



 REPORT WORLD

Survival Is Syria's Strategy

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The recent victory in Aleppo has further emboldened the Syrian government and its allies in a war it now largely believes it has won—a conviction that has been growing since the government’s last major military setbacks in the spring of 2015. As the government consolidates its gains, its stakeholders are beginning to look ahead toward a waning of the war, or even a post-war period. Yet the existing evidence makes it hard to judge if the government has a coherent long-term strategy: the series of improvised actions it has taken since 2011 to prevent government collapse and in some cases, to extend or re-impose control, indicate familiarity with survival mode operations rather than over a strategic vision.

Even before the war, the Syrian government typically lacked a long-term strategic vision; improvisation and simplification were the main traits of policies and decisions¹ for the first decade of President Bashar al-Assad’s rule.² The younger president struggled to consolidate his position in a system he could rule but not reform, lead but not wield. Assad eschewed any assessment of the long-term impact of his policies as he navigated the upheavals of economic liberalization and the regional turmoil prompted by the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Today, the existential threat posed by an insurgency backed by many countries as well as the loss of control over much of its border have made basic survival and preservation of the state the government’s obsessions. Syria’s rulers don’t rely on think tanks or strategic studies centers to come up with plans. Furthermore, the government has no mechanism of auditing or following up on the decisions it has previously made; if the government produces any “lessons learned” at all, they are intended to explain away failures rather than critically learn from them. According to interviews and private conversations with government sources, Damascus expected since 2011 that the conflict would last years or even decades, but that the government would ultimately prevail. The government at times appears to substitute tactics for strategy, in a manner that has served its limited survival aims. Improvisation is the main tactic of an opportunistic government that constantly evolves and adapts to changes on the ground, both inside Syria and abroad.

While the state has fractured and weakened during the conflict, many analysts observing from afar via the internet overstate the extent and impact³ of that fragmentation. The state has lost territory, but it has generally retained its integrity in the areas where it still exists. Government supporters believe that as the conflict winds down, the president will be able to reassert authority over all Syrian territory, albeit through new modes of governance. Still, many senior officials admit there is no going back to pre-conflict 2010. Today, the government depends on domestic and foreign allies, whose unyielding support has enabled the Syrian state to gradually come out on top in the armed conflict—but whose limitations will curtail its ability to plan for the future.

This report is based on extensive travel across numerous provinces within government-controlled Syria over the last few years, and draws on conversations I have had with a wide array of Syrians (both inside and outside government-controlled Syria), as well government officials, opposition members, foreign NGO workers and diplomats. Decision

making in Syria is notoriously opaque, and has grown more so since 2011, when the government shifted to war footing. Now more than ever, the government of Damascus is a collection of officials—implementers rather than decision-makers—who execute the brief, usually vague, directives that come down from the presidential palace. Assad does not have a small inner circle but rather a large one,⁴ further complicating decision making as contradictory information and advice reach the top and a cautious president takes a long time to make up his mind. Moreover, once a decision is made, it is hard to follow up on how, or whether, it was implemented. By all indications, the government’s long-term plan is to maintain what it can and preserve the state’s control inasmuch of the country as it can—even if only in the most minimal form—so that it can eventually return.

Damascus officials also reject the need for “extraordinary measures,” such as structural reform or a commitment to transfer power away from the current president. They believe that reforms must not be made from a position of weakness, or in a way that could appear to be a concession to armed actors. Instead, the officials argue that patience and what they call “long breath policies” will enable them to emerge from the war without enacting any radical changes. But they also admit that changes (in terms of decentralization, giving more administrative authority to the provinces, and better laws regulating elections and political parties) will be necessary once the government has won; furthermore, they recognize that its reforms should not appear to be concessions forced upon it.

The “Long Breath” Strategy

Syria’s contemporary leaders seem to have adopted a simplified version of the “long breath strategy” of the former president—and father of Syria’s current leader—Hafez al Assad. This strategy was named for Syria’s ability to draw a deep breath and weather short-term pain and setbacks in pursuit of a better deal. Hafez’s strategy consisted of maintaining a wide array of allies, proxies, and clients—including opponents of his allies—in order to compensate for weaknesses in certain areas. It was a strategy of pragmatism over ideological beliefs. Hafez’s strategy refused to surrender quickly and instead focused on enduring the pressure and pain of “finger biting” in the hopes that the pain would force adversaries to scream first. His “waiting game”—as it came to be known within Arab political circles—depended on being active and pragmatic in terms of finding allies and keeping relations with everyone,⁵ even if those relations were extremely precarious. Hafez worked hard to build a complex network of relations with governments and political parties, and sometimes even with the parties and factions opposed to the governments of friendly states. This is evidenced in how he hosted members of the Pakistani opposition in the 1980s and 1990s,⁶ while maintaining friendly relations with the Pakistani government. He even hosted and provided support to the Arabs of Ahwaz,⁷ the Arab region in Iran which Iraq claimed for decades; in fact, Syrian officials claim the support provided by Hafez to those in the 1980s and 1990s actually exceeded the support provided by the Iraqi government itself.⁸

The “waiting game” worked for Hafez because he had built up an array of convenient allies and with such a strategy, time was on his side. Yet what the government in Damascus is doing now is a simplified version of Hafez’s “long breath” that leaves it weaker and more vulnerable, because it is depending solely on “passive waiting” rather than filling the wait with active and meticulously planned endeavors. Without the extensive micromanagement and wide suite of players cultivated by Hafez, the “long breath light” approach of the current Syrian leadership creates new vulnerabilities, by putting most of its eggs in just a few baskets (Iran, Russia, Hezbollah, and to the extent that they support Damascus independently of Tehran, the Popular Mobilisation Forces of Iraq). In a nutshell, the basic strategy of the government is survival on its own terms wrapped up in the blanket of “long breath.”

Since 2011 the Syrian government sees itself as having made many compromises. From the start of the crisis it negotiated with local opposition leaders in the early phase of demonstrations and offered them concessions in an attempt to placate them and halt the growing chaos. “These concessions included the release of prisoners—including Islamists who would eventually play a key role in the uprising, smuggling privileges for certain towns, the withdrawal of certain security forces from towns and checkpoints, the right to protest in certain areas for specific times without hindrance,” said a high-level source close to the government in Damascus. “When the opposition became an armed opposition, the government again changed, forced to adapt to a changing environment, and started to pursue local ceasefire deals.”

According to the same source, “This was the part of the government’s evolution from a heavily centralized one to one where power is gradually devolved to the local level, to leaders not appointed by the center but acknowledged by the center.” Other Syrian officials agreed with this sentiment.

The Changes in and Around Syria

With the United States in the process of ushering in a Trump administration that has so far promised a very different approach to Syria from President Obama’s policy, it is still too early to tell what exactly lies in store for Syria. However, to a large extent it does not matter who won the U.S. presidential election, because the government in Damascus feels its recent string of military successes have achieved a strategic victory for the Syrian government, even if the conflict is likely to drag on. The armed opposition, to some extent, has been neutralized and fractured; while major population centers have been recaptured and somewhat secured.

Today, the government’s regional opponents have other concerns and priorities. Turkey is no longer pursuing regime change⁹ in Syria;¹⁰ its priority is the Kurds first and then ISIS.¹¹ In recent months, reports have also emerged over closed-door meetings between Turkish and Syrian security officials to coordinate on issues related to the Kurds,

terrorism, and the situation in northern Syria. In the recent battle for Aleppo, Turkey—which has been an indispensable military backer of the opposition in the north for most of the war—did not lift a finger for its proxies in Aleppo, despite its active military presence a mere forty-five kilometers away in Al Bab. For the last year, Turkey has done very little to help the opposition in Aleppo, and the change in their priorities regarding Syria is evident in the public removal of former prime minister¹² Ahmet Davutoglu, who became the scapegoat for Erdogan’s foreign policy setbacks.¹³ As a result, events have pushed Turkey closer to the axis of Russia, one of the Syrian government’s main backers. This new order has manifested in apparent understandings between Russia and Turkey that have governed the two country’s military operations along the Turkish-Syrian border.

Egypt is looking to play a larger role in the region; previously a strong ally and client of Saudi Arabia, its recent political maneuvers have demonstrated it no longer considers Saudi Arabia a safe bet as a close ally in the region. Facing its own ISIS-led insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula, Egypt quietly now sees Syria as a credible partner in the war against terrorism, and is keen to cooperate with the Syrian army. Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi’s shift has marked a wider opening to Assad among Sunni Arab politicians in the region, including from Sudan. High-level security meetings¹⁴ have been taking place between the Syrians and Egyptians,¹⁵ with both governments recently releasing statements on the need for greater security and political cooperation between the two—President Sisi said for the first time in a TV interview¹⁶ recently that “there should be international support for the Libyan, Iraqi and Syrian national armies to ensure security in their countries.” This statement was then followed by the deployment of two hundred Egyptian army personnel¹⁷ to Syria to assess the war, and meetings between Syrian and Egyptian security officials to discuss reconstruction cooperation—developments confirmed by Syrian sources.

Jordan, on the other hand, has long been working toward preventing any form of escalation along its northern border¹⁸ with Syria.¹⁹ It is focusing its Military Operations Command (MOC) on fighting ISIS instead of the Syrian government—to the relief of some opposition fighters who are exhausted, and to the chagrin of some factions in the Southern Front who have lost their *raison d’être* and an important source of power and revenue. Meanwhile, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, perhaps the most vocal supporters regarding regime change in Syria, are now looking for a face-saving exit from their previous position. According to opposition sources I spoke to, Saudi support for armed groups has declined significantly. As the armed opposition’s largest financial and military backers, their clients on the ground have not delivered a successful military offensive since they captured Idlib in 2015. The lack of successful military offensives is coupled with the fact that while the world was focused on Aleppo, the Syrian government was chipping away at opposition territory in other areas—whether militarily or via local truces—slowly regaining lost territory.

Another issue for the Gulf states—and generally for those financially, politically, and militarily invested in Syria’s opposition—is that over the last year there have been more and more incidents of infighting between opposition groups in the south, eastern Ghouta, northern Homs, Idlib, and Aleppo. We have observed regular assassinations as well as actual battles such as the summer battles in eastern Ghouta²⁰ between Jaish al Islam and Faylaq Rahman, which cost hundreds of lives and even involved tanks. Battles in Daraa²¹ and Hama²² similarly serve as examples. This infighting has led to less support from opposition backers (success sells, while failures do not) and an influx of fighters moving from the more moderate opposition toward the more extremist elements of the opposition—which means any future U.S. administration will have trouble finding suitable partners on the ground precisely because it is becoming harder and harder to find groups that can still be considered “moderate.”

Normalization While Insurgency Simmers

Some Western diplomats have been saying privately that they need to reassess their Syria policy, and are quietly looking at ways to slowly restart relations, albeit on a very low level, with Damascus, realizing that Assad is still in the palace six years later. In turn, Damascus—according to Western diplomats I spoke with on condition of anonymity—has begun raising the prospect of resuming intelligence and counter-terrorism cooperation if Western governments agree to reopen embassies, normalize relations, and discuss reconstruction aid.

Backers of the opposition have discovered that their influence over events on the ground is decreasing. Meanwhile, the Syrian government and its backers have encountered little physical pushback, just verbal condemnation. The government continues to reject transition, refuses to reach agreements with the Western-designated opposition, and continues to fight their battles against the opposition with brutal tactics, including crippling sieges²³ and inaccurate, indiscriminate bombings.²⁴

To that end, it does not matter that Donald Trump is president of the United States, as the Syrian war is already heading towards a strategic end, even if Idlib remains a simmering conflict zone; the government will be more free to regain territory in the east and is currently pursuing tribal alliances and the creation of new military units to do so. With regards to the Kurds, at the moment, they are surrounded by worse enemies in a hostile region. But eventually, like all Syrians living in Syrian territory, they will be forced to come back within the folds of the government system. They might be attracted by government offers of increased language and cultural rights (a means of persuasion that already has begun in recent years). Furthermore, because the Americans are pushing to use the Kurds to recapture territory under ISIS control, those within Kurdish-controlled areas are exhausted.

Meanwhile, Syrians in opposition-held areas are also exhausted; those who stayed behind envisioned the war would end victoriously after several months and now nearly six years later, they find themselves in the same place with little hope of victory, their children unschooled, their livelihoods precarious, and access to basic services incredibly limited. Ultimately, throughout the conflict they have still depended on the central government for key functions of citizenship and livelihood: passports, birth certificates, death certificates, education, healthcare, clean water, electricity, other registry services, and in many cases, public sector salaries.

In some ways, Syria can be compared to the Israel-Palestine crisis,²⁵ in that the Syrian government expects a long war that can be reduced to a low-level insurgency in some pockets of the country, an insurgency that the government is confident it can bottle up and manage over the long haul. Israel has managed, militarily and through local political channels, to subdue and control the West Bank and its administrative-political services through the use of overwhelming brutality and the co-opting of local leaders to the point where it is no longer a threat, whereas while Gaza remains a military nuisance, but it is not a territorial threat. The Syrian government and its allies expect the war in Syria and the rest of the region to last a long while, and it will not be a clean victory. Rather, a continued low-level insurgency or terrorist phenomenon like the one Baghdad suffers from²⁶ is a realistic outcome, and part of the new “normal” in the region.

Today, more and more, tacit agreements are being reached between the Syrian government and opposition factions, specifically those based in the center and the south, largely due to the fact that the appetite for escalation among the local civilian population in opposition territory has decreased. When the uprisings first began, a strong minority of the population felt the fall of the government was inevitable, and were therefore not counting on the conflict to have reached this level of violence, nor to have lasted this long. Today, the opposition-led promise of victory no longer seems attainable, and these centers of civilian populations have considerable influence over the local fighters in the area (again, specifically in the south and center). These civilians have therefore been more persuasive in convincing the local armed opposition groups to negotiate truces with the government in return for some semblance of normalcy and government services. Indeed, the government’s methods of brutal sieges and military tactics should not be overlooked, and have played a significant role in pushing civilians to pressure the opposition fighters.

Furthermore, the government remains completely confident in the absolute commitment of its allies Iran, Russia, Hezbollah, and the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Each ally may have differing reasons for supporting Assad and views on short-term tactical issues, but there is a consensus among them on what the final goal is. The PMF, for example, views a victory for the Syrian government as paramount to Iraqi national security. Senior government sources express full confidence that Russia’s President Vladimir Putin is behind the government, and Assad specifically, for the long term, including after the war is over. Russia, which has perhaps invested the most militarily and financially in the

war, continues to expand its investment in Syria, having recently set up a “green customs corridor”²⁷ with the Syrian government—an agricultural free-trade zone between the two countries with favorable rates for Russia. The agreement indicates support for the government is not coming to an end anytime soon. Meanwhile, the government’s Shia allies, whether Hezbollah, Iran, or the Iraqi PMF believe there is a very real Salafi-Takfiri threat²⁸ whose intellectual base might be in the Gulf but whose military base is in Syria. As long as that military base exists, the Shia feel threatened. Furthermore, Syria serves as a land route between Iran and Lebanon, which is strategically important for the Shia allies, and can only function with a Hezbollah-friendly government in Syria.

After pacifying Aleppo city, the government’s goal is to contain Idlib, while not necessarily recapturing it. Priorities are being debated within the government and with its allies; with some favoring a move towards al Bab and eventually Raqqa, while others prefer to focus on Idlib and Deir Ezzor. It also intends to retake areas held by ISIS and the Kurdish People’s Protection Units²⁹ (YPG)—which is Syria’s Kurdistan Worker Party, or PKK, franchise. The government plans to ally with Arab tribes (as we are seeing now with the tribes from Sheitat regarding the offensive to recapture Deir Ezzor from ISIS), and the Russians are helping the government establish new army units to focus on the northeast. The removal of the Aleppo city frontline will make it easier for the government to focus on the east—which had been its goal before Aleppo escalated several months ago.

The State’s Military Infrastructure

The war, as well as crippling economic sanctions imposed on Syria, have weakened the government’s ability to provide certain services. Today it has to rely on a plethora of loyalist paramilitary forces—both local and foreign—that are less disciplined than that of a national force, and in many ways more corrupt. The long-term vision is that by the end of the war they will be shut down or absorbed into the army (this was a Russian condition when it initially joined the battlefield in 2015; that there be a traditional military command structure and such local groups should be absorbed into the army). Today we are already witnessing a blurring of the lines with the Desert Hawks³⁰ and the Fourth Corps within the Syrian army and with the newly established “Fifth Legion”³¹ of the army to be composed of volunteers and trained by the Russians. It is worth bearing in mind that Russian and Iranian support for militias in Syria is expedient, not a long-term strategy. Their goal is to support the state’s victory, not to maintain their own proxies in Syria. Additionally, this foreign support is not independent, in that it can only come through the consent of—and coordination with—the Syrian state.

It should not be overlooked that the loyalist National Defense Forces (NDF) were created in direct response to the initial lack of discipline of the local popular committees. The Syrian government allowed the creation of such forces when it faced a backlash from provinces where people wanted to defend their communities from opposition assaults, without wanting to join the army to fight off opposition factions in distant areas. Sweida is a clear example of this—where the local population was not willing to be sent to fight in Idlib for example, but was keen to take up arms against the militant attacks around their province. This is also evidenced in other provinces such as Homs, Quneitra, Latakia, and Damascus. Therefore, the creation of the NDF and other similar factions served the government in that it allowed the local populations to protect their communities against attacks while freeing up the army to participate in larger, more intense battles elsewhere. Essentially, the rise of the “popular committees” in loyalist areas was done in an organic, grassroots, and spontaneous way that largely resembled the growth of the early opposition insurgency. Similar to the early opposition groups, pro-government popular committees eventually became more organized, whether as the NDF or other paramilitary forces supported by Russia and Iran. Both sides of the divide between NDF/local forces and the local opposition saw themselves as protecting themselves and their communities from a threat.

Over time, the Syrian government tried to organize these militias and control them, especially after they engaged in provocative and embarrassing actions culminating in the May 2012 Houla massacre.³² Practically, it has proven difficult to integrate these militiamen into the government’s conventional forces, largely because in many cases, they lack the training, discipline, and will to go to the frontlines (unless there is a promise of extra pay or looting). Generally speaking, the militias have been able to hold on to territory cleared of opposition fighters and free the army to go to the frontlines, but as shown by both the recent loss of Palmyra to ISIS in December 2016 while the government’s attention was on Aleppo, and the September 2013 massacre of Alawite villagers in the Latakia countryside³³, local militias are not necessarily good at holding territory in the face of an opposition offensive. Furthermore, the NDF is resented by the conventional forces for its lack of discipline and commitment to the battle, its high level of corruption, and its higher pay. However, this dissatisfaction also works the other way; on a recent trip to Quneitra, local NDF fighters complained that there have been occasions where the army lost key posts due to lack of experience or interest after the posts had been recaptured from the opposition by the local NDF forces.

In all cases, the local militias answer to a security chief from the agency they are affiliated with, or as in the case of the NDF, to the Republican Guard officer, Brigadier General Bassam al Hassan in the presidential palace. The NDF is just one of his files, and he is considered to be one of the most powerful security officers in the country.

Reigning in Militias, Talk of a “Democratic System”

While much has been³⁴ written about how the outsourcing of fighting³⁵ frontline battles to both local and foreign militias³⁶ has led to the fragmentation of the state and its grip on power, this is largely exaggerated and overlooks the fact that none of these militias are vying for state power. No militias have confronted the state, nor challenged the leadership in any way. While some members have certainly engaged in organized crime and clashed with local security forces, this is a battle they will likely always lose because their commanders serve a leader in Damascus. The state will not tolerate competition either; there are several examples of the state disciplining local militia leaders for stepping out of bounds—Aymen Jaber of the Desert Hawks is the most recent example.

As US- and EU-led sanctions continue to cripple the economy,³⁷ pro-government militias are considered a more attractive option to men of military age in government areas; not only are the salaries better, but they are allowed to remain in their home areas and defend their own towns. Yet with pro-government militias comes the issue of looting, which has continued steadily throughout the war. According to sources in Damascus, the military and the militias have created a sophisticated system to ensure towns formerly under opposition control are today surgically “cleansed” of their belongings. Yet the more this continues, the more local residents³⁸—both in pro-government areas and formerly pro opposition areas—are raising their voices and bringing forward complaints. Both army soldiers and militia members have been arrested and have faced trial for participating in looting—though the numbers of arrests are small in comparison to the frequency with which looting is occurring.³⁹

Government officials insist that they will address this problem when the existential threat that led to the creation of the militias in the first place is removed. They point to the gradual control they have already imposed in recaptured territories, and when confronted with the long-term risks posed by relying on such militias, officials are quick to retort that before 2011 there were no militias, no checkpoints, no Iranians, Lebanese, or Iraqis—until the backers of the armed opposition bled the army and weakened the state, thus forcing the state to rely on whatever means it could to survive. Furthermore, the sanctions imposed by the EU and the United States have gone on to empower a small class of Syrian oligarchs with links to Assad’s circle and the security services. While destroying the average businessman, the bargain this new “war profiteers” class of Syrians with ties to Assad has struck is that it must support the state financially, or through the recruitment of local militias for security.

What exactly these officials mean when they speak of a more democratic Syria is so far unclear, but it is significant that senior officials are using such language.

In terms of providing services, the Syrian government is certainly fraying at the edges; there are continual electricity, fuel, and water shortages. The economy, suffering under sanctions and six years into a war, has all but collapsed. There is a general consensus within the system that they cannot rule as they have done in the past, and that they do need to forge a path towards a more “democratic” governance; first de facto and then de jure. Senior officials, such as state security chief Deeb Zeitoun, have asserted privately the need for a more “democratic system.”⁴⁰ What exactly these officials mean when they speak of a more democratic Syria is so far unclear, but it is significant that senior officials are using such language. The very nature of the deals they are making with the opposition are themselves a small step forward; today they are relying on local leaders in opposition areas, organically produced in the last six years who have a secure grassroots base.⁴¹ One Syrian security official recently spoke privately of the need for political pluralism and decentralization, according to a source present in the meeting. He called for changing the laws governing political parties so as to allow for Kurdish factions and even Islamists to have parties.

Ad-hoc Negotiations

The same government that six years ago refused to even acknowledge a civilian opposition is now routinely negotiating with armed opposition groups that it usually describes in public statements as “terrorists”, giving those very same “terrorists” local authority. These deals are largely reliant on a “trial and error” practice rather than an instituted policy applied across the country. Much of it relies on the personalities and the specific security forces involved. For example, in the province of Daraa, many of the local agreements have been successful due to the role of Brigadier General Wafic Nasser and the tribal/clan relations of the families in the area.

According to one government official in the area, “Every family has at least one member in the opposition and one family with the government, so communication and coming to truces and ceasefires are more possible.”

The Syrian state’s negotiation with armed opposition groups is also partly due to the fact much of the “old guard” has retired, and a new guard has risen in a culture in which negotiating with the “enemy” is routine. While this implies a certain level of pragmatism and openness, it also lends itself to the argument that this new guard is more aware of how weak the government is.

In state media,⁴² the idea of “reconciliation”—a loaded term only used by pro-government voices—is now commonplace and conventional. It refers to local truces, ceasefires, or understandings. Such deals today are not considered a betrayal; rather, they are lauded. Local opposition leaders produced by the uprising are promoted in the media as patriots for making such deals as well, and given a modicum of local authority. The pattern is that in an area where the balance of

power favors the Syrian government, local opposition fighters agree to a truce as well as to abstain from fighting against the state. Often, they also hand over heavy weapons, but are allowed to keep their light and medium weapons. Those fighters and civilians who do not want to live in such a location can choose to leave, but are not forced to leave, and are safely escorted to opposition-held territories—Idlib is usually the preferred option for these opposition fighters. This process has been taking place since it was first proposed to the head of state security by a Western NGO official in February 2014. Since then, several thousand opposition fighters and their families have preferred to leave ceasefire zones and go to opposition-held territories, recently culminating in about 34,000 opposition fighters and civilians⁴³ leaving opposition-held neighborhoods in eastern Aleppo, according to the United Nations. In all cases, they have been escorted safely and largely without incident.

The government says it is keen to allow the civilians to return to areas it has retaken, whether Daraya or East Aleppo (once they remove the unexploded ordinance and rebuild the infrastructure in order to make it conducive to provide services). The governor of the Damascus countryside, Alaa Ibrahim, along with the head of the Ba'ath Party and the Security Committee for Damascus Countryside, Homam Haidar, are already engaged in planning the return of the internally displaced to Daraya. According to a source who was present in a private meeting with Ibrahim, he is looking for ways to convince the refugees to return from abroad. Currently, the main challenges the state faces when trying to encourage civilians to return to areas in Homs, greater Damascus, and now, Aleppo, are the lack of services, the destroyed infrastructure, and the state's inability to repair them on its own.

In East Aleppo, for example, civilians have started to return to their homes in areas that are no longer active frontlines, such as Hanano and Sakhur. Likewise, as soon as sieges ended in Moadamiyah, Qudsayya, Khan Sheeh, and Hame, these towns saw an influx of former residents who had been displaced returning.

New Practices in Pro-Government Syria

These sorts of local agreements are part of an overall “regime change” that has taken place. The Syrian government and its security forces have changed irrevocably and sometimes in ways that resemble the opposition; a loyalist civil society has emerged; volunteers are helping the displaced, cooking food for security forces, and providing other services as the state has weakened. Facebook⁴⁴ pages⁴⁵ have organized loyalists in ways that resemble the opposition coordination councils in 2011. To some extent, it may be incorrect to refer to “loyalists” or “pro regime supporters”—no one in government-held areas considers the government a model system, and many complain about the system of governance. Officials also acknowledge that their system is not the best, but respond with “we aren't great, but they are worse.” Privately, in some circles, even Assad is criticized for being weak, indecisive, and tolerant of corruption and

incompetence in the government. Meanwhile, the local militias and mafias also abuse these “loyalists”—they, too, are sick of them, keen to see them reigned in. Furthermore, a wave of public criticism has come out against the mass looting carried out by the local militias, accusing them of working against the interests of society, with the most recent of these accusations surfacing during the battle of Aleppo.⁴⁶

At the same time, however, it is worth recognizing that the government has become a worse version of itself. Opportunities for corruption are much more prevalent; more checkpoints encourage more bribes; and the international criminalization of doing business has been pushed into the hands of mafia bosses—while the traditional business class has been pulverized. Furthermore, the devaluation of the currency, due to the sanctions and the continuing war, means that salaries are worthless and the government must turn a blind eye to looting as a way for security forces to sustain themselves.

As with all counter-insurgencies—most recently the American case in occupied Iraq—mass arrests of military-aged males tend to be common and security forces are unable to sift between the innocent and the guilty. Overwhelmed security apparatuses resort to more and more brutal tactics while overcrowded prisons and increased deaths in detention continue—in part due to terrible conditions. Yet the need to maintain the war effort and good morale of all the forces fighting on behalf of the state limit the extent to which public dispensation of justice can be executed. This means the Syrian government has been concerned about publicly punishing ill-disciplined militia men or security forces for fear of such actions having a negative impact on the security forces; so essentially, when they are punished, it is done so quietly.

Senior government officials believe they started a process of reform in 2011 when they responded to initial protests by making changes to the constitution—such as removing Article 8 and limiting the presidency to two seven-year terms, as well as abolishing the emergency law⁴⁷ and state security court, while also introducing a law for peaceful protests⁴⁸ and the inclusion of more political parties. Yet, these changes are considered by the opposition as falling well short of the mark of serious reform.

That being said, senior officials do admit that more reforms are necessary, and point to a more robust implementation of Local Administration Law 107, which seeks to promote state government decentralization and recognize local elected councils,⁴⁹ as a crucial step they must take. They also point to the participation of more political parties⁵⁰ (albeit government approved opposition) in the 2016 parliamentary elections,⁵¹ as well as the participation of a far greater number of candidates than ever before, although, as pointed out by opposition circles, all candidates are government sanctioned.

But as long as the war is the main dynamic it will be difficult to advocate any reforms without being conflated with the

insurgency. Ultimately it is the “loyalists”—those who remained in government controlled areas—who will gradually push the government toward more reform and democracy. After all, in their eyes, it is their sons who have died, it is their money that has kept the country from collapsing, and it is their resistance to the opposition that has kept the government from being overthrown. When the existential threat is no longer there, this more assertive class of Syrians will push the government to reform.

The international community could reach out to these “loyalists.” According to a Damascus-based UN official I spoke with, the majority of Syrians (both opposition supporters and government supporters) live in government-controlled areas but have been ignored by the international community in favor of those living in Idlib, Aleppo, Daraa. Those in government areas have the semblance of civil society, with unions, guilds, and so forth, and in the last year or so, these residents have held protests for more accountability—demonstrating the gradual empowerment they feel as part of the “loyalist” society.⁵² While these strands of civil society may be weak at the moment, they represent hundreds of thousands of people, and have the potential to be strengthened as viable alternatives to the current centralized and calcified system. Private conversations with government officials indicate they would welcome such cooperation because it does not threaten the fundamental nature of the state.

What Does the Future Hold for the Government, and for Syria?

Today senior officials like Assad himself—but also his head of State Security, Deeb Zeitoun—view a more robust implementation of Law 107 as a necessary element in its post conflict stabilization efforts. Syria has been divided by the war. Government officials consider this division by devolving power to the local level so that they can, in fact, reintegrate Syria in a non threatening way—essentially returning the “state”—but not the “regime”—to places like Idlib that have been largely cut off from the state since 2012. The government has continued to pay salaries to government employees in areas seized by the opposition as a way to preserve a link to the state. The strategy behind this is two-fold: to show the population in those areas that the government has not forgotten them, as well as to maintain continuous contact with these areas despite the lack of a physical presence and control.

The same can be said militarily—the Syrian army has fought tooth and nail to maintain state presence in areas of less strategic importance to the center, including Deir Ezzor or even Aleppo itself (including majority Sunni areas, a fact that dispels the sectarian narrative). Many senior officials in the government are from areas held by opposition factions or ISIS. They would not accept writing off their homes and shrinking to what some outsiders call the “useful Syria.” Syrian

officials from Aleppo, Raqqa, Idlib, or Daraa are just as fiercely nationalistic as officials from Latakia or Damascus and resent the opposition fighters who seized their hometowns. The government believes it is the government of all of Syria and as Assad has said repeatedly, it intends to regain control over all of Syria.

This may take years and may at first be indirect but appears inevitable—or at a minimum, non-negotiable for the government. Even for people in areas that have been outside of state control for the last few years, there will be a pull back to the state which provides the essential services a modern citizen needs—such as health care, clean water, education, birth certificates, passports and so on. The government has used ruthless force to prevent further loss of territory and to regain ground, and it has demonstrated it has no issue doing so again to ensure its position. But it also believes it is the government and views itself not only as legitimate but also as having a duty to protect the citizens in its areas—even if it means sacrificing those civilians in areas held by the opposition.

Just a side note on nationalism—this is a big player in the lives of those living in government areas. This nationalism is the notion that the fate and future of the Syrian nation should be decided by Syrians alone, and not imposed by foreign forces—forces they see as having actively worked to destroy the fabric of their society. These people are fiercely nationalistic (which doesn't automatically translate to being loyalists), and many still maintain contact with their relatives in opposition-held areas, keen to ensure the country will not be divided or redrawn to suit foreign notions of sectarian statelets. While they may be frustrated with the slow pace of the government in terms of reform, and dealing with issues such as the rise of corruption, there is also a strong reaction to anything that may come from outside their borders. They all believe the war will last a long time, and they see the Arab world as having turned its back on Syria, instead preferring to aid what they consider to be groups who are determined to impose a political system that is not natural to Syria. When foreign governments attempted to court officials in Damascus with the idea of replacing Assad with “anyone at all” (names such as Ali Mamlouk and foreign minister Walid Mouallem were floated as possible acceptable replacements), these notions were rejected precisely for the fact it was seen as blatant foreign meddling. It's not about loyalty to Bashar al-Assad as a president as much as it is about loyalty to the state of Syria.

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With regards to local administration, the state plans to treat each area differently, depending on the area and the players, so finding patterns will be difficult, as it is largely dependent on the nature of the situation—which is very symptomatic of the government's ad-hoc “trial and error” approach. However, the two most recent examples of “reconciliation” deals in Hame and Qudsayah⁵³ (Khan Sheeh and Moadamiyah and other towns are in a similar process), are the models the

government hopes to follow for populated areas. In these two locations, the population centers were normalized, in that the checkpoints and the siege were fully removed, and the status of all wanted men was normalized (as in, all wanted suspects had the opportunity to be removed from the security databases).

For areas not under siege, a different pattern will likely evolve. In areas like in the south, the government will likely rule through proxy—the structure and civilian apparatus will become the government, or will at least be in sync with the government due to the services operated, provided, and coordinated by government bodies. Government services will then likely eventually be restored and administered by locals. Syria will become decentralized—to what extent has yet to be determined, but it would be a de facto decentralization in a way that still guarantees state control to the borders of the country. In fact, in the last few weeks, we have already seen an increase of such local agreements in the province of Quneitra and a push for such agreements in the Damascus countryside.

For the government, focusing on local ceasefires, truces, agreements, and a level of decentralization is the only way it can survive—adapting and learning from its trial and error experiments. For the last two years at least, the government has been sending high-level representatives to hold secret meetings in Europe and the Middle East with opposition factions in order to facilitate these deals. Yet with all this in mind, it cannot be overstated that there is still no coherent strategy from the government on how to approach these local deals; as stated earlier, these deals are largely dependent on which security agency is in the area and on which individual from the government's side is doing the negotiating. Other factors also come into play, such as the incentive sieges provide for both sides in the form of war economy, the influence of the local population over the influence of foreign backers, and again, the personalities (not the politics) of those involved in the negotiations. Thus we can expect to see an evolution, differing from place to place, as various agreements and understandings are reached on an ad-hoc basis by the government and local power brokers until eventually, years later, we are likely to see a new reality enshrined.

The way the government interprets it, not only do these deals give recognition and authority to local opposition leaders, but they also pave the way for these local leaders to potentially play a role in the future when it comes to shaping Syria after the conflict, without being an existential threat to the state. For example, members of Moadamiyah's opposition local council can eventually run for parliament. Different levels of reintegration can be expected in the years to come following the end of the war, but by dispensing more authority to local civil administrations and provinces, the Syrian government would still be able to view its goal—recapturing all of Syria's territory under the central government—as achieved.

Notes

1. "Saqba....is [this town] behind the decision to stop importing into Syria?" *Al Iqtisadi*, October 3, 2011, <https://sy.aliqtisadi.com/64311-%D8%B3%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D9%87%D9%84-%D9%87%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%81/>.
2. An example of these traits is how he conducted his foreign policy regarding Turkey and the negative impact that had on his domestic economy. At the time Turkey wanted to neutralize Syria because of Greece, while also wanting a gateway into the Arab world. Syria, keen to have good relations with a neighboring state following the Iraqi invasion, opened its doors to Turkey. Turkish products then flooded the Syrian markets due to incredibly favorable foreign tariff rates, causing many Syrian small business owners and factories to close, unable to compete, leaving thousands unemployed. The rise in unemployment was never addressed until it was much too late. The town of Saqba is an example of that.
3. Tobias Schneider, "The Decay of the Syrian Regime Is Much Worse Than You Think," *War On The Rocks* August 31, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/08/the-decay-of-the-syrian-regime-is-much-worse-than-you-think/>.
4. President Bashar al-Assad relies on a number of trusted advisers, including his brother Maher, who is a powerful general but by no means the most senior figure in the Syrian security apparatus. A functioning bureaucracy, government, and state persist independent of the presidency, albeit with limited independent power.
5. One example of Hafez's "waiting game" is how he approached Syrian foreign policy decisions regarding the United States during the 1990s; from Syria's involvement alongside the United States in the first Iraq War, and then partnering with the United States to help facilitate peace talks between the Israelis and Palestinians. Bashar has been much less flexible and pragmatic in his approach.
6. Ayaz Ahmed Khan, "Syria-Pakistan Relations," *Dawn Newspaper*, July 28, 2012, <http://www.dawn.com/news/737798/syria-pakistan-relations>.
7. Syria reportedly helped set up the Ahwaz Arab Renaissance Party in the 1990s, one of numerous armed groups that was fighting against the Iranian central government. In the early 2000s, Syria deported several Ahwaz political refugees from Syria back to Iran.
8. The Ba'ath party set up an "Arabista" office in its headquarters in Damascus, to facilitate support and aid for the Ahwaz. This office was subsequently closed in 2005. Furthermore, the old Ba'ath Party logo includes the province of Ahwaz but in recent years there is a new 'unofficial' one that no longer has the province of Ahwaz on it.
9. Nick Tattersall and Humeyra Pamuk, "After Aleppo, a chapter closes on Turkey's ambitions in Syria," *Reuters*, December 15, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-idUSKBN14422U>.
10. The current ceasefire in Syria between the armed opposition and the government was brokered by Russia, and for the first time, Turkey, cutting out the United States. AFP, "Turkey and the Syria conflict: Key Developments," *Yahoo News*, December 30, 2016, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/turkey-syria-conflict-key-developments-182129077.html>.
11. "Turkey scrambles to cut its losses in Syria," *Al Monitor*, December 11, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/12/turkey-syria-policy-kurds-aleppo-russia.html>.
12. Aron Lund, "Will Turkey Change its Syria Policy? Four Experts Answer," *Diwan-Carnegie Middle East Center*, June 21, 2016, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/63865>.

13. Following the resignation of Davutoglu, Turkey revised its Syria policy, and actively started its rapprochement with Russia
14. "Syrian security chief makes public Cairo visit-SANA," *Reuters*, October 17, 2016, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-egypt-idUKKBN12H2AM>.
15. Ali Mamlouk, Syria's national security head, is reported to have visited Egypt at least three times in 2016 to discuss security cooperation. Egyptian security officials have also visited Syria.
16. "Egypt's Sisi expresses support for Syrian regime military," *The New Arab*, November 24, 2016, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2016/11/23/egypts-sisi-expresses-support-for-syrian-regime-military>.
17. Firas Al Shoufi, "Military cooperation with Egypt: 200 experts and officers in Syria," *Al Akhbar*, December 7, 2016, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/269261>.
18. Interview with head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Jordanian Armed Forces *BBC Arabic*, December 30, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8YSpBn86Ks&feature=youtu.be>.
19. In the recent interview (cited above in Footnote 18) the head of the Jordanian Joint Chiefs of Staff said Jordan's priority is security along its border, revealing that there is still some level of communication between Jordan and Syria concerning security issues. He also stated that Jordan will only reopen its border once the Syrian army has regained control of it.
20. Aron Lund, "Into the Tunnels," The Century Foundation, December 21, 2016 <https://tcf.org/content/report/into-the-tunnels/>.
21. "Deadly rebel infighting in Daraa," *Syria:Direct*, March 29, 2016, <http://syriadirect.org/news/deadly-rebel-infighting-in-daraa-%E2%80%98what-is-happening-is-a-war-in-every-sense-of-the-word%E2%80%99/>.
22. "A high price for rebel infighting in Hama as regime forces regain territory," *Syria:Direct*, October 10, 2016, <http://syriadirect.org/news/a-high-price-for-rebel-infighting-in-hama-as-regime-forces-regain-territory/>.
23. "Syria conflict: Almost one million living under siege-UN," *BBC*, November 21, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38056872>.
24. "Syrian helicopter bombs displaced persons camp, many dead-residents" *Reuters*, October 30, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-camp-idUSKBN0I1S320141030>.
25. Hagar Shezaf, "How Israel outsources torture to its Palestinian subcontractor," *+972 Mag*, February 25, 2016 <https://972mag.com/how-israel-outsources-torture-to-its-palestinian-subcontractor/117397/>.
26. "Suicide Bombing in Baghdad Kills at least 36," *New York Times*, January 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/02/world/middleeast/iraq-baghdad-market-suicide-bombing-islamic-state.html>.
27. "Russia sets up free trade zone with Syria," *Russia Today*, November 22, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/business/367810-russia-syria-free-trade-deal/>.
28. "Sheikh Qassem: Hezbollah Will not Leave Syria as Long as There Is Need to Fight Takfiris," *Al Manar*, October 19, 2016, <http://english.almanar.com.lb/70398>.
29. Ghadi Sary, "Kurdish Self-governance in Syria: Survival and Ambition," Chatham House, September 15, 2016, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/kurdish-self-governance-syria-survival-and-ambition>.
30. Aymenn Jawad Al Tamimi, "The Desert Falcons: the Elite Pro-Assad Force," *Syria Comment*, April 8, 2014,

<http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/desert-falcons-elite-pro-assad-force/>.

31. Aymenn Jawad Al Tamimi, "The Fifth Legion: A New Auxiliary Force" *Syria Comment*, December 24, 2016, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/fifth-legion-new-auxiliary-force/>.

32. "Houla: How a massacre unfolded," *BBC*, June 8, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18233934>.

33. Jonathan Steele "Syria: massacre reports emerge from Assad's Alawite heartland," *The Guardian*, October 2, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/02/syria-massacre-reports-alawites-assad>.

34. "'Privatized Violence': Pro-Regime Militias and the State in Syria," *SISMEC*, September 16, 2016, <http://www.sismec.org/2016/09/16/privatized-violence-pro-regime-militias-state-syria/>.

35. Aron Lund, "Who Are the Pro-Assad Militias?" *Carnegie Middle East Center*, March 2, 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59215>.

36. Hugh Naylor "In Syria's Aleppo, Shiite militias point to Iran's unparalleled influence," *The Washington Post*, November 20, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/in-syrias-aleppo-shiite-militias-point-to-irans-unparalleled-influence/2016/11/20/2f1a47c2-92cd-11e6-bc00-1a9756d4111b_story.html.

37. Nour Samaha, "The Black Market Kings of Damascus," *The Atlantic*, October 3, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/10/syria-war-economy-damascus-assad/502304/>.

38. Radio interview with Ninar FM, November 16, 2016 <http://ninarfm.com/%D9%85%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A3%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%81%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8/>.

39. According to Damascus-based sources, there has been an increase recently in the number of ongoing investigations and trials of senior commanders within both the local militias and the armed forces regarding looting of property, kidnapping, arms dealing, and other crimes.

40. While these senior officials may not be fully familiar with democracy and what such a transition entails, they understand the concept of pluralism and blame the antiquated Ba'ath party for the lack of it.

41. Examples can be found in the areas under opposition control noted earlier in Damascus, Daraa, and Quneitra.

42. "Reconciliation Document Signed in Khan Arnaba Town in Quneitra," *Syrian Arab News Agency*, May 22, 2016, <http://sana.sy/en/?p=77968>.

43. Ellen Francis, "Syrian army announces victory in Aleppo in boost for Assad," *Reuters*, December 20, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKBN14B1NQ>.

44. "Martyr Banner Association" Facebook Page <https://www.facebook.com/rayeet.alshahed.camp/>.

45. "Saeed Society" Facebook Page <https://www.facebook.com/saaed.society/>.

46. One of the most vocal individuals against the looting in Aleppo has been Fares Shehabi, head of Aleppo's Chamber of Commerce, former MP and ardent supporter of the government. He has aired his views against the local militias looting (Radio interview with Ninar FM, November 16, 2016) both on the radio and across social media, calling for this issue to be addressed.

47. "Syria protests: Bashar al Assad lifts emergency law," *BBC*, April 21, 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle>

east-13161329.

48. "Syria protests: Assad to lift state of emergency," *BBC*, April 20, 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13134322>.

49. "Local Administration Law" *Syrian Law Journal*, <http://www.syrianlawjournal.com/index.php/main-legislation/constitutional-law/#l1-4>.

50. Marah Mashi, "The new people's parliament: 'national unity' ...and businessmen" *Al Akhbar*, April 18, 2016, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/256303>.

51. "Analysis: The new people's parliament in Syria where the majority of them are 'Ba'athists' and as if nothing happened" *CNN Arabic*, April 18, 2016, <http://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2016/04/18/syria-parliament-elections-report>.

52. As one example, protests were held in the Alawite town of Zahraa in Homs in December 2015 by the families of hostages kidnapped by the opposition to protest against the government's lack of action in terms of bringing back their kidnapped relatives. "Pro-regime demonstration to demand release of kidnapped relatives in Waer deal," *Syria:Direct*, December 9, 2015, <http://syriadirect.org/news/pro-regime-demonstration-to-demand-release-of-kidnapped-relatives-in-waer-deal/>.

53. "Reconciliation in Qudsaya and Al-Hameh, Damascus Countryside," *SANA*, October 18, 2016, <http://sana.sy/en/?p=90948>.



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