

The Geopolitics of Syria



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Introduction

Syria has a long history which stretches back over 10,000 years. The country has always been a place of interest to the world's powers. Its agricultural development and irrigation earned it the title of the 'fertile crescent.' Syria became a transit country for rulers from the East and West, who crossed it in pursuit of power and wealth. Cultures from all directions left their effects on Syria, including the Aramaeans, who were followed by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, Persians, and finally, Greek and Roman rulers. Thereafter Syria or al-sham came under Islamic rule.

Modern Syria is located along the eastern Mediterranean Sea, bordering Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq. Syria is composed of diverse ethnic groups with Damascus as its heartland.

From World War One Syria became a battleground between competing foreign powers due to its strategic location at the heart of the Middle East. Controlling Syria would give any foreign power a base to expand into the broader region. This is why foreign powers have for long competed for the strategic country and this is why Syria has faced numerous foreign supported coups, and a number of regimes have been supported and propped up by foreign powers.

Foreign interference has been the curse of the Syrian people and in this deep dive we delve into Syria's history and relationship with the regional nations and foreign powers.





The French and British Struggle Over Syria

British and French diplomats Mark Sykes (L) and François Georges-Picot

The country known today as Syria was formally created through the Paris Peace Conference that took place over 1919 and 1920. This conference was organized by the countries that had been victorious in the First World War, which were primarily Great Britain, France and the United States, with the objective to agree on the peace terms for the defeated Central Powers, Germany and the Ottoman Empire.

Among the outcomes of the conference was that as per the Sykes-Picot agreement, which had been agreed between the British and French diplomats Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot in 1916, France would have a mandate over the territories in the Middle East that lay north and east of Palestine, named Syria. This French Mandate over Syria was formalized by the League of Nations, the predecessor of the United Nations, on the 24th of July, 1922.

In 1918 the British army defeated the Ottoman army defending Damascus, which established British control over Syria. Despite the Sykes-Picot agreement, the British decided to use their military victory to make Syria a colony of the British Crown. For this reason, it rushed to make the people of Syria accept its client, Faisal, the son of Sharif Hussein, as their leader. Faisal promised the people that he would implement Islam over them, by making the Quran

his unofficial constitution and the example set by the Prophet Mohammed, the Sunnah, his benchmark. In return, Syria's leading Islamic scholars gave him a pledge of allegiance, the bay'ah, expecting him to become their Caliph. With this support secured, the British then ensured that Syria did not become a Caliphate, and that instead it was their preferred political system that would be implemented. Therefore, on the 8th of March 1920, Faisal was declared King of Syria, while a parliament, the Syrian National Congress, was established.

The French would have none of it, however, and sent an army into Syria to change the country's political situation. This French army, led by general Henri Gouraud, reached Damascus on the 24th of July 1920. The resulting battle between the French army and King Faisal's troops was decisively won by the French. Faisal was then dethroned by the French and sent into exile with orders never to return. On the 1st of August 1920 he headed to British-controlled Haifa in Palestine, and from there he travelled on to Italy, where he stayed for months before being received by King George V of Britain during November. Following this meeting, the British decided they could still make use of Faisal, so they sent him to Baghdad where they crowned him King of Iraq on the 23rd of August 1921.¹

Sykes-Picot Agreement, 1916

TURKEY

SYRIA

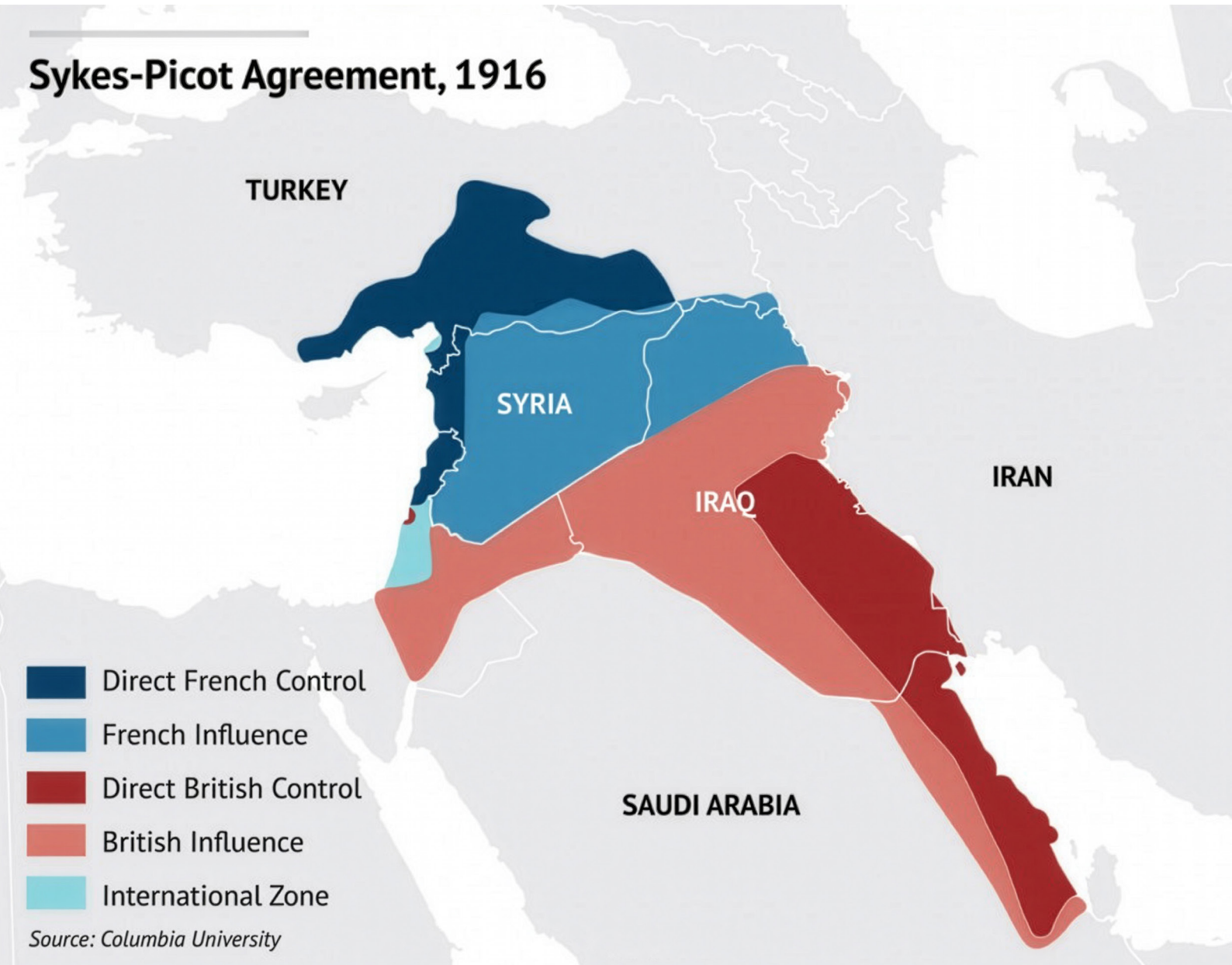
IRAQ

IRAN

SAUDI ARABIA

- Direct French Control
- French Influence
- Direct British Control
- British Influence
- International Zone

Source: Columbia University



French Syria

Once in control, France changed Syria's political reality. General Henri Gouraud became the first High Commissioner of the Levant, the highest political position in the French Mandate area, and he subdivided the region into six "autonomous" states. These states were the State of Damascus, the State of Aleppo, the Alawite State, the State of Jabal Druze, the State of Greater Lebanon, and the Sanjak of Alexandretta. The State of Greater Lebanon would later become the country of Lebanon, while the Sanjak of Alexandretta would eventually become part of modern-day Turkey. Modern Syria therefore comprises the French mandate states of Damascus, Aleppo, the area of the Alawites around Latakia by the Mediterranean coast and Jabal Druze.

During the years of the Second World War, the ability of the French to govern the Mandate area significantly weakened. France itself was divided during the war years, with the north being occupied by Nazi Germany while the south was governed from the city of Vichy by Marshal Philippe Petain, who was closely aligned with Nazi Germany. This state known as "Vichy France" took over the colonies of France and as such became the colonial power in the French Mandate area. Vichy France's limited ability to effectively govern created an opportunity for Syrian nationalists to call for independence in 1941. Shukri Al Quwatli, a Sunni Muslim from the wealthy Al Quwatli family of merchants in Damascus, who had a history of leading pan-Arab nationalism in Syria going back all the way to the times of Ottoman rule, led these Syrian nationalists. In 1920, upon their entry into Syria, the French had issued an arrest warrant for Shukri Al Quwatli and sentenced him to death over his pan-Arab nationalist activities. This caused Al Quwatli to flee to Egypt, but under pressure from the British, France later allowed him to return to Syria.²

Vichy France tried to suppress the Syrian independence movement led by Al Quwatli, but the British supported a third French movement, named Free France which was headed by general Charles de

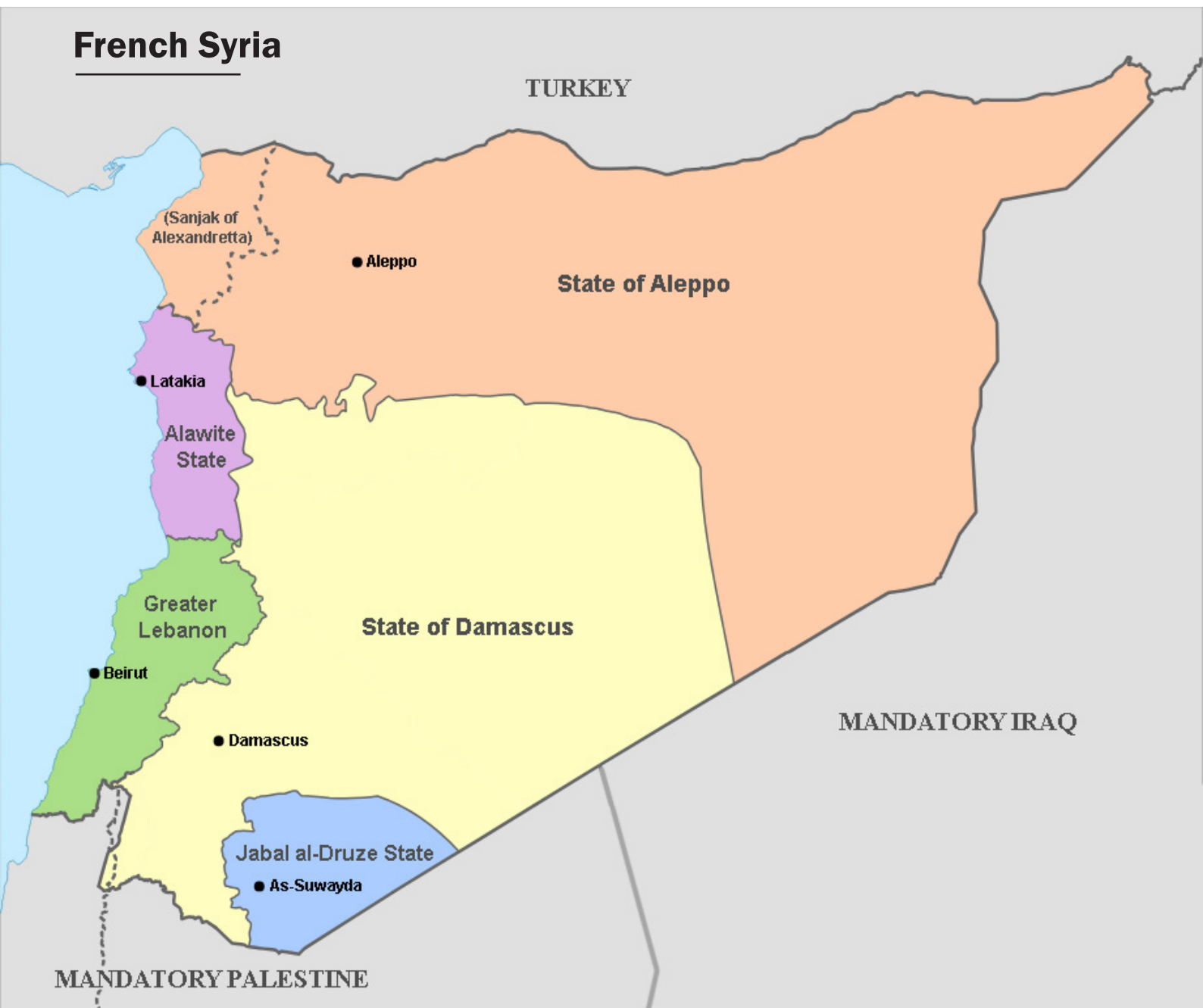
Gaulle and based in London, to take control over Lebanon and Syria. General Charles de Gaulle then agreed to Syrian independence, despite his ambition to preserve control over the French colonies around the world, including Syria. De Gaulle reasoned that through allowing formal independence, he could build goodwill with Syrian nationalists and thereby get them to agree on a treaty with France that would keep Syria within the French orbit. Based on this plan, in 1943 Free France allowed elections for a Syrian president which were won by Al Quwatli. He officially became president of Syria on the 17th August 1943.

What general De Gaulle did not fully appreciate at that time, however, was that Al Quwatli collaborated with Britain. Britain wanted to use him to end the influence of France in the Middle East, such that the entire region could be brought under their control.

What general De Gaulle did not fully appreciate at that time, however, was that Al Quwatli collaborated with Britain. Britain wanted to use him to end the influence of France in the Middle East, such that the entire region could be brought under their control. In 1942 already, and again in 1943, Al Quwatli had made secret pledges to the British that if they supported him to free Syria from French influence, he would establish close relations between Syria and British controlled Palestine and Iraq.³ In these pledges Al Quwatli swore on his honor, in his name and on behalf of the Syrian nation, to establish Greater Syria; to grant Britain concessions for oil exploration in Syria; to grant Britain a preferential political, economic and financial status in the country; to adopt a foreign policy compatible with Britain's and to allow Britain a role in establishing the Syrian army.⁴

Eventually, thanks to the work by the French intelligence officer Fernand Oliva-Roget, general De Gaulle became fully informed of the secret deals between Al Quwatli and the British, as well as the British aim to use its relations with Al Quwatli to remove French influence from Syria. Therefore, once de Gaulle had been appointed formal leader of France, after its liberation from Nazi Germany occupation in 1944, he started work to counter the British schemes. In 1945 de Gaulle instructed the French army in Syria to

take back control. On the 29th of May 1945 French troops stormed the Syrian parliament and tried to arrest president al Quwatli. Al Quwatli was rushed to safety by the British, who then organized a military counter-offensive against the French in Syria. On the 1st of June 1945, the British forces moved into Syria from Trans-jordan to confront the French army. The British forces took control over Damascus and forced the French army to return to its barracks. Eventually, the British forced the French to completely pull its army out Syria, leading Al Quwatli to formally declare Syrian independence from France on the 17th of April 1946.⁵





The American Effort to Seize Syria from Britain

Because of Al Quwatli's relations with the British and his decision to allow the Syrian Communist Party (SCP) to operate freely in Syria,⁶ he did not have many friends in America. Therefore, when Al Quwatli in 1947 approached America requesting arms for his newly created army, America refused. Al Quwatli then further aggravated the situation when he refused to allow the Americans to build the Trans-Arabian Pipeline (Tapline) through Syria, to bring Saudi oil to the Mediterranean port city of Sidon in Lebanon. The reason he refused was that the American oil operations in Saudi Arabia were a direct threat to the Iraqi Petroleum Company (IPC) that was under the control of Britain.⁷ For this reason, in 1948 Miles Copeland, a CIA officer stationed at the American embassy in Damascus, began planning to overthrow Al Quwatli. Copeland searched for a person inside Syria with the ability to influence Syrian politics, and with the personality that would make him useful to America. He found that person in Husni al Za'im, a career Syrian soldier who the American CIA agents described as "corrupt-ed", "power crazy", and "not very clever".⁸ Throughout his career, Al Za'im had never shown any interest in principles or convictions. Instead, he worked to further his own interests irrespective of who was in power in Syria. He had joined the Ottoman army when it ruled over Syria, and then joined the French army in Syria after the establishment of the French Mandate. Because he had supported Vichy France, he was fired by the Free France regime in Syria, which left him roaming the streets of Syria. After Syrian independence in 1946 he therefore begged Al Quwatli to give him a position in the new Syrian army, which he was granted. By 1948 Al Za'im was the leader of the Syrian army, which at the time was being trained by America.⁹ All this made him useful to the Americans. In conversation with the American CIA agent Stephan Mead he promised that in return for American support, he would establish a dictatorship in

Syria that would enable him to ban the communist party and put its leaders in jail, allow the Tapline to be built through Syria and sign a peace treaty with Israel. The Americans agreed to support Al Za'im who then, on the 29th of March 1949, executed a coup against president Al Quwatli. The Americans quickly supported the regime of Al Za'im in Syria by sending him an official letter of recognition on the 27th of April 1949. Thereafter, Al Za'im did as he had promised. He instituted a military dictatorship in Syria, arresting and imprisoning all who he thought opposed him, signed a contract for the Tapline with the Americans, and started secret negotiation with Israel about a peace treaty and the resettlement of 300,000 Palestinians to Syria. He also requested American support for the development of the Syrian army, but this the Americans refused on the request of Israeli prime minister Ben Gurion, who asked America not to arm his neighbours.¹⁰

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Just four months after Al Za'im's coup, however, during the early hours of the 14th of August 1949, he himself was deposed through a coup led by colonel Sami Al Hinnawi. Al Hinnawi had been won over by



Syrian General Husni al-Za'im, 1949

Colonel Stirling of the British secret service. A fluent Arabic speaker, Stirling was an important element of the British secret service in the Middle East, leading, among other things, the clandestine operations designed to manipulate Syrian public opinion to align it with British interests.¹¹ Under Stirling's guidance, Al Hinnawi had Al Za'im executed. Thereafter he established a new government led by Syrians loyal to the British. This new leadership invited King Faisal II of Iraq, the grandson of Faisal bin Hussein who had been king of Syria in 1920 and after being deposed by the French had been made king of Iraq by the British, to Damascus to organize a Syrian-Iraqi union.¹²

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The plan for a Syrian-Iraqi union under British guidance would never come to fruition, however, because in December 1949 a third coup took place in Syria. This time, the regime established by colonel Al Hinnawi was overthrown by Adib Al Shishakli, another colonel in the Syrian army. Unlike Al Hinnawi, Al Shishakli was very much opposed to the British and against the vision of a Syrian-Iraqi union under British guidance. Once in power, Al Shishakli returned Syria to the policies of his predecessor Al Za'im, the agent for America. He renewed the concession for the Tapline as well as the offer to allow Palestinians that had been made refugees by Israel to resettle in Syria.¹³ Politically, he also returned Syria to the track originally established by Al Za'im, that of effective military dictatorship. Al Shishakli's spies and security agents were posted throughout the country to monitor any potential anti-Shishakli activity. All political parties were banned, especially religious parties since Al Shishakli promoted a general secularization of Syrian society.¹⁴ Under Al Shishakli, diplomatic relations between Syria and America flourished. Formal meetings between Syrian officials and their American counterparts became regular occurrences. For example, in 1952 the American secretary of state John Foster Dulles travelled to Syria to meet Al Shishakli, becoming the first American official to do

so. Despite this, what Al Shishakli was not able to achieve was firm American support for the military buildup he had in mind. Just as had happened to Al Za'im request, Al Shishakli's requests for American military support were refused. Again on the request of the Israelis the Americans demanded assurances from Al Shishakli that any American weapons would never be used against Israel, something Al Shishakli could not accept due to the uproar this would cause inside Syria.¹⁵



Adib Shishakli 1951



The Short Lived Egyptian-Syrian Union

In 1954 Al Shishakli became a victim of another coup in Syria. This coup returned former president Hashim Al Atassi to political power. Al Atassi worked to return Syria to the British camp, aligning himself with the foremost British agent in Iraq, Nuri Al Sa'id.¹⁶ Meanwhile, he strongly opposed efforts by Gamal Abdul Nasser, who was another army officer brought to power in Egypt by the CIA's Miles Copeland, to bring Syria into his – and by extension America's – orbit.

As president of Egypt, Abdul Nasser closely aligned Egypt with America. He nationalized the British owned Suez Canal, as a result of which Britain partnered with France and Israel to try and depose him via a military intervention. This effort failed, however, as America came to Abdul Nasser's support. America harshly criticized the military response by Britain, France and Israel to Abdul Nasser's nationalization of Suez at the United Nations. Furthermore, it threatened to sell its holding of British pounds, an act which would have crashed the value of the British pound and thereby cause a financial crisis in Britain. Britain therefore had no choice but to pull its troops from Egypt, followed soon thereafter by France and Israel. As a reward, America then allowed Britain to receive a large loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).¹⁷

In response to Suez, Abdul Nasser became a hero for the people across the Arab World. This established an opportunity to bring Syria back under American control, through a union of Egypt and Syria. Leveraging his immense popularity among the Syrians, Abdul Nasser achieved this union in 1958. On the 22nd of February of that year, the union charter for the United Arab Republic was signed. Effectively, this

made Syria a province of Egypt, under the control of Abdul Nasser. The Syrian government was abolished, and all foreign embassies in Damascus were turned into consulates. Now with the ability to drive affairs in Syria, Abdul Nasser banned the Syrian Communist Party and exiled its leader Khaled Bakdash. After Al Za'im had introduced the police state in Syria, which Al Shishakli had developed further, Abdul Nasser perfected it. He promoted the merciless intelligence chief Abdul Hamid Sarraj to minister of interior, who organized mass surveillance of Syrian society. Every phone conversation was tapped and spies were placed on every street corner and every place of gathering. Those suspected of opposition views were arrested and thrown into prison without trial. Abdul Nasser gave junior officers in the intelligence services, the Mukhabarat, a free hand to torture at will. The dungeons were quickly filled. In one infamous incident, Farjallah al Helou, founder of the Lebanese Communist Party, was tortured to death by Sarraj's henchmen in 1958. Traces of the crime were eliminated by dissolving al Helou's body in acid.¹⁸ As far as foreign policy was concerned, Abdul Nasser ensured both Egypt and Syria were aligned with American plans for the Middle East.¹⁹

On the 28th of September 1961 another coup in Syria brought an end to Abdul Nasser's United Arab Republic. It was led by a thirty-five-year-old officer named Abdul Karim Al Nehlawi. Al Nehlawi was supported by the business communities of Damascus and Aleppo, which had been hit hard by Abdul Nasser's economic policies, and supported regionally by Abdul Nasser's opponents in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. He was also supported by Britain's longtime agents in Syria, including Al Quwatli, who at the time of the coup was in Switzerland for medical treatment.²⁰

Whatever Al Nehlawi and his supporters had in mind for the post United Arab Republic period, nothing would come from it as fourteen months later, on the 8th of March 1963, Syria was again rocked by a military coup. This time, the coup mastermind was Ziad Al Hariri, a young man from Daraa who served as commander of Syrian troops on the Golan Heights. He was a committed Nasserist and friend of Egyptian intelligence. Al Hariri was supported by a group of Alawite officers, all members of the Syrian Ba'ath Party. The objective of the coup was to preserve the United Arab Republic. The new regime put all members of Syria's traditional political elite in prison, thereby ending the ability of Britain to influ-

Hafez al-Assad



ence Syrian affairs.²¹

Among the group of Alawite Ba'athists was a thirty-three year old officer from the Syrian Air Force named Hafez Al Assad. After years of infighting in the Syrian military-political elite established by the 1963 coup, during November 1970, Hafez Al Assad executed a coup against his former partners to take control of Syria for himself.



Hafez Al-Assad Embraces America

Official American documents from the time indicate it was supportive of Al Assad's coup. Al Assad had ambitions to reduce the influence of the Soviet Union in Syria, which aligned with what America had asked from Al Za'im, Al Shishakli and Abdul Nasser. Furthermore, Al Assad was assessed by the Americans as the "less fanatical" within the Ba'ath elite, more willing to collaborate with neighbouring countries, and more willing to join the peace talks between Egypt and Israel which the Americans were sponsoring. Al Assad's visit to Anwar Sadat, Egypt's new president following the death of Abdul Nasser and an equally close ally for America as Abdul Nasser had been, supported this assessment. The 1973 war between Egypt and Syria on one side, and Israel on the other, indicates that Al Assad was in fact doing more than just moderate Syrian policies. He coordinated with Sadat of Egypt to attack Israel in a way that supported the American plans for the Middle East. The war ended after both sides achieved some tactical wins and defeats, while the strategic wins were purely American. Henry Kissinger, America's national security advisor and secretary of state at the time, explained this in a conversation with executives from America's oil industry. *"We are in a better position for negotiations than at any time since 1948..."*, Kissinger said. *"Although the Israelis have won militarily, they have paid a tremendous price. They have suffered some 7,000 casualties, which would have been equivalent to some 300 to 400,000 casualties for us. They have found out that rapid spectacular victories are no longer possible and that in any war, they face a war of attrition which they cannot win over time. Our influence with Israel is greater than ever. They cannot go to war again without an open supply line from the U.S."* Kissinger also spoke of an opportunity to end the soft power influence of the Soviet Union in the Middle East once and for all. Israel's American

weapons had stopped the Arab armies which were equipped by the Soviet Union, namely, something which had not gone unnoticed by the Arab street.

After the 1973 War, the rule of Al Assad saw a return of active diplomatic relations between Syria and America. After John Foster Dulles had visited Damascus in 1953 to meet with Al Shishakli, Henry Kissinger travelled to Damascus in 1973 to meet Al Assad. This would be the first of a number of in person meetings between the two. Kissinger made twenty-eight trips to Damascus over the following year, discussing with Al Assad potential pathways to a peace agreement between Syria and Israel. In 1974 the two achieved an agreement to disengage Syrian and Israeli troops along the Golan Heights, which left Israel in control of over half of the strategically important Syrian territory. Less than a month later, Richard Nixon became the first President to visit Damascus.

The closeness of the relationship between Al Assad and Kissinger was indicated by Al Assad's treatment of the Soviet Union's foreign minister Andrei Gromyko. Concerned about Al Assad's diplomatic engagements with America, Gromyko tried to speak to Al Assad as frequently as Kissinger. On the 27th of May 1974 he therefore travelled to Syria to meet Al Assad after a scheduled meeting between Al Assad and Kissinger. When Kissinger learned about this, he decided to travel to Syria again, this time unscheduled, which left Al Assad in the strange situation of being visited by the foreign ministers of both America and the Soviet Union at the same time. Al Assad then decided to cancel his meeting with Gromyko, as well as the dinner scheduled between the two. To Kissinger Al Assad then said, *"...let us eat Gromyko's*

Despite this very close relation with Al Assad, Kissinger failed to achieve his ultimate objective of a comprehensive peace agreement between Syria and Israel. The main reason for this was not unwillingness on the part of Al Assad. Rather, as Al Assad explained to Kissinger, it was an inability for Al Assad to do this, as the Syrian people were voraciously against it. In essence, Al Assad feared for his position in Syria if he went along with Kissinger, arguing that the people under his rule would not accept it and rise up against him if he followed the American plan too quickly and too openly.²³ Kissinger's response to this situation was to sideline Syria, and instead focus America's diplomatic efforts in the Middle East on getting the other Arab countries to agree peace with Israel first.



Richard Nixon, Hafez al-Assad and Henry Kissinger in Damascus in 1974



Hafez Al-Assad Delivers for America

Towards the end of Kissinger's official role in the American government, he worked with the Syrians to organize a managed entry of the Syrian army into Lebanon. Kissinger's objective was to use Syria to bring the Palestinian resistance movements in Lebanon under control. Syria could do this better than America itself, Kissinger argued, since a direct American entry into Lebanon would only arouse the British and the French, who not only felt they had important interests in the country but also loyal agents who could create unrest and problems. Through organizing a series of secret meetings between Syria and Israel, Kissinger arranged the Red Line Agreement which defined what Syria would do in Lebanon and how, based on the American plan for the Middle East and with Israeli agreement. As part of this plan, Kissinger also asked America's agents in Saudi Arabia and Iran to organize support for Syria, to enable it to be effective in Lebanon. Syrian success in Lebanon was important for Kissinger. Anything other than Syrian success would "...probably mean the overthrow of Assad", Kissinger said. And that, he repeated again and again, was a prospect he feared.²⁴

The close collaboration between Kissinger and Al Assad during the first few years of Hafez Al Assad's rule created the situation that later on the Americans would, publicly at least, criticize the Al Assad regime for, specifically Syria's relations with Iran. The reality behind the scenes was a far cry from the public statements, however. Kissinger saw in Hafez Al Assad an important American ally who supported American interests in the Middle East in a variety of crucial ways. This Syrian support for America continued even after Kissinger left the stage of geopolitics. For example, during the Iran-Iraq War, which started in 1980, Syria supported Iran by maintaining an aggressive posture towards Iraq, which forced Iraq to keep troops on the Syrian-Iraqi border.²⁵ Considering that this war was in reality a war between Britain

via Saddam Hussein and America via the regime of Khomeini, this Syrian position was very much aligned with American interests.

In 1990 Al Assad supported America more openly. He was the first Arab leader who echoed America's position regarding Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, calling upon Iraq to unconditionally withdraw immediately. When America organized its military operation against Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Syria made fifteen to twenty thousand Syrian soldiers available to support the American Operation Desert Storm. During the war, Al Assad criticized Saddam Hussein for attacking Israel with scud-rockets, which Saddam did hoping that this move would cause Arab public opinion to side with him and limit the ability of Arab countries to support America.²⁶

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Following America's First War on Iraq, Syrian support for America's peace proposal regarding Israel also returned. On the 6th of March 1991 America's president George H. W. Bush (senior) launched a new initiative to achieve a permanent peace deal between Israel and the Arab countries via multilateral negotiations. Hafez Al Assad joined the American initiative despite recognizing that the Syrian public

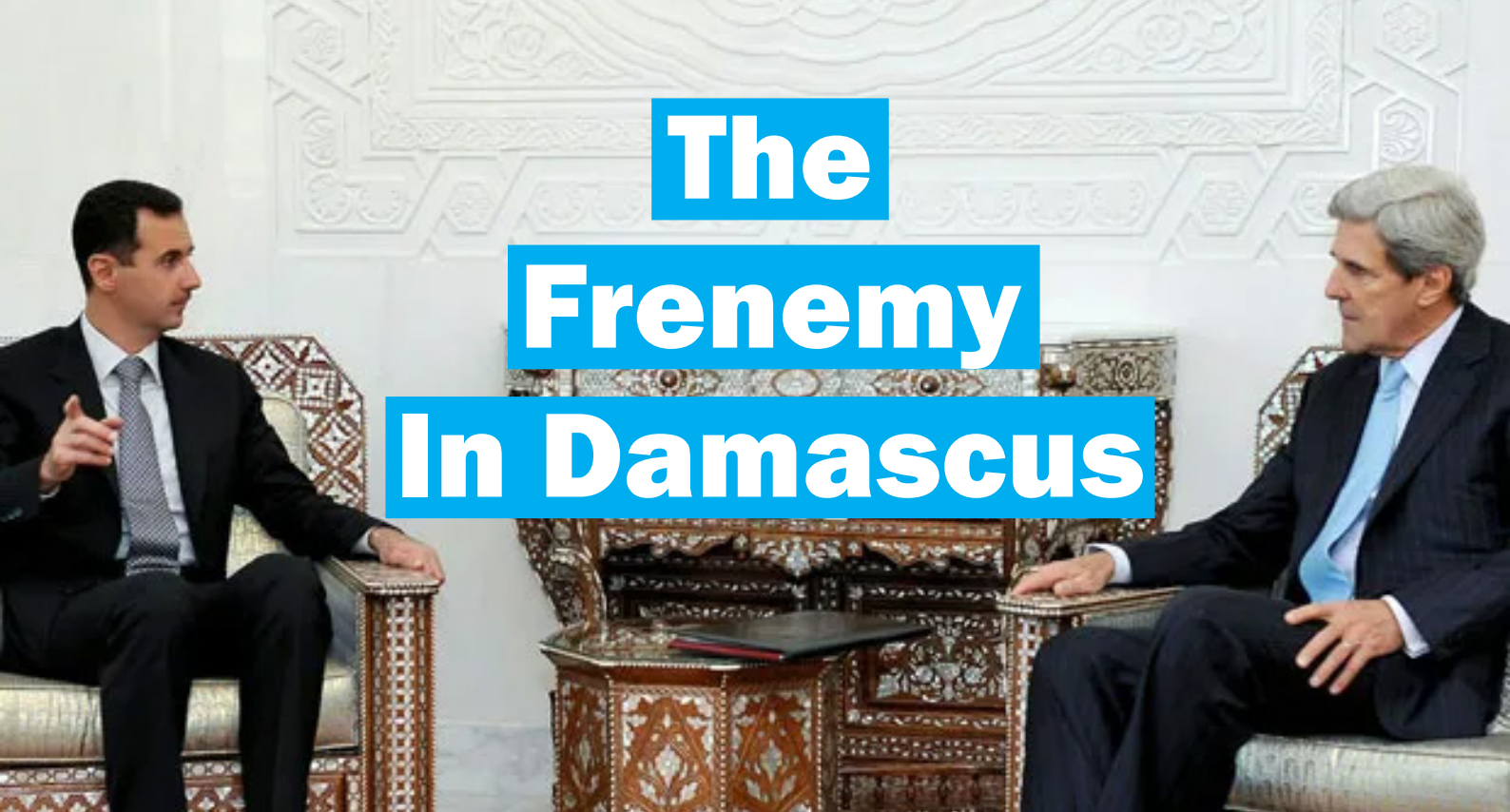
was very much against it – as it had been also when Kissinger first worked with Al Assad to start negotiations with Israel. Al Assad then coordinated with America through numerous meetings with America's secretary of state James A. Baker, who travelled to Damascus almost monthly. The American objective was to pressure the Palestinian resistance to agree to peace with Israel, by threatening the resistance with the possibility of peace between Israel and the Arab countries which would end any kind of support for the Palestinians.

The relations between Al Assad and America remained close during the years of American president Bill Clinton. Between 1993 and 1996, Clinton's secretary of state Warren Christopher made almost thirty trips to Damascus.²⁷ In December 1999, towards the end of the Clinton era, Al Assad told America's secretary of state Madeleine Albright that he wanted to seriously negotiate with Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Barak. This led to the Barak-Shara meeting in Washington in December 1999.²⁸ One of the main reasons these negotiations did not result in an agreement was that the Israelis spied on Clinton's conversations with Al Assad.²⁹

When in 2000 Hafiz Al Assad died, he was lauded by America as an exemplary leader, exactly the kind of figure Syria had needed. A man who had “...transformed a Middle East backwater into an inverted regional power,”³⁰ a “...towering figure...” and “...respected.” Bill Clinton remembered him not as an enemy or adversary, but as a close partner to the Americans. “Over the last seven years, I have met him many times and gotten to know him very well. We had our differences, but I always respected him...” President Clinton said. “Since the Madrid conference, he made a strategic choice for peace, and we worked together to achieve that goal.” Clinton further said that Al Assad had “...made clear Syria's continued commitment to the path of peace”³¹ Clinton's secretary of state Madeleine Albright said that Al Assad “...ruled Syria for over 30 years and stood out as a major figure in the region... He made a strategic choice for peace at Madrid in 1991. In all of our talks, he remained committed to that choice. We strongly believe that was the right choice and expect that Syria will continue on the path of peace. We look forward to working with Syria to bring about the goal of a comprehensive Middle East peace.”³²



Hafez al-Assad and his wife, Mrs Anisa Makhoulf. On the back row, from left to right: Maher, Bashar, Basil, Majid, and Bushra al-Assad.



The Frenemy In Damascus

Following the death of Hafez Al Assad, his son Bashar was appointed as president. America's support for this decision was evidenced by the fact that secretary of state Madeleine Albright was one of just two western officials who travelled to the funeral of Hafez Al Assad, to meet with the new president Bashar.[38] After the meeting, Albright said that for as far as domestic policy was concerned Bashar was the "reformer" the country needed.³³ With regards to international policy, the secretary of state said she was very encouraged by Al Assad's promise to pursue a policy of continuity.³⁴

However, Bashar Al Assad's rise to power largely coincided with the rise of the neocon movement in America. President George W. Bush (junior) brought many of the leaders of the neocon movement into the centers of American power, which enabled them to work on the execution of their plan for the Middle East. This plan had originally been developed in 1996 and published under the name "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm". It proposed that America leave the Middle East policy that had formed the basis of its actions in the region. In the words of American president Carter's secretary of state Cyrus Vance, this traditional American policy was about establishing stable, moderate, pro-Western regimes in the Middle East, to ensure unhindered American access to Arab oil, which required peace between Israel and the Arab countries.³⁵ The Middle East policy proposed by the neocons, however, called for military intervention in the Middle East by America. Instead of leading negotiations, the neo-

cons essentially said that America should just send in its military and force the creation of the Middle East that it wanted to see. First on the list of countries that would need to undergo this treatment was Iraq. Second Syria. Third Iran.³⁶

Bashar Al Assad's Syria tried to prevent the neocon agenda from reaching Syria through active engagement with America. It stepped up intelligence-sharing on Al Qaeda with the CIA in an attempt to appease the neoconservatives in the Bush administration.³⁷ But Syria didn't get the response it hoped for. While Syria's support for America's War on Terror prevented the neocons from executing their plan for Syria, it did not fully undo the damage to the American-Syrian relations caused by the neocons. Syria was largely ignored by America under president George W. Bush as it focused on its second invasion and occupation of Iraq. Syria therefore began to offer "support with conditions" to America in Iraq.

Syria began to organize the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq, who wished to support the Iraqi resistance, even going so far as organizing their training at the Syrian border town of Al Bukamal. The Syrian objective behind this apparent support for the anti-American fighters was to penetrate and influence their networks. This left the Syrian government, in particular Assad's brother-in-law Assef Shawkat, with detailed knowledge of Iraqi resistance activities. During a meeting with officials from the American State Department, Ali Mamlouk, then director of General Intelligence and National Security, told the

Americans, “...we don’t attack or kill them immediately. Instead, we embed ourselves in them and only at the opportune moment do we move”. Mamlouk then offered Syria’s support to the Americans, but in exchange for reduced economic sanctions and an improved regional and international political status for the Syrian regime.³⁸

What the Syrians were trying to get from America was aligned with what the Americans by that time were willing to offer. As the American military got into serious trouble in Iraq following the invasion of 2003, a special committee was established in 2006 to search for a solution. This committee was officially named the Iraq Study Group (ISG), but became known as the Baker-Hamilton Commission after its two chairmen, former secretary of state James A. Baker and former congressman Lee H. Hamilton. The ISG concluded that America’s situation in Iraq was “grave and deteriorating”, and recommended, among other things, close collaboration with Syria (and Iran) in order to defeat the Iraqi resistance. The ISG suggested that through offering economic incentives, as well as a promise of formally restoring diplomatic relations with Syria, the country could be persuaded to go along with the American requests.³⁹

In addition to supporting America’s broader Middle East plans, Bashar Al Assad also continued to follow in his father’s footsteps when it came to the subject of Israel. He participated in two efforts to achieve a peace accord, one led by Turkey which involved Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert and another led by America which involved Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. One of the American medi-

ators later revealed details of what Bashar Al Assad was willing to offer to reach an accord. This included breaking military ties with Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas, and neutralizing all threats to Israel arising in Syria, on the condition that Israel would agree to restore to Syria all land taken from it in June 1967, in other words, the Golan Heights.⁴⁰ These negotiations continued and progressed over the course of 2010 and 2011, and only stopped when the Syrian Revolution began in 2012.⁴¹

These Syrian positions on subjects considered critical for America explain why American officials continued to visit Syria during the reign of Bashar Al Assad. The prominent Democratic congressperson Nancy Pelosi led a delegation that visited Damascus for talks with Bashar Al Assad in 2007. In 2009, shortly after Barack Obama took over from George W. Bush as president of America, congressman John Kerry and his wife Teresa travelled to Damascus to have dinner with Bashar Al Assad and his wife. In 2010, Kerry travelled to Damascus again. At a press conference following his trip he said that the American administration considered Syria “...an essential player in bringing peace and stability to the region”. In all, Kerry would make six visits to Syria until the outbreak of the revolution against the Al Assad regime in 2011. As to that revolution, just days before it started, on the 27th of March 2011 America’s secretary of state Hillary Clinton still defended Bashar Al Assad, saying about him, “There’s a different leader in Syria now. Many of the members of Congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he’s a reformer.”⁴²



John Kerry (who was then senator for Massachusetts) and his wife Teresa dined with the Assads in February 2009 at a restaurant in Damascus



Syria and the Alawi's

The Alawi's trace their origins from the ninth century. In 859, Ibn Nusayr, a follower of the eleventh Imam, Hassan al-'Askari declared himself the bab 'gateway to truth'. On the basis of this authority, Ibn Nusayr proclaimed a host of new doctrines which, brought Alawism into existence and rendered him an apostate. Alawi beliefs include holding Imam Ali divine as well as holding the Alawi faith in strict secrecy from outsiders. The five pillars of Islam are viewed as symbolic only and therefore not practiced. Alawi's are much closer to Christianity as they celebrate most of their festivals, they also believe in reincarnation. Thus the Alawi's are not remotely close to the Shi'ah and their beliefs are what led them to being ostracised from Islamic society for most of their history.

Centuries of hostility defined the Alawi psyche. They acquired a reputation as fierce and unruly mountain people who resisted paying taxes they owed the authorities and frequently plundered other villagers. Alawi's retreated to the mountains and have historically taken Latakia as their homeland. Lacking any political power, isolated from the larger polities around them the decline of the Ottomans could not have come sooner. By the time WW1 came about the Alawi's were considered the poorest in the East. It was when the French took hold of both modern Lebanon and Syria in 1920 that Alawi fortunes changed.

The Alawi's adopted a pro-French position even before the French conquest of Damascus in July 1920. According to Yusuf al-Hakim, a prominent Syrian politician, *"The 'Alawi's saw themselves in a state of grace after hell; accordingly, they were dedicated to the French mandate and did not send a delegation to*

the [General] Syrian Congress." The Alawi's rebelled against Prince Faisal, whom they suspected of wanting to dominate them, they launched a rebellion against his rule in 1919, using French arms. General Gouraud received a telegram in late 1919 from 73 Alawi chiefs representing different tribes, who asked for *"the establishment of an independent Nusayri union under our absolute protection."*

The French, similar to their colonial strategy in Africa were looking to consolidate their rule through forging links with minorities. French efforts to cooperate with minorities meant the Alawi's gained political autonomy, the state of Latakia was set up on 1 July 1922. They also gained legal autonomy; a 1922 decision to end Sunni control of court cases involving Alawi's transferred these cases to Alawi jurists. The Alawi state enjoyed low taxation and a sizeable French subsidy. Not surprisingly, Alawi's accepted all these changes with enthusiasm. At the time when resistance movements were mounted against the French mandate, when Damascus, Aleppo, and the Hawran witnessed continuous rebellions on behalf of Islamic unity and independence, the Alawi's were blessing the division of the country into tiny statelets.

In return, the Alawi's helped maintain French rule. They turned out in large numbers when most Syrians boycotted the French-sponsored elections of January 1926. They provided a disproportionate number of soldiers to the government, forming about half the eight infantry battalions making up the Troupes Spéciales du Levant, serving as police, and supplying intelligence. As late as May 1945, the vast majority of Troupes Spéciales remained loyal to their French commanders. Alawi's broke up demonstrations by

Muslims, shut down strikes, and quelled rebellions. The Alawi's publicly favoured the continuation of French rule, fearing that France's departure would lead to a reassertion of Muslim control over them. Henri de Jouvenel, the French High Commissioner for Syria (1925-27), quoted a leading Alawi politician telling him: "We have succeeded in making more progress in three or four years than we had in three or four centuries, leave us therefore in our present situation."

The French mandate provided the critical boost to the Alawi's. The French spent years trying to legitimise and support the Alawi's against the Sunni majority, the French even had the Nusayri's change their name to Alawi's to emphasize the sect's connection to Ali (ra) and to the Shia'ah. Along with the Druze and Christians, the Alawi's enabled France to build a more effective counterweight to the Sunni Muslims in managing the French colonial asset.

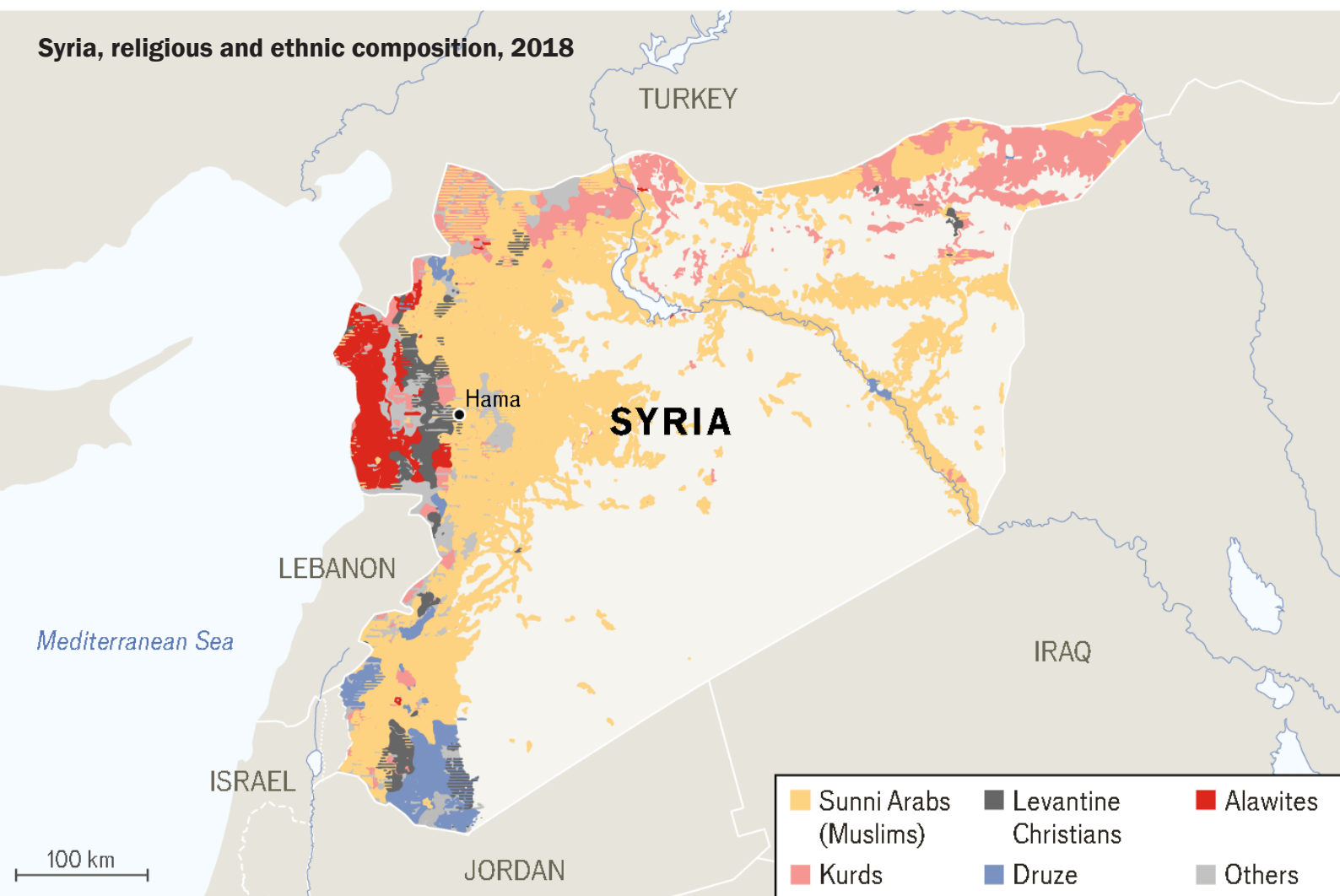
The French reversed Ottoman designs of the Syrian security apparatus which allowed for the influx of Alawi's into military, police and intelligence posts to suppress challenges to French rule. Consequently, the end of the French mandate in 1946 was a defining moment for the Alawi's, who by then had got their

first real taste of a privileged life after centuries of poverty.

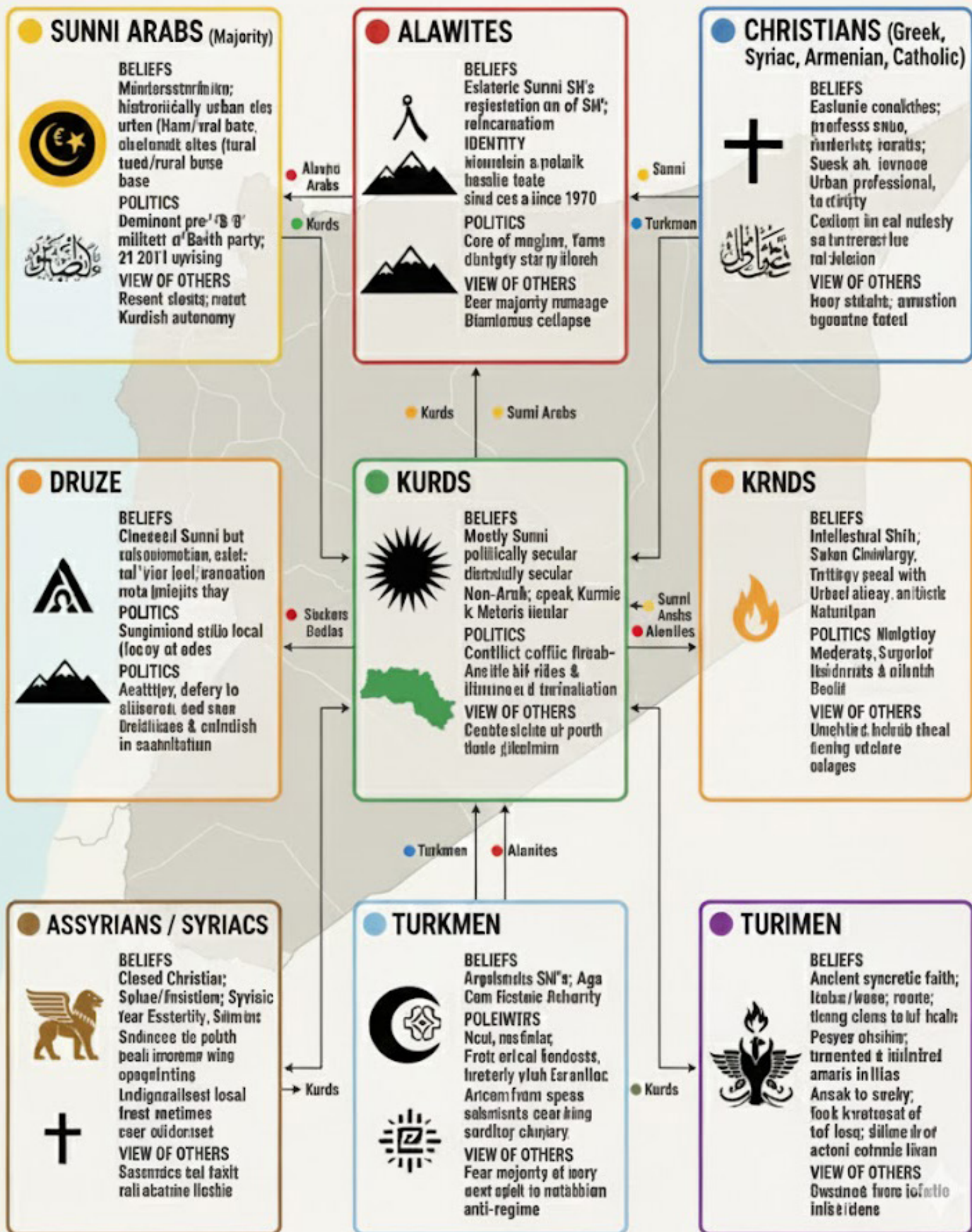
The Alawi's dominated the armed forces upon the French departure. While Muslims occupied the top posts within the military, the lower ranks were filled by Alawi's who could not afford the military exemption fees paid by most of the Muslims. The seed was thus planted for an Alawi-led military coup. The 1950's 1960's and 1970's was a period of intense struggle between the British and the US which led to numerous coups and counter coups in the region.

The birth of the Ba'ath party in Syria in 1947 was a key tool for eventual Alawi domination of Syria. The Baathist campaign of secularism, socialism and Arab nationalism provided the ideal platform and political vehicle to organize and unify around. In 1963, Ba'athist power was cemented through a military coup led by President Amin al-Hafiz, who discharged many ranking Muslim officers, thereby providing openings for hundreds of Alawi's to fill top-tier military positions. This measure tipped the balance in favour of Alawi officers who staged a coup in 1966 and for the first time placed Damascus in the hands of the Alawi's.

Syria, religious and ethnic composition, 2018



Syria's Ethnic Dynamics





Pillars of the regime

Hafez Al-Assad proved to be ruthless, preventing any challenge to his rule, banning an open press and political debate. He strengthened the secret police (Mukhabarat) and turned them into permanent informants. As a result, by the time his son Bashar took over, there were a number of pillars the al-Assad regime was constructed upon,

The first pillar was always the Alawi population from who the al-Assad family are from. As a minority, they consisted of around 2 million people; 11% of the population. For the Alawi regime to subdue a Muslim majority, it had to control every aspect of the state's apparatus. The Alawi's permeated every sector of the state's institutions and aligned themselves with other minorities like the Druze, Christians and Shi'ah in a position of unquestioned power.

The second pillar was the security apparatus. Syria's four main intelligence services were directly under the control of the Syrian president and had overlapping functions so that the regime was not overly dependent on any one of them. Each operated in near total secrecy. The secret service was responsible for internal surveillance of the population in general and detecting signs of organised political activity that ran counter to the interests of the regime. Over the past 45 years, the Syrian security apparatus had been successful in clamping down on the entire country. Political dissent was virtually non-existent, whilst any Syrian citizen wishing to travel abroad would have to

pass a number of stringent security checks.

The third pillar was the patronage networks the regime established with a number of Muslims in order to placate the majority Muslim population. The Tlass family, who Hafez al-Assad established links with soon after he came to power in 1963 was critical to the al-Assad clan's ability to maintain military support among the Muslim elite, the family was also a major link between the Alawi and the Muslim business community. Mustafa Tlass, the patriarch of the Tlass family, was the Muslim pillar of the predominantly Alawi al-Assad regime. He served as defence minister for the al-Assad regime from 1972 to 2004 and played an instrumental role in ensuring that the young Bashar al-Assad would have the support of the old guard in succeeding his father, Hafez al-Assad. His son Manaf Tlass was a close friend of Basil Assad, Hafez Assad's eldest son and heir apparent until his death in a 1994 car accident. Having attended military college with Bashar al-Assad and after Hafez al-Assad's death in 2000, Manaf Tlass became Bashar al-Assad's right-hand-man. Manaf Tlass helped Bashar al-Assad increase his base of support by introducing him to members of the Sunni business elite. Tlass even held unsuccessful talks with the Syrian opposition during the Syrian uprising. In July 2012 Tlass defected from the regime along with 23 other officers.

The fourth pillar was the army. The Syrian military consisted of air, ground, and navy forces. Active personnel were an estimated 295,000, with an additional 314,000 reserves, prior to the Arab Spring uprising.

The majority of the Syrian military were Sunni, however most of the military leadership were Alawi. The Alawi's made up 11% of the Syrian population but were estimated to make up 70% of the career soldiers in the Syrian Army. When the Arab Spring spread across Syria, the burden of the fighting fell on two dependable elite units: the 4th armored division, under the de facto command of Basher's brother, Maher, and the Republican Guard. Together, these formations had no more than 30,000 men – less than 14% of the army's total strength but they bore the lion's share of the task of combating the uprising.

In November 2012 faced with the prospect of losing Aleppo Bashar al-Assad vowed to *"live or die in Syria, I am Syrian, I was made in Syria, I have to live*

in Syria and die in Syria. I do not think the west is going [to intervene], but if they do so, nobody can tell what is next. I think the price of this invasion if it happened is going to be more than the whole world can afford." Speaking to Russia Today TV, the Syrian president made clear he had no intention of fleeing.

The uprising in Syria started in March 2011. By April 2011, realising the growing number of demonstrations and the fact that arrests and torture had failed to subdue the masses Bashar al-Assad launched a massive crackdown on his own people, shelling towns, besieging them and sending in tanks. Dera'a was the first town, to have faced al-Assad's strategy of crushing the people with overwhelming force. Snipers took up positions on rooftops, water supplies were cut, as well as telephone lines and the town was completely cut off from the rest of the country. Demonstrations still continued in large numbers, even as the regime expanded its strategy of besieging towns.





Arab Spring Rocks al-Assad Regime

When the Arabic Spring reached Syria, America responded in order to protect its influence in the country. Under the flag of the United Nations, America organized a conference in Geneva, Switzerland, to get all the world's great powers – America, Russia, Great Britain, France, China, Germany – to agree that the solution for the “Syrian problem” was preserving the state institutions established by the Al Assad's, specifically the police, secret services and military.⁴³ Leon Panetta, America's secretary of defense, said at the time, *“I think it's important when Assad leaves, and he will leave, to try to preserve stability in that country... The best way to preserve that kind of stability is to maintain as much of the military and police as you can, along with security forces, and hope that they will transition to a democratic form of government. That's the key.”*⁴⁴

America wanted Bashar Al Assad to be replaced by someone more palatable for the people of Syria, such that the Syrian masses would accept the continuation of the state built by the Al Assad family. The Russians disagreed with America that the solution to the “Syrian problem” needed to include a departure of Al Assad. Their position was that not only the Al Assad regime's government institutions should remain intact, but that Bashar Al Assad himself should also remain president of Syria. The Russians wanted to avoid the region getting the idea that violent revolutions could change a political reality, because a significant parts of

Russian territory has a Muslim-majority population. In 2013 America then started to provide weapons and training to some of the resistance groups in Syria. While this was presented as an effort to “topple Al Assad”, the details of the program reveal that it was designed to protect the Syrian regime built by the Al Assads. The program backed forces affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) that the American government considered politically moderate, that is, non “Islamist”. The goal of the program was to empower the FSA against Islamist factions, particularly Jabhat Al Nusra, the Syrian branch of al Qaeda that is now known as Hayat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS). America provided these approved rebel groups with light weapons, military training, salaries, and sometimes anti-tank missiles. Washington, however, always refused to provide them with heavier weapons such as surface-to-air missiles.⁴⁵ America also made certain that it gave enough resources to the groups allied with it such that they could hold back the resistance groups it did not like, but never so many resources that they would achieve battlefield dominance. In other words, they were drip-feeding opposition groups just enough to survive but never enough to become dominant actors.⁴⁶

In 2014 a coalition led by America then launched military operations inside the country, but these too turned out to be primarily directed not against the Syrian regime, but against the “Islamist” rebel groups

resisting the rule of Bashar Al Assad, including the Islamic State group,⁴⁷ exactly as the Syrian regime had hoped⁴⁸.

In 2015 America and Russia put their longstanding differences aside and agreed to collaborate in Syria. This American–Russian partnership for Syria came about through a series of meetings over the first months of 2015 between the ministers of foreign affairs of both countries, America’s John Kerry and Russia’s Sergey Lavrov. The American president Obama and Russian prime-minister Putin then met to discuss Syria on the 28th of September 2015. Shortly after, on the 30th of September, Russia intervened militarily in Syria. A press conference by Kerry and Lavrov just hours after Russia’s first attacks confirmed that these Russian actions were undertaken based on the American–Russian partnership for Syria. During this press conference both parties said, namely, that they shared a desire to keep Syria “democratic, united, secular”. And that the militaries of the two countries would collaborate closely in Syria to achieve this.⁴⁹

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The essence of this American–Russian partnership was revealed two months later. Both America and Russia wanted the Syrian state built by the Al Assad family to be protected, but they had disagreed about the role of Bashar Al Assad himself in this government. To get Russia to send its military to Syria in order to support the Al Assad regime, eventually America accepted the Russian position regarding Bashar Al Assad. During a press conference in De-

cember 2015, John Kerry announced that America had changed its Syria policy, and that a stepping down of Bashar Al Assad in Syria had been dropped from its list of priorities. Furthermore, in return for Russia’s military engagement in Syria, America turned a blind eye to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and its annexation of the Crimea, although this breached the security assurances it had given the government of Ukraine in a 1994 treaty named the Budapest Memorandum.

With Russia’s brutal air assaults, Iran and Hezbollah’s massacres on the ground alongside thousands of Shi’ah militia fighters recruited from across the region the tide turned against the Syrian people. Bashar al-Assad and his regime proceeded to destroy the country through grinding years of slaughter that saw hundreds of thousands murdered and millions dispossessed and displaced. The global powers proceeded to organise summits to discuss the future of Syria in Astana, Geneva and Riyadh, only inviting select Syrian groups. Whilst the regional powers from Jordan to Saudi to the UAE and Turkey armed the various rebel groups and then pushed them into truces and reconciliations with the regime in Damascus. Turkey, Russia and the Syrian regime agreed de-escalation zones amongst themselves, which saw rebel groups with their families transported to these zones after agreeing to put down the arms. At the beginning of 2017 the regime recaptured Aleppo after destroying much of the city’s infrastructure. Bashar al-Assad, with help from the global and regional powers had, as far as he was concerned, survived and ended the Arab Spring uprising in Syria and he claimed he had recaptured most of Syria from rebel hands and therefore was the legitimate ruler of all of Syria.





Russia and Iran to the Rescue

Russia intervened in Syria in September 2015, after the US and Russia put aside their long standing differences. The US did this because in July 2015 Bashar al-Assad admitted in a televised speech before local dignitaries in Damascus, that the Syrian army had given up some areas of Syria, in order to fight elsewhere. *“It was necessary to specify critical areas for our armed forces to hang on to. Concern for our soldiers forces us to let go of some areas. Every inch of Syria is precious. There is a lack of human resources... Everything is available [for the army], but there is a shortfall in human capacity,”* Assad said.⁵⁰ This meant al-Assad’s forces had been crippled to the point they had to give up some areas in order to defend others.

Russia’s intervention in Syria proved to be pivotal in saving the al-Assad regime from collapse. Russian forces stabilised and strengthened President Bashar al-Assad’s government by providing airpower and conducting airstrikes against rebel groups. Russia expanded and beefed up its air base in Khmeiem which also acted as a supply base for weapons, missiles and ordinance to be used to defend the al-Assad regime.

In order to facilitate Russia’s presence, the US signed a Memorandum of Understanding on air safety in Syria in 2015. The MOU, aimed to minimise the risk of inflight incidents among US and Russian aircraft operating in Syrian airspace. The Pentagon’s press secretary, Peter Cook said at the time the MOU includes specific safety protocols for aircrews to follow, including maintaining professional airmanship at all times, the use of specific communication frequencies

and the establishment of a communication line on the ground.⁵¹

When the Syrian uprising began in 2012, the US, despite its public portrayal of opposing al-Assad, ultimately backed his regime to maintain its interests. It coordinated with Russia and Iran to intervene, ensuring the Syrian regime’s survival while supporting select rebel groups to control the revolution’s direction

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Iran’s intervention saw the country mobilise its resources and provide critical military forces, money and weapons. While Russia’s intervention was the turning point, Iran laid the groundwork for this and provided significant fighters on the ground who Russia provided air cover to. This saw al-Assad’s dependency on Iran deepen, leading to long-term Iranian influence in Syria’s military, economy, and politics. In time it became a major problem for al-Assad.

Iran provided significant economic and financial aid to prop up the Syrian regime; Tehran poured billions of dollars into Syria that included credit lines and

oil shipments to keep the Syrian economy afloat. Iran also deployed the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), particularly the Quds Force, which played a leading role in advising and coordinating Syrian government forces. Iran also recruited, trained and funded thousands of Shi'ah militias that carried out massacres across Syria and helped regime forces retake towns and cities that were lost by the regime. In parallel to this Lebanon's Hezbollah provided cru-

cial manpower, when al-Assad's army was crippled due to many units defecting to the rebels.

The fall of Aleppo, after years under rebel control in 2016 was the final turning point that enabled al-Assad to recapture most of the country. Iranian ground forces with Russian air support saved the al-Assad regime after committing untold atrocities and recapturing territory from rebel groups.





The Frenemy in Raqqa

Prior to Russia's intervention in 2015, the al-Assad regime in 2013 was facing catastrophe when many officers defected from the Syrian army to the rebel groups that helped them seize much of Northern and Eastern Syria from the regime and were planning a final assault on Damascus itself. The regime lost Aleppo, Idlib and Raqqa, which became the first provincial capital to fall into opposition hands. Opposition forces also controlled parts of the Damascus suburbs. The al-Assad regime was forced to give up fighting for most of the country in order to defend Damascus.

At this moment, ISIS moved into Syria and turned the tide for Bashar al-Assad's regime. Jabhat al-Nusra was founded in 2011 as an al-Qaeda affiliate. It was created by Abu Mohammad al-Joulani, who was sent by al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to expand the movement into Syria. In April 2013, al-Baghdadi announced the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), merging his group (al-Qaeda in Iraq) with the Syrian-based Jabhat al-Nusra. However, Nusra's al-Joulani rejected this and pledged loyalty to al-Qaeda's global leader, leading to a split between the two groups. Baghdadi's ISIS proceeded to move into Syria, regularly criss-crossing the Iraqi-Syrian border. ISIS seized control from the rebel groups of much of eastern Syria, including Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and parts of Aleppo province. In early 2014, when ISIS captured Raqqa,

they made it the de facto capital of their so-called "caliphate."

The origins of ISIS remain murky to this day. All of the senior leaders of ISIS were in US prison, Camp Bucca, south of Baghdad from 2004 in the midst of the insurgency against US forces during the Iraq war. Over the years the US released the insurgents who went on to form ISIS. Whilst ISIS began in Iraq it constantly streamed across the Iraqi-Syrian border, moving supplies in convoys of trucks that were never targeted by US airpower. The US even gave ISIS cover when it conducted strikes in Syria in 2014 against a new dubious group that was called 'Khorasan,' which officials at the time said was plotting an imminent attack on US soil. Bizarrely, the history of the Khorasan was virtually non-existent, and US officials never mentioned the group until the week before the strikes began in September 2014. Estimated at 50 fighters, the group suddenly became a huge pretext for military intervention, even though an air sortie on 23rd September 2014 reportedly killed 30 of them.⁵² Andrew McCarthy, a former US federal terrorism prosecutor highlighted in the National Review magazine: "*You haven't heard of the Khorasan group because there isn't one. It is a name the administration came up with calculating that Khorasan had sufficient connection to jihadist lore [so] that no one would call the President on it.*"⁵³ Harakat Hazm highlighted the airstrikes were a significant US effort



to destroy Jabhat al-Nusra, and a minuscule effort to destroy ISIS, and no effort at all to destroy al-Assad. This is very significant as Harakat Hazm, which was allied with the CIA-backed Free Syrian Army, was one of the first rebel groups to receive US anti-tank missiles. That effectively made it one of America's most trusted allies in the Syrian conflict.

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Janes Intelligence, the prestigious global security firm, released data that highlighted the number of operations conducted by ISIS and the Bashar al-Assad regime at the time. It found around 64% of verifiable ISIS attacks in Syria from November 21 2013 – November 21 2014 targeted other rebel groups. Just 13% of ISIS attacks during the same period targeted al-Assad's forces. It also found al-Assad's counterterrorism operations, more than two-thirds of which were airstrikes, skewed heavily towards groups

whose names were not ISIS. Of 982 counterterrorism operations for the year, just 6% directly targeted ISIS.⁵⁴ ISIS and al-Assad rarely targeted each other. Further data from Janes on a regional level showed that there were 238 counterterrorism operations in Aleppo for the year through November 21 2014, but just 14 of those targeted ISIS. In the ISIS stronghold of Raqqa, there were 22 counterterrorism operations but just half targeted ISIS.

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What ISIS did was enter into Syria when the al-Assad regime was about to collapse in 2013 and rather than join the rebel groups on their assault on Damascus they began taking territory that was already under rebel control. As a result, the rebel groups were forced to take on ISIS who forced them to fight on two fronts that split their resources and attention and took the pressure of al-Assad's forces. The timing of the ISIS intervention was perfect for al-Assad. When ISIS was crossing the Syrian-Iraqi border supplying its forces, the US who had the resources and intelligence did not intervene. All this indicates that whether knowingly or unknowingly, ISIS served the US agenda of propping up the al-Assad regime.



The Enemy of my Enemy is my Friend

The Kurds, comprising about 10% of Syria's population and concentrated in the northeast, largely stayed out of the fight when the Arab Spring began in 2013 in Syria. But that changed in 2014, when ISIS swept across eastern Syria and northern Iraq, creating their so-called 'caliphate.' As a result, the Kurds organised into a militia to defend their territory.

The Kurdish groups consisted of multiple factions that coalesced into the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The largest fraction amongst them was the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG). The PYD and YPG were closely linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), who waged a protracted insurgency against Türkiye from 1984 to 2013 which included the widespread use of targeted killings and suicide bombings. The PYD formed in 2003 as a covert political branch of the PKK following former Hafez al-Assad's expulsion of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan from Syria in 1998. The

PYD maintained close ideological alignment with the political philosophy of the PKK, including the unique use of female fighters and a cult-like reverence for Abdullah Ocalan.

By the end of 2014 ISIS had saved the regime in Damascus and the US turned against ISIS and switched support to the Kurds. The US deployed special forces to work with the SDF, marking the first official US troop presence in Syria. The US-Kurdish partnership grew and this coalition took back territory from ISIS, with Raqqa falling in 2017. The last territory ISIS held in Syria was Baghouz, located in Deir ez-Zor province near the Iraqi border. The SDF, with support from the US defeated ISIS and retook Hasakah, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor from ISIS and held out at attempts by al-Assad from re-taking them. This meant the Kurds controlled the country's oil-rich region, which is where US troops are still stationed today.

When Baghouz fell to the Kurds they took tens of thousands of ISIS

fighters and their families into custody. Separate to these, thousands of ISIS fighters surrendered or were captured during multiple Kurdish-US offensives. Male ISIS fighters were placed in makeshift Kurdish prisons. Whilst the Al-Hol and Roj camps housed women and children associated with ISIS. The Kurdish administration has demanded foreign countries repatriate their ISIS nationals, but many refused. As a result, thousands of foreign and local ISIS members remain in overcrowded Kurdish-run detention facilities. Today the SDF still holds over 10,000 ISIS fighters in prisons across northeastern Syria, while thousands of women and children remain in refugee camps.

The rise of the Kurds in Syria caused worry in Türkiye, who saw them as affiliated to the PKK. When President Trump abruptly ordered the withdrawal of most US forces in North Syria in October 2019, Türkiye invaded North Syria, seizing control of a slice of northeastern Syria from the Kurds and it still occupies these today.

Türkiye Expands into North Syria

From the beginning of the uprising in Syria, Türkiye backed elements of the opposition against Bashar al-Assad. Türkiye provided financial support, arms, political coordination and intervened in North Syria which saw its influence grow over elements of the opposition. Türkiye allowed the Free Syrian Army (FSA) which consisted of defected soldiers from the Syrian army to operate from Turkish territory, helping it organise offensives.

From 2016 Türkiye launched multiple military operations that expanded its influence and created rebel-controlled zones. Whilst many of the offensives targeted Kurdish held areas, Operation Spring Shield in 2020 saw Türkiye engage Syrian government forces in Idlib, which prevented the collapse of rebel defences.

Numerous agreements between rebel groups and the Syrian regime, guaranteed by Russia and Türkiye, saw the creation of de-escalation zones which permitted rebel groups and their families to leave the areas they were fighting and relocate. This saw many rebel groups end up in Idlib in North Syria, which was effectively under the control of Türkiye.

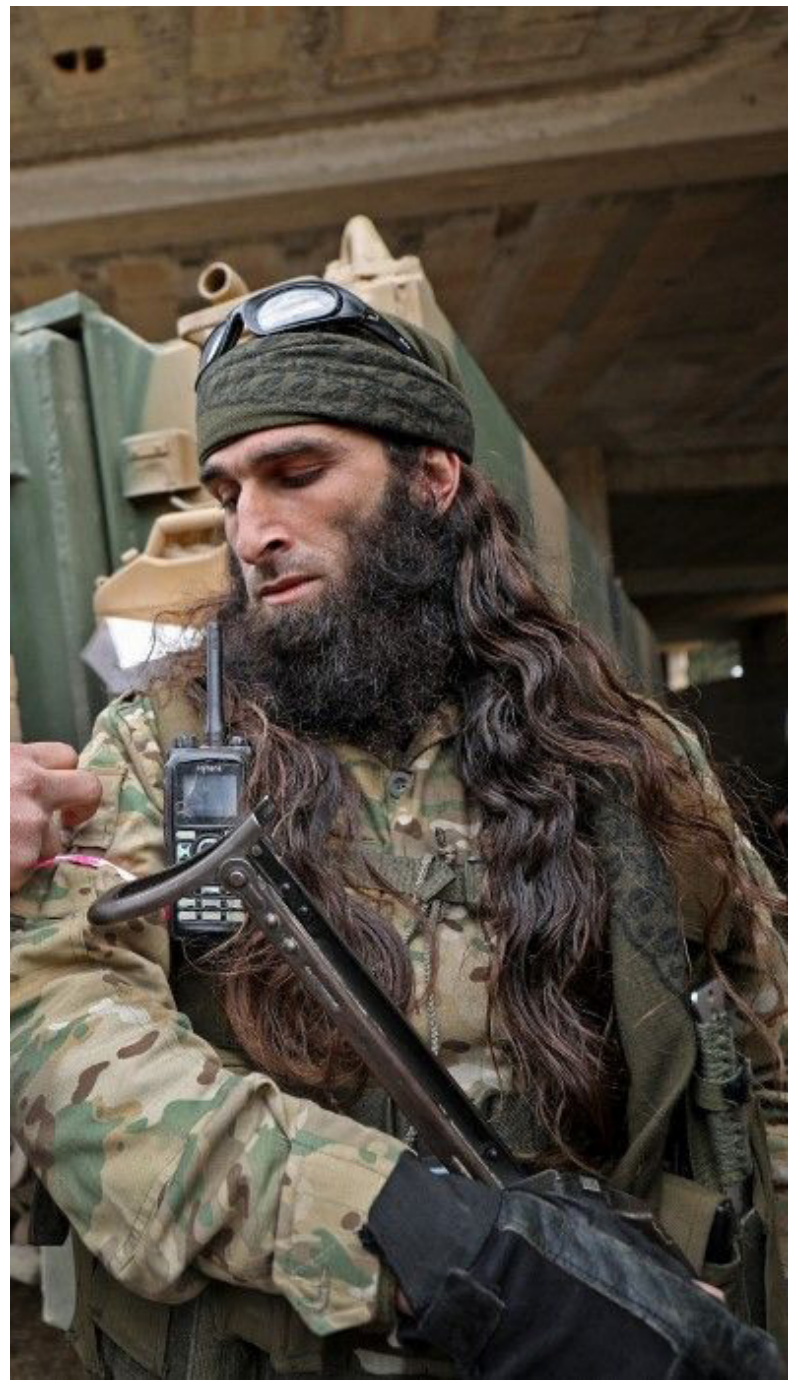
Türkiye rebranded and organised rebels into the Syrian National Army (SNA, formerly FSA) under Turkish military command. The SNA became Türkiye's main proxy force in northern Syria, relying on Turkish weapons, salaries, and logistics. Turkish intelligence (MIT) played a major role in mediating disputes between the many rebel factions.

Al-Assad had managed with Iranian and Russian help in 2016 to cripple the uprising against him, but the north of Syria needed to be recaptured. In 2020, the Syrian government forces launched an offensive into Idlib, the last major rebel-held province and the last remaining territory out of government hands.

Whilst Russia supported the Syrian government offensive into Idlib, Russia wanted to avoid direct conflict with Türkiye, and this led to a ceasefire

agreement between Türkiye and Russia who were backing opposing forces in Idlib. Much to the anger of al-Assad the ceasefire helped freeze the frontlines and Russia and Türkiye agreed to conduct joint patrols to enforce the ceasefire. The deal that was brokered stopped al-Assad from retaking Idlib. Although Russia and Türkiye were in theory backing opposing forces – Russia was backing the al-Assad regime and Türkiye the opposing rebel groups, much to the anger of Bashar al-Assad, Russia and Türkiye coordinated in Idlib.

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Idlib: The Battle within a Battle

Idlib was the last rebel stronghold after Aleppo fell in 2016. Many of the rebel groups that were either defeated elsewhere or entered into agreements ended up in Idlib. In the North of Syria, the Kurds controlled the North-East of the country and Türkiye and the rebel groups it backed controlled the North-West of Syria.. A consortium of different rebel groups controlled Idlib and over the years, control of Idlib shifted due to infighting, external interventions and battles with the Syrian regime forces.

Syria's rebels captured Idlib city in March 2015 during 'Operation Victory Army' by combining and carrying out an operation with coordination and sharing of resources. The main groups were Jabhat al-Nusra – who had split from ISIS, Ahrar al-Sham, who was one of the largest groups during the uprising with tens of thousands of fighters, as well as the Free Syrian Army, which was backed by Türkiye. The victory in Idlib forced all the various factions to co-operate in its administration and the outcome saw mixed results.

In 2016, Abu Muhammed Joulani rebranded Jabhat al-Nusra as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Whilst Joulani was originally sent by the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Bakr Baghdadi, to expand into Syria, Joulani operated separately and this led to tensions that saw him swear loyalty to Al Qaeda global leader Aymen Zawahiri. This led to tensions between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra and only got worse when al-Nus-

ra took part in the Idlib operation and then administered the territory. ISIS accused Joulani of betrayal, leading to defections and the formation of Hurras al-Din, a new al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, which HTS crushed in 2020.

Rebranded as HTS, Joulani then turned against Ahrar al-Sham, defeating it and taking over Idlib. HTS absorbed and eliminated the smaller factions, becoming the dominant force by 2017 in Idlib. HTS established a civilian front, called "Syrian Salvation Government" (SG) as its political and administrative arm. The SG functioned like a state, with a prime minister, ministries and local departments overseeing sectors such as education, health and reconstruction, while maintaining a religious council guided by the Shari'ah.

HTS prioritised stability, public services and reconstruction and showcased Idlib as a model of success under HTS rule, enhancing both his group's legitimacy and Joulani's own political aspirations. Under his leadership, HTS had crushed and marginalised other factions, both jihadists and rebels to consolidate power. During its rule in Idlib, HTS avoided meaningful combat against government forces and marginalised jihadists and foreign fighters in Idlib to prevent them from engaging in such actions. This was all achieved with Turkish cooperation.

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Bashar: The Survivor

By 2022 the US began to push the regional Arab nations to begin normalising relations with the regime in Damascus. Barbara Leaf, Assistant Secretary of State, highlighted in 2022 that the US had sent a message to the Arab rulers about their shift in policy. *“They want to try an engagement. Our approach on that score is that make sure to get something for that engagement.”*⁵⁵ The Biden administration blocked Congress from moving forward with the Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act. The Biden administration also began saying it would let the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act expire at the end of 2024.

On the 19th May 2023, the Assad regime regained Syria’s seat at the 32nd League of Arab States’ Summit that took place in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, marking the end of over a decade of regional boycott and Assad’s exclusion from Arab circles.

In the West, Italy was the first nation to appoint an ambassador to Syria, marking the end of 13 years of severed diplomatic relations. Italy undertook this decision independently of the EU’s collective foreign policy, despite significant sanctions imposed on the al-Assad regime by Western states. The Italian government, led by Giorgia Meloni and supported by seven European countries, aimed to repatriate Syrian refugees and cater to Italy’s right-wing and populist claims, over and above neglecting human rights values.



Prior to the Hamas's assault on Israel that led to a change in the security architecture of the region, the regional landscape was stabilising with al-Assad being seen by most as the legitimate ruler of Syria and with the Abraham accords, normalisation was moving in earnest between Israel and a host of regional Arab states.

Bashar al-Assad had turned his position around after 13 years of war. The uprising had been crippled with regional and global powers coming to al-Assad's aid. Both direct support from Iran and Russia and indirect support from the US, who was the long-term guarantor of the regime. Whilst, externally, normalisation with the Syrian regime was increasing, domestically al-Assad was facing some major challenges.

Tensions were growing with Iran and although al-Assad always admitted Iran and Hezbollah helped his regime to survive, he expected them to withdraw after defeating the rebels. Instead, Iran intensified its military and intelligence presence without al-Assad's consent and against his plans to retake parts of the country that he didn't control. Iran was using its intervention in Syria to consolidate its presence in Syria regardless of who occupied the presidency. After taking control of much of Syria, by 2022 al-Assad no longer needed Iran and concluded Iran's presence will discourage Western countries from contributing to Syria's reconstruction.

On the eve of October 7th the Syrian economy was in a state of severe crisis with widespread poverty, significant infrastructure damage, and a pressing need for international assistance to facilitate recovery and reconstruction efforts. Manufacturing, production and services were all in a disastrous state after 13 years of war and this meant many soldiers, security officials and those linked to the regime didn't receive salaries and corruption was rife with militia groups helping themselves to the country's resources. The security class in Syria had been in constant war for 13 years and the economic situation was dire, even for those who supported the regime.

“the US could have removed al-Assad and his regime and stopped all the bloodshed and deaths, the US saw its interests best secured by ensuring the uprising did not succeed. This was why the US was pushing the Arab rulers to normalise relations with al-Assad from 2022, as the uprising was over by this point”

Iran since the beginning of the uprising against the al-Assad regime poured in considerable resources to prop up Bashar al-Assad and his regime. As the years turned into a decade along with western sanctions this was hurting the Iranian economy. The Covid-19 outbreak made things even worse and the lockdowns

were used by the Iranian regime to clamp down on growing domestic protests. Resentment and suspicion between Syria, Iran and Hezbollah was also growing as Syria became the theatre for significant amounts of Iranian attrition. Hezbollah lost some of its most able commanders in Syria – in part to rebels, in part to Israel, and in part to Syrian forces themselves, with whom they repeatedly clashed over suspicious deals with the president's brother. Iranian commanders who fought in defence of the Syrian regime were consistently liquidated by Israeli air strikes and in many suspicious circumstances. From 2020 al-Assad's began dismissing many ranking Syrian security and military personnel who appreciated what Iran did for their country, the Syrian-Iranian relationship was deteriorating.

For Iran, embedding itself in Syria and maintaining a long-term permanent presence was a prize worth paying for as this aided its strategic position in the region. This went directly against the wishes of al-Assad, who depended on Iran's intervention for survival but as far as al-Assad was concerned he had won against the uprising and Iran had now outlived its welcome.

“The security class in Syria had been in constant war for 13 years and the economic situation was dire, even for those who vsupported the regime”

Israel watched in horror when the Arab Spring began in Syria in 2013. Israel's most secure border had been its border with Syria. This cooperation, despite all the rhetoric of being enemies, saw Israeli security officials line up to defend al-Assad. Maj-Gen. (Res) Amos Gilad said in an interview with Israel Radio that Assad is in total control of his country's weapons systems and is acting sensibly with regard to Israel. The Ex-IDF chief Dan Halutz said Israel prefers that Assad stay in power. *“The regime in Syria kills its citizens every day, but we must acknowledge that the opposition in Syria is composed of Muslim extremists like al-Qaeda.”*⁵⁶ Whilst Israel saw the al-Assads as a critical player in maintaining Israel's most secure border, they always saw Syria's relationship with Iran and Hezbollah as a problem. This is why Israel carried out hundreds of airstrikes against military targets in Syria, that mostly targeted Iranian military infrastructure in Syria such as weapons depots, command centers and drone bases. Israel also regularly struck Hezbollah weapons convoys in order to prevent advanced weapons from reaching Lebanon.

Israel also conducted covert operations inside Syria, including the assassination of key figures linked to Iran and Hezbollah. In 2020, Israel assassinated Iranian general Mohammad Reza Zahedi in Syria. Israel also used Hezbollah's entry into Syria to carry out covert intelligence program into Hizbullah's structure, which was how they were able to assassinate all its senior leaders in 2024 in Lebanon.

Türkiye played the most active role in Syria and on the eve of October the 7th had successfully carved out a sphere of influence in northern Syria. Türkiye supported rebel forces, it fought against the Kurds and prevented their expansion, it fought ISIS and managed refugees and took part in the political conferences and settlements with other powers about the future of Syria.

Russia provided al-Assad with airpower and support ever since it intervened in 2015. This was in cooperation with the US and was one of the factors that drove many of the rebel groups into the arms of regional powers and the US. But when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022 and the difficulties it initially faced, its attention turned to its war in Europe and its position in Syria became secondary and fell in terms of priority. Russia's presence was never large in Syria, at its peak there were 5,000 security and military personnel in Syria, this was a small to medium operation for Russia.

As far as the US was concerned on the eve of October the 7th Syria remained a proxy for her and she had successfully used both regional and international powers to maintain the status quo in the country. Whilst the US could have removed al-Assad and his regime and stopped all the bloodshed and deaths, the US saw its interests best secured by ensuring the uprising did not succeed. This was why the US was pushing the Arab rulers to normalise relations with al-Assad from 2022, as the uprising was over by this point.





Reshaping the Region

Israel has always considered the military capabilities of the surrounding nations in the region as a mortal threat. Israel is an artificial creation by the Europeans and was established as a settler colony. Israel has always been outnumbered in the region and is minuscule in size when compared to the other regional nations. This is why Israel has for long viewed its survival as only possible with the destruction of the military capabilities in the region. This is why in the past Egypt was an enemy and then the armed groups and Iran became Israel's enemy, that presented an existential threat to her. Despite US attempts to normalise relations between Israel and her neighbours, the Israelis have constantly resisted this.

From at least 1996, the Israeli strategy to solve this security nightmare has been an aggressive policy that envisions the overthrow of a number of regimes as well as the destruction of the military capabilities of others that could threaten Israel. This was converted into policy in 1996 and called – 'A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm,' which was prepared by the neocons that saw the overthrow of the regimes in Iraq, Syria, Iran and Libya, the destruction of the WMD's and military capabilities of the region and then the establishment of a new region based on western values and with Israel's security problems solved. But when the Neocons came to power during the George W. Bush administration, they attempted to implement this strategy and failed due to the insurgency in Iraq and subsequent failures in Afghanistan.

When the events of October the 7th, 2023, took place, Netanyahu used the event to bring the clean break strategy back again as the attack on Israel provided the opportunity to reshape the security balance in the region. The Financial Times described this

new policy as: *"Across the Middle East, Israel now sees an opportunity to take the fight to its foes and attempt to impose a new order: what Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu calls a "strategic turn" to change "the security reality in our region for generations to come."*⁵⁷ Netanyahu repeated on multiple occasions the opportunity to reshape the region. Netanyahu told Israeli lawmakers in December 2024: *"I said yesterday that we are in a period of days of greatness, but also challenging days. These are large days – because in them we are changing the strategic reality in the Middle East."*⁵⁸

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What ensued from Israel was the Clean Break strategy from 1996, but on steroids. On many occasions Israel even disobeyed the US administration to reshape the region. Despite US attempts to curtail Israel's onslaught on Gaza, Israel proceeded to commit a genocide in Gaza and make it unliveable for the people there. Israel's onslaught saw it target Hamas's military capabilities and then it turned on Hezbollah. This was despite the White House calling upon Israel not to escalate and open a second front.

By the time Israel assassinated Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrullah on the 29th of September 2024 and the group's entire senior leadership, the US aligned with Israel to strategically alter the region's security and change the situation in Syria. This meant the situation in Syria needed to be altered as Hizbullah's supply lines ran through Syria and Syria's military capabilities were always seen as a threat by Israel. To bring Syria in line with the new regional set up both Iran and Russia needed to be ejected from Syria.

13 Years of War in One Week



After 13 years of war in Syria and after spending this whole period propping up the regime, the US changed tact and immediately prepared the rebel groups who would topple the al-Assad regime. The Revolutionary Commando Army (RCA), a group aligned against ISIS, were told “this is your moment” in a briefing by US Special Forces. Having worked with the RCA to dismantle the so-called ISIS caliphate, the US was still paying their salaries. Capt Mashadani and his fellow commanders said American officers at Al Tanf base brought the Abu Khatab brigade and other units under the joint command of the RCA. The RCA’s ranks grew from about 800 to as many as 3,000. Capt Mashadani confirmed the RCA and the fighters of HTS, who were led by Mohammed al-Jolani, were co-operating, and communication between the two forces was being coordinated by the Americans at Al-Tanf base, on the Syria-Iraq border.⁵⁹

Whilst the US organised the groups in the South of Syria it was Türkiye that had for long managed the groups in the north of Syria. Türkiye maintained their military capabilities and dealt with Russia, Iran and the al-Assad regime on the rebel groups behalf. When the rebel groups stormed Aleppo on the 30th of November and eventually captured it they were organised into the Al-Fath Al-Mubin Operations Room, which was led by HTS and also included the National Liberation Front, the Jaysh Al-Izza group as well as the Syrian National Army (SNA). All of them have for the last decade been under Turkish tutelage.

When these Turkish backed factions moved onto Hama, they faced no opposition from regime forces, who were in disarray. Russia was forced to carry out airstrikes and Iran after more than a decade of war

and reeling from its losses in Lebanon, Palestine and now direct war with Israel, was forced to call upon pro-Iranian groups in Iraq to intervene.

The US began to openly attack Bashar al-Assad. NSC spokesperson Sean Savett said Syria’s refusal to engage in a political process and its reliance on Russia and Iran had created the conditions now unfolding, including the collapse of Assad regime lines in north-west Syria.

The rebel groups advance to a great extent was enabled by the coordinated use of new, highly sophisticated drone technology, which needed outside support. The opposition created the “Shahin” unit, specializing in the production, manufacturing, and development of advanced drones and weapons. The Shahin unit used turbojet-powered kamikaze drones that would be difficult to manufacture due to the complexity of their production, supply chain and sophisticated use of materials.⁶⁰ Türkiye’s role and the use of sophisticated drones indicate that the anti-regime forces were not as spontaneous and independent, as was made out.

Iran began to move its forces out of Syria, even before Bashar al-Assad’s regime collapsed on the 8th of December 2024. Iran withdrew its military commanders and personnel including top commanders of the powerful Quds Forces, the external branch of the Revolutionary Guards Corps. The two top generals of Iran’s Quds forces, deployed to advise the Syrian army, fled to Iraq as the rebel groups took over Homs and Deir al-Zour. Iran had done nearly all of the heavy lifting to prop up the al-Assad regime, as regime forces were ousted from Aleppo and Homs, Iran decided its regional priorities had changed with

Hezbollah decimated in Lebanon and Hamas devastated in Gaza, as well as its now direct war with Israel, Syria had now fallen in importance.

Russia provided air-support to Syrian forces to defend Aleppo and Hama, but these fell extremely quickly to rebel forces. After a decade of supporting the al-Assad regime, Russia was now heavily committed to the ongoing war in Ukraine, limiting its ability to send additional reinforcements to Syria. Ukraine was always more important to Moscow than Syria was ever going to be. Even with Russian air support, the Syrian army was unable to mount an effective counteroffensive. Despite Russian airpower, regime forces on the ground were capitulating en masse. Moscow had concluded, even before the fall of Damascus, that preserving its military assets was more important now than a prolonged battle with advancing rebels. Russia relocated its forces to Libya. After a decade of defending the al-Assad regime, Russia determined preserving and protecting its military assets was more important than defending the al-Assad regime.

Within 48 hours of the fall of the al-Assad regime, Netanyahu said *“I authorized the air force to bomb strategic military capabilities left by the Syrian army, so that they would not fall into the hands of the jihadists. We have no intention of interfering in Syria’s internal affairs, but we clearly intend to do what is necessary to ensure our security.”*⁸¹ The Israeli air force conducted more than 350 strikes on targets including anti-aircraft batteries, military airfields, weapons production sites and combat aircraft and missiles. In addition, missile vessels struck the Syrian naval facilities of Al-Bayda port and Latakia port, where 15 Syrian naval vessels were docked. Israeli officials said the strikes across Syria were aimed at destroying strategic weapons and military infrastructure to prevent them being used by rebel groups. Israel also moved into the demilitarised zone of the Golan Heights, eventually annexing all of the strategic territory and the border areas into Syria. Israel claimed that with al-Assad gone, all previous deals were now null and void.

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Within one week the long term al-Assad dynasty was gone, its military capabilities destroyed, and the strategic Golan heights were now fully seized by Israel. Iran and Russia were humiliated as all the blood and treasure spent to prop up the regime had gone down the drain. They had nothing to show after spending over a decade in the country trying to maintain the status quo.

The US maintained its position as master over Syria and shuffled who its proxy was in the country. Türkiye played a key role in nurturing this proxy and building its capabilities. Israel achieved its long-held belief of cutting Hizballah supply lines and destroying Syria’s military capabilities and reversing Iran’s position in the country.



From Bad Terrorist to Good Terrorist

Ahmed al-Sharaa has been known to the US since he was imprisoned in Camp Bucca in 2004. When he took power in Damascus on the 8th of December 2024 he was meeting with global leaders, presenting an image of moderation and someone the world can rely upon. Gone are the jihadi attire and military uniform and now he's only seen in tailored suits.

Since assuming power, al-Sharaa has hosted meetings with foreign delegations, primarily from the Arab world but also from the United States, Türkiye and Ukraine. The US removed the \$10 million bounty on al-Sharaa after the meeting between US diplomats and al-Sharaa in Damascus in December 2024, marking the first official US diplomatic engagement. During the meeting, al-Sharaa committed to preventing terrorist groups from operating within Syria or posing external threats, including to the US and its allies. In response, the US lifted the bounty to facilitate ongoing dialogue.

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Whilst al-Sharaa's group is a designated terrorist organization, in January 2025 HTS was dissolved and all the various groups and rebel forces were amalgamated into Syria's new military forces. Al-Sharaa's message for the world has not been one of Islam or the Shari'ah. Despite his ideological roots in Salafi-jihadism, he has never supported the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate.

Syria is in many ways in a similar situation to Afghanistan. Both nations need foreign aid, they need foreign support and the rulers in the capital are really just one warlord amongst many. The Kurds control 33% of Syrian territory and in the south of Syria Israel is expanding. In the coastal areas the Alawites remain an influential force and in Iraq there are Shi'ah militia groups with their eyes still on Damascus.

Syria has lost its military capabilities. It's been in a devastating war for 13 years which has put the country back decades. A UN development report believes it will take five decades for Syria to get back to pre-war economic levels.⁶² Syria's new leader will need foreign help for reconstruction, and this is how the US will keep the country within its sphere of influence.





One Year Since the Fall of al-Assad

The sight of Bashar al-Assad boarding a Russian-bound plane on 8 December 2024 reached its first anniversary in 2025. After thirteen years of civil war, a coalition of rebel groups overthrew the regime in just two weeks, bringing the House of al-Assad to a bloody end.

The 13-year uprising and civil war left the country in ruins. Infrastructure was shattered, poverty and corruption were entrenched, and economic decline became widespread. Whoever took over would inherit a nation facing enormous challenges.

Ahmed al-Sharaa emerged as Syria's new ruler with a weak hand and the daunting task of rebuilding the country. Almost immediately, Israel launched a brutal bombing campaign that destroyed Syria's heavy weaponry and military platforms. Israel tore up previous treaties and took control of the Golan Heights, arguing that the agreements no longer applied since the former regime was gone. Israel continued to expand into southern Syria, even striking the Ministry of Defence headquarters and the presidential palace.

Eventually, direct talks began between the two governments, but Israel was able to impose terms that Damascus could do little to resist. Israel demanded the complete demilitarisation of southern Syria and, in alliance with the Druze, granted them a degree of autonomy. Whether Israel will honour this deal remains uncertain, as it failed to do so in Gaza and Lebanon.

Economically, in his first year, Ahmed al-Sharaa has promised much but delivered little. A UN report highlights that Syria will require over \$250 billion in reconstruction investment and decades of work to recover. As a result, al-Sharaa has toured the world seeking funds. He travelled to France, the United States, Russia, and regional capitals to secure financial assistance.

Al-Sharaa has also worked to lift sanctions on himself and Syria. The United States removed its measures against both the new president and the country, followed by the EU and the UN. These steps allow Syria to re-enter the global economy and regain access to essential credit and international markets.

In November 2025, Ahmed al-Sharaa's visit to the White House marked a moment once thought impossible. A former al-Qaeda leader turned statesman now negotiating with America's political leadership was a powerful symbol. It projected the image of a Syria willing to engage with the international community and assume a constructive role. This strengthened al-Sharaa's domestic standing.

In October 2025, al-Sharaa visited Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow, his first state visit since taking power in December 2024 after the overthrow of Assad, Moscow's long-time ally. After a decade of costly support, Russia was left stunned and largely powerless when the regime it backed finally collapsed.

Damascus, however, is too weak to pursue confrontational foreign policy against any major military power, including Russia. As a result, Syria has prioritised pragmatic ties with Moscow, leaving key Assad-era diplomatic agreements intact—especially those concerning Russian military bases in Syria. Damascus has also sought to improve personal relations with Russian leadership to secure vital energy and food imports, which remain essential for a war-torn nation still desperate for reconstruction.

Domestically, al-Sharaa remains only one warlord among many. In the north, Damascus is in talks with the Kurds, who have long sought autonomy. In the south, the Druze have openly rebelled against the capital and, backed by Israel, now possess a patron

Damascus cannot confront. In the coastal west, the Alawites—stripped of power—are effectively at war with the authorities in Damascus. These tensions exploded in May 2025 when sectarian killings erupted between former Assad loyalists and the new regime. While the government claims investigations are ongoing, domestic tensions persist.

As al-Sharaa reaches his first anniversary, the outlook appears bleak. He remains popular for now, largely because many Syrians are simply relieved the previous regime has fallen. But unless he improves the economy, develops the country, and raises Syria's prospects, opposition to him and his government will only grow.



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