[22].

[20] McHugo, "The Land that Once was Known as Shaam," 50-51.

[21] Lesch, "World War I," 20-21.

[22] McHugo, "The Land that Once was Known as Shaam," 60-62.

Map 1. *Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916). Britannica*[23].

In parallel, Britain held negotiations with the Arabs, in particular with Sharif Hussein of Mecca (1853-1931), with the aim to obtain an Arab revolt against the Ottomans, promising the independence of the Arab territories in return. These pledges were formalised in the Hussein-McMahon correspondence (1915-1916)[24], but with many ambiguities and reservations, especially concerning the exact borders and Western influence over the region. Indeed, these contradictions between the promises made to the Arabs, the French and the Zionists laid the foundation for many future conflicts. Eventually, the Arab revolt led by Hussein's son Faisal (1885-1933), with British support, began in 1916 and, although militarily significant, it did not lead to the immediate recognition of an independent Arab state. Merely one year later, in 1917, the Balfour Declaration sanctioned British support for the creation of a "Jewish national homeland" in Palestine, adding further complexity to an already fragmented landscape[25].

[23] Britannica. "Sykes-Picot Agreement" [map] https://www.britannica.com/event/Sykes-Picot-Agreement. (Last accessed 6 October 2025.)

[24] McHugo, "The Land that Once was Known as Shaam,"54-55.

[25] Lesch, "World War I," 22.

The question on how to partition the Levant became pivotal in the post-war period and in 1919, during the Paris Peace Conference, new negotiations were held: Paris claimed Syria on the basis of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, while London tried to maintain some influence through their previous support of Faisal. One attempt at American mediation was the King-Crane Commission, which noted that public opinion in Syria was against a French mandate and preferred an American or British one if necessary[26]. However, the commission's report was ignored by the European powers.

The San Remo Conference, held in 1920, made the mandate system official: Britain was given Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine, while France was given Syria (including Lebanon). Theoretically the mandate was presented as a form of temporary administration aimed at independence, but in reality, the mandating powers acted as full-fledged colonisers[27].

The brief experience of the Arab Kingdom of Syria under Faisal ended abruptly in July 1920, when French troops marched into Syria, drove out Faisal and defeated his forces at the Battle of Maysaloun, entering Damascus. Faisal was forced into exile, marking the end of the Arab attempt at self-determination in Syria[28]. In order to contain further tensions with France and at the same time maintain an ally in the area, Britain decided in 1921 to support Faisal's brother, ʿAbdallah (1946-1951), as emir of Transjordan, and Faisal himself was appointed king of Iraq. In this way, London sought to contain French influence and symbolically compensate the Hashemite family, while maintaining control over the region[29]. Meanwhile, Syria officially entered the French Mandate period, ushering in a new phase of its history under European rule.

1.1 The end of the French mandate and the birth of the Syrian Republic

A French-imposed regime of direct rule was established in 1920 and the area of Greater Syria was fragmented into five parts based on a sectarian and ethnic division: one was Lebanon, *Le Grand Liban*; the second was the State of Damascus, including the towns of Homs and Hama;

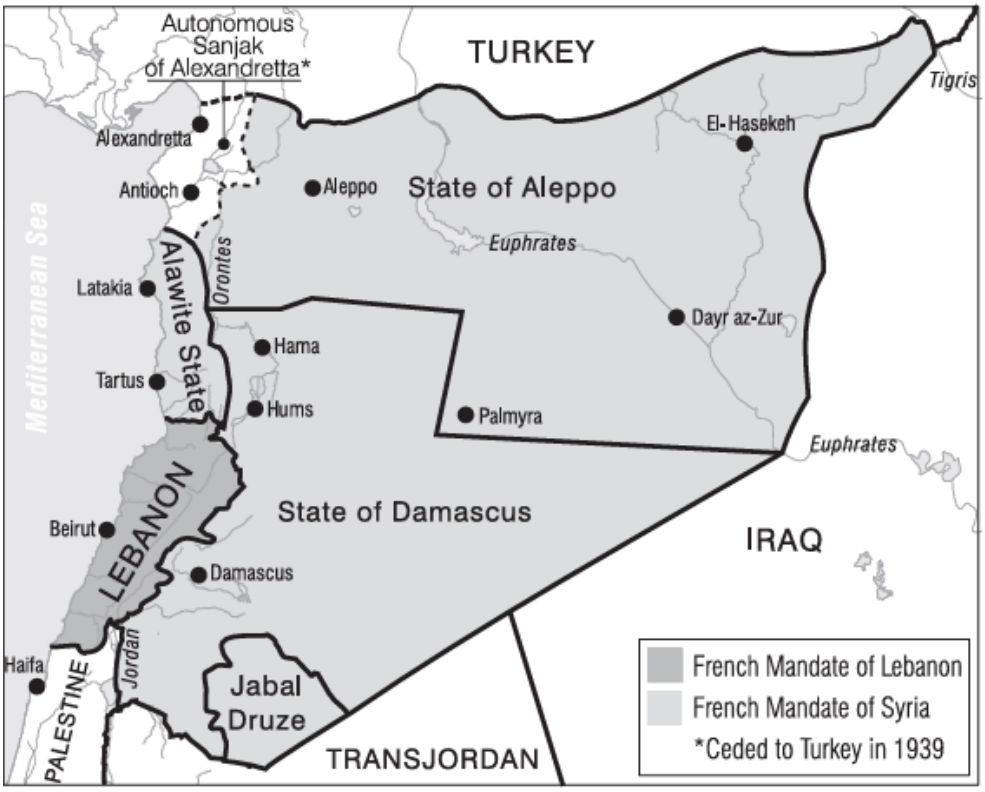
[26] McHugo, "The Land that Once was Known as Shaam," 63-65.

[27] Lesch, "World War I," 26.

[28] *Ibidem*.

[29] McHugo, "The Land that Once was Known as Shaam," 67.

the third was the State of Aleppo, that extended from the so-called *Jazirah* (the desert area to the east of the Euphrates, characterised by a Bedouin prominence) to the Sanjak of Alexandretta, that theoretically was part of the State of Aleppo, but in practice subjected to a special autonomous government; the fourth was the mountainous region of the Jabal Druse, inhabited predominantly by the Druze population, that was concentrated in the Hawran surrounding the town of Suwayda; lastly, there was the province of Latakia, mostly an ʿAlawi area[30].



Map 2. *French Mandate of Syria and Lebanon (1920)*[31].

Together these territories contained barely three million inhabitants, a total that the French authorities considered advisable to divide into five states, each with a different government, administration, budget, and constitution[32]. Clearly, this was not due to a lack of attention nor information, but rather a deliberate strategy to forestall the formation of a unified nationalist

[30] Antonius, "Syria and the French Mandate," 525-26

[31] Fawwaz Traboulsi, "From Mandate to Independence (1920–1943)," *A History of Modern Lebanon*, (Pluto Press: 2012), 89, [map].

[32] Antonius, "Syria and the French Mandate," 526.

front and discourage a wider sense of community. It was no coincidence that the State of Damascus and the State of Aleppo were initially divided: the former was the beating heart of Syrian politics and nationalism, while the latter was wealthy and particularly exposed to trade; together the two would have posed a risky threat to the Mandatory Power. Only four years later, in 1924, due to purely economic reasons, they would be reunited under a single entity[33].

In the first five years of the French mandate in Syria, from 1920 to 1925, general unrest was spreading all over the country, leading to sporadic uprisings. Most were swiftly contained, yet a few grew serious enough to alarm the Mandatory Power: a rebellion in the Latakia region in 1920, insurgencies in Damascus in 1923, and, the most dramatic of all, the Great Rebellion of 1925-27, also known as the Druze Rebellion. Starting from the territory of Jabal Druse, the rebels – led by Sultan al-Atrash (1891-1982) – rose up against the French colonial policies and the *divide et impera* strategy that the Mandatory Power was deploying to keep its authority[34].

What started as a local revolt, quickly evolved into a national movement where religious affiliation became secondary. Druzes, Muslims, and often even Christians, aware of French manipulation, felt closer to Syria than to France. The response to this strong popular resistance was extremely harsh. In October 1925, when the rebels took over most of Damascus, order collapsed. Nevertheless, the insurgents made sure to protect Christian and Jewish communities, demonstrating that Syrian nationalism was not sectarian, contrary to what the French claimed. Paris's response was brutal: for two days, the air force bombed the city, reducing entire neighbourhoods to rubble. Despite the bombing, the uprising continued for months. It was not until 1927, with the arrival of additional colonial troops from Algeria, Senegal, and Madagascar, that France was able to restore power over Syria[35]. Despite its military defeat, the Great Syrian Revolt strengthened national identity and led to a stronger sense of unity in opposition to French colonial rule.

After this heinous event that left the rest of the "civilized world" horrified, France had to appoint a new High Commissioner in Syria, the politician Henry de Jouvenel (1876-1935). His work proved noteworthy and, as he tried to pacify the country, de Jouvenel made a landmark pledge: France now intended to negotiate a treaty that would end the mandate and recognize Syrian

[33] McHugo, "French Rule, 1920-1946," 78.

[34] *Ivi*, 82.

[35] *Ivi*, 89.

independence, following Britain's footsteps in Iraq[36]. That statement transformed for the first time Syrian nationalist attitudes, nudging opposition toward cautious cooperation with the Mandatory Power. Indeed, the newly formed National Bloc – made up of Sunni urban notables mainly from Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama – had as its goal the independence of the country, which was to be achieved through *"honourable cooperation"* with France rather than through revolt[37]. After this turning-point, de Jouvenel's successor, Henri Ponsot (1877-1963) moved accordingly: he first insisted that Syria had to fulfil Article 1 of the mandate by drafting an organic law and, in April 1928, after eighteen months (and eight years of French control over the area), he authorized elections for a constituent assembly. In just two months, the assembly had completed a draft-constitution that proclaimed Syria a sovereign republic and limited French interference to a brief period of transition.

However, six key articles that restricted French prerogatives were not approved by High Commissioner Ponsot, who asked to remove those from the final text[38]. When the deputies refused, a nine-month standoff followed and, in February 1929, Ponsot dissolved the body without setting a new date for elections. Fifteen months later, in May 1930, Ponsot promulgated five separate constitutions: one each for the Lebanese Republic, the State of Syria, the ʿAlawite and Druze territories, and the Sanjak of Alexandretta. The Syrian text recycled most of the assembly's draft but inserted a crucial safeguard: Article 116 declared that any clause affecting French "special interests" would remain inoperative until a concluded bilateral treaty. In other words, the sovereignty of Syria stayed in French hands[39]. Only in late 1931 did Ponsot reopen the political process, authorising elections for a Chamber of Deputies charged with selecting a president and cabinet that could, in theory, negotiate the long-promised treaty. After violence and behind-the-scenes bargaining, by March 1932 a chamber of seventy deputies was in place, safely weighted by a pro-French majority. It elected Muhammad ʿAli al-ʿAbid (1867-1939) as the first president of the Republic of Syria, but talks with Paris were nowhere to be seen.

A brief window of hope opened when the socialist Popular Front came to power in France and in 1936 a delegation from the National Bloc travelled to Paris[40]. The French Prime Minister

---

[36] Antonius, "Syria and the French Mandate," 529.

[37] *Ibidem*.

[38] Lesch, "The French Rule," 34.

[39] Antonius, "Syria and the French Mandate," 530.

[40] McHugo, "French Rule, 1920-1946," 96-97.

Léon Blum (1872-1950) agreed on a new treaty that recognized Syrian and Lebanese independence and set a three-year schedule for French troops to leave. However, the treaty was never ratified: Blum's government fell in 1937 and, with the growing threat of a new war in Europe, France abandoned its commitment to Syrian independence. Syrian trust of French rule was already seriously undermined when in 1939 the situation worsened: Paris ceded the Sanjak of Alexandretta – then renamed Hatay – to Turkey, generating even more discontent within Syrians who saw this move as a breach of the pre-existent agreement of keeping territorial integrity[41]. The French decision was part of a bigger strategy in the prelude of a war against Germany, ceding Alexandretta was meant to secure Turkey's neutrality or, in the best-case scenario, its alliance.

On the eve of the Second World War, Syria was further than ever from independence; the constitution was suspended and France reasserted direct control. After France signed the armistice with Germany in June 1940, the French garrison in Syria pledged loyalty to Vichy and ended all resistance to the Axis, permitting German planes to use Syrian airfields in 1941[42]. In response, Britain and Free French forces invaded the country in June, and after a month Damascus fell. Then the Vichy governor Henri Dentz was removed and General Georges Catroux was put in charge; he declared Syria and Lebanon independent, although real authority remained in Allied hands. New elections were held in 1943 and brought National Bloc leader Shukri al-Quwwatli (1891-1967) to the presidency[43]. His government demanded full French withdrawal; nonetheless, the following two years were characterised by disagreements in the transition of power from the French administration to the Syrian and Lebanese governments. Paris delayed handing over the Syrian army, French troops bombarded Damascus and arrested nationalist leaders. At that point Britain stepped in and intervened militarily, forcing a cease-fire and bringing the dispute to the United Nations' table[44]. Long negotiations led to an accord for the simultaneous withdrawal of British and French forces, and by that time Syria was already a founding member of both the United Nations and the Arab League. The last French soldiers departed on 17 April 1946, a date Syrians still mark as *Yawm al-Jala* (يوم الجلاء), Evacuation Day, celebrating the independence and sovereignty that was stolen from them.

---

[41] *Ivi*, 99.

[42] *Ivi*, 106-107.

[43] Lesch, "The French Rule," 34.

[44] McHugo, "French Rule, 1920-1946," 109-110.

Independence granted Syria formal sovereignty and international recognition, yet it emerged with fragile institutions and a society still scarred by years of partition. Even so, the mandate had forged a powerful sense of collective identity that enabled the new republic to take its place on the world stage and to bring the French mandate to a definitive end.

1.1.1 Greater Syria: Antoun Saʿadeh and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party

Freedom, however, did not mend the wounds left by decades of partition. The cession of Alexandretta to Turkey and the artificial frontiers separating Damascus from Lebanon, Palestine, and Transjordan led many intellectuals to believe that the republic was only a fragment of the historical *Bilad al-Sham*. In this climate of territorial frustration and political instability, alternative nationalist projects flourished. Foremost was Antoun Saʿadeh's Syrian Social Nationalist Party (الحزب السوري القومي الاجتماعي) or SSNP, whose vision of a "Greater Syria", *Suriyya al-Kubra* (سوريا الكبرى), rejected the post-1918 map and offered a radically different project for unity and renewal[45].

Indeed, amid the ferment, journalist-philologist Antoun Saʿadeh (1904-1949) launched the clandestine Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) in Beirut in 1932. Where pan-Arabism looked to linguistic unity and Islamists to religious bonds, Saʿadeh articulated a quite radical alternative: the resurrection of a unified and sovereign "Greater Syria" grounded in geography, historical continuity, and secular national identity. In a region increasingly fragmented by foreign-imposed borders and divided along sectarian and ideological lines, his movement promised not simply to reverse colonial partition but to craft a secular republic capable of leading a broader Levantine renaissance. At the heart of Saʿadeh's vision lay the concept of "Natural Syria" or "Greater Syria," a geographic and historical entity that extended from the Taurus Mountains in the north to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal in the south, and from the Mediterranean and Cyprus in the west to the Persian Gulf and the Zagros Mountains in the east.

[45] Eyal Zisser, "The Syrian Phoenix: The Revival of the Syrian Social National Party in Syria." *Die Welt Des Islams* 47, no. 2 (2007): 189.

This territory encompassed present-day Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Kuwait, Iraq, and parts of southern Turkey, Sinai, Iran, and Cyprus[46].

In his later work *Al-Islam fi Risalatayh: Al-Masihiyyah wa al-Muhammadiyyah*, Saʿadeh states:

> *We have said that nationalism is the feeling that each nation possesses regarding its own inner character, its rights, and its aspirations. Indeed, nationalism constitutes the character and spirit of a given society and can be found only in a society that is fused both physically and spiritually. Therefore, as the Arab world does not constitute one country, one environment, and one society, we cannot say that it has one nationalism, common aspirations, common outlook on life and art […]*[47]

Unlike pan-Arab ideologues who defined the nation through linguistic and cultural unity across a vast Arab expanse, Saʿadeh grounded Syrian nationhood in the shared social, geographic, and historical development of the populations who had inhabited the Fertile Crescent[48]. Saʿadeh built his ideology on what he defined as "Material Spiritualism" (*al-Madrahiyya*)[49]. According to this doctrine, the development of society and the individual arises from the dialectical interaction between the material conditions of existence and the inner, cultural, and moral life of the nation. On the practical side, the country needed modern schools, factories, and strong state institutions. On the inner side, Syrians had to rediscover their own history and values. Only by combining material progress with a cultural reawakening could a secular and nationalist Greater Syria prosper.

The SSNP's program included not only a philosophical and ideological manifesto but also a set of reformist principles designed to radically reshape Syria's social, political, and economic order: first and foremost, the party called for the complete separation of religion and state,

---

[46] Christopher Solomon, Jesse McDonald, and Nick Grinstead. "Eagles Riding the Storm of War: The Role of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party." Clingendael Institute, 2019: 3.

[47] Antun Sa'adeh, Al-Islam fi Risalatayh: Al-Masihiyyah wa al-Muhammadiyyah, (Islam in its Christian and Muhammadan Messages), 3rd ed, (Beirut: 1958), 207-16, 243-45.

[48] Solomon, McDonald, and Grinstead, "Eagles Riding the Storm of War: The Role of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party,": 7.

[49] Dr. Adel Beshara, "Antun Sa'adeh (1904-1949)," Antun Sa'Adeh. https://www.antoun-saadeh.com/languages/en/510. (Last accessed 3 October 2025.)

arguing that sectarianism was the principal obstacle to national unity.[50] Accordingly, the SSNP advocated for a unified legal system grounded in civil law that would guarantee equality before the law for all citizens, regardless of sect or confession. Secondly, the SSNP targeted feudalism as a major barrier to economic justice. While not legally codified, feudalism in Syria had persisted through powerful landowning elites who controlled vast estates and subjected peasants to exploitative labour conditions. Saʿadeh saw this system as both unjust and economically inefficient, thus proposing a comprehensive economic restructuring based on productive labour, state-regulated capital, and equitable wealth distribution. Militarily, the SSNP believed that Syria's sovereignty was meaningless without the power to defend it, and the formation of a modern and unified military was deemed essential not only to protect Syria's territorial integrity but also to recover lost territories and deter future invasions. While not joining the Pan-Arabist cause, the SSNP favoured voluntary Arab cooperation and, in terms of foreign affairs, it singled out Zionism as a colonial threat, thus calling for the complete rejection of Jewish immigration and the restoration of Syrian territorial sovereignty in Palestine[51].
Although the SSNP never gained control of a state apparatus, its influence was far-reaching in the Levant and Saʿadeh's execution in 1949 – following a failed uprising in Lebanon – transformed him into a martyr figure for many supporters. While its territorial goals remain unrealized, the SSNP remains a testament to the enduring appeal of a nationalism rooted in local historical consciousness and social cohesion, and civic equality. The party continued to play a role in Lebanese politics, especially during the civil war, and maintained a presence in Syrian political life[52].

1.1.2 Instability and Military Coups

Syria emerged from World War II as a newly independent state freed from the shackles of the French mandate[53]. The country was formally sovereign, yet essentially fragile: the institutions created under colonial rule were weak, the bureaucracy was limited, and the economy was heavily dependent on previously imposed models. The scars of sectarian fragmentation,

[50] *Ibidem.*

[51] *Ibidem.*

[52] Zisser, "The Syrian Phoenix: The Revival of the Syrian Social National Party in Syria.": 195-201.

[53] Lesch, "Syria amid the Cold Wars", 37.

worsened by French administration, kept undermining natural cohesion. External threats – mainly the fear of expansionist ambitions from Turkey, Transjordan, and Iraq, as well as Zionist claims in Palestine – and the lack of a cohesive political identity exacerbated domestic instability. Politically, the post-mandate scene in Syria appeared extraordinarily lively, but also highly disorganised. With independence, the country became a parliamentary republic, nonetheless political parties were extremely weak and mostly moved by their own group's interests.

The National Bloc, which had led the struggle for independence, split into local factions, with rivalry between Damascus and Aleppo: the National Party (of Damascus) and the People's Party (of Aleppo) represented the two poles of power. Meanwhile, at the opposite extreme of Saʿadeh's Syrian Social Nationalist Party, there was the Syrian Communist Party, led by Khaled Bagdash (1912-1995), that linked to workers' organizations and progressive urban classes[54]. Another important movement was Islamism, represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, officially founded in Syria in 1945-1946 and led by Mustafa al-Sibaʿi (195-1964). The movement wanted to revive Islam and liberate the Arab world from foreign domination, but its Syrian declination had a more flexible position than its Egyptian counterpart. Despite the presence of nationalists, communists and Islamists, it was Baʿthism that became the dominant ideology in post-war Syria; founded by Michel ʿAflaq (1910-1989) and Salah al-Din Bitar (1912-1980), the Baʿth Party combined unity, freedom and socialism in a pan-Arab and secular vision[55].

However, the competition among these political parties and the lack of strong parliamentary tradition, paved the way for a long season of coups d'état. One tangible symptom was the delay in producing a republican constitution: until the first coup of 1949 every election was still conducted under the basic law drafted under French mandatory supervision in the 1930s. In 1947, in the first post-mandate elections veteran nationalist Shukri al-Quwwatli was re-elected; however, his presidency did not last long, on 30 March 1949 Colonel Husni al-Zaʿim (1897-1949) staged the country's first coup, dissolved parliament, and briefly won U.S. and Iraqi recognition, only to be shot by fellow officers under General Sami al-Hinnawi (1898-1950) five months later[56]. That inaugurated the season of military coups in Syria, a tradition that would shape the country's trajectory for the following two decades. General Hinnawi and provisional

[54] McHugo, "From Independence to Hafez al-Assad, 1946-1970," 115-116.

[55] *Ivi*, 118-119.

[56] *Ivi*, 126-127.

president Hashim al-Atasi (1875-1960) tried to speed the institutional process and rekindle the relations with the other Arab countries, in order to deal with internal challenges with a more unified approach and, at the same time, bring closer the Arab front – as a matter of fact, the two leaders were pushing for a regional axis with Iraq, Transjordan, and Syria. The need to unite Syria with other Arab states was also symptomatic of the lack of national political and economic resources: the new country was fragile and unprepared for the immediate challenges and, orphaned from *Bilad al-Sham*, did not know how to face the difficulties of modernity and the post-colonial era[57].

However, Hinnawi and al-Atasi's project was not welcomed by the other main Arab alliance of the time, the one between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, that feared a Hashemite expansion. Consequently, a third coup led by Colonel Adib al-Shishakli (1909-1964) was carried out in December. Under his rule Syria fell into direct military rule: al-Shishakli banned parties and drastically reduced civil rights. Politically and economically backed by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, he rigged the 1953 elections for his Arab Liberation Party, but once he lost its support, he fled to Lebanon and then to Brazil in 1954[58].

The 1950 constitution was reinstated, new elections held, and Quwwatli returned to the presidency in 1955, yet the system remained extremely fragile: cabinet crises followed one another, plots were uncovered, and nearly one thousand Syrians died in political violence between 1949 and 1957. By the time martial law was finally lifted in July 1957, the pattern was set: rival civilian blocs, assertive regional powers, and an army convinced that national salvation lay in its own hands.

1.2 The 1948 Arab-Israeli war and its impact on Syria

Shortly after the UN-endorsed partition of Palestine in November 1947, Israel proclaimed its independence on 14 May 1948, the day the British Mandate over Palestine expired. The Jewish community in Palestine (the *Yishuv*), largely composed of European immigrants and Holocaust

[57] Johannes S. T. Waardenburg, "La Siria contemporanea prima dell'instaurazione del regime degli al-Asad" in *La Siria Contemporanea: Ridisegnando la carta del Vicino Oriente*, vol. 1 (Rome: Istituto per l'Oriente C.A. Nallino, 2021), 67.

[58] McHugo, "From Independence to Hafez al-Assad, 1946-1970," 131-132.

survivors, rejected all Arab proposals for a single binational state[59]. It was well-organized and armed, whereas the Arab population was very fragmented and poorly coordinated. Within twenty-four hours of Israel's proclamation, on 15 May 1948, war had already become inevitable: the neighbouring Arab states of Egypt, Transjordan, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon moved their armies across the former mandate's frontiers, joining local Palestinian and Arab-League forces already deployed on the ground.

Following the example of the other Arab countries, Syria intervened in Palestine, like its neighbours the decision to fight emerged at the intersection of regional ambition and domestic fragility; yet the Syrian army was ill-prepared and underequipped. It totalled around 6,000-7,000 soldiers, many of whom had served in the French mandate and came from minority backgrounds[60]; the regent political class did not trust fully the army and its loyalty, which was the reason why its size and equipment were deliberately kept minimum.

Nevertheless, the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 revealed the young republic's fragility. It could be argued that Syria's decision to join the wider Arab invasion of May 1948 reflected a broader political necessity rather than pure military confidence and a firm rejection of the new Jewish state: firstly, Damascus was alarmed by King ʿAbdallah of Transjordan, whose ambition was to annex the West Bank while staying out of the territory assigned to Israel[61]. The same fear of a Hashemite expansion was shared by Cairo, consequently Syria and Egypt, together, felt that the only way to protect their interests and prevent a further expansion north and westward was to send expeditionary forces, even though neither government expected a swift victory. Secondly, the mass expulsion of Palestinians that began months before formal Israeli statehood increased popular outrage, and, by early 1948, hundreds of thousands of refugees were forced to leave from Galilee and the Palestinian coastal plain; street protests, newspaper campaigns and mosque sermons demanded action on a scale that could not be ignored by Arab leaders[62]. Finally, longstanding border disputes, entwined with control of water, pushed Syria to act. The Anglo-French boundary of 1923 put the Jordan River and Lake Tiberias entirely inside

---

[59] *Ivi*, 124.

[60] *Ibidem.*

[61] Michael Eppel, "The Arab States and the 1948 War in Palestine: The Socio-Political Struggles, the Compelling Nationalist Discourse and the Regional Context of Involvement." *Middle Eastern Studies* 48, no. 1 (2012): 14.

[62] *Ivi*, 20.

Mandatory Palestine, yet granted Syrian villagers enduring rights to fish, draw drinking water and maintain a pier on the lake. Syrian strategists worried that once an Israeli state consolidated sovereignty along that line, Damascus might lose practical access to the Jordan headwaters – two of which rise in Lebanon and the Golan Heights – and thus pressed south from the heights to secure a foothold on the river and the lake[63]. Together, fear of Hashemite expansion, domestic pressure over the Palestinian exodus, and the quest for a defensible, water-secure frontier pushed Syria into a war whose origins lay as much in Arab politics and geography as in hostility to Israel itself.

During the July 1949, armistice talks forced Damascus to accept three UN-supervised demilitarised zones (DMZs) along the Jordan and Yarmuk, and tolerate Israeli control of Lake Tiberias – concessions that the Syrian public opinion interpreted as national humiliation, as Syria had to pull its troops back behind colonial-era boundaries[64]. Palestinian refugees poured into the Hawran plain and the outskirts of Damascus, overwhelming local supply-and-relief committees, driving up rents and sharpening class tensions between big landholders and the landless. The defeat shattered whatever prestige President Shukri al-Quwwatli's National Bloc still enjoyed, fed popular contempt for the old urban notable class, and convinced many officers that only the army could rescue national honour.

Ideologically, 1948 catalysed the rise of radical anti-Western currents – Baʿthism, Arab Socialism, communism – that portrayed Zionism, imperialism, and domestic "feudalists" (the country's big landowning elite) as intertwined enemies. Strategically, 1948 marked the beginning of a new phase in foreign policy: Israel became a permanent security preoccupation, justifying higher military budgets and closer ties first to Egypt's Gamal ʿAbd al-Nasser (1918-1970) and, eventually, to the Soviet Union. Regionally, this war served as a unifying myth: the new and now military proven Israeli state pushed Cairo, Damascus, Amman, and Baghdad to stand united under the Arab League, drove popular movements to demand stronger pan-Arab coordination, and kept the "liberation of Palestine" at the centre of every major regional alliance and rivalry, from the rise of Nasser in the 1950s, through the brief United Arab Republic, to the Arab summits of the late 1960s.

---

[63] Jerome Slater, "Lost Opportunities for Peace in the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Israel and Syria, 1948-2001." *International Security* 27, no. 1 (2002): 83.

[64] Donald Neff, 1994. "Israel-Syria: Conflict at the Jordan River, 1949-1967." *Journal of Palestine Studie*s 23 (4): 27.

Thus 1948 did far more than redraw a frontier; it reordered Syria's domestic balance of power, accelerated the politicisation of the army, and anchored the republic's identity in a narrative of resistance that would shape every subsequent regional crisis. Nevertheless, in the war's immediate aftermath, Syria briefly explored diplomatic alternatives to confrontation: in July 1949, under the newly installed regime of Colonel Husni al-Zaʿim, Damascus entered armistice talks with the Jewish state, under UN supervision, and, in a remarkable but brief overture, Zaʿim, seeking American financial and military support, offered to recognise Israel and to resettle around 300,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria in exchange for a peace treaty and shared access to the water of the Jordan River and Lake Tiberias[65]. Then Israeli prime minister, David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973), however, rejected the proposal refusing even to discuss it with the Syrian counterpart. A few years later, al-Shishakli renewed a similar offer, again, without success[66]. The collapse of both initiatives deepened public disillusionment and reinforced the perception that pragmatic diplomacy and assertiveness were not the right paths to restore Syria's regional dignity.

1.3 The Pan-Arabist dream

The 1948 military shock reverberated far beyond Syria's borders and spread through every Arab capital. The premises to the war made by each government was the promise of an easy victory in the name of the Palestinian cause and Arab resistance; after just fourteen months Egyptian, Transjordanian, Syrian, Lebanese, Iraqi, Saudi and Yemenite forces returned humbled, bringing with them a profound sense of humiliation and loss. Into the vacuum created by general dissatisfaction, a new generation of intellectuals and officers stepped in, motivated by the idea of Arab unity as the best path to economic prosperity, social cohesion, and deterrent from Israeli and Western influence.

Pan-Arabism was hardly new: the political movement emerged in the mid-to-late nineteenth century and reached its acme in the 1960s; it advocated for the political, cultural and socioeconomic unity of Arabs from the Mashreq to the Maghreb, across all the new-born states

[65] Slater, "Lost Opportunities for Peace in the Arab-Israeli Conflict," 86.

[66] *Ivi*, 87.

that were created after decolonisation. In that sense, it is a movement eminently tied to colonial and postcolonial history, indeed arguably conceived of indissociably from it[67].

In the late Ottoman era, the Mashreq – and above all Egypt and Syrian provinces – became the cradle of three major intellectual movements that would shape twentieth-century Arab thought: pan-Islamism, pan-Arabism and territorial patriotism (*wataniyya*). The *Nahda* (النهضة), or Arab cultural renaissance, started to spread among Egyptian and Syrian elites, encouraging educational reform, linguistic revival and broader social modernisation. In doing so, it forged a new, largely secular sense of "Arabness" that served simultaneously as an act of resistance to European imperialism as well as a counter-weight to Ottoman Turkish dominance.

The First World War transformed this ferment into overt political action: the abrupt replacement of Istanbul's sultanate by French and British rule acted as a catalyst, exposing the fragility of local autonomist hopes, elevating the symbolism of a common Arabic language and history, and linking the demand for self-determination to the idea of a wider Arab nation that could match European power[68]. Intellectuals such as the Syrian reformer Satiʿ al-Husri (1880-1968) argued that "people who speak a unitary language have one heart and a common soul; they constitute one nation and so must possess one state[69]."

Christian Arab writers, like Butrus al-Bustani (1819-1883), and Nasif Yaziji (1800-1871) were among the first to articulate the idea of Arab cultural and linguistic unity, as both a vehicle of revival and a shield against foreign domination, thereby underscoring the non-religious character of their movement. By contrast, some Muslim thinkers, such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) Muhammad ʿAbduh (1849-1905) and Rashid Rida (1865-1935), advanced a primarily pan-Islamist project centred on the reform and solidarity of the Islamic *umma* in response to European imperialism[70].

---

[67] Ould Mohamedou, Mohammad-Mahmoud, "The Rise and Fall of Pan-Arabism." Geneva Graduate Institute, January 31, 2019, https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/communications/news/rise-and-fall-pan-arabism. (Last accessed 14 October 2025.)

[68] Corrao, "Islam moderno e contemporaneo," *Islam, religione e politica,* 116-117.

[69] Adeed Dawisha, "Saṭiʿ al-Ḥuṣri's Theory of Nationalism," *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair,* 2nd ed. (Princeton University Press: 2003), 49-50.

[70] Francesca Maria Corrao, "Riforma e Cultura nell'Islam Contemporaneo," *L'Islam non è terrorismo*. (Bologna: il Mulino, 2018), 21.

Between the two world wars, the discourse surrounding Arab unity migrated from elite's salons and university classes to mass politics. Across the region students, junior officers and the *effendiyya* – the educated middle class – embraced Arabism as a language of social justice: it promised agrarian reform against large estate-holders, industrial modernisation, and a meritocratic alternative to the *ancien régime* of notables who had collaborated with the mandates[71]. The Second World War widened the audience: allied occupation troops, wartime inflation, puppet governments, and then the defeat in Palestine supplied the emotional ignition necessary to attract more people to Pan-Arabist ideals. Arab nationalism lived its most important moment between the middle of the 1940s and the end of the 1960s: in just ten years pivotal events – including the creation of the Arab League in 1945, the founding congress of the Baʿth Party in Damascus in 1947, the 1952 coup that brought Nasser to power in Egypt, the Bandung conference of 1955 – would drastically alter the scenario[72].

Within a decade, Pan-Arab chants echoed from Maghreb to Mashreq; yet monarchies in Amman, Riyadh and Rabat limited their participation, worried of the repercussions that this new current would have on their power. However, Pan-Arabism had in itself contradictions: every state jealously protected its freshly acquired sovereignty, which made the hypothesis of a genuine federation unfeasible. Yet, between 1955 and 1957 the combination of Israeli rearmament, the Baghdad Pact and the Suez Crisis convinced many Syrians that unity could no longer be postponed: political pressure from Baʿthists, independent officers and street demonstrations pushed Damascus into the arms of Nasser, a turn that would lead to the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958.

Whereas the UAR experiment, its heady beginning and precipitous collapse, belongs to the next section, what matters in the conclusion of this paragraph is that by the mid-1950s pan-Arabism had evolved from an intellectual current into the dominant ideology shaping politics: it offered a framework to reinterpret colonial history, a vocabulary for social revolution, and a strategic doctrine that promised security through supra-state solidarity.

---

[71] Eppel, "The Arab States and the 1948 War in Palestine," 4-5.

[72] Patrizia Manduchi, "Arab Nationalism(s): Rise and Decline of an Ideology." *Oriente Moderno* 97, no. 1 (2017): 18-19.

1.3.1 The short-lived United Arab Republic

The defeat of the Arab armies in Palestine and the failure to prevent the establishment of the State of Israel had already sown deep frustration across the Levant, a sentiment that would only grow stronger over the following decade. Indeed, between 1948 and 1953, the United States had provided over $250 million in aid to Israel, while all Arab countries combined received less than half that amount[73]. In Syria, this blatant imbalance fuelled widespread anti-Americanism, culminating in mass demonstrations and growing support to the Communist Party. Meanwhile, in Egypt, King Faruq's monarchy was collapsing under the weight of corruption, foreign domination, and the lingering presence of British troops along the Suez Canal.

In 1952, the Free Officers Movement led by Mohamed Naguib (1901-1984) overthrew the monarchy, abolishing the centuries-old Egyptian kingdom and transforming Egypt into a republic. Two years later, Gamal ʿAbd al-Nasser, Naguib's closest deputy and the true architect of the revolution, consolidated power, becoming the second President of the Arab Republic of Egypt. His rise had a profound impact on the Arab world: Nasser came to embody the ideals of Arab unity, anti-imperialism, and independence from colonial domination, values that deeply resonated with the Baʿthist vision of Syria's young intellectuals and officers. Although Syria initially gravitated towards the rising Egyptian force, it kept its distance, for instance, by preferring to stay closer to the Soviet bloc in 1954 instead of signing the Baghdad Pact with Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and Iraq, thus rejecting the newly proposed pro-Western alliance[74].

The tipping point came with the Suez Crisis of 1956 and Syrian Crisis of 1957. When Nasser nationalised the Canal – transferring administrative control from the Western-owned Suez Canal Company to Egypt's Suez Canal Authority, after the Britain and France decided to withdraw their financial support to the construction of the Aswan Dam[75] – the two European

[73] McHugo, "From Independence to Hafez al-Assad, 1946-70," 133.

[74] Lesch, "Syria amid the Cold Wars", 42-43.

[75] Michael B. Oren, "Escalation to Suez: The Egypt-Israel Border War, 1949-56." *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, no. 2 (1989): 347.

powers and Israel launched a tripartite invasion[76]. Although Egypt suffered militarily, the political outcome was an unequivocal victory: under joint pressure from the United States and the Soviet Union, the three aggressors were forced to withdraw. The Crisis shattered the illusion of British and French dominance and elevated Nasser to the status of pan-Arab hero.

In Syria, the repercussions of Suez were profound. The country was plagued by chronic political instability, the legacy of successive coups between 1949 and 1954, and a deeply divided parliament paralysed by ideological rivalries between Baʿthists, Communists, Arab nationalists, and conservative notables.

The army, increasingly politicised, saw in Nasser's Egypt both an ideological model and a stabilising force. However, domestic instability was not the only source of insecurity weighting on Syria; indeed, the country was not spared the Cold War's external dynamics. For the United States, Turkey and the allies of the Baghdad Pact, the prospect of a communist takeover in Syria appeared as a tangible menace. Such threat prompted Turkey to deploy its troops along the common border with Syria[77].

The tensions ended formally when the United States convinced Ankara to withdraw its forces, however this event, combined with the aftermath of the 1956 Crisis, pushed Syria to strengthen its ties with Egypt. In this climate of insecurity and ideological fervour, Nasser's message of Arab unity and anti-imperialism offered both a sense of purpose and a geopolitical shield. The convergence of regional tensions, Cold War rivalries, and Syria's fragile internal balance transformed the idea of union with Egypt from a distant aspiration into an urgent political necessity.

The initiative for unity thus originated more from Damascus than Cairo. In early 1958, a high-level Syrian delegation flew to Cairo (unattended) to propose an immediate political union. At first, Nasser was cautious and favoured the idea of a federal union; he feared Syria's instability and did not wish to inherit its political divisions, nonetheless he had spent his whole career

[76] The Suez Crisis is also known as the second Arab-Israeli war. The events of 1956 were not isolated, but rather the culmination of a long diplomatic and military escalation between the Egypt and Israel, that had developed since the 1949 Egypt-Israel Armistice Agreements (EIAA) and had been intensified by Cold War dynamics and recurrent border incidents.

[77] Lesch, "Syria amid the Cold Wars," 44.

advocating for Arab unity. When the Egyptian President asked for Syria's condition for union, the delegation had none, Nasser, however had plenty[78].

Negotiations were swift and unilateral. On 1 February 1958, after a single marathon session, the Syrian delegation accepted the formation of a fully unitary state, the United Arab Republic, under Egyptian leadership. The agreement stipulated the dissolution of Syrian political parties, the withdrawal of the army from politics, a unified military command under Egyptian officers, and the centralisation of key ministries in Cairo. The union was submitted to a plebiscite held on 21 February 1958 that resulted in clear favour of the merge. Crowds celebrated the birth of the UAR, and in that moment it seemed that the long-dreamed pan-Arabist ideal was finally taking institutional form.

Image 1. *Syrian President Shukri al-Quwatli and his Egyptian counterpart Gamal ʿAbd al-Nasser sign the union agreement between their countries in Damascus*[79].

[78] Sami Moubayed, "*The United Arab Republic: A Look at Egypt and Syria's Short-Lived Union*," Al Majalla, February 22, 2024, https://en.majalla.com/node/311251/documents-memoirs/united-arab-republic-look-egypt-and-syrias-shortlived-union. (Last accessed 20 October 2025.)

[79] *Ibidem*.

Yet the initial euphoria surrounding the birth of the United Arab Republic quickly gave way to growing tensions. While the union had been celebrated as a first step towards the realisation of pan-Arab ideals, its practical management soon revealed profound structural imbalances. The UAR had been conceived as a unitary state, not a federal arrangement, and this centralisation of authority placed Syria in a subordinate position from the outset[80]. Discontent grew as the terms of the Union had to be implemented: on the political level, key positions were held by Egyptians, while the Syrian apparatus was limited to its regional affairs and minor roles in secondary ministries[81]; Syrian political parties and groups that were active at the time of the merge had eventually to be dissolved, but kept operating undercover the whole time; many officials and members of the élite had to move to Cairo to cover mostly symbolic roles.

All of these elements led to a shared feeling that Syria had become a mere province of the Union under Egypt administration. Economic factors heavily contributed to the internal crisis: firstly, Syria suffered three consecutive years of drought (1958-60), which resulted in the reduction of national income by about a third; secondly, oil revenues experienced a sharp fall after the Suez Crisis; thirdly, with the Union came unified financial and monetary policies, including import restrictions and currency controls, while exchange rates were determined in Cairo, all of which caused the Syrian pound to lose both autonomy and value; lastly, Nasser's socialist reforms – specifically agrarian reforms and nationalisation of banks, large enterprises and strategic industries – did not yield the desired results, eroding popular support for the Union[82].

The gap between rhetoric and reality became evident: far from strengthening Syria's sovereignty, the UAR seemed to have compromised it. After just four years, the very forces that had supported the union were now questioning its feasibility. By 1960-61, economic discontent, political marginalization, and military frustration combined to create an increasingly volatile situation in Damascus: these tensions culminated in a conspiracy led by Lieutenant-Colonel ʿAbd al-Karim al-Nahlawi and a group of fellow officers who believed that only secession could "save" Syria from permanent subordination. On 28 September 1961, their carefully planned coup unfolded in a matter of hours: tanks surrounded the presidential palace in Damascus, radio broadcasts declared the dissolution of the UAR, and a provisional

[80] McHugo, "From Independence to Hafez al-Assad, 1946-70," 141.

[81] Lesch, "Syria amid the Cold Wars," 45.

[82] Monte Palmer, "The United Arab Republic: An Assessment of Its Failure." *Middle East Journal* 20, no. 1 (1966): 61-63.

government of conservative notables quickly restored the pre-1958[83]. Nasser publicly condemned the move, but Egyptian forces were too distant to intervene, and other Arab states refused to act. Within forty-eight hours, the Union existed only on paper.

The failure of the UAR left an indelible stain not only on Nasser's leadership, but also on the ideals of Arab nationalism and unity. Nevertheless, on 5 October 1961, during a speech, Nasser said he was confident that the first experiment in Arab Unity would not be the last, but a forerunner operation from which to learn[84]. The Egyptian President, although heartbroken from the outcome, accepted Syria secession and its role at the UN as an independent state, declaring the Syrian national unity had to be priority within its new government[85].

The collapse of the UAR had profound consequences for Syrian politics. Syrian traditional political parties had lost what little credibility they retained and, in the vacuum that followed, the Baʿth Party emerged as the principal political force capable of articulating a new national project.

1.4 The rise of the Baʿth Party

As seen throughout the previous sections, the Baʿth Party (حزب البعث) was a recurrent actor in Syria's post-independence political dynamics. Having emerged as one of the key forces advocating for pan-Arabism and social transformation, Baʿthism became increasingly dominant in Syria's domestic and regional trajectory. The following sections will provide a closer examination of the Party's ideological foundations, social base, and political evolution, in order to better understand its decisive role in shaping modern Syria.

The Arab Socialist Renaissance Party, better known as the Baʿth (*Renaissance*) Party, was dedicated to exactly what its name proclaims: the renaissance of the Arab nation by means of Arab socialism[86]. Its ideological and political roots were forged during the late 1930s and early 1940s, a period marked by anti-colonial ferment and social transformation in Syria. In the broader framework of the French mandate, nationalist intellectuals such as Michel ʿAflaq

[83] *Ivi*, 67.

[84] Patrick Seale, "The Break-Up of the United Arab Republic." *The World Today* 17, no. 11 (1961): 479.

[85] McHugo, "From Independence to Hafez al-Assad, 1946-70,"143.

[86] Robert Olson, "The Ba'th In Syria 1947–1979: An Interpretative Historical Essay (Part One)." *Oriente Moderno* 58, no. 12 (1978): 645.

(Orthodox Christian) and Salah al-Din al-Bitar (Sunni Muslim), sought to articulate a new vision of Arab identity and emancipation. Having both studied at the Sorbonne in Paris, the two were deeply influenced by European socialist ideas as well as Arab nationalist thought and advocated for anti-imperialism and revolutionary socialism[87]. In 1940, the Arab Baʿth Movement was founded and shortly after it started to be involved in Arab nationalist militant activities, including anti-British support to Iraq in the British-led Allied military campaign of 1941.

The core tenet of Baʿthist ideology was the belief in the pre-existence of the Arab nation, artificially fragmented by Western imperialism but destined for rebirth through political unity. According to ʿAflaq, Arabism was, in fact, a secular and moral identity, transcending religious divisions and rooted in a shared historical consciousness. Unity, freedom, and socialism, *Wahda, Hurriyya, Ishtirakiyya* (وحدة, حرية, اشتراكية), were the three backbones of Baʿthism and, soon, this trinity would have become the defining motto of the movement[88].

Chanting "unity, freedom, and socialism", Baʿthists advocated, first, for the union of all Arabs under one state, second, for independence from foreign powers and their influence, and, third, for an "Arab way to socialism", diverging from materialist Marxism, and grounded in moral and spiritual values[89].

The early Baʿth attracted followers mainly from the urban middle classes of Damascus, students, and minor landowners from minority communities, particularly ʿAlawis, Druze, and Ismaʿilis, who were drawn by its non-sectarian message and promise of renewal.

A crucial development came in 1952 with the party's alliance with Akram al-Hawrani's and his Arab Socialist Movement, which had a strong rural base among middle peasants and an established network within the army[90]. From its inception, the Baʿth Party's vision of social justice implied a direct challenge to the entrenched landowning elites that had dominated Syrian politics under Ottoman times and kept their power during the French Mandate, sometimes compromising full Arab independence by willingly cooperating with colonial powers. In that sense, dismantling the entrenched political elite was a necessary step to advance in Arab

---

[87] McHugo, "From Independence to Hafez al-Assad, 1946-70," 118-119.

[88] John F. Devlin, "The Baath Party: Rise and Metamorphosis." *The American Historical Review 96*, no. 5 (1991): 1397.

[89] Olson, "The Ba'th In Syria 1947–1979: An Interpretative Historical Essay (Part One)," 649-653.

[90] McHugo, "From Independence to Hafez al-Assad, 1946-70," 122. 130.

nationalism[91]. The alliance with Akram al-Hawrani's (1911-1996) Arab Socialist Movement was pivotal: though himself from a Hama landowning family, al-Hawrani had turned against his class, mobilizing poor and landless peasants as his base[92]. The merger introduced into Baʿthism a distinctly rural and anti-feudal orientation, pushing the Party to embrace land reform, state control of heavy industry, and workers' participation in management. By the early 1950s, the now-called Arab Baʿth Socialist Party had transformed from a small intellectual circle into a dynamic political force, becoming one of the driving political parties in the country. During the United Arab Republic, the Baʿth backed the Union on pan-Arab grounds but opposed the abolition of parties and the centralization of authority in Cairo, a tension that foreshadowed its later strategic recalibration[93]. When the UAR collapsed under its own weight in 1961, the Syrian secession exposed the fragility of parliamentary mechanisms and confirmed, for many Baʿthists, that Arab unity without Syrian autonomy was not feasible. The failure of the UAR triggered profound introspection within the Party: a younger generation, forged in the disillusionment of tangible pan-Arab ideals, began to prioritize Syrian "regional" concerns over abstract Arab unity, shifting the ideological focus from unity to social and structural transformation within Syria itself.

In the vacuum that followed the secession, the Baʿth reorganized both politically and operationally. After the secession, Syria lived two years of pure political anarchy, the constitution was restored but with no consequent stability, discontent was growing and chaos was reigning. While the weak Syrian leadership was trying to rebuild party structures, younger officers tightened intra-army networks and drew a clear lesson from the failed UAR: no subordination to foreign leaders, total control over army and administration, coherent and disciplined ideology[94].

Out of this instability emerged the clandestine Military Committee, formed by like-minded Baʿthist officers (including Hafez al-Assad), to rebuild professional control and ensure that future moves would be coordinated between party and army. On the eve of the 1960s, the Baʿth had thus evolved from a movement of moral renewal into a structured organization with a dual backbone (political and military) prepared to shape Syria's next phase.

---

[91] Devlin, "The Baath Party: Rise and Metamorphosis." 1396-1397.

[92] *Ivi*, 1399.

[93] Lesch, "Syria amid the Cold Wars," 45.

[94] Devlin, "The Baath Party: Rise and Metamorphosis." 1401-1402.

1.4.1 1963-1966: Baʿth's road to power

By early 1963, in the aftermath of the failed experiment of the United Arab Republic, Syria's political landscape remained deeply fragmented: the collapse of the UAR had discredited many of the old political elites, while the Baʿth Party, though weakened and divided, retained a strong foothold among radical military officers and segments of the middle classes. The broader regional context also seemed to favour a Baʿthist takeover.

In February 1963, with the Ramadan Revolution, the Iraqi branch of the Baʿth successfully staged its own coup in Baghdad, raising hopes for a renewed Arab nationalist momentum[95]. The Syrian Military Committee, aware of growing chaos in Damascus and inspired by the Iraqi example, decided to advance with its own plan: on the morning of 8 March 1963, the Military Committee joined forces with non-Baʿthist officers, launching a swift and largely bloodless coup d'état[96]. Within hours, the civilian government had collapsed, brigades took control of key administrative buildings, the airport, and radio stations in Damascus, and a Revolutionary Command Council was proclaimed.

Though the Baʿth Party emerged as the main political force behind the new regime, the coup was not purely a Baʿthist operation: it had been supported by a broad coalition of Arab nationalists, Nasserists, and independent unionists[97], united by their opposition to the old order and desire for change. In the weeks following the coup, the Military Committee and its Baʿthist allies steadily consolidated their grip on power, and key positions in the army and security services were quickly filled by Baʿthist loyalists, while rival factions were side-lined or purged. It is worth noticing that among the newly appointed officers the quota of ʿAlawites was as high as 90 per cent[98].

---

[95] Lesch, "The 1967 Arab-Israeli War," 46-47.

[96] Devlin, "The Baath Party: Rise and Metamorphosis." 1402.

[97] Nikolaos van Dam, "A Synopsis of Baʿthist History Before the Syrian Revolution (2011)," *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria*. (2017).

[98] *Ibidem.*

The ʿAlawis are a small religious minority that make up between 10 and 13 percent of Syria's population[99], mainly living in the provinces of Latakia and Tartus. In terms of doctrine, ʿAlawism is a form of Shiʿa Islam with neo-Platonic, syncretic and esoteric elements that have been viewed even as heretical by some orthodox scholars. Already in the 14th century an anti-ʿAlawi sentiment had emerged in the region, but this controversy had been forgotten for centuries, until it resurfaced in the 19th century[100]. Blending Shiʿism, Gnosticism, and Phoenician mythology, the ʿAlawite had long been regarded with suspicion by the Sunni majority and their practice of *taqiyya* (تقية) – the permission to hide own's beliefs in the face of persecution – further deepened mistrust within people[101]. However, something changed during the French Mandate, with their gradual integration into the army and state institutions, posing an end to their isolation within Syria.

The decisive role played by ʿAlawi officers in the subsequent developments comes hardly as a surprise, given that the leading positions within the Military Committee were held by Muhammad ʿUmran (1922-1972), Salah Jadid (1926-1993) and Hafez al-Assad (1930-2000) – all ʿAlawites. Collectively these three ʿAlawite leaders would have crucial influence in reshaping Syrian armed forced under Baʿthist control, paving the way for a sectarian chain of command[102]. However, after the first purge and isolation of non-loyalists from the army and from the overall political scene, an intra-Baʿthist struggle for power began[103]. Not only the Party had to assert its dominance over rival political forces, it also had to navigate conflicts between its members, mainly between the older, more moderate, party founders and the new, more

---

[99] Cathrin Schaer, "Syria's Alawite community: Once feared, now living in fear?", DW, December 12, 2024, https://www.dw.com/en/syrias-alawite-community-once-feared-now-living-in-fear/a-71172759. (Last accessed on 22 January 2026.)

[100] McHugo, "Inside the Syria of Hafez al-Assad, 1970-2000," 180.

[101] *Ibidem*.

[102] Malcolm H. Kerr, "Hafiz Asad and the Changing Patterns of Syrian Politics." *International Journal* 28, no. 4 (1973): 693.

[103] Mikey Muhanna, "Samer Abboud. Syria's Political History From 1946," *The afikra Podcast*, June 9, 2025. Podcast audio . https://open.spotify.com/episode/6vitGG1s6ua9z1aPI4Dvsr?si=32db091dbbcd4075. (Last accessed on 4 November 2025.)

radical, generation[104]. Among the first group were ʿAflaq and Bitar, the two pioneers of Baʿthism favoured a gradual transition, where the ties between State and Party would be loose and less radicalised in society.

On the other hand, young officers, including Jadid and al-Assad, were advocating for an intransigent nationalism, based on the nexus "State-Party", in which the former embodied a Leninist model of the state. Nevertheless, within Syria, ʿAflaq and Bitar had scarce support, as the failure of the UAR still echoed in most members' minds and old leaders were associated to collateral damages of the pan-Arab experiment. Indeed, the new Baʿthist generation deemed itself more "regional" rather than pan-Arab, advocating for a stricter focus on Syria[105].

The growing divide between these two branches undermined Baʿth internal cohesion: as the Military Committee consolidated its control over the armed forces and state bureaucracy, the formal authority of the National Command, led by ʿAflaq and Bitar, was progressively eroded. By 1965, the Party had become increasingly intertwined with the military apparatus, with Jadid and al-Assad exerting decisive influence behind the scenes.

This gradual drift set the stage for yet another coup: three years of internal rivalries culminated in February 1966, when the radical Baʿth faction orchestrated a military takeover against the National Command[106]. The operation, swift and well-coordinated, resulted in the arrest of Michel ʿAflaq, Salah al-Din al-Bitar, and their civilian supporters, effectively removing the Party's founding generation from power. Jadid emerged as the real architect of the new regime, assuming control through the Regional Command of the Syrian Baʿth, while al-Assad, appointed Minister of Defence, became one of his key allies within the military establishment. The 1966 coup represented not only a generational shift but also a profound ideological transformation within Baʿthism itself[107]. Jadid's regime sought to accelerate revolutionary transformation through extensive nationalisations, radical land reforms, and a more authoritarian fusion of Party and State. The Baʿth thus evolved from a broad nationalist movement into a tightly controlled apparatus of military-bureaucratic rule, dominated by the Regional Command and supported by networks of loyal officers, many of whom, like Jadid and

---

[104] Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Syria Under the Ba'th: State Formation in a Fragmented Society." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (1982): 182.

[105] Devlin, "The Baath Party: Rise and Metamorphosis," 1403.

[106] Lesch, "The 1967 Arab-Israeli War," 47.

[107] *Ivi*, 48.

al-Assad, belonged to minority backgrounds. This emerging power structure would prove both a source of strength for the regime and a factor of deepening polarisation within Syrian society, a dynamic that would define the evolution of Baʿthist Syria in the years to come.

In the broader regional scenario, while the 1966 coup consolidated Baʿthist power within Syria, it also deepened the rift with the Iraqi branch of the Party, which remained loyal to ʿAflaq's ideological line[108]. Indeed, both Party founders eventually left Syria and sought refuge in neighbouring Iraq, where they were recognised as the legitimate leaders of the movement and continued to operate through the National Command in exile. The resulting schism formalised the split of the Baʿth movement into two distinct and often hostile entities: the Syrian and the Iraqi Baʿth, each pursuing its own brand of Arab socialism and regional ambition.

1.5 The Six-Day War defeat

The radical internal transformation initiated by the 1966 Baʿthist coup soon had to face a decisive external test. Indeed, the takeover of the new Baʿthist leadership coincided with the rapid unfolding of an extremely volatile regional landscape, marked by escalating tensions with Israel that would eventually culminate in the disastrous Six-Day War of 1967.

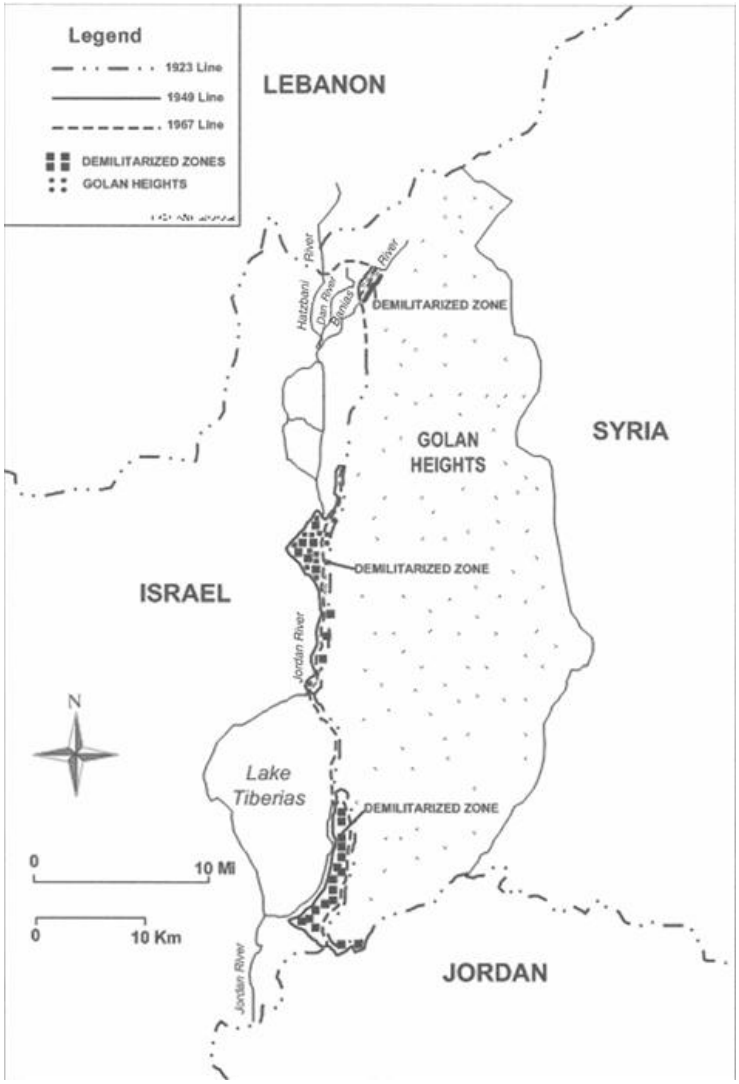
As far as Syria is concerned, the context leading to the third Arab-Israeli confrontation must be understood not merely as an outcome of regional rivalries and anti-Israeli sentiment, but as the final act of a series of deepening clashes between the two countries, which were fuelled by four main factors: territorial disputes, shared water resources, Baʿth militant radicalization, and underlying Cold War dynamics. The first two issues were closely interlinked, rooted in the vague legacy of the 1923 Anglo-French border that placed both the Jordan River and Lake Tiberias within Mandatory Palestine, while granting Syrians limited rights of access.

This ambiguous arrangement became a frequent source of friction after 1948, as Israel and Syria sought to assert sovereignty over the demilitarised zones (DMZs) established by the 1949 armistice. Since then, during the 1950s, border incidents over farming land, fishing rights, and irrigation projects often escalated into military clashes.

On Israel's side, these disproportionate acts of aggression were not isolated incidents, but rather part of a deliberate top-down policy aimed at seizing territory and extending instability in the

[108] Devlin, "The Baath Party: Rise and Metamorphosis," 1403.

region. The ultimate goal was to draw Egypt into the conflict in defence of Syria, thereby allowing Israel to justify its attacks on its southern border as a form of "preventive war"[109].



Map 3. *Jordan River Watershed (1923-1967)*[110].

Tensions worsened when in the early 1960s Israel started building its National Water Carrier, an ambitious project whose original concept dated back to Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) himself. Completed in 1964, the carrier diverted Jordan River's waters towards the Negev Desert, making it even more crucial for Syria to maintain its sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which would guarantee control over some of the river's headwaters feeding Lake Tiberias. Syria, with the support of the Arab League, even attempted to halt Israel's project with the Headwater

[109] Slater, "Lost Opportunities for Peace in the Arab-Israeli Conflict," 89.

[110] Slater, "Lost Opportunities for Peace in the Arab-Israeli Conflict," 85. [map].

Diversion Plan, however, construction works inside Syrian territory were targeted by Israeli air strikes, which significantly heightened military tensions along the border[111].

Additionally, another factor further ignited friction in the region. Beyond practical reasons such as water disputes and territorial control, a deeper and ideological motive also drove Israeli policy: Israeli Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, envisioned the establishment of "Greater Israel", which, in his view, would encompass not only the Golan Heights and much of southwestern Syria, but also both banks of the Jordan River and the region's key water sources[112]. This vision, grounded in both Zionist historical claims and strategic calculations, reinforced Israel's determination to assert dominance over territories deemed vital for the state's expansion and survival.

Having examined the first two factors leading to the 1967 war, attention should now turn to the remaining ones: Baʿth militant radicalization and underlying Cold War dynamics. The domestic political transformation in Syria played a crucial role in the Six-Day war anticipation. Following the 1966 internal coup, the neo-Baʿthist leadership adopted an increasingly revolutionary stance, portraying Zionism and Western hegemony as the country's primary enemies: the Party's radicalization translated into a foreign policy marked by assertive rhetoric and the militarization of Syrian politics. Ideologically, Baʿthist socialist and anti-Western orientation resonated with the Soviet Union worldview, fostering closer political ties between Damascus and Moscow during the 1960s. Overlaying these regional dynamics, the Cold War added a broader strategic dimension, intensifying rivalries and turning local disputes into arenas of global competition. Indeed, the Soviet Union, in exchange for an ally in the Levant, supplied Syria with military aid, training, and diplomatic backing[113].

In May 1967, Soviet intelligence reports (later proven inaccurate) warned of Israeli troop concentrations near the Syrian border, triggering a chain of miscalculations that rapidly intensified the crisis. Encouraged by these reports and its own revolutionary rhetoric, Syria amplified its calls for Arab solidarity, setting the stage for the war that unfolded in the following month. As the crisis deepened, the Baʿthist leadership believed that a confrontation with Israel was not only inevitable, but also ideologically imperative. Nevertheless, the Syrian military

---

[111] Muhammad Muslih, "The Golan: Israel, Syria, and Strategic Calculations." *Middle East Journal* 47, no. 4 (1993): 613-15.

[112] Slater, "Lost Opportunities for Peace in the Arab-Israeli Conflict," 90.

[113] *Ivi*, 89.

remained underprepared for a conventional war, and the gap between rhetoric and capability would become evident once hostilities began.

On 5 June 1967, Israel launched pre-emptive air strikes that destroyed nearly the entire Egyptian air force; simultaneously, its ground forces advanced into the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip, forcing President Nasser to retreat within a few days. Bound by its recent defence pact with Egypt, Jordan entered the conflict but was rapidly defeated, and, when Syria joined the war, it met the same fate as its Arab companions. The United Nations Security Council called for a ceasefire on 6 June, which was accepted by Syria two days later[114]. However, on June 9-10, Israeli troops advanced swiftly in the Golan Heights, exploiting the weaknesses of Syrian defence. Despite attempts at resistance, Syrian forces were unable to prevent the loss of the Golan and by the end of the war, Israel had seized approximately 1,250 square kilometres of newly occupied territory[115].

Israel's overwhelming victory humiliated the Arab governments, marking a definite end to the pan-Arab dream. For the Baʿthist leadership, the fall of the Golan Heights exposed the gap between the regime's pan-Arabist ambitions and the realities of regional power dynamics. The defeat echoed across all Arab countries as a profound humiliation and a source of collective shame: with more than 15,000 fatalities, over 300,000 Palestinians and 100,000 Syrians displaced from the newly occupied territories, in just six days the regional balance of power had shifted irreversibly. In less than a decade, the myth of Arab unity and rebirth had been shattered twice: first, by the failure of the United Arab Republic in 1961; second, by the catastrophic outcome of the Six-Day war. Baʿthist Syria, Nasser's Egypt and their neighbours found themselves deprived of both national and Arab pride, facing growing doubts about their real power and enduring territorial losses that would remain an open wound for years to come.

1.6 Hafez al-Assad's rise to power: the last coup and the Corrective Movement

The 1967 Arab-Israeli war instilled profound mistrust among the people of Syria. The traumatic outcome of the conflict further destabilized an already fragile domestic scenario, delegitimizing

[114] McHugo, "From Independence to Hafez al-Assad, 1946-70," 151.

[115] Muslih, "The Golan: Israel, Syria, and Strategic Calculations." 621.

Jadid's leadership of both the neo-Baʿth and the state itself. In this aftermath, the country experienced a collective loss of faith in Baʿthist ideology and its ambitious "revolutionary" project.

Internally, the Party grew increasingly polarised and fragmented, as rivalries among its leading figures became more evident than ever, most notably between Salah Jadid and Hafez al-Assad. The former, representing the ideological core of neo-Baʿthism, remained committed to a radical vision of Arab socialism and revolutionary struggle, he sought to continue Syria's alignment with the USSR and expand support for liberation movements across the region, even at the cost a renewed confrontation with Israel and conservative Arab monarchies[116]. On the other hand, al-Assad, as Minister of Defence, had a more state-centred approach, he prioritised national strength and professionalization of the armed forces over regional involvement, advocating for political stability and military improvement. Additionally, he was wary about too much dependence on foreign powers, Soviet Union included[117]. While Jadid considered revolution as a permanent process, Assad viewed it as a completed phase that had to give way to consolidation of power.

On the regional scale, the clear discrepancies in the two leaders' approaches became extremely obvious when it came to handling the 1970 Jordanian civil war, a turning point for both Syria's internal politics and inter-Arab relations. After the 1967 war, Palestinian guerrilla groups operating from Jordan increasingly challenged King Hussein's (1935-1999) authority, almost establishing an "independent" state within the Hashemite kingdom. When the situation escalated into open conflict in September 1970, the Jordanian army launched a brutal campaign against the Palestinian *fedayeen* (armed Palestinian organizations), resulting in thousands of casualties and the eventual expulsion of Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to Lebanon[118]. Under Jadid command, Syria attempted to intervene militarily in support of Palestinian *fedayeen,* but its armed forces were promptly repelled by the Hashemite army. In contrast, Assad opposed Syrian intervention, as he opposed independent actions by the resistance[119]. Indeed, he deliberately refrained from providing air cover to the advancing Syrian tanks, a calculated decision that summarised his regional vision: military discipline and national

---

[116] John Galvani, "Syria and the Baath Party." *MERIP Reports*, no. 25 (1974): 7-8.

[117] *Ivi*, 9.

[118] *Ivi*, 13-14.

[119] *Ivi*, 9.

power had to be the priority, rather than ideological solidarity with revolutionary movements. The events of Black September exposed the limits of Jadid and Assad coexistence in the Baʿth leadership, but it was in the months that followed the Jordanian crisis that internal confrontation within the Party reached its peak[120].

During the Extraordinary Party Congress of November 1970, the two leaders openly clashed over Syria's foreign policy and new Baʿthist ideology. Jadid and his supporters within the Regional Command exposed Assad's misconduct during the events of September 1970, underlying his betrayal to the Palestinian cause. Nevertheless, al-Assad, in the aftermath of the congress, from his position of power, started to consolidate his position, methodically isolating Jadid's supporters from the military apparatus and effectively securing control over the army and intelligence services. On 13 November 1970, Assad launched a swift and bloodless coup: Jadid and his supporters were arrested and confined in jail for the rest of their lives, while Assad emerged as Syria's undisputed leader[121]. The takeover was later presented not as a simple coup, but as a "Corrective Movement", *al-harakat at-tashihiyya* (الحركة التصحيحية), an act of "correction", aimed at restoring stability and discipline, and at bringing Baʿthist ideology on the right track. The Corrective Movement marked the final coup in Syria's post-independence turmoil, closing an era characterised by twenty-one changes of government in just twenty-four years of independence and inaugurating a durable and authoritarian order that would define the Assad regime for the decades to come[122].

Over the previous pages, the analysis has traced roughly six decades of profound transformation in Syria. Under late Ottoman rule, the Syrian provinces had already experienced important changes in administrative structures, patterns of centralisation and local identities. After the First World War, however, the dismemberment of *Bilad al-Sham* and the establishment of the French Mandate introduced new borders that exacerbated regional and social fragmentation; the years of Mandate rule were marked by chronic instability, yet the struggle for independence gradually emerged as a common horizon, a necessary precondition for the pursuit of an authentic national identity and the formulation of a "modern" Syrian state. With Evacuation Day, underlying problems of cohesion and governance did not leave with France's last soldier:

---

[120] Lesch, "Syria Under Hafez al-Assad," 59.

[121] Galvani, "Syria and the Baath Party." 9.

[122] Adeed. I. Dawisha,"Syria under Asad, 1970-78: The Centres of Power." *Government and Opposition* 13, no. 3 (1978): 341.

in the years after 1946, fragile institutions, intense ideological competition and the growing politicisation of the army produced a turbulent political life. Up to the first Baʿthist coup in 1963, the rapid alternation of governments and coalitions made it difficult to establish stable rules of the game. Power tended to fall to whichever faction could mobilise sufficient support within the armed forces or secure a group of loyalists, only to be challenged and replaced in turn. Taken together these developments highlight a trajectory in which structural fragility was combined with a progressive concentration of power in the hands of the military elite, that became the decisive arbiter between those who gained power and those who were ousted. In this perspective, Assad's rise might appear simply as one more episode in the long series of Syrian coups, yet his takeover in 1970 broke the cycle and laid the basis for a more durable but highly authoritarian system. His ascent unfolded in broader regional and international context of transformation that build on the collapse of the traditional empires, the two World Wars, the creation of the state of Israel, and the first waves of decolonization that reshaped the global order from the second half of the twentieth century. In addition, some of Syria's own experiments (such as the failed Union with Egypt in the UAR), the military defeat by Israel in 1967, and the death of Nasser in 1970, contributed to the erosion of pan-Arab ideals and of hopes for lasting alliances between Arab states. Cold War rivalries further reinforced this pattern: regional regimes tended to pledge allegiance first to one of the two superpowers, and, only secondarily, to the Arab nation as a whole. The Assad era crystallised many of these legacies, translating them into a new internal order and specific vision of Syria's role in the region, a configuration that the following chapter will analyse in terms of its consolidation, legitimation, and contestation over the subsequent decades.

2 The rule of Hafez al-Assad: creating *Suriyatu al-Assad*

2.1 Understanding the Syrian regime: a new political order

When Hafez al-Assad seized power in November 1970, a new era began in Syria. He would stay in control of the country for three decades, until his death on 10 June 2000. Few at the time of his takeover could have predicted that his coup would be the last after years of chronic instability, and even fewer would have believed that he would maintain such an enduring grip on power[123].

Syria was still recovering from political turmoil, domestic disillusionment and regional humiliation. Even before he could emerge as a leader, Assad had developed a profound sense of shame and frustration stemming from the country's repeated failures to assert itself as a leading Arab power, from the collapse of the dream of a Greater Syria, and from the devastating defeat suffered at the hands of what seemed to be an "invincible" Israel in 1967.

By the time he took command of the Syrian Air Force in 1963, mutual trust and internal cohesion within the Baʿth leadership was gradually eroding: many were discouraged and locked in ideological or personal feuds, and the yearning for order, both within the Party and the country itself, was growing stronger. It was in this atmosphere of disillusionment and exhaustion that Hafez al-Assad reached an essential conclusion: the only salvation for the country and for the restoration of its honour required a firm and dominant leader in charge. Perhaps that man could be him.

The Corrective Movement of November 1970 was presented not merely as another coup, but rather as a correction of the deviations that brought the Baʿthist project to crisis, what was not yet foreseeable was that it would mark the birth of a new political order that fundamentally redefined the Syrian state. Whereas his predecessors had struggled to reconcile the revolutionary ambitions of Baʿthism and Pan Arabist ideals with the demands of governance, Assad prioritised stability and discipline that, combined, would have favoured a durable authoritarian system, based on ideological continuity and national sovereignty. The final outcome was the establishment of a new regime that would become known as *Suriyatu al-Assad*, "Assad's Syria".

---

[123] McHugo, "Inside the Syria of Hafez al-Assad, 1970-2000," 155.

While maintaining the Baʿth Party's formal supremacy, Assad effectively subordinated it the presidency and, through it, to the network of intelligence and security agencies that would soon form the backbone of his rule. He succeeded in institutionalising his authority: the state itself became the embodiment of the ruler's will and loyalty to Assad gradually became synonym with loyalty to the nation. From the moment he won the race to power, all of his policies had a shared aim: tie personal power with bureaucratic and military structures so that its perpetuation and longevity could be ensured. Although Hafez al-Assad's takeover brought order in Syria's chaos, stability came at the cost of personal liberty[124]. Authoritarianism thus acquired a stabilising dimension; it was presented not as the negation of freedom but as a necessary condition for national survival and prosperity.

The following sections will examine the main features of *Suriyatu al-Assad'*s architecture, a state in which the boundaries between leader, party and nation gradually became blurred over time.

2.1.1 Establishing authoritarian rule

The reason why Hafez al-Assad was able to assume direct control of Syria in 1970 was the support of the armed forces behind each of his moves. Nevertheless, to preserve the durability of his corrective revolution, Assad needed more than military strength, he required constitutional legitimacy. While Assad never intended to diminish the absolute power he had attained, from the very beginning, he carefully legitimised his rule through constitutional and democratic imagery, portraying himself as a national-populist leader whose authority and legitimacy were rooted in popular consensus rather than coercion[125].

The first step in that direction was the 1971 referendum, in which Assad was the sole candidate to run for a seven-year term. Immediately afterwards, he appointed the People's Council, a legislative body that formally named Assad president of the republic with a crushing 99 percent

---

[124] Raymond Pierre Hylton, *"Hafez al-Assad Takes Control of Syria,"* EBSCO, 2023, https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/politics-and-government/hafez-al-assad-takes-control-syria. (Last accessed 12 November 2025.)

[125] Moshe Ma'oz, "Asad's Leadership of Syria," *Oriente Moderno* 12 (73), no. 1/6 (1993): 101.

majority[126]. Established in 1971, and composed of 173 members and one chamber, the People's Council was intended to assist the President in his legislative decisions. In practice, however, it resembled a national parliament, stripped of influence and substantial power[127]. One of its first tasks was to draft a definitive constitutional text and, within a few years, the 1973 Constitution was promulgated, finalising the transformation of what had begun as a coup into a formal political system.

At the ideological core of the new Syrian permanent constitution stood Article 8, declaring the Baʿth Party as the leading party in the society and the state:

> Art. 8. *The vanguard party in the society and the state is the Baʿth Arab Socialist Party. It directs a national progressive front which strives to unify the potential of the popular masses and to press them into the service of the goals of the Arab nation*[128].

This clause ensured one-party dominance and effectively removed any space for political competition. Although some non-Baʿthist were tolerated and even represented in political institutions, there was no way they could have threatened the Party's position now[129]. Under Baʿthist guidance, the parliament represented not only the ruling party but also the communists and three small socialist parties, that in 1972 united in the "National Progressive Front"[130], fostering the illusion of political pluralism, while integrating opposition into a tightly controlled framework. Following the logic of apparent inclusion without real participation, also elections were now a ritual act of consent rather than mechanism of representation.

After decades of failed attempts, it would have seemed that the Baʿthist revolution eventually took place, however, what was now the Baʿth Party had completely lost its original features and values. It was now as a movement that existed to support the leader and a vehicle through which authoritarian control was formalised and reproduced[131].

---

[126] Malcolm H. Kerr, "Hafiz Asad and the Changing Patterns of Syrian Politics." *International Journal* 28, no. 4 (1973): 702-703.

[127] Waardenburg, "Hafiz al-Asad," 86.

[128] Peter B. Heller, "The Permanent Syrian Constitution of March 13, 1973." *Middle East Journal* 28, no. 1 (1974): 55.

[129] McHugo, "Inside the Syria of Hafez al-Assad, 1970-2000," 184.

[130] Ma'oz, "Asad's Leadership of Syria," 101.

[131] McHugo, "Inside the Syria of Hafez al-Assad, 1970-2000," 183.

As President of the Republic, Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Secretary-General of the Baʿth Party's Regional Command, Hafez al-Assad concentrated in his own hands all the key levels of institutional authority. Formally, he controlled the legislative power through the People's Council and the executive through the appointment of local administrations; judicial independence remained nominal, as the President oversaw courts through the Ministry of Justice. Below this upper tier, the state bureaucracy, provincial governors, and municipal authorities operated as extensions of presidential authority, executing policies and maintaining loyalty at local levels.

Indeed, Hafez al-Assad had gained quite some experience himself of coups and revolutionary dynamics to leave details by chance, and he knew he would not be repeating the same mistakes of his predecessors: the same armed forces that brought him to power could not be neglected, the army had to be strengthened and expanded, not only in the optics of regional conflicts and Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, but especially for his own survival. Loyalty within the military body was the first of the many pillars elevating him to power.

Another delicate challenge Assad faced while institutionalising his authority was his religious background: in a predominantly Sunni country, where for centuries the ʿAlawis had been marginalised, excluded from the centres of power, and confined to impoverished rural areas, the rise of an ʿAlawite president was, to many, unsettling, especially considering that he was the first non-Sunni ever to occupy this position. Hafez al-Assad was perfectly aware of this vulnerable clause, and, to consolidate his rule among the whole population, he had to transcend sectarian identity and, in order to articulate this narrative, his strategy focused on two parallel tacks: first, he presented himself as a national leader whose legitimacy did not stem from any specific religious affiliation; second, he actively sought religious recognition for ʿAlawites within the broader Islamic framework. Initially, Assad promoted a secular discourse, where state and religion were clearly separated; however, this early ambition was ultimately derailed by political necessity. When the definitive constitution was drafted, Assad was ultimately forced into a key compromise: accepting the requirement that the President of Syria must be a Muslim. This concession was made in order to appease Islamist groups and prevent threats to his authority, demonstrating that the political imperative for survival outweighed the ideological aim of secularism. Strategically, in 1973, al-Assad secured a *fatwa* from the leading Lebanese Shʿi scholar, Musa al-Sadr (1928-1978), declaring the ʿAlawites to be legitimate Shiʿi Muslims and members of Twelver Shiʿism, trying to detach the label "heretic" from his

community[132]. Furthermore, from the very beginning, Hafez al-Assad sought to present himself as a pious Muslim, in order to secure the support of the Sunni ʿ*ulama*: he regularly attended prayers in Sunni mosques, despite his ʿAlawite background, performed the *hajj* in the 1970s and obtained formal recognition from the Sunni *mufti* of Damascus[133]. In his early speeches, he frequently employed Islamic concept, such as *jihad* and *shahada*, to frame the struggle against Israel in religiously resonant terms, thereby reinforcing his claims to power within a predominantly Sunni society.

This might have provided theological cover for Assad's leadership, nonetheless, sectarian dynamics remained embedded in the structure of power, never with the final intent of creating an ʿAlawi nation-state but rather as a direct mechanism of patronage to extend his influence and prolong his survival. The delicate balance between institutional authority, military loyalty, and sectarian cohesion would ultimately determine both the stability and the longevity of Assad's rule.

2.1.2 Cult of personality

Across the Arab world, the end of World War II and the gradual departure of European occupation forces in the new states that had emerged from the collapse of the Ottoman empire, together with the introduction of the Western-imported notion of "modern state", brought a new macro-trend that, over the following decades, consolidated the rise of authoritarian regimes throughout the region[134]. Weak institutions, failure of civilian governments, and regular coups slowly normalised the establishment of authoritarian governance. By the 1960s and 1970s, this trajectory culminated in the full consolidation of autocratic models across much of the Arab world with centralised systems of personal rule.

In Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba (1903-2000) crafted a paternalistic authority grounded in a modernising narrative, spread within the country through state-controlled newspapers, radio broadcasts, and civic education that portrayed him as "the supreme fighter", the father of the

[132] Ma'oz, "Asad's Leadership of Syria," 103.

[133] Waardenburg, "Hafiz al-Asad," 88.

[134] Kevin W. Martin, "Speaking with the 'Voice of Syria': Producing the Arab World's First Personality Cult." *Middle East Journal* 72, no. 4 (2018): 631.

nation and the founder of modern Tunisia[135]. In Libya, Muammar al-Qaddafi (1942-2011) perfected his charisma through revolutionary imagery, by filling public space with slogans from his Green Book, mass rallies and omnipresent portraits that elevated him to the symbolic embodiment of the revolution itself; he even described himself as the "prophet leading his people to salvation"[136]. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein's (1937-2006) cult began even before his presidency: he mobilised media and laid down dense network of propaganda that presented him as the leader that his country, as well as the Arab world, needed; through the use of radio, cinema and monumental statues; Saddam, like Bourguiba, also crafted a paternalistic narrative and, like Qaddafi, he often resorted to metaphors that portrayed him as Iraq's "Prophet" to navigate modern times[137].

Despite the different historical contexts in which these autocrats rose to power, the methods they employed were strikingly similar. In all republican regimes, the systematic use of state-controlled media, visual iconography and symbolic rituals constituted the fundamental repertoire through which authority was produced and reproduced. The proportions and rhetorical styles varied from country to country, but the underlying mechanisms were common: the public space was transformed into a political stage where the leader's image, voice and narrative became all-pervading. Even in monarchical systems – such as Jordan, Morocco or Saudi Arabia – where the logic of dynastic continuity differed from revolutionary republicanism, similar techniques were employed to cultivate loyalty: royal portraits, ceremonial rituals and carefully choreographed media representations reinforced the sacralisation of the sovereign and naturalised the centrality of the ruling family within the national identity.

As far as Syria was concerned, the core foundations of republican authoritarianism and early forms of personality cults developed long before the rise of the al-Assad family. Since independence, the country had been characterised by an extremely fragile political system, military interferences and constant competition for legitimacy. In such environment, Colonel Adib al-Shishakli, who served as the de facto leader of Syria from 1949 to 1954, was the first to realise that control of the state could not rely only on coercive force, but required a symbolic

---

[135] Joseph Sassoon, "Leadership and the Cult of Personality," *Anatomy of Authoritarianism in the Arab Republics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 201. 204.

[136] *Ivi*, 202-203.

[137] *Ivi*, 200. 202. 204.

strategy capable of generating consensus. His experiment represented the first systematic attempt in the Arab world to build a modern cult of personality[138]: he used state radio, party press, official iconography and public rituals as Syria's national hero and saviour. Out of all the previous mentioned elements radio was perhaps the most potent mass medium[139]: not only he was a pioneer of the use of radio propaganda, creating the Syrian Broadcasting Service, but Shishakli also increased state-owned periodicals, such as the magazines *al-Idha'a al-Suriyya* ("Syrian broadcasting") and *Majallat al-Shurta wa al-Amn al-'Amm* ("Police and public security magazine").

Image 2. *Official Portrait of Adib al-Shishakli from Majallat al-Shurta.*[140].

Although his regime was short-lived and preceded the Corrective Movement by nearly three decades, Shishakli offered an embryonic model of personality cult that laid the groundwork for

[138] Martin, "Speaking with the 'Voice of Syria': Producing the Arab World's First Personality Cult." 632.

[139] *Ivi*, 635.

[140] *Ivi*, 646. Source: Majallat al-Shurta no. 7 (July 1953): cover (cropped)

his successors' developments[141]. His legacy provided an initial template that Hafez al-Assad would later expand and systematise on far greater scale, both in size and ambition.

Building on the work of his predecessors, al-Assad elevated the concept of personality cult to an unprecedented level of institutionalisation following his seizure of power in 1970. He knew he would not get nearly enough authority from the armed forces or the Baʿth Party alone, indeed, his grip on power depended on the creation of a symbolic universe in which the leader appeared as the embodiment of national unity, resilience and continuity. To this end, the regime mobilised the full communicative apparatus of the state: radio and television broadcasts were placed under strict control, newspapers were subordinated to the Party's directives, each cultural institution (including schools, youth organizations and military academies) became a channel for disseminating his ideology, image and narrative. Assad's portrait gradually became the décor of the walls of ministries, classrooms, offices and public squares, while statues and billboards made his presence visually inescapable.

Image 3. *Portrait of Hafez al-Assad in Damascus, 1994*[142].

[141] *Ivi*, 652.

[142] Wikipedia, "Hafez al-Assad's cult of personality," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hafez_al-Assad%27s_cult_of_personality. (Last accessed 17 November 2025.)

These images contributed to Assad's political message in which the identity of Syria, the Baʿthist revolution and the figure of the leader were fused into a single symbol.

National holidays did not escape the optic of propaganda, rather they became vehicles for Assad's political agenda, especially after he consolidated his rule in 1973[143]: the regime reconfigured the Syrian commemorative calendar to place Assad at the centre of the country's historical narrative. Whereas earlier Baʿthist commemorations emphasised the party and the revolution, from the 1970s the leader himself was placed at the centre and national holidays were systemically reshaped to construct a narrative in which Hafez al-Assad appeared as the culmination of Syria's modern history. The regime institutionalised parades, official speeches, moment of silence, and public gatherings in order to produce a cyclical reaffirmation of loyalty. The Assad era even rewrote the meaning of Evacuation Day, portraying independence from France not as the culmination of the anti-colonial struggle but as the first step in a longer trajectory that reached its full realisation under Assad[144]. Indeed, the Corrective Movement Day and, later in 1973, the October War anniversary were framed as the true fulfilment of independence: whereas Evacuation Day marked the mere departure of French troops, these dates were portrayed as the moments when Syria achieved its real sovereignty and restored its dignity. The former event signalled the end of internal chaos and the beginning of a durable and firm rule; the latter celebrated the fight for national pride and military superiority in the confrontation with Israel that began almost three decades earlier.

The purpose of this mostly-symbolic apparatus, however, cannot be understood solely as an attempt to generate devotion. As Elisabeth Jean Wood argues in her analysis of Lisa Wedeen's *Ambiguities of Domination*, the cult of Assad functioned primarily as an instrument of "disciplinary symbolic power"[145], a mechanism through which the regime produced compliance by compelling citizens to perform acts of loyalty regardless of their personal beliefs. Participation in rallies, public display of portraits and attendance at national celebrations did not depend on sincere enthusiasm, but on no possibility of real choice. Nonetheless, the power of these rituals derived from the very fact that they were enacted "as if" they were believed.

---

[143] Elie Podeh. "Celebrating Continuity: The Role of State Holidays in Syria (1918-2010)." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 4 (2013): 442.

[144] *Ivi*, 443.

[145] Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Implications of Wedeen's Ambiguities of Domination for the Analysis of Political Violence." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 55, no. 1 (2022): 40.

The gap between public performance and private beliefs generated a form of complicity that normalised the regime's presence in everyday life and blurred the boundaries of propaganda and popular contestation[146]. Yet this evident discrepancy did not imply neglecting the private sphere: on the contrary, the regime tolerated as much personal freedom as this liberty posed no threat to its political order. This fragile balance was ensured through the vigilant surveillance by a ubiquitous security apparatus, whose role in regulating public behaviour and private dissent will be examined in the following section.

2.1.3 Intelligence services and the security apparatus

Behind the façade of constitutional institutions, real power under Hafez al-Assad resided in a dense and ramified security apparatus that penetrated every sphere of political and social life. Although the Syrian state and the 1973 Constitution projected the image of a modern republic with a parliament, a judiciary, and ministries, real control during the Assad era operated according to a dual logic that distinguished two level of power: formal power (*al-sultah al-zahirah*) and hidden power (*al-sultah al-hafiyyah*)[147]. The latter rested not in abstract institutions but in concrete security organs whose authority systematically took precedence over that of the cabinet, parliament and courts. The formal state comprised the government institutions, yet these bodies possessed little autonomous decision-making capacity. The real centre of authority laid instead in an inner core of special military units, intelligence branches, and security agencies whose loyalty to the president was personal rather than institutional, and whose jurisdiction was not constrained by law[148]. Assad relied on these organs to maintain cohesion, discipline, and the unquestioned obedience of subordinates throughout his thirty-year rule. These agencies acted simultaneously as instruments of surveillance, coercion, and repression, guaranteeing that neither formal institutions nor citizens ever challenged the president's supremacy.

Although Hafez al-Assad profoundly reorganised the intelligence outline after 1970, the foundations of Syria's security apparatus preceded his rise: already in the late 1960s, as then Minister of Defence, Assad had strengthened the Military Intelligence Department, creating the

---

[146] *Ivi*, 41.

[147] Mahmud Sadiq, "Hiwar hawlat Suriya." Dar 'Ukaz, London (1993): 71-77.

[148] Waardenburg, "Hafiz al-Asad", 84.

Special Military Forces *(al-Quwwat al-Hassah)* in 1968, as elite units loyal to him. In 1969 he further expanded the Military Intelligence Directorate *(Shuʻbat al-Mukhabarat al-ʻAskariyya)*, laying the groundwork for a loyal coercive structure even before reaching presidency[149]. Once in power, he restructured and multiplied the intelligence organizations, in order to prevent any single branch from accumulating excessive influence. At the apex of this apparatus stood the National Security Bureau, formally embedded in the Baʿth Party's Regional Command, but in practice dependant directly to the president, which coordinated the four main services[150]: Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, General Security and Political Security. This meticulous planning was reinforced by Assad's own political past: having personally witnessed a succession of coups between the 1950s and 1970, he had no intention of leaving any space unmonitored. In the early years of his rule, his strategy was always to secure consensus where possible, but always backed by the use of coercion when needed. The degree of repression during his rule varied over time and it was proportionate to the seriousness of the threats which the regime perceived to its own survival[151].

From 1971, Assad created the Political Security Directorate *(Idarat al-Amn al-Siyasi)*, established the Companies for the Defence of the Revolution and strengthened the newly formed Republican Guard, in order to protect command centres[152]. Rather than a unified intelligence system, Assad engineered a redundant and competitive security architecture, in which each branch monitored the others. This deliberate fragmentation reduced the risk that any single branch could become strong enough to threat the regime itself, but it also produced overlapping jurisdictions and encouraged mutual suspicion, as different routinely spied on one other and competed for presidential favour rather than collaborating and sharing information[153]. The army itself was reorganised into a least four distinct formations placed under different chains of command, in rivalry with one another but all ultimately loyal to the President. It was

---

[149] *Ivi,* 102.

[150] Radwan Ziadeh, "Power and Policy in Syria: Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East." London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2011.

[151] McHugo, "Inside the Syria of Hafez al-Assad, 1970-2000," 185.

[152] Waardenburg, "Hafiz al-Asad", 102.

[153] Wladimir Glasman, *"Les ressources sécuritaires du régime en Syrie."* Institut de recherches et d'études sur le monde arabe et musulman (IREMAM), January 19, 2014. https://iremam.hypotheses.org/3969. (Last accessed 05 December 2025.)

Assad's persistent paranoia of a potential uprising against, together with his determination not to be toppled like his predecessors, that shaped the new design of the Syrian security apparatus. At the heart of this system stood the *mukhabarat*, the network of police and intelligence services that became the most feared branch of power within Syria. Their role extended far beyond conventional security duties: they supervised political actors, monitored the army, infiltrated Baʿth Party structures, surveilled universities, factories, unions, religious institutions, and even local administrations. They maintained a nationwide web of informants, rendering everyday life pervaded by uncertainty, as no one could be sure who might be reporting to which branch. In addition, informants were active at every level of the armed forces and military offices, ensuring that potential dissent within the army was detected and neutralised before it could become a danger for Assad himself[154]. In practice, the *mukhabarat* operated with near-total autonomy: under the 1963 Emergency Law, they were exempt from judicial oversight and could detain individuals indefinitely[155]. Bribery, personal networks, and corruption were widespread, as to obtaining the release of a detained relative often required direct connections within the security agencies; ordinary Syrians feared stepping into the hands of the *mukhabarat*, as they knew that torture or death were real possibilities.

The rising power of intelligence services can be also traced by the gradual marginalisation of the Baʿth Party itself; although article 8 of the 1973 Constitution proclaimed it the "leading party in the state and society", in practice its prerogatives were steadily transferred to the *mukhabarat* and from 1985 to 2000, the Party was not convened to a single congress, a striking indication of its loss of relevance and mainly symbolic role[156]. When the congress was finally held in 2000, its purpose was simply to ratify and legitimise the transfer of leadership from Hafez to Bashar al-Assad[157].

Contrary to the formal bureaucratic image of the state, the intelligence services formed a parallel state, one that guaranteed the functioning of the regime more than any ministry or constitutional body. The omnipresence of the *mukhabarat* ensured that dissent remained fragmented, opposition movements disorganised, and social life permeated by self-censorship and anticipatory obedience. In the end, the intelligence services were the structural backbone

---

[154] Glasman, "Les ressources sécuritaires du régime en Syrie."

[155] McHugo, "Inside the Syria of Hafez al-Assad, 1970-2000," 185.

[156] Glasman, "Les ressources sécuritaires du régime en Syrie."

[157] *Ibidem*.

of Assad's authoritarian rule: they enforced loyalty at the top, instilled fear at the bottom, and sustained the entire system of governance that fortified the Syrian state for decades.

2.1.4 Economic policies and the clientelist state model

If the foundations of the state, the security apparatus, the armed forces, and the wider bureaucracy rested on deeply entrenched systems of loyalty, top-down dependency, and coercion, economic policy was no exception. From the beginning, Hafez al-Assad conceived development and progress not as a technocratic project aimed at maximising national welfare, but as a tool for building and managing networks of loyalists. Accordingly, the regime sought to establish a tight symbiosis between the political elite and the business community, based on the logic of mutual profit and shared interests, often at the expense of the country's long-term economic health.

In terms of political economy, it is possible to broadly divide Hafez al-Assad's rule into two phases: a first period that starts with his seizure of power in 1970 and extends to mid- to late 1980s, characterised by a state-led "socialist" economy; and a second stage, from the late 1980s onwards, marked by a cautious and highly selective economic liberalisation[158]. In the aftermath of the Corrective Movement, Assad did not repudiate the Baʿthist commitment to state-led development. On the contrary, he reaffirmed the central role of the state in planning and directing economic activity; indeed, he inherited and revised the radical Baʿthist project of the 1960s, which had already dismantled much of the old landowning and industrial bourgeoisie through agrarian reforms and nationalisations. At the same time, Assad's approach was markedly more pragmatic than the one of his predecessors and his commitment to Arab socialism was subordinated to the political imperative of regime survival and longevity.

Although Assad softened the most radical aspects of Baʿthist economic ideology, he preserved its core features: the doctrinal commitment to Arab socialism, state-led development and egalitarian redistribution remained pivotal to the regime's legitimation discourse. The state continued to claim a historic mission to protect peasants, workers and lower-middle classes from the predatory practices of the pre-1963 bourgeoisie, and to use its control over land, credit,

[158] Ivan Briscoe, Janssen Floor, and Rosan Smits. "Syria's Political Economy: Background and Development." *Stability and Economic Recovery after Assad: Key Steps for Syria's Post-Conflict Transition*. Clingendael Institute, 2012: 9.

and strategic industries to present itself as a promoter of social justice. In this sense, Baʿth's socialist vocabulary was not abandoned; rather, it was reinterpreted in a more conservative and statist key, as the ideological camouflage of a system increasingly oriented towards consolidation of an authoritarian status quo.

Following Baʿthist footsteps, the public sector was confirmed as the leading segment of Syrian economy, while the private sector was confined to small and medium activities in commerce, construction, and light manufacturing[159]. Within this framework, the state assumed a pervasive role in economic planning and redistribution: through ministries and a dense bureaucratic apparatus, the regime controlled investment decisions, foreign exchange, and credit flows, especially in strategic sectors, such as heavy industry, energy, and infrastructure. The expansion of the public sector was central to this model: state-owned enterprises and public administration came to employ an even larger share of the labour force, while a system of subsidies on basic goods helped to contain the cost of living. Public employment, redistribution of resources, and state-provided services thus formed the backbone of the initial economic phase of Assad's rule. In addition, five-year plans and annual budgets were formally designed to guide development, but in practice they also served to channel resources towards regions and social groups considered politically crucial.

The social basis of this model had a marked sectarian and regional dimension, yet it could not be reduced to it. On the one hand, the Baʿthist takeover and subsequent expansion of the state apparatus opened unprecedented (and sometimes disproportionate) opportunities for members of rural and previously marginalised communities, including ʿAlawites, Druze and other minorities, who were recruited into the officer corps, the security services and the provincial party branches, and benefitted from land redistribution and public sector employment. On the other hand, Assad was extremely aware that no regime in Syria could afford to rely exclusively on minorities: the Sunni Arab majority, and in particular the urban bourgeoisie of Damascus and Aleppo, had to be won over[160]. Economically, this meant gradually rebuilding a relationship with segments of the Sunni business community, who were offered controlled access to trade, construction and import-export activities in exchange for political compliance and participation

---

[159] Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "The Political Economy of Economic Liberalization in Syria," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27, no. 3 (1995): 306.

[160] Briscoe, Floor, and Smits, "Syria's Political Economy: Background and Development," 11.

in informal state-business networks[161]. The result was a hybrid coalition in which rural minorities and lower-middle classes were incorporated through the public sector and welfare, while key Sunni merchants and industrialists were co-opted through selective economic benefits.

The system's outcomes, especially in its first decade and a half, were significant. In rural areas, the consolidation of agrarian reform and the expansion of state credit weakened old patterns of dependence on landlords and money lenders[162], providing small peasants with more secure access to land and resources. At the same time, the regime invested heavily in basic infrastructure: between the early 1960s and the early 1990s, railway mileage multiplied fourfold, paved roads increased fivefold and the rural road network improved markedly; electrification progressed from a tiny fraction of villages, before the construction of the Tabqa dam, to the vast majority of villages by the early 1990s, and access to piped water was extended to most of the population[163]. Improvements in education and health were equally noteworthy: illiteracy, which in the 1960s had affected a majority of Syrians, and especially rural women, declined dramatically, and by the early 1990s most ten-year-old children were able to read; infant mortality rates fell and life expectancy rose, indicating the spread of a basic healthcare system[164].

For a quite short period of time, in the 1970s, Assad's Syria was a highly functional state[165]: reforms, innovation and redistribution contributed to stability and progress, and public-sector jobs guaranteed modest but regular salaries. In this way, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, most Syrians depended directly on the state for their livelihoods. However, the same mechanisms that enabled redistribution also fostered patterns of patronage and clientelism, meaning that access to resources was often channelled through Party and state intermediaries. Over time, the statist "socialist" model turned into a clientelist system, where access to state resources depended above all on personal networks, political loyalty, and, often, on regional or sectarian ties. In this context, the line between public and private became increasingly blurred

[161] *Ibidem*.

[162] McHugo, "Inside the Syria of Hafez al-Assad, 1970-2000," 186.

[163] *Ibidem*.

[164] *Ibidem*.

[165] Muhanna, "Samer Abboud. Syria's Political History From 1946," *The afikra Podcast*.

and a new crony bourgeoisie emerged, closely linked to military and security elites, and to highly profitable sectors[166].

From the mid-1980s, the "social peace" of the previous decade began to erode and mounting economic pressures began to expose the limits of this model. Due to falling oil prices, declining Arab aid, and rising cost of regional conflicts, economic growth slowed, inflation rose, and wages stagnated or fell. At the same time, general unrest, fuelled in particular by Islamist groups was spreading in the country[167]. Confronted with the early stages of crisis in his regime, Hafez al-Assad gradually opened up to a moderate and tightly controlled liberalisation of the economy. 1986 is considered the starting point of Syria's liberalisation period, known as *infitah* (opening)[168]: from the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the regime loosened some of the most rigid procedures of state control, promoted some form of economic pluralism and sought to attract private investors. However, liberalisation was cautious and highly selective, indeed, it largely formalised pre-existing informal ties between state and business, allowing their intra-networks to crystallise around the political and security elite.

During these turbulent years, a newly formed class emerged and came out victorious out of the crisis: *al-tabaqa al-jadida*, a new extremely wealthy "bourgeoisie" composed of well-connected entrepreneurs, was to dominate the most profitable sectors of state and economy[169]. Although the early 1990s witnessed a brief phase of growth, the dominance of clientelism and cronyism, together with the lack of effective oversight, quickly produced widespread corruption and a distorted allocation of resources. At the same time, the close overlap between economic privilege and political power made deep reform almost impossible, since any serious restructuring would have directly threatened the patronage networks on which the regime's survival depended.

---

[166] Briscoe, Floor, and Smits, "Syria's Political Economy: Background and Development," 12.

[167] In particular, Sunni Islamist groups associated to the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. These dynamics are discussed in more details in section 2.2.1.

[168] Briscoe, Floor, and Smits, "Syria's Political Economy: Background and Development," 13.

[169] *Ivi*, 14.

2.2 *Fatrat al-ahdath*: The "period of the events" (1976-1982)

Between 1976 and 1982, Syria entered what many Syrians later referred to as *fatrat al-ahdath* (فترة الأحداث), literally "period of the events". The expression itself is revealing: it condenses years of mounting violence into an almost euphemistic label, suggesting both the imprint of these "events" on everyday memory and the difficulty of naming them directly. In retrospect, the term has come to denote a cycle of escalating confrontation between the regime and a heterogeneous opposition, in which the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist actors played a decisive role. These were the years of Syria's military intervention in Lebanon, of growing socio-economic strain, and of an intensifying spiral of assassinations of ʿAlawite prominent figures, bombings and large-scale repressive operations that culminated in the destruction of Hama in February 1982[170]. Far from representing an abrupt departure from the preceding decade, *fatrat al-ahdath* can be seen as the violent culmination of tensions and contradictions that had been accumulating since the early 1970s.

As the previous section showed, Hafez al-Assad secured his power by blending presidential authority and party dominance, backed by a pervasive security apparatus and a clientelist political economy. Through constitutional legitimisation, Baʿth's institutional primacy and the proliferation of the *mukhabarat*, the regime succeeded in consolidating its control while projecting an image of general stability and legal authority. The period of events thus posed a crucial "stress test" of Assad's authoritarian project: on one level, it revealed the regime's capacity to mobilise substantial coercive resources and to adapt its alliances in the face of insurgency; special units within the armed forces and security services were deployed domestically on an unprecedented scale, and the 1963 Emergency Law was used to justify extensive campaigns of arrests and collective punishment. On another level, however, the period unveiled deep divisions within Syrian society that Assad's state had failed to understand, ending up exacerbating them in some respects. Islamist mobilisation in the late 1970s drew on long-standing ideological opposition to Baʿthist secularism, grievances rooted in uneven development, widespread corruption and a perceived sectarian bias within the security apparatus and the ruling elite.

[170] McHugo, "Inside the Syria of Hafez al-Assad, 1970-2000," 191.

This section analyses *fatrat al-ahdath* as a critical juncture in the history of the Assad regime, focusing on the increasing use of violence by the state. During these years, practices of coercion were normalised, creating enduring consequences and the entrenchment of patterns of impunity and brutal repression that would rewrite Syria's most recent history. The relationship between the ruler and the ruled was reshaped in terms of fear, surveillance and punishment and, in this sense, the period of events helped to establish a repertoire of domination that would serve as an example in the following decades.

2.2.1 The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist opposition

Between the mid-1970s and early 1980s, the most organised challenge to Hafez al-Assad's rule came from Sunni Islamist milieus, above all the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun* (الإخوان المسلمون). The evolution of the *Ikhwan* in Syria has often been overshadowed by its Egyptian counterpart, whose considerable influence on modern Islamist movements has been widely discussed and analysed by scholars in the past decades, nevertheless the trajectory of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood stands as a distinctive case within the broader framework of Sunni Islamist activism[171].

While ideologically inspired by the Egyptian branch and the key figure of Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949), the Syrian *Ikhwan* developed largely independently, shaped by the country's own social structures and political dynamics, which at times aligned with the Egyptian scenario, yet at others differed considerably. In the Syrian context, the roots of the movement lay in a network of *jamʿiyyat*, association or societies, that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s across the main cities, including Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama. These groups, largely led by members of the religious class and small bourgeoisie, sought to promote and defend Islamic morals against Western cultural influences[172]. Between 1945 and 1946, these satellites gradually unified under the name of Muslim Brotherhood, institutionally distinct from its Egyptian mother movement, yet still acknowledging the symbolic primacy of Cairo[173]. Unlike the Egyptian *Ikhwan*, which became a mass extra-parliamentary movement, constantly contested

---

[171] Joshua Teitelbaum, "The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, 1945–1958: Founding, Social Origins, Ideology." *Middle East Journal* 65, no. 2 (2011): 213-14.

[172] *Ivi*, 219-20.

[173] *Ivi*, 216.

and eventually outlawed during Nasser's rule, the Syrian Brotherhood evolved into a parliamentary political actor, that participated in the 1947 and 1949 elections and adapted its message to the socially diverse and confessionally mixed society. Publicly, Syrian leaders stressed the universal and non-sectarian character of Islam, intending to accommodate Christian and Jewish minorities within the country. Islam was presented as a universal philosophy and religion as brotherhood, whereas the real enemy stood in sectarianism[174]. Furthermore, in response to the ideological programs offered by the Baʿth and the Communist Party, the Syrian *Ikhwan* formulated the doctrine of the so-called "Socialism of Islam", where religion constituted an ethical framework capable of addressing inequalities, and Islam represented a "third way" between communist and capitalist rhetoric[175].

During the short-lived union with Egypt, political parties were outlawed[176] and, especially in Egypt the Muslim Brothers were widely persecuted, whereas in Syria the *Ikhwan al-Muslimun* were forced to end their activity, formally. Nevertheless, their underground operations never stopped, and, after Syria secession from the UAR, they could resume the movement's activity. Over time, however, the Syrian Brotherhood's trajectory was increasingly shaped by a combination of internal divisions and mounting social pressures that created fertile ground for radicalisation. Following the death of its early leader Mustafa al-Sibaʿi, the movement fragmented between the Damascene faction advocating for a more peaceful opposition and a northern bloc, whose centres were Aleppo and Hama, with a growing appetite for armed struggle. In addition to this internal drift, there were several socio-economic drivers that catalysed change: during the 1960s, Baʿthist reforms had uneven effects on the Syrian population, disproportionately affecting Sunni merchants and artisanal classes, especially in the northern cities, explaining the less diplomatic approach of Aleppo and Hama. The two urban centres were limitedly industrialised and strongly relied on trade and small-family run manufacturing, consequently the regime's nationalisation policies and land reforms were widely perceived as benefiting rural and ʿAlawite constituencies, at the expense of the long-

[174] *Ivi*, 222.

[175] *Ivi*, 224.

[176] For a detailed discussion of the UAR and the banning of political parties, see above, 1.3.1 The short-lived United Arab Republic.

dominant Sunni urban elites[177]. Parallel to this growing resentment, symbolic controversies – such as anti-Islamic articles published in military journals, the regime's intervention in Lebanon against the PLO-aligned factions in 1976, increasing power abuses from the security apparatus – further fuelled segments of the Sunni population[178].

Another factor influencing the renewed appeal of confrontational politics was the rapid expansion of higher education: in the 1970s, the demographic of politicised young men with growing expectations and limited opportunities became particularly receptive of the more militant currents within the Islamist field[179]. And, as it often does, discontent created a fertile ground for polarisation within society. In addition, when Assad came to power in 1970, exponents from the movement were already marginalised in official political channels or excluded from the one-party system, and the regime gradually became an enemy standing in the way of the realisation of the *Ikhwan*'s goals. In this climate, the preacher Marwan Hadid (1934-1976) became a catalyst for militancy, organising clandestine cells that would later constitute the "Combatant Vanguard of the Muslim Brotherhood", an offshoot advocating for far more revolutionary that the *Ikhwan*'s leadership and determined to push the movement toward armed revolt. Hadid died in custody in 1976 and his martyrdom became a symbolic trigger for "the *jihad* in Syria"[180].

From 1976 onwards a campaign of assassinations of prominent ʿAlawi figures and bomb attacks against government targets unfolded along with an increasingly militant religious rhetoric, influenced by the writings of Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), his emphasis on *takfir* and the denunciation of apostate rulers. In this Islamist ferment, Syria was not isolated, indeed, the late 1970s signified the global rise of political Islam and Islamism, driven by the decline of Arab nationalism, socio-economic crises, the spread of Saudi Wahhabism and Salafism, and the growing influence of "petro-Islam". The turning point was 1979, when the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan transformed Islamism into a transnational political force. At a time when the Sunni-Shiʿi divide was far less pronounced than it would later become, Sunni militants in Syria could look to the 1979 Iranian revolution not as a sectarian

---

[177] Brynjar Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976–82: The History and Legacy of a Failed Revolt." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 4 (2016): 544.

[178] *Ibidem*.

[179] *Ivi*, 545.

[180] *Ibidem.*

project but as the successful overthrow of a "godless" order, a model that encouraged them to imagine a similar transformation at home[181].

Following the example set by Iranian revolutionaries, the Combatant Vanguard militants orchestrated an attack on Aleppo Artillery School in June 1979 which was conceived to force the Brotherhood into open conflict with the regime. The incident pushed the *Ikhwan*'s leadership-in-exile, despite its initial condemnations, to declare a *jihad* against the government later that year. Yet this escalation exposed the profound organisational fragmentation that plagued the Islamist opposition: the Brotherhood's exiled leadership struggled to coordinate with fighters on the ground, disagreements persisted over alliances with secular opposition groups, and significant segments of the Sunni commercial elites in Damascus and Aleppo refused to lend support to a movement they viewed as dangerously destabilising.

By 1980-81, while armed clashes, targeted assassinations, and mass strikes shook the northern cities, the Brotherhood's inability to generate broad-based mobilisation became a critical weakness. Hafez al-Assad's regime exploited these divisions with a combination of repression, strategic co-optation of Sunni notables, and the deployment of massive military force. But, as the confrontation intensified, Aleppo and Hama became the epicentres of an increasingly desperate insurgency, marked by guerrilla operations, urban battles, and mounting sectarian violence.

2.2.2 The Hama massacre (1982)

By early 1982, the chain of events set in motion by the Islamist uprisings had reached a point of no return. Hama, already one of the most restless cities in Syria, became the main theatre of confrontation between the regime and a coalition of Islamist militants and local opponents. It was not the first time that the city had witnessed a remarkable collective act of resistance: indeed, two years earlier, in February 1980, its residents enforced a near-total six-day strike in protest against government brutality, supported not only by Islamists but also lawyers, merchants, Nasserists, Communists and dissidents[182]. Although the regime forcefully reimposed a tightly controlled order, grounded in coercion and repression, over the following

[181] McHugo, "Inside the Syria of Hafez al-Assad, 1970-2000," 191.

[182] Dara Conduit, "The Patterns of Syrian Uprising: Comparing Hama in 1980–1982 and Homs in 2011," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 1 (2017): 75.

months, the episode exposed the depth of popular frustration and the city gained a pivotal role in the growing discontent in the nation.

The renewed uprising of 1982 was part of a broader escalation that had been intensifying across the country, threatening the regime a little more each day, especially after the attempted assassination of Hafez al-Assad – that nearly succeeded – by Islamist militants in June 1980, which appeared to confirm his worst fears about the trajectory of the insurgency. As expected, the consequent repression was brutal: hundreds of Islamist detainees were summarily executed in Tadmor Prison, confirming that violence would be used without any restraint. Nevertheless, further attacks were carried out throughout 1981, until the confrontation reached its climax in Hama, where, after years of preparation, the Combatant Vanguard was finally ready to implement its plan to topple the regime[183].

From the early hours of 2 February 1982, the confrontation escalated rapidly when an army patrol was ambushed while searching the old city, having discovered a clandestine militant hideout. This attack served as a signal to other underground cells: mosque speakers began to call for *jihad*, Islamists seized control of several neighbourhoods, attacked the homes of Baʿthist officials, police checkpoints, and arm deposits in an attempt to turn Hama into a rebel enclave. By dawn, dozens of regime cadres had been killed, rebels were proclaiming the city as a liberated space, temporarily freed from Baʿthist authority and state security control, from which a broader uprising would soon erupt. Nonetheless, the rebellion did not spread and the regime's counter-offensive was pitiless and indiscriminate[184], what unfolded was a prolonged siege of Hama and large-scale military campaigns against the city as a whole. In the days that followed revenge was ruthless: regime forces encircled Hama, cutting off electricity, water, and communications before launching a massive assault on the city.

The scale of the violence was compounded by the almost total absence of independent witnesses: Syrian authorities imposed a strict news blackout from the outset of the operation, banning journalists from even driving along the road to Hama, assuring foreign diplomats that "nothing was out of the ordinary" and presenting the assault as a limited "search campaign" against Muslim Brotherhood units allegedly opposed by the local population[185]. Information about the siege reached Western media only a week later and, even then, in a fragmented form,

---

[183] McHugo, "Inside the Syria of Hafez al-Assad, 1970-2000," 193.

[184] *Ibidem*.

[185] Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976–82: The History and Legacy of a Failed Revolt," 554.

while the regime publicly downplayed events and acted "surprised" at the little international attention the events attracted[186].

Even within Syria, independent domestic media were unable to document what was happening in Hama, and only one foreign journalist managed to witness part of the assault: the American journalist Robert Fisk happened, by chance, to be travelling close enough to Hama to realise that heavy fighting was under way; he abandoned his original itinerary, diverted towards the city, and from the opposite bank of the river Orontes (*Naḥr al-ʿAsi* in Arabic) he saw tanks relentlessly bombarding the old quarters under a curtain of smoke and exhausted, starving civilians being led out, while the regime assured a complete media blackout and later denounced his reports as lies[187].

Estimates of casualties and destruction vary widely and remain difficult to verify. Contemporary journalistic accounts and later human-rights reports suggest a range between 10,000 and 25,000 people killed during the three-week assault, the vast majority at the hands of government forces[188].

More recent documentation by the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), based on individual testimonies and collected records, confirms the deaths of at least 7,984 identified civilians and an estimated number of 3,762 cases of enforced disappearance, while estimating that in reality between 30,000 and 40,000 civilians were killed and around 17,000 people went missing and remain unaccounted for[189]. The material devastation was also immense: several neighbourhoods were partially destroyed; dozens of mosques and a number of churches were partially or completely levelled.

---

[186] *Ibidem*.

[187] McHugo, "Inside the Syria of Hafez al-Assad, 1970-2000," 193-194.

[188] Yavuz Güçtürk, "War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity in Syria." *Insight Turkey* 17, no. 1 (2015): 28.

[189] Syrian Network for Human Rights, "The 40th Anniversary of the 1982 Hama Massacre Coincides with Rifaat al Assad's Return to Bashar al Assad," The Syrian Network for Human Rights, (February 28, 2022): 3-4. https://snhr.org/blog/2022/02/28/57397/. (Last accessed 26 November 2025.)

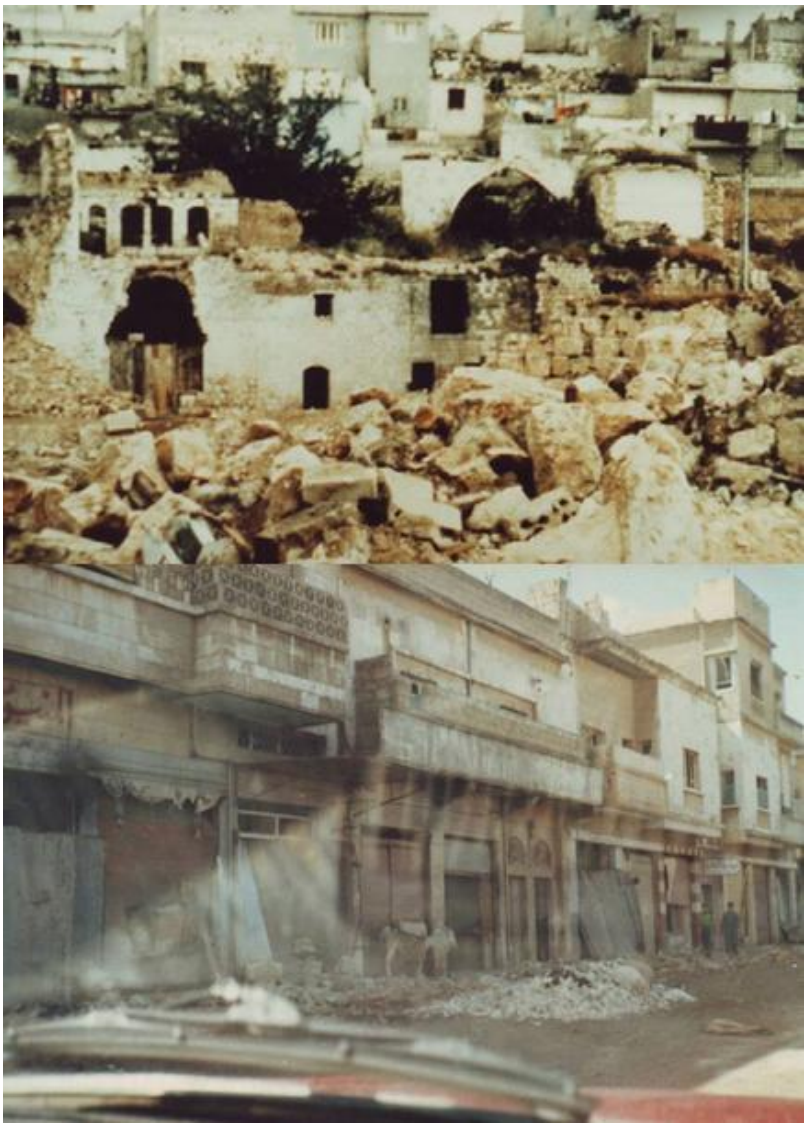


Image 4. *Photos showing the destruction of Hama*[190].

Hama was under siege with a strict curfew for the whole month of February and, even when the last pockets of resistance were crushed, mass arrests and summary executions of suspected rebels continued both in the city and detention centres. Hafez al-Assad's brother, Rifʿat (b. 1937), and his Defence Companies are widely regarded as having played a central operational role in the assault, a circumstance that further crowned his prominence in the security apparatus, while feeding his personal ambitions; indeed, in 1983-84, after Hafez al-Assad suffered a serious health crisis, Rifʿat launched a failed coup attempt, provoking an intra-regime crisis that ultimately ended with his exile.

[190] *Ivi*, 10-11.

Although more than four decades have passed, no independent investigation or prosecution has been carried out, instead, many perpetrators of the 1982 Hama massacre were rewarded and promoted, entrenching within the regime a culture of impunity that later shaped its strategies during the 2011 uprisings[191].

Image 5. *One of the phrases that regime troops wrote on the walls of the city*[192].

It is a Baʿthist slogan that propagandistically echoes the *shahada*, literally from Arabic:

لا إله إلا الوطن ولا رسول إلا البعث.

"la ilaha illa al-watan wa la rasula illa al-Baʿth", which translates to: "There is no God but homeland and no messenger but the Baʿth (Party).[193]"

[191] Güçtürk, "War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity in Syria." 28.

[192] Syrian Network for Human Rights, "The 40th Anniversary of the 1982 Hama Massacre Coincides with Rifaat al Assad's Return to Bashar al Assad," 13.

[193] This phrase deliberately mimics the Islamic *shahada*, the central Muslim profession of faith and one of the five pillars of Islam, replacing God with the homeland and Prophet with the Baʿth Party. It was perceived as a blatant act of blasphemy and exemplifies the regime's attempt to sacralise both the nation and the ruling party.

2.3 Syria's Foreign policy (1970-2000)

Hafez al-Assad reached power in a moment of profound turbulence in both the regional and international order, as the post-Second World War system was evolving into a new configuration. The 1970s were marked by the consolidation of the Arab-Israeli balance of power that resulted from the 1967 war, culminating in the 1973 October War – the last major inter-state confrontation, which briefly produced a more unified, though not fully cohesive, Arab front before the conflict gradually shifted into a predominantly Palestinian-Israeli struggle. While Arab states continued to proclaim their support for the Palestinian cause, none would engage again with the level of direct military involvement seen in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973. This decade was also defined by the first oil shock and the emergence of the use of oil as a tool of political leverage in international diplomacy, as well as the deepening of Cold War alignments in the Middle East. In the 1980s this landscape was further reshaped by the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, the Lebanese Civil War, the Iranian Revolution, and the Iran-Iraq War, all unfolding as broader Cold War tensions sharpened again, and allowed Syria to use its position as a key Soviet ally to increase its strategic influence in the region. By contrast, the 1990s opened with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US-led coalition in the 1990-91 Gulf War and the complete loss of credibility of the pan-Arab rhetoric, together with the launch of the Arab-Israeli peace process in Madrid and Oslo, ushering in a new, unipolar context in which Syria had to adjust its traditional foreign policy strategies and alliances.

Within this fluctuating scenario, Hafez al-Assad constantly balanced ideological commitments with pragmatic calculations, seeking to preserve Syria's claim to a central role in Middle Eastern politics, while always subordinating this ambition to his absolute priority of regime survival.

2.3.1 The last phase of the Arab-Israeli conflict: the 1973 war, the Golan Heights, and the Camp David Accords

The Syria that Hafez al-Assad inherited in 1970 was profoundly shaken by the 1967 defeat and the loss of the Golan Heights, as both events had exposed the limits of domestic policies and the vulnerability of the country's borders. From the outset, Assad's strategy was to reverse the loss of Syrian territories and redefine the balance of power with Israel. The Golan thus acquired

a distinct centrality in Syrian foreign policy, becoming the main prism through which, the regime viewed the Israeli threat and the benchmark against which it measured the success or failure of its diplomatic and military actions.

On the Israeli side, the post-1967 phase was defined by a "status quo strategy"[194]: bolstered by military superiority and American support, under the leadership of then Prime Minister Golda Meir (1898-1978), Israel prioritised maintaining control over occupied territories, including the Golan, rather than exploring negotiable solutions. This was the case even when Egypt and Jordan showed willingness to negotiate on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 242 (1967)[195], which articulated the formula of "land for peace" by calling, on the one hand, for the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict and, on the other, for the termination of the state of belligerency, the recognition of every state's sovereignty and right to live in peace within secure and recognised borders, and a just settlement of the refugee problem[196]. Later, Resolution 338 (1973)[197] would reaffirm this framework in the aftermath of the October War, coupling an immediate ceasefire demand with the call for the "implementation of Resolution 242 in all of its parts" and for the opening of negotiations aimed at achieving a just and durable peace[198].

Within this context, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, at least three Israeli schools of thought emerged regarding the future of the Golan Heights and relations with Syria[199]: a first, more centrist but ambivalent approach accepted in principle the applicability of Resolution 242 to the Syrian front as well, but linked the extent and pace of any withdrawal to the commitment to peace that Damascus was willing to offer[200]. A second, more confrontational current insisted on a direct nexus between security and territory, perceiving the return of the Golan as incompatible with Israel's own survival. Unsurprisingly, some exponents of this view denied

---

[194] Moshe Ma'oz, "From Conflict to Peace? Israel's Relations with Syria and the Palestinians." *Middle East Journal* 53, no. 3 (1999): 399–401.

[195] United Nations Security Council, Resolution 242 (1967) [on a peaceful and accepted settlement of the Middle East situation]. S/RES/242(1967).

[196] Ma'oz, "From Conflict to Peace?" 399.

[197] United Nations Security Council, Resolution 338 (1973) [on a cease-fire in the Middle East]. S/RES/338(1973).

[198] Ma'oz, "From Conflict to Peace?". 401-402.

[199] Muslih, "The Golan: Israel, Syria, and Strategic Calculations," 622-625.

[200] *Ivi*, 622.

that the Golan fell within the scope of Resolution 242[201]. A third, minority but influential, school of thought within parts of the Israel's Labour Party's establishment argued that complete or almost total withdrawal was feasible if accompanied by overall peace, robust demilitarisation measures and international verification mechanisms[202].

From the Syrian perspective, the loss of the Golan was experienced as an existential wound. The presence of the Israeli army on the plateau, less than an hour's drive from Damascus, was perceived as both an immediate security threat and a permanent reminder of the humiliation of 1967. Indeed, Assad's doctrine towards Israel and the Golan can be encapsulated in two formulas: "land before peace" and "total peace for total withdrawal"[203]. The first expressed Damascus's position that any detailed discussion of the content and modalities of peace had to be preceded by an Israeli commitment to withdraw to the 4 June 1967 line; whereas, the second signalled Syria's declared willingness, in return for full evacuation of the Golan, not merely to end the formal state of war but to establish comprehensive peace. This stance was affected by two constraints: structurally, Syria faced a profound asymmetry in military power and international backing compared to Israel (a gap that could not be filled even by massive Soviet assistance); politically, the regime needed to preserve its nationalist credentials both domestically and in the wider Arab arena, therefore it could not appear overly conciliatory on what was widely regarded as the most symbolically sensitive confrontation stance with Israel.

The October 1973 war was a decisive test of this posture: coordinating with Egypt, that deployed its forced to the Sinai Peninsula, Syria launched a surprise attack on the Golan front on October 6, aiming, according to later testimonies, not at the invasion of Israel, but at the reconquest of their territories lost in 1967[204]. Conscious of Israel's latest development of nuclear weapons and the catastrophic risks of a total war, Assad conceived the conflict as a limited offensive designed to break the diplomatic deadlock and improve Syria's bargaining position rather than attempting to redraw the map of the Middle East[205]. Although Syrian troops initially managed to overrun parts of the Golan Heights, they were eventually pushed back, and the Israeli Defence Forces not only re-established their position on the plateau but further advanced

---

[201] *Ivi*, 623-624.

[202] *Ivi*, 624-625.

[203] *Ivi*, 629.

[204] Slater, "Lost Opportunities for Peace in the Arab-Israeli Conflict," 93-94.

[205] *Ivi*, 93.

into Syrian territory, before a ceasefire came into effect with UN Council Resolution 338[206]. For Assad, the result of this war was ambivalent: Syria had technically failed to recover the Golan and had suffered new losses, yet its performance, together with Egypt's, helped to dismantle (at least in part) the myth of Israel's invincibility. From this moment onward, Damascus formally embraced the 242/338 framework and increasingly shifted from a strategy centred on building strategic parity with Israel, to one that relied primarily on diplomacy.

As far as Israel was concerned, a crucial turning point was marked by the Golan Heights Law, adopted under Begin's (1913-1992) government in 1981: without formally using the word "annexation", the law extended Israeli jurisdiction and administration to the Golan Heights, de facto integrating the plateau into its territory and consolidation its control on what was now believed an indispensable security buffer zone. Internationally, the move was swiftly condemned: the UN Security Council Resolution 497 (1981) declared the new law "null and void and without international legal effect"[207]. While the Golan Heights Law had no real effect on the legal status on the Syrian occupied territory, it further entrenched Israeli public attachment to the Golan.

Despite the palpable hostilities and lack of trust in Israel's position, Syria's gradual turn to diplomacy unfolded within a broader Arab search for political settlement in the region. This diplomatic track, however, developed in a strategic environment profoundly reshaped by the Camp David Accords (1978) and the subsequent Egypt-Israel peace treaty (1979). Indeed, by signing a bilateral agreement that focused on the return of Sinai and largely overlooked both the Palestinian and Syrian dimensions, Egypt broke the newly established Arab commitment to cohesive diplomacy on this matter. Following a parallel path to the common Arab struggle, Camp David inaugurated a new order, characterised by bilateral, U.S.-mediated diplomacy where each Arab party dealt on its own, rather than through a multilateral UN-centred framework[208]. With the largest Arab military power removed from the confrontation with Israel, the unified Arab front was fractured and weak. Nevertheless, at the Fez Summit of 1982, the Arab League sought to reassert a collective approach, drafting an eight-point plan, with its

[206] *Ivi*, 94-95.

[207] Muslih, "The Golan: Israel, Syria, and Strategic Calculations," 624.

[208] Daniela Huber, "Forty Years of Camp David, Forty Years Without Peace." *Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)*, (2018): 3-5.

deliberations for the first pan-Arab peace plan for the Middle East[209]: they offered Israel recognition and normal relations in return for complete withdrawal from all occupied territories, the dismantling of settlements and the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital[210].

The end of the Cold War, the collapse of the USSR, and the Gulf War of 1991 opened a new phase, in which Washington, at the peak of its hegemony, sought to consolidate regional order by launching new peace processes. In October 1991, the Madrid Peace Conference brought together Israel and its Arab neighbours in a multilateral setting, paving the way to the Oslo Accords. The participation in Madrid, for Assad, signalled the definite abandonment of any meaningful military operation and that the recovery of the Golan had to be achieved through negotiations, most probably brokered by the U.S. Although the Oslo Accords (1993-95) were mainly a Palestinian-Israeli process, it had important implication for Syria: on the one hand, the willingness of Rabin's (1922-1995) government to enter peace talks with the PLO was suggesting that Israel could be soon ready to find a compromise with Damascus as well; on the other hand, there was a growing concern that a distinct Israeli-Palestinian deal could marginalise and weaken Syria and the Golan issue[211].

In the early 1990s, the Syrian-Israeli track made unprecedented progress: Rabin agreed to enter negotiations with Syria, and the two states engaged on deep negotiations with the final aim of drafting an agreement and finalising their diplomatic normalisation process[212]. Yet domestic policies intervened, and after Rabin's assassination in 1995, this new bilateral track gradually slowed, eventually freezing completely under Benjamin Netanyahu's government. The years preceding Hafez al-Assad's death, brought some new but weak attempts, and after three decades of war, diplomacy, and "near misses", in 2000, the Golan question remained unsolved.

---

[209] "THE FEZ SUMMIT." *Strategic Studies* 6, no. 1 (1982): 13.

[210] Huber, "Forty Years of Camp David, Forty Years Without Peace." 5-6.

[211] Ma'oz, "From Conflict to Peace?" 413-16.

[212] Slater, "Lost Opportunities for Peace in the Arab-Israeli Conflict," 95.

2.3.2 The Lebanese Civil War, Syria's support of Hezbollah, and the Syrian occupation of Lebanon

In Syrian foreign policy, Lebanon occupied a singular position at the blurred boundary between external and domestic politics; this frontier was shaped by historical and ideological factors, that long preceded the Assad era [213]. Unlike relations with other Arab states, Damascus treated Lebanese politics as both foreign and domestic affairs, building on the historical imagery of "Grater Syria", it claimed that these were "distinctive relations", *alaqat mumayyaza*, to justify its special supervisory and interfering role over its smaller neighbour[214]. This exceptional framing was rooted in the legacy of the French Mandate, during which modern day Lebanon was separated from the area of "Greater Syria", further compromising what Syrian nationalists regarded as the natural Syrian homeland[215]. Despite the complicity forged through years of unified opposition to the French Mandate, after Lebanese independence in 1943. the idea of a possible reunification gradually gave way to the more pragmatic notion of preserving a special relationship between the two countries. Thus, Syrian interference had been quite strong in Lebanese domestic affairs for almost three decades before reaching a clear involvement after the start of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975[216].

Beyond these more ideological and nationalist claims, Syria's approach to Lebanon was increasingly shaped by security calculations linked to two factors: the loss of the Golan Heights in 1967 and the Palestinian question. The former led Damascus to fear that Israel was innately expansionist and might seek additional land to secure what it considered its new borders, thereby pushing its military presence deeper into southern Lebanon and even closer to Syrian territory[217]. The latter factor, the Palestinian question, related to both the growing militarisation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and the progressively consolidated position of the PLO

---

[213] On the historical background of Greater Syria and the ideology of the SSNP, see section 1.1.1 Greater Syria: Antoun Saʿadeh and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party.

[214]Bassel Salloukh, "Syria and Lebanon: A Brotherhood Transformed," *Middle East Report*, no. 236 (2005): 14.

[215]Benedetta Berti, "The Usual Suspect: Syrian Involvement in Lebanon." *The Ongoing Battle for Beirut: Old Dynamics and New Trends*. Institute for National Security Studies, (2011):16.

[216] *Ibidem*.

[217] Adeed I. Dawisha, "Syria in Lebanon. Assad's Vietnam?" *Foreign Policy*, no. 33 (1978): 139.

leadership there, which turned the country into the main political and military centre of the Palestinian resistance movement[218]. Indeed, in this context of territorial loss, perceived Israeli expansionism, and concerns over unrestrained Palestinian activism, the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975 was not viewed by Damascus ad a merely neighbouring state's internal conflict, but rather as an immediate threat to Syrian security.

The spark that ignited the Lebanese Civil War appeared to be the culmination of long-standing sectarian and socio-political tensions within the country[219]. The alliance that emerged in the 1970s between Palestinian refugees under the leadership of the PLO and Lebanese Muslim groups, who felt underrepresented by the Maronite-dominated order, triggered a Christian counterreaction and rapidly led to the proliferation of sectarian militias, which soon turned this turmoil into a full-scale civil war[220]. As massacres were perpetrated by both sides, state authority progressively collapsed and victims multiplied, prospects of a PLO's victory and Lebanon's de facto partition along confessional lines seemed concrete[221]. From Damascus perspective, this trajectory threatened to produce two equally unacceptable outcomes: on the one hand, a radical PLO-led order could drag Syria and its Arab neighbours into a premature

[218] Berti, "The Usual Suspect: Syrian Involvement in Lebanon." 18.

[219] The early phase of the Lebanese Civil War is often described as a confrontation between two broad camps: the Lebanese Front (an umbrella of mainly Maronite Christian right-wing parties and militias, with the Kataib/Phalangists as a key component) and the Lebanese National Movement (a coalition of leftist and pan-Arab parties that aligned politically, and at times militarily with armed Palestinian factions, especially the PLO). Alongside these blocs, Shiʿi actors (most notably Amal, and later Hezbollah) emerged as increasingly autonomous poles, while the conflict was progressively influenced by Israeli military actions and Syrian intervention. Although underlying grievances had been accumulating for years, a widely cited trigger of the war is the Ain al-Rummaneh incident (13 April 1975): following shootings near a church in the area, a Phalangist gunmen attacked a bus carrying Palestinians, killing several passengers. In the following weeks, violence spread through street fighting, sniping, kidnappings, and the multiplication of checkpoints, as state institutions proved unable to contain escalation. A clear example of this dynamic was the "Black Saturday" (6 December 1975), when Phalangist forces set up checkpoints in Beirut and executed people on the basis of sectarian affiliation.

[220] Berti, "The Usual Suspect: Syrian Involvement in Lebanon." 18-19.

[221] *Ivi*, 18.

and costly confrontation with Israel; on the other hand, a Christian defeat would have invited Israel to directly intervene and internationalise the conflict[222].

Under these circumstances, Syria decided to intervene militarily in 1976; in a speech delivered on 20 June, President Hafez al-Assad explored the rationale behind intervention and, among the justifications, he invoked that "through history, Syria and Lebanon have been one country and one people", thereby reaffirming the "Greater Syria" lens through which Damascus traditionally viewed Lebanon[223]. At the peak of sectarian hostilities, Syria stepped in the conflict, positioning itself as an arbiter and protector of the Lebanese battlefield, whose role was to prevent the collapse or partition of the Lebanese state. Nonetheless, over the following years, Syrian involvement was marked by shifting alliances, strategic assassinations, political and diplomatic pressure, and an extensive reliance on local proxies, whose treatment varied according to Damascus's assessment of their ties to Israel and degree of threat they posed to the Syrian regime[224]. Israel's intervention radically reshaped this already intricate scenario, while renewed Syrian-Iranian coordination on the Lebanese battlefield paved the way for the emergence of a new actor: Hezbollah. In 1982, in the months following the Israeli invasion aimed at expelling Palestinians militias, the Assad regime authorised several members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to move from Syria into Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, where they established training facilities for groups of young Shiʿi militants who would eventually converge to form Hezbollah[225]. Over the following years, Hezbollah gradually consolidated itself as both an armed movement and political actor: early cells, trained and financed by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, gained prominence by attacking Western and Israeli targets, but only a few years later, in 1985, Hezbollah's Open Letter provided the party with a clearer organisational structure and ideological programme[226]. Yet, Hezbollah's growing activism during the second half of the 1980s also generated tensions with Damascus, as rivalry grew between the Iran-backed militia and the Amal Movement, Syria's Shiʿi ally in Lebanon that had emerged in the 1970s under Imam Musa al-Sadr. This

---

[222] Salloukh, "Syria and Lebanon: A Brotherhood Transformed," 15-16.

[223] Berti, "The Usual Suspect: Syrian Involvement in Lebanon." 16.

[224] *Ivi*, 20.

[225] Mohanad Hage Ali, "Hezbollah and Syria From 1982 to 2011." *Power Points Defining the Syria-Hezbollah Relationship*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019: 4.

[226] *Ibidem*.

convergence translated into escalating armed clashes between Amal and Hezbollah, with the Syrian army occasionally intervening on the former's side. In May 1986, fighting left several Hezbollah members and two Syrian soldiers dead; when Hezbollah responded by kidnapping two Syrian officers, Damascus reacted by arresting party cadres, and, in February 1987, Syrian troops killed a number of the party's militants at its Fathallah "headquarters" in West Beirut, an episode that served as a warning not to cross Syrian red lines[227]. The clashes between the two Shiʿi groups continued until eventually Syria and Iran found an agreement in November 1990, by which time the broader framework of post-war Lebanon had already been set[228]. The Taif Accord of 1989 formally ended the Civil War and rebalanced Lebanon's confessional system to grant equal ratio of Christian and Muslim representatives in the Parliament, yet this agreement was also relevant in terms of foreign affairs: it recognised a "special relationship" between Lebanon and Syria, pointed out Israel's responsibility to withdraw from Lebanese territory, and it entrusted Syrian troops to assist Lebanon in restoring its authority and stability, de facto granting Syria a legal basis to endure its military presence[229].

Within this post-war order, Hezbollah shifted its focus (in line with Damascus's preferences) on fighting Israel's military occupation of southern Lebanon, accepting Syria's dominant role in the country. Indeed, the Lebanese Civil War, Syria's evolving support for Hezbollah and stronger ties with Iran, together with the post-Taif Accord guardianship over its smaller neighbour, turned Lebanon into a crucial area of interest and security buffer for Damascus, laying the foundations for the patterns of control and occupation that would characterise Syria's role in Lebanon during the end of Hafez al-Assad's rule and beyond.

2.3.3 Syria's relations with Iraq: the Iran-Iraq war and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait

Despite sharing striking structural similarities, in the second half of the 20th century, the bilateral relations between Syria and Iraq became one of the most antagonistic in the Arab world. Both states were ruled by Baʿthist regimes which, after the 1960s, evolved into rival

[227] *Ivi*, 5.

[228] *Ibidem*.

[229] Berti, "The Usual Suspect: Syrian Involvement in Lebanon." 21-22.

regional commands, each claiming to embody the true Baʿthist ideology and to speak for the Arab nation as a whole. Furthermore, in each case, power rested in the hands of a minority elite: in Syria, as seen above, the ʿAlawite community; in Iraq, a Sunni Arab minority was dominating a country of Shiʿi Arab (55%) majority[230]. At the same time, both systems suffered from fragile internal cohesion and often recurred to pan-Arab rhetoric to legitimise their actions.

In his 1992 article "Syria and Iraq - The Geopathology of a Relationship", Alasdair Drysdale explores the dynamic behind the two countries' competition and describes their hostile position as a "geopathology": two neighbouring states carved out by colonial powers from a larger Arab space, both convinced that their borders were artificial and mutilated, both cultivating ambitious nationalist projects of "Greater Syria" and "Greater Iraq", yet locked in a pattern of intense rivalry rather than unity[231]. While Syria's ideological claims have been already discussed in the previous pages, Iraq's irredentist project was centred on Kuwait and the Iranian province of Khuzistan. Thus, pan-Arab commitments on both sides ended up fuelling the competition between Damascus and Baghdad, instead of fostering a unified front.

Map 4. *Syria and Iraq*[232].

[230] Alasdair Drysdale, "Syria and Iraq - The Geopathology of a Relationship." *GeoJournal* 28, no. 3 (1992): 349.

[231] *Ivi*, 347-350.

[232] *Ivi*, 348. [map]

Beyond ideology and competing projects, a series of very concrete disputes over oil and water deepened Syrian-Iraqi antagonism in the 1970s: a first major point of contention concerned the Kirkuk pipelines to Baniyas and Tripoli, which carried most of Iraq's northern crude oil across Syrian territory; in 1972-73, Syria attempted to sharply increase transit fees, forcing Baghdad to develop alternative routes, including a new pipeline through Turkey, consequently, suspending all Iraqi oil flows via Syria in 1976 and depriving the Assad's regime of substantial revenues[233]. Water added a second layer of tension, as Baghdad accused Damascus of deliberately restricting the Euphrates's flow and endangering Iraqi agriculture, which heavily relied on its irrigation system[234]. Nevertheless, despite mediation attempts on the issue, a water-sharing accord was never signed, leaving lingering suspects among Syria and Iraq.

On the eve of the 1980s, therefore, the two Baʿthist neighbours were already divided, not only by ideological claims, but also by unresolved conflicts over pipelines and water resources[235]. This entrenched antagonism made it easier for Iran to capitalise on their rivalry and draw Syria into a lasting strategic alignment against Iraq. In the decades before the Islamic Revolution, Iran had been a very distant partner for Damascus, as the Pahlavi monarchy was a pillar of the pro-Western order in the Gulf, and a close ally of the United States and Israel in the region. However, the 1979 Revolution completely altered this picture: the fall of the Shah simultaneously weakened two of his main adversaries, Israel and the United States, and created an unexpected partnership for Assad[236]. Despite the obvious ideological incongruence between a secular Baʿthist regime and a theocratic Shiʿi system, Tehran offered a valuable ally both to strengthen the resistance against Zionism and to rebalance regional power, at Iraq's expense[237]. The Iran-Iraq war that erupted in 1980 locked Baghdad and Tehran into a protracted and highly destructive conflict. In the light of the Syrian-Iraqi competition, when the latter attacked Iran, Damascus quickly condemned the attack as "the wrong war against the wrong enemy at the wrong time", particularly alluding at how the same resources could have contributed to the fight against Israeli expansion[238]. Notably, Syria was the only Arab country to align itself with

---

[233] *Ivi*, 351.

[234] *Ivi*, 352.

[235] *Ivi*, 351-352.

[236] W. Andrew Terrill, "Iran's Strategy for Saving Asad." *Middle East Journal* 69, no. 2 (2015): 222.

[237] Drysdale, "Syria and Iraq - The Geopathology of a Relationship." 352-53.

[238] *Ivi*, 353.

Tehran: coherently with Assad's view of Israel as the primary threat and his interest of weakening Saddam's Iraq, Syria consolidated its strategic alliance with Iran, closing in 1982 the Iraqi pipeline across its territory and breaking diplomatic relation with its neighbour[239].
Merely a decade later, the 1990-91 Gulf War found Syria opposing Iraq again, but this time as part of the U.S.-led coalition: the end of the Cold War, the subsequent collapse of communist regimes and the gradual disengagement of the Soviet Union in international affairs, prompted Assad to reassess Syria's pro-Iranian posture by improving relations with key Arab partners. Moreover, when Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, this ongoing realignment intersected with Syria's deep-rooted hostility towards Saddam. In this context, joining the U.S. coalition allowed Assad to simultaneously confront his Baʿthist rival, regain centrality in the Arab system, and demonstrate Syria's useful support, in a moment when Western backing seemed indispensable[240].
In this perspective, Syria's participation in the coalition against Iraq, coming after a decade in which Damascus had already broken its pan-Arab narrative by siding with non-Arab Iran, highlights how concerns over state security and regime survival, for both Hafez al-Assad and Saddam Hussein, outweighed the unifying potential of Baʿthism and pan-Arabism, once again proving that the pan-Arab momentum had effectively run its course[241].

2.3.4 A Soviet ally in the Levant: ties with the USSR

While the previous sections have examined Syria's position in the Middle East and its relations with neighbouring Arab states, it is equally important to note that the years that followed the country's independence unfolded within the broader framework of the Cold War, in which every state was drawn, willingly or not, into the global competition for hegemony between the United States and the Soviet Union. In Syria's case, a cautious approach to the USSR began soon after independence, taking the form of diplomatic backing, cultural and economic

[239] *Ibidem*.

[240] *Ivi*, 354-55.

[241] Another clear indication of the crisis of pan-Arabism was the treatment of Palestinians refugees and residents in Kuwait after the 1990-91 Gulf War: in the wake of PLO's support for Saddam Hussein, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were expelled or stripped their residency rights, revealing how quickly appeals to Arab solidarity could be sacrificed to state interests.

agreements, yet in limited form. The real turning point, however, came in the mid-1950s: the crisis surrounding the pro-Western Baghdad Pact, combined with Soviet arms deliveries, growing trade partnerships, and a consistent aid agreement for the Euphrates Dam and other development projects, transformed the relationship with the Soviet Union into a central pillar of Syria's external orientation[242].

In the 1960s, this alignment was affected by Syria's turbulent domestic politics: following the Baʿth 1963 coup, relations with Moscow were initially marked by suspicion, as the Soviets viewed ʿAflaq's doctrine of "Arab Socialism" as an ambiguous alternative to orthodox communism[243]. Nonetheless, the Party's Sixth National Congress of October 1963 adopted a more radical socialist programme, centred on extensive nationalisations and embracing Marxist and Leninist concepts, resulting in a gradual reassessment with Moscow, and a more favourable portrayal of the Syrian regime in the Soviet press; indeed, from 1965 onwards, the expansion of state control over the economy further aligned Syria's trajectory with the Soviet model [244]. The 1966 coup which brought the more radical wing of the Baʿth Party initially confused Moscow; yet, the new leadership's deepening of socialist reforms and anti-Western stance soon reassured the USSR[245]. For the isolated Baʿth regime, lacking broad Sunni and middle-class support, closer alignment with Moscow promised military supplies, financial aids, international diplomatic recognition and, via the Soviet channel, a route to the wider "progressive" Arab front. For the Soviet Union, backing Damascus was equally convenient: it allowed to maintain a key foothold in the Levant, counter the influence of more conservative, U.S.-backed Arab states (such as Saudi Arabia), and helped Moscow to present itself as the main sponsor of Arab radicalism[246]. In this sense, the post-1966 reproachment served the interests of both sides.

With Hafez al-Assad's seizure of power, Soviet-Syrian relations entered a more pragmatic and institutionalised phase: although the new leader viewed the USSR with suspicion in his early years in the Baʿth Party, Assad sought to stabilise the country after years of factional turmoil and to rebuild the army following the 1967 defeat, making the USSR an indispensable external

---

[242] Rami Ginat, "The Soviet Union and the Syrian Ba'th Regime: From Hesitation to Rapprochement." *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 2 (2000): 156.

[243] *Ivi*, 157.

[244] *Ibidem*.

[245] *Ivi*, 159.

[246] *Ivi*, 163.

partner[247]. Indeed, within ten weeks of his coup, he travelled to Moscow to prove his counterpart that Syria would remain a loyal ally of the socialist camp[248]. In 1971, Assad granted the Soviet Navy access to the ports of Latakia and Tartous, from which the regime received in return a massive flow of weapons and training programmes. Moreover, he allowed the Syrian Communist Party to resurface, though under tight regime's control, thus signalling political goodwill towards Moscow, while maintaining domestic control[249].

Following the October 1973 War, the USSR backed Syria and replenished its forces with vast supplies of tanks and aircraft. Yet, Assad simultaneously explored limited openings towards the United States welcoming President Nixon (1913-1994) in Damascus in 1974, fuelling Soviet mistrust in the mid-1970s[250]. However, suspicion was mutual and it deepened after the 1976 Syrian intervention in Lebanon: not only did Assad fail to inform Moscow of his plan, but used the operation to weaken the PLO and Lebanese militias, moves that the Soviets strongly disliked even as they kept proclaiming Soviet-Syrian solidarity[251]. The incident provoked a temporary freeze in arms supplies and the suspension of Soviet access to its naval bases in Syria, but, by the end of the decade, shared concerned over Sadat's (1918-1981) shift towards the U.S. and Israel brought both sides back into alignment. In addition, due to troubles in domestic affairs and the rise of Islamist opposition, Assad's was further encouraged to renew his dependence on Soviet support: in 1980, not only he did not condemn the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan, but he formalised the Syrian-Soviet axis through a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation[252].

From the 1980s, however, the structural foundation began to erode: Gorbachev's (1931-2022) doctrine of "new thinking" and the Soviet Union's slow withdrawal from international areas of conflict, left no certainties to Assad. In order to secure the regime's place in an emerging U.S. dominated order, between 1989 and 1991, Syria began to join Arab-Israeli peace talks and took

---

[247] Aron Lund, "From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russian-Syrian Relations." *Swedish Institute of International Affairs*, no. 2/2019 (2019): 6-7.

[248] *Ivi*, 7.

[249] *Ibidem*.

[250] *Ivi*, 8.

[251] John C. Campbell, "The Soviet Union in the Middle East." *Middle East Journal* 32, no. 1 (1978): 9.

[252] Lund, "From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russian-Syrian Relations." 10.

part in the coalition against Iraq, and it was eventually rewarded with Gulf States' financial support and U.S.-Saudi-backing in the settlement of the war in Lebanon[253].

The dissolution of the USSR at the end of 1991 closed the Cold War chapter of Syrian-Soviet relations and, although military and economic ties persisted with post-Soviet Russia, the regime had lost its principal patron and international partner, making it necessary for Assad to look at Washington and European capitals to navigate the new global balance of power. Nonetheless, under the rule of his son Bashar, the legacy of these strong ties with Moscow would resurface, evolving into one of the cornerstones of Syria's foreign policy in the twenty-first century.

[253] *Ivi*, 11.

3. Bashar al-Assad's Syria: continuity, authoritarianism, and crisis

3.1 Bashar al-Assad's arrival to power*: Jumlukiya*, the hereditary republic

In the final decade of Hafez al-Assad's rule, the final central question facing the Syrian regime was no longer how to seize power, but how to pass it on without risking a return to the pattern of coups and intra-elite rivalries that had characterised the pre-1970 republic. Before Hafez al-Assad grasped power, Syria's post-independence politics were highly unstable: between 1949 and 1970 the country experienced back-to-back military coups and repeated wars with Israel[254]. Furthermore, from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, Syria was shaken by a violent confrontation between the Baʿth regime and the Muslim Brotherhood, culminating in the brutal repression of the Islamist insurgency in Hama in 1982[255], a period that could be described as a near civil war[256].

While Hafez al-Assad's long rule brought the country under a comparatively stable authoritarian order, that very stability created a problem: how to manage succession in a system whose institutions were designed to preserve the president's dominance but offered no clear, legitimate rule for leadership change. The stability he shaped rested almost entirely on his personal authority and on institutions built to serve his will rather than to constrain it; in addition, the state's legitimacy derived less from constitutional or institutional norms than from loyalty to the president himself, leaving no established mechanism through which power could be transferred once he was gone. From the mid-1970s, Hafez al-Assad initially looked at his

[254] Joshua Stacher, "Reinterpreting Authoritarian Power: Syria's Hereditary Succession." *Middle East Journal* 65, no. 2 (2011): 197.

[255] For a more detailed explanation of the Islamist opposition and the following Hama massacre, see above 2.2.1 The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist opposition and 2.2.2 The Hama massacre (1982).

[256] Stacher, "Reinterpreting Authoritarian Power: Syria's Hereditary Succession." 197.

younger brother Rifʿat[257], commander of the Defence Companies[258], as his heir, only to sideline him after Rifʿat, a decade later, attempted to exploit the president's illness to oust him[259]. Formally, this process ended in 1998, when Rifʿat was removed from his role as Vice President for National Security Affairs, by then, the succession plan had shifted to Hafez al-Assad's eldest son, Basil (1962-1994); however, his unexpected death in a car accident in 1994 forced the president to assess his plan once again[260]. Consequently, the task of succession fell to Bashar, who at the time was still an ophthalmology trainee in London: when Basil died, Bashar was recalled to Damascus, given his older brother's position in the Republican Guard, involved in high-profile campaigns, and gradually granted more powers every day[261]. Taken together, these steps clearly marked his shift from a relative outsider to the designated heir. In many ways, this process built on a script that had already been tested in its early stages with Basil, indeed, in the early 1990s the president's eldest son had been carefully positioned as the future leader of Syria: he gradually gained military rank and public visibility, moreover, the media began to depict

---

[257] Rifʿat al-Assad (b. 1937), Hafez al-Assad's younger brother, rose as one of the regime's most powerful figures within the security apparatus in the 1970s and 1980s. Beyond family ties, his influence rested on two main pillars: his command of the Defence Companies, and the leverage this gave him within the regime's coercive apparatus. From this position, he built an increasingly autonomous powerbase, rooted in loyalist and patronage networks, and acquired a political relevance that periodically fuelled speculation about his potential role in the succession. Building on the prominence he had gained in the aftermath of the Hama massacre of 1982 and amid Hafez al-Assad's deteriorating health, in 1983-1984 he mobilised his loyalists in order to attempt a coup against his brother. The episode triggered an intra-regime confrontation, which ultimately cost Rifʿat political isolation and led to his eventual exile. In 1998, his removal as Vice President for National Security Affairs formalised Rifʿat exclusion from Syria's decision-making.

[258] The Defence Companies constituted a key pillar of the regime's security architecture, from 1971 until their dismemberment in 1984. Organised outside regular military chains of command and closely tied to the presidency through Rifʿat al-Assad's leadership, the Defence Companies were mainly composed of a network of loyalist ʿAlawites and had exceptional autonomy; their role was pivotal in suppressing domestic dissent.

[259] Najib Ghadbian, "The New Asad: Dynamics of Continuity and Change in Syria." *Middle East Journal* 55, no. 4 (2001): 625.

[260] *Ibidem*.

[261] *Ivi*, 625-626.

him through a litany of titles such as "doctor", "engineer", or "knight", building around him an aura of legitimacy, which culminated with the epitome "martyr" after his death[262].

By the late 1990s, as Hafez al-Assad's health deteriorated, Baʿth leaders and security chiefs converged on Bashar as the best possible option to preserve regime continuity rather than risk a divisive struggle over succession[263]. Research on authoritarian regimes describe this kind of father-to-son handover in non-monarchical systems as "hereditary succession", in other words, the transfer of top executive power from ruler to son, in a process initiated before the leader's death and eventually completed without any democratic procedure or any constitutional recognition of familiar rule[264]. Such successions are rare, but follow a quite recognisable pattern[265]: they happen most likely when a long-serving autocrat has ousted his rivals, overshadowed the ruling party and when senior elites, lacking any established precedent for leadership selection, fear a power vacuum that could threat them[266]; in these circumstances, hereditary succession often appears as the safest and simplest solution.

Syria's new millennium transition was part of a broader regional trend in which republican autocracies sought to ensure the survival of the regime through dynastic succession; yet the Syrian case stood out for being the first instance in the Arab world where this father-to-son transfer was successfully completed[267]. After Bashar al-Assad's arrival to power, a specific term was coined a for this emerging pattern: *jumlukiya*, which combined the Arabic words for republic (*jumhuriya*) and monarchy (*malikiya*)[268]. Syria, thus, became a paradigmatic case of "republic-monarchy" in the region, a formally republican system in which institutions continued to serve the optic of popular sovereignty, while the effective logic of power had become openly dynastic. On 10 June 2000, Hafez's al-Assad death set in motion a rapid and carefully managed transfer of power that combined the legal façade of republican procedure

---

[262] *Ivi*, 625.

[263] Jason Brownlee, "Hereditary Succession in Modern Autocracies." *World Politics* 59, no. 4 (2007): 618.

[264] *Ivi*, 598-599.

[265] *Ivi*, 598.

[266] *Ivi*, 600-601.

[267] Stacher, "Reinterpreting Authoritarian Power: Syria's Hereditary Succession." 208-209.

[268] Alaa Al-Din Arafat, "Epilogue: Succession or Success?" *Hosni Mubarak and the Future of Democracy in Egypt*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009: 185.

with the reality of pre-arranged handover[269]. His death was announced at 6 p.m. an state radio; shortly afterwards the People's Assembly convened to amend the constitution, lowering the minimum age for presidential candidates from forty to thirty-four, tailoring the eligibility criteria to Bashar's age[270]. Within days, Doctor Bashar al-Assad was promoted to Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, designated the Secretary General of the Baʿth Party by the Party Congress[271], and unanimously endorsed by parliament as the sole candidate for presidency[272]. This sequence culminated in the national July referendum, in which Bashas al-Assad obtained over 97% of votes, being the only candidate[273].

Image 6. *Bashar al-Assad prepares to deliver his first speech on 17 July 2000*[274]**.**

[269] Faiza R. Rais, "Syria Under Bashar Al Assad: A Profile of Power." *Strategic Studies* 24, no. 3 (2004): 144.

[270] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Special Brief: The Death of President Hafez al-Assad (1930-2000) and the General Party Congress* (17-21 June 2000). Damascus: UNDP Office in Syria, 2000.

[271] The ninth Regional Congress of the Baʿth Party, held on 17 June 2000, was the first meeting of the Party to be convened in fifteen years, highlighting the merely symbolic role of the institutional process.

[272] Ghadbian, "The New Asad: Dynamics of Continuity and Change in Syria." 626-627.

[273] Stacher, "Reinterpreting Authoritarian Power: Syria's Hereditary Succession." 206.

[274] CNN, "Photos: Bashar al-Assad's Political Career," August 29, 2013. https://edition.cnn.com/2013/08/28/world/gallery/al-assad-through-the-years/index.html. (Last accessed on 10 December 2025.) [image. Source: LOUAI BESHARA/AFP/Getty Images.]

Although the entire process was orchestrated from above and void of genuine electoral competition, people's expectations around Bashar's presidency were initially high, charged with hopes of change and modernity. His background as a medicine student based in London and his young age encouraged many Syrians to see him as a more open and modern leader compared to his father, potentially willing to soften the harshest features of his rule[275].

3.1.1 The Damascus Spring and the failure of political reforms

The early years of Bashar al-Assad's presidency were accompanied by a brief but intense wave of political expectations, indeed, in the month that followed Hafez al-Assad's death, the new president's youth, technocratic and reformist rhetoric seemed to signal a departure from the rigid authoritarianism of the previous three decades. A key moment in this attempted rebranding was Bashar's inaugural speech in July 2000 in which the newly appointed president carefully balanced promises of change with reassurances about regime stability, sending early signals to Syrian society of a supposed willingness to reform. Nevertheless, as the following pages will show, these expectations were soon curtailed: the brief opening that followed his rise to power quickly ran up against the structural constraints of the imperative to safeguard the regime's survival.

In his address to the Syrian parliament on 17 July 2000, Bashar al-Assad contributed himself to craft this idea of renewal and hope, choosing with great attention the words in his speech[276]. He explicitly anchored himself to his father's legacy while simultaneously redefining the source of political legitimacy in terms of people's will and citizen participation. He also called on Syrians to contribute to new ideas, to improve or discard those that had become obstacles to progress, and to adapt older concepts to present and future needs, presenting reform as a continuous process of evaluation and self-critique[277]. Emphasising the importance of creative minds, he insisted that competence rather than age should determine who could contribute to

---

[275] Carmen Becker, "Strategies of Power Consolidation in Syria Under Bashar Al-Asad: Modernizing Control Over Resources." *The Arab Studies Journal* 13/14, no. 2/1 (2005): 66.

[276] McHugo, "Bashar al-Assad, 2000 – ." 203-204.

[277] Bashar Al-Assad, "President Bashar al-Assad: Inaugural Address." Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), July 17, 2000. Republished at al-bab.com. https://al-bab.com/documents-section/president-bashar-al-assad-inaugural-address. (Last accessed on 12 January 2026).

the renovation of Syria, and distinguished constructive criticism from destructive one, even acknowledging past errors, however, underlining that their correction should not be fuelled by a spirit of revenge[278]. During his speech he even insisted on personal and institutional accountability, arguing that it can and should be rectified. In economic terms, the speech recognised the sharp fluctuations of Syria's economy and called for clearer strategies to guide gradual reform: the president advocated economic change through modernising legislation, activating the private sector alongside a more competitive public sector and reducing bureaucratic obstacles, all with the aim of raising the living standards[279]. Finally, on foreign policy, in continuity with his father's rule, he reaffirmed the commitment to Arab solidarity, the centrality of the Lebanese dossier, and the need of a strategic peace with Israel that guarantees the full return of the Golan to the 1967 lines[280]. In his own words, however, this stance translated into a neat distinction between urgency for peace and an uncompromising refusal to concede territory, sovereignty or the dignity of this nation:

> نؤكد هنا اننا مستعجلون لتحقيق السلام ولكننا غير مستعدين للتفريط بالأرض ولا نقبل لسيادتنا ان تمس، بمعنى اننا نستعجل السلام لأنه خيارنا والشعب السوري شعب محب للسلام عبر التاريخ، ولاننا مشتاقون لكي يعود الجولان كاملا وأهله الى الوطن، وغير مستعدين للتفريط بالأرض لأننا لا نقبل بها منقوصة او على حساب السيادة الوطنية[281].

> *We would like to stress here that we have the urge to reach a state of peace but we are not ready to give up an inch of our territory nor do we accept our sovereignty to be impinged upon. We would like to achieve peace because it is our strategic choice and because the Syrian people have always been, through history, peace lovers and because we would love to restore our beloved Golan complete and because we want its people to go back to their homes, but we are not ready to give up an inch of our territory nor to achieve peace at the expense of our national sovereignty*[282].

---

[278] *Ibidem.*

[279] *Ibidem.*

[280] McHugo, "Bashar al-Assad, 2000 – ." 204.

[281] As-Safir, "بشار الأسد في خطاب القسم". July 18, 2000. https://archive.assafir.com/ssr/1056961.html. (Last accessed on 11 December 2025.)

[282] Al-Assad, "President Bashar al-Assad: Inaugural Address." Source and English translation: Syrian Arab News Agency. Republished at al-bab.com.

Precisely because of the themes articulated in this inaugural speech, many Syrian intellectuals and activists interpreted the beginning of Bashar al-Assad's mandate as a controlled but meaningful opening and, in the month that followed the change of leadership, his modern rhetoric quickly translated into a modest but visible political ferment, especially in Damascus[283].

An increasingly lively intellectual discourse had been visible in urban centres since the mid-1990s, but from late summer 2000, these discussions started to take a more organised form: regular meetings and literary circles were held in private homes of intellectuals, writers, lawyers, and other professionals who were interested in debating the future of their country. For instance, one of the most prominent initiatives was launched by businessman and member of the People's Assembly, Riyad Sayf (b. 1946), who started to organise weekly meetings in his house in the outskirt of Damascus[284]; his "Forum for National Dialogue" soon attracted such large audiences that it allowed him to announce his intent of creating a new political party, "The Social Peace Party"[285]. Roughly at the same time, similar salons and initiatives multiplied in Damascus and in other major cities, followed by smaller provincial towns eager to break with the political stagnation of the previous millennium.

A number of forums and petitions articulated common demands coming from the people, including an increased protection of human rights, a more just treatment of prisoners, the gradual restoration of civil and political liberties, and of freedom of expression, association and press[286]. These demands led to the so-called "Statement of the 99", a petition signed by prominent intellectuals on September 2000[287], which urged the new president to accompany economic reform with genuine political liberalisation and democracy, and to recognise the plurality of opinions and ideologies within Syrian society. In the months between late 2000 and early 2001, this ferment expanded, committees and unofficial forums multiplied, reaching an

---

[283] Eyal Zisser, "A False Spring in Damascus." *ORIENT-HAMBURG-, Deutsches Orient-Institut*; (2003): 40.

[284] *Ivi*, 46.

[285] *Ibidem*.

[286] *Ivi*, 47.48.

[287] *Ivi*, 49.

estimated number of 170 across Syria[288]. In January 2001, a new petition was published, this time called "Statement of the 1000", still calling for party-based democracy and the lifting of the state of emergency (in place since 1963)[289]. To all of these requests, the regime responded with a limited series of liberalisation measures, such as the release of political prisoners, partial amenities, the granting of licenses for independent newspapers and an apparent encouragement of an atmosphere of discussion [290]. However, these did not alter the fundamental pillars of Baʿthist rule and the Assad regime itself.

The expectations raised in the early months of Bashar's government were short-lived: key figures within the Baʿth Party leadership, senior officers and intelligence chiefs who had risen during Hafez al-Assad warned the new president that further opening and reforms would undermine the cohesion and order within the regime and that, in such scenario, they could no longer guarantee his hold on power[291]. Eventually, he decided to side with the old guard and to accept the dismantling of the fragile experiment that had taken shape around the intellectual salons of 2000 and 2001. Within less than a year, most forums were closed, leading activists arrested and restrictions governing public debates were reimposed, bringing to an end the brief Damascus Spring[292].

Even though these early movements failed to produce a lasting change, the short opening of 2000-2001 left an important legacy for the future mobilisation: a decade before the Arab uprisings, the Damascus Spring sharpened popular demands, fostered networks of activists and intellectuals, and, above all, exposed the regime's narrow limits of tolerance.

3.1.2 Economic decline and the erosion of consent

Following the regime's suppression of the Damascus Spring, popular frustration shifted from the sphere of political participation to the realm of everyday livelihoods, as widening socio-

[288] Syrian Future Movement. "The experience of the "Damascus Spring" and the "Tamasuk" autumn." March 24, 2025. https://sfuturem.org/en/2025/03/the-experience-of-the-damascus-spring-and-the-tamasuk-autumn/. (Last accessed on 11 December 2025.)

[289] *Ibidem*.

[290] McHugo, "Bashar al-Assad, 2000 – ." 206.

[291] *Ivi*, 207.

[292] *Ibidem*.

economic insecurity and perceived inequality fuelled a growing sense of social discontent. In the 2000s, moreover, these pressures piled up on top of long-standing legacies for Hafez al-Assad's era, such as authoritarian depoliticization, entrenched patronage, and persistent top-down control, while new strains emerged from demographic pressure.

In Syria the population was exceptionally young: by 2009, more than one-third of the total was under fifteen and, since 2001, the labour force had been expanding by nearly 5 percent annually, a pace that a fiscally constrained and institutionally fragile state was ill-equipped to match through sufficient job creation for a steadily growing number of entrants[293]. The economy was unable to absorb the roughly 230,000 young Syrians that every year entered the job market, pushing many into precarious employment and informal work, thus narrowing prospects of upward mobility and reinforcing an already-existing widespread sense of unfairness and frustration[294]. Yet, even for those who did find work, economic insecurity was intensified by a rising cost of living that steadily outpaced earnings: by the end of the decade, purchasing power had been eroded as wages failed to keep pace with inflation[295]. Importantly, this growing burden on ordinary households did not emerge overnight: in the early 2000s, reforms that liberalised rent regulations contributed to a sharp rise in rental costs, as landlords were given greater scope to increase them, adding further pressure to household budgets[296]. In addition, from 2005 onwards, prices began to rise more quickly, with average inflation reaching about 10% in 2006, largely because food became more expensive due to domestic supply shortages and higher international princes[297].

Within this climate of already climbing living costs, the regime's later changes to fuel subsidies became a major catalyst of social and political discontent. In practical terms, this meant that the state began to withdraw the long-stating price support that had kept fuel (and diesel especially) artificially cheap. In May 2008, regime authorities raised domestic fuel prices as part of a

---

[293] Lindsay A. Gifford, "Syria: The Change That Never Came." *Current History* 108, no. 722 (2009): 418.

[294] Briscoe, Floor, and Smits, "Syria's Political Economy: Background and Development," 18.

[295] Gifford, "Syria: The Change That Never Came.": 418.

[296] Khalid Abu-Ismail, Ali Abdel-Gadir, and Heba El-Laithy. *"Poverty and Inequality in Syria (1997-2007)."* Arab Development Challenges Report Background Paper 2011/15. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), March 26, 2020: 25.

[297] *Ibidem*.

programme to diminish petroleum subsidies, and, for ordinary Syrians, the effects were immediate[298]: because diesel was a necessity for transport, heating, and many production chains, higher fuel costs soon translated into a raise in prices of basic goods and services, deepening the perceived burden of new reforms.

This feeling of insecurity and volatility was all more acute because it unfolded in a context where many Syrians already felt that economic changes operated unevenly, rewarding those with privileged access while exposing normal people to fewer protections[299]. While the economy did not seem to recover and purchasing power kept declining, new fiscal adjustments were increasingly experienced not as a temporary sacrifice for collective improvement, but as an unequal process in which the burden fell primarily on ordinary citizens. In 2005, the regime started promoting a transition to a "Social Market Economy" that mostly meant a shift towards controlled liberalisation and market-oriented measures: technocrats were put in key economic positions, new legislations were emanated, new institutions and financial bodies created[300]. Yet even with more than one thousand decrees, liberalisation did not seem to deliver any of the hoped results[301].

Furthermore, the opening of the private sector was mostly selective: opportunities tended to be concentrated among individuals holding state positions or closely connected to regime families, that were basically turning the private sector into an extension of political patronage[302]. Indeed, during the Assad era, in Syria, *shabakat* (from Arabic, networks) were informally linking business and state services to the security apparatus and political elites; they served as the main channels through which access to a preferential line was secured, granting protection, economic opportunities and privileges, a pattern that helps to explain why liberalisation tended to benefit regime-connected insiders rather than create real competition[303]. This architecture consolidated what can be defined as crony-based patronage system[304]: a model in which a narrow circle of

---

[298] International Monetary Fund, "Syrian Arab Republic. Staff Report for the 2008 Article IV Consultation." *IMF Country Report no.09/55*, Washington, DC (February 2009): 4-5.

[299] Briscoe, Floor, and Smits, "Syria's Political Economy: Background and Development," 16-17.

[300] *Ivi*, 15-16.

[301] *Ivi*, 16.

[302] *Ivi*, 16-17.

[303] *Ivi*, 15.

[304] *Ivi*, 9.

loyalists accumulated good jobs and salaries, while whoever lacked the right connections was frequently pushed in informal positions and destined to insecurity.

One of the most emblematic figures illustrating this model was Rami Makhlouf (1969-), Bashar al-Assad's first cousin: born into the regime's inner circle, Makhlouf rose in the 1990s as his family expanded into the growing private sector, he then became one of the most powerful Syrian businessmen in banking, telecommunications, and real estate, among other sectors[305]. His name became synonym with insider privilege and a symbol of the ruling family's corruption, gradually fuelling resentment among ordinary Syrians over the years, until he was eventually a target of popular anger during the early 2011 uprising.[306] In June 2011, Makhlouf publicly announced his withdrawal from business to focus on charity and philanthropy, in an attempt to defuse widespread hostilities towards him[307]. At the same time, despite leaving Syria, some reports have supposed that he continued supporting the regime financially from outside the country[308].

A further driver of resentment was the uneven geography of economic and social change between urban centres and the countryside, especially the rural north-east, the so-called *Jazira* (Arabic for "island"), a region historically shared with Iraq lying in the broader space between the mid-upper sections of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, hence its name[309]. As a region that has long transcended state borders, the Jazira retained cultural ties and a strong identity even after the consolidation of the Syrian-Iraqi frontier[310]. As far as Syria is concerned, it broadly comprises the governorates and urban centres of the north-east, including Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor,

---

[305] Ivan Briscoe, Floor Janssen, and Rosan Smits, "Appendix 2: Key Individuals in Syria's Political Economy." *Stability and Economic Recovery after Assad: Key Steps for Syria's Post-Conflict Transition*. Clingendael Institute, 2012: 45.

[306] *Ivi*, 45-46.

[307] Reuters. "Cyprus rescinds citizenship of Assad billionaire cousin." Reuters, June 1, 2013. https://www.reuters.com/article/world/cyprus-rescinds-citizenship-of-assad-billionaire-cousin-idUSBRE95006H/. (Last accessed on 12 December 2025.)

[308] Briscoe, Janssen, and Smits, "Appendix 2: Key Individuals in Syria's Political Economy.": 46.

[309] Andrea Plebani, "Periphery No More: The Jazira Between Local, Regional, And International Dynamics." *States, Actors and Geopolitical Drivers in the Mediterranean: Perspectives on the New Centrality in a Changing Region*, ed. Francesca Maria Corrao and Riccardo Redaelli, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan (2021): 237-238.

[310] *Ibidem*.

and al-Hasakah, while remaining embedded in a wider cross-border system of exchange and mobility. Yet, despite its geo-economic potential, as it combines great agricultural assets and hydrocarbon resources[311], the *Jazira* was marked by structural disadvantage. Poverty was disproportionately concentrated in rural areas and, by 2007, nearly one-fifth of the rural population in north-eastern Syria fell below the poverty line, while more generally welfare improvements tended to be urban-biased[312]. In practice, this meant that cities were better positioned to capture the limited opportunities under Bashar al-Assad's regime, whereas rural livelihoods were highly exposed to stagnation and chronic neglect.

On top of these structural imbalances, a series of external shocks further strained Syria's economy and state capacity in the second half of the 2000s, amplifying pre-existing grievances: one was environmental – drought -, the other demographic and regional - refugees' influx. First, a severe, years-long drought began in 2006 and persisted until 2010, hitting the whole country, but most hardly the north-east. UN data points out that around 1.3 million people were "affected" and 800,000 "severely affected", as livestock losses eroded an already fragile agriculture and contributed to increasing food insecurity and malnutrition, rapidly escalating the drought's humanitarian impact[313].

As the crisis worsened, so did internal displacement: UN assessments estimated roughly 300,000 people leaving the north-eastern part of the country to leave in precarious households in the peripheries of major cities[314]. Second, Syria simultaneously had to absorb a large influx of Iraqi refugees after the 2003 invasion. With Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Iran, Turkey and the Gulf states, Syria was one of the first countries reached by Iraqis in the region[315].

---

[311] *Ibidem*.

[312] Abu-Ismail, Abdel-Gadir, and El-Laithy, *"Poverty and Inequality in Syria (1997-2007)."*: 6-7.

[313] Francesca De Châtel, "The Role of Drought and Climate Change in the Syrian Uprising: Untangling the Triggers of the Revolution." *Middle Eastern Studies* 50, no. 4 (2014): 525.

[314] *Ivi*, 527.

[315] Kelly O'Donnell and Kathleen Newland, *"The Iraqi Refugee Crisis: The Need for Action."* Migration Policy Institute. Washington, (2008): 11.

Map 5. *Displaced Iraqis in the Region as April 12, 2007*[316].

By 2007, Iraqi refugee population in Syria was around 1.2-1.4 million and, later that year, authorities had to introduce visa restrictions as arrivals surged, with reportedly 2,000 border crossings per day[317]. This influx increased pressure on an already weak economy, while Iraqis were formally barred from enter the Syrian job market and forced to work illegally[318].

Taken together, demographic pressures, ineffective reform attempts, regional inequalities, and external shocks undermined what little confidence Syrians still placed in the regime and the new-Assad leadership, turning everyday struggles into a deeper crisis of legitimacy and consent.

3.1.3 Suppression of opposition and media control

Over Bashar al-Assad's first decade in power, the gap between early expectations and the regime's human rights record became increasingly difficult to ignore. Initially, many Syrians

---

[316] *Ivi*, 3 [map. Source: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, UNHCR, Displaced Iraqis, April 2007.]

[317] *Ivi*, 11-12.

[318] *Ivi*, 13.

placed their hopes in the new president and their optimism was also mirrored in the language of Assad's earliest public statements, which repeatedly hinted to renewal, reform and transparency. Yet, the abrupt end of the Damascus Spring in late August 2001, sealed by the arrest of prominent intellectuals and key figures associated with discussion forums, foreshadowed a very different trajectory only a year after Bashar's ascension to power. At that stage, however, the regime's crackdown could have still been interpreted in a way that left room for some benefit of the doubt: perhaps the new president had limited leverage, his instincts may have been more reformist than those of the old guard, and the decisive push for repression came from entrenched power elites determined to prevent any loss of control[319].

Nevertheless, by 2010, a decade later, this explanation was increasingly difficult to sustain. While the regime continued to prioritise economic and fiscal reform and often framed political liberalisation as secondary, invoking regional instability and unpredictable geopolitical developments, Bashar al-Assad did not translate reformist rhetoric into meaningful political and legal change[320]: he neither curtailed the structural abuses embedded in Syria's security apparatus nor pursued accountability for past violations; instead, patterns of coercion persisted, building on precedents established in the 1970s and, above all, the 1980s.

The regime's suppressive trajectory was not merely the result of the discretionary enforcement of violence, rather it rested on a durable legal and institutional architecture that long preceded Bashar's rule and remained largely intact throughout his first decade. Central to this framework was the state of emergency, in force since Baʿthist takeover in 1963, which established de facto martial-law governance and granted authorities extraordinary power to restrict meetings, forums, and movement, and to carry out preventive arrests on the basis of a broad interpretation of national security and general danger[321].

---

[319] McHugo, "Bashar al-Assad, 2000 – ." 207.

[320] Human Rights Watch, *A Wasted Decade: Human Rights in Syria during Bashar al-Asad's First Ten Years in Power,* (New York: Human Rights Watch, July 2010): 3.

[321] Human Rights Watch, *No Room to Breathe: State of Repression of Human Rights Activism in Syria,* New York: Human Rights Watch, vol. 19, no. 6(E). October 2007: 15.

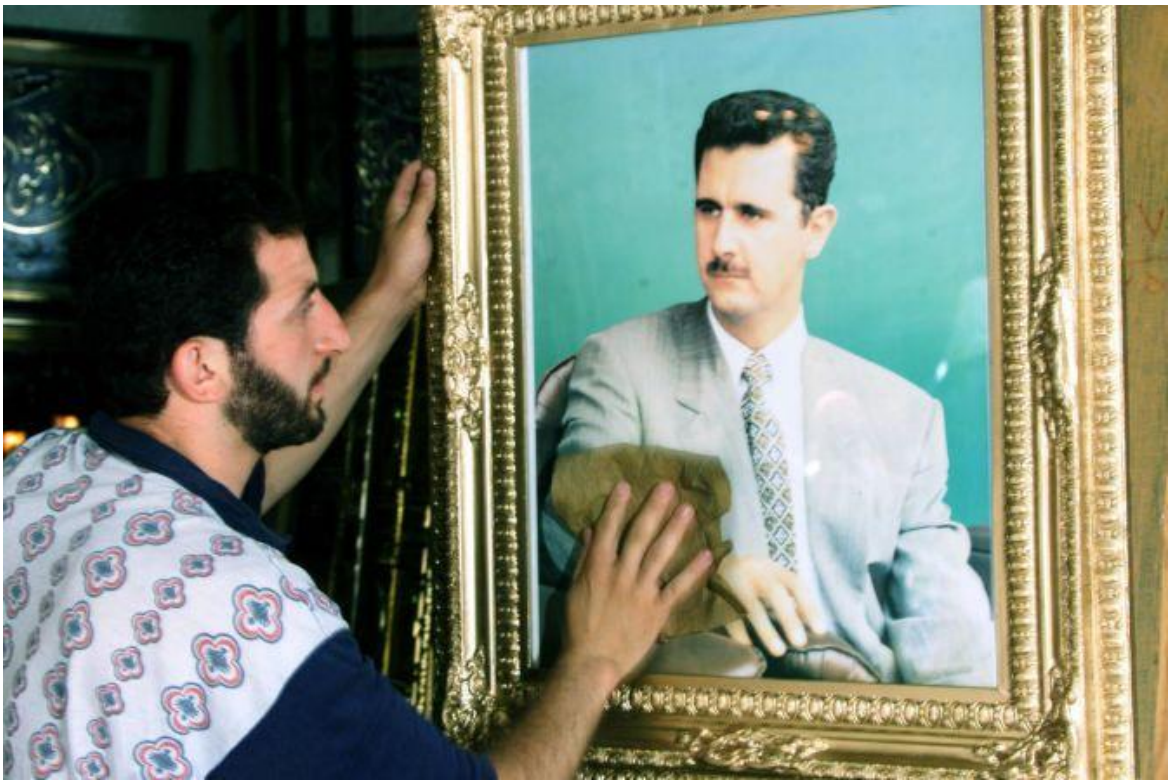


Image 7. *A shopkeeper cleans a portrait of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus on June 20, 2000*[322].

A further contradiction emerged between the regime's proclaimed commitments and its daily coercive practices is Syria's ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1969, an agreement that obliges state parties to protect a broad range of human rights, including basic freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, due process, and movement[323].

Yet, in practice, these formals commitments were systematically disregarded by routine operations of Syria's security apparatus and intelligence agencies: the *mukhabarat* effectively remained the backbone of domestic control, detaining individuals without arrest warrants, refusing to disclose detainees' details for week or even months, and regularly relying on intimidation and violence[324].

[322] CNN, "Photos: Bashar al-Assad's Political Career," August 29, 2013. [image. Source: RAMZI HAIDAR/AFP/Getty Images.]

[323] Human Rights Watch, *A Wasted Decade*, 8.

[324] *Ivi*, 2.

In detention, coercion often escalated into abuse, including cases in which prison officials returned the body of detainees to their families bearing visible signs of torture[325]. This coercive power was reinforced by the existence of exceptional juridical mechanisms that consolidated under Hafez al-Assad's rule, above all the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC): civilian defendants who were referred to the SSSC were exempted from ordinary procedural guarantees and were denied fair trials and interrogations[326].

However, the prison system itself remained one of the most powerful symbols of the unaccountability of the regime's criminal record, as it combined behind closed doors security power, secrecy and impunity. For instance, the Tadmor prison had become synonymous with the Assad state's punitive omnipotence, that had its most violent peak in the 1980s: Tadmor became a facility where loyalists and army officials carried out abuse, torture and summary executions, but never had to justify formally any of their actions[327].

The Damascus Spring raised expectations that a limited break with the past might have been possible, the closure of Mazzeh prison and the transfer of hundreds of political detainees from Tadmor to Sednaya were read as positive signals, since the latter was regarded as offering comparatively better conditions[328]. Nevertheless, public perception soon shifted, and Sednaya came to embody Bashar al-Assad's continuity with his father's rule: the prison closed his doors to independent observers, credible investigations into abuses reportedly committed within its walls never occurred, and families were denied information about detainees' fate.

In 2007, any residual expectation of political opening was further shattered by Bashar al-Assad's reconfirmation for a second term: through referendum, he secured an overwhelming 97% majority[329], reaffirming the regime's reliance on apparent popular consensus rather than a real attempt to establish a competitive pluralistic system.

---

[325] *Ivi*, 18-19.

[326] *Ivi*, 13.

[327] *Ivi*, 18.

[328] *Ibidem*.

[329] BBC News, *"Syria's Assad wins another term,"* May 29, 2007. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6700021.stm. (Last accessed on 15 December 2025.)

Image 8. *Two unidentified supporters of al-Assad join him on the balcony as he celebrates the referendum results in Damascus on May 29, 2007.*[330]

Another key pillar of repression in the 2000s was the fact that human rights activism was structurally kept illegal. Associations were required to register under the 1958 Law on Associations and Private Societies (Law No.93) with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour[331]. In practice, however, registration functioned as a security screening mechanism: even when human rights groups submitted applications, the authorities either rejected the requests or kept them pending indefinitely. This prevented groups from obtaining legal status and kept them in a permanent condition of vulnerability, making their activities easier to criminalise and exposing their members to surveillance, harassment, and arrest[332]. Moreover, the law prohibited unregistered groups from carrying out activities, framing them as illegal, invoking the Syrian Penal Code (Art. 288) to prosecute individuals for participating to unauthorised organisations of international character[333]. This created a permanently vulnerable

[330] CNN, "Photos: Bashar al-Assad's Political Career." August 29, 2013. [image. Source: LOUAI BESHARA/AFP/Getty Images.]

[331] Human Rights Watch, *No Room to Breathe*: 18.

[332] *Ivi*, 24.

[333] *Ivi*, 26-27.

framework under which activists had to operate, often suffering charges, punishments (such as travel bans and movement restrictions), and prison.

Suppression of dissent was also carefully monitored through the media. Although soon after Bashar al-Assad seized power, he removed the ban on independent publications, that change did not translate into press freedom[334]. Indeed, the new 2001 Press Law (Decree No. 50/2001) simultaneously expanded tools of government control, increasing pre-existing restrictions, obligations, and penalties imposed on publishers and journalists[335]. These measures encouraged strict compliance, while nudging self-censorship, as publishing without a license or violating state's guidelines could be punishes with high fines and jail terms. Moreover, the few private political outlets that survived were typically tied to regime-connected networks (as in the case of the newspaper *al-Watan*, reportedly connected to the previously cited Rami Makhlouf) rather than operating independently[336].

As internet access expanded, online space followed much the same trajectory as the press, rather than being a space for free expression, digital speech became increasingly monitored, infiltrated and censored. In 2009, the OpenNet Initiative reported that Syria's telecommunication market was the most regulated in the Middle East, noting that the state-owned Syrian Telecom (STE) managed the overall country's telecommunications infrastructure[337]. The report additionally highlighted the growing practice of monitoring users, including measures to control internet cafés, and the increasing number of arrests for online writings. Such cases are frequently channelled into prosecution through the vague Penal Code provisions, notably Article 285, which criminalises acts deemed to "weaken national sentiment", and Article 286, which targets the spread of "false or exaggerated information"[338].

The repression of opposition during Bashar al-Assad's first ten years in power was not sporadic but structural, often disguised as liberalisation while remaining anchored in emergency rule,

---

[334] Human Rights Watch, *A Wasted Decade*, 11.

[335] Leah Caldwell, *"Privileging the Private: Media and Development in Syria,"* Arab Media & Society. No. 12. December 11, 2010. https://www.arabmediasociety.com/privileging-the-private-media-and-development-in-syria/. (Last accessed on 15 December 2025.)

[336] Human Rights Watch, *A Wasted Decade*, 12.

[337] OpenNet Initiative, *"Internet Filtering in Syria,"* August 07, 2009: 2. https://opennet.net/research/profiles/Syria.

[338] Human Rights Watch, *A Wasted Decade*, 17.

the dominance of the security apparatus, and the brutal silencing of any dissent. The rebranding of existing regulations did not produce any tangible improvements, instead, it reinforced coercive mechanisms and reduced everyday freedoms for ordinary Syrians.

3.2 Syria's Foreign Policy (2000-2011): Regional Alignments and Rivalries

Between 2001 and 2011, Syria's foreign policy was shaped less by an ambition to redesign the regional order than by the imperative of regime security in a rapidly shifting Middle East. In many respects, external affairs under Bashar al-Assad were also a matter of inheritance from his father: when he assumed power in 2000, Damascus was still bound to the unresolved files that had structured Hafez al-Assad's regional strategy for decades, including the confrontation with Israel and the frozen question of the Golan Heights, Syria's dominant role in Lebanon as a primary arena of influence, and a tense relationship with Iraq determined by Baʿthist rivalries, border politics, and shifting Arab alignments. These dossiers were not peripheral to the regime, rather they supported its domestic legitimacy. Yet, Bashar's first decade also unfolded in a regional and international landscape that had changed drastically since the era in which those policies were first crafted: the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union left the United States as the dominant global power. The Middle East was no exception to this framework. After the 11 September 2001 attacks, Washington's "War on Terror" further pushed security concerns and counterterrorism to the forefront of regional politics, reordering partnerships and rivalries. This left Damascus managing several fronts at once, and, while Bashar al-Assad was struggling to consolidate authority and credibility at home, failures abroad further eroded the image of control and strength the regime relied on. In response, the Syrian leadership leaned more heavily on its most reliable partners (such as Iran), while seeking to contain threats through coercive methods (particularly in Lebanon). These choices deepened Syria's isolation and further undermined Bashar's position.

3.2.1 The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq (2003)

As the regional order entered the post-Cold War era, Iraq remained a key variable in Syria's strategic environment. The 1990-91 Gulf War and the decade of sanctions and containment that

followed contributed to a Middle East in which U.S. military power played a decisive role. For Damascus, this period unfolded with Syrian-Iraqi relations still constrained by the long-standing split between the two rival Baʿthist regimes, a rupture that had deepened in the 1980s when Syria sided with Iran, worsening mutual distrust. Yet, in the late 1990s Hafez al-Assad cautiously reopened channels with Baghdad, in a limited but calculated way, driven by mounting concerns over renewed confrontations with Israel and growing American leverage in the region[339]. This recalibration began in 1997, when al-Assad reassessed Iraq as a less immediate danger, in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and, above all, the 1990-91 Gulf War, which left Iraq weakened militarily, internationally isolated, and subjected to a decade of sanctions and containment, limiting Baghdad's capacity to act as a regional threat. In the late 1990s, as regional tensions rose on other fronts, Hafez al-Assad grew increasingly alarmed by the regional climate shaped by Benjamin Netanyahu's (1949-) 1996 electoral victory in Israel and by the risk that Syria's mounting tensions with Turkey could spiral into a direct armed confrontation[340]. For Syria, the cautious opening toward Baghdad functioned less as reconciliation than as a tactical recalibration, aimed at lowering exposure on one flank as tensions intensified elsewhere. On the economic level, this mild opening translated into a tangible expansion of Syrian-Iraqi exchanges: trade grew sharply, including through arrangements that partially bypassed the sanctions imposed on Iraq. However, this limited rapprochement would be abruptly tested in 2003, when Iraq became the primary channel through which American leverage over Damascus would be exercised.

Indeed, the attacks of 11 September 2001 abruptly changed the regional rules of the game, placing Middle Eastern regimes under new counterterrorism lens in which suspicion became the default. Newly appointed Bashar al-Assad moved quickly to contain the fallout for Syria, he condemned the attacks, signalled willingness to cooperate, and permitted U.S. investigators to travel to Syria as part of early post-9/11 cooperation with American authorities[341]. At the same time, the Bush administration's "War on Terror" rapidly evolved beyond Afghanistan, initially framed as the main battlefield as the Taliban regime refused to hand over Osama bin Laden (1957-2011), protecting the al-Qaeda leadership. Yet the campaigned soon expanded

---

[339] Eyal Zisser, "Syria and the War in Iraq." *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 7, no. 2 (June, 2003): 48.

[340] *Ibidem*.

[341] *Ivi*, 47-48.

into a broader securitised agenda in which Iraq became a central target – strategically, as a state to be neutralised, and, symbolically, as an enemy onto which multiple security narratives could be projected. In the run-up to the Iraq war, U.S. public rationale shifted in a highly flexible way: the initial emphasis on Iraq's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) was followed by claims of links between Saddam Hussein, Al-Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks; later, the narrative was reframed through a humanitarian perspective based on the moral necessity for regime change[342]. Parallelly, the "War on Terror" fostered a popular discourse in which "Arab" and "Muslim" identities were increasingly blurred together and easily associated with terrorism and violence in Western narratives[343]. In this sense, Iraq's growing centrality intersected with a broader post-Cold War framing in which Western politics and media progressively searched for a symbolic enemy to replace the role the Soviet Union had long played in Occidental security imagination following the Second World War, an idea well-captured by a New York Times headline: "The Red Menace is Gone. But Here's Islam"[344]. Negative stereotypes about Muslims, most notably portrayals that casted them as violent and untrustworthy, were widespread in U.S. public opinion and tended to correlate with stronger support for key policies of the "War on Terror", including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq[345].

After months of dispute at the UN table over inspections for weapons of mass destruction and Iraqi alleged failure to comply with its disarmament obligations, in early 2003, the United States moved from coercive diplomacy to open warfare. In diplomatic terms, American officials framed the use of force as a response to Iraq's material breach of prior UN obligations under Resolution 1441, as well as the broader ceasefire framework that followed the Gulf War of 1991, particularly Resolution 687[346]. The core premise of the Bush administration was that Saddam Hussein retained weapons of mass destruction and that these could intersect with terrorist threats; these arguments were meant to back the legitimacy of the invasion, yet no

---

[342] Jenna Pitchford, "The 'Global War on Terror,' Identity, and Changing Perceptions: Iraqi Responses to America's War in Iraq," *Journal of American Studies* 45, no. 4 (2011): 705.

[343] *Ivi*, 706.

[344] *Ibidem*.

[345] John Sides and Kimberly Gross, "Stereotypes of Muslims and Support for the War on Terror," *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 3 (2013): 583. 591-593.

[346] John Yoo, "International Law and the War in Iraq," *The American Journal of International Law* 97, no. 3 (2003): 565-568.

evidence was eventually found in support of these claims, weakening the very foundations of the intervention[347]. In March 2003, George W. Bush abandoned the diplomatic efforts and issued Saddam Hussein a 48-hour ultimatum to leave Iraq[348]. The ad hoc "coalition of the willing"[349], formed for the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, launched an attack that rapidly defeated Iraqi forces, making the collapse of Saddam's regime imminent. On April 2003, foreign troops entered Baghdad, and, less than a month later, President Bush (1946-) announced the end of major combat operations[350]; yet, this first invasion phase was followed by a far more protracted occupation, with the final U.S. military withdrawal occurring almost nine years later. With Saddam Hussein's fall, Syria found itself caught between two competing imperatives: on the one hand, Damascus had long relied on anti-American and pan-Arab rhetoric as a core pillar of its regional identity (despite the fact that the latter's façade had already been repeatedly eroded, not least by Syria's own ruptures and rivalries with Iraq). On the other hand, the rapid U.S. victory in Baghdad sharply intensifies Syrian fears of being drawn into the expanding and ruthless war on terror and potentially becoming a target itself[351].

In the months leading to the war, Bashar al-Assad had sought to adopt a harsher public line and tried to rally an Arab front against the intervention: in March 2003, at the Arab League Summit in Sharm al-Shaykh and during his address at the Syrian People's Assembly, he criticised Arab states that remained passive, or worse, aligned with Washington, arguing that the least would have been not to assist the United States in its attack on Iraq[352]. Once the invasion began, this posture was reinforced through official support for the neighbouring Arab state, but it immediately collided with Syria's fear of being treated as the next target: as U.S. officials started accusing Damascus of aiding Iraq, allowing foreign fighters to transit into the battlefield,

---

[347] David C. Gompert, Hans Binnendijk, and Bonny Lin, "The U.S. Invasion of Iraq, 2003," *Blinders, Blunders, and Wars: What America and China Can Learn*, RAND Corporation, 2014: 161.

[348] *Ivi*, 171.

[349] Leading nations, such as France, Germany, and Russia, did not take part in the U.S.-led coalition, pointing out the unjustified scope of the invasion under international law. See Yoo, "International Law and the War in Iraq," 563.

[350] *Ibidem*.

[351] Zisser, "Syria and the War in Iraq," 44.

[352] *Ivi*, 52.

and threatening sanctions, the regime shifted into risk-mitigation, seeking to contain the fallout with Washington[353].

In the post-invasion phase, U.S. pressure on Damascus intensified and crystallised into a clear set of demands, urging Syria to curb its regional involvement (including ending its support for militant Palestinian factions, dismantling Hezbollah, withdrawing from Lebanon and cooperating in the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq)[354]. All these requests were perceived by the Syrian regime as an attempt to strip away its remaining strategic leverage. When compliance was not forthcoming, these political demands were followed by a more coercive measure: the Syrian Accountability Act, adopted in late 2003, translated American accusations, such as terrorism, concerns about weapons of mass destruction, facilitation of fighters into Iraq, into a formal framework for sanctions against Syria[355].

Overall, the 2003 invasion was short in its conventional phase, but it inaugurated a far longer and destabilising post-war order, with the United States now physically entrenched in the Middle East. In this sense, American intervention's proclaimed objectives were undermined by its outcomes: Iraq remained highly unstable amid renewed violence and the war proved far from favourable to Western interests in the fight against Islamic terrorism[356]. For Damascus, this shift turned Iraq from a manageable neighbour into an immediate strategic exposure, especially when prolonged instability quickly rooted in the region, deepening broader sectarian threats, polarisation, and jihadist mobilisation.

---

[353] *Ibidem*.

[354] Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Role of Syria in the Post-Iraq War Middle East," *European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed)*, 2005: 144.

[355] *Ibidem*.

[356] Louise Fawcett, "The Iraq War Ten Years on: Assessing the Fallout," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 89, no. 2 (2013): 325.

3.2.2 Syria in Lebanon, from occupation to withdrawal: the Cedar Revolution, Hezbollah's war with Israel, and the consolidation of the Syria-Iran axis

By the end of the Lebanese Civil War, Syria's intervention had solidified into a durable system of tutelage[357]. The post-Taif order provided Damascus with a legal and political framework through which it could arbitrate Lebanese politics, reinforced by a dense network of influence built on military presence, intelligence penetration, and carefully managed local proxies. In practice, this tutelage served two strategic aims: first, it preserved Syria's regional leverage by maintaining Lebanon as a tactical buffer zone against Israel; second, it allowed Syria to manage Hezbollah's armed role as an instrument of deterrence while still attempting to keep its actions within broader regime interests[358]. Having emerged in the context of the Lebanese civil war in the early 1980s and in direct response to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Hezbollah was built with substantial Iranian support, especially through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which provided training and funding to the movement's early recruits. This external backing was complemented by Damascus's permissive environment, which enabled the group's consolidation and helped integrate Hezbollah into Syria's broader deterrence strategy against Israel. Over time, Hezbollah evolved into a hybrid actor, combining its armed wing with a growing political organisation and social network, entering Lebanese politics while keeping resistance against Israel central to its programme.

To sustain this arrangement, Damascus cast itself as an indispensable arbiter of Lebanon's fragile post-war balance, using pervasive oversight to keep Lebanese politics aligned with Syrian interests. Over the 1990s and early 2000s, therefore, stability in Lebanon rested less on autonomous state consolidation than on Syria's capacity to enforce this perceived order. Rather than prioritising Lebanon's post-war recovery as a project for independent reconstruction and institutional consolidation, Syria progressively entrenched a system of managed dependence. A clear illustration of this manufactured dependency was the architecture of the Lebanese

[357] For a more detailed discussion on Syria's involvement in the Lebanese Civil War and its post-war order, see above 2.3.2 The Lebanese Civil War, Syria's support of Hezbollah, and the Syrian occupation of Lebanon (p.72).

[358] Salloukh, "Syria and Lebanon: A Brotherhood Transformed," 18-19.

intelligence and its security apparatus, which became increasingly subordinated to Syrian interests and oversight, and deeply interlocked with the daily functioning of Beirut's institutions. Legally, this was codified by the 1991 "Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination", which established comprehensive coordination between the two states' military, security, and intelligence; practically, however, the cooperation described in the agreement had quickly turned into an asymmetric intelligence colonization by Syrian agencies[359].

The Syrian-managed order relied not on consensual legitimacy, but on coercive management and hierarchical dominance: following a similar strategy to the one the regime was already applying to its domestic policies, dissenting forces were suppressed, opponents to Syrian involvement were systematically neutralised and contained through bans, imprisonment and harassment[360]. Simultaneously, Syria's ability to sustain this arrangement was facilitated by a permissive external environment: first, the ambiguity embedded in the Taif framework itself left room for expansive interpretations of when, and under what conditions, withdrawal would become due[361]; second, the 1990-91 Gulf crisis and Damascus' decision to join the U.S.-led coalition contributed to a climate in which Washington quietly tolerated Syria's involvement in Lebanon[362].

This international attitude began to erode after 2003. As seen in the previous pages[363], the American invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq reshaped regional balances in the Middle East and signalled an increasingly security-driven posture, to which Arab governments progressively had to calibrate their own policies. In this context, Lebanon emerged as a particularly exposed arena where multiple regional struggles intersected: the unresolved Arab-Israeli confrontation, the growing prominence of armed non-state actors (such Hezbollah), Iran's expanding regional influence, and Syria's links to militant groups[364]. A first concrete sign of change came in September 2004, when Washington and Paris jointly pushed through UN

---

[359] *Ivi*, 19-20.

[360] *Ivi*, 19.

[361] *Ivi*, 18.

[362] *Ibidem*.

[363] See above 3.2.1 The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq (2003).

[364] Silvia Colombo, and Nathalie Tocci, eds. "Syria and Lebanon: Diverging Paths of State Unsustainability," *The Challenges of State Sustainability in the Mediterranean*. Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), 2011: 241-242.

Security Council Resolution 1559, calling for a withdrawal of "all remaining foreign forces" from Lebanon and for the "disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias"[365], "calling upon all parties concerned to cooperate fully and urgently for the full implementation of this and all relevant resolutions concerning the restoration of territorial integrity, full sovereignty and political independence of Lebanon"[366]; thereby, directly challenging both Syria's decade-long order and Hezbollah's status quo. Indeed, UNSCR 1559 became the key diplomatic instrument through which the Lebanese file was recast as a high-priority international security issue. Nonetheless, Resolution 1559 did not moderate Syrian behaviour, it hardened it.

To this new challenge, that was directly threatening Syrian long-claimed "protective" role over its smaller neighbour, Damascus responded intensifying its control inside Lebanon, rather than showing its willingness to a gradual exit. Bashar al-Assad reinforced the most visible pillar of Syrian tutelage: the presidency. Emile Lahoud (1936-), army commander since 1990 and president since 1998, was not a neutral institutional figure: his presidency embodied the tight linkage between Damascus's strategic priorities and Beirut's top institutions[367]. Therefore, extending his term in 2004 was a test of strength, as it showed that Syria still claimed the final word over Lebanon. Tensions escalated quickly, as mounting external pressure combined with broad Lebanese opposition to Lahoud's extended mandate. The latter was sharpened by growing open confrontation with Rafik Hariri (1944-2005): a Sunni businessman and politician with deep international and regional connections who had been central to Lebanon's post-war political economy, already during Hafez al-Assad presidency[368]. Hariri's influence derived not only from his support in concluding the Taif Accords and his multiple terms as prime minister, but also from his role in the reconstruction agenda after the civil war[369]. For Damascus his profile was politically unsettling from the start and the regime's hope was to delimit clearly his

---

[365] Salloukh, "Syria and Lebanon: A Brotherhood Transformed," 20.

[366] United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1559 (2004) [on the political independence and withdrawal of foreign forces from Lebanon], S/RES/1559(2004). September 2, 2004.

[367] Mounir Rabih, "Emile Lahoud: The beginning of the end for Damascus in Lebanon." L'Orient Today. April 4, 2023. https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1333683/emile-lahoud-the-beginning-of-the-end-for-damascus-in-lebanon.html. (Last accessed on 18 December 2025.)

[368] *Ibidem*.

[369] Maria-Rita Kassis, "Justice or Peace? The Hariri Assassination and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 4, no. 6 (2010): 3.

areas of leverage, mainly economy and finance, rather than treating Hariri as a relevant leader with a legitimate say in political and security affairs. With Bashar al-Assad's consolidation of power, suspicions toward Sunni leadership increased and disagreement between Hariri and Damascus became clear[370]. After Lahoud's prolonged mandate, UNSCR 1559 and renewed attention on Lebanon by the international community, Hariri appeared as a pivotal figure capable of turning external diplomatic pressure into domestic institutional change, making him a target within Syrian struggle over Lebanon[371]. The turning point arrived on 14 February 2005, when Hariri was assassinated in Beirut, in what Damascus would have defined a "car accident"[372].

This pattern of suspicious accidents and political assassinations targeting prominent public voices was not new, but Hariri's death acted as a catalyst: while Damascus denied involvement, many Lebanese interpreted the killing through the lens of long-standing political intimidation[373]. The event rapidly turned into mass mobilisation and a cross-sectarian wave of protests that culminated in the 14 March 2005 demonstration, when almost a million Lebanese citizens protested for an immediate withdrawal of Syrian troops from their territory[374]. This massive movement of peaceful marches was later associated with the "Cedar Revolution" *(thawrat al-arz).* The attempt to silence Hariri's voice and the Lebanese opposition, turned against Damascus, that was soon stripped of the diplomatic room it relied on for decades: Syria's exit from Lebanon could no longer be a matter of negotiations, rather it was framed as an urgent requirement that could not be slowed down or postponed. In practical terms, the withdrawal unfolded with striking speed, Syrian military forces were pulled back in less than a month, the intelligence apparatus underwent the same fate, and Syria's Lebanese backers were weakened or pushed at the margins of politics[375]. The withdrawal was officially announced on 26 April 2005, and its immediate impact was a sharp loss of prestige for Damascus, widely perceived as a collective humiliation after decades of tutelage. In Syria's perspective, the post-2005 environment fostered a shift from direct control to proxy-based influence, with Hezbollah

---

[370] Rabih, "Emile Lahoud: The beginning of the end for Damascus in Lebanon."

[371] Kassis, "Justice or Peace? The Hariri Assassination and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon." 5.

[372] *Ivi*, 3.

[373] Kassis, "Justice or Peace? The Hariri Assassination and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon." 6-7.

[374] Rabih, "Emile Lahoud: The beginning of the end for Damascus in Lebanon."

[375] Salloukh, "Syria and Lebanon: A Brotherhood Transformed," 21.

becoming the main channel through which Syria could retain leverage without having to reassert an overt military presence on Lebanese soil[376].

This reconfiguration was particularly relevant for the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, which further deepened Lebanon's internal divisions and elevated the domestic and regional status held by the armed group. The conflict was triggered by an operation carried out by Hezbollah in which five Israeli soldiers were killed and two captured; Israel responded with large-scale strikes across Lebanon, and the fight quickly escalated beyond what either Lebanon's government or external observers expected[377]. Under UN Security Council Resolution 1701, the war ended and UNIFIL's role was expanded in the region, attempting to restore stability; yet it did not prevent Hezbollah's subsequent consolidation and rearmament[378]. In addition, the war strengthened Hezbollah's self-presentation as a resistance actor, whose legitimacy stemmed directly from national identity and the struggle for self-determination against Israel[379].

For Damascus, this outcome was strategically ambivalent. On the one hand, the 2006 war confirmed the limits of Lebanese state authority and entrenched Hezbollah as central actor, making the disarmament clause of UNSCR 1559 increasingly unrealistic in the short term. On the other hand, it also meant that Syria's influence in Lebanon was now mediated through a partner whose autonomy and domestic legitimacy had expanded significantly[380]. In this new landscape, Lebanon became a front managed through alliance politics, accelerating the consolidation of the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis as the primary vehicle through which the regime sought to preserve regional involvement after the collapse of its dominance in Beirut[381].

Iranian backing became extremely valuable to Damascus in the post-2005 phase, as Syria emerged from the isolation that followed the Hariri's assassination and was under Western scrutiny[382]. Moreover, Tehran had been openly supporting Hezbollah during the 2006 confrontation with Israel, reinforcing the group's regional standing and, indirectly, the broader

---

[376] Colombo and Tocci, eds. "Syria and Lebanon: Diverging Paths of State Unsustainability," 242.

[377] Michael Rubin, "The Enduring Iran-Syria-Hezbollah Axis." *American Enterprise Institute*, 2009: 1.

[378] *Ivi*, 2.

[379] Colombo and Tocci, eds. "Syria and Lebanon: Diverging Paths of State Unsustainability," 241.

[380] *Ivi*, 231.

[381] *Ibidem*.

[382] *Ivi*, 232.

"resistance camp"[383], the regional bloc of states and allied non-state actors that defines itself through continued opposition to Israel and external regional settlements. In this axis, Syria remained indispensable because its territory served as a key logistical corridor enabling Iranian assistance to reach its proxies.

3.2.3 The Kurdish question: a cross-border dilemma

In the Syrian context, discussions of domestic and regional security cannot be fully understood without addressing the Kurdish question. Although the country is hardly unfamiliar with ethnic and religious diversity, the Kurdish discourse is not simply another minority issue confined to the Syrian territory; rather, it is a politically charged question whose drivers and consequences extend beyond national borders. Indeed, Kurdish communities form part of a wider transnational population spread across several states in the Levant and beyond. As a result, Kurdish claims in Syria have often been intertwined with cross-border security dynamics, especially along the Turkish and Iraqi frontiers, making this issue increasingly difficult to contain as a purely domestic minority question. Shaped by neighbouring conflicts and shifting balances of power, it evolved over time into a strategic regional file whose tensions could rapidly escalate and spill across borders, with repercussions for Syria's internal stability and its broader regional relations.

The Kurds constitute a population group with a distinct cultural and ethnic identity, historically rooted in the mountainous belt spanning the border regions of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria – an area often referred to as "Kurdistan"[384]. However, "Kurdistan" is best understood as a historically layered geopolitical label rather than a territory with fixed ethnic borders: the term appears in early Arab geographical writings and was later institutionalised under the Seljuks as the province of "Kūridstān", before becoming widely used from the early sixteenth century to describe the mountainous area between the Ottoman and Persian empires[385]. Even then, calling an area "Kurdistan" did not imply it had clear ethnic borders: in a region shaped by tribal and

[383] Rubin, "The Enduring Iran-Syria-Hezbollah Axis.": 2.

[384] Michael M. Gunter, "The Kurdish Question in Perspective," *World Affairs* 166, no. 4 (2004): 197.

[385] Nicola Degli Esposti, *Whose Kurdistan? Class Politics and Kurdish Nationalism in the Middle East, 1918-2018,* PhD dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2020: 20.

nomadic life, identities were often flexible and Kurdish tribes lived alongside Arab and Turkish groups[386].

In the early 2000s, estimates placed the overall Kurdish population at roughly 25-28 million, while also pointing out that precise figures remained difficult to establish: host states had a tendency to undercount Kurds for political reasons, whereas Kurdish actors may inflate numbers in order to bolster their claims[387]. Additional uncertainty stems from the absence of a commonly accepted definition of who should be counted as Kurdish, given the blurred boundaries between self-identity, language, and ancestry[388]. Within these approximations, the largest communities are located in Turkey, followed by Iran, Iraq, and Syria; beyond these core four states, sizable Kurdish populations are found in parts of the former Soviet Union, and a growing diaspora community lives in Western Europe and the United States[389].

From a social and cultural perspective, the Kurds are predominantly Sunni Muslims whose languages belong to the Indo-European branch; even though linguistic diversity is significant, Kurmanji and Sorani are usually identified as the two principal variants, alongside other dialects. Kurdish is not a single standardised language but a cluster of dialects that are only partly mutually intelligible, partly because the lack of a Kurdish state historically hindered the consolidation of one unified national language[390]. Within this linguistic spectrum, Kurmanji is predominant among Kurds in Turkey and Syria (and in parts of northern Iraq), while Sorani is spoken by most Iraqi and Iranian Kurds; other Kurdish varieties also include Zaza in Turkey and Gorani and other dialects in Iraq and Iran[391]. Religiously, while most Kurdish speakers are Sunni, often associated with the Shafiʿi school, Kurdish communities also include important minorities such as Alevis in Turkey and Twelver Shiʿa in Iran, and Sufi orders have also shaped religious life in parts of Kurdistan[392].

---

[386] *Ibidem*.

[387] Gunter, "The Kurdish Question in Perspective," 197-198.

[388] *Ibidem*.

[389] *Ivi*, 198.

[390] Degli Esposti, *Whose Kurdistan? Class Politics and Kurdish Nationalism in the Middle East, 1918-2018*, 21.

[391] *Ivi*, 21-22.

[392] *Ivi*, 22.

As far as Syria is concerned, the Kurdish community is commonly estimated at around two million, which is roughly 10 percent of the country's population. Syrian Kurds primarily speak Kurmanji, are predominately Sunni, and are concentrated in northern border areas, where proximity to Turkey and Iraq reinforces the cross-border dimension of the Kurdish question[393]. Historically, Kurdish nationalism is often traced to the late Ottoman period, when nineteenth-century reforms strengthened central authority and replaced indirect imperial rule with centralised state administration, progressively curtailing Kurdish local autonomy. A decisive rupture, however, came after World War I, when the post-war international settlement divided Kurdish-inhabited areas among new states, leaving Kurds as minorities in several countries rather than granting them an internationally recognised state of their own. This outcome was particularly tied to the post-war treaties: in 1920, the Treaty of Sèvres briefly raised expectation by envisaging a process that could lead to Kurdish autonomy and even independence; yet it was never implemented and soon rejected by the Turkish nationalist movement led by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk, 1881-1938), which overturned the post-1918 settlement and forced a renegotiation of the peace terms[394]. The resulting Treaty of Lausanne (1923) replaced Sèvres and recognised the sovereignty of the new Turkish Republic, removing any special provisions for the Kurds and thereby consolidating a regional order in which statelessness became a structural feature of the Kurdish question[395].

These dynamics were followed by repeated cycles of insurgency and repression, but the Kurdish file was not confined to Turkey: the 1991 Gulf War and its aftermath in Iraq marked a further turning point. Following Baghdad's military defeat, a nationwide uprising swept across the country in March 1991, first in southern cities (where Shiʿa mobilisation was stronger) and then in the Kurdish north, only to be crushed with severe violence by regime forces. In the north, Baghdad's counteroffensive quickly turned into a refugee catastrophe, with entire communities fleeing towards the nearest exits: the Iranian border to the east and the Turkish one to the north. The mass displacement of predominantly Kurdish civilians and the risk of refoulement at the Turkish border paved the way for UNSCR 688 (5 April 1991), which condemned Iraq's repression in Kurdish-populated areas and demanded humanitarian access, providing an

---

[393] Robert Lowe, "The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered." *Middle East Programme*. MEP BP 06/01. London: Chatham House (The Royal Institute of International Affairs), January 2006: 2.

[394] Gunter, "The Kurdish Question in Perspective," 199.

[395] *Ibidem*.

essential reference point for a protected "safe zone"[396]. This created an institutional precedent for Kurdish self-rule in northern Iraq[397]. However, this outcome also produced an immediate regional security dilemma: as the protected zone consolidated, neighbouring states (above all Turkey, but also Iran and Syria) watched the emergence of a de facto Kurdish polity with growing concern, fearing the long-term consolidation of a Kurdish state-like entity[398].

After the 2003 invasion of Iraq and Saddam Hussein's removal from power, Kurdish leverage in the emerging post-war order increased, and the Kurdish question gained renewed regional visibility. In Syria, this shockwave had clear repercussions: the Iraq war not only had sharpened Arab-Kurdish tensions, but also fostered new expectations among Syrian Kurds[399]. For Damascus, this regional momentum intersected with a pre-existing domestic vulnerability: Kurds in Syria had long faced restrictive policies and structural marginalisation, including systematic discrimination and repression. In Al-Hasakah Governorate, on 12 March 2004, the Qamishli riots marked a domestic turning point: clashes at a football match escalated after security forces shot dead at least seven Kurds, sparkling mass demonstration across multiple Kurdish populated areas. Some protests turned violent and were met with a brutal response by the regime, with a final toll of around forty Kurdish deaths, over one hundred injured, and more than two thousand arrests among Kurds[400]. This episode suggested the beginning of a new phase in the relationship between Syrian Kurds and the state, shaped by the visible collision of long-standing grievances with a fragile balance of power within the region. Taken together, the post-2003 empowerment of Iraqi Kurdi and the 2004 Qamishli unrest showed how Kurdish mobilisation in Syria could be rapidly activated by external developments, turning what might appear as an internal minority file into an interregional security dilemma. Most importantly, the Turkish dimension would become central to how Damascus managed this dossier.

---

[396] Sophie Haspeslagh, "Safe Havens and the Kurdish Crisis in Iraq (1991)," *Beyond Intractability*, Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado: 1.

[397] Gunter, "The Kurdish Question in Perspective," 202.

[398] *Ivi*, 203.

[399] Lowe, "The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered." 5.

[400] *Ibidem*.

3.2.4 Syria-Turkey relations

Prior to 2011, the relations between Syria and Turkey had a fluctuating trajectory: on the one hand, historical rivalry and strategic mistrust; on the other hand, a rapprochement and growing cooperation in the 2000s. However, before examining the later improvements under Bashar al-Assad, it is useful to clarify why the Turkish dossier has been one of the most sensitive for Damascus for decades: the northern border has been the focus of territorial disputes and competing claims over water resources, as well as the cross-border Kurdish question, which turned bilateral tensions into regional security threats[401].

The first structural fault line concerns the former Syrian Sanjak of Alexandretta, annexed by Turkey in 1939 and renamed Hatay, which, for decades, remained a symbol of territorial loss and resentment in Syrian national narratives, and thus continued to fuel antagonism in bilateral relations[402]. Although political confrontation eventually ceased, this matter retained its significance in terms of identity and legitimacy, as it evoked the memory of territorial dismemberment that was forced upon Syria during the French Mandate. The second technical and political rivalry was strictly linked to the waters of the Tigris and the Euphrates: Turkey's control over the headwaters and its ability to regulate flows through large dams gave Ankara a structural advantage over its downstream neighbour, increasing Syrian perception of economic vulnerability[403]. The third, and most challenging, dimension revolved around the Kurdish dilemma: Ankara framed Kurdish networks and mobilisation as an internal stability issue with direct implications for territorial integrity and security; as a result, developments along the border could either increase bilateral tensions or affect the balance of leverage between the two sides[404]. Throughout the 1990s, Syria was often viewed as a compounded threat, where security

---

[401] Lea Nocera, "Perspectives on the New Centrality of the Mediterranean States: The Role of Turkey in a Changing Region." In *States, Actors and Geopolitical Drivers in the Mediterranean: Perspectives on the New Centrality in a Changing Region*, edited by Francesca Maria Corrao and Riccardo Redaelli, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021): 224-225.

[402] Carolyn C. James and Özgür Özdamar. "Modeling Foreign Policy and Ethnic Conflict: Turkey's Policies Towards Syria." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 5, no. 1 (2009): 30.

[403] *Ivi*, 26-27.

[404] *Ivi*, 17.

concerns, territorial disputes, and competition over resources reinforced one another. This framing contributed to a cycle of escalation that eventually peaked at the end of the decade.

Within this broader scenario, the most sensitive issue concerned Kurdish militancy: in 1984, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – founded in 1978 and envisaged as a militant movement rather than a conventional political party – launched an armed insurgency against Turkey, initially pursuing a separatist campaign for an independent Kurdish state and later articulating its objectives in terms of autonomy and political rights[405]. In the Turkish-Syrian-Kurdish diplomatic triangle, the PKK became the main driver of security concerns in bilateral relations between Damascus and Ankara. During the 1990s, Turkey's most serious allegations was that Syria was actively enabling PKK's activities, not only by tolerating its presence on its territory, but by offering shelter to key figures and providing logistical support, making it harder to contain cross-border militancy[406]. Tensions reached their peak in 1998: for years, Turkey had hinted that it might use force if Syria did not change its approach, but it was not until 1998 that this threat became explicit and Turkish troops moved toward the border, bringing the two countries to the brink of confrontation[407]. Several domestic and regional factors made Turkey's pressure more effective: rising nationalist sentiment within the country, Russia's reduced engagement in Middle Eastern politics, and an international climate that increasingly reinforced Ankara's position towards the PKK[408]. Eventually, the outcome was the signing of the Adana Accord in October 1998, which codified Syria's acceptance of Turkish terms, including Damascus' commitment to ending its support of PKK activities[409]. This opened a phase of normalization and, even though Adana did not eliminate the underlying structural rivalries, it lowered the immediate risk of escalation, establishing the baseline that, in the early 2000s, made a broader shift toward dialogue feasible.

---

[405] *Ivi*, 25.

[406] *Ibidem*.

[407] Bülent Aras and Rabia Karakaya Polat, "From Conflict to Cooperation: Desecuritization of Turkey's Relations with Syria and Iran." *Security Dialogue* 39, no. 5 (2008): 509.

[408] Turkey has long treated the PKK as a terrorist organization, framing its activities since the armed campaign in 1984 as terrorism. Internationally, the United States also designated the PKK as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in 1997, and the European Union followed in 2002, by adding the PKK to its terrorism-related restrictive measures list.

[409] Aras and Polat, "From Conflict to Cooperation: Desecuritization of Turkey's Relations with Syria and Iran." 509.

A key shift in this phase was marked by Turkey's EU trajectory, which encouraged a less confrontational posture: after submitting its formal application for EEC membership in 1987, Turkey was officially recognised as an EU candidate in 1999[410]. However, prerequisites for moving forward in the accession process were explicitly tied to meeting the Copenhagen Criteria, that includes stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights, and protection of minorities. Understandingly, this democratisation agenda increased flexibility and reduced the securitisation in Turkey's domestic and, overall, regional approach[411]. In addition, the 2003 Iraq war reshaped regional threat perceptions: as instability in Iraq became the main strategic concern, Syria's reputation as the primary security problem diminished, and convergence between the two neighbours became more valuable than confrontation[412]. Between 2006 and 2010, cooperation widened, with Ankara increasingly treating Damascus as a partner for managing regional crises, consistent with Turkey's broader agenda of projecting itself as a Mediterranean mediator[413]. The clearest example was Ankara's attempt to facilitate Israeli-Syrian peace talks, made possible by the combination of improved ties with Damascus and Turkey's established working relationship with Israel, which had deepened since the 1990s [414]. On this basis, Ankara could credibly present itself as one of the few actors able to communicate with both Syria and Israel at the same time and sought to convert this dual corridor into diplomatic capital: indirect Israeli-Syrian negotiations resumed in 2008 under Turkish mediations after years of deadlock; and four rounds were held, with Turkish officials acting as intermediaries between the delegations rather than hosting face-to-face talks[415]. Yet, the mediation track quickly collapsed, as Israel's 2008-2009 attacks on Gaza halted the negotiations and undermined Turkey's credibility as a regional broker.

---

[410] Nocera, "Perspectives on the New Centrality of the Mediterranean States: The Role of Turkey in a Changing Region.": 225.

[411] Aras and Polat, "From Conflict to Cooperation: Desecuritization of Turkey's Relations with Syria and Iran." 496-499.

[412] Ofra Bengio, "Altercating Interests and Orientations between Israel and Turkey: A View from Israel," *Insight Turkey* 11, no. 2 (2009): 47.

[413] Aras and Polat, "From Conflict to Cooperation: Desecuritization of Turkey's Relations with Syria and Iran," 507. 511.

[414] Bengio, "Altercating Interests and Orientations between Israel and Turkey," 48.

[415] *Ivi*, 50.

Overall, the 2000s rapprochement rested on pragmatic convergence of interests that proved mutually convenient for both countries; yet, even at its peak, this partnership was heavily dependent on a favourable regional and international environment and did not solve underlying discrepancies between Syria and Turkey. After 2011, these tensions resurfaced as the Syrian uprising dramatically altered the scenario and the northern border grew increasingly volatile, soon becoming a critical corridor both during the Syrian conflict and, later, in the 2015 migration crisis.

3.3 An assessment of Bashar al-Assad's first decade to power

Taken as a whole, Bashar al-Assad's first decade in power was defined less by a genuine change than by a broad continuity with the political architecture consolidated under his father. The carefully managed succession, often captured by the formula *jumlukiya*, helped preserve regime stability at a delicate moment; nonetheless, it also raised expectations among Syrians that a new leadership might inaugurate a different political order. In the early 2000s, hopes for reform were not limited to economic modernisation, instead, they extended to the prospect of a state less reliant on the repression of dissent and more responsive to citizens' voices. Yet the arc of the decade suggests the opposite trajectory: the regime's priorities remained anchored in control rather than liberalisation, and the widening gap between symbolic modernization attempts and underlying political closure became a central driver of disillusionment. The main beneficiaries of this authoritarian continuity remained the same entrenched networks surrounding the ruling elite, whose privileged access to state resources, economic opportunities, and vigilant institutions both rewarded loyalty and sustained the durability of the regime. In this way, material privilege and coercive power reinforced one another: the rewards of the status quo were concentrated within a narrow circle, while the wider population was kept in check through a pervasive atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, and deterrence. Over time, the previous factors, combined with demographic pressure, uneven regional development, and declining social protections, produced a widening sense that the state was retreating from the social contract, while continuing to demand political acquiescence in return. Repression in the 2000s was not sporadic but structural; and while, by the end of the decade, the regime had largely neutralised organised opposition, it did so at the cost of leaving core grievances unaddressed and channelling frustration into less visible, yet potentially more explosive, forms.

Regionally, Damascus sought to compensate for domestic fragility by projecting leverage outward, through alliances, proxy networks and a persistent effort to avoid isolation. Yet the external environment was far less permissive than in Hafez al-Assad's late years: first, the 2003 invasion of Iraq produced chronic instability, intensified U.S. pressure, and deepened polarisation and militant mobilisation in the region. Second, the 2005 withdrawal from Lebanon was widely perceived as a strategic humiliation; yet Syria kept exerting its influence through indirect control, with Hezbollah serving as its principal channel of leverage. At the same time, Syrian territory proved essential as a logistical corridor for Iran's regional axis. Finally, the Kurdish question and the Turkish dimension increasingly intersected along Syria's northern border, as the post-2003 scenario made clear that Kurdish mobilisation could swiftly become a regional security variable, influencing cross-border balances.

Overall, the 2000-2011 arc produced a form of brittle stability: the regime preserved its core authoritarian structure while selectively modernising its image, containing opposition, and managing external pressure. However, by the eve of the 2011 uprising, the Syrian regime had failed to renew popular consent; instead, it allowed the grievances planted under Hafez al-Assad to take deeper root and widen, intensifying throughout the 2000s, until they culminated in an open rupture in 2011.

4 The Syrian Uprising and the Internationalised Civil War

This chapter traces Syria's evolution from the first protests of 2011 to a conflict arena defined by an increasingly fragmented landscape and growing involvement of regional and international actors. Its central argument is that the transformations that unfolded in the years following 2011 were not linear: a popular push for change, rooted in decades of silenced, unaddressed demands and enabled by a favourable regional wave of mobilisation, was rapidly reshaped by the strategies of multiple domestic and foreign players, whose involvement introduced competing agendas that increasingly entangled the conflict's objectives and alignments, contributing to Syria's shift from protest to a protracted and internationalised civil war.

4.1 The Arab Uprisings and the Syrian spark

For much of the late twentieth century and the 2000s, political life across much of the Arab world appeared structurally frozen: rulers tended to remain in office for decades, elections (where held) functioned more as instruments of legitimisation than as mechanisms of genuine transparency; and regimes regularly repressed the limited forms of public criticism[416]. At the same time, populations were becoming markedly younger and exposure to regional and international events was widening thorough new media and communication technologies, which allowed information to circulate faster and made it harder for states to control all political narratives[417].

Within this context, what later became widely known, especially in Western media, as the "Arab Spring" refers to the wave of mass mobilisations that began in Tunisia in December 2010, generating a domino effect across the region, as protests spread in multiple Arab countries. A key catalyst in the vast echo of unrest was the self-immolation of the Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi, an act of protest against arbitrary state abuse[418]. This incident quickly came to summarise a broader set of pressures that were shared, though in different

[416] P.R. Kumaraswamy, "The Arab Spring." *India International Centre Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2011): 55.

[417] *Ibidem*.

[418] Hafez Ghanem, "Roots of the Arab Spring." In *The Arab Spring Five Years Later: Toward Greater Inclusiveness*, 39–64. Brookings Institution Press, 2016: 63.

intensity and combination, across many Arab societies. Economically, frustration was often driven by a persistent gap between rising expectations, especially among younger and more educated groups, and limited opportunities, with job markets unable to create enough positions for graduates, leaving large segments of the workforce in informal employment[419]. Socially, burdens were sharpened by uneven development within countries, with some regions markedly less developed than others, helping to explain why mobilisation could ignite in disadvantaged localities[420]. Just as importantly, socio-economic hardship was compounded by governance failures: routine experiences of arbitrary state power and the lack of credible channels for complaints and accountability turned material vulnerability into a common sense of humiliation and political exclusion. In this way, younger citizens frequently perceived themselves as doubly excluded, economically and politically, holding ruling elites responsible for failing their prospects[421].

The speed with which protests travelled from Tunisia to other Arab states is often explained through diffusion dynamics rather than a purely domestic chain of events in each country: Tunisia's initial breakthrough created a visible precedent that others could look up to and emulate[422]. In addition, digital media functioned as an accelerator, increasing the speed and capacity of information exchange among activists across borders and reinforcing the idea that national struggles were part of a shared regional momentum[423].

Outcomes, however, varied widely. Despite the regional character of mass protests, regimes faced starkly different fates: in some cases (notably Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen) rulers were overthrown, while elsewhere long-standing leaders endured despite significant mobilisation – Syria is a paradigmatic example of a regime that survived the initial challenge, but at the cost of descending into a prolonged civil war[424]. This uneven pattern was also visible in the Arab monarchies, which, aside from Bahrain, largely avoided the most destabilising

---

[419] *Ibidem*.

[420] *Ivi*, 61.

[421] *Ivi*, 58.

[422] Sean Yom, Joel Beinin, Frédéric Vairel, Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud, Andrew Reynolds, Ishac Diwan, et al. "The Arab Spring: One Region, Several Puzzles, and Many Explanations." *Government and Opposition* 50, no. 4 (2015): 692.

[423] *Ibidem*.

[424] *Ivi*, 694.

outcomes: in many kingdoms, demonstrations were smaller and often framed around reform rather than revolution, and states often combined flexibility with containment[425].

The terminology used to frame these events is itself contested, reflecting a broader debate over their trajectories: the label "Arab Spring" has been criticised as a misleading metaphor that implicitly suggests a linear and optimistic transition, projecting simplistic expectations onto trajectories that, in many contexts, led, instead, to repression, fragmentation and war; hence the widespread counter-image of a prolonged and brutal "winter" in the aftermath of the uprisings[426]. Syria joined the 2011 wave, but soon followed a distinct escalation path: what initially resembled other regional uprisings rapidly evolved into a widening cycle of violence.

4.1.1 The outbreak of protests in Syria: mobilisation, crackdown, and early escalation

When the Syrian uprising erupted in spring 2011, it did not begin as a sudden rupture; but as a tipping point: decades of long-accumulated frustrations met the regional shock of the Arab uprisings, until a local catalyst turned latent discontent into open mobilisation[427]. The first visible spark appeared in March 2011, although the immediate catalyst had occurred weeks earlier in the Darʿa Governorate, where on 22 February 2011 a group of young boys reportedly painted anti-regime graffiti on their school's wall, including the slogan "Your turn is coming, Doctor", *ejak ad-dawr ya duktur* (أجاك الدور يا دكتور), and taunts like "No teaching, no school, till the end of Bashar's rule"[428]. Their subsequent arrest by security services soon became a public cause, providing the trigger that channelled diffused resentment into collective action: families

[425] Zoltan Barany, "The 'Arab Spring' in the Kingdoms." Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 2012: 2.

[426] Jose V. Ciprut, "Easter in Winter: The "Arab Spring" Seven Years Later." Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2017.

[427] Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria: From 'authoritarian Upgrading' to Revolution?" *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 88, no. 1 (2012): 106.

[428] Dominic Evans and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, *"From teenage graffiti to a country in ruins: Syria's two years of rebellion."* Reuters, March 17, 2013. https://www.reuters.com/article/world/uk/from-teenage-graffiti-to-a-country-in-ruins-syrias-two-years-of-rebellion-idUSBRE92G067/. (Last accessed on 10 January 2026.)

and local people demanded the boys' release and sought mediation with the authorities, but the dismissive response they encountered only deepened local anger[429]. Reports that the boys had been beaten and tortured in detention further inflamed popular outrage, turning the demand for their release into a wider protest against impunity and coercion[430]. Darʿa, however, was not an isolated outburst emerging from out of the blue. For instance, in the week preceding the unrest in the Governorate, Syria had already witness cautious signs of public anger: a spontaneous crowd protest in Damascus on 16 February 2011, sparked by the beating of a young man by police forces, showed how quickly localised abuse could draw large numbers into the street, even under heavy surveillance[431]. At the same time, the regional wave of uprisings was reshaping expectation and encouraging Syrians to believe that collective action was both feasible and contagious[432]. Nevertheless, the early signs of dissent were contained and scattered, not because grievances were absent, but because socio-economic and political frustrations coexisted with the regime's pervasive security grip, which set clear limits on public mobilisation, and the memory of past coercion (most notably the precedents set in Hama in 1982) made repression a powerful deterrent[433]. What made Darʿa decisive was that the graffiti episode tied local grievance with a narrative that travelled fast, transforming the provincial incident into a national symbol[434]. In mid-March, cautious mobilisation began to surface in the capital, however, demonstrations were quickly met with arrests, signalling the repressive character of the state's response[435]. During the Damascus' protests of 15 March 2011, activists

---

[429] Rania Abouzeid, "Syria's Revolt: How Graffiti Stirred an Uprising." TIME, March 22, 2011. https://time.com/archive/6956938/syrias-revolt-how-graffiti-stirred-an-uprising/. (Last accessed on 10 January 2026).

[430] *Ibidem*.

[431] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic*. A/HRC/18/53. Geneva: United Nations, September 15, 2001: 11.

[432] Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, "Syria in the Arab Spring: The integration of Syria's conflict with the Arab uprisings, 2011–2013." *Research & Politics*, 1(3). October-December 2014:1.

[433] Philippe Droz-Vincent, "'State of Barbary' (Take Two): From the Arab Spring to the Return of Violence in Syria." *Middle East Journal* 68, no. 1 (2014): 42-43.

[434] Abouzeid, "Syria's Revolt: How Graffiti Stirred an Uprising."

[435] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic*: 39.

called for action under the banner of a first "Day of Dignity", a name meant to emphasise the popular demands for dignity (*karama*), justice, basic rights, and, above all the lift of the emergency law and the release of political prisoners; rather than an explicit request for an immediate regime change[436]. Early protesters also sought to protect the uprising's legitimacy by insisting on "three noes": no to violence, no to sectarianism, and no to foreign intervention; thereby signalling their commitment to non-violent mobilisation, rejecting confessional framing, and underlining the autonomous and national character of the movement[437].

Within this fluctuating scenario, the first decisive confrontation erupted in Darʿa on 18 March, where escalation unfolded rapidly, turning the city into the epicentre of popular anger: after relatives of the detained boys continued to demand their release and were met with insults and humiliation by local authorities, residents gathered near the Omari Mosque following Friday prayers[438]. Security forces first tried to disperse the crowd with tear gas and then opened fire, causing several casualties[439]. The next day, security forces fired again on demonstrators, turning unrest for the boys' release into an escalating cycle of protests, funerals, and repression, that would rapidly spread beyond the Governorate[440]. As news of the killings circulated, demonstrations multiplied across the country, quickly producing new casualties and arrests, reinforcing the escalation pattern of the uprisings.

A key accelerator of diffusion was the emergence of an activist media infrastructure, which served as a logistical and organizational backbone that enabled coordination under pervasive surveillance[441]: through Facebook and related platforms, local grassroots coordination cells of activists could plan where and when to mobilise, share instructions and safety updates, as well as document events to spread information despite the regime's tight control of public space[442].

---

[436] Al Jazeera, *"Syria Braces for 'Day of Dignity' Rallies."* Al Jazeera, March 25, 2011. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/3/25/syria-braces-for-day-of-dignity-rallies. (Last accessed on 10 January 2026.)

[437] Droz-Vincent, "'State of Barbary' (Take Two)," 58.

[438] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic*: 10.

[439] *Ibidem*.

[440] *Ibidem*.

[441] Rasmus Rodineliussen, "Organising the Syrian revolution – student activism through Facebook." *Visual Studies* 34, no.3 (2019): 239.

[442] *Ivi*, 244.

To avoid being tracked or hacked, activists relied on basic online safety tricks: many used several accounts (including fake ones), connected through hotspots or proxies, and often let diaspora-based admins to manage pages and hold passwords[443]. At the same time, Facebook, together with YouTube, amplified the coverage of the revolts and allowed activists to share within and outside Syria visual proof of state's repression and human rights violations[444].

Indeed, although Assad's regime tried to contain the protests through a package of reforms, these were largely token concessions that unfolded alongside a growing use of coercion: the regime initially responded with a dual strategy, mixing massive repression with selective appeasement, while promises of political opening largely remained unimplemented in practice[445]. This posture can be described as "adaptive authoritarianism", which refers to the regime's ability to survive mass pressure by recalibrating its tactics without an actual process of democratization: rather than choosing between reform or repression, it combined the controlled opening with escalating brutality[446]. Over time, this adaptation became more than short-term crisis management: it turned into a deeper authoritarian reconstructing, as the regime consolidated smaller but loyal support base through sectarian fear-based mobilisation, strengthened its coercive capacity by relying on loyalist militias alongside regular security forces, and used state control over communications to monitor, target, and fragment opponents[447]. Technically, the protesters' key demand was addressed on paper on 21 April 2011, when presidential decrees lifted the State of Emergency Law of 1963 and abolished the Supreme State Security Court[448]. Yet, security and intelligence agencies continued to enjoy immunity from prosecution and accountability; moreover, sieges of Syrian towns continued even after the lifting was announced, showing the inconsistency between reforms and reality[449]. By late April and May, the widening gap between formal concessions and everyday events became even more visible: systematic use of snipers against demonstrators and summary

---

[443] *Ivi*, 244-245.

[444] *Ivi*, 239.

[445] Hinnebusch, "Syria: From 'authoritarian Upgrading' to Revolution?" 108.

[446] Steven Heydemann, "Syria's Adaptive Authoritarianism," in *The Political Science of Syria's War*. (Washington, DC: Project on Middle East Political Science, 2013), 54-58.

[447] *Ibidem*.

[448] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic*: 6.

[449] *Ivi*, 6-7.

executions were happening all over Syria[450]. In this tense atmosphere, individual cases acquired strong symbolic power once diffused online through activist media: one of the most tragic moments of the early Syrian uprising was the case of Hamza al-Khatib, a thirteen-year-old boy from near Darʿa, whose body was returned to his family nearly a month after his disappearance, bearing signs of torture and mutilation[451]. Soon, the images of his violated body turned him into a symbol of the brutality of the regime, sparking even wider outrage in the country[452], especially after the authorities denied all allegations of torture and accused opposition networks of manipulating digital media of the boy to further discredit the state[453].

As repression intensified, the trajectory of the revolts also began to shift: while mobilisation remained predominantly civilian in the first months, a gradual process of militarisation of opposition forces started to take shape by the summer of 2011, as the uprising moved toward a new phase of confrontation.

4.2 From uprising to civil war

From the first demonstration in mid-March 2011, Syria's uprisings moved with striking speed from civic mobilisation to sustained armed conflict. As reform promises and meaningful compromises failed to materialise, violent repression accelerated the shift from protest to security confrontation, in which fear, reprisals, and increasingly sectarian narratives began to shape behaviour on both sides[454]. Over the course of 2011 and 2012, defections and local self-defence units gradually coalesced into a fragmented insurgency, while the regime compensated by expanding coercion: pro-regime militias and auxiliaries became vital, and the repertoire of violence escalated from shootings and raids to sieges and heavy bombardment, before widening further to chemical attacks by 2013[455]. As state authority eroded unevenly across the territory,

---

[450] *Ivi*, 21-22.

[451] Droz-Vincent, "'State of Barbary' (Take Two)," 44.

[452] *Ibidem*.

[453] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic*: 43-44.

[454] Heiko Wimmen, "Syria's Path from Civic Uprising to Civil War." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016: 3-5.

[455] Droz-Vincent, "'State of Barbary' (Take Two)," 39. 50-53.

the opposition landscape simultaneously multiplied: local committees and councils, armed factions tied to different sponsors and priorities, and exile-based political bodies that claimed to speak for the revolution[456]. In parallel, jihadist mobilisation, extending well beyond Syria's borders, was drawing in foreign fighters and networks that not only increased the complexity of the Syrian battlefield, but also destabilised neighbouring states and heightened security concerns across the region and beyond[457].

4.2.1 Militarisation and fragmentation of the opposition

Although the uprising began with a strong popular commitment to peaceful protests, accompanied by slogans such as *"silmyyia, silmyyia"* ("peacefully, peacefully"), armed dynamics emerged gradually rather than spontaneously[458]. Early on, limited forms of civilian self-defence appeared in response to regime violence, and grew more common as the summer progressed and international pressure failed to halt the top-down repression. The conviction that grassroot mobilisation was the only viable way to withstand and properly resist the crackdowns carried out by the Assad's regime gradually spread: as repression intensified, calls for self-defence gained traction as a mean of protection for communities, and for a growing number of civilians and activists this logic increasingly implied armed resistance[459]. However, the shift from protest to organised armed defence was neither immediate nor uniform, it developed unevenly and only crystallised over the months following the first protests[460].

On the regime side, the crackdown was carried out not only by regular security forces, but also by pro-Assad paramilitary networks commonly labelled *shabiha*[461]. The term is often used in two overlapping senses: in a narrower meaning, it refers to militia groups rooted in largely ʿAlawi smuggling and criminal networks linked to regime insiders[462]; more broadly, it also

---

[456] Bryan Price, "Syria: A Wicked Problem for All." *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 8 (2013): 3-4.

[457] *Ivi*, 4.

[458] Droz-Vincent, "'State of Barbary' (Take Two)," 49-50.

[459] *Ivi*, 50.

[460] *Ibidem*.

[461] Joseph Holliday, "The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War." *Institute for the Study of War*, 2013:16.

[462] *Ivi*, 16-17.

came to encompass locally organised Popular Committees, which operated as pro-regime neighbourhood auxiliaries mobilised through loyalist networks and typically coordinated by local security branches or Baʿth structures, armed to police communities through checkpoints, surveillance, and support to arrests[463]. Together, these auxiliaries helped extend coercive control at local level, deepening fear and sharpening the spiral that pushed parts of the uprising towards armed self-defence.

A further accelerator of militarisation within the opposition came with defections from the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) – the state's regular armed forces and the backbone of Assad's coercive apparatus –, as soldiers and officers refused to keep participating in repression and sought to reorganise themselves outside the chain of command. As violence escalated in the second half of 2011, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) emerged less as a single organisation than as a banner intended to legitimise armed protection and encourage further defections[464]: it was announced in July 2011 by defected officer Riad al-Asaad, and soon became a loose label adopted by many local armed groups whose links to any central leadership were often purely nominal[465].

As the conflict militarised on both sides, the anti-regime camp did not consolidate into a single leadership; instead, it expanded into partially overlapping arenas, including armed networks, exile-based political umbrellas, internal opposition platforms, and a dense grassroot architecture inside Syria[466]. Yet, this fragmentation had practical consequences: local armed and civilian actors tended to organise around neighbourhoods, towns, and provinces, with limited regional coordination, and competing claims to represent the uprising[467]. Within the resistance actors, armed groups on the ground were mostly local, and the Free Syrian Army's relevance laid primarily in its symbolic and mobilising function, presenting armed action as protection of civilians and the uprising, rather than in its capacity to command a unified front.

---

[463] *Ivi*, 18-19.

[464] Droz-Vincent, "'State of Barbary' (Take Two)," 50-51.

[465] Aron Lund, "Divided They Stand: An Overview of Syria's Military Landscape," Uppsala: Foundation for European Progressive Studies, May 2012: 17.

[466] Yezid Sayigh, "The Syrian Opposition's Leadership Problem," Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, April 2013: 8-9.

[467] Lund, "Divided They Stand: An Overview of Syria's Military Landscape," 18.

In parallel, the proliferation of brigades and the repeated creation of command structures reflected persistent coordination problems rather than durable and united alliance[468].

While grassroot networks sustained much of the mobilisation inside Syria, the Syrian National Council (SNC), operating largely from abroad, quickly became the opposition's most prominent political umbrella, seeking to represent the uprising and secure international recognition[469]. Formed in Istanbul in October 2011, the Syrian National Council was established by a group composed mostly of exiled Syrian dissidents and activists, and it operated primarily from abroad under the leadership of Burhan Ghalioun (b. 1945). Presenting itself as a representative framework for the revolution, the Syrian National Council (SNC) sought to assemble a broad civilian coalition, bringing together major currents, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, independents, minority representatives, Kurdish and Assyrian components[470]. Yet, its external base and the difficulties in internal coordination, constrained its effectiveness and limited its ability to shape strategy inside Syria[471]. In practice, it often struggled to translate its political statements and diplomatic initiatives into direction over actors on the ground, and, as the uprising militarised, action and decision-making increasingly shifted to local structures operating within Syria, beyond the Council's organizational reach[472].

Alongside the Syrian National Council (SNC), the National Coordination Committee (NCC) constituted the main internal opposition platform. Based in Damascus and established in September 2011, unlike the expatriate SNC that prioritised international recognition and external leverage, the National Coordination Committee called for a negotiated political transition and explicitly rejected foreign military intervention[473]. Although it was one of the principal opposition umbrellas inside the country, its domestic reach and mass base were limited[474].

Indeed, at the core of the uprising, the pivotal organisational layer was built from below: the rapid spread of Local Coordination Committees (*tansiqiyyat*) became the backbone of Syrian

---

[468] Sayigh, "The Syrian Opposition's Leadership Problem," 8-9.

[469] Elizabeth O'Bagy, "Syria's Political Opposition." Institute for the Study of War, 2012: 9.

[470] *Ivi*, 10-11.

[471] *Ivi*, 9.

[472] *Ibidem*.

[473] *Ivi*, 18-20.

[474] *Ivi*, 19-20.

mobilisation. By early 2012, roughly 400 committees operated across cities, suburbs, and towns, relying on volunteer networks rooted in local communities[475]. As the revolt expanded, so did the organisational structure of the Local Coordination Committees and their networks gradually layered into broader coordinating bodies designated to provide strategical coordination: Revolutionary Councils at district and city level, Revolutionary Command Councils in major cities and provinces, and, at national level, the Syrian Revolution General Commission[476]. However, despite this dense infrastructure, coordination remained fragile: battlefield fragmentation and the absence of an effective overarching authority prevented the opposition from operating as a unified alternative to the regime, leaving its forces highly divided and without an adequate mechanism to aggregate and speak with one voice[477].

One clear example of how quickly the conflict escalated into systematic violence is Homs, where protests began in mid-March 2011 and were soon caught in a vicious cycle of killings and renewed mobilisation, until the regime's crackdown turned the city into a constant display of violence[478]. By early 2012, this trajectory culminated in the siege of Homs, which combined cutting off water and medical supplies, mass arrests, and sustained artillery bombardment with a ground assault that eventually cleared opposition neighbourhoods, house by house, followed by a tight security presence and checkpoint control to consolidate the regime's post-siege domination[479].

As Homs forcibly stabilised, the conflict's centre of gravity increasingly shifted northward, where regime's shortage of reliable ground forces created a permissive condition for insurgent expansion and cross-border supply[480]. Indeed, the state concentrated its main forces in provincial towns and along major urban corridors, but lacked sufficient manpower to sustain continuous control beyond those nodes. A recurring pattern thus emerged in the north: in Idlib in mid-March 2012 and later in Aleppo in July 2012, loyalist units would surge to reassert control over contested towns and re-establish surveillance of urban centres; yet, unable to hold

---

[475] *Ivi*, 22.

[476] *Ivi*, 22-25.

[477] Lund, "Divided They Stand: An Overview of Syria's Military Landscape," 4.

[478] Dara Conduit, "The Patterns of Syrian Uprising: Comparing Hama in 1980–1982 and Homs in 2011," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 1 (2017): 76.

[479] Holliday, "The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War." 15.

[480] *Ivi*, 12. 19.

wider areas afterward, these operations often pushed rebel forces into the countryside rather than eliminating them[481]. From there, insurgents exploited rural depth to reorganise, rebuild local networks, and gradually erode regime presence beyond the main strategic cities[482]. This imbalance made northern Syria a structurally favourable environment for the opposition.

By 2012, as the conflict expanded, a further actor became increasingly salient: Kurdish forces, organised around the Democratic Union Party (PYD) – the dominant Syrian Kurdish political movement – and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG)[483]. Rather than fully merging into Arab-dominated opposition, Kurdish mobilisation followed a distinct agenda centred on local security and self-administration, producing an uneasy and often ambivalent relationship with other rebel factions[484]. As state authority thinned and was deployed elsewhere, by summer 2012, the PYD/YPG moved to consolidate de facto control over the main Kurdish-majority areas, primarily concentrated across northern and north-eastern Syria[485].

By late 2012 and into 2013, the uprising's militarisation had become both deeper and more structurally embedded, as armed contestation expanded across multiple fronts and regime responses increasingly relied on standoff violence to withstand rebel forces across multiple arenas. At the same time, growing militarisation did not consolidate the opposition into a coherent command structure; instead, the proliferation of local battalions and competing actors created a battlefield in which coordination and governance outcomes varied sharply from one locality to another[486].

In this setting, alongside militarisation and fragmentation, a third element increasingly complicated the picture: the rise of Islamist factions and transnational jihadist actors, whose appeal and recruitment accelerated as the conflict hardened into a civil war, pushing parts of the insurgency toward more radical frames, further intensifying competition over the revolt's meaning and exacerbating intra-rebel frictions.

---

[481] *Ivi*, 33-34.

[482] *Ivi*, 34-35.

[483] Cengiz Gunes and Robert Lowe, "The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East," *Middle East and North Africa Programme*. London: Chatham House (The Royal Institute of International Affairs), July 2015: 4.

[484] *Ivi*, 6.

[485] *Ivi*, 4. 8.

[486] Aron Lund, "The Non-State Militant Landscape in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 8 (2013): 23.

4.2.2 Jihadist factions and the rise of ISIS

By 2012, the armed landscape that had emerged from the uprising was no longer defined only by local brigades and loosely coordinated opposition coalitions; instead, a growing share of battlefield capacity and political influence began to concentrate around Islamist currents, including factions linked to Salafi-jihadi networks[487]. This shift signalled a further descent of the conflict into a sectarian civil war, in which radical jihadi actors increasingly influenced both the opposition's military priorities and its ideological framing, widening the war's horizons beyond a popular mobilisation against the Assad regime.

Before analysing the impact that this jihadist turn had on the Syrian war, it helps to clarify the distinction between Islamism, Salafism, and Salafi-jihadism. First, Islamism can be understood as a form of politicised Islam, whose movements argue that public authority and the state should be organised around an Islamic framework, often with the aim of establishing a religious order governed by sharia law; more broadly, this falls within the wider universe of "political Islam", a looser umbrella term covering actors who bring Islamic references into politics and public life, including movements that pursue their goals through institutional participation and elections rather than revolutionary rupture[488]. In the Syrian case, this label is usually tied to Sunni Islamist currents, which range from more pragmatic political Islam to stricter doctrinal projects[489]. Second, Salafism is an ultra-orthodox and puritan current within Sunni Islam that emphasises doctrinal purity and a return to the earliest models of faith and to the example of the pious ancestors; it is often associated with Gulf-based religious networks and it often adopts an exclusivist stance toward other faiths (also within Islam), non-religious ideologies and secular political projects[490]. Because it is first a doctrinal orientation, Salafism can take different

---

[487] Aron Lund, "Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front," *Swedish Institute of International Affairs*, no. 17 (March 2013): 3.

[488] Mohammed Hashas, "Arab Mediterranean Islam: Intellectual and Political Trends," in *States, Actors and Geopolitical Drivers in the Mediterranean: Perspectives on the New Centrality in a Changing Region*, edited by Francesca Maria Corrao and Riccardo Redaelli, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan (2021): 141-142.

[489] Lund, "Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front," 4.

[490] *Ibidem*.

political forms – quietist, activist, or militant/jihadi – depending on context and organisation[491]. Third, Salafi-jihadism is a particularly radical variant within this spectrum: it combines Salafi religious doctrine with the view that armed jihad is not only legitimate but central[492]; it tends to frame violent mobilisation as a means of restoring an "authentic" Islamic order, often with transnational horizons, and sometimes portrays armed confrontation as a duty that targets both external enemies and local rulers or movements portrayed as illegitimate or apostate (at times through practices of *takfir* used to legitimise violence against "apostate" Muslims as well as non-Muslims)[493].

To avoid treating these categories as purely wartime labels, it is useful to situate them within Syria's pre-2011 religious landscape, which had long combined episodes of Islamist activism and armed confrontation with subsequent decades of repression and state control over religious institutions and public preaching. After the regime crushed organised Islamist opposition with extreme brutality in the early 1980s[494], it pursued a dual strategy: it repressed Islamist activists, but it also tolerated, and sometimes promoted, non-violent religious groups that remained outside direct political mobilisation[495]. A key religious figure in this environment was Sheikh Mohammad Saeed Ramadan al-Buti (d. 2013), widely describes as Syria's most renowned Muslim scholar and a prominent voice within the mainstream Sunni leadership, whose influence in the 1990s and 2000s was closely tied to the dense links between influential *ʿulama* and conservative Sunni middle class[496]. Doctrinally, al-Buti defended traditional Sufism against Salafi puritanism, an approach that suited the regime's preference for influential but politically non-revolutionary voices[497]. Despite his quietist image, in 2003 al-Buti publicly urged Muslims to fulfil the "duty of jihad" against the U.S. invasion of Iraq, while the regime's permissive

---

[491] Hashas, "Arab Mediterranean Islam: Intellectual and Political Trends," 131-132.

[492] Lund, "Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front," 6-7.

[493] Hashas, "Arab Mediterranean Islam: Intellectual and Political Trends," 133-134.

[494] For further details on Islamist opposition in Syria see 2.2.1 The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist opposition and 2.2.2 The Hama massacre (1982).

[495] Hamza al-Mustapha, *The al-Nusra Front: From Formation to Dissension*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, February 2014: 2-3.

[496] Thomas Pierret and Kjetil Selvik, "Limits of 'Authoritarian Upgrading' in Syria: Private Welfare, Islamic Charities, and the Rise of the Zayd Movement," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41, no. 4 (2009): 600-601.

[497] al-Mustapha, *The al-Nusra Front: From Formation to Dissension*, 2-3.

stance toward "Support Committees for Iraq" enabled jihadi milieus to build recruitment and logistical networks inside Syria, which later fed into the rise of a new generation of radical militants[498]. When the Syrian uprising began in 2011, al-Buti opposed to anti-regime mobilisation and warned against turning mosques into platforms for incitement, thereby aligning himself with the state's narrative[499]. This highlights how Syria's religious actors had distinct and sometimes divergent positions toward the regime, Salafism and the use of jihad, rather than forming a single, ideologically coherent bloc.

From 2012 to 2013, the jihadist turn within Syria can be read as a shift in the internal balance of the insurgency, as Islamist mobilisation became more prominent in rhetoric, symbols and recruitment, even though many local brigades and non-jihadist factions remained active in the rebel camp. A key driver in this development was that the war's violence increasingly acquired a sectarian and polarising logic, which made radical religious narratives socially compelling[500]. In this climate, religious and radical registers, often including Salafi vocabulary[501], became simple but powerful identity markers that often offered fighters a clear sense of belonging and a religious rationale for extreme violence, as the war was experienced more and more as a conflict between communities and as state channels for political bargaining collapsed under militarisation[502]. This ideological deepening also overlapped with a transnational mobilisation dynamic: the arrival of foreign fighters, initially limited in 2012, became a steady flow by early 2013 and then accelerated sharply in the second half of that year, reinforcing the violent character of some rebel fringes[503].

---

[498] *Ivi*, 3.

[499] Al Arabiya, "Sheikh al-Bouti, the Syrian Sunni cleric who stood by Assad," Al Arabiya English, March 22, 2013. https://english.alarabiya.net/News/2013/03/22/-Sheikh-al-Bouti-the-Syrian-Sunni-cleric-who-stood-by-Assad. (Last accessed on 13 February 2026).

[500] Lund, "Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front," 10.

[501] Importantly, "Salafi" here refers to a doctrinal idiom that could be adopted by non-jihadist Islamist factions as well as by Salafi-jihadis, even if the latter pushed it toward more uncompromising, militarised ends.

[502] Lund, "Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front," 10.

[503] Edwin Bakker and Mark Singleton, "Foreign Fighters in the Syria and Iraq Conflict: Statistics and Characteristics of a Rapidly Growing Phenomenon." *Foreign Fighters under International Law and Beyond* (2016): 13–14.

Furthermore, the regime's approach to the uprising also contributed to the empowerment of more radical opposition currents: pursuing the survival of the regime, Bashar al-Assad benefited from the rebels' radicalisation, as portraying the rebellion as extremist both weakened international sympathy for the insurgency and helped frame the state as a source of protection for minorities. Following a cynical survival strategy, in early 2011, one of the initial responses of the regime was to release a large number of detainees, often associated with jihadist milieus, from Syrian prisons[504]. Many of them later became organisers, commanders, or fighters within emergent armed networks, strengthening the revolution's most radical factions and, over time, overshadowing moderate opposition actors[505]. Moreover, the regime's coercive priorities frequently fell most heavily on non-jihadist and less extreme formations, while radical factions sometimes faced less pressure and confrontation from Assadist forces[506]. In practice, these dynamics widened the space in which radical opposition groups could consolidate, thereby allowing Damascus to portray the uprising not as a mass protest movement but as a security threat[507].

Within the insurgency's Islamist currents, the field can be sketched as a spectrum rather than a single bloc: on the one hand were global Salafi-jihadis, organisations whose leadership and outlook were embedded in transnational jihadist causes and who viewed Syria as one front in a wider war; these networks were usually linked to earlier jihadi theatres, especially Iraq and its wing of al-Qaeda[508]. On the other end of the spectrum were homegrown or nationalist Salafis that shared much of the same doctrinal vocabulary with the former group, but tended to be more locally rooted and more focused on Syria's political future, following a more pragmatic path that set them apart from the most uncompromising jihadist currents[509]. Between these poles, a number of factions adopted elements of Islamist and Salafi discourse with varying degrees of ideological commitment, different organisational models and modes of warfare.

---

[504] Florian Waetzel, "Review of *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Evolution of an Insurgency* by Charles Lister." *Democracy and Security* 12, no. 2 (2016): 128.

[505] *Ibidem*.

[506] *Ibidem*.

[507] *Ibidem*.

[508] Lund, "Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front," 14.

[509] *Ibidem*.

The Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) fits squarely toward the homegrown end of this spectrum: formed in December 2012, as a Salafi-leaning coalition bringing together eleven Islamist factions, it was dominated by the Ahrar al-Sham branch[510]. Politically, the Syrian Islamic Front was committed to building an Islamic state centred on Syria, reflecting a more locally oriented project rather than a global one[511]. In this perspective, the Syrian Islamic Front can be understood as a kind of "third way" able to oscillate between more moderate Islamist factions and radical movements[512]. Among the latter, one of the key transnational Salafi-jihadi actors was Jabhat al-Nusra, whose emergence was closely connected to the Iraqi arena, rather than being a purely Syrian faction. The group was organised in mid-2011 by Abu Muhammad al-Sharaʿ al-Julani (b. 1982) operating within the orbit of Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) – the Iraqi al-Qaeda-aligned network – and its creation was publicly announced in January 2012, after having received ISI support to establish the group's Syrian branch[513]. During late 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra quickly became one of the most influential anti-regime forces and the leading Salafi-jihadi faction, expanding its influence in parts of eastern Syria[514]. At the same time, its leader, al-Julani, increasingly pursued a pragmatic strategy aimed at integrating the group within the wider Syrian rebellion, rather than rigidly reproducing the Iraqi model[515]. This move by al-Julani heightened tensions with ISI's leadership, which began to question the reliability and loyalty of its offshoot: by late 2012 and early 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the ISI's leader, intensified oversight over Jabhat al-Nusra and tried to reassert control over the Syrian branch[516]. However, mistrust deepened, until the dispute eventually culminated in a decisive unilateral move: on 9 April 2013, Baghdadi announced the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS/ISIL), declaring the dissolution of Jabhat al-Nusra, as it would be absorbed into

---

[510] *Ivi*, 4.

[511] *Ivi*, 4.

[512] Charles Lister, "Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape." *Policy Briefing*. Doha: Brookings Doha Center, May 2014: 8.

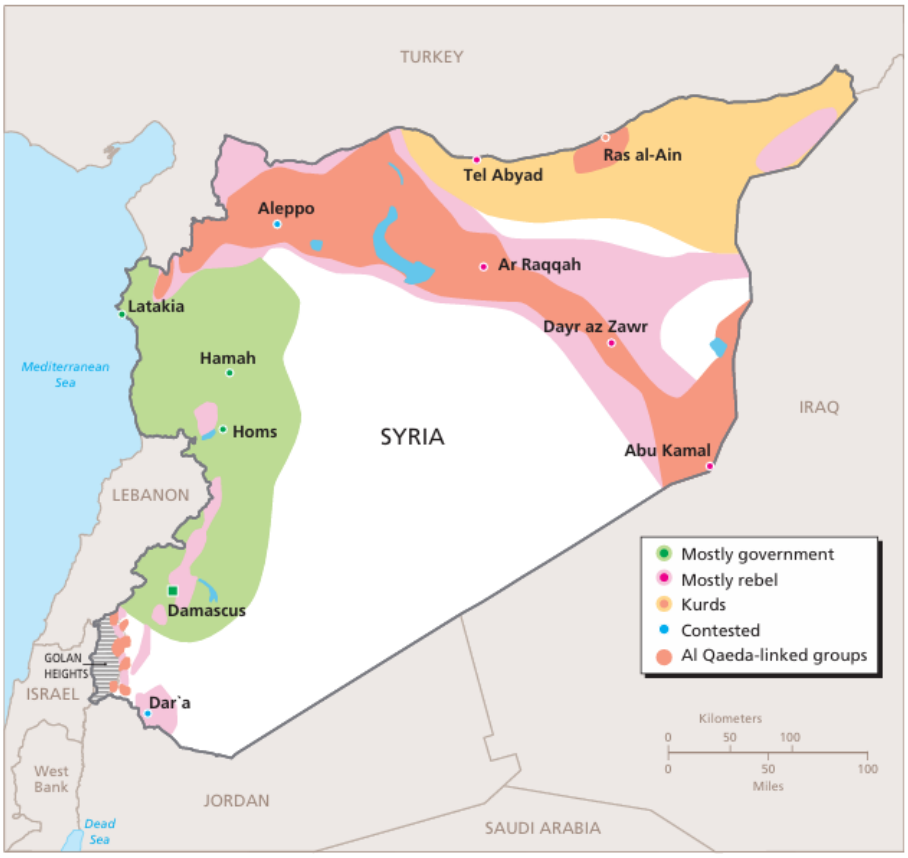
[513] Lund, "The Non-State Militant Landscape in Syria.": 26.

[514] Hassan Hassan, "Two Houses Divided: How Conflict in Syria Shaped the Future of Jihadism." *CTC SENTINEL* 11, no. 9 (October 2018): 2.

[515] *Ibidem*.

[516] *Ibidem*.

the new entity[517]. The very next day, al-Julani publicly rejected the merger, reaffirming his pledge of alliance to al-Qaeda's central leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and not to Baghdadi, thus asserting Jabhat al-Nusra's separate chain of command and distancing it from the Islamic State project[518]. Yet, even after al-Julani opposed the unification, the Islamic State expanded into Syria, turning rivalry into open competition over fighters, territory, and resources, making coexistence increasingly unfeasible. Although Zawahiri tried to contain the rift by insisting the two organisations remain distinct, Baghdadi dismissed the ruling, presenting his decision as irreversible, as the Islamic State would have continued operating in Syria regardless[519].



Map 6. *Rebel vs. Government Control, June 2013*[520].

[517] Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State." *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, no. 19 (March 2015): 25.

[518] *Ibidem*.

[519] *Ivi*, 26.

[520] Brian Michael Jenkins, "The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War." RAND Corporation, 2014: 5.

Following the 2013 ISIL-al-Nusra rupture, the war in Syria had entered a phase in which jihadist actors were no longer a marginal fringe of the conflict, but fundamental contenders shaping the insurgency's trajectory. The uprising that had started a few years earlier had evolved beyond regime-opposition confrontation, turning into a multi-layered civil war. In practice, the split did not remain confined to leadership rivalries, but it fed directly into the broader intra-rebel infighting of 2013 and early 2014, as the competing organisations pursued incompatible strategies for Syria. While other rebels fought Assad on the frontlines, ISIL increasingly focused on consolidating dominance in opposition-held areas by controlling movement through checkpoints, enforcing its version of sharia, and forcibly pushing Sunni rival rebel factions out of localities previously taken from the regime (including Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, Aleppo, and Hasaka); thereby intensifying violence between rebels and further fragmenting the opposition camp[521]. In addition, a major rupture within the global jihadist movement followed in February 2014, when al-Qaeda's central leadership publicly cut ties with ISIS, declaring it was no longer one of its affiliates[522].

Although the statement directly challenged Baghdadi's claims to legitimacy and authority, Zawahiri's condemnation did not stop ISIS from gaining even more organisational autonomy and territory: after the fall of Mosul, Baghdadi proclaimed the establishment of the Caliphate in June 2014, a move that further destabilised the Syrian insurgency by pulling fighters, resources, and political attention into a new centre of gravity[523]. This declaration by the Islamic State was relevant not only due to its symbolic power, but also due to the political order it sought to assert: once the Caliphate was proclaimed, ISIS framed allegiance to Baghdadi as a binding obligation on Muslims, and insisted that other jihadist organisations had no valid authority in any area under Islamic State control, thereby portraying competing factions as illegitimate unless they submitted to this new hierarchy[524].

---

[521] Hassan, "Two Houses Divided: How Conflict in Syria Shaped the Future of Jihadism." 4.

[522] *Ibidem*.

[523] *Ibidem*.

[524] Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State." 31-32.

4.3 Internationalisation of the conflict and foreign intervention

By mid-2013, the Syrian conflict had already moved far beyond the political grammar of protest and repression. What began in 2011 as a wave of civic mobilisation had been rapidly reconfigured by escalating coercion, militarisation, and fragmentation into a civil war with mass lethality: a report commissioned by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights estimated at least 92,901 documented deaths between March 2011 and the end of April 2013, underscoring how quickly violence had reached a systemic scale[525].

In parallel, episodes associated with chemical weapons use became emblematic of both the regime's coercive repertoire and the conflict's growing international relevance. Allegations began to surface already in early 2013, but the turning point came with the 21 August 2013 attack in Eastern Ghouta, carried out while UN inspectors were in Syria, after which UN assessments confirmed large-scale chemical weapons use and indicated many samples positive for sarin – a war crime under international law[526]. These attacks functioned lass as a conventional battlefield instrument than as tools of terror, and their use reshaped diplomacy around the war by intensifying international pressure: faced with the risk of external military intervention, the Syrian regime agreed to sign the "Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction" in September 2013, accepting to declare its chemical arsenal and eliminate it under UN supervision[527]. Yet, even after the 2013-2014 disarmament process, the chemical file did not simply close, and later findings, such as recurring allegations of chlorine attacks, suggested that chemical weapons remained an active dimension of the war[528]. These episodes signalled a decisive threshold: Syria was no longer perceived as a domestic uprising, but as a major international crisis in which humanitarian, security, and political concerns increasingly overlapped.

---

[525] Megan Price, Jeff Klingner, Anas Qtiesh, and Patrick Ball. *"Updated Statistical Analysis of Documentation of Killings in the Syrian Arab Republic."* Report commissioned by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (June 13, 2013): 1.

[526] Güçtürk, "War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity in Syria," 37.

[527] *Ibidem*.

[528] *Ivi*, 38.

Internationalisation did not occur as a single external intervention; rather, it emerged through the cumulative entanglement of local dynamics with regional and global agendas. On the one hand, the regime's resilience was progressively reinforced by external backing (especially from Russia and Iran), providing political support and material assistance at key moments when the balance appeared uncertain[529]. On the other hand, support to different rebel groups became structured through selective patronage networks that channelled money, arms, and influence, sharpening rivalry within the anti-regime camp and tying the revolution's trajectories to the priorities of external sponsors[530]. In this sense, the war in Syria evolved into a multi-layered conflict: a national civil war embedded into regional and international logics, where proxy war dynamics intersected with local coalitions and strategic calculations of foreign powers[531]. Meanwhile, the entry of transnational jihadist actors pushed counter-terrorism objectives closer to the centre of international engagement, setting the stage for the major military and political alignments that followed from 2014 onward.

4.3.1 Syria as a proxy war battlefield: regional sponsors

As the conflict in Syria unfolded and grew progressively fractured and multi-layered, the country became a stage on which external powers could pursue their rivalries indirectly, through Syrian partners on the ground, by funding, arming, advising, and politically backing local actors, rather than fighting each other openly as direct belligerents[532]. In this sense, the Syrian war is often described as a proxy war: although its origins and causes were rooted in domestic dynamics, the uprising and subsequent militarization became increasingly internationalised as

[529] Jenkins, "The Dynamics of Syria′s Civil War." 7.

[530] Anand Gopal and Jeremy Hodge, "Introduction: A Network View of Syria's Proxy War." *Social Networks, Class, and the Syrian Proxy War*. New America, 2021: 10-11.

[531] Erwin van Veen, Alba Di Pietrantonio Pellise, Nancy Ezzeddine, and Paolo Napolitano. "Tracing the Evolution of the Syrian Civil War (2011-2020)." *Band-Aids, Not Bullets: EU Policies and Interventions in the Syrian and Iraqi Civil Wars*. Clingendael Institute, 2021: 15.

[532] Jeffrey Martini, Erin York, and William Young, "Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition." In *Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition*, RAND Corporation, 2013. 1.

foreign actors treated the battlefield as a way to reshape the regional balance of power at comparatively lower cost than direct interstate war[533].

Syria became particularly vulnerable to this dynamic for two connected reasons: first, the conflict rapidly became embedded in wider regional rivalries, with opposing coalitions pursuing incompatible outcomes for Syria and the Assad regime; second, the fragmentation of authority inside the country made external sponsorship and protection increasingly appealing to domestic actors[534]. Therefore, the proxy dimension of the Syrian conflict intensified over time, rather than emerging fully formed from the outset, and, as the war evolved, it acquired the features of an internationalised civil war: the regime and its allies remained pivotal in shaping the overall trajectory, while external support to anti-regime armed groups fuelled the conflict and extended its duration[535]. At the same time, external backing for the opposition also shifted in its patterns: between late 2011 and late 2012, funding and arms flows were comparatively decentralised, arriving via multiple donors and conduits, while factions competed to secure resources[536]. From late 2012, opposition support became more structured, as financial and weapons transfers increasingly flowed through two competing sponsor networks – one linked mainly to Qatar and Turkey, and the other tied more closely to Saudi Arabia – which pushed many factions to align with one side or the other in line with the political vision they sought for Syria and the region[537]. After 2015, the rise of ISIS and Russia's intervention eventually reshaped regional and international priorities and, with them, the configuration of external support[538].

---

[533] Nasreen Akhtar and Hala Nageen, "The Syrian Conflict: An Inside-Out and Outside-In Approach." *International Journal on World Peace* 36, no. 3 (2019): 23.

[534] Martini, York, and Young, "Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition," 2.

[535] van Veen, Di Pietrantonio Pellise, Ezzeddine, and Napolitano, "Tracing the Evolution of the Syrian Civil War (2011-2020)," 15.

[536] Anand Gopal and Jeremy Hodge, "The Syrian Proxy War: 2011–2016." *Social Networks, Class, and the Syrian Proxy War*. New America, 2021: 27.

[537] *Ibidem*.

[538] *Ibidem*.

Opposition to Assad Regime	Non-Aligned	Support for Assad Regime
Turkey	Israel	Russia
Saudi Arabia	Iraq	Iran
United States	Lebanon	Hezbollah
GCC States		
Jordan		
Libya		

Table 1. *Alignment of external actors (2013)*[539]. Source: Jeffrey Martini, Erin York, and William Young, "Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition." (cropped)[540]

The following sections map the main regional sponsors on the anti-Assad side before turning to the pro-regime axis. On this side, regional sponsorship combined geopolitical aims (weakening Damascus and constraining Iranian influence), security concerns (border instability, spillover, displacement), and competing political preferences on what a post-Assad order could look like[541]. Although Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia were all committed, at least in the early phase, to seeing Assad removed, their involvement in Syria reflected partly overlapping but not identical objectives[542]. Indeed, the anti-regime camp was internally divided by different attitudes toward Islamist governance and by Turkey's distinct priority of managing border security and preventing Kurdish territorial consolidation[543].

Turkey's initial turn against Assad was paired with a strong investment in exiled opposition structures and in cross border facilitation: Ankara supported the Syrian National Council (SNC)[544] that operated from Turkey and enabled the logistical sustainment of several rebel actors from, or through, Turkish territory[545]. This policy was also shaped by Turkey's ruling party, the AKP (in English the "Justice and Development Party"), that had been governing since

---

[539] In Table 1 Libya refers to the post-2011 authorities based in Tripoli, that positioned themselves against Assad. Later, actors linked to Khalifa Haftar in eastern Libya pursued closer ties with Damascus. See Christopher Phillips, "How the wars in Libya and Syria are strangely intertwined," *Middle East Eye*, July 22, 2020. https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/how-wars-libya-and-syria-are-strangely-intertwined. (Last accessed on 12 February 2026).

[540] Martini, York, and Young, "Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition," 2.

[541] *Ibidem*.

[542] Christopher Phillips, "International actors in the Syrian conflict." *Orient* 60, no.2 (2019): 9.

[543] Orit Perlov and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Syria's Civil War: Kurdish Success, Turkish Dilemma." Institute for National Security Studies, 2016: 2-3.

[544] For further details, see above 4.2.1 Militarisation and fragmentation of the opposition.

[545] Phillips, "International actors in the Syrian conflict," 10.

2002. The AKP, Turkey's most conservative and Islamist-leaning party, showed open support towards actors linked to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, whose political orientation was considered as broadly compatible with Turkey's preferences for a new order in Syria[546]. In parallel, Turkey's approach to sponsorship reflected deep security concerns: sharing its southern border with Syria, the war's escalation soon raised fears of spillover and militant infiltration, while mass influx of refugees increased pressure on domestic governance[547]. Lastly, Ankara's strategy was decisively influenced by the Kurdish question[548]: as Kurdish-led forces gained control along northern Syria, Turkey prioritised preventing the PYD/YPG from consolidating authority along the border, driven by fears that increased Kurdish territorial consolidation would strengthen PKK's militancy and reduce Turkish leverage[549].

Among Gulf states, both Qatar and Saudi Arabia positioned themselves against Assad and, especially in the initial phase of the conflict, invested heavily to support the armed and political opposition. Their sponsorship bolstered the opposition's capabilities, yet it enhanced fragmentation by strengthening multiple factions rather than a single unified front[550]. Furthermore, the clearest fault line between Doha and Riyadh concerned which opposition actors they sought to empower: Qatar was more inclined to work with Muslim Brotherhood networks and, broadly, with the mainstream Islamist currents, often aligning with Turkey[551]; whereas Riyadh was less comfortable with those actors, and sought to back alternative leadership figures and political groupings closer to Saudi preferences, partly to counterbalance Doha's support of Islamist frameworks[552].

Meanwhile, on the pro-Assad side, Iran emerged as the central regional sponsor, treating the survival of the Syrian regime as a core strategic interest within Tehran's wider strategy in the region[553]. Iran's commitment was rooted in Syria's role as a fundamental Arab ally and transit

---

[546] Thowhidul Islam, "Turkey's Akp Foreign Policy Toward Syria: Shifting Policy During the Arab Spring." *International Journal on World Peace* 33, no. 1 (2016): 24.

[547] Perlov and Lindenstrauss, "Syria's Civil War: Kurdish Success, Turkish Dilemma." 1.

[548] For more details on the Kurdish question, Kurdish parties and militancy, see above 3.2.3 The Kurdish question: a cross-border dilemma3.2.3 The Kurdish question: a cross-border dilemma

[549] Perlov and Lindenstrauss, "Syria's Civil War: Kurdish Success, Turkish Dilemma." 2.

[550] Phillips, "International actors in the Syrian conflict." 12.

[551] Lister, "Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape." 2.

[552] Phillips, "International actors in the Syrian conflict." 12-13.

[553] Martini, York, and Young, "Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition." 2.

route through which Tehran could sustain its wider regional networks, most importantly by keeping open the corridor that enables Hezbollah to receive its military supplies[554]. In this landscape, the Syrian battlefield was pivotal to protect the Iranian axis in the Levant and preserve strategic depth through Damascus and Hezbollah. To support Assad in the war, Iran did not merely provide diplomatic backing, but it also combined substantial financial and material support, training, advisory support, and technical expertise[555]. Operationally, Iran relied largely on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as the main instrument to support Assad on the ground, deploying personnel to Syria to train, advise, and help coordinate regime forces[556]. In addition, Iran facilitated Hezbollah's entry into combat alongside Syrian troops from 2012 and expanded the pro-Assad mobilisation by bringing in foreign Shiʿa fighters from Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, reinforcing the regime's manpower[557].

To sum up, Syria had become a consolidated proxy battlefield in which regional patrons structured the conflict around two broad axes, pro- and anti-Assad, each pursuing its own interests, sometimes convergent and sometimes openly competing. Yet, from 2014 onward, the war's trajectory was no longer shaped by regional sponsors alone: the consolidation of ISIS and the resulting reordering of external priorities brought the United States and Russia into a more decisive role, shifting the conflict from a predominantly regional proxy competition to a phase increasingly defined by great-power intervention.

4.3.2 International actors and strategic priorities: Russia and the U.S.

While the conflict remained rooted in a struggle over authority and legitimacy inside Syria, its evolution was increasingly shaped by external involvement that enabled, constrained, or redirected local actors. Although Syrian forces cannot be understood as simple extensions of foreign capitals, their relative strength, cohesion, and strategic room for manoeuvre were repeatedly affected by the diplomatic protection, financial channels, and military assistance provided by outside backers[558]. In other words, foreign involvement did not replace Syrian

[554] *Ibidem*.

[555] Phillips, "International actors in the Syrian conflict." 9.

[556] W. Andrew Terrill, "Iran's Strategy for Saving Asad." *Middle East Journal* 69, no. 2 (2015): 230.

[557] Phillips, "International actors in the Syrian conflict." 9.

[558] *Ivi*, 7.

agency, but it often reconfigured the constraints under which domestic actors operated. Beyond the regional sponsors discussed above[559], the United States and Russia proved the most consequential at the global level, not only for what they did or declined to do militarily, but also because their rivalry turned Syria into a dispute over the rules of crisis management in the post-Cold War order[560].

Those divergent approaches were sharpened by the Libyan precedent. In March 2011, Russia did not block an UN-authorised intervention framed around civilian protection; yet, Moscow later argued that the mandate had been stretched in practice into a vehicle for regime change and that the fragmentation that followed Qaddafi's fall served as evidence that externally driven transitions can produce prolonged disorder[561]. At the same time, Qaddafi's fall deprived Russia of a key partner it had cultivated in the 2000s, and underscored how quickly influence in the region could evaporate once an allied regime collapsed, reinforcing the strategic value Moscow attached to preserving its remaining footholds in the Middle East, above all in Syria[562].

Russia's relationship with Damascus dates back to the Cold War era[563], when Assad's Syria became one of the Soviet Union's main allies in the Middle East. After a period of weakened ties in the 1990s, the partnership was revived under Vladimir Putin in 2005, when Moscow cancelled roughly three quarters of Syria's debt to Russia, as a symbolic way to reinforce their alliance[564]. When the 2011 crisis erupted, Syria, therefore, held major strategic value for Russia on several fronts: first, it hosted Moscow's only naval outlet and logistical foothold on the Mediterranean at the port of Tartus, providing a crucial access beyond Russia's immediate borders[565]; a coastal presence that would later be reinforced by the construction of Russia's Khmeimim military base near Latakia after the 2015 intervention[566]. Second, sustaining the

---

[559] See above 4.3.1 Syria as a proxy war battlefield: regional sponsors.

[560] van Veen, Di Pietrantonio Pellise, Ezzeddine, and Napolitano, "Tracing the Evolution of the Syrian Civil War (2011-2020)," 16.

[561] Julie Wilhelmsen and Kristin Haugevik, "Strategic Partners against Terrorism 2.0?: Russia's Initial Positions on Syria." Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), 2016: 2.

[562]Alexey Malashenko, "Russia and The Arab Spring." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013: 12.

[563] For further details, see above 2.3.4 A Soviet ally in the Levant: ties with the USSR.

[564] Wilhelmsen and Haugevik, "Strategic Partners against Terrorism 2.0?" 4.

[565] Malashenko, "Russia and The Arab Spring." 6.

[566] Phillips, "International actors in the Syrian conflict." 7-8.

Assad regime helped the Kremlin project its influence and act as a diplomatic counterpart to the United States, rather than allow the Middle East to fall fully under Western predominance[567]. Finally, Russia feared that Assad's ousting could create a power vacuum in which Islamist extremists might thrive (a concern shaped in part by the memories of the Chechen wars)[568]. In the name of its alliance with Assad, as early as October 2011, a few months into the uprising, Russia used its veto at the UN Security Council to shield Damascus from formal international condemnation and the possibility of escalating punitive measures[569]. Meanwhile, the United States and its Western partners moved in the opposite direction, publicly calling for Assad's departure, imposing sanctions, and supporting anti-Assad forces politically[570]. By 2012, Syria's diplomatic isolation on the international stage had deepened, a trend reinforced by the Arab League's decision to suspend Damascus's membership, a move that aligned much of the Arab Middle East against Assad[571].

Amid an increasingly unfavourable regional environment for Assad, Arab and UN initiatives began to converge on a clearer transition agenda: in January 2012, the Arab League called for Assad to hand executive authority and move toward a negotiated settlement. When Damascus rejected the plan, it was brought to the UN table, but Russia and China vetoed a draft resolution that would have effectively internationalised that framework through UN mediation[572]. With the route blocked, the focus shifted to an internationally brokered political track, culminating in the Geneva I Conference (30 June 2012), which outlined the establishment of a transitional governing body, operating in a neutral environment and formed by mutual consent, potentially including representatives from both the government and the opposition[573]. However, the Geneva I plan remained unimplemented, because the agreement was subject to incompatible interpretations among key stakeholders, most sharply between Washington and Moscow –

---

[567] Wilhelmsen and Haugevik, "Strategic Partners against Terrorism 2.0?" 4.

[568] Matthew D. Crosston, "Cold War and Ayatollah Residues: Syria as a Chessboard for Russia, Iran, and the United States." *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (2014): 96.

[569] Phillips, "International actors in the Syrian conflict." 7.

[570] Wilhelmsen and Haugevik, "Strategic Partners against Terrorism 2.0?" 2-3.

[571] Malashenko, "Russia and The Arab Spring." 13.

[572] ACRPS Policy Analysis Unit, *Geneva Conference II: Challenges Faced in Syria and the Region.* Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, March 2014: 2.

[573] *Ivi*, 3.

particularly over whether "mutual consent" implied Assad's removal from the transition process[574].

The failure of Geneva I meant that, by 2013, crisis management shifted from a diplomatic transition agenda to narrower priority files. A moment of particular concern followed the Ghouta attack of August 2013, one of the first chemical incidents to receive strong international condemnation and triggered an immediate U.S. response: for Washington, preventing the proliferation of Assad's chemical arsenal had become a core priority, often described by President Obama as a "red line", and Ghouta was widely seen as the moment that line was crossed[575]. The United States began preparing punitive strikes, but eventually stepped back from direct military action, accepting a Russia-mediated arrangement to place Syria's chemical stockpile under international control and proceed with its destruction[576]. For the Kremlin, the chemical weapons crisis offered an opportunity to block Western intervention while reasserting Russia's role as an indispensable broker[577]: consistent with this approach, Moscow supported UNSC Resolution 2118 (2013), which set obligations and deadlines for the definite removal of Syria's arsenal and associated production facilities[578]. As a result, the disarmament process linked to chemical weapons became a compromise that temporarily defused the immediate risk of U.S. strikes while transforming the crisis into a negotiated file: it allowed Washington to claim progress on chemical non-proliferation without escalating militarily, and it enabled Moscow to avoid intervention and reposition itself in the mediation talks. At the same time, the episode reinforced a broader dynamic in U.S.-Russia interaction over Syria: moments of international escalation, at least in the early phase, tended to be channelled into negotiations, containing direct confrontation while largely preserving Moscow's prerogatives regarding externally driven political outcomes[579].

A clear turning point in U.S.-Russia relations arrived in 2014, with direct repercussions for Syria's landscape. First, the Ukraine crisis of February 2014, culminating in Russia's annexation of Crimea, prompted the United States and the European Union to impose sanctions

---

[574] *Ibidem*.

[575] Phillips, "International actors in the Syrian conflict." 8.

[576] *Ibidem*.

[577] Malashenko, "Russia and The Arab Spring." 13.

[578] Wilhelmsen and Haugevik, "Strategic Partners against Terrorism 2.0?" 2.

[579] *Ivi*, 3.

and intensify Russia's diplomatic isolation, hardening the broader climate in which the Syrian war unfolded[580]. Second, this deterioration coincided with the failure of Geneva II talks on Syria (January-February 2014), convened as the intended follow-up to Geneva I: the negotiations ran through two rounds with no meaningful progress due to lack of consensus, reflecting the entrenched gap between the sponsors[581]. Third, the rapid rise of ISIS in 2014, reinforced by the proclamation of the Caliphate in June, accelerated the reordering of U.S. priorities in Syria: concerns shifted from supporting the anti-Assad rebellion to fighting the Islamic State, which became the West's primary security challenge, with resources and operational attention redirected toward the emerging anti-ISIS campaign[582].

4.3.3 Reconfiguration of the war: anti-ISIS campaign, Russia's intervention and realignments (2014-2016)

By mid-2014, the collapse of state authority across contiguous spaces in Syria and Iraq created conditions in which armed non-state actors could seize territory, govern populations, and compete with state institutions over functions normally associated with sovereignty, including basic administration, enforcing rules, and regulating public order[583]. Indeed, in this vacuum, ISIS did more than exploit battlefield gains: it recast military expansion into a claim of legitimate rule. The June 2014 Caliphate proclamation was presented as an alternative political order, one that rejected the logic of bounded nation-states and instead asserted a religious-political authority intended to supersede existing borders and governments[584].

The announcement of the Caliphate also marked a shift in how the conflict was perceived externally: ISIS was no longer treated as one armed faction among many, but as a project combining conventional military capacity, territorial control, and cross-border ideological

---

[580] *Ivi*, 2.

[581] ACRPS Policy Analysis Unit, *Geneva Conference II: Challenges Faced in Syria and the Region.* 1.

[582] van Veen, Di Pietrantonio Pellise, Ezzeddine, and Napolitano, "Tracing the Evolution of the Syrian Civil War (2011-2020)," 16. 18.

[583] David M. Kobs, "The Ideological and Political Power of the Islamic State." Edited by Larry D. Miller. *The Army War College Review*. Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2016: 41-42.

[584] *Ivi*, 42.

mobilisation[585]. In parallel, the dramatic weakening of Iraqi state forces during the summer of 2014 reinforced the sense that the crisis had become systemic; ISIS's offensive was unfolding with striking speed: as Iraqi units collapsed, the group pushed into Mosul and rapidly expanded across northern Iraq, effectively eliminating four Iraqi army divisions and, within less than ninety days, consolidating a territorial domain encompassing millions of inhabitants and an unprecedented financial base, built on the revenues generated in areas under its control[586]. ISIS's strategy followed a hybrid logic, blending conventional assaults with guerrilla warfare and terrorism, in order to exploit local vulnerabilities, intimidate communities, and expand beyond its initial strongholds[587]. This combination increased the group's adaptability and made it harder to contain, since it could survive territorial setbacks by dispersing its forces, relying on clandestine networks, and continuing to destabilise reclaimed areas through insurgent attacks[588].

The international response that followed prioritised degrading ISIS's military capacity, while empowering local partners to hold ground: the campaign, known as "Operation Inherent Resolve", was launched in the summer of 2014 and opened with U.S. airstrikes in Iraq in August, establishing air power as the coalition's primary instrument while relying on partner forces for ground operations[589]. In the early battlefield dynamics of late 2014 and early 2015, the coalition did not expect an immediate territorial collapse; instead, its initial objective was to slow ISIS's operational speed and block further rapid offensives[590]. Over time, the central challenge became whether tactical gains – recapturing towns or pushing ISIS off key routes – could be translated into durable control, limiting the group's ability to regroup, disperse and re-emerge[591].

A decisive early test of this approach was the battle of Kobane (October 2014-early 2015), which shaped both the coalition campaign and the internal alignment of armed actors in Syria:

---

[585] Harleen Gambhir, "Isis's Global Strategy: a Wargame." Institute for the Study of War, 2015: 9.

[586] Kobs, "The Ideological and Political Power of the Islamic State." 40.

[587] Jessica Lewis McFate, "The Isis Defense in Iraq and Syria: Countering an Adaptive Enemy." Institute for the Study of War, 2015: 17-18.

[588] *Ibidem*.

[589] Kobs, "The Ideological and Political Power of the Islamic State." 43.

[590] McFate, "The Isis Defense in Iraq and Syria: Countering an Adaptive Enemy." 17-18.

[591] *Ibidem*.

as ISIS attempted to seize the Syrian-Turkish border town of Kobane, Syrian Kurdish forces, backed by U.S. air support, halted the offensive[592]. The outcome reinforced the coalition's emerging reliance on Kurdish forces as the most reliable local partner against ISIS, since Kobane's battle demonstrated how sustained air power combined with cohesive ground forces could be translated into tangible gains[593]. Building on that experience, the coalition's involvement quickly shifted from a defensive air-support mission to a more structured operational partnership with Syrian Kurdish forces across northern Syria[594]; above all the YPG (People's Protection Units), the main Kurdish militia on the ground, and the broader PYD (Democratic Union Party) political-military structure that governed Kurdish-held areas[595]. In practice, sustained and structured air support enabled the PYD/YPG to expand outward from Kobane, consolidate territory along key corridors, and weaken ISIS presence in the north[596].

The campaign was further reshaped in the autumn of 2015 by the creation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an umbrella coalition designed to bring together the Kurdish PYD/YPG and a range of Arab and other non-Kurdish armed groups under a single command label[597]. From the start, their formation was closely tied to U.S. operational needs in the anti-ISIS campaign. At the same time, despite its multi-ethnic presentation, the Syrian Democratic Forces largely remained Kurdish-dominant, functioning as a vehicle that helped confer international legitimacy on Kurdish-led armed groups and enabled them to consolidate control across a significant portion of northern Syria, while also deepening tensions with Turkey, which was wary that the new arrangement would entrench a Kurdish enclave along its southern border[598].

As Washington pressed ahead with its campaign, Moscow entered the war in September 2015, launching a direct air operation in Syria[599]. Russia framed the move as a counter-terrorism

---

[592] *Ivi*, 9. 22.

[593] William Hale, "Turkey, the U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War." *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 4 (2019): 29.

[594] Sam Heller, "External intervention in the Syrian civil war, 2015," in *SIPRI Yearbook 2016: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 135.

[595] *Ibidem*.

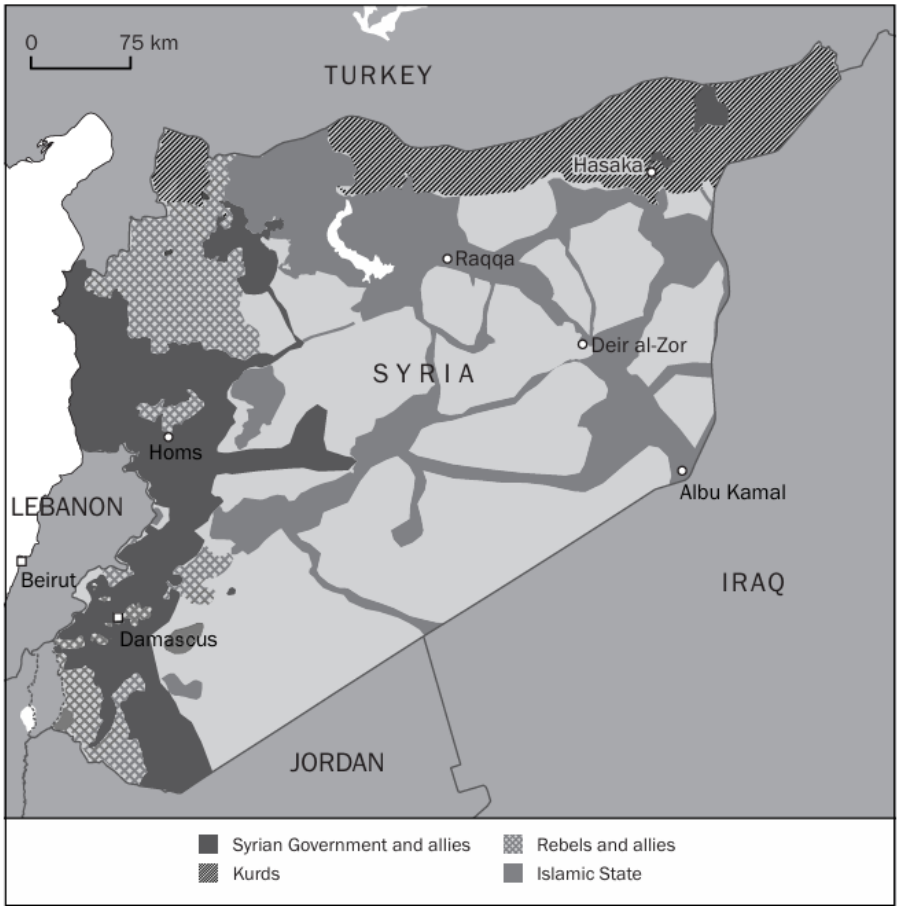
[596] *Ivi*, 135-136.

[597] *Ibidem*.

[598] Hale, "Turkey, the U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War," *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 4 (2019): 29-30.

[599] Heller, "External intervention in the Syrian civil war, 2015," 137-138.

mission in support of Syria's internationally recognised government, embedding its rationale for intervention in a broader context of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference; yet, Russian involvement in practice was also shaped by a more immediate objective: preventing Assad's military collapse[600]. Indeed, in 2015, regime forces controlled only one-sixth of the Syrian territory[601].



Map 7. *Control of Syrian territory by armed groups, December 2015*.[602]

[600] Anton Lavrov, Julien Barnes-Dacey, Dimitar Bechev, Timofey Borisov, Dmitriy Frolovskiy, Florence Gaub, Dalia Ghanem-Yazbeck, et al. "Russia in Syria: A Military Analysis." Edited by Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secrieru. *RUSSIA'S RETURN TO THE MIDDLE EAST: BUILDING SANDCASTLES?* European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2018: 47-48.

[601] *Ivi*, 52.

[602] Heller, "External intervention in the Syrian civil war, 2015," 132. [Figure. Credit: Hugo Ahlenius, Nordpil, <https://nordpil.se/>. Source: Syria Live Map, <http://syria.liveuamap.com/en/time/03.01.2016>.] (last accessed on 02/02/2026).

Russian airstrikes did not focus only on ISIS but also hit a wide range of anti-Assad armed groups, including factions backed by the United States and Turkey[603]. Operationally, Russian airpower became a key enabler of a strengthened pro-Assad coalition: Moscow provided air support, while Iranian-backed forces and allied militias supplied much of the ground manpower, in a coordinated effort to secure strategic hubs[604]. Furthermore, Russia's role quickly became systemic rather than episodic: beyond the air campaign, Moscow deployed limited but pivotal presence on the ground, including military advisers, liaison officers, and specialised teams for operational coordination, helping regime forces achieve battlefield gains and improve unit effectiveness[605]. Rather than deploying large conventional ground formations, Russia consolidated its intervention by setting up an infrastructure – centred on bases, logistics, command-and-control – that could operate in Syria on a permanent basis. In parallel, Damascus granted Moscow long-term access to its air and naval facilities, turning the 2015 intervention into a durable and strategic foothold for Russia[606]. Together, the mix of bases, advisors, and ground units helped Russia to entrench its military leverage, while keeping its official troop presence relatively limited[607].

The most consequential payoff of this reinforced coalition in support of the regime came with the recapture of eastern Aleppo in December 2016, widely treated as Assad's most important victory since the outbreak of the war[608]: Aleppo was one of the principal rebel strongholds[609]

---

[603] Lavrov, Barnes-Dacey, Bechev, Borisov, Frolovskiy, Gaub, Ghanem-Yazbeck, et al. "Russia in Syria: A Military Analysis." 48.

[604] *Ivi*, 50.

[605] Zvi Magen, Udi Dekel, and Sarah Fainberg, "How Deep Are the Cracks in the Russian-Iranian Coalition in Syria?" Institute for National Security Studies, 2016: 1-2.

[606] Lavrov, Barnes-Dacey, Bechev, Borisov, Frolovskiy, Gaub, Ghanem-Yazbeck, et al. "Russia in Syria: A Military Analysis." 53.

[607] *Ivi*, 50-53.

[608] Francesco Fusco, "La Politica Di Potenza Della Federazione Russa in Siria." *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali* 88, no. 1 (349) (2021): 108.

[609] In this context, "rebel" refers to the constellation of armed opposition factions that held Aleppo's eastern districts from mid-2012 until the late-2016 offensive by regime forces. The rebel coalition ranged from Free Syrian Army factions to Islamist militias and radical jihadi groups. Notably, Aleppo was not entirely under rebel control during this period: the western districts remained under government

that the government managed to retake after the 2015 intervention, signalling that Moscow's entry had decisively reversed earlier expectations of regime erosion. More broadly, the fall of Aleppo deprived the armed opposition of its most significant urban base and confirmed that the balance of power was shifting in Assad's favour, as regime advances were increasingly synchronised with Russian and Iranian support[610].

Image 9. *Syrian and Russian soldiers, March 2016.*[611]
On the car's hood, the Arabic text reads *al-maham al-khassa* (المهام الخاصة),
which literally means "Special Operations".

This military turning point also had immediate diplomatic effects: as regime forces consolidated control in Aleppo, Ankara, still formally committed to Assad's eventual removal, began to assess the new scenario shaped by Russia's intervention and by the rising relevance of the Kurdish question – as U.S.-backed SDF gains increasingly became Turkey's primary security

authority, while some neighbourhoods in the north of the city were held by Kurdish forces. Moreover, ISIS presence extended in rural areas across parts of the Aleppo governorate.

[610] Udi Dekel, "The War in Syria: Advancing Toward a New Stage?" Institute for National Security Studies, 2018: 1-2.

[611] Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, "The Russian Gambit in Syria." Danish Institute for International Studies, 2016. [Source: AP, Pavel Golovkin]

concern – and it consequently moved toward more pragmatic coordination with Moscow[612]. In line with this rapprochement, in late December 2016, Russia and Turkey jointly sponsored a ceasefire framework between the Syrian government and segments of the armed opposition (excluding ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra), effectively signalling a shift from the stalled UN-led Geneva track, toward a new diplomatic format that soon evolved into the Astana process in 2017[613].

4.4 Stalemate and regime survival without victory

Although the recapture of Aleppo in December 2016 decisively strengthened the regime's position, it did not bring the war close to an end; rather, it ushered in a new phase of managed conflict. Indeed, the period that followed was characterised by a gradual consolidation in which the regime reasserted control step by step, combining sustained battlefield pressure with negotiated arrangements that translated into a territorial recovery of state authority. Between 2016 and 2018, Damascus dismantled most organised opposition enclaves, retaking much of the territory lost between 2012 and 2015, thereby enabling the regime to reframe the conflict as effectively won[614].

Yet, in practice, the territorial consolidation that came after 2016 was rarely the product of battlefield conquest alone: so-called "reconciliation agreements" (*muslaha*) and "de-escalation zones" became central instruments through which the regime (and its allies) managed Syria's fragmentation and gradually consolidated power[615]. While the two operated at different levels, they worked in tandem to translate military leverage into political and administrative control. On the one hand, reconciliation agreements functioned less as a genuine political compromise than as a mechanism for converting coercion into compliance: in some cases, they involved limited arrangements after a ceasefire, in others they amounted to near-surrender outcomes, including organised transfers of fighters – and at times, broader population displacement – out

---

[612] Hale, "Turkey, the U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War," 31.

[613] *Ivi*, 31-32.

[614] Philippe Droz-Vincent, "Fighting for a Monopoly on Governance: How the Asad State 'Won' the Syrian War and to What Extent." *Middle East Journal* 75, no. 1 (2021): 33.

[615] Raymond Hinnebusch and Omar Imady, "Syria's Reconciliation Agreements." Report. *St. Andrews Research Repository*, July 30, 2017: 1.

of contested areas[616]. On the other hand, de-escalation zones operated as a macro-framework that temporarily froze selected fronts and managed the opposition's remaining space; they were formalised through the Astana track, launched in January 2017 under Russian, Turkish and Iranian sponsorship as a parallel negotiation channel to the UN-led Geneva process, with a more operational focus on ceasefires and territorial management than on a comprehensive political transition[617]. In this setting, opposition groups, already weakened by battlefield losses, were channelled into the Astana framework: the resulting arrangement delineated four de-escalation zones (northern Homs, Eastern Ghouta, Darʿa and Idlib) and framed the reduction of hostilities around commitments to humanitarian access, the restoration of basic services, and counterterrorism operations[618].

Despite the regime's gains and its initial reconsolidation, Syria's map remained deeply fractured, with two unresolved theatres in particular shaping the post-2016 order: the northwest, centred on Idlib, and the semi-autonomous northeast under SDF control and U.S. military presence[619]. The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) became Washington's core local partner and proved the most effective U.S. ally against ISIS: this partnership was pivotal to the campaign's endgame and, by 2017-2019, the Islamic State lost its major territorial hubs and no longer held large contiguous portions of terrain[620]; although the group adapted rather than disappearing, even after the collapse of the Caliphate's territorial project[621].

The northwest remained the main area of unresolved conflict and humanitarian vulnerability, since it contained the largest remaining opposition enclave and became a focal point of Russian and Turkish bargaining[622]. In 2019-2020, regime offensives around Idlib, backed by Russia, triggered mass displacement and brought Ankara and Moscow close to direct escalation, before

---

[616] *Ivi*, 3.

[617] Michael Singh, Charles Cleveland, Melissa Dalton, Frederic Hof, Kimberly Kagan, Mara Karlin, Dana Stroul, et al. "Assessment of The Current Situation in Syria." *Syria Study Group*. US Institute of Peace, 2019: 28.

[618] Hinnebusch and Imady, "Syria's Reconciliation Agreements." 1-2.

[619] Droz-Vincent, "Fighting for a Monopoly on Governance," 33.

[620] Singh, Cleveland, Dalton, Hof, Kagan, Karlin, Stroul, et al. "Assessment of The Current Situation in Syria." 32.

[621] *Ivi*, 18.

[622] Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, "Syria: 10 Years On." Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2021: 1.

a ceasefire reached on 5 March 2020 lowered the risk of large-scale hostilities; yet it did not remove the underlying drivers of renewed clashes[623].

Taken together, these developments produced a conflict that was increasingly managed rather than resolved: front lines hardened, external guarantors shaped the terms of de-escalation, and Damascus's territorial and administrative recovery did not translate into full sovereignty control. In this sense, the regime survived and re-consolidated, but it did so without achieving reunification, integrity of borders, durable peace, or a settlement capable of rebuilding political consent. This configuration helps understand why the post-2016 phase can be described as regime survival without victory: the regime reasserted its presence and coercive control, but it did not secure the political conditions normally associated with winning a civil war. In this optic, Assad's win should be read as a phase in the conflict's evolution rather than its termination[624].

A first dimension of this legitimacy crisis is Syria's shift from relatively autonomous rule to a "transactional state", in which regime authority is no longer exercised though a self-sufficient sovereign apparatus[625]; instead, it rests on continuous bargaining: domestically, with powerful networks that grew stronger out of the war economy (such as armed intermediaries, and others brokers linked to militias and business elites) and, externally, with patrons (above all Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah) whose support remains indispensable for sustaining territorial control and regime durability[626]. Paradoxically, these foreign interventions were critical for survival, but they also contributed to erode Syria's national sovereignty and autonomy by weakening central command and embedding external influence within the country's state institutions[627].

A second dimension of the legitimacy crisis concerned the regime's incomplete recovery of territorial sovereignty, especially in the domains that ordinarily signal effective state authority:

---

[623] *Ivi*, 2.

[624] Samar Batrawi, "The Nature of the Syrian Regime." *Pandora's Box in Syria: Anticipating Negative Externalities of a Re-Entrenching Regime*. Clingendael Institute, 2020: 6.

[625] *Ivi*, 9.

[626] *Ibidem*.

[627] *Ibidem*.

Syria's borders remained fragmented and only partially controlled by Damascus, while the country's airspace and maritime zones stayed monitored through Russia's military presence[628]. A third dimension lies in the regime's inability to reconstitute a credible social contract after military reconsolidation, as the material foundations of welfare and state obligations to the population continued to erode. The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) assessment of the first fourteen years of the conflict (up to the end of 2024) depicts a country trapped in long-term developmental regression, where economic collapse and institutional decay have translated into persistent impoverishment and shrinking access to basic public goods[629]. Living standards deteriorated sharply, with a steep decline in per-capita income and output: in 2024, UNDP estimates that per-capita GDP was only 25% of its 2010 level[630], while inflation has exploded and purchasing power has been hollowed out. The result is pervasive deprivation: around nine in ten Syrians lived in poverty and food insecurity affects large segments of the population[631]. The erosion of the social contract is visible also in basic human development outcomes: the conflict worsened Syria's health profile, with higher mortality rates and reduced life expectancy, as the healthcare system has been strained by destruction, shortages and chronic underfunding[632]. Service delivery has consequently collapsed: over half of Syria's education and healthcare facilities are reported to be non-functional[633]. In education, war damage has pushed millions of children out of school, deepening generational poverty[634]. Moreover, this already-fragile scenario was further strained by the Covid-19 pandemic, which exposed chronic weaknesses in Syria's public health system and the regime's limited capacity

---

[628] Fabrice Balanche, "The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria." The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. PolicyWatch 3433, February 10, 2021. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/assad-regime-has-failed-restore-full-sovereignty-over-syria. (Last accessed on 22 January 2026.)

[629] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *The Impact of the Conflict in Syria: A Devastated Economy, Pervasive Poverty and a Challenging Road Ahead to Social and Economic Recovery*. Damascus: UNDP Office in Syria, 2025: 4. 27.

[630] *Ivi*, 4.

[631] *Ibidem*.

[632] *Ivi*, 36.

[633] *Ivi*, 9.

[634] *Ivi*, 35.

to deliver services across a fragmented territory[635]. Under these conditions, basic needs are not met through state provision but through external assistance, with around 75% of the population depending on some form of humanitarian aid[636].

A fourth dimension of the regime's legitimacy deficit is rooted in the systematic violence against civilians throughout the conflict, which not only shaped the battlefield but also irreparably undermined any plausible claim to moral or restorative authority. Beyond the vast death toll (estimated to be higher than 585,000[637]), the regime relied on an extensive apparatus of arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, and torture: in the first two years of the uprising alone, around 300,000 people were detained, within a system in which coercive interrogation and abuse became routine instruments of repression[638]. Forced displacement, moreover, unfolded on a historic scale: more than half of Syria's pre-war population was forced to leave their homes, resulting in 6.2 million internally displaced persons and 6.7 million refugees[639].

In sum, although the regime could stabilise control, compared to the early years of the uprising, this was not enough to reconstruct the political, institutional, and social conditions that would make that control sustainable – meaning a form of governance grounded in restored state capacity and consent rather than external leverage and coercive practices. Therefore, Assad's victory is best read as managed equilibrium and a phase in the conflict's evolution rather than its resolution.

---

[635] Droz-Vincent, "Fighting for a Monopoly on Governance," 54.

[636] United Nations Development Programme, *The Impact of the Conflict in Syria: A Devastated Economy, Pervasive Poverty and a Challenging Road Ahead to Social and Economic Recovery*. 4.

[637] Samer Jabbour, Jennifer Leaning, Iman Nuwayhid, Alastair Ager, Melani Cammett, Omar Dewachi, Fouad M. Fouad, et al. "10 Years of the Syrian Conflict: A Time to Act and Not Merely to Remember." *The Lancet* 397, no. 10281 (April 3, 2021): 1245.

[638] Joel Rayburn, and Nawaf Obaid, "Assad Regime Crimes against Humanity in Detention Facilities." *Murder by Chain of Command: The Case against Assad*. New America, 2023: 17.

[639] Jabbour, Leaning, Nuwayhid, Ager, Cammett, Dewachi, Fouad, et al. "10 Years of the Syrian Conflict: A Time to Act and Not Merely to Remember." 1245.

4.5 Epilogue: the ruin of the Assad regime

In the years following the regime's recapture of key urban centres, as the war entered a lower-intensity phase and several major frontlines hardened into more durable boundaries between rival areas of control, Syria was drifting into a repressive peace[640]: an order that substituted negotiated conflict resolution with routinised coercion, institutionalised forms of political exclusion of targeted communities through law and administrative practices, and internationally brokered management, producing a condition that was neither war nor peace, but rather the continuation of violence as a governing principle of Assad's Syria[641]. Seen from this angle, the post-war order did not mark a transition towards reconstruction and reintegration; instead, it locked Syria into an unstable structure, characterised by repression without legitimacy, sovereignty without capacity, and reconstruction without resources. In practice, political representation was replaced by mechanism that categorised citizens by presumed loyalty and treated dissent as a security offence, often through broad legal labels associated with terrorism and threats to the state[642]. Over time, this model produced a form of governance that was effective at disciplining society, yet too hollow to generate trust, restore basic state functions, or credibly reintegrate communities into political life[643]. The logic that sustained regime endurance – rule through fear, exclusion, and transactional loyalty – therefore carried a self-undermining effect: it preserved control while steadily eroding cohesion within the very institutions tasked with defending the order.

By the early 2020s, the regime faced mounting pressures. Economic collapse and sanctions, compounded by corruption and mismanagement, deepened social hardship, while humanitarian needs remained extremely high and strategic dependency became structural[644]. In parallel, the regional environment after 2023 became decisive: first, Israel significantly intensified its

---

[640] Samer Abboud, "Syria's Repressive Peace," in *Struggles for Political Change in the Arab World: Regimes, Oppositions, and External Actors after the Spring*, edited by Lisa Blaydes, Amr Hamzawy, and Hesham Sallam. University of Michigan Press, 2022: 125-126.

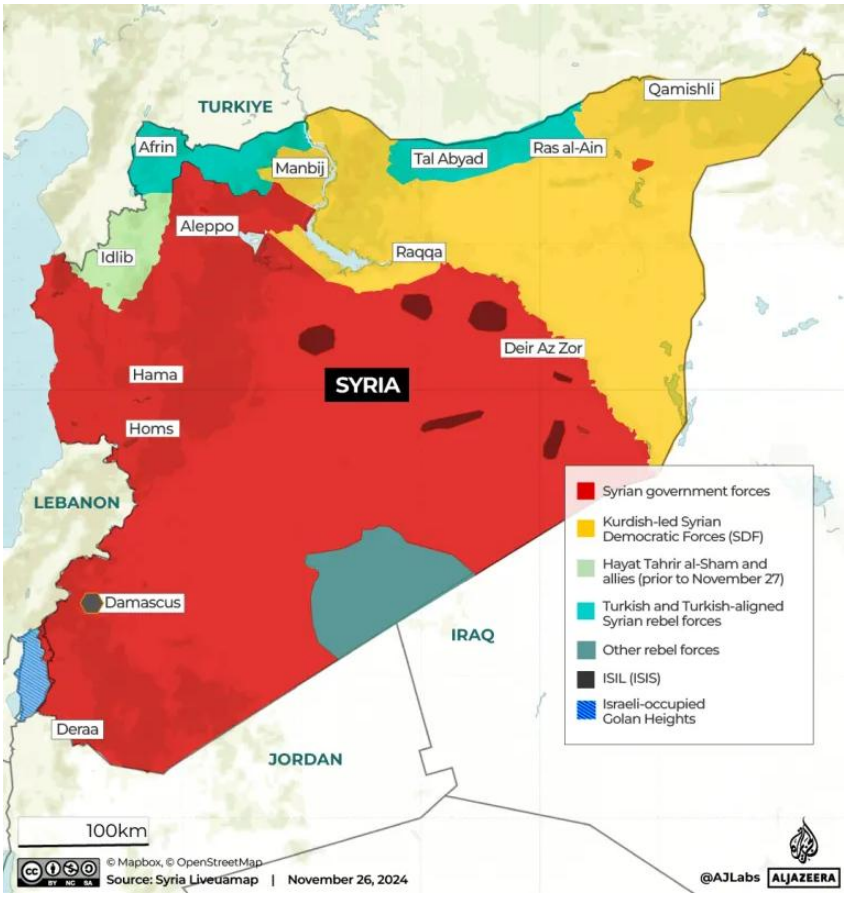
[641] *Ivi*, 143-144.

[642] *Ivi*, 125.

[643] *Ivi*, 125. 141.

[644] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*. A/HRC/58/66. Geneva: United Nations, March 19, 2025: 10.

operations against Iran-linked militias after the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, reducing Tehran's effective capacity to sustain Damascus in moment of acute threat; simultaneously, Russia's protracted war in Ukraine constrained Moscow's ability to maintain meaningful backing to Assad's forces and to provide the same level of engagement in Syria[645]. Taken together, these shifts did not produce an immediate turning point on the ground; rather, they underscored how far Assad's post-war endurance relied on external protection, and how little institutional resilience remained once that support became less steady. As a result, the regime could still impose control in the short term, but it became increasingly vulnerable to sudden shocks once foreign backing weakened and internal cohesion was strained.

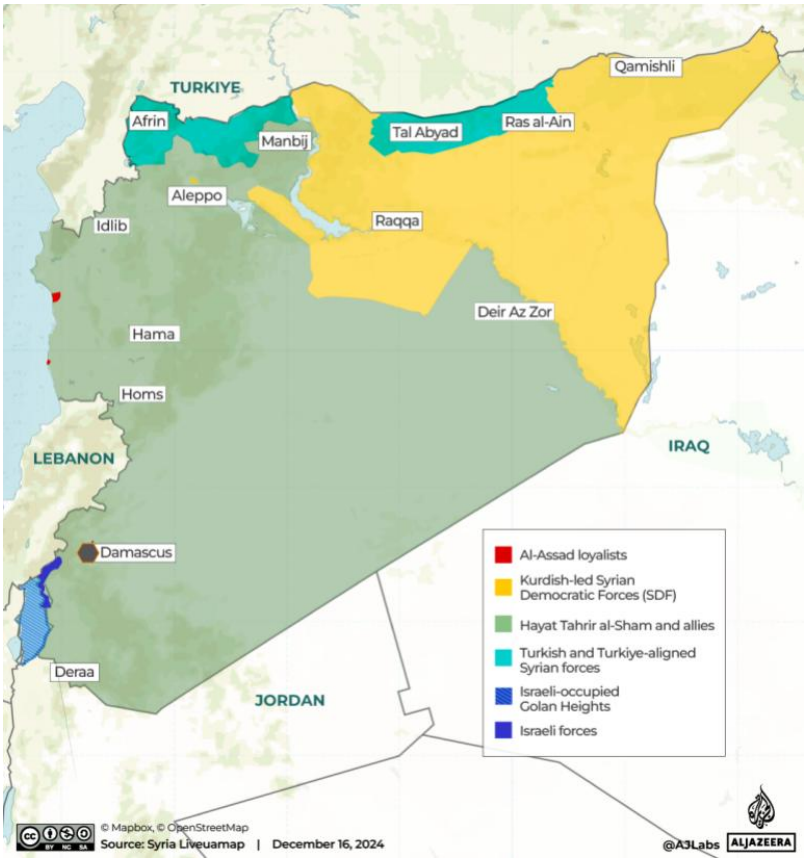


Map 8. *Syria's territorial control on November 26, 2024*.[646]

[645] Jang Ji-Hyang, "The Fall of Syria's Hereditary Dictatorship and the Launch of an Islamist Transitional Government: Analysis and Implications." Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2025: 1.

[646] Al Jazeera, "Taking Syria: The opposition's battles shown in 11 maps for 11 days," Al Jazeera. December 8, 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/1/who-controls-what-in-syria-in-maps. (Last accessed on 10 February 2026.)

In late 2024, the Assad regime did not fall in stages, it collapsed[647]: on 8 December 2024, opposition forces entered Damascus and Bashar al-Assad fled the country, ending more than five decades of Assad-family rule[648]. The collapse followed a fast offensive launched on 27 November 2024, known as "Operation Deterrence of Aggression", during which Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and allied factions seized Aleppo, Hama, and Homs in roughly twelve days before eventually taking the capital[649].



Map 9. *Syria's territorial control on December 16, 2024*.[650]

---

[647] Cengiz Günay, Josefine Paulsen, and Yuki Adachi, "A Tug-Of-War That Risks Snapping the Rope: Regional Competition Over Post-Assad Syria." OIIP - Austrian Institute for International Affairs, 2025: 5.

[648] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, 2.

[649] *Ibidem*.

[650] Al Jazeera, "Syria war live tracker: Maps and charts." Al Jazeera. December 16, 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/3/syria-tracker-maps-and-charts. (Last accessed on 10 February 2026.)

The sudden centrality of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham is crucial for understanding both the military outcome and the shape of the subsequent transition; the group became the leading force withing the coalition that ousted Assad, but its central leadership carried a contentious legacy: Ahmed al-Sharaaʿ al-Julani (b. 1982) is widely described as a former leader of Jabhat al-Nusra[651], and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham emerged from Syria's broader jihadist milieu[652]. However, since 2017, a deliberate shift in HTS's strategy made the rebel group more than a battlefield coalition partner: in Idlib, it gradually reduced its emphasis on transnational-jihadist rhetoric and, instead, prioritised durable territorial control, coupling military interventions with increased moderation and rebranding efforts that aimed to distance the group from its al-Qaeda-associated past[653]. This recalibration did not erase HTS's contested origins, but it broadened its claim to governance, not only as a military spearhead of the offensive, but also as a plausible (if highly divisive) centre of gravity for a post-Assad arrangement. As of December 2025, the picture is mixed: stabilization has advanced faster than political consolidation. Institutionally, the transitional leadership moved swiftly to set up interim governing bodies, appoint a largely technocratic cabinet, and launch provisional constitutional and political outline, while formally dismantling core pillars of the Assad-era order (notably the 2012 constitution, parliament, and the Baʿth Party, as well as announcing the formal dissolution and reorganization of the former regime's intelligence and security apparatus)[654].

Yet the new state remains structurally fragile and internally fragmented; trust among minority communities is limited, and relations with Druze and Kurdish actors have repeatedly stalled over the balance between central authority and local autonomy[655]. Externally and economically, the first year after Assad brought an initial diplomatic opening, including broader international recognition and the easing of sanctions imposed on the former regime[656]. Still, the end of Assad's regime was characterised by abrupt collapse, rather than an orderly, negotiated

---

[651] For further details on Jabhat al-Nusra and its role in the Syrian conflict, see 4.2.2 Jihadist factions and the rise of ISIS.

[652] Carmit Valensi and Amal Hayek, "The New Syria—One Year After al-Sharaa's Rise to Power." Institute for National Security Studies, 2025: 1.

[653] *Ibidem*.

[654] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, 1.

[655] Valensi and Hayek, "The New Syria—One Year After al-Sharaa's Rise to Power." 3-4.

[656] *Ivi*, 5.

handover, and this has shaped the transition that followed: after decades in which legitimacy was scarce and power relied on repression and selective inclusion, the sudden breakdown of the Syrian regime and its old command structure left the country without a coherent institutional backbone to anchor the new order[657].

Image 10. *People waving flags adopted by the new Syrian rulers during celebrations in Umayyad Square, after the ousting of Bashar al-Assad, in Damascus on. December 20, 2024.* [658]

In this sense, the regime's "ruin" was not simply its military defeat in December 2024; it was the culmination of a long process in which the very mechanisms that sustained Assad's longevity – pervasive security apparatus, coercive governance, political exclusion, and reliance on external patrons – gradually emptied institutional legitimacy and any durable basis of popular consent. When the shock arrived, the façade of state control proved brittle: eroded by

[657] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, 2.

[658] Reuters, "Year in review: Syria's rebel army topples Assad regime," December 31, 2024. [Source: REUTERS/Amr Alfiky]. https://www.reuters.com/pictures/year-review-syrias-rebel-army-topples-assad-regime-2024-12-31/. (Last accessed on 30 January 2026.)

years of civil war, corruption, and foreign dependency, the regime's military and security institutions crumbled, in many areas with little or no meaningful resistance[659].

Seen in that light, the expression used in the thesis's title, *rise, rule, and ruin of a regime*, suggests not a linear ascent followed by an abrupt collapse, but the arc of an authoritarian project whose sources of durability also fuelled its vulnerabilities. Bashar al-Assad's fall in December 2024 thus marks the endpoint of that trajectory: a system that survived by coercion and external protection ultimately proved unable to withstand a major unexpected shock once its internal integrity and foreign backing weakened. It also closes the cycle opened in 2011, when the regime's choice of repression over bargaining transformed an initial protest wave into an internationalised war, and, even after its claimed battlefield "victory", into a repressive peace: a post-war order that did not address the conflict's root grievances, but instead froze frontlines within Syria and disciplined society through repression and managed compliance, projecting the appearance of stability without the institutional foundations to sustain it. Likewise, the regime failed to rebuild state capacity, restore consent, or deliver a durable settlement to the conflict, setting the conditions for the eventual ruin of five decades of Assad's rule.

[659] Günay, Paulsen, and Adachi, "A Tug-Of-War That Risks Snapping the Rope," 6.

Conclusion

This thesis has argued that Syria's contemporary political trajectory is best understood less as a sequence of distinct periods than as the unfolding of a single governing logic whose strengths and weaknesses were intertwined. The Syrian regime displayed a notable capacity for endurance, but it was built through practices that steadily reduced the state's ability to regenerate legitimacy, adapt to pressure, and mediate conflict without violence. From the early post-independence period to the consolidation of Baʿthist power and the Assad family's long rule, political stability was achieved less by the construction of inclusive institutions than by the progressive securitisation of governance: through the expansion of coercive capacities, the narrowing of political participation, and the transformation of state institutions into instruments of regime survival. Over time, durability and fragility became mutually reinforcing outcomes: the more the system relied on coercion, selective inclusion, and external protection to survive, the more it weakened the institutional foundations that might have made survival less dependent on those same tools. A central implication of this argument is the distinction between "regime survival" and "state resilience": the former can be achieved through control, while the latter requires institutions able to process conflict, renew consent, and sustain cooperation beyond fear or dependency.

From this perspective, the Assad era appears not merely as an authoritarian consolidation that contained earlier instability, but as a reorganisation of political life around a security-centred order. The system proved capable of suppressing dissent and maintaining cohesion within the ruling elite, yet it did so by turning institutions into instruments of regime preservation rather than arenas of credible representation and compromise. The long-term effect was a form of rule that could impose compliance, but struggled to produce genuine consent, especially as living conditions deteriorated, inequality deepened, and the regime could no longer plausibly present itself as either a provider of basic welfare or a guarantor of stability. In other words, repression was not simply a response to threats, it became institutionalised as a modality of rule, closing off channels for opposition, political competition, and peaceful demands for change.

This helps clarify why the 2011 uprising should be treated as the moment when accumulated grievances and blocked channels for political expression met a regional window that made mass mobilisation feasible. Because the regime approached the revolts primarily as a security threat rather than a political challenge, its violent response quickly led to the militarisation of the conflict and pulled external actors even deeper into Syria's domestic struggle, tying battlefield

dynamics and any prospects for settlement to rival foreign strategies. The war and the ensuing humanitarian catastrophe transformed the Syrian state so profoundly that, even after the regime's claimed victory and the reassertion of control over much of the population, it proved unable to restore a social contract strong enough to reach a level that would make its rule substantively durable. In the end, the order established in 1970 by Hafez al-Assad's "Corrective Movement" reached its conclusion because it had eroded from within. The collapse of December 2024 thus exposed vulnerabilities embedded in an authoritarian legacy that prioritised survival over legitimacy and control over institutional resilience, steadily narrowing the regime's capacity to adjust to changing pressures, manage conflict through politics and govern in the public interest rather than for its own preservation.

The conclusion, therefore, returns to the thesis's guiding questions set out in the introduction. First: how did Syria move from early post-independence volatility to a consolidated authoritarian order under the Baʿth Party and, later, the Assad family? Second: why did that order ultimately fail to prevent the descent into civil war in 2011 and, eventually, collapse in late 2024?

Syria's shift from early post-independence instability to a consolidated authoritarian order was not the product of a linear institutional maturation, rather it was the result of a gradual reconfiguration of political life around security, discipline, and controlled inclusion. In the years following independence, the weakness of civilian institutions, intense elite fragmentation and competition, and repeated military intervention made power unstable and frequently contested through non-institutional channels and outside formal constitutional procedures. Over time, the armed forces became both the arena and the instrument through which politics was decided, and this dynamic created an opening for actors able to merge ideological and political mobilisation with coercive power. The ascent of the Baʿth Party provided precisely such a framework: it linked ideology to a project of state control, expanded the party-state nexus, and embedded loyalty structures within administration and public life. Under Hafez al-Assad, this trajectory culminated in a more coherent authoritarian stabilisation centred on the presidency, reinforced by overlapping security services and sustained through patronage networks. Stability, in this sense, did not signify the absence of instability, rather, it reflected the regime's capacity to contain and silence it through an order that could suppress dissent, contain factionalism within the ruling coalition, while projecting durability, even as it hollowed out independent political voices and reduced the state's role in mediating domestic opposition through negotiation and compromise. This same architecture was passed down from father to

son in 2000, when Bashar al-Assad inherited a system designed to prevent and limit contestation rather than accommodate it, as the brief experience of the Damascus Spring vividly demonstrated. All these elements together provide an answer to the first guiding question, explaining how Syria's early post-independence volatility gave way to a consolidated authoritarian order, and they also set up the second question by showing how the same patterns and mechanisms that contained instability would later jeopardise the regime's efficiency to respond to mass challenge and systemic crisis.

In 2011, when protests spread across the country and pressures mounted, the regime confronted a form of mobilisation that could not be neutralised through the familiar combination of limited concessions, selective co-optation and tightly managed repression. Because the regime had long framed political pluralism as a threat and systematically emptied representative institutions of real authority, the state lacked credible channels through which reforms could translate into actual commitments and grievances could be properly addressed. As a result, protests were treated as an existential danger, and repression became the default response. From then on, the order's durability increasingly reflected wartime survival rather than governance: the very architecture that kept the regime afloat also corroded state and institutional capacity, widening the gap between control and legitimacy. After years of war, the economy was exhausted and social trust was shattered, leaving legitimacy deficits that repression could contain but not repair. Eventually, when external shielding and internal cohesion weakened in late 2024, the system collapsed rather than reconfigured itself, marking the culmination of decades of cumulative erosion. The result was not only the end of a ruling coalition, but the exposure of underlying institutional fragility that, since independence, has shifted shape rather than disappearing.

The transition from the thesis's historical explanations to the present begins with the collapse of the Assad order in December 2024, an event that closed a long cycle of authoritarian consolidation, yet it did not automatically produce a resilient state. What followed has been less a clean post-regime settlement than a contested attempt to translate leadership change into state reconstruction. In the terms developed throughout the thesis, the core question has shifted from how the old system survived to whether a new political order can rebuild state capacity and legitimacy without reverting to the same security-centred approach that once kept instability in check by containing its symptoms rather than resolving its drivers. This is the central dilemma of post-conflict state-building in Syria today. The new authorities have had to pursue stabilisation while simultaneously confronting problems left unaddressed for decades and

sharpened by years of war: rebuilding monopoly over force while absorbing or disbanding armed groups, restoring basic administration and services in a devastated economy and fragmented territory, and responding to demands for accountability for past crimes without fuelling retaliation. These tasks are made harder by deep mistrust and by sectarian divisions that have long been exploited as circumstances required, and that can be easily triggered whenever the system falters or accountability is pursued unevenly. Moreover, the comprehensive challenge is that security imperatives still structure political life, but durable reconstruction requires institutions that can process conflict, manage pluralism, and generate consent beyond fear, dependence or emergency rule. Within this context, some of the most significant pressures of this transition phase are best understood not as isolated incidents but as structural tests that concentrate Syria's unresolved legacies into a new political landscape.

A first test concerns the residual presence of armed loyalist networks and the position of ʿAlawite communities in the post-Assad order. The link between the two is partly institutional and partly rooted in public perceptions: under Assad, key segments of the coercive apparatus and regime patronage were closely associated with ʿAlawite strongholds, creating a simplified but durable public association between community identity and loyalist networks. After the regime's collapse, this legacy created two immediate dangers: on the one hand, the remnants of the old security networks could retain informal influence over mobilisation; on the other, efforts to pursue accountability for past violence might slide into collective suspicion, fuelling sectarian divisions.

This dilemma is mirrored in institutional form by the fate of the Baʿth Party. Its dissolution marks a clear symbolic rupture with one-party rule, but its deeper significance lies in what it signals for the architecture of the new order. Founded in the mid-twentieth century as an Arab nationalist and socialist movement, the Baʿth became the backbone of Syria's post-1963 political order and, after 1970, one of the main pillars through which the regime was organised during the Assad era, soon ceasing to function as a conventional party and, instead, operating as a structure to manage loyalty and power. For this reason, it was a practical imperative to transition away from Baʿthist authoritarianism in the early post-Assad period. Yet dismantling the party as a formal institution does not automatically dissolve the networks it cultivated for decades. Therefore, the new order has to build alternative institutions capable of sustaining the state and its legitimacy, while organising political participation without reverting to old patterns.

Within this scenario, Sunni communities occupy a pivotal but complex position: they are often treated as the majority benefiting from regime change, yet they are not a single political actor and their expectations are quite diverse. For many, the end of the Assad order is linked to hopes of normalisation, economic relief, and meaningful inclusion after years of violence and marginalisation; at the same time, there are fears that daily life will remain shaped by armed actors rather than accountable institutions, with security provided through informal power instead of a structured legal framework.

Another set of questions is posed by Druze and Kurdish communities, which highlight how minority protection and local autonomy become central political issues when national institutions are weak. In the south, Druze communities have historically relied on their own local protection and some degree of autonomy; moreover, their relationship with the central power structure has often been shaped by a preference of managing risk through self-sufficiency rather than full integration on uncertain terms. In the north and northeast, the Kurdish question remains one of the most relevant files of the post-Assad era, as it is both a domestic issue and regional dossier. It concentrates the unresolved problem of sovereignty in a country that, for years, functioned with de facto territorial pluralism, where Kurdish-led institutions exercised real authority over parts of Syrian territory. The Kurdish file also sits at the intersection of international priorities, mainly of the U.S. and Turkey. While the former has long treated Kurdish-led forces as a key partner in counterterrorism operations; the latter, by contrast, views Kurdish armed structures along its border as a strategic threat and seeks to limit their autonomy. The result is that negotiations over integration, security control and local governance are not shaped only by Syrian actors but also by external leverage.

For the transition as a whole, territorial reunification is both essential and exceptionally difficult, as it depends on multiple variables, many of which are neither predictable nor purely domestic. A coherent national space is necessary to restore basic administration, rebuild a shared legal framework, reduce the scope of armed actors as parallel authorities, and reconstruct core services such as education and healthcare. Yet reunification cannot be achieved simply by declaring sovereignty, it depends on negotiated agreements and mutual recognition, and on credible arrangements that can be accepted across communities that have lived for long under different, tailored systems of rule.

Taken together, these developments suggest that post-Assad Syria is not yet a consolidated political order but a turbulent attempt to rebuild the state on new foundations. The core lesson that emerges from the thesis remains decisive for the present: coercion can impose short-term

control, but it cannot by itself restore legitimacy or produce resilient institutions. At the same time, the fragility of this moment should not obscure the significance of the rupture itself: the collapse of a regime that had been governing for fifty-four years, unravelling in a matter of twelve days, opened a political horizon long denied to Syrians, reshaping the country's political imagination and reviving possibilities that had long seemed foreclosed. Assad's fall also gave new urgency to pressures and demands that had been building for decades and became increasingly visible from the 2000s onward. For all the uncertainty it entails, the current phase is not only marked by daunting challenges but also by a renewed sense of hope: themes such as representation, accountability, coexistence, and citizenship are back on the agenda, opening, perhaps for the first time in a long while, the possibility of a more inclusive public debate where Syria's future is no longer predetermined by fear. Whether that hope can be translated into a durable settlement remains uncertain, but the end of the Assad system has already changed the parameters of what Syrians can imagine, demand, and attempt to build.

Bibliography

Books and Journal Articles

Abboud, Samer. “Syria’s Repressive Peace.” In *Struggles for Political Change in the Arab World: Regimes, Oppositions, and External Actors after the Spring*, edited by Lisa Blaydes, Amr Hamzawy, and Hesham Sallam, 124–47. University of Michigan Press, 2022. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.12237894.12.

Abu-Ismail, Khalid, Ali Abdel-Gadir, and Heba El-Laithy. *“Poverty and Inequality in Syria (1997-2007).”* Arab Development Challenges Report Background Paper 2011/15. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), March 26, 2020. https://www.undp.org/arab-states/publications/poverty-and-inequality-syria-1997-2007.

ACRPS Policy Analysis Unit. *Geneva Conference II: Challenges Faced in Syria and the Region.* Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, March 2014. https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/Geneva_Conference_II_Challenges_Faced_in_Syria_and_the_Region.pdf.

Akhtar, Nasreen, and Hala Nageen. “The Syrian Conflict: An Inside-Out and Outside-In Approach.” *International Journal on World Peace* 36, no. 3 (2019): 7–34. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26884530.

Albert, Craig Douglas. “A History of Violence: Ethnic Group Identity and the Iraqi Kurds.” *Iran & the Caucasus* 17, no. 2 (2013): 215–34. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23597596.

al-Haj Saleh, Yassin. *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*. London: C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, 2017.

al-Mustapha, Hamza. *The al-Nusra Front: From Formation to Dissension*. Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, February 2014.

Ali, Mohanad Hage. “Hezbollah and Syria from 1982 to 2011.” *Power Points Defining the Syria-Hezbollah Relationship*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep20960.5.

Alkaff, Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman, and NurulHuda Binte Yussof. “An Overview of the Syrian Conflict.” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 8, no. 8 (2016): 8–11. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26351442.

Antonius, George. “Syria and the French Mandate.” *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1931-1939) 13, no. 4 (1934): 523–39. https://doi.org/10.2307/2603401.

Arafat, Alaa Al-Din. “Epilogue: Succession or Success?” *Hosni Mubarak and the Future of Democracy in Egypt*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009: 185-202. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137067531_12

Aras, Bülent, and Rabia Karakaya Polat. “From Conflict to Cooperation: Desecuritization of Turkey’s Relations with Syria and Iran.” *Security Dialogue* 39, no. 5 (2008): 495–515. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26299784.

Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. “Syria: 10 Years On.” Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep32072.

Averre, Derek, and Lance Davies. “Russia, Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: The Case of Syria.” *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 91, no. 4 (2015): 813–34. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24539206.

Bakker, Edwin and Mark Singleton. “Foreign Fighters in the Syria and Iraq Conflict: Statistics and Characteristics of a Rapidly Growing Phenomenon.” In *Foreign Fighters under International Law and Beyond*, edited by Andrea de Guttry, Francesca Capone, and Christophe Paulussen, 9–25. The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2016.

Barany, Zoltan. “The ‘Arab Spring’ in the Kingdoms.” Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 2012. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12644.

Batrawi, Samar. “The Nature of the Syrian Regime.” *Pandora’s Box in Syria: Anticipating Negative Externalities of a Re-Entrenching Regime*. Clingendael Institute, 2020. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24674.6.

Becker, Carmen. “Strategies of Power Consolidation in Syria Under Bashar Al-Asad: Modernizing Control Over Resources.” *The Arab Studies Journal* 13/14, no. 2/1 (2005): 65–91. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27933934.

Bengio, Ofra. “Altercating Interests and Orientations between Israel and Turkey: A View from Israel.” *Insight Turkey* 11, no. 2 (2009): 43–55. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26331173.

Berti, Benedetta. “The Usual Suspect: Syrian Involvement in Lebanon.” *The Ongoing Battle for Beirut: Old Dynamics and New Trends*. Institute for National Security Studies, 2011. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep08964.5.

Briscoe, Ivan, Floor Janssen, and Rosan Smits. “Appendix 2: Key Individuals in Syria’s Political Economy.” *Stability and Economic Recovery after Assad: Key Steps for Syria’s Post-Conflict Transition*. Clingendael Institute, 2012. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05545.9.

Briscoe, Ivan, Floor Janssen, and Rosan Smits. “Syria’s Political Economy: Background and Development.” *Stability and Economic Recovery after Assad: Key Steps for Syria’s Post-Conflict Transition*. Clingendael Institute, 2012: 9–22. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05545.5.

Brownlee, Jason. “Hereditary Succession in Modern Autocracies.” *World Politics* 59, no. 4 (2007): 595–628. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40060174.

Bunzel, Cole. “From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State.” *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, no. 19 (March 2015). https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-ideology-of-the-Islamic-State.pdf.

Cafarella, Jennifer, and Jason Zhou. “Russia, Iran, and Assad: A Fragile Interdependence.” *Russia’s Dead-End Diplomacy in Syria*. Institute for the Study of War, 2019. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19570.5.

Campbell, John C. “The Soviet Union in the Middle East.” *Middle East Journal* 32, no. 1 (1978): 1–12. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4325709.

Ciprut, Jose V. “Easter in Winter: The ”Arab Spring” Seven Years Later.” Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2017. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep16857.

Colombo, Silvia, and Nathalie Tocci, eds. “Syria and Lebanon: Diverging Paths of State Unsustainability.” *The Challenges of State Sustainability in the Mediterranean*. Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), 2011. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09864.11.

Conduit, Dara. “The Patterns of Syrian Uprising: Comparing Hama in 1980–1982 and Homs in 2011.” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 1 (2017): 73–87. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26155500.

Corrao, Francesca Maria. *Islam, religione e politica*. Rome: LUISS University Press, 2015.

Corrao, Francesca Maria and Luciano Violante. *L'Islam non è terrorismo*. Bologna: il Mulino, 2018.

Crosston, Matthew D. "Cold War and Ayatollah Residues: Syria as a Chessboard for Russia, Iran, and the United States." *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (2014): 94–111. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26270818.

Dam, Nikolaos Van. *Destroying a Nation. The Civil War in Syria*. 1st ed. Bloomsbury Publishing: 2017. https://www.perlego.com/book/919905/destroying-a-nation-the-civil-war-in-syria-pdf.

Dawisha, Adeed. "Saṭiʿ al-Ḥuṣri's Theory of Nationalism." *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair*. 2nd ed. Princeton University Press (2003): 49-50. https://archive.org/details/arabnationalismi0000dawi/page/n8/mode/1up.

Dawisha, Adeed I. "Syria in Lebanon. Assad's Vietnam?" *Foreign Policy*, no. 33 (1978): 135–50. https://doi.org/10.2307/1148465.

Dawisha, Adeed I. "Syria under Asad, 1970-78: The Centres of Power." *Government and Opposition* 13, no. 3 (1978): 341–54. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44482247.

De Châtel, Francesca. "The Role of Drought and Climate Change in the Syrian Uprising: Untangling the Triggers of the Revolution." *Middle Eastern Studies* 50, no. 4 (2014): 521–35. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24583514.

Degli Esposti, Nicola. *Whose Kurdistan? Class Politics and Kurdish Nationalism in the Middle East, 1918-2018.* PhD dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2020.

Dekel, Udi. "The War in Syria: Advancing Toward a New Stage?" Institute for National Security Studies, 2018. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17049.

Devlin, John F. "The Baath Party: Rise and Metamorphosis." *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 5 (1991): 1396–1407. https://doi.org/10.2307/2165277.

Droz-Vincent, Philippe. "Fighting for a Monopoly on Governance: How the Asad State 'Won' the Syrian War and to What Extent." *Middle East Journal* 75, no. 1 (2021): 33–54. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27286579.

Droz-Vincent, Philippe. "'State of Barbary' (Take Two): From the Arab Spring to the Return of Violence in Syria." *Middle East Journal* 68, no. 1 (2014): 33–58. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43698560.

Drysdale, Alasdair. "Syria and Iraq - The Geopathology of a Relationship." *GeoJournal* 28, no. 3 (1992): 347–55. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41145606.

Eppel, Michael. "The Arab States and the 1948 War in Palestine: The Socio-Political Struggles, the Compelling Nationalist Discourse and the Regional Context of Involvement." *Middle Eastern Studies* 48, no. 1 (2012): 1–31. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23217085.

Fawcett, Louise. "The Iraq War Ten Years on: Assessing the Fallout." *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 89, no. 2 (2013): 325–43. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23473539.

Fusco, Francesco. "La Politica Di Potenza Della Federazione Russa in Siria." *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali* 88, no. 1 (349) (2021): 103–26. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27094435.

Gade, Emily Kalah, Mohammed M Hafez, and Michael Gabbay. "Fratricide in Rebel Movements: A Network Analysis of Syrian Militant Infighting." *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 3 (2019): 321–35. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48596195.

Galvani, John. "Syria and the Baath Party." *MERIP Reports*, no. 25 (1974): 3–16. https://doi.org/10.2307/3011567.

Gambhir, Harleen. "Isis's Global Strategy: a Wargame." Institute for the Study of War, 2015. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07907.

Gause, F. Gregory. "Iraq's Decisions to Go to War, 1980 and 1990." *Middle East Journal* 56, no. 1 (2002): 47–70. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4329720.

Ghadbian, Najib. "The New Asad: Dynamics of Continuity and Change in Syria." *Middle East Journal* 55, no. 4 (2001): 624–41. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4329687.

Ghanem, Hafez. "Roots of the Arab Spring." In *The Arab Spring Five Years Later: Toward Greater Inclusiveness*, 39–64. Brookings Institution Press, 2016. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctt1657tv8.6.

Gifford, Lindsay A. "Syria: The Change That Never Came." *Current History* 108, no. 722 (2009): 417–23. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45318880.

Ginat, Rami. “The Soviet Union and the Syrian Ba’th Regime: From Hesitation to Rapprochement.” *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 2 (2000): 150–71. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4284075.

Golan, Galia. “The Soviet Union and the Outbreak of the June 1967 Six-Day War.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 1 (2006): 3–19. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26925884.

Gompert, David C., Hans Binnendijk, and Bonny Lin. “The U.S. Invasion of Iraq, 2003.” In *Blinders, Blunders, and Wars: What America and China Can Learn*, 161–74. RAND Corporation, 2014. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt1287m9t.21.

Gopal, Anand, and Jeremy Hodge. “Introduction: A Network View of Syria’s Proxy War.” *Social Networks, Class, and the Syrian Proxy War*. New America, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep30592.4.

Gopal, Anand, and Jeremy Hodge. “The Syrian Proxy War: 2011–2016.” *Social Networks, Class, and the Syrian Proxy War*. New America, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep30592.7.

Güçtürk, Yavuz. “War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity in Syria.” *Insight Turkey* 17, no. 1 (2015): 27–40. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26299714.

Günay, Cengiz, Josefine Paulsen, and Yuki Adachi. “A Tug-Of-War That Risks Snapping The Rope: Regional Competition Over Post-Assad Syria.” OIIP - Austrian Institute for International Affairs, 2025. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep70401.

Gunes, Cengiz and Robert Lowe. “The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East.” *Middle East and North Africa Programme*. London: Chatham House (The Royal Institute of International Affairs), July 2015. https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/20150723SyriaKurdsGunesLowe.pdf.

Gunter, Michael M. “The Kurdish Question in Perspective.” *World Affairs* 166, no. 4 (2004): 197–205. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20672696.

Hale, William. “Turkey, the U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War.” *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 4 (2019): 25–40. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26842776.

Hansen, Flemming Splidsboel. “The Russian Gambit in Syria.” Danish Institute for International Studies, 2016. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13244.

Hashas, Mohammed. “Arab Mediterranean Islam: Intellectual and Political Trends.” In *States, Actors and Geopolitical Drivers in the Mediterranean: Perspectives on the New Centrality in a Changing Region*, edited by Francesca Maria Corrao and Riccardo Redaelli, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan (2021): 129-156.

Hassan, Hassan. “Two Houses Divided: How Conflict in Syria Shaped the Future of Jihadism.” *CTC SENTINEL* 11, no. 9 (October 2018): 1-9. https://ctc.westpoint.edu/two-houses-divided-conflict-syria-shaped-future-jihadism/.

Haspeslagh, Sophie. “Safe Havens and the Kurdish Crisis in Iraq (1991).” *Beyond Intractability*, Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado: 1. https://www.beyondintractability.org/cic_documents/Safe-Havens-Iraq.pdf.

Heller, Peter B. “The Permanent Syrian Constitution of March 13, 1973.” *Middle East Journal* 28, no. 1 (1974): 53–66. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4325185.

Heller, Sam. “External intervention in the Syrian civil war, 2015.” In *SIPRI Yearbook 2016: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 129-142.

Heydemann, Steven. “Syria’s Adaptive Authoritarianism.” In *The Political Science of Syria’s War*. (Washington, DC: Project on Middle East Political Science, 2013), 54-58. https://pomeps.org/syrias-adaptive-authoritarianism.

Hinnebusch, Raymond. “Syria: From ‘authoritarian Upgrading’ to Revolution?” *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 88, no. 1 (2012): 95–113. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41428543.

Hinnebusch, Raymond and Omar Imady. “Syria’s Reconciliation Agreements.” Report. *St. Andrews Research Repository*, July 30, 2017. https://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/10023/11737/Report_Hinnebusch_Imadi_SyriasReconciliationAgreements.pdf?sequence=1.

Hinnebusch, Raymond A. “Syria Under the Ba’th: State Formation in a Fragmented Society.” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (1982): 177–99. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41857625.

Hinnebusch, Raymond A. “The Political Economy of Economic Liberalization in Syria.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27, no. 3 (1995): 305–20. http://www.jstor.org/stable/176253.

Hinnebusch, Raymond. “The Role of Syria in the Post-Iraq War Middle East.” *European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed)*, 2005: https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-role-of-syria-in-the-post-iraq-war-middle-east/.

Holliday, Joseph. “The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War.” I*nstitute for the Study of War*, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07937.1.

Huber, Daniela. “Forty Years of Camp David, Forty Years Without Peace.” *Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)*, (2018): 1-15. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19660.

Human Rights Watch. *A Wasted Decade: Human Rights in Syria during Bashar al-Asad’s First Ten Years in Power.* New York: Human Rights Watch, July 2010. https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/07/16/wasted-decade/human-rights-syria-during-bashar-al-asads-first-ten-years-power.

Human Rights Watch. *No Room to Breathe: State of Repression of Human Rights Activism in Syria.* New York: Human Rights Watch, vol. 19, no. 6(E). October 2007. https://www.hrw.org/report/2007/10/16/no-room-breathe/state-repression-human-rights-activism-syria.

International Monetary Fund. “Syrian Arab Republic. Staff Report for the 2008 Article IV Consultation.” *IMF Country Report no.09/55*, Washington, DC (February 2009). https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2009/cr0955.pdf.

Islam, Thowhidul. “Turkey’s Akp Foreign Policy Toward Syria: Shifting Policy During the Arab Spring.” *International Journal on World Peace* 33, no. 1 (2016): 7–41. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45014320.

Jabbour, Samer, Jennifer Leaning, Iman Nuwayhid, Alastair Ager, Melani Cammett, Omar Dewachi, Fouad M. Fouad, et al. “10 Years of the Syrian Conflict: A Time to Act and Not Merely to Remember.” *The Lancet* 397, no. 10281 (April 3, 2021). https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)00623-1/fulltext.

James, Carolyn C., and Özgür Özdamar. “Modeling Foreign Policy and Ethnic Conflict: Turkey’s Policies Towards Syria.” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 5, no. 1 (2009): 17–36. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24909869.

Jenkins, Brian Michael. “The Dynamics of Syria′s Civil War.” RAND Corporation, 2014. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep02450.

Ji-Hyang, Jang. “The Fall of Syria’s Hereditary Dictatorship and the Launch of an Islamist Transitional Government: Analysis and Implications.” Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2025. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep71431.

Karsh, Efraim. “Geopolitical Determinism: The Origins of the Iran-Iraq War.” *Middle East Journal* 44, no. 2 (1990): 256–68. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4328101.

Kassab, Elizabeth Suzanne. *“The First Modern Arab Cultural Renaissance or Nahda, From the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Mid-Twenty Century.”* Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 17-47.

Kassis, Maria-Rita. “Justice or Peace? The Hariri Assassination and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon.” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 4, no. 6 (2010): 3–14. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26298490.

Kerr, Malcolm H. “Hafiz Asad and the Changing Patterns of Syrian Politics.” *International Journal* 28, no. 4 (1973): 689–706. https://doi.org/10.2307/40201173.

Kobs, David M. “The Ideological and Political Power of the Islamic State.” Edited by Larry D. Miller. *The Army War College Review*. Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2016. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11940.6.

Kumaraswamy, P.R. “The Arab Spring.” *India International Centre Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2011): 52–62. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44733617.

Lahoud, Nelly and Muhammad al-Ubaydi. “The War of Jihadists Against Jihadists in Syria.” *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 3 (2014): 1–6. https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/CTCSentinel-Vol7Iss3.pdf.

Lavrov, Anton, Julien Barnes-Dacey, Dimitar Bechev, Timofey Borisov, Dmitriy Frolovskiy, Florence Gaub, Dalia Ghanem-Yazbeck, et al. “Russia in Syria: A Military Analysis.” Edited by Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secrieru. *Russia’s Return to The Middle East: Building Sandcastles?* European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2018. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21138.9.

Lesch, David W. *Syria: A Modern History*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

Levitt, Matthew and Aaron Y. Zelin. “Hizb Allah’s Gambit in Syria.” *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 8 (2013): 14–17. https://ctc.westpoint.edu/syria-a-wicked-problem-for-all/.

Lia, Brynjar. “The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976–82: The History and Legacy of a Failed Revolt.” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 4 (2016): 541–59. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26155517.

Lister, Charles. “Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria’s Military Landscape.” *Policy Briefing*. Doha: Brookings Doha Center, May 2014. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/dynamic-stalemate-surveying-syrias-military-landscape/.

Lowe, Robert. “The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered.” *Middle East Programme*. MEP BP 06/01. London: Chatham House (The Royal Institute of International Affairs), January 2006. https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Middle%20East/bpsyriankurds.pdf.

Lund, Aron. “Divided They Stand: An Overview of Syria’s Military Landscape.” Uppsala: Foundation for European Progressive Studies, May 2012. https://feps-europe.eu/publication/149-divided-they-stand/.

Lund, Aron. “From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russian-Syrian Relations.” *Swedish Institute of International Affairs*, no. 2/2019 (2019): 4-52. https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2019/ui-paper-no.-7-2019.pdf.

Lund, Aron. “Syria’s Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front.” *Swedish Institute of International Affairs*, no. 17 (March 2013): 3-40. https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/syrias-salafi-insurgents-the-rise-of-the-syrian-islamic-front-min.pdf.

Lund, Aron. “The Non-State Militant Landscape in Syria.” *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 8 (2013): 23-27. https://ctc.westpoint.edu/syria-a-wicked-problem-for-all/.

Lynch, Marc, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday. “Syria in the Arab Spring: The integration of Syria’s conflict with the Arab uprisings, 2011–2013.” *Research & Politics*, 1(3). October-December 2014:1-7. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168014549091.

Magen, Zvi, Udi Dekel, and Sarah Fainberg. “How Deep Are the Cracks in the Russian-Iranian Coalition in Syria?” Institute for National Security Studies, 2016. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep08278.

Malashenko, Alexey. “Russia and the Arab Spring.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13003.

Manduchi, Patrizia. “Arab Nationalism(s): Rise and Decline of an Ideology.” *Oriente Moderno* 97, no. 1 (2017): 4–35. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48572289.

Ma’oz, Moshe. “Asad’s Leadership of Syria.” *Oriente Moderno* 12 (73), no. 1/6 (1993): 97–105. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25817251.

Ma’oz, Moshe. “From Conflict to Peace? Israel’s Relations with Syria and the Palestinians.” *Middle East Journal* 53, no. 3 (1999): 393–416. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4329353.

Martin, Kevin W. “Speaking with the ‘Voice of Syria’: Producing the Arab World’s First Personality Cult.” *Middle East Journal* 72, no. 4 (2018): 631–53. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26933009.

Martini, Jeffrey, Erin York, and William Young. “Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition.” In *Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition*, RAND Corporation, 2013. 1–10. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt2jc9hh.1.

McFate, Jessica Lewis. “The Isis Defense in Iraq and Syria: Countering an Adaptive Enemy.” Institute for the Study of War, 2015. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07905.

McHugo, John. *Syria: A Recent History*, 2nd ed. London: Saqi Books, 2017.

Muslih, Muhammad. “The Golan: Israel, Syria, and Strategic Calculations.” *Middle East Journal* 47, no. 4 (1993): 611–32. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4328632.

Neff, Donald. 1994. “Israel-Syria: Conflict at the Jordan River, 1949-1967.” *Journal of Palestine Studie*s 23 (4): 26–40. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2307/2538209.

Nelson, Chad E. “Revolution and War: Saddam’s Decision to Invade Iran.” *Middle East Journal* 72, no. 2 (2018): 246–66. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26932953.

Nocera, Lea. “Perspectives on the New Centrality of the Mediterranean States: The Role of Turkey in a Changing Region.” In *States, Actors and Geopolitical Drivers in the Mediterranean: Perspectives on the New Centrality in a Changing Region*, edited by Francesca Maria Corrao and Riccardo Redaelli, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan (2021): 219-234.

O’Bagy, Elizabeth. “Syria’s Political Opposition.” *Institute for the Study of War,* 2012. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07933.1.

O'Donnell, Kelly and Kathleen Newland. *"The Iraqi Refugee Crisis: The Need for Action."* Migration Policy Institute. Washington, (2008). https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/MPI-The_Iraqi_Refugee_Crisis_The_Need_for_Action_011808.pdf.

Olson, Robert. "The Ba'th in Syria 1947–1979: An Interpretative Historical Essay (Part One)." *Oriente Moderno* 58, no. 12 (1978): 645–81. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25816643.

OpenNet Initiative. *"Internet Filtering in Syria."* August 07, 2009. https://opennet.net/research/profiles/Syria.

Oren, Michael B. "Escalation to Suez: The Egypt-Israel Border War, 1949-56." *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, no. 2 (1989): 347–73. http://www.jstor.org/stable/260827.

Palmer, Monte. "The United Arab Republic: An Assessment of Its Failure." *Middle East Journal* 20, no. 1 (1966): 50–67. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4323954.

Perlmutter, Amos. "From Obscurity to Rule: The Syrian Army and the Ba'th Party." *The Western Political Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (1969): 827–45. https://doi.org/10.2307/447038.

Perlov, Orit, and Gallia Lindenstrauss. "Syria's Civil War: Kurdish Success, Turkish Dilemma." Institute for National Security Studies, 2016. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep08750.

Petran, Tabitha. "Syria." *Nations of the modern world*. (London, Ernest Benn: 1972): 61.

Phillips, Christopher. "International actors in the Syrian conflict." *Orient* 60, no.2 (2019): 7-15. https://qmro.qmul.ac.uk/xmlui/handle/123456789/56660.

Pierret, Thomas, and Kjetil Selvik. "Limits of 'Authoritarian Upgrading' in Syria: Private Welfare, Islamic Charities, and the Rise of the Zayd Movement." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41, no. 4 (2009): 595–614. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40389308.

Pitchford, Jenna. "The 'Global War on Terror,' Identity, and Changing Perceptions: Iraqi Responses to America's War in Iraq." *Journal of American Studies* 45, no. 4 (2011): 695–716. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41427295.

Plebani, Andrea. "Periphery No More: The Jazira Between Local, Regional, And International Dynamics." In *States, Actors and Geopolitical Drivers in the Mediterranean: Perspectives on the New Centrality in a Changing Region*, edited by Francesca Maria Corrao and Riccardo Redaelli, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan (2021): 237-250.

Podeh, Elie. “Celebrating Continuity: The Role of State Holidays in Syria (1918-2010).” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 4 (2013): 428–56. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43917107.

Price, Bryan. “Syria: A Wicked Problem for All.” *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 8 (2013): 1-4. https://ctc.westpoint.edu/syria-a-wicked-problem-for-all/.

Price, Megan, Jeff Klingner, Anas Qtiesh, and Patrick Ball. *“Updated Statistical Analysis of Documentation of Killings in the Syrian Arab Republic.”* Report commissioned by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (June 13, 2013). https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/SY/HRDAG-Updated-SY-report.pdf.

Rais, Faiza R. “Syria Under Bashar Al Assad: A Profile of Power.” *Strategic Studies* 24, no. 3 (2004): 144–68. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45242542.

Rayburn, Joel, and Nawaf Obaid. “Assad Regime Crimes against Humanity in Detention Facilities.” *Murder by Chain of Command: The Case against Assad*. New America, 2023. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep53553.5.

Rich, Ben and Dara Conduit. “The Impact of Jihadist Foreign Fighters on Indigenous Secular-Nationalist Causes: Contrasting Chechnya and Syria.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 2 (2015): 113-131. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2014.979605.

Rodineliussen, Rasmus. “Organising the Syrian revolution – student activism through Facebook.” *Visual Studies* 34, no.3 (2019): 239-251. https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2019.1653790.

Rojhelati, Ziryan. “Post-Assad Syria: What the Fall of the Regime Means for the World.” Rudaw Research Center, 2024. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep65346.

Rubin, Michael. “The Enduring Iran-Syria-Hezbollah Axis.” American Enterprise Institute, 2009. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep03078.

Ryan, Curtis. “The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria.” *Middle East Report*, no. 262 (2012): 28–31. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41702433.

Sa’adeh, Antun. “Al-Islam fi Risalatayh: Al-Masihiyyah wa al-Muhammadiyyah, (Islam in its Christian and Muhammadan Messages).” 3rd ed, (Beirut: 1958): 207-16, 243-45.

Sadiq, Mahmud. “Hiwar hawlat Suriya.” Dar ‘Ukaz, London (1993): 71-77.

Salloukh, Bassel. “Syria and Lebanon: A Brotherhood Transformed.” *Middle East Report*, no. 236 (2005): 14–21. https://doi.org/10.2307/30042457.

Sassoon, Joseph. “Leadership and the Cult of Personality.” *Anatomy of Authoritarianism in the Arab Republics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 185–220. https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/anatomy-of-authoritarianism-in-the-arab-republics/leadership-and-the-cult-of-personality/5586A891641CB15F276C87F7E8F772CD.

Sayigh, Yezid. “The Syrian Opposition’s Leadership Problem.” Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, April 2013. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2013/04/the-syrian-oppositions-leadership-problem?lang=en.

Seale, Patrick. “The Break-Up of the United Arab Republic.” *The World Today* 17, no. 11 (1961): 471–79. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40393301.

Shemesh, Moshe. “Prelude to the Six-Day War: The Arab-Israeli Struggle over Water Resources.” *Israel Studies* 9, no. 3 (2004): 1–45. http://www.jstor.org/stable/30245638.

Sides, John, and Kimberly Gross. “Stereotypes of Muslims and Support for the War on Terror.” *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 3 (2013): 583–98. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022381613000388.

Singh, Michael, Charles Cleveland, Melissa Dalton, Frederic Hof, Kimberly Kagan, Mara Karlin, Dana Stroul, et al. “ASSESSMENT OF THE CURRENT SITUATION IN SYRIA.” *SYRIA STUDY GROUP*. US Institute of Peace, 2019. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep20255.6.

Slater, Jerome. “Lost Opportunities for Peace in the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Israel and Syria, 1948-2001.” *International Security* 27, no. 1 (2002): 79–106. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3092153.

Solomon, Christopher, Jesse McDonald, and Nick Grinstead. “Eagles Riding the Storm of War: The Role of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party.” Clingendael Institute, 2019: 1-12. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21309.

Stacher, Joshua. “Reinterpreting Authoritarian Power: Syria’s Hereditary Succession.” *Middle East Journal* 65, no. 2 (2011): 197–212. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23012145.

Svolik, Milan W. “Power Sharing and Leadership Dynamics in Authoritarian Regimes.” *American Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 2 (2009): 477–94. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25548130.

Teitelbaum, Joshua. “The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, 1945-1958: Founding, Social Origins, Ideology.” *Middle East Journal* 65, no. 2 (2011): 213–33. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23012146.

Terrill, W. Andrew. “Iran’s Strategy for Saving Asad.” *Middle East Journal* 69, no. 2 (2015): 222–36. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43698235.

“THE FEZ SUMMIT.” *Strategic Studies* 6, no. 1 (1982): 13–15. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45182815.

Traboulsi, Fawwaz. “From Mandate to Independence (1920–1943).” In *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 88–109. Pluto Press, 2012. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183p4f5.12.

Uludag, Mekki. “Syrian Civil War: Important Players and Key Implications – A Factsheet.” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 7, no. 7 (2015): 4–10. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26351370.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *The Impact of the Conflict in Syria: A Devastated Economy, Pervasive Poverty and a Challenging Road Ahead to Social and Economic Recovery*. Damascus: UNDP Office in Syria, 2025. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-02/undp-sy-seia-final-24022025_compressed.pdf.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *Special Brief: The Death of President Hafez al-Assad (1930-2000) and the General Party Congress (17-21 June 2000)*. Damascus: UNDP Office in Syria, 2000. https://search.archives.un.org/uploads/r/united-nations-archives/7/3/7/737726030fcab2d6355c3d867615ca88cb1d8c94eafba228726801d65e8f682a/S-1098-0106-04-00003.pdf

United Nations Human Rights Council. *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*. A/HRC/58/66. Geneva: United Nations, March 19, 2025. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4081875?v=pdf.

United Nations Human Rights Council. *Report of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic*. A/HRC/18/53. Geneva: United Nations, September 15, 2001. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/countries/SY/Syria_Report_2011-08-17.pdf.

United Nations Security Council. *Resolution 1559 (2004) [on the political independence and withdrawal of foreign forces from Lebanon]*, S/RES/1559(2004). September 2, 2004. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/529421?v=pdf#files.

United Nations Security Council. *Resolution 242 (1967) [on a peaceful and accepted settlement of the Middle East situation]*. S/RES/242(1967). 22 November 1967. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/90717?v=pdf#files.

United Nations Security Council. *Resolution 338 (1973) [on a cease-fire in the Middle East]*. S/RES/338(1973). 22 October 1973. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/93466?v=pdf.

Valensi, Carmit, and Amal Hayek. "The New Syria—One Year After al-Sharaa's Rise to Power." Institute for National Security Studies, 2025. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep74781.

Veen, Erwin van, Alba Di Pietrantonio Pellise, Nancy Ezzeddine, and Paolo Napolitano. "Tracing the Evolution of the Syrian Civil War (2011-2020)." *Band-Aids, Not Bullets: EU Policies and Interventions in the Syrian and Iraqi Civil Wars*. Clingendael Institute, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28665.7.

Waardenburg, Johannes S. T. *La Siria Contemporanea: Ridisegnando la carta del Vicino Oriente*, vol. 1 (Rome: Istituto per l'Oriente C.A. Nallino, 2021).

Waetzel, Florian. "Review of *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Evolution of an Insurgency* by Charles Lister." *Democracy and Security* 12, no. 2 (2016): 127–31. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48602398.

Wilhelmsen, Julie, and Kristin Haugevik. "Strategic Partners against Terrorism 2.0?: Russia's Initial Positions on Syria." Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), 2016. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep08022.

Wimmen, Heiko. "Syria's Path from Civic Uprising to Civil War." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13045.

World Bank. *Agriculture in Syria: Towards the Social Market. Agriculture Sector Note and Technical Note on Agricultural Subsidies.* Sustainable Development Department, Middle East and North Africa Region, no. 47546, Washington, DC: World Bank, June 2008. https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/890301468304199912/syria-agriculture-in-syria-towards-the-social-market.

Wood, Elisabeth Jean. “Implications of Wedeen’s Ambiguities of Domination for the Analysis of Political Violence.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 55, no. 1 (2022): 40–43. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096521001293.

Yom, Sean, Joel Beinin, Frédéric Vairel, Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud, Andrew Reynolds, Ishac Diwan, et al. “The Arab Spring: One Region, Several Puzzles, and Many Explanations.” *Government and Opposition* 50, no. 4 (2015): 682–704. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26349787.

Yoo, John. “International Law and the War in Iraq.” *The American Journal of International Law* 97, no. 3 (2003): 563–76. https://doi.org/10.2307/3109841.

Ziadeh, Radwan. “*Power and Policy in Syria: Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East*.” London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2011. https://www.perlego.com/book/915886/power-and-policy-in-syria-intelligence-services-foreign-relations-and-democracy-in-the-modern-middle-east.

Zisser, Eyal. “A False Spring in Damascus.” *ORIENT-HAMBURG-, Deutsches Orient-Institut*; (2003): 39-61. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297949378_A_false_spring_in_Damascus.

Zisser, Eyal. “Syria and the War in Iraq.” Middle East Review of International Affairs, vol. 7, no. 2 (June, 2003). https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/meria/meria03_zie01.pdf.

Zisser, Eyal. “The Syrian Phoenix: The Revival of the Syrian Social National Party in Syria.” *Die Welt Des Islams* 47, no. 2 (2007): 188–206. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20140764.

Websites

Abouzeid, Rania. “Syria’s Revolt: How Graffiti Stirred an Uprising.” TIME, March 22, 2011.

Al Arabiya. “Sheikh al-Bouti, the Syrian Sunni cleric who stood by Assad.” Al Arabiya English, March 22, 2013.

Al-Assad, Bashar. “President Bashar al-Assad: Inaugural Address.” Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), July 17, 2000. Source and English translation: Syrian Arab News Agency. Republished at al-bab.com.

Al Jazeera. “Taking Syria: The opposition’s battles shown in 11 maps for 11 days.” Al Jazeera. December 8, 2024.

Al Jazeera. “Syria Braces for ‘Day of Dignity’ Rallies.” Al Jazeera, March 25, 2011.

Al Jazeera. “Syria war live tracker: Maps and charts.” Al Jazeera. December 16, 2024.

As-Safir, “بشار الأسد في خطاب القسم: مستعجلون لتحقيق السلام وغير مستعدين للتفريط بالأرض لا توجد عصاً سحرية لحل المشكلات دفعة واحدة... وعملية التغيير ليست هدفاً بحد ذاتها”. July 18, 2000.

Balanche, Fabrice. “The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria.” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. PolicyWatch 3433, February 10, 2021.

BBC News. “Syria’s Assad wins another term.” May 29, 2007.

Beshara, Adel, Dr. “Antun Sa’adeh (1904-1949).” Antun Sa’Adeh.

Caldwell, Leah. “Privileging the Private: Media and Development in Syria.” Arab Media & Society. No. 12. December 11, 2010.

CNN. “Photos: Bashar al-Assad’s Political Career.” CNN, August 29, 2013. [image]

Evans, Dominic and Suleiman Al-Khalidi. “From teenage graffiti to a country in ruins: Syria’s two years of rebellion.” Reuters, March 17, 2013.

Glasman, Wladimir. “Les ressources sécuritaires du régime en Syrie.” Institut de recherches et d’études sur le monde arabe et musulman (IREMAM), January 19, 2014.

Hylton, Raymond Pierre. “Hafez al-Assad Takes Control of Syria.” EBSCO, 2023.

Moubayed, Sami. “The United Arab Republic: A Look at Egypt and Syria's Short-Lived Union.” Al Majalla, February 22, 2024.

Ould Mohamedou, Mohammad-Mahmoud. “The Rise and Fall of Pan-Arabism.” Geneva Graduate Institute. January 31, 2019.

Phillips, Christopher. “How the wars in Libya and Syria are strangely intertwined.” Middle East Eye, July 22, 2020.

Rabih, Mounir. “Emile Lahoud: The beginning of the end for Damascus in Lebanon.” L’Orient Today. April 4, 2023.

Reuters. “Cyprus rescinds citizenship of Assad billionaire cousin.” Reuters. June 1, 2013.

Reuters. “Timeline: Violence in Syria.” Reuters. June 20, 2011. https://www.reuters.com/article/world/timeline-violence-in-syria-idUSBRE85Q16O/. Last accessed on 10 January 2026.

Reuters. “Year in review: Syria’s rebel army topples Assad regime.” Reuters. December 31, 2024.

Schaer, Cathrin. “Syria's Alawite community: Once feared, now living in fear?” DW. December 12, 2024.

Syrian Future Movement. “The experience of the “Damascus Spring” and the “Tamasuk” autumn.” Syrian Future Movement. March 24, 2025.

Syrian Network for Human Rights. “The 40th Anniversary of the 1982 Hama Massacre Coincides with Rifaat al Assad’s Return to Bashar al Assad.” Syrian Network for Human Rights. February 28, 2022: 3-27.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Mamluk.” Encyclopedia Britannica, April 7, 2020. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mamluk-soldier. Last accessed 2 October 2025.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Sykes-Picot Agreement.” Encyclopedia Britannica, October 14, 2025.

Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. “Hafez al-Assad’s cult of personality.” Wikipedia.

Podcasts

Muhanna, Mikey. “Samer Abboud. Syria’s Political History From 1946.” *The afikra Podcast*, June 9, 2025. Podcast audio.