

"Syria from Birth to Today: Exploring the Reasons why the Regime did not Fall"

Al-Furat Center for Studies

Introduction

After World War I and due to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, along with the intervention of Western powers in dividing its remnants among themselves, the Sykes-Picot Agreement was concluded. This agreement drew new artificial borders, with Syria becoming one of these newly defined entities. It remained under French mandate until the French eventually withdrew due to both World War II and popular uprisings. Since then, Syria has witnessed numerous governments and frequent coups, until the Ba'ath Party came to power.

For over a decade now, Syria has held a significant place on the international and regional discussion table. The year 2011 marked a turning point in its trajectory. Syria was already grappling with internal crises, external pressures, and international isolation, which culminated in an explosion coinciding with the "Arab Spring."

However, what is noteworthy is that Syria's version of the "Arab Spring" differed from what occurred in Egypt and Tunisia. This explosion in Syria led to a civil war, regional and international interventions, which in turn have kept the conflict ongoing to this day.

This research includes information about the historical evolution of Syria, from its birth to the French mandate, to the change in the current system, the Ba'ath Party's authority, and the subsequent changes that have taken place in it.

The significance of this research lies in the fact that the Syrian issue has occupied many researchers, study centers, and numerous books have been written about it. It has become a complex problem resistant to resolution and a field for settling local, regional, and international scores. What motivated us to undertake this research is the desire to delve into the reasons why this regime did not fall, despite its international isolation, numerous sanctions, deteriorating economic conditions, and external interventions. This drove us to delve into the history, nature, and strategy of this state in order to uncover the reasons for it not falling.

Geopolitical Location

Syria is situated in an important geopolitical location. The phrase "Whoever controls northern Syria controls the Levant, and whoever controls the Levant threatens Egypt, and whoever threatens Egypt threatens the region"¹ aptly illustrates this significance.

Syria has been considered the pivotal state in regional balance, and as Patrick Seale states in the introduction to his book "The Struggle for Syria," "Whoever leads the Middle East must control Syria. This is due to several reasons that lead me to adopt this perspective. One of them is Syria's strategic location; it overlooks the northeastern 'corridors' leading to Egypt, the overland route between Iraq and the Mediterranean Sea, the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula, and the northern borders of the Arab world... Syria is a good observation center from which the policies of major powers in the region can be monitored."²

At present, Syrian territory is included in the expansion projects of regional states. Iran utilizes Syria as part of its "Shia Crescent" project, while Turkey invests in its expansionist project called the "New Ottoman Empire."

The same applies to the United States, as Syria holds significant importance for it due to its direct borders with Israel. Additionally, it is considered a part of the American project known as the "Greater Middle East."

History of Syria

History is shaped by the balance of power between parties rather than by conspiracies. The birth of Syria was a result of understandings between parties and the sharing of interests. We will highlight several pivotal stages in Syria's history, including the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the Faisal government, the French mandate, and the Ba'ath Party's coup.

Sykes-Picot Agreement

The Sykes-Picot Agreement was secretly concluded between Britain and France in 1916. Under this agreement, the French were granted direct administrative control over Greater Lebanon and the coastal areas of Syria, known as the "Blue Zone." Meanwhile, Britain was granted rights of consultation in the southern part of Mesopotamia, known as the "Red Zone," extending intermittently from Baghdad to a small area encompassing Haifa and Acre. This also included the right to establish a railway line connecting the three cities. As for Palestine and the holy places, they

¹ "Walid Fikry, The Ottoman Crime," The Arcade for Publishing and Distribution, p. 161.

² Patrick Seale, "The Struggle for Syria," p. 14.

would be under international administration within a smaller brown region, with details to be determined after the war.

In the territories situated between these regions - the "Blue Zone," "Red Zone," and "brown Zone" - both parties agreed to recognize an independent Arab state or a confederation of Arab states. This state would be protected and subject to the authority of an Arab president. It would encompass Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and also the Mosul region. Within this arrangement, both Britain and France, within their respective spheres of influence, would have the exclusive right to provide the "ruler" with advisors or foreign officials upon the request of the Arab state or confederation of Arab states.³

Despite the prevailing sentiments of that time, nationalist tendencies were not dominant in the political landscape. Instead, democratic and decentralized governance tendencies were the primary demand of the region's cultures. In 1913, a group of Arab intellectuals and politicians gathered at the French Geographic Society in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Paris. One of their key demands was a return to Ottoman decentralized governance.⁴

After World War I in 1918, the Ottoman Empire collapsed under the control of the Allied powers. New states were formed, previously non-existent, each with different names. This was part of forming new spheres of influence. In this context, Mr. Abdullah Öcalan states about the Sykes-Picot Agreement: "Instead of establishing Ottoman peace, this agreement plunged the Middle East into a suffocating crisis and a blocked tunnel. The prominent nationalist states at the end of the war were all systematized constructs imposed on their own people internally and on each other externally. The eradication of traditional society meant declaring war on the peoples. Meanwhile, the maps drawn with a ruler were a call to ignite war among artificial states."⁵

Government of Faisal

After Prince Faisal bin Hussein managed to gain control over Syria, including Aleppo, with support from the British, he established the first Arab government in the Levant under the name "Faisal's Arab Government."⁶ The French dissolved this government in 1920, following an agreement between the British and the French to implement the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

³ Carl E. Meyer, Shareen Blair Brysac, "Kings' Makers," New Lines Printing Press, First Edition, 2010, p. 140.

⁴ "The Road to Sykes-Picot: World War I Through Arab Eyes," Al Jazeera Center for Studies, Dar Al Arabiya for Science Publishers, Group of Researchers, 2016, p. 92.

⁵ Abdullah Öcalan, "The Fifth Book," p. 544.

⁶ "The Road to Sykes-Picot: World War I Through Arab Eyes," Al Jazeera Center for Studies, Dar Al Arabiya for Science Publishers, Group of Researchers, 2016, p. 106.

When Faisal ruled Syria, he found that the multiplicity of affiliations in Syria required a decentralized system for the Syrian state. As a result, he drafted a constitution that divided Syria into provinces with local governance. The first constitution for Syria was written in the same year. Article 2 of the constitution stated: "The Syrian Kingdom consists of provinces forming a political unit that cannot be fragmented." Article 27 emphasized political decentralization: "The general government for the Syrian provinces consists of the ministerial body, responsible for their affairs before the General Assembly."⁷ This "Faisalite" government did not last long, as the French intervened and established a new mandate government in its place.

The French Mandate

After the French colonization, four states were established in present-day Syria: the State of Damascus, the State of Aleppo, the State of the Druze, and the Sanjak of Alexandretta (Iskenderun). Syrian Arab nationalists rejected the division of Syria into these states, while contrasting opinions emerged in regions like the Alawites, the Druze Mountain, and the northeastern Jazira region, where local leaderships had their own considerations.⁸

It wasn't until 1925 that the State of Syria was formed, incorporating Aleppo and Damascus. Meanwhile, the Alawite Mountain and the Druze maintained extensive self-governance, as did the Sanjak of Alexandretta.⁹ These states didn't unite within a centralized framework until shortly before the French departure from Syria.

After the victory of the "Free French" forces, they reached an agreement with the National Bloc for the independence of Syria, culminating in the 1936 agreement. They eventually left in 1946 under the pressure of mass protests.

The Kurds and the French Mandate

Kurdish regions, like the rest of Syria, were under Ottoman rule, but they enjoyed a sort of decentralized administration. When the French arrived, the Kurds, like other groups, demanded local self-rule to manage their own affairs. During the signing of the treaty between France and the National Government in Damascus in the 1930s, Kurdish tribal leaders conveyed their demands to France, seeking a greater role for regional components in managing their self-governance. (It's crucial to highlight that France used the Kurds as a winning card in their hands at that time, either in their relations with Turkey or while drawing Syrian borders, even if the negatives of this action didn't reach the level of what England did regarding Iraq. France's approach

⁷ [Syrian Constitution of 1920](#).

⁸ Nicolaos van Dam, "The aforementioned source," p. 65.

⁹ [The Historical Evolution of Centralization and Decentralization in Syria](#).

was selfish and played a pivotal role in the modern-era division of Kurdistan through the Ankara Agreement of 1921.)¹⁰

We can understand the Kurdish situation through a confidential report sent by the French President, Alexandre Millerand, to the French High Commissioner. In the report dated August 6, 1920, titled "Plan for the Organization of the French Mandate in Syria," Millerand proposes an alternative format for the "National Kingdom" involving a series of states, starting with the Turkish and Kurdish territories. He states, "First of all, we cannot directly include Turkish territories (Antep, Birecik, and Kilis) or Kurdish territories (east of the Euphrates, including Urfa and Mardin) in this federation. These areas lie in the north and northeast and lack any national connection with Syria. As soon as the hostile military operations carried out by the Turkish nationalists occur, the region can be handed over to 'local leaders,' specifically mentioning 'Mohammed Pasha,' the leader of the Mili tribe residing in Verancheir. It's necessary to also adjust the border drawing so that the Mili tribe isn't split into two parts... Such an understanding with the Kurds and the resettlement of Chaldean and Assyrian elements along the railroad line in the east of the Euphrates put us in a politically ideal position regarding Kurdistan... He concluded, that organizing the Turkish and Kurdish territories, followed by organizing Aleppo and Tripoli, based on the political settlement formula for the Antep region and the cautious infiltration formula in the eastern Euphrates area, allows us to assess whether these regions should be directed towards an independent system or integrated into the Syrian federation. In any case, a clear distinction must be made between these territories and the Syrian lands at present."¹¹

However, the existence of the abandoned Kurds and even Turkmens within the boundaries of the state that would later be declared as the Syrian Arab Republic was not taken into consideration at all. Instead, the matter was settled secretly, and a fait accompli was imposed based on the balances of military and political power and nothing else. Furthermore, even the situation of the Arabs was not included in any law, but only the interests of the mandate state (France) were considered... From the beginning, it becomes evident from the prevailing situation, which is contentious in its essence, the dire consequences that would arise from it.¹²

The Phenomenon of Coups

France left Syria, leaving behind an appetite for leaderships to seize power, as it hadn't left behind an organized structure or an established entity. With every coup,

¹⁰ Abdullah Öcalan, "Manifesto of Democratic Civilization," Third Edition, Volume Five, p. 276.

¹¹ Wajih Kouthrani, "The Levant at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century," Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Third Edition/2013, p. 232.

¹² "Abdullah Öcalan, Volume Five, p. 187."

there were signs of a new coup emerging. Coups were characterized by their short duration, indicating the weakness of the nascent state.

After France's departure, the ruling Arab elite adopted a centralized approach to governance, which led Syria to experience eight coups: the first occurred in March 1949 led by Husni al-Zaim, the second in August of the same year, in which Sami al-Hinnawi ousted Husni al-Zaim. The third coup took place in December 1951, led by Adib al-Shishakli against Hashim al-Atassi, followed by the fourth coup in February 1954, led by Mamoun al-Kuzbari against Adib al-Shishakli.

The fifth coup came in September 1961, led by Haydar al-Kuzbari against the United Arab Republic with Egypt during the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser.

The sixth coup took place in March 1963, led by Lu'ay al-Atassi and the Ba'ath Party against the government of Nazim al-Qudsi. The seventh coup occurred in February 1966, led by Salah Jadid, ousting Amin Hafez. The last coup happened in November 1970, where Hafez al-Assad ousted Salah Jadid, also known as the "Corrective Movement."¹³

Local Power Struggles and the Victory of the Ba'ath Party

The Ba'athists engaged in numerous convoluted struggles to seize power, culminating in their control over coups and monopolizing governance. The central slogan of Ba'athism was "Arab Unity," becoming an obsession for Ba'athists who tirelessly sought mechanisms to implement these ideas of unity under one banner, one flag, one king, one nation, one army. This was realized when Egypt and Syria united between 1958 and 1961.

After the separation that occurred on September 28, 1961, the name changed from the "United Arab Republic" to the "Syrian Republic," but soon it became the "Syrian Arab Republic."

After a series of military coups, the Ba'ath Party returned to the political and military scene with strength, following its dissolution in 1958. The Ba'athist military coup led by officers Salah Jadid, Hafez al-Assad, and Mohammed Umran took place on March 8, 1963, known as the "March 8 Revolution." Upon the Ba'ath Party taking power in Syria, the new government under Salah al-Bitar declared a state of emergency, which became the longest-lasting state of emergency declaration in history, lasting from March 8, 1963, to April 21, 2011.¹⁴

¹³ [Arab Military Coups... Beginning with Iraq and Syria, Ending in Sudan.](#)"

¹⁴ [The March 8 coup, which paved the way for Assad's control of Syria.](#)

After the Ba'ath Party took control, a series of power struggles emerged among its leaders themselves, leading to the elimination of their ranks. This internal conflict took on sectarian dimensions, leading to the 1966 coup against President Amin al-Hafez and General Umran, known as the "February 23 Movement." The outcome of this movement was the purging of military factions led by prominent Sunni officers. The Ba'ath Party branches were split on February 23, 1966, when Generals Salah Jadid and Hafez al-Assad ousted the party's national leadership led by Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Bitar, the party's founders since 1947. President Amin al-Hafez was ousted, and the party's founders were either imprisoned or went into exile.

Afterwards, the liquidation of Druze officers occurred, as they felt disillusioned due to not obtaining positions and attempted failed coups, resulting in the assassination of Sulaiman Hatoom. Later on, officers from the Hauran region were also eliminated and removed from their positions. This was due to their expressed concerns about the growing Alawite influence in both the military and the party. The conflicts did not stop there; they escalated further to an internal power struggle between Hafez al-Assad and Salah Jadid. This struggle arose from differences in opinions regarding governance methods. Following long-standing conflicts between the military and political factions within Syria, especially after the loss of the 1967 war with Israel, Hafez al-Assad, who had the military power, backed by certain Ba'athist officers, led a military coup on November 16, 1970, against officer Salah Jadid, and then-President Nouredin al-Atassi. Both were imprisoned, and this coup was named the "Corrective Movement." Syria entered a phase of comprehensive Ba'athist rule, led by a single party, until it transformed into a state characterized by family and sectarian dominance.

Akram al-Hourani stated in his memoirs, "After the June defeat, the Syrian regime did not engage in any self-review of the dangers and deviations it had committed. On the contrary, the influence of Hafez al-Assad, the leader of the army, the leader of the air force, the defense minister, and a member of the national leadership, expanded. Similarly, the powers and authorities of the intelligence director, Abdul Karim al-Jundi, expanded after the defeat. He imprisoned significant numbers of various political parties, subjecting them to severe forms of torture on charges of attempting to overthrow the regime." He also mentioned, "He began preparing the army to defend the regime rather than defending the nation. Competent officers were discharged from the Syrian army to be replaced by party members, teachers, employees, especially after the March 8 coup."¹⁵

After four decades of consolidating control, Syria entered a new phase due to the "Arab Spring" protests, marking a period of renewed internal conflicts, regional and international interventions, making it a battleground for settling scores among various factions.

¹⁵ Akram Al-Hourani, *Memoirs*, p. 3630.

The Nature of the Syrian Regime

The current regime in Syria derives its roots from the Ba'athist coup in 1963 and the 1973 constitution, both of which solidified the leadership role of the "Ba'ath Party." The developments witnessed in Syria during the rule of the Ba'ath Party can be summarized as follows:

- Hafez al-Assad designed a dual form of authority after coming to power. He allocated a significant share of the government and civilian administration to the Sunni majority and a majority share in the party formations. However, he retained the effective top of the military institution, leadership of security agencies, and numerous intelligence agencies under the complete control of the Alawites.¹⁶

- The regime formed alliances with small parties to stay in power. The Syrian regime used various means to remain in power, including temporary alliances aimed at monopolizing power. This strategy has been repeated on various occasions since 1963 and especially during the Syrian war that began in 2011. The Ba'athist rulers were willing to forge alliances with parties that were not ideologically close or even considered enemies, as long as they could achieve their primary goal of staying in power and monopolizing it.¹⁷

- The regime also played on the aspect of minorities, using them as leverage. Genghis Ghandar, in his book "Mesopotamia train," describing the nature of the Syrian regime, stated, "There is no second man in Syria, nor a third, fourth, fifth, or sixth. One can only talk about several individuals in the seventh rank; this regime is a minority regime. Its existence and continuity rely on establishing relations with minorities and holding each of them as a 'pressure card.'"¹⁸

- The regime followed customary practices. "The Syrian state has not entered a natural course in any form since the 1920s. To this day, it is governed by customary rules and lacks a constitutional system based on social consensus."¹⁹ The state of emergency law was lifted in 2011, but a similar law was enacted, called the "Law for the Protection of National Security, the Preservation of Citizen Dignity, and the Fight Against Terrorism." The regime's survival depends on keeping the state of emergency in effect.

¹⁶ [The upper ascent path: Al-Assad gave the party and administration for the year \(2-2\).](#)

¹⁷ Nikolaos Van Dam, *Destroying a Homeland, The Civil War in Syria*, Jana Tamer for Studies and Publishing, first edition, Beirut, 2018, pg. 26

¹⁸ Genghis Chandar, *Mesopotamia Express*, Arab House of Science, first edition, 2014, p. 63

¹⁹ Abdullah Ocalan, *Volume V*, 2018, p. 187

- The most significant action taken by Hafez al-Assad was transforming the political system from one weakened by coups to a comprehensive system where the president controlled all branches of power. He engaged in a struggle against anyone who opposed his authority, closed the door to any form of pluralism in any field, and maintained a unified visual, auditory, and written media outlet following a single agenda. The Ba'ath Party was considered the leader of both the state and society, as he stated, "Everyone living in Syria is a Ba'athist, but not organized."

- The Syrian regime is distinguished as a military system, where military ranks continue to manage the state. The appointment of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad did not occur without granting him a military rank, qualifying him to assume the position of the President of the Republic.

- The governing system in Syria is described as republican, but it contradicts its name. Firstly, a republican system relies on elections to fill the positions of state institutions, but here, the election process is superficial, following shadow lists. Secondly, a republic should be civil, but here, it is governed by intelligence and the military. Thirdly, it's termed a republic, but it follows an inherited system of power transition. Fourthly, it's called a republic, but it doesn't operate according to civil constitutions and laws. The constitution changes according to those in power, as exemplified by amending the constitution to suit the age of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (34 years) when deemed necessary.

To understand the nature of this regime, several characteristics explain it:

Weak Institutions

The most distinctive feature of this regime is that it established weak institutions with no authority against the security forces. These security forces can change these institutions if their interests require, and the regime gathered around it small and weak parties to create an illusion of power-sharing. "It relies on an extreme dependence on the president and the balance of power that he skillfully formulated. The influence and political and economic weight of different circles within the regime were measured by their proximity to the president."²⁰

²⁰ [Syria during the era of Bashar \(2: \(Challenges of internal politics\). Pg. 11](#)

Religious Aspect

When the 1973 constitution was drafted, the provision stating that the president of the republic must be Muslim was removed. However, this change in the constitution was met with public protests rejecting it in many areas. This led to a reversal of the change. Then the question was raised whether it is appropriate to call Alawites Muslims. To resolve this dilemma, Assad turned to his influential Shia friend, Imam Musa al-Sadr, the leader of the Supreme Shia Council in Lebanon. Al-Sadr issued a fatwa stating that Alawites are indeed a sect of Shia Muslims. This removed the religious barrier from Assad's path to the presidency.²¹

After embedding the state religion in the constitution, the regime tried to promote moderate Islam. However, it faced opposition from the "Muslim Brotherhood", which the regime fought against and neutralized. Religion became a tool to be used when needed.

Security Aspect

The role of security agencies takes precedence in all aspects of life in Syria. No action can be taken without security approval, making these agencies the actual rulers of Syria. All economic, political, cultural, and social activities are connected to them. These agencies are linked to the National Security Office, which reports directly to the presidency, giving it control over all activities in Syria. Most of these security agencies were established after the Ba'ath Party took power in 1963 and declared a state of emergency on March 8, 1963.²² These agencies include military intelligence, political security, state security, and air force intelligence, each with numerous branches. They all rely on instilling fear and terror, and employ various methods of surveillance and eavesdropping. Academic James T. Quilliam described the Syrian security apparatus as follows: "The government created several internal security agencies with overlapping jurisdictions that always work to monitor the army's loyalty and to monitor each other through independent communication channels with dominant leaders²³." In another context, he stated, "The head of state was keen to keep the intelligence agencies in a competitive state among themselves so that none of their leaders would assume a dominant position."²⁴

According to David W. Lesch, a lecturer and author in Middle Eastern history and politics, "by 2011, there was one intelligence agent for approximately every 240 people in Syria. The funding of the security apparatus, estimated at around three

²¹ Patrick Seale, *The Struggle Over the Middle East*, Al-Makatabat Company for Distribution and Publishing, Seventh Edition, 2007, pg. 279

²² [The security services and their role in the aspects of life in Syria.](#)

²³ Syrian Center for Justice and Accountability, *Walls Have Ears, Analysis of Confidential Documents from the Syrian Security Services*, 2019, p. 14

²⁴ *The paths of Damascus*, pg. 30.

billion dollars per year, accounted for more than a third of the military budget."²⁵ The intelligence agencies became the formidable force in maintaining the regime.

Corruption

Corruption, which corrodes the Syrian regime, plays a significant role in shaping the societal structure in Syria. A class of extreme wealth emerged, and the ranks of those benefiting from their positions in the government expanded day by day. In this context, Kamal Deeb, in his book "History of Syria," discusses how the regime allowed these individuals to misuse their positions: "Some saw Assad's leniency towards these desires as a reward for their loyalty and services, while others believed that Assad couldn't control the corrupt because their numbers had grown, and individuals in high positions had joined them to the extent that any attempt by Assad to rein them in could threaten the pillars of the regime."²⁶

The British writer and journalist Patrick Seale explains this corruption by stating: "The regime needed a new bourgeoisie class to replace the old one that had opposed it. The influential elite didn't settle for enrichment alone; they also abused their powers. Some of them began to enforce the law as they saw fit."

As a result, it can be said that the extent of corruption in the country has expanded to the point where it has become a societal phenomenon.

The Army

Since the Ba'ath Party took power, it established two armies: a regular army that is not heavily relied upon and a parallel army that plays a significant role in protecting the regime. This parallel army is composed largely of Alawites.

Syria was initially known for its military coups. To avoid similar coups during its rule, the regime neglected to strengthen the regular military institution. Instead, it established a parallel military force within the structure of the regular army, tasked primarily with protecting the regime. Examples of such forces include the "Republican Guard" and the "Fourth Division," previously known as the "Defense Brigades." As a result, even army commanders did not have full control over their units. A Syrian army officer stated, "True, I was the commander of a unit, but I was surrounded by three Alawite colonels. They were theoretically under my command, but not for certain decisions I could make, including moving my unit to flee with it. They had orders to kill me, so controlling the army was a very complex process."²⁷

Some statistics indicate that the size of the Syrian army reached 220,000 soldiers in 2011, of which the regime could only rely on 65,000 soldiers. In its battles against

²⁵ David W. Lesch, Syria, The Fall of the Assad Kingdom, Publications Company, Beirut, first edition, 2014, pg. 91.

²⁶ Deeb Kamal, Contemporary History of Syria, Dar Al-Nahar, Beirut, first edition, 2011, pg. 439.

²⁷ Christian Chenou, George Malbrunot, The Paths of Damascus, Publications, Distribution and Publishing Company, first edition, 2017, Beirut, pg. 242.

armed opposition factions, the regime resorted to relying on units it considered reliable and more loyal than others.

Syrian Regime's Strategy

On the international stage, the Syrian regime adopted a policy of non-alignment during the era of the bipolar world order. However, its strategy leaned towards the Soviet Union.

At the regional level, the regime supported "liberation movements" and indirectly provided support to armed groups in neighboring countries. It supported Palestinian movements and even granted space to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to use Syrian and Lebanese territories, facilitating its movement. Abdullah Öcalan stated, "Syria considered our presence a guarantee for itself against any potential threat from Turkey. Syria historically feared its northern neighbor as well. Therefore, our presence there served as a security barrier for them on all fronts."²⁸

In addition to supporting those movements, the regime adopted nationalistic slogans such as "resistance and steadfastness," by supporting the "Axis of Resistance" in Lebanon and Palestine against Israel. The alliance with Hezbollah and the Iranian regime became a cornerstone of Syria's defensive strategy²⁹. Consequently, Syria became a complementary link in the "Shia Crescent" project.

On the domestic level, the regime pursued a flexible policy towards minorities, but without addressing their issues and problems. The accumulation of these problems, along with social, political, and economic issues, led to a worsening and exacerbation of all aspects of public life, culminating in the explosion of the Syrian domestic situation in 2011.

Reconciliations

Simultaneously with its internal war, the Syrian regime worked on implementing a policy of reconciliations. For this purpose, a ministry named the "Ministry of National Reconciliation" was established in 2012. The plan involved linking military operations with a process of calming down the targeted area, paving the way for complete control and the termination of tension hotspots.

In 2015, the "Hmeimim Reconciliation Center" was established, which played a significant role in regaining control of areas for the regime, especially after tightening the grip on the opposition and offering them reconciliation deals. The regime followed various tactics to regain control over these areas, such as "security and stability in exchange for freedoms" and a blockade strategy "security in exchange for food." Then, it compensated residents with a "protection in exchange for loyalty"

²⁸ Abdullah Ocalan, *Manifesto of Democratic Civilization*, Third Edition, 2017, Volume Five, p. 387.

²⁹ Kamal Deeb, p. 635.

policy. This led to the regime regaining control over many areas in the suburbs of Damascus, Homs, and Daraa.

Demographic Change

Demographic change is like an old-new policy adopted by the Syrian regime. It is considered the best way to weaken opposition strongholds and replace their popular base with a regime-supportive one.

An example of this is the "Arab Belt" project approved by the Syrian government in 1965 and executed by the Ba'ath Party in 1974. This project aimed to empty the Kurdish area by displacing Kurds and settling Arabs in their place along a 300 km-long and 15 km-wide strip bordering Turkey. The goal was to achieve various objectives, including fragmenting the Kurdish community and ensuring there would be no future movements opposing the current regime.

During the years of the Syrian crisis, this policy continued. It usually started with ceasefires, negotiations, followed by evacuating populations from their homes. The forced displacement of people from the suburbs of Damascus, especially the "Eastern Ghouta," to Idlib and occupied Afrin, is an example of this policy. The purpose was to alleviate tension from the central areas, particularly Damascus.

Reasons for the Regime Not Falling

As a result of the "Arab Spring" uprisings that started in Tunisia and spread to Egypt, the popular protest movement in both countries managed to overthrow their presidents, providing motivation for other populations in the region, including the Syrian people, to follow the same path.

However, in Syria, the outcome was unexpected for the people. It resulted in millions of displaced persons, refugees, and migrants, hundreds of thousands of dead and wounded, and the regime maintaining its grip on power.

Internal Reasons

- Opposition's situation: After the peaceful protests began across most Syrian regions, cracks started to appear within the army's ranks. Although these divisions were initially limited, they formed the nucleus of what became known as the "Free Syrian Army" in 2011. While some countries expressed readiness to cooperate with this newly formed army, there were several reasons that hindered the opposition from achieving its goals, including:

1. Lack of a well-thought-out strategy (ideological, philosophical, constructive ideas, keeping up with the times) to achieve change. Without a clear theory and vision, results are hard to attain.
2. Regional interventions by parties like Turkey, Iran, Qatar, Jordan, and some Gulf countries turned the conflict into a battleground for settling scores and regional power struggles.
3. Opposition's fragmentation and disunity, despite the initial international support. Lack of unified leadership among the Free Syrian Army factions meant that no matter how much support they received, their agendas diverged, rendering foreign support less effective.
4. Focus on material gains and salaries from supporting countries, which affected the opposition's effectiveness.
5. The disarray of the political opposition, and its lack of a recognizable leadership, despite the existence of political blocs at various stages claiming to represent them; led to a loss of control over the Free Syrian Army. Competition for positions created a significant rift between the opposition residing abroad and the people struggling with war, difficult living conditions, and difficult lives. This divergence occurred due to differing needs between the people on the ground and the opposition's goals, primarily aiming to represent them instead of achieving true leadership.³⁰
6. Rapid shift from peaceful activism to armed struggle was one of the reasons for the opposition's failure. Additionally, the extremism that emerged within the opposition tilted the balance in favor of the regime.
7. Failure to attract minority groups; attempts to involve minorities in opposition activities remained superficial. One of the opposition leaders says in this regard: "They are looking nowadays for one Christian, two Alawites, and three Druze, and they say that they have a representative capacity³¹." So, - in short - we can say that the opposition and the regime have become two sides of the same coin.
8. The emergence and expansion of "ISIS" in Syria and Iraq shifted global priorities to combating this organization, which was perceived as the greater threat. The regime benefited from ISIS's presence to fight its enemies. As a result, the chaos created in Syria served the regime's interests.

The Kurd's Situation

The Syrian Kurds actively participated in building the Syrian Republic and played a significant role in the state-building phase. However, they faced marginalization by

³⁰ [The Syrian opposition and the leadership problem.](#)

³¹ Digged W. Lesch, *The Fall of the Assad Kingdom*, p. 143

the "Ba'ath Party," endured suffering, and were even stripped of Syrian citizenship and rights. The fact that Kurds in Syria were among the key founders of modern Syria was overlooked. More ever "A significant proportion of the Kurds in Syria are not even citizens; That is, they are not legally recognized. The rest of them lack any legal, cultural, economic, administrative or political rights. In other words, the Kurdish situation was more backward than that of the colonized."³²

In 2004, the Kurds launched a comprehensive uprising against the injustices they faced. This was a first step in breaking the barrier of fear. However, they stood alone without receiving support from other oppressed segments of the population. Arab chauvinism united with the state against the Kurds.

In 2011, the Kurds distanced themselves from the conflict between the opposition and the government. They focused on defending their areas and protecting their cities. The Self-Protection Forces were formed and worked to defend their regions against attacks by "ISIS," liberating most of these areas. At that time, the Syrian government was busy confronting the opposition, which was threatening the main cities; Therefore, it did not see that danger in the Kurds, given that the Kurds were on the marginalized side of the state. The government avoided confronting the Kurds and other minorities. Furthermore, the presence of a spirit of resistance among the Kurds in confronting "ISIS" and dismantling its power had an impact on the regime, which was on the verge of collapse. In reality, safeguarding the northern borders acted as a deterrent against the regime's downfall.

The Administrative Situation

From the early days of the 2011 popular uprising in Syria, maintaining the functioning of state institutions became a priority for the regime. The services provided were aimed at benefiting the Damascus government. For example, it continued to pay salaries to government employees in areas outside its control.

Also, one of the reasons for the regime's ability to withstand opposition was its official legitimacy on the international stage. It saw itself as the legitimate representative of the state, tying its fate to that of the nation. The regime focused on centralizing many of its administrative functions. It distributed essential services across cities in Syrian provinces. "The regime controls city centers, while the opposition controls the outskirts. In city centers, the population and jobs are concentrated in the centers, making it the center of power. This was a mistake made by the opposition. It believed that the territories were the most important, but ultimately, in the Syrian context, the centers were key."³³

³² Abdullah Ocalan, Volume Five, 2018, p. 187

³³ [The strategy of the Syrian regime during the uprising.](#)

External Factors

A. Regional Factors

- **Iran:** Syria is strategically important to Iran. When the peaceful protests turned into armed conflict, Iran was the first to intervene with its loyal factions, elements, and experts from the Revolutionary Guard. The Syrian situation was threatened with collapse, prompting Iran to intervene and prevent this scenario. "The evolution of the Syrian crisis differs from other Arab Spring revolutions. The Syrian uprising poses a threat to alliances, meaning that the fall of the regime would lead to the collapse of the Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut axis."³⁴ Iran considered the Syrian arena a rear-front to protect its interests and sectarian regime. It involved itself in managing the crisis by exerting influence over all aspects of governance. Iran has become a hidden force hindering any solutions at the moment, presenting an obstacle to any Syrian resolution.

- **Turkey:** On another front, Turkey provided diplomatic and military support to rebel and extremist groups. It allowed extremist fighters to cross its borders, marking the beginning of Turkey's involvement in the Syrian conflict.

Turkey's intervention and control over northern regions in favor of the opposition prevented any resolution of the Syrian crisis. Turkey will not abandon these areas unless it secures its interests. These areas are leverage for Turkey to impose its conditions at the right time. Turkey's embrace of the opposition shifted the opposition's course from confronting the regime to using it for the protection of Turkish national security. As a result, the essence of the opposition was diluted. Despite Turkey's claim to be fighting against the regime, it played a role in protecting the regime from falling.

- **Qatar:** Qatar's role in this context cannot be ignored. It contributed to arming the early Syrian opposition, legitimizing the regime's fight against it.

B. International Factors

- **Russia:** Russia has a long historical relationship with Syria. Syria has been a key ally for Russia in the Middle East, and abandoning this ally would mean giving up its interests in the region. As Russia saw itself as an emerging power, it found in Syria an opportunity to fulfill its ambitions. Russia's timely intervention in 2015 prevented the regime's collapse. It became a guarantor for the regime in international and regional forums. Both China and Russia exercised their veto power about 14 times until 2019, causing the failure of the United Nations Security Council to pass decisive resolutions against the regime.

³⁴ The paths of Damascus, pg. 202

- **United States and the West:** The direct reason for the United States and the Western intervention in Syria was to combat ISIS. They needed to ally with local forces to form a barrier against terrorism. The West didn't prioritize directly toppling the regime; instead, their focus was on changing its behavior. Emphasizing "counterterrorism" more than "regime change" provided the regime with an opportunity to regain strength and consolidate. Nevertheless, these parties still possess pressure cards against the regime and use them in sensitive situations. These include issues like the "use of chemical weapons," the massacres committed by the regime (such as the Tadamon massacre), imposing many sanctions, imposing a ban on normalization with the regime, and enforcing the Caesar Act. Syria thus became an arena for conflicts between different powers. The pressures to protect and change the regime converged, preventing its complete downfall.

Internal Challenges Facing the Syrian Regime

Despite the ongoing war in Syria not having succeeded in toppling the regime so far, it has led to significant challenges that have hindered any resolution to the Syrian crisis. It's unlikely that the regime can effectively address these problems, which include:

Reconstruction

If we hypothetically consider the end of the Syrian war and cessation of military operations, the extensively damaged infrastructure remains one of the biggest challenges and obstacles for Damascus. In the energy sector alone, 70% of power stations and fuel supply lines are out of service. This can paralyze many other vital sectors dependent on energy. According to UN reports, the cost of reconstruction in Syria is estimated at \$400 billion, excluding the cost of resettling around 12 million refugees and displaced persons.

The question that arises is: who will undertake this reconstruction? The countries supporting the regime are themselves under the weight of international sanctions. Moreover, other countries have linked reconstruction to a political solution. Investors are also hesitant to engage in this situation due to the presence of the "Caesar Act." As such, the idea of reconstruction remains unattainable in the current circumstances.

The Caesar Act

The US law known as the "Caesar Act" entered into force in its first phase on June 17, 2020. It aims to impose financial, economic, and political isolation on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his allies, coercing them into accepting a political solution to the Syrian crisis based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254. The law

also entails imposing sanctions on those providing financial and technical support to the Syrian government, including countries like Russia, Iran, and Lebanon. It can be summarized as the United States punishing countries for their involvement in conflicts within a third-party state.

The Refugee Crisis

As the Syrian crisis enters its eleventh year, approximately 6.7 million people remain internally displaced, and 5.6 million are refugees outside the country. This staggering number constitutes nearly a quarter of the world's total refugees, making Syrian refugees one of the largest displacement crises globally. Consequently, they have become an additional burden on the regime, further complicating the prospects for resolving the crisis.

What Lies Ahead for Syria

Predicting Syria's future is exceptionally challenging due to the intricate reality shaped by international, regional, and local interests, creating a knot that is difficult to untangle.

On the military front, significant military operations have not been witnessed in Syria since 2020. Despite sporadic battles between conflict parties, the frontlines and major fronts continue to experience a state of stalemate.

Syria is now divided into three main spheres of influence, each controlled by local forces supported extensively by powerful international actors. There are numerous military forces and foreign bases distributed across these influence areas. Therefore, any military intervention to support any ally on the ground could prolong the conflict in Syria. Moreover, continuous violence and conflict sustained through the backing of these allies could facilitate the resurgence of terrorist groups. Each of these influence areas has conflicting interests and goals with the other parties, further complicating the Syrian situation. In such complexity, a pressing question emerges: what will be the fate of these influence areas in the future?

All available data and facts indicate that solutions remain immature, and the goals of various active parties in Syria remain shrouded in mystery, which is why the root causes of the war persist. Another notable aspect in this regard is that all forces present in these regions implicitly recognize each other's influence, implying, in various ways, an acknowledgment of these regions.

In conclusion, Syria's state of division is approaching the Iraqi scenario, and the destinies of both states might involve the emergence of new forms of statehood. Italian journalist Yaroslav Trofimov states, "Syria and Iraq have effectively ceased to function as states. Large parts of both countries are now outside the central

government's control, and the meaning of the Iraqi and Syrian states themselves has been hollowed out by the dominance of sectarian and ethnic identities... Amid the chaos now engulfing the Middle East, it seems that the European colonizer-created states of a century ago are collapsing most profoundly."³⁵

One of the possibilities that many discuss is the regime implementing some reforms by altering or amending the constitution. However, such regimes are resistant to reform, as any relaxation could lead to their downfall. The Syrian regime is well aware of this fact.

³⁵ [Will new borders mean less conflict in the Middle East?](#)