

Why Has Bashar Won the War in Syria?

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“Without us, Bashar would not have survived,” claimed Ali Akbar Velayati, the advisor of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on international affairs, in November 2017.¹ In January 2018, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah said:

There is a president in Damascus. One could have assumed, when it all began, that he would become frightened, would pack his suitcases and move to Latakia, and from there, would seek refuge in Moscow or in some other country...but the man did not become frightened...he stayed strong and determined. He remained in Damascus and did not leave. And a cadre of state and security forces remained with him...the country did not collapse...and no company or even a squad deserted the Syrian army. The army remained intact and so did the security mechanisms and the state institutions. They remained intact because there was someone to look after them. And it is clear that they would not have succeeded in standing steadfast and surviving over the last seven years were it not for the broad grassroots support.²

The war in Syria is nearly over. To be sure, the restoration of calm and stability throughout the country, and even more so, peacemaking or national reconciliation among the segments of Syrian society, are still remote objectives, if they are even viable. But the fighting on the battlefield has been decided, and Bashar al-Assad, the reason for the war and to many, its “hero,” is the one who ended with the upper hand: he, and with him, all those whom he represented and fought for – the family and the dynasty, the Alawite community, and finally, the coalition of social and economic forces that underlay his Syrian Ba’ath regime.

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Bashar al-Assad's victory was handed to him thanks to his allies, but also thanks to his enemies and rivals, i.e., thanks to the recruitment of Tehran and Moscow to fight for him and subdue his enemies, but also thanks to the inertia to the point of inaction demonstrated by the West, primarily the United States, toward the crisis in Syria. However, at the same time, and perhaps most of all, his victory is an outcome of the domestic reality in Syria: on the one hand, the failure of the rebels to consolidate ranks, to cultivate a political and military leadership, and to shed the radical Salafi jihadist image plastered on them; and on the other hand, the political acumen and survival skills that Bashar demonstrated, along with the support that he and the Syrian state received, from extensive segments of the population.

This is an insight that is critical to any discussion of the future of Syria, and particularly, to any discussion of the future of the foreign presence in Syria, both Russian and Iranian, i.e., the attempts by Moscow and Tehran to impose their wills on this country – either together or through tension, competition, or rivalry between them. Such a discussion should take into account that Bashar did not wage this battle of life or death, from which he emerged victorious, only to become a puppet ruler manipulated by others, even they are Russian President Vladimir Putin, or Iranian Revolutionary Guards Quds Force Commander General Qasem Soleimani. To the extent that he can control matters, Bashar will presumably strive to become once again an independent agent who makes all decisions regarding the future of his regime and his country.

The Initial Stages

The bloody civil war waged in Syria over the last seven years has brought the country to the brink of dissolution and even collapse, and also led to the decomposition of Syrian society into its basic elements (religious and ethnic groups, tribes, clans, and families). By early 2018, it was estimated that close to half a million people had been killed and more than two million wounded during the fighting. Another ten million Syrians, about half of the population in the country, lost their homes, and between five to eight million of them fled across the border and became refugees.³ Furthermore, about three quarters of the Syrian economy has been destroyed, including national and economic infrastructure – the education and health systems, the transportation networks, electricity and water systems, the oil and gas fields, and crops and granaries.⁴

The catalyst of the war was protest – protests, initially local, limited, and mainly nonviolent, of peasants from rural and peripheral regions who were hungry both for bread and for change – that erupted in March 2011 as part of the events of the Arab Spring. Within a few months, this protest escalated into a wide scale grassroots uprising that eventually developed into a bloody civil war that has dragged on for more than seven years. After the initial weeks and months, this war also took on communal and ethnic tones and even religious connotations in the form of a religious war (jihad) against the “heretical Alawite regime” of Bashar al-Assad, the ally of the Shia camp in the Middle East led by Iran and Hezbollah.⁵

While Syria became a battlefield, it also became a regional and international arena in which Bashar al-Assad and his domestic rivals were pawns in a chess game played by the world powers, primarily Russia, but also the United States, and the competing regional powers, including Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. This involvement only exacerbated the crisis in Syria, fed the fighting waged on its soil, and prolonged the war that is not in the Syrian national interest, and certainly not in the interests of the Syrian people, who were the ones affected by these foreign powers attacking their country and seeking to reap personal gain from its destruction.⁶

During the initial years of the war, the scales were tipped in favor of the rebels. The rebels were supported by substantial segments of Syrian society, particularly the Sunnis living in the rural and peripheral regions who constitute at least one third of the residents of Syria, but they failed in their attempts to cultivate any legitimate and effective political and military leadership that could steer the rebellion to victory. In fact, hundreds of armed groups fought in the arena without any unity or joint command, and some eventually took on more Islamic colors, especially the longer the war dragged on. Nevertheless, the rebels succeeded in dealing a blow to the Syrian regime, which demonstrated helplessness and inaction against them. Although the regime in Damascus managed to survive the onslaught, it demonstrated low morale, exhaustion, and fatigue in light of the prolonged campaign that steadily eroded its assets, manpower, and territory, mainly in the northern and eastern regions of Syria, but also in rural and peripheral regions in the center and southern regions of the country. In fact, Bashar’s regime was left controlling less than one quarter of Syrian territory. This was a narrow strip of land that extended from the capital city, Damascus, southward to the cities of Daraa, the capital of the Hauran, and as-Suwayda, the capital of Jabal al-Druze; and

northwards to the cities of Homs and Hama in central Syria and to Aleppo, the second largest city in Syria, and extending to the Alawite territory on the Syrian coast. More than half of the original population of the country (some 13 million, out of 25 million) reside in this strip of land. The Syrian institutions continued functioning and providing basic services to civilians, including the supply of electricity and water, food supply, welfare, health, and educational services, and more.⁷

The rebels, for their part, continued advancing one step at a time – village, town, and provincial city, one after the other – on the way to achieving their objective, the collapse of Bashar al-Assad’s regime. At times, it appeared that their victory was just a matter of time, and that the Syrian state could not survive. Indeed, this was the picture in July 2012 after the assassination of the Syrian security elite during a terrorist attack in the heart of Damascus; so it appeared in March 2013, with the occupation of ar-Raqqah, the capital of the ar-Raqqah province; and so it appeared in the spring of 2015, following the rebels’ success in seizing control over the Idlib province, as well as the success of the Islamic State in breaking through into the heart of Syria (with its occupation of the city of Tadmor) and into the south (beginning with a few suburbs of Damascus and ending at the foot of Jabal al-Druze).

The Foundations of Bashar’s Victory

Yet anyone who had already eulogized Bashar al-Assad was taken by surprise when Moscow and Tehran were recruited in September 2015 to help him remain in office and subdue his enemies. Russian combat planes and helicopters, Quds Force ground forces, and combatants from Hezbollah and Shia militias from across the Middle East that were established and trained by Iran came to Syrian soil and tipped the scales in Bashar’s favor. The Russian air strikes on rebel targets, or more precisely, on civilian regions where the rebels operated, dealt a mortal blow to the rebels’ unity and fighting spirit and even their fighting power, while leading primarily to casualties among the civilian population that had granted them shelter. These strikes enabled the Syrian army, and mainly the Iranian forces, Hezbollah forces, and Shia militias that Iran deployed in Syria to seize the initiative and take control over a majority – about three quarters – of the territory of Syria.⁸ In tandem, Washington formed an international coalition, comprising mainly Shia forces in Iraq and Kurds in Syria, which led to the collapse of the Islamic State, despite the fact that the Syrian regime, and mainly Iran, rushed to fill the void that the Islamic State left behind it in

eastern Syria, the Syrian desert, and the Deir ez-Zor province.⁹ However, Washington has had no overall policy with regard to the Syrian question, and its policy – under both the Obama and Trump administrations – is essentially a focus on the battle against the Islamic State and willingness to leave the task of ending the war in Syria to Moscow, even at the price of leaving the Russians’ protégé, Bashar al-Assad, in the presidential seat in Damascus.

Yet besides reliance on Russia and Iran for the turning point in the war, and apart from Washington’s inactivity and its aversion to any involvement in this war, domestic circumstances enabled the regime’s victory. True, the rebels failed to consolidate ranks, cultivate a legitimate agreed leadership, and achieve domestic and international support for their plight, but the regime’s strengths were also critical. Over the long years of the war, Bashar and the Assad dynasty that he headed, along with the Syrian state and its institutions – mainly the army and the government and security mechanisms – endured and demonstrated unity and power that surprised many who had repeatedly predicted their demise. The state and military institutions did not implode, as occurred in Libya and in Yemen, but rather, continued to function, even if often in a partial and limited way. The Syrian army, for example, contended with waves of desertions that amounted to about one third of its standing army, but this still did not result in its collapse, and the desertions remained limited to small groups of soldiers and their commanders (no military unit the size of a regiment or larger defected to the ranks of the rebels). The senior military leadership and the state and political leadership also remained loyal to the President and his regime. The government in Damascus continued to maintain a functional framework – even if fragmented and partial – of education, health, and welfare systems, and most importantly, the supply of food and critical basic necessities, which preserved the population’s support for the state and its institutions.¹⁰ All of these enabled Bashar and his regime to rise up like a phoenix and spread its wings, once Russia and Iran succeeded in tipping the military campaign in its favor. Indeed, as Nasrallah stated: “We came to Syria and, after us, the Iranians came and, after them, groups of combatants came from Iraq...and, over the last two years, the Russians also joined all of these. But if the Syrian army had not been there throughout that entire time, all of these foreign forces that arrived on Syrian soil would have been considered (and mainly perceived by the Syrians) as an army of occupation; but this is not what has happened.”¹¹

This victory by Bashar was, rather, the culmination of four separate victories:

The first victory was the victory of the man, Bashar al-Assad, who demonstrated self-control, determination, and adherence to his objective, and a calculated, cold-blooded, apathetic, not to mention, merciless, willingness to sacrifice millions of his own people for the sake of ensuring his personal survival and the survival of his regime. Beyond this, Bashar also demonstrated political acumen and manipulative capabilities, such as his success in hooking Russia and Iran – two rivals with little ties between them – and recruiting them to his aid, while achieving maneuvering room for himself (albeit limited), and freedom of action opposite them by exploiting the tension and rivalries between the two countries.¹²

The second victory was the victory of the Alawite community, which had solidly positioned itself behind Bashar and sent its sons to battle for him and, essentially, for the “Alawite Project” – the hegemony that the Alawites achieved over Syria. Consequently, the Alawites continued to be inducted in droves into the standing army and in the armed militias – nearly the only community from among the mosaic of Syrian religious and ethnic communities – to fight Bashar’s war, which was synonymous with their war.¹³ One symbol is Brigadier General Suheil al-Hassan, nicknamed “the Tiger,” who led many of the battles waged by the Syrian regime and who became one of the symbols of victory by the regime in Damascus. He was invited to meet with Putin during the Russian President’s visit to Syria in December 2017, and he was also mentioned as Russia’s choice as a replacement for Bashar, insofar as it might become necessary.¹⁴

The third victory was the survival of the social coalition underpinning the Syrian regime – that coalition of social forces that stood behind him, either by actively fighting alongside him, or by supporting him from the sidelines, or by sitting on the fence and abstaining from coming out against him. Heading this coalition were the members of the Alawite community, but there were also members from other minorities, as well as members of the Sunni middle and upper classes living in the major cities.

The Syrian Ba’ath party began its regime representing a broad social coalition deeply rooted in the Syrian populace. Although this coalition was led by the Alawite community, its partners included members of the other minority communities in the country, such as the Druze, the Isma’ili communities, the Christians, and more importantly, members of the Sunni

community, initially in rural and peripheral regions, and in recent decades, also the middle and upper classes in the major cities.¹⁵

The cracks that were discovered in the foundation of this coalition in recent decades, or more accurately, the abyss that grew between the rural Sunni segment and the regime in Damascus, are what led to the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. It was the rural Sunni segment – about one third of the entire population in Syria and about half of the Sunni community in the country – that turned its back on Bashar’s regime, and feeling betrayed and neglected by the regime, launched an all-out war against it in March 2011. Extensive segments of the population in Syria – members of all religious and ethnic communities and economic classes – were initially enthusiastic about the Syrian revolution. However, after the revolution turned into a bloody civil war, and mainly, a jihad – a religious war led by Salafī jihadist groups originating mostly from rural and peripheral regions – the minority communities and the middle and upper class Sunnis living in the major cities lost their enthusiasm for the revolution, its instigators and leaders, and the combat forces that operated throughout Syria. To be sure, the fault lines in Syria have always been socio-economic and not necessarily religious or ethnic. Moreover, the Sunni middle and upper classes in the major cities have always tended – and certainly since the outbreak of the revolution in Syria – to consider the affiliations between rural population segments and radical Islamic segments as a danger to the social, economic, and political order maintained in Syria headed by the Assad dynasty and supported by the Alawite community, but in which the Sunni urban population also finally found its place (this, thanks to the long years of stability in Syria since the early 1970s and especially since the government in Damascus adopted a policy of economic openness and encouragement of the private sector). This urban Sunni foundation was and has remained an essentially secular Arab nationalist community.¹⁶

The fourth victory was the victory of the Syrian state, as Bashar and his domestic and foreign partners sought to present their victory as a victory for the idea and institution of the Syrian state. This is how Bashar himself boasted during his victory campaign in March 2018 in the Ghouta region east of Damascus, after it was seized by his army, when he announced: “The ace in our hands is the support of the Syrian people, since without such support, our actions would have been illegitimate. The Syrian people want the [Syrian] state, and therefore, they are returning to it.”¹⁷

One can argue about the significance of this victory, particularly considering the horrific human and material price that the Syrian regime paid for its achievement. But the fact is that many of Syria's residents preferred to be loyal to the state institution or, at the very least, not to come out against it and face the "unknown." During the initial decades of the state, the elite population segments in Syria were hard pressed to accept it and even opted, as one may recall, to disavow it, when they decided in a self-destructive act in February 1958 to form the United Arab Republic with its Arab big sister, Egypt. However, as the years passed, it seemed that the Syrians changed their mind and, considering the years of stability and empowerment that Syria demonstrated to its residents, and certainly to those who benefited from the fruits of this stability under the Assad dynasty, these citizens refrained from renouncing the state and its institutions.

Nonetheless, the years of the war were destructive to the country and to the society in Syria. The demographic upheaval was immense, an outcome of the ethnic cleansing of millions of Syrians, who became exiled refugees against their will. In recent years, Bashar has declared on numerous occasions that he will not call for the refugees to return to their homeland,¹⁸ and further boasted that the Syrian population has become more harmonious¹⁹ now that Syria is rid of its surplus populations, an outcome of natural increase that grew out of control, mainly during the 1980s and 1990s. These surplus populations were the underlying cause of the communal and ethnic tension felt in the country and were a burden on its resources.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that an end to the travails and the arrival at a state of tranquility or, at the very least, to political stability that will enable Syria to return to its days of greatness or at the very least to the golden era that had existed during the reign of Bashar's father, Hafez al-Assad, is a long way off. After all, Syria has been destroyed and its social fabric shattered. Consequently, it is easy to understand the contention, both within Syria and internationally, that Bashar's victory is an "empty victory" and that he will have a hard time regaining control over the entire country and rehabilitating the state's institutions and mechanisms in a way that will enable him to rule over the country effectively, and help him to cement the pieces of the Syrian social mosaic that were shattered.²⁰

The course of events in Syria over recent years has demonstrated that Bashar al-Assad is a determined ruler willing to sacrifice millions of his

own people in order to achieve his objectives and his own survival. In the Middle East, uncontrolled blood-soaked tyranny, such as Saddam Hussein demonstrated in Iraq, is a despot's key survival strategy that posits that instilling abject fear guarantees popular submissiveness. Coupled with this, Bashar continues, to a great extent, to benefit from support from an important segment of the Syrian population, which remains loyal to this ruler and to his regime as well as to the Syrian state as an organizing idea for their lives and their existence. This support enabled him to survive the long years of the war and, with the assistance of Russia and Iran, to regain control over most of the territory of Syria. Bashar did not wage this battle for survival merely in order to become a captive or a puppet ruler to be manipulated by Tehran or by Moscow, and therefore, to the extent that matters are under his control, Bashar will presumably strive to take control over the future of his country. This fact should be taken into account in any forecast that attempts to predict the future in Syria.

Notes

- 1 Reuters, "From Aleppo, Top Iranian Official Hails Tehran's Growth as Regional Power," *Haaretz*, November 8, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2MIhRIA>.
- 2 See Hassan Nasrallah's interview with *the al-Mayadeen* television channel, January 3, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2KLdQCN7>.
- 3 Megan Specia, "How Syria's Death Toll is Lost in the Fog of War," *New York Times*, April 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/syria-death-toll.html>.
- 4 Alon Rieger and Eran Yashiv, "The Syrian Economy: Current State and Future Scenarios," *Strategic Assessment* 20, no. 1 (2017): 71-82, http://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/SA20.1_Rieger-Yashiv.pdf.
- 5 For general background on the war in Syria, see Eyal Zisser, *Syria: Protest, Revolution, Civil War* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle East Studies, 2014); Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2013); David W. Lesch, *The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).
- 6 Amos Harel, "There is Only One Show Now in Syria: A Dual between the World Powers," *Haaretz*, April 13, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-MAGAZINE-1.5994393>.
- 7 For details about the stages of the war, see William W. Harris, *Quicksilver War: Syria, Iraq and the Spiral of Conflict* (London: Hurst, 2018).
- 8 Amos Yadlin, "Russia in Syria and the Implications for Israel," *Strategic Assessment* 19, no. 2 (2016): 9-26, especially pp. 9-12, <http://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/systemfiles/INSS.StrAss19.2.July16.01Yadlin.pdf>; Eyal Zisser, "Russia's War in Syria," *Strategic Assessment* 19, no. 1 (2016): 41-49,

- http://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/systemfiles/adkan19-1ENG_3_Zisser.pdf.
- 9 Marta Furlan and Carmit Valensi, "The Day after the Islamic State," *Strategic Assessment* 20, no. 3 (2017): 71-81, <http://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/the-day-after.pdf>.
 - 10 Eyal Zisser, "The Deadlocked Syrian Crisis: The Fable of the Ants and the Elephant," *Strategic Assessment* 16, no. 2 (2013): 35-45, http://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/systemfiles/adkan16_2ENG5_Zisser.pdf.
 - 11 See note 2.
 - 12 For more about Bashar al-Assad, see Eyal Zisser, "Alone at the Top: Bashar al-Assad and the Struggle for Syria," *Strategic Assessment* 16, no. 3 (2013): 57-65, http://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/systemfiles/adkan16_3ENG3.pdf_Zisser.pdf.
 - 13 See Leon T. Goldsmith, *Cycle of Fear: Syria's Alawites in War and Peace* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2015); Michael Kerr and Craig Larkin, eds., *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2015), p. 384.
 - 14 See, for example: "Osak al-Nimr, Suheil al-Hassan," <https://www.facebook.com/syrianarmy.sy>; see also "Who is the Tiger that Assad Fears," *al-Arabiya* television, February 25, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2z8DVtS>.
 - 15 Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and their Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'athist Syria, Army, Party and Peasant* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990).
 - 16 Benedetta Berti, "The Turmoil in Syria: What Lies Ahead," *Strategic Assessment* 15, no. 1 (2012): 55-65, http://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/systemfiles/adkan15_1ENG_Berti.pdf. See also Zisser, *Syria: Protest, Revolution, Civil War*.
 - 17 See *al-Ahd* (Beirut), March 18, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2MHByQA>.
 - 18 See the interviews that Bashar al-Assad granted to the Italian newspaper *Il Giornale*, and to the Italian TV channel TG5 on December 29, 2016, http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=322&Itemid=468.
 - 19 For the full version of Bashar al-Assad's statements, see *Aletho News*, August 20, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2IPjGRt>.
 - 20 See for example Elizabeth Tsurkov, "The Strength and Weakness of the Assad Regime," Forum for Regional Thinking, October 18, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2lOctli>.