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# The Syrian State: A Two-Headed Monster is Emerging

→ Bassma Kodmani



Mugs with photos of Bashar al-Assad, Vladimir Putin and Hassan Nassrallah on sale in a shop in the old city of Damascus, Syria, March 2016. © EPA/YOUSSEF BADAWI



**\*This piece published by ARI in collaboration with [Chatham House](#) is part of a series which addresses the future of governance and security in the Middle East and North Africa, and their impact on the role of the state in the region.**

Only Syrians above 70 years of age can recall what the Syrian state was like before the rule of the Assad family. In the 1940s and 1950s, the traditional upper-class families of urban background, those with whom French authorities had worked during the Mandate period dominated the institutions of the young state. They controlled the main power centres (government, army, the economy and the religious establishment). The sociology of the state reflected the structures of a traditional society, elite-based and largely Sunni but with a genuine representation of ethnic and religious communities.

Syria was known for its highly unstable politics and successive military coups after independence in 1946. The historic rupture however dates back some years before Hafez al-Assad seized power. 1963 marks the transformation of the social composition of the state. The most ideologically dogmatic wing of the Baath Party, composed of lower-middle-class men of rural background, took control of key institutions, and security agencies mushroomed in an erratic manner, especially between 1963 and 1966.<sup>1</sup> As commander-in-chief of the air force and later minister of defence, Assad was already working behind the scenes. He led the process of reorganizing the power centres of the state based on sectarian considerations, starting with the army and extending to the security agencies. Assad's coup in 1970 therefore crowned seven years of careful social engineering which he continued to perfect throughout the three decades of his dictatorial rule.

The regime apparatus was structured around a dozen different intelligence agencies which competed and exercised close surveillance over each other. These agencies were safely controlled by a core group of strongly indoctrinated, power-thirsty officers who inspired fear, yet they gradually developed an organized system of corruption that became the necessary glue to keep it going. A web of beneficiaries, big and small, became attached to the system and grew dependent on the income they drew from bribes.



This satisfied them, partly thanks to the financial gain but also because the system spared them the obligation to comply with any of the rules that applied to ordinary citizens. These shadowy margins of illegality and impunity were the very source of rent off which the intelligence officers lived, along with the larger chain of individuals serving in the system. Over time, this distribution of rent became the key element sustaining the system's stability; the removal of these margins would have led to its collapse. Any officer with the naive intention of redressing the corruption was considered an enemy and a deadly threat to the system as a whole, and was ousted, peacefully or otherwise.<sup>2</sup>

In his relations with outside powers, Assad had specialized in treating security as a commodity for purposes of trade, regularly exporting insecurity as a means of achieving strategic objectives and offering “services”, such as reining in radical elements he had unleashed in the first place, in exchange for ensuring the support of those outside powers for the survival of his regime. Trading with security as a commodity made the regime a useful ally for regional and international players. Syria was publicly considered a rogue state by Western democracies, but most intelligence agencies of those same countries dealt with the regime's security apparatus and with Assad as a useful broker.



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Bashar al-Assad inherited a sophisticated and stable *securitocracy*<sup>3</sup> which he took for granted. Since he came to power in 2000, the ruling group shifted its attention to the economy. The security apparatus remained at the heart of the regime but the fact that the system had worked so efficiently over 30 years gave Bashar the sense that he could now rely on the legacy of his father and enjoy the dividends of controlling the economy, primarily as a source of enrichment.

Under Hafez al-Assad, some political calculus was part of the strategy to maintain stability. Alliance with the Sunni bourgeoisie, and representation of tribes, peasants and workers in a (powerless) parliament, were cultivated in parallel with the dominance of the all-powerful security agencies. Here, too, Bashar thought he could merely surf on the social and economic alliances his father had developed. His marriage with a woman from the Sunni bourgeoisie of Homs was deemed sufficient to seal the work of his father. Building consensus within society was not a priority. It was enough to ensure that the consensus within the security apparatus, and hence its cohesion, remained solid.

Authoritarianism remained intact, but it became more of a family business. The expectation that Bashar would be a weak president whetted the appetite of his kin. He struck deals and conceded economic advantages to members of his family in order to consolidate his control. He made his mother's family, the Makhloufs, all-powerful: his cousin Rami was granted a large percentage of most contracts with foreign investors thus allowing him to build an economic empire for the benefit of the family at large, while Rami's father, Mohammad, took on the role of personal mentor to Bashar, and other cousins filled top security jobs. Bashar pushed aside most of his father's old guard.

The uprising in 2011 kickstarted an evolution of the system in which the margins of illegality gained more autonomy. Seeing his authority challenged, Bashar decided that he needed to embrace the fiercest part of his system and respond exclusively with military means, a decision that made him entirely dependent on his repressive apparatus and started a process of dislocation of the centre and a rapid growth of the margins, which increasingly depleted the centre.

Warlordism became the new version of the widespread cronyism which prevailed up to 2011. Warlords formed an *ad hoc* elite of opportunists willing to serve the



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regime unconditionally in order to grab some of its vanishing resources and wealth.<sup>4</sup> While in the past, profiteers would primarily defend the interests of the regime because this guaranteed their own interests, the new profiteers now pursue their own interests independently of the interests of the state and the regime. The margins have in effect taken over and engulfed the centre.

The regime's capacity to trade with security has also been all but destroyed since the terrorist groups have grown into transnational actors with more power and resources than the state. As towns and cities slipped out of central government control during the conflict, the regime relied on local groups and individuals in various parts of the country to manage state affairs. In certain cases, as in selling and buying oil and the transport of goods, it traded with every willing actor on the ground, including with ISIS. Giving away shares of the economy and control over natural resources to foreign powers, and ceding checkpoints to jihadi groups affiliated with Al Qaeda, appeared as the only way to retain some link with different parts of the territory of the state. The result is a system that feeds on the debris of the state with the key actors having a vested interest in maintaining it and snatching what they can as long as there are gains to be made. One report described it as a hollowed-out state which is funding itself in ways that push the country deeper into a downward spiral.<sup>5</sup>

In effect, even in the areas where it regained military control, the state has retreated from a host of essential functions such as ensuring core municipal services. Formal institutions which provided services to the population have all but suffocated under the practices of the informal warlord system.

The comparison with Libya is relevant here with regard to the control of the economy by rival militias, which represents the biggest challenge to the quest for stabilization and a political settlement in Libya. The key difference is the level of resources and the size of the rent to share. The Syrian state is bankrupt and drains whatever resources it can from an already impoverished population as well as from the cronies who it allowed to accumulate wealth. The regime is basically forcing Syrian society to subsidize the state. It attempts to resume the pre-war strategy of spreading fear to deter society from any attempt to protest in the areas where it regained control. For now, it retains some capacity to spread fear and is using it to kill any sense of agency among an exhausted citizenry.<sup>6</sup>

5 [The Syrian State: A Two-Headed Monster is Emerging](#)



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As he was losing control over national territory and resources, Assad solicited outside support. Over the years, the family's control over the state was gradually replaced by foreign control. Iran and Russia have largely taken control of security agencies, the army and the economy.

Iran's long-term strategy for influence in Syria is built on creating bottom-up support within society, maintaining parallel institutions to those of the state, and infiltrating the core functions of the state, primarily security agencies through buying individual loyalties. Its interest lies in keeping state institutions weak in order to show that the militias have no coherent institutions to reintegrate and anchor themselves, thus justifying the need for Iranian-supported paramilitary groups on the model of Hezbollah in Lebanon.

This runs counter to Russia's strategy in Syria, which is based on rebuilding strong state institutions, primarily the army, while ensuring that key military and political figures are loyal to Russia. The two powers differ in their methods of maintaining influence but as a result of their combined strategies, control of the Syrian state has been lost to the outside.

Historically, actions and choices of outside actors always played a major role in the management of state affairs in Syria, but these actions and choices have now engulfed the state and any form of national agency.

While this process of gradual disintegration was at work over the first seven years following the uprising, it has accelerated significantly during the last two years. Statehood is a facade behind which a network of predators and foreign actors operate. World powers, including Western countries, dread a collapse à la Libya or Iraq. They particularly fear the scenario of remnants of the fallen regime disbanding and going underground. Regime change had become a dirty word. Preserving continuity of the state is a priority and the opposition was pressed to define its agenda accordingly. In effect, the thugs of the regime in Syria are already operating freely for their own interests, coexisting with an Assad whose capabilities are now considerably reduced, a reality he tries to conceal by giving media interviews claiming that the state is back in control.

The collapse of the Syrian state is largely a reality. It has occurred through a



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process of gradual disintegration instead of a sudden breakdown. Within the regime and among those considered loyal to Assad, an increasing number of key officers respond to directions from either Russia or Iran. Assad's allies know that he is not the guarantor of the continuity of the state anymore. But he is a convenient representative of Syrian legality who signs off on what Russia on one hand and Iran on the other wish, in order to consolidate their control. Instead of a failed state, a two-headed system has emerged and replaced the monster that the Syrian state had become under Assad. There is every indication that it will endure for years to come.



## Endnotes

1. Syria Modern History website, [symh.com](http://symh.com)
2. Michel Kilo *Deir el Josour*, a novel published in Lebanon, 1986.
3. The word *Securitocracy* was first used in a comparative study of the security sectors of Arab countries published by the Arab Reform Initiative. [arab-reform.net](http://arab-reform.net)
4. Hamit Bozarslan, *Crise, Violence, Dé-civilisation*, CNRS Editions, 2019, p. 127.
5. Synaps, “War by Other Means. Syria’s Economic Struggle”, September 2019, [synaps.network](http://synaps.network).
6. Lina Khatib and Lina Sinjab, “Syria’s Transactional State: How the Conflict Changed the Syrian State’s Exercise of Power”, Chatham House, October 2018. [chathamhouse.org](http://chathamhouse.org)



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## About the author



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