

## *The End of the Syrian Civil War*

# The Many Implications

by Eyal Zisser

The civil war that raged in Syria over the past eight years seems to be drawing to a close. In July 2018, the Syrian regime regained control of the southern part of the country, including the town of Dar'a where the revolt began in March 2011. Five months later in December 2018, U.S. president Donald Trump announced his decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, driving the final nail in the coffin of the rebellion.<sup>1</sup>

Although the return of stability and security to the war-torn country is still a far-off goal, the military campaign is effectively over. The efforts of the rebel groups—supported by large segments of the Syrian population—to overthrow the Assad regime, which has ruled the country since 1970, have failed. President Bashar Assad emerged as the undisputed winner though he did so only thanks to the massive military aid rendered by Moscow, Tehran, and Iran's Hezbollah Lebanese proxy. How will the end of the war affect Syria's relations with its patrons, and what will be its implications for wider Middle Eastern stability?



*Syrian president Bashar Assad (left) and Russian president Vladimir Putin meet in Moscow to discuss military operations in Syria, October 2015. Assad emerged as the winner in the Syrian civil war, but he only weathered the storm thanks to massive military support from Moscow and Tehran.*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Guardian* (London), [July 31, 2018](#); Lara Seligman, "[The Unintended Consequences of Trump's Decision to Withdraw from Syria](#)," *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 28, 2019.

## The Ongoing Struggle for Syria

Viewed from a broad historical perspective, the end of the civil war concludes yet another chapter in “the struggle for Syria” that has plagued the country since gaining independence in April 1946, or indeed, since its designation as a distinct political entity under French mandate at the end of the 1920s.<sup>2</sup>

For the first one-third of this time, the Syrian state was a weak entity, lacking in stability, subject to frequent military coups and regime changes with no effective ruling center, a punching bag for regional and great power interference alike. Hafez Assad’s rise to power in November 1970 seemed to have brought this struggle to an end by ushering in a prolonged spell of domestic stability and regional preeminence that continued into the reign of Bashar, who in June 2000 succeeded his father. This was due in no small part to the broad social base underpinning the regime, comprising a diverse coalition of minority communities and groups led by the Alawites, on the one hand, and the Sunni peasantry on the other.<sup>3</sup>

With the outbreak of the civil war, the struggle for Syria was renewed. For most beligerents—whether Bashar and his supporters or the various opposition factions, including some Islamist groups not connected to the Islamic State (ISIS)—the struggle revolved around keeping or gaining control of the Syrian state and determining its future character and governance (i.e., Baathist secularism vs. Islamist rule) as none of them wished its demise or incorporation into a wider entity.

In this respect, the role played by ISIS in the Syrian civil war, with its avowed goal of

incorporating the Levant into the newly proclaimed caliphate, was the exception. If anything, ISIS is more a product of the Iraqi rather than the Syrian political scene: It is there where its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi emerged, operated, and proclaimed himself caliph. By contrast, ISIS’s Syrian branch, Jabhat an-Nusra, led by the Syrian Abu Muhammad Julani, has always been considered an integral part of Greater Syria (*ash-Sham*): hence, Jabhat an-Nusra’s conflict with its parent organization and hence its later conflict with al-Qaeda, with which it subsequently came to be affiliated.<sup>4</sup>

## Debunking the “Arab Spring” Illusion

In an address at Damascus University on June 20, 2011, three months after the outbreak of the anti-regime uprising, Assad assured his audience that these “intrigues and acts of murder do not have it in their power to prevent the blossoming in Syria,” vowing

to turn this decisive moment into a ... day, in which the hope will throb that our homeland will return to being the place of quiet and calm we have become accustomed to.<sup>5</sup>

It took the Syrian president nearly eight years to restore (a semblance of) the promised “quiet and calm,” albeit at the horrendous cost of more than half-a-million fatalities, two million wounded, some five to eight million refugees who fled the country, and untold mayhem and destruction. What

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2 Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945-1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).

3 Nikolas Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria, Politics and Society under Assad and the Ba’th Party* (London: Tauris, 2011).

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4 William Harris, *Quicksilver War, Syria, Iraq and the Spiral Conflict* (London: Hurst, 2018), pp. 55-102.

5 “[Speech by President Bashar Assad at Damascus University on the situation in Syria](#),” Voltaire Network (Damascus), June 20, 2011.

made this bloodbath particularly ironic is that on his ascendance a decade earlier, the young Bashar tried to introduce certain changes, and even some limited reform, in the socioeconomic realm. Yet, having realized that these winds of change were turning into a storm, he backed down and brought the short-lived “Damascus Spring” to an abrupt end. Those who had raised their voices in favor of reform and change, in no small measure at the encouragement of Bashar himself, were imprisoned, and severe restrictions on the freedom of expression were reintroduced.<sup>6</sup>

But in 2011, Assad was confronted with a fresh and much less controllable “spring” not of his own making, comprised of large numbers of disgruntled peasants and periphery residents yearning for improvement in their socioeconomic lot rather than Damascene intellectuals and thinkers. Now, Assad was forced to use harsher measures to repress the rapidly spreading rebellion. His predicament was substantially aggravated by the fact that the Syrian upheaval was the local manifestation of a tidal wave of regional uprisings that ensued in December 2010 and led to the fall of the long-reigning dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya. More worryingly, with the uprisings lauded in the West as “the Arab Spring” and actively supported by Western powers—whether tacitly as in the Obama administration’s pressure on Egyptian president Mubarak to step down or directly



Credit: Mstyslav Chernov

*Syrian refugees rest on the floor of a railway station, Budapest, Hungary, September 2015. It took Assad nearly eight years to defeat his enemies, but at the horrendous cost of more than half-a-million fatalities, two million wounded, and some five to eight million who fled the country.*

through the military intervention that overthrew Libya’s dictator Mu’ammar Qaddafi—the Assad regime seemed to be next in line on the Western hit list. As President Obama put it in a May 2011 speech, “The Syrian people have shown their courage in demanding a transition to democracy. President Assad now has a choice: He can lead that transition, or get out of the way.”<sup>7</sup>

The Assad regime weathered the storm through massive military support from Tehran and Moscow, which also shielded it from repeated U.S. intervention threats—most notably in August 2012 when Obama announced his intention to launch a punitive strike in response to the deadly gassing of more than a thousand Syrian civilians.

In doing so, the Assad regime not only defeated a lethal threat to its existence but

6 Eyal Zisser, “A False Spring in Damascus,” *Orient*, no. 1, 2003, pp. 39-63.

7 Efraim Karsh, “Obama’s Middle East Delusions,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2016.

also spelled the end of Western delusions of regional democratization and openness that would allow ordinary Middle Easterners to determine their own fate and the fate of their respective societies and states.<sup>8</sup> Eight years after it was triggered by the self-immolation of a disgruntled Tunisian peddler, the “Arab Spring” had not only failed to bring the region closer to these cherished ideals but made their attainment ever more remote, and nowhere more so than in Syria. Apart from the horrendous loss of life and disastrous destruction of properties and infrastructures, the civil war dealt a mortal blow to the yearning for change and the readiness to fight for it. Even more, it undermined the faith in the ability of the individual and society to bring about the desired changes.

**The Syrian civil war dealt a mortal blow to the yearning for change and the readiness to fight for it.**

Most Western observers of the Middle East should have paid greater heed to their regional counterparts who had long argued that, given the historical legacy and socioeconomic conditions attending decades of rule by authoritarian monarchies and military dictatorships, the Arab world was not ripe for a change, certainly not for democracy.<sup>9</sup> Local analysts were, therefore, much more cautious and circumscribed in defining the regional turbulence, using

the term *harak*—a movement or a shift that might not necessarily lead anywhere—rather than euphoric terms signifying a sharp change of direction or break from past

practices. Indeed, careful examination of the circumstances in each state affected by the “Arab Spring,” especially the dynamics of the events and the actors involved in them, reveals that nowhere were these upheavals initiated by forces seeking liberal-type freedoms and democratization. Rather, they were in many instances a corollary of socioeconomic protests by youths seeking status and a more meaningful role for their generation. They were a far cry from the Western notion of an “Arab Spring.”<sup>10</sup>

### Denting the Pan-ideologies

Just as the Syrian civil war exposed the hollowness of the euphoric Western depiction of the Arab uprisings, so it dealt a devastating blow to the related ideal of pan-Arabism, which had dominated inter-Arab politics for much of the twentieth century.

To be sure, the notion of the “Arab Nation” (or the “Arab World”) underpinning the pan-Arab ideal had been in steady decline since Syria dissolved its unification with Egypt in 1961 followed by the astounding Israeli victory over an all-Arab coalition in the June 1967 war. So much so, that

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Thomas L. Friedman, “Out of Touch, Out of Time,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 10, 2011; Marc Lynch, “Obama’s ‘Arab Spring,’” *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 6, 2011; Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012), pp. 67-100.

<sup>9</sup> For another view, see Daniel Pipes, “[Why Egypt Will Not Soon Become Democratic](#),” *The Economist*, Feb. 4, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Burhan Ghalioun, “[Man al-mas’ul an Inhiyar Amal al-Islah wa-l-Dimuqratiyya min jadid fi-l-Sharq al-Awsat?](#)” *al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin* (Baghdad), Nov. 21, 2006; “[7 A’wam ala al-Kharif 2011](#),” *al-Khalij* (UAE), Jan. 15, 2018.



American academic Fouad Ajami pronounced the “end of Pan-Arabism”<sup>11</sup> upon the signing of the September 1978 Israel-Egypt Camp David agreements, which culminated six months later in a full-fledged peace accord. Thus, when the Arab uprisings broke out, they were widely seen as a resurgence of Arabism (and Sunni identity) that would uplift the “Arab Nation” from the depths to which it had sunk and cut non-Arab Turkey and Iran down to size.<sup>12</sup>



*Turkish troops assemble near Aleppo, Syria. Ankara exploited the civil war to extend its power and influence and to gain a foothold in Syria's northern part—a longstanding goal dating back to the fall of the Ottoman Empire.*

In fact, the opposite happened. Not only did the uprisings not lead to greater Arab unity and solidarity, but they allowed Tehran and Ankara to extend their power and influence across the region. In this respect, the Syrian civil war, too, played a key role. Within this framework, Ankara exploited the civil war to gain a foothold in Syria's northern part—a longstanding goal dating back to the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the post-World War I redrawing of the Middle East's borders. For its part, Tehran used its support for the Assad regime to establish a firm military foothold in Syria, both directly via its Islamic Revolutionary Guards and indirectly through Hezbollah and other proxy Shiite militias. Tehran has thus come closer than ever to creating a land corridor from the Iranian border all the way

to the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>13</sup>

It is indeed doubly ironic that Syria, which has long cast itself as “the beating heart of Arabism,” has been forced to rely on non-Arab Iran for survival while confronting some of its most prominent Arab sisters (notably Riyadh and the Gulf monarchies), and that its avowedly secularist Baathist government has been saved by an Islamist regime. And while this dependence has been mitigated by Russia's military presence, it has, nevertheless, drawn Damascus into the maelstrom of international politics and reduced its control over its own destiny as when in January 2018 and February 2019, Moscow, Tehran, and Ankara held summit meetings to discuss Syria's future.<sup>14</sup> This

11 Fouad Ajami, “[The End of Pan-Arabism](#),” *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1978/79, pp. 355-73.

12 Simon Tisdall, “[Iran has been isolated by the Arab Spring](#),” *The Guardian*, May 17, 2018.

13 Bulent Aras and Emirhan Yorulmazlar, “[Turkey and Iran after the Arab Spring: Finding a Middle Ground](#),” *Middle East Policy Council*, Winter 2014.

14 *Hurriyet Daily News* (Istanbul), [Jan. 29, 2018](#); *Euronews* (Lyon), [Feb. 14, 2019](#).

reliance on Iran has also put the Assad regime on a collision course with Israel, which has sought to prevent the entrenchment of Tehran's military presence through sustained air strikes against Iranian targets in Syria.

**The steady decline in pan-Arabism was matched by a corresponding rise in Islamist power and influence.**

### **Islamism's Moderate Revival**

Not surprisingly, the steady decline in pan-Arabism was matched by a corresponding rise in Islamist power and influence given the zero-sum relationship between the two rival ideologies. For a while, it seemed that the post-World War I Middle Eastern system, based on the territorial nation state and largely ruled by predominantly secularist, authoritarian regimes, would provide a lasting substitute to this order. But the powerful religious undercurrents among the region's deeply devout societies continued to bedevil the regimes (e.g., the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's decades-long violent resistance), gaining strong momentum from the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the attendant surge of Islamist terror groups (e.g., Hamas, Hezbollah, al-Qaeda). These currents then culminated in the "Arab Spring" with the replacement of autocratic rulers in Tunisia and (temporarily) in Egypt by Islamist regimes.

Islamization played an important role in the Syrian civil war as well, with Islamic slogans and terminology becoming a unifying factor and force multiplier for the various rebel groups while those loyal to pan-Arabism or Syrian territorial nationalism fell behind. Nor was this the first time for the regime to be endangered by violent Islamism. Hafez Assad was confronted with a nationwide Muslim Brotherhood revolt in

the early 1980s, which he suppressed with great difficulty and the utmost brutality. The revolt culminated in the notorious February 1982 Hama massacre where thou-

sands of civilians were slaughtered and large parts of the city were razed. The Syrian Brotherhood never recovered from this setback, and the Islamist banner during the 2011-18 uprising was raised by Salafist and jihadist groups whose following in the country's rural and peripheral areas was wider than the Brotherhood's mainly urban support base.<sup>15</sup> The result has been a far heavier human toll attending the suppression of the recent revolt and the preservation of the Baathist-type of "political secularism," in which the ruling elites and significant parts of the population refuse to grant clerics political control over their lives.

### **Changing the Great-power Game**

Apart from its far-reaching domestic and regional implications, the Syrian civil war played a key role in expediting the end of the Pax Americana that began with the 1991 Kuwait war and reached its peak following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the East European bloc. Yet this dominance was rapidly undone by President Obama's hasty disengagement from Afghanistan and Iraq, which created a power vacuum that allowed the Taliban to intensify their fight against the Kabul government and laid the groundwork for the advent of ISIS and the establishment

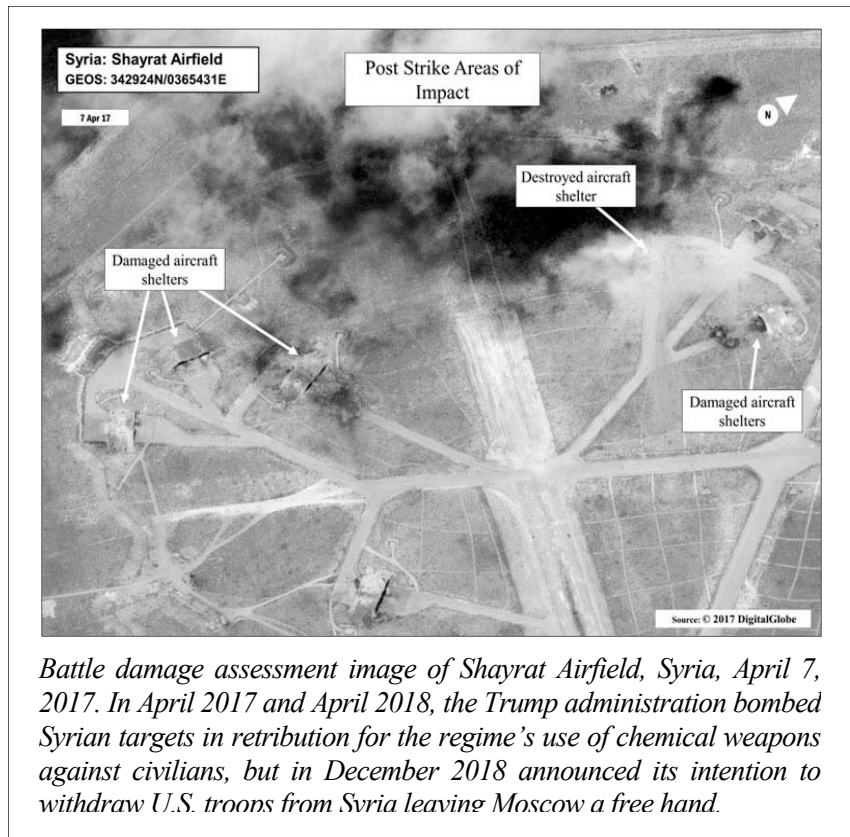
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15 Israa Saber, "[What is the future of political Islam? Experts discuss](#)," Brookings Institute, May 4, 2018; Hicham Alaoui, "[Failed dream of political Islam](#)," *Le Monde diplomatique*, Nov. 2, 2018.

of the Islamic State in vast tracts of Iraq and Syria.<sup>16</sup>

The Syrian civil war accelerated the process of U.S. regional retrenchment. With Obama's repeated calls for Assad's abdication and warnings of harsh retribution ignored by the Syrian dictator, and Moscow and Tehran throwing their weight behind their prized protégé, Washington looked a pale shadow of the omnipotent superpower it seemed two decades earlier—an exhausted and disillusioned power, lacking the will and the power to engage in the region's volatile affairs.

This image was reinforced by President Trump's America-First policy. To be sure, in April 2017 and again in April 2018, the administration bombed Syrian regime targets in retribution for its use of chemical weapons against civilians (something repeatedly threatened but never done by Obama) thus restoring a semblance of U.S. deterrence—but this was the exception. Following in its predecessor's footsteps, the Trump administration continued to prosecute the "small war" of fighting ISIS, which played a secondary role in the Syrian civil war, while leaving Moscow a free hand to suppress the anti-regime rebels (some of whom were armed and trained by Washington). Then Washington announced in December 2018 its intention to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria.



*Battle damage assessment image of Shayrat Airfield, Syria, April 7, 2017. In April 2017 and April 2018, the Trump administration bombed Syrian targets in retribution for the regime's use of chemical weapons against civilians, but in December 2018 announced its intention to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria leaving Moscow a free hand.*

Little wonder that as Assad emerged victorious from his eight-year struggle for survival, Russian president Vladimir Putin has come to be seen as the real winner of the conflict, having put his political prestige on the line to ensure his protégé's survival against the widespread warnings of a replay of Russia's Afghanistan debacle. Standing in stark contrast to Washington's passivity and inaction, this determined risk-taking allowed Moscow to regain its long-lost position as the Middle East's preeminent foreign power.<sup>17</sup>

It is, nevertheless, far too premature to pronounce the end of U.S. Middle East preeminence, let alone abdication of its regional duties and interests. It is true that

16 Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, "[The End of Pax Americana. Why Washington's Middle East Pullback Makes Sense](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, Nov./Dec. 2015.

17 Christopher J. Bolan, "[Russian and Iranian 'Victory' in Syria: Does It Matter?](#)" *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Dec. 20, 2018.

U.S. administrations have experienced repeated setbacks since entering the region in strength in the post-World War II era, including the 1950s loss of the Egyptian foothold and the 1979 loss of Iran as an ally. But Washington has always found the determination and sense of purpose to rebound as it did when detaching Egypt from Moscow in the 1970s, reversing Iraq's 1990 annexation of Kuwait, and presiding over Israel's growing reconciliation with its Arab neighbors.

Moreover, to the credit of the Obama and the Trump administrations, it should be noted that Syria has never featured prominently in U.S. interests. When, in the 1950s, the country came under Soviet patronage, Washington focused on preventing Damascus from disrupting its regional interests rather than turning Syria into a full-fledged U.S. ally. At times, Washington tried to rally Damascus behind its interests, for example, through participation in the 1991 anti-Iraq war coalition and the U.S.-sponsored negotiations with Israel in the 1990s.

In this respect, the looming withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria is not out of line with Washington's post-WWII policy or without its own logic, namely, disengaging from the Syrian marsh after attaining the desired goal, however modest and local, rather than sinking deeper into this treacherous water. President Trump's derisive characterization reflects this policy: "Syria was lost long ago. ... we're not talking about vast wealth, we are talking about sand and death."<sup>18</sup> It, nevertheless, remains an open question whether greater support for the rebels at the early stages of the conflict and enforcement of Obama's threatened retribution for Bashar's use of chemical weapons would have entailed real gains for Washington,

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18 Richard Hall, "[Trump says Syria is 'sand and death' in defence of troop withdrawal](#)," *The Independent* (London), Jan. 3, 2019.

perhaps even sparing the need for later military intervention.

## Conclusion

With the anti-regime revolt all but suppressed, President Assad will likely focus more on reasserting his authority and rebuilding the security forces than reconstructing the Syrian state and society—beyond providing the population with the basic necessities of life. He is unlikely to be concerned about absorbing the millions of refugees who fled the country.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the regime seems to view the mass exodus as a blessing in disguise that rid the country of a large, hostile population and helped reduce the economic burden created by Syria's rapid prewar natural population growth—one of the highest in the world and an important impetus for the rebellion. In Bashar's words:

In this war we lost our best sons. The country's economic infrastructure has been destroyed almost completely. We spent a lot of money, and the war cost us in blood and sweat. All this is true, but in return we have gained a healthier and more harmonious society in the true and deepest sense of the term harmony.<sup>20</sup>

This in turn means that the end of the civil war does not portend a new departure for Syria. Domestically, it promises a return to the prewar reality of underdevelopment and backwardness under a dictatorial regime.

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19 Oded Eran, "[The Slim Prospects for a Complete Economic Recovery in Syria](#)," *Strategic Assessment*, Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv, Jan. 2019.

20 Aletho News, Aug. 20, 2017; Eyal Zisser, "The Syrian refugees—left to their fate," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, no. 2, 2019.



Internationally, it will likely mean continued hostility and suspicion toward the West, especially the United States and Israel, and continued deference to Russia and Iran coupled with an attempt to widen the regime's room for maneuvering and freedom of action vis-à-vis these patrons. Damascus will also endeavor to limit Israel's military operations against Iranian targets on Syrian soil while seeking to avoid an all-out confrontation.

More importantly, postwar Syria can be viewed as a microcosm of regional processes and undercurrents in the post-Arab uprisings era—a region pointed to the past rather than the future, whose inhabitants live in misery and hopelessness, lacking basic freedoms and human rights, and ravaged by endemic

violence, radicalism, and terrorism. With the local dictatorial regimes that ruled the region for most of the twentieth century proving their ability to retain power in the face of the challenges posed by militant Islam and (to a far lesser extent) liberal democracy, the Middle East will continue in the foreseeable future to hover on the abyss while narrowly avoiding falling into it.

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