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At the End of the Day, Bashar al-Assad

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The war in Syria is over, and Bashar al-Assad has weathered the tumult. However, the regime is weakened, stripped of power and resources, and hard-pressed to impose its authority in the state. Moreover, Russia and Iran continue to maintain their presence and influence in the country. Yet notwithstanding the regime's weakness, there is no evident alternative. All the respective domestic, regional, and international actors understand this, and are ready to renew the dialogue with the regime, recognize it, and thereby grant it legitimacy. Syria will not readily recover its pre-war status, but Bashar has survived the war and is laboring to regain control in the country. In that case, sooner or later, Israel, like the other regional actors, will have to factor him in when formulating policy and planning activity in the Syrian space.

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Introduction

The blood-soaked civil war raging in Syria for the past decade posed a threat to the existence of the Syrian regime, i.e., the regime of Bashar al-Assad, and apparently even the very existence of the Syrian state that he rules. But in the end, thanks to the involvement of Russia and Iran in the fighting, Bashar al-Assad survived the war and retained his position, while the “rebel camp,” or more precisely, the hundreds of armed groups that fought against him, and sometimes against each other, were defeated on the battlefield and scattered in all directions.

Foreign involvement in Syria's affairs has helped prolong the civil war and currently sabotages efforts to restore peace and calm to the country and put it back on its feet.

But the victory achieved in Damascus against its enemies is a hollow victory. The Syrian regime is exhausted and weak, lacking manpower and economic resources, and remains dependent on its allies, Russia and Iran, who want to secure their own presence and their grip on Syria. Clearly the restoration of security and stability throughout the country, and the start of the process of rebuilding the Syrian economy, which is critical to the ability of the Assad regime to ensure long term popular support, are still distant objectives.

The starkest expression of the weakness of the Syrian regime is the fact that about a quarter of the country's territory *is not under its control*. In the east, where most of the country's oilfields and granaries are located, the Kurds have set up an autonomous government under the protection of the United States. The latter also continues to maintain a military presence at al-Tanf in southeast Syria. The Idlib region of northwest Syria is controlled by groups of armed rebels, many of them Salafist jihadist, headed by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. They enjoy the protection of Turkey, which also maintains a military presence along the border between

the two countries, with the aid of rebel groups attached to the Free Syrian Army. And finally, on the outskirts of the area of settlements in southern and eastern Syria, ISIS cells continue to operate, launching terror attacks against the regime's forces. In other words, the defeat of the organization and the collapse of the caliphate that it established did not erase or eliminate it, but at most sent ISIS back to the situation that existed before it declared its caliphate.

Even in areas of the country that are officially under the control of the regime, its governance is limited. This is due to the Russian and Iranian presence on Syrian soil, and due to the ongoing activity of armed groups that are often under the protection of Tehran and Moscow and are supported by them. The regime has control of the large urban centers, main traffic arteries, and border crossings, but it has difficulty maintaining governance in rural and peripheral areas, which throughout the past decade have been the focus of protest and rebellion.

Thus the question is whether Bashar is in control of Syria, or is he a ruler who is powerless beyond the walls of his palace, or even a puppet controlled by Russia and Iran? In Israel, this question is often asked in a slightly different way, deriving from Israel's interest in Syria: is Bashar able to push Iran and Hezbollah out of the country, or at least limit their activities there?

The Struggle over Syria in the Regional and International Arenas

Foreign involvement in Syria's affairs has helped prolong the civil war and currently sabotages efforts to restore peace and calm to the country and put it back on its feet. Contrary to the hopes of the regime and its allies, the result achieved on the battlefield has paradoxically led to greater foreign involvement and intensified the struggle between the regional and international forces operating on Syrian soil and seeking a grip on the country.

Russia and the United States: The struggle between Washington and Moscow is unfolding on Syrian soil, as well as elsewhere. While

President Trump announced that he was determined to withdraw American troops from Syria, he maintained a military presence in the country. On the other hand, the Biden administration has clarified that **it does not intend** to remove US forces from Syria, but the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan and the expected departure of military advisers from Iraq prompt speculation over if/when Syria's turn will come. Meanwhile, this American presence in Syria is a source of friction with Russia and with Iran, which used its proxies (pro-Iranian Iraqi militias) **to attack the US base in al-Tanf**, in response to Israel's attacks on Syria and Iraqi space.

Turkey sought to exploit the crisis in Syria, along with the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, as well as in Libya, to become a regional actor with status and influence in the Arab world. To that end it has given aid to Islamic groups such as those operating in northern Syria. However, Turkish military involvement in the country is focused mainly on the attempt to prevent the **formation of a Kurdish autonomy** on Turkey's border with Syria. In this context, Turkey has embarked on a series of military operations: Euphrates Shield in August 2016, Olive Branch in January 2018, and Peace Spring in October 2019, all intended to prevent the Kurds from gaining territorial contiguity from the east to the Mediterranean coast, and to drive them out of northwestern Syria (the Afrin region), which they turned into a kind of buffer zone under the control of Syrian rebels loyal to them. In Operation Spring Shield in March 2020, the Turks took on forces of the Syrian army and Hezbollah fighters who were trying, with Russian encouragement, to take control of the Idlib region.

It will likely be difficult for Turkey to maintain a military presence on Syrian territory for an extended period, partly because such action is not supported by the Turkish public, and if it can find what it considers a satisfactory solution to the Kurdish question, it will probably restrict its presence and involvement. In any

case, a US withdrawal from Syria could trap the Kurds between the Turkish hammer and Bashar's anvil and motivate them to return to the regime in Damascus, with which they never broke off relations, even at the height of the civil war battles.

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The struggle between Israel and Iran: Israel exploited the **window of opportunity opened by the war** to conduct its "campaign between wars" against Iran and Hezbollah. It has carried out a long series of air attacks to damage the convoys transporting weapons from Iran to Hezbollah, to prevent the forces of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the pro-Iranian Shiite militias from gaining a hold on Syrian soil, and to interfere with the progress of the precision missiles project, which is intended to convert the missiles held by Hezbollah to more advanced long range missiles with precision strike capability.

These attacks are still ongoing. Israel has stressed repeatedly that its moves against Iran are not directed at the Syrian regime. It appears that it still "believes" in Bashar, and even deems the continuation of his regime to be its preferred option, as "the devil you know," since it grew accustomed to him long ago. Israel also hopes that the pressure it exerts on Bashar, through its repeated attacks, will lead him, with Russian encouragement, to oust the Iranians from Syria.

Russia and Iran—allies or bosses: Russia and of course Iran are not just part of the solution to the plight of the Syrian regime, but also in fact are part of the problem, since their ambitions and interests in Syria, as well as their military presence there, may have helped the regime retain power, but also make it hard for the regime to get back on its feet.

Russia hopes to score political gains from its involvement in Syria, so that it can strengthen its status and its image, and acquire bargaining chips against its rivals, above all the United States. First and foremost, however, it wants to make Syria its forward base for the eastern coast of the Mediterranean. In addition, Moscow seeks economic gains, and is working to obtain a hold on sources of energy in the oil and gas fields.

Iran too hopes to make Syria its forward base against its enemies, above all Israel and the United States, and sees Syria as an important element in the land bridge it wants to form from Iran through Iraq to Lebanon. In this framework, the Iranians have deployed weapon systems on Syrian territory such as UAVs, air defense systems, and advanced missiles. Iran has also brought Shiite militias into Syria—Fatimiyoun, Chaydariun, and Zainabiyoun, whose fighters are recruited in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. Their purpose is to help the Syrian regime in its fight against the rebels, but in the long run they are intended to promote Iran's entrenchment in the country, and it is even claimed that the Iranians are working to settle their fighters on Syrian soil where they can help in the process of Shi'ization among the local Alawite population as well as the Sunnis. Like the Russians, the Iranians are working to gain an economic hold on the country.

Russia does not hide its concerns that Iran's efforts to consolidate its grip on Syria will undermine the country's fragile stability and even lead to military conflict with Israel. Iran for its part does not hide its suspicions that the Russians have chosen to ignore or even tacitly approve Israel's air attacks on Iranian targets in Syria, and that Moscow might lend a hand, together with Israel and the United States, to the political moves to drive it out of Syria.

This situation weakens the Syrian regime, but at the same time gives it the ability to maneuver among its patrons. It appears that Bashar has a clear preference for an alliance with Moscow, but is determined to maintain his freedom of

movement, and as evidence, he has blocked or even thwarted moves that Moscow wished to promote in the international arena, aimed at bringing about a political settlement that could have forced him to make concessions. In fact, Bashar still needs Iran and wants to maintain ties with it, as the Iranians and Hezbollah were the first who came to his aid when the civil war broke out. At the same time, he wants to limit the Iranian presence in Syria—inter alia, even if not exclusively, because of the military pressure applied by Israel. For example, it was reported that Bashar al-Assad supported the dismissal of the commander of Iranian forces in Syria Javad Ghaffari for being "overly active" against Israel.

The Russians have no interest in direct control of Syrian territory, and seek, rather, to restore stability and strengthen the central regime. They have pinned their hopes on the regime as a means of promoting their own interests in the country, without the need to maintain a massive military presence that could become bogged down in the Syrian morass. Unlike Russia, Iran seeks a direct hold on the land itself, and it apparently believes that the chaotic situation in Syria actually serves its purposes.

The Syrian Regime at Home: A Hollow Structure

The weakness of the Syrian military undermines the regime's governance capability, which is far from complete and in many cases symbolic only. According to estimates, only about a third of the personnel that were serving before the war began are currently in the military, that is, less than a hundred thousand regular troops. Many of the armed fighters listed on the regime's "payroll" are actually serving as semi-regular forces or even in the militias whose subordination to the central regime's authority, and certainly to the army command in Damascus, is shaky. Many unit commanders operate as "warlords" who—now that the war against the rebels has ended—are involved in the struggle for control and influence over areas where they deployed against their colleagues—

commanders of other army units and of the local militias.

The Russians have invested considerable effort in improving the operational fitness and control of the Syrian military, and have equipped it with advanced weapon systems. They have also set in motion a structural reorganization and established new units, over which they have a certain degree of influence. Yet in spite of Moscow's efforts, the Syrian army still [lacks operational fitness](#) to take action not only against Israel or Turkey, but also against its enemies at home—whether ISIS or armed groups that continue to operate on territory that is theoretically under its control.

Syria's struggle for governance: In this complex situation, the regime is working patiently but with determination to restore its authority all over the country. One example is southern Syria—a sensitive region because of its proximity to the border with Jordan and with Israel. There is a Russian presence there, an Iranian and Hezbollah presence, and armed groups continue to operate; the situation is similar elsewhere in the country. In the beginning, the regime accepted the continued activity of the armed groups, which often enjoyed Russian protection, but later, when it felt that conditions were ripe and after receiving a green light as well as assistance from the Russians, it initiated military moves to defeat these groups. One example was the return in the summer of 2021 of [regime forces to the city of Daraa](#), where protests began a decade earlier.

Still, the government forces remain weak and lack manpower, as well as the determination and motivation to work to restore the ironclad rule to southern Syria. Moreover, the armed groups may have laid down their arms and ceased fighting the regime, but ultimately they emerged from forces in the local society—families and clans and even tribes—that continue to be a significant element in the lives of the population and must be taken into account.

State, society, and economy: In addition to restoring its military power and sovereignty,

the Syrian regime has taken steps to rebuild state institutions, including its military system and (though of lower priority) its social and economic systems, as the means for controlling the population. However, [the regime's economic resources are depleted](#), and its allies Russia and Iran lack the resources required to rebuild the country's economic infrastructure, or even to meet the people's basic living needs.

Reports from Syria show [that most of the population](#)—at least two thirds and perhaps more—live below the poverty line of \$1.90 per day, while unemployment rates are estimated at over 50 percent. This critical economic situation was aggravated during 2020 by the COVID-19 crisis, as well as by the economic sanctions imposed by the US administration (the Caesar Act, which came into force in June 2020). The aid provided by Tehran and Moscow, Iranian oil and Russian wheat, was not enough.

Nevertheless, Syria did not slide into absolute anarchy, as state institutions did not collapse and the regime continues to provide services, though minimal and mainly in the large urban centers. State institutions still operate, albeit not fully. Even before the civil war, [Syria was a failed Third World country](#) with a low standard of living, where most of the population lived below the poverty line. The present situation, as difficult as it may be, is preferable in the eyes of most Syrians to the constant danger to life and limb they experienced during the battles. However, in the long run, the ongoing distress is not only likely to sabotage efforts by the regime to rebuild the country, but also carries the potential risk of once again undermining the stability that is fragile in any case.

The refugee issue: The fate of the millions of refugees who fled Syria does not bother the regime, and it appears to be glad to be free of the economic burden as well as the risk to security and stability. The regime has also issued [regulations and orders](#) that are intended to make it harder for the refugees to return home and reclaim their property. It was actually the

Russians who tried without success to promote the return of the refugees to Syria, perhaps in an attempt to gain the support of the United States and Europe for Moscow's actions aimed at ensuring stability in Syria.

All this has significance for the [demographic balance](#) between the country's various communities, since most of the refugees are Sunnis from rural and peripheral areas, where the protests against the regime first began. According to Syria there are currently almost 17 million people in Syria: about 10 million in the area under regime control, about 4 million in the Idlib region (mostly Sunnis), and another 3 million in the autonomous Kurdish zone (mostly Kurds). In other words, Sunnis now account for only 55 percent of the Syrian population under Bashar al-Assad, compared to 70 percent before the war, while the proportion of Alawites has almost doubled to 22 percent.

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The weakness of the Syrian regime and the chaotic situation in the country notwithstanding, the sources of power that underpin the ability of Bashar al-Assad and his regime continue to survive: his personal resilience and the determination and willingness he has shown to brutally suppress any opposition; the support of his family and the entire Alawite community; and finally the support he received from the forces that are the foundation of his regime—minorities, Christians, and Druze, as well as members of the urban elites, including Sunnis. Bashar al-Assad also relies on state mechanisms and institutions, particularly the military and the security system. All these suffered severe blows but did not collapse; they maintained their unity and continued to function, and as such, helped him preserve the Syrian state and his own rule.

For its part, the rebel camp failed in its attempts to unite the ranks and produce an effective and accepted leadership that could lead it to victory. Hundreds and perhaps even more than one thousand armed groups

sprang up all over Syria, in rural and peripheral areas, often with a local—family or clan—basis, acting independently of one another and with no subordination to the fictitious umbrella groups that operated outside Syria, such as the Free Syrian Army, the National Council, or the National Coalition. The appearance of ISIS also ultimately served the regime's purposes, since its radicalism stained the rebel camp and repelled supporters at home and abroad.

Apart from all this, Syria is functioning according to an organizing idea of political logic, and not as a tribal society in which chaos is a fundamental premise. Unlike Lebanon, the community breakdown in Syria is not the key, certainly not legally or in public, to the conduct of the various sources of power in the country. The political logic—the territorial boundaries and the ideological framework that defines the structure and function of the state and its institutions—is accepted by all the actors, external and internal, since nobody challenges them.

Thus, there is no alternative to the current regime or to Bashar al-Assad, since Russia and Iran, as well as the regime's forces and the warlords, the commanders of the armed groups, and the militias serving the regime for their own purposes or under the protection of foreign forces all see Bashar as the cornerstone of the Syrian order on which they depend. This is the case even if they wish to maintain a certain degree of independence from the central government in Damascus and from competing military and security forces deployed within their operational space.

None of the other regional or international forces that intervened in the Syrian conflict have any solution for the bloody situation in Syria, and they are therefore prepared to fully exploit efforts toward a political solution that leaves Bashar in place. The world is returning to Syria and renewing the dialogue with the Damascus regime, and is even prepared to grant it recognition and legitimacy. Thus there are Arab countries working to [normalize their relations](#) with Damascus and bring Syria back into the Arab

League, particularly Oman, the UAE, Algeria, and recently also Jordan and Egypt, some of them in the hope that this will drive Iran out of the country. Similarly, there are European countries, though not Britain, France, or Germany, that are renewing their dialogue with Damascus, and some are also reopening their embassies there, hoping—thus far in vain—that Syria will agree to the repatriation of the refugees who fled the country during the fighting.

Even Washington was prepared in August 2021 to support a deal for [the supply of gas and electricity](#) from Egypt and Jordan, through Syria to Lebanon. Although this deal was primarily intended to enable the Beirut government to obstruct Hezbollah's plan to import oil from Iran, it also involved some recognition by the United States of the reality prevailing in Syria, acceptance of the continued rule of Bashar al-Assad, and even willingness to receive his help in order to secure calm and stability in neighboring Lebanon.

Syria will not recover its pre-war status any time soon, but Bashar has survived and is working to regain control of the country. Reports from Syria also indicate that Bashar is becoming more assertive toward Iran and, with the help of Russia, is trying to limit its presence in the country and is even prepared to take advantage of Israel's attacks against Iranian targets on Syrian soil.

This situation could present Israel with some complex challenges, such as a pan-Arab move, and perhaps one day also a Western effort, to bring Syria back into the bosom of the Arab world and even of the international community, thus giving the Damascus regime renewed legitimacy, in the hope that this will help drive Iran out of Syria. But it is doubtful that Bashar will agree [to sever his ties with Iran](#), in view of his perception that the internal and external threats he faces still demand Tehran's help, even if he wishes to restrict its presence and influence inside Syria. The Arab and Western attempts to embrace the Bashar regime could have consequences for Israel, since they could

put pressure on it to limit its activity on Syrian soil, and even revive questions about the Golan Heights, which in the previous decade appeared settled and closed.

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As for Israel's campaign between wars, Bashar will presumably continue to avoid any response to Israeli attacks on Syrian soil, but there is no doubt that in the long run he will want to return to the situation before the war, when there was a balance of deterrence between Syria and Israel that deterred Israel from operating on its territory. He could perhaps return to his former ways and [seek to replenish his stocks of chemical weapons](#) or renew his efforts to obtain nuclear weapons, which were thwarted by Israel in September 2007.

It is not only Israel that faces a closing window of opportunity in Syria, but also Iran, and the situation could increase tension in Tehran, as well as drive it to record achievements while still possible—which might lead both sides to moves that will further exacerbate the friction between them.

Like other players in the region, then, Israel must continue to take Bashar into account, and assume that he will once again play a more significant role, internally and externally, even if this process takes a long time. Meanwhile Israel should keep its eye on Iran and deepen its dialogue with Moscow on these issues.

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