

Bashar al-Assad's Struggle for Survival: Has the Miracle Occurred?

Eyal Zisser

The summer of 2014 marked the beginning of a turn in the tide of the civil war in Syria. The accomplishments of the rebels in battles against the regime tilted the scales in their favor and raised doubts regarding Bashar al-Assad's ability to continue securing his rule, even in the heart of the Syrian state – the thin strip stretching from the capital Damascus to the city of Aleppo, to the Alawite coastal region in the north, and perhaps also to the city of Daraa and the Druze Mountain in the south.

This changing tide in the Syrian war was the result of the ongoing depletion of the ranks of the Syrian regime and the exhaustion of the manpower at its disposal. Marked by fatigue and low morale, Bashar's army was in growing need of members of his Alawite community who remained willing to fight and even die for him, as well as the Hizbollah fighters who were sent to his aid from neighboring Lebanon. The rebels, on the other hand, proved motivated, determined, and capable of perseverance. Indeed, they succeeded in unifying their ranks, and today, in contrast to the hundreds of groups that had been operating throughout the country, there are now only a few groups operating – all, incidentally, of radical Islamic character. Countries coming to the aid of the rebels also included Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, who decided to topple the Assad regime and showed determination equal to that of Bashar's allies – Iran, Hizbollah, and Russia.

At the end of the day, however, the Syrian regime has revealed an extraordinary ability to survive. Despite the blows it has sustained, it has not collapsed and has even succeeded in preserving the cohesion of its

Prof. Eyal Zisser is the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at Tel Aviv University, and a senior research fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies.

civilian government systems, military forces, and security systems, along with the support of different segments of the Syrian population. More important, the regime remains in control of the regions that appear to be critical for a functional Syrian state entity: the capital city of Damascus, other major cities (Aleppo, Homs, and Hama), the Syrian-Lebanese border region, and the coastal region.

Moreover, all those who believed that only a miracle could save Bashar al-Assad have once again witnessed that in the Middle East, “miracles” should indeed be part of assessments and expert forecasts. First signs of such an unexpected development in the Syrian arena appeared on the horizon in July 2015, in reports of secret contacts between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Russia aimed at striking a regional deal to ensure Bashar’s continued rule. A similar shift regarding the Syrian question also began to emerge in the positions of the United States and Turkey, in face of the Islamic State threat. But all this paled in comparison to the September 2015 decision by Russia and Iran to send military forces to Syria on a scale that would ensure the continuation of the Syrian regime, even if it fails to bring the long war in Syria to an end.¹

The Syrian Revolution: From the Damascus Spring to the Islamic State Summer

In March 2011, Arab Spring fever spread to Syria when a limited local protest of peasants beset by socioeconomic hardship evolved into a large scale popular uprising against the Bashar al-Assad regime, ultimately becoming a bloody civil war with no end in sight. As days, weeks, and months passed, the struggle in Syria assumed an ethnic, and even worse, religious character of a holy war, comprising Islamic groups within Syria and volunteers who poured into the country from throughout the Arab and Muslim world to fight the infidel Alawite regime in Damascus, which is also the ally of the Shiite camp in the Middle East, led by Iran and Hizbollah.²

Three major phases can be identified in Syria’s descent into civil war, which led to the collapse of the state and the dissolution of Syrian society:

Phase One: “The Damascus Spring,” from March 2011 to March 2013. This phase was characterized by the slow and graduated but ongoing loss of regime assets such as manpower and territory, primarily in rural regions and the periphery. Yet despite its losses in life and resources, the Syrian regime remained standing, even though its plummeting status suggested

that the fall of the regime was inevitable, and possibly only a matter of days or weeks.

Phase Two: "The Bashar Spring," from May 2013 to June 2014. This phase was characterized by improvement in the state of the Syrian regime, to the point that Bashar al-Assad seemed to have a good chance of surviving the war and continuing to rule from his palace in Damascus. This recovery in the standing of the Syrian regime was assisted by the mobilization of Hizbollah, under Iranian orders, to come to Bashar's aid. The regime's achievements assumed greater importance in light of the rebels' failure to unify their ranks and foster an agreed upon military and state leadership to lead them to decision on the battlefield. The process of Islamic radicalization that overcame the rebel camp also appeared to play into Bashar's hands, as many within Syria and elsewhere now regarded him as the lesser of two evils, in comparison to radical groups such as the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra (the Support Front).³

Phase Three: "The Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra Summer," from June 2014. This phase has consisted primarily of scales tipping in favor of the rebels, and seizure by the Islamic State of large parts of northern Iraq and eastern Syria. During the same period, a group of rebels operating in western Syria, most notably Jabhat al-Nusra, succeeded in dislodging the regime from its stronghold in southern Syria (the districts of Daraa and Quneitra) and the north of the country (the Idlib district).

The rise of the Islamic State in eastern Syria and Jabhat al-Nusra in western Syria was characterized by three significant, interrelated, and mutually reinforcing processes. The first was the consolidation of ranks within the rebel camp. During the first years of the revolution, hundreds of armed groups lacking coordination and central leadership were engaged in fighting both the regime and one another. Western and Arab countries failed in their attempt to "create" leadership bodies such as the National Council (August 2011) and the National Coalition (November 2012), as well as in their efforts to create military umbrella organizations such as the Free Syrian Army (July 2011) and later, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Syria (September 2012) and the Islamic Front (November 2013). However, in the past year, the rebel groups operating in Syria have come together, albeit within a radical Islamic framework leaving no room for the existence of groups that do not identify themselves as Salafi Islamist. In eastern Syria, the Islamic State has crushed all its rivals, emerging as the single operational force in this area. Elsewhere, however, the Kurdish forces,

particularly the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), are also active, operating primarily in the Kurdish enclaves in northeastern Syria. In western parts of the country, Jabhat al-Nusra emerged as a prominent leading force, but one that exercises pragmatism and is willing to cooperate with other Salafi Islamist groups, most prominently Jaysh al-Islam (the Army of Islam), led by Zahran Alloush, and the Ahrar al-Sham movement under the leadership of Abu Hamia al-Hamawi.⁴

The second significant process was the mobilization of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, and, to a certain extent, Jordan, in an effort to bring about the collapse of the Assad regime. These countries increased coordination among themselves, as well as financial and logistical aid and assistance in training the rebels. Above all, they compelled their allies within Syria to cooperate with one another. In conjunction with the United States, these countries also set up operational headquarters in Jordan and Turkey to coordinate the fighting of a significant portion of the rebel groups in southern and northern Syria, and this has introduced logic and a systematic element that the rebellion lacked up to that point. Nonetheless, in contrast to fighting in southern Syria, where it was possible to identify the guiding and moderating hand of Jordan and possibly also the shadow of Israel, in northern Syria the Turks refrained from restraining the various rebel groups. This explains the prominence of radical Islamic groups – led by Jabhat al-Nusra – in this region, which was already known as a religiously devout area with a conservative tradition.⁵

In a third process, a result of these factors, the Syrian regime experienced an ongoing decline in strength. To be sure, minority groups, including Christians, Druze, and of course Alawites, as well as members of the Sunni middle and upper class in the major cities, continued to see Bashar al-Assad as a preferable alternative in light of the increasing power of the radical Islamic groups within the rebel camp. Overall, however, most either lacked the ability or the desire to fight for him on the battlefield. The resulting skyrocketing rate of desertion and evasion of military service required the Syrian regime to take special measures to track down and arrest offenders. It likewise forced the regime to rely on members of Bashar's own sector, whether as soldiers in the military or paid volunteers in the militias he established, such as the National Defense Forces (Quwat ad-Difa'a al-Watani). The regime also incorporated Hizbollah fighters, and even Iraqi and Afghan Shiite volunteers, into its military effort. Nonetheless, the

campaign in Syria has been, and remains, an accumulation of limited battles with tactical significance, waged by a few hundred fighters on each side, in numerous confrontations throughout the country, which makes it increasingly difficult for the regime to mobilize a force capable of defeating the rebels at each of these points of battle.⁶

The Fighting Fronts

From the summer of 2014 onward, the Syrian regime found itself facing two primary fighting fronts:

The eastern front: In the summer of 2014, the Islamic State swooped in from the desert and seized control of significant parts of northern Iraq and eastern Syria. Since then, the organization has worked to establish its rule in the al-Jazeera region (eastern Syria – the az-Zor, al-Hasakeh, and al-Raqqa districts), while also striving to destroy the still remaining regime enclaves in eastern Syria, such as the cities of al-Tabaka and Abu Kamal (which it conquered in the summer of 2014), and the cities of al-Hasakeh and Deir az-Zor, which became standing targets of its attacks, although efforts to take them have thus far ended in failure. At the same time, the Islamic State has attempted to dislodge the Kurds from their enclaves in northern Syria, such as Kobani (Ayn al-Arab), but have been stopped by Kurdish fighters of the People's Protection Units, which are apparently benefiting from US support.⁷ In central Syria, Islamic State fighters succeeded in May 2015 in conquering the city of Tadmur, which constitutes the gateway into central Syria from the desert toward Homs (a distance of 155 km) and Damascus (a distance of 210 km). Finally, in early April 2015, Islamic State fighters managed to establish control over a number of suburbs of Damascus and, in the course of May and June 2015, to advance to the eastern foothills of the Druze Mountain (the villages of Bier al-Kasab and al-Qasr).⁸

The southern and northern front: During the final months of 2014, Jabhat al-Nusra and its partners seized control of most of southern Syria – the rural areas of the Daraa and Quneitra districts and the district of Damascus rural areas (Rif Dimashq). The rebels surrounded the cities of Daraa and Quneitra and also seized control of most of the Syrian Golan Heights. In the north, the rebels succeeded in seizing control of most of the territory of northwestern Syria, first and foremost the Idlib district. In the course of March-April 2015, the rebels conquered Idlib, the district capital, followed by the cities of Jisr al-Shughur and Arihah, which control the roads from Aleppo and Idlib to southern Syria and the coastal region.

These achievements provided them with a safe region along the Turkish border, which enabled them to increase the pressure on Aleppo. It also provided them with a starting position toward the Syrian coast.⁹

The Syrian regime called Hezbollah fighters to its aid in the spring of 2015 with the aim of strengthening its control in the Syrian-Lebanese border region (the al-Qalamoun mountains) and the western approach to Damascus (al-Ghouta al-Gharbiya), and the town of al-Zabadani, through which the roads from Damascus run to the north (toward Homs and Hama) and the west (toward Beirut). These regions, which are important for morale and for securing an essential lifeline for the Syrian regime and Hezbollah alike, cover an area of 800 square kilometers (out of Syria's total area of 185,000 square kilometers).¹⁰

The Regime Hangs On

Despite the blows it has sustained, the regime is still standing. The governing systems and state institutions continue to function – even if only partially – in the areas under its control and beyond, and to provide social, welfare, and economic services (education, health, food, electricity, and water supply). It has even paid the salaries of civil servants in regions under rebel control, and continues to maintain unity – of the regime and the security elite, the governing and party systems, and the army units and security forces. In addition to the minority religious groups, the Sunni population in Syria's major cities remains loyal to the regime, or has at least refrained from opposing it.

Nonetheless, reports from Syria indicate increasing concern among members of the coalition of social forces that constitute the foundation of the regime in Damascus regarding its fate and their own. Thus, behind the scenes protest among Alawites has repeatedly risen above the surface due to the increasing price they are being forced to pay for keeping Bashar in power, to the point of a threat to their future status and very existence in Syrian territory. This protest found expression, for example, on social networks in the summer of 2014, after videos were posted on the internet showing hundreds of Syrian soldiers, including many Alawites, who fell into the hands of ISIS fighters in the fighting for the al-Tabaka airport, being marched naked to their deaths.¹¹

Concern has also been visible among members of the Druze in light of the achievements of the rebels, especially after the latter managed to seize control over most of southern Syria to the Druze Mountain, which is now

surrounded on two sides – from the east, by Islamic State fighters, and from the west, by fighters of Jabhat al-Nusra. The Druze have not concealed their concerns regarding a possible situation in which the Syrian regime will no longer be able to protect them and may abandon their stronghold in the Druze Mountain in order to focus its strength on defending the capital city of Damascus. For this reason, the Druze have started to seek alternative sources of assistance for the future, such as Jordan and even Israel.¹² It is therefore no surprise that young Druze (who according to the authorities in Damascus number 37,000) have refrained from enlisting in the Syrian army or militias established by the regime and fighting in their ranks in areas outside the Druze Mountain. At the same time, reports have emerged regarding the local establishment of Druze militias engaged in preparations to defend themselves on the Druze Mountain. The leader of one such effort known as Rijal al-Karama (Men of Dignity), Shaykh Wahid Fahd al-Balous, who is known to have called for members of the sect to disengage from what he regards as their close ties with the Syrian regime, was murdered in September 2015 in the city of Sweida. His supporters have charged the Syrian regime with responsibility for his death.¹³

The Russians are Coming – and with them, the Iranians

The deep processes underway within the Syrian state and society have therefore raised doubts regarding the ability of Bashar al-Assad to remain in power in the long run and have led many to conclude that only a drastic development can save him, such as the collapse of the united front currently demonstrated by the armed rebel groups; mobilization of the United States in favor of Bashar; or cessation of Turkish, Saudi, and Qatari aid to the rebels.

Initial signs of such a development have begun to appear. In September 2015, Russian combat air squadrons and combat soldiers arrived on Syria soil, in addition to members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, who were sent to Syria – possibly in accordance with an Iranian-Russian understanding or agreement – to provide assistance to the Assad regime and ensure Bashar's survival in Syria.¹⁴ The Russian and Iranian forces that have been dispatched to Syria thus far are not enough to restore Bashar's control over most of the territory of the Syrian state, particularly over the eastern regions currently under Islamic State control. They are, however, sufficient to enable him to maintain his control of the Syrian coast, which contains a large Alawite population whose loyalty to the regime is assured under all circumstances, no matter what the cost.

This measure reflects Russian and Iranian recognition of a reality in which the Syrian state of yore has ceased to exist and, on its ruins, an ISIS state has been established in eastern Syria, while Kurdish enclaves exist alongside rebel enclaves in southern and northern Syria, and a hardcore Bashar state, or a “little or vital Syria,” continues under Russian and Iranian influence, largely dependent on the goodwill of these two countries.

Indeed, Iranian Revolutionary Guard personnel in Syria appear to be conducting themselves as if they are already in charge. In the Golan Heights, according to Israeli sources, they are working to build themselves a base of operations against Israel and have no hesitation about heating up the border using local cells under the command of Iranian officers, at times against the desire or interest of the Syrian regime itself. On the al-Zabadani and Idlib fronts, the Iranians are conducting negotiations with Jabhat al-Nusra with the aim of relieving a number of Shiite villages of al-Nusra pressure in the Idlib district in exchange for a reduction of Hizbollah pressure on al-Zabadani. All of this occurs as if the Syrian regime no longer exists.¹⁵

Russian and Iranian involvement in Syria comes against a background of persistent reports regarding contacts between the Syrian regime and a number of its sworn rivals in the regional arena who support the rebel groups in the country. According to one such report, Syrian security chief General Ali Mamlouk paid visits first to Saudi Arabia and then to Egypt. His visit to the Saudi kingdom was part of an Iranian-Russian effort to bring about reconciliation between Syria and Saudi Arabia.¹⁶ This effort was bolstered by developments that have taken place in the regional sphere in recent months, including: the death of King Abdullah in January 2015 and his replacement by his brother King Salman, whose first acts in power included replacing the Saudi political and security elite responsible, inter alia, for Saudi involvement in the war in Syria; the June 2015 Turkish parliamentary elections, which eroded the power of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the motivating force behind Turkish intervention in Syria; and finally, the nuclear agreement concluded by the P5+1 with Iran in July 2015, which resulted in the beginning of a new chapter in relations between Tehran and Washington.

Conclusion

At the end of nearly five years of war in Syria, the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad is still standing, based on powerful apparatuses such as government institutions, the military, and the security services, which, despite the

blows they sustained, have still not collapsed. Nonetheless, Bashar now finds himself with his back against the wall, facing the ongoing depletion of the regime's resources. Iran, Hizbollah, and Russia may be providing him with financial assistance, arms, and ammunition, as well as oil and oil products, but even the forces they have started to send to his aid do not provide him with a solution for the one resource he truly needs: manpower for his army and his militias.

The radicalization, to the point of religious fanaticism, of the rebel ranks initially worked to the benefit of the Syrian regime and, for many in the West, transformed Bashar into the only alternative to Islamic extremism. This sentiment was effectively articulated by CIA chief John Brennan who, in March 2015, warned that Bashar's fall from power could open the gates of Damascus to ISIS.¹⁷ But Islamic radicalism has ultimately proven to be a bonding and motivating force that has worked in favor of the rebel groups and has succeeded in unifying them, which is something that slogans of Syrian nationalism and patriotism failed to do since the outbreak of the revolution.

The deep-seated processes underway within the Syrian state and Syrian society have therefore raised doubts regarding Bashar's ability to remain in power for the long term and have led many to the conclusion that only a miracle can save him. However, just such a miracle seems to have occurred, following the change in position on the Syrian question among certain regional and international actors.

Iran and Russia have taken another significant step forward by beginning to send military forces to fight alongside Bashar, and the United States, European Union states, and even Turkey and Saudi Arabia are reassessing their positions regarding the future of Bashar al-Assad's rule in Damascus. After all, the actors involved in the Syrian sphere, and the Americans and Europeans in particular, have reached the conclusion that a supreme effort must be made to preserve the institutions of the Syrian state in order to prevent the return of the Iraqi scenario, in which the destruction of the state and state institutions – and the army in particular – is what created the vacuum that facilitated the emergence of the Islamic State. This also explains the commitment of Tehran and Moscow, which are now liable to become embroiled in the Syrian quagmire and a hopeless war with few accomplishments.

The question, therefore, is as follows: is it possible to square the Syrian circle and reach a solution to the crisis that is agreed upon by at least

Russia and the United States, and some of the states in the region, or is Syria doomed to the continuation of war and fighting? If the war continues, Russian-Iranian intervention may prove to be a recipe for prolonging the belligerency and deepening the human tragedy underway in Syria. The price will be the limited accomplishment of preserving Bashar's rule over one quarter of the territory of Syria, which in practice will further entrench the division of the Syrian state.

Notes

- 1 See the report provided by Oded Granot on Israeli television, Channel 1, July 24, 2015, <http://www.iba.org.il/program.aspx?scode=1767568>.
- 2 For general background about the Syrian revolution, see Eyal Zisser, *Syria: Protest, Revolution, and Civil War* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2014).
- 3 See Eyal Zisser, "The End of the Syrian Revolution: Between Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Islamic Caliphate and Bashar al-Assad's Ba'ath Regime," *Strategic Assessment* 17, no. 3 (2014): 55-65.
- 4 See Alex MacDonald, "Rise of Jaish al-Islam Marks a Turn in Syria Conflict," *Middle East Eye*, May 7, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/jaish-al-islam-piece-918366283#sthash.Nkcd1djl.dpuf>.
- 5 See Ben Hubbard, "Warily, Jordan Assists Rebels in Syrian War," *New York Times*, April 10, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/11/world/middleeast/syria.html?_r=0. See also Omer Einav, "The Battle for Daraa: Shifting the Balance in Syria?" *INSS Insight* No. 693, May 3, 2015, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=9401>.
- 6 See "Assad Admits: The Army Has Retreated Due to a Lack of Soldiers," *Haaretz*, July 26, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/world/middle-east/premium-1.2692177>. See also Farahmand Alipour, "Iranian Doc Follows Afghan Fighters in Syria," *al-Monitor*, May 4, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/iran-syria-afghan-fighters-brigade-civil-war.html#ixzz3gEGZxVmM>.
- 7 See Ofra Bengio, "The Birth of the Kurdish State in Syria," *al-Monitor*, January 14, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/iw/originals/2014/01/israel-syria-kurdish-region-separatists.html#ixzz3gES25WVF>.
- 8 See "The Fall of Tadmur, Ramadi and the Border Crossings Impose ISIS Organization as a Main Player," *Khalifah*, May 22, 2015, <http://www.khalifah.com/the-fall-of-tadmur-ramadi-and-the-border-crossings-impose-isis-organization-as-a-main-player/>.
- 9 Adallah Suleiman Ali, "Idlib in the Eye of the Storm," *al-Monitor*, March 30, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2015/03/syria-idlib-jabhatalnusra-is-caliphate.html>.

- 10 Bassem Mroue, "In the al-Qalamoun Mountains the Yellow Hezbollah Flag is a Lifeline for Assad," *AP*, published in *Haaretz*, May 11, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/world/middle-east/.premium-1.2633960>.
- 11 Oula Abdulhamid Alrifai, "Not Alright with Syria's Alawites: Growing Resentment Splinters Assad's Power Base," *Foreign Affairs*, December 3, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2014-12-03/not-alright-syrias-alawites>. Later, in October 2014, demonstrations erupted in the city of Homs after dozens of children were killed by an explosive device detonated in a school in the neighborhood of Akrama, one of the Alawite neighborhoods in the city. See "Syria Crisis: Homs Bomb Kills at Least 14 in Alawite Area," *BBC News*, April 18, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27079555>.
- 12 Patrick J. McDonnell and Nabih Bulos, "Syrian Military and Druze Allies Join Forces to Fend Off Terrorists," *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-syria-south-20150621-story.html#page=1>. See also Amos Harel, "The 'Alliance of Blood' with the Druze is on a Collision Course with the Policy of Minimal Intervention in Syria," *Haaretz*, June 17, 2015.
- 13 "Death of Druze Leader Reported in Syria," al-Jazeera Television, September 5, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/09/death-druze-leader-reported-syria-blast-150905022304903>. See also Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The New Druze Militia Factions of Suwayda Province," *Syria Comment*, August 7, 2015, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-new-druze-militia-factions-of-suwayda-province>.
- 14 Julian Borger, "Russian Troops in Syria Could End Up Helping ISIS, Report Claims," *The Guardian*, September 25, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/25/russia-troops-syria-could-helping-isis-report>.
- 15 Scott Lucas, "Rebels, Regime, and Iran Agree to Ceasefires in South and Northwest," *Syria Daily*, September 2015, <http://eaworldview.com/2015/09/syria-daily-rebels-regime-and-iran-agree-to-ceasefires-in-south-and-northwest>.
- 16 See Lord Michael Williams of Baglan, "Syria's Regime Reaches Out Amidst Regional Realignment," Chatam House, August 13, 2015, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/syrias-regime-reaches-out-amidst-regional-realignment>.
- 17 See "CIA Chief: The United States Fears the Collapse of the Assad Regime," *Walla*, March 14, 2015, <http://news.walla.co.il/item/2837703>.