

## SYRIA PAST AND PRESENT

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**Abstract:** The internal situation in Syria during the first four years of conflict resembles a kaleidoscope showing a different picture every minute. Individual elements keep changing their places, some lose their meaning, others take more space, some disappear completely, and new ones take their place. Perhaps this view does not change from day to day, but it surely changes from month to month, and an inexperienced observer may soon be lost in the mass of new information and changing names. The present text aims to present a short review of the situation during the Syrian civil war. The present conflict has its roots deep in the past and in order to understand it one needs to go back in time and describe – even if superficially – the history of Syria since it gained its independence. Its earlier history is, of course, also fascinating, yet if one does not want to be forced to write a book on the five thousand years of Syrian history, it seems fitting to refer the reader to other works on the subject. Therefore, the first part of the present draft will focus on the historical background of the current conflict, and the second part will concern the course of the conflict since its outbreak in 2011 through July 2015.

**Key words:** Syria, civil war, Hafiz al-Assad, Bashar al-Assad, history of Syria

### 1. BASIC INFORMATION

In order to understand contemporary Syria, it is necessary to provide some basic statistical data. First of all, it is difficult to talk about a Syrian nationality. From the ethnic point of view, the society seems to be almost homogeneous, as slightly more than 90 percent of the population are Arabs, with the remainder consisting mainly of Kurds and Armenians. Nevertheless – despite the fact that the Syrian state has existed for more than seventy years – most of the population identifies not with the state, but with their religious community or simply local community, which often are identical.

In spite of the state's longstanding policy that aimed at eradicating religious differences, these differences remain the feature that is still the most important element of social affiliation. Exact estimates of the size of individual groups are

problematic, as it is impossible to obtain exact data, e.g., through a census, during civil war. Current estimates are based largely on guesses and approximated data concerning refugees in Syria's neighbouring states. They are, obviously, far from accurate. Most citizens of Syria are Sunnis, estimated to be 74 percent of the total, another 10 percent are Kurds, and the rest are Arabs.<sup>1</sup> Therefore it may be assumed that the Sunni Arabs comprise less than two-thirds of the Syrian society. The second biggest religious group are different factions of Shiites, including Alawites (although some Shiites express doubt in this matter), Isma'ili and Twelvers (the Twelve Imams believers). Together they constitute – with the noticeable domination of the Alawites – 13 percent of the society.<sup>2</sup> About 10 percent are Christians of different rites--the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Syriac Orthodox Church (“Jacobite”) together with the part of it which is in union with Catholicism, Armenian churches, the Assyrian Church of the East (“Nestorian”), the Chaldean Church of Babylon (Roman Catholic), the Maronite Church, et al., yet due to strong emigration one may encounter estimates showing that the number of Christians in Syria has dropped to a mere 8 percent.<sup>3</sup> Without a doubt this is the fastest disappearing group among Syria minorities, as even on the verge of World War I, the Christian population was estimated to be about 20 percent, not to mention the earlier period. Finally, the Druze population is estimated to be about 3 percent.<sup>4</sup> We should always be aware of complicated internal relationships in Syrian society, because without this awareness there is no way to understand the country's past or present.<sup>5</sup> Their relationships with each other can be summarized by a description of the situation in the 1870s by Isabel Burton, wife of the British consul in Damascus, which, unfortunately, still seems to be surprisingly valid: “They hate one another. The Sunnis excommunicate the Shias and both hate the Druze; all detest the Alawis; the Maronites do not love anybody but themselves and are duly abhorred by all; the Greek Orthodox abominate the

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<sup>1</sup> Statistical data quoted from: *The World Factbook CIA*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>. Accessed 2015-06-24. In other publications the data vary – depending on author and time – between 64 and 74 per cent.

<sup>2</sup> In this case the data tend to vary even more, estimations range from 13 to 21 per cent. If one adopts the higher number, the Alawites would make even 18 per cent of the society, yet it does not seem probable. One should keep in mind that being an Alawite in Syria ruled by the Assad family carried benefits, hence their number in the official data might have been overstated.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. International Religious Freedom Report for 2013 prepared by the U.S. Department of State, which suggests that the number of Syrian Christians has dropped; <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dclid=222313#wrapper>. Accessed 2015-06-24. Earlier data ranged from 10 to 15 per cent.

<sup>4</sup> Other data raise this number to 5 per cent.

<sup>5</sup> A book by Ch. Sahner, *Among the Ruins. Syria Past and Present*, Oxford: University Press 2014, esp. 1–112 may be seen as an interesting, unscientific in style, introduction to the ethnic-religious relationships.

Greek Catholics and the Latins; all despise the Jews.”<sup>6</sup> The only change is the disappearance of the Jewish minority, as most of them moved to Israel, save for several dozen people who remained in Damascus and Aleppo.

## 2. THE FIRST YEARS OF INDEPENDENT SYRIA

The Sunnis were and still are the majority in society, therefore, they were the first to rule independent Syria. Additionally, the social elite consisting of the largest landowners renting land to peasants was also recruited from the Sunnis. As Syria's economy on the eve of independence was based mainly on agriculture, a very limited group centered in Damascus and Aleppo dominated the rest of society. The founder of the National Party and first president, Shukri al-Quwatli, came from this group<sup>7</sup>. However, the difficult post-war economic situation and, especially, the completely unsuccessful 1948 intervention by Syrian military forces into Palestine against the newly created state of Israel triggered protests. When in December 1948 the government wanted to use the army to suppress internal protests, the idea to conduct a coup d'état ripened in military environments. The coup took place on March 29, 1949. The new leader was Husni al-Za'im, Chief of Staff prior to the overthrow, was a former French army officer of Kurdish origin. The coup, itself, was bloodless, President al-Quwatli was arrested for a short time and then migrated to Egypt. In July Al-Za'im proclaimed himself President and attempted to modernize Syria by, among other things, proposing to grant voting rights to women and trying to eliminate the traditional covering of the face, which aroused the antipathy of conservative Sunni communities. In addition, dissatisfaction resulted from increased taxes, necessary for increasing the size of the Syrian army, which had demonstrated its embarrassing weakness in the war against Israel. Another step was planning to build the Trans-Arabian Pipeline in agreement with the USA, which was actually supposed to be one of the reasons why the newly created CIA supported the coup. This last point, together with talks with Israel, was perceived in Arab nationalist environments as capitulating to Zionism and the West. The direct cause of another coup, led by Al-Za'im's army colleague, Sami al-Hinnawi, was turning the founder of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, Antun Sa'ad, over to Lebanon. Sa'ad advocated the creation of a Greater Syria that would include Lebanon, therefore he had been involved in attempts to overthrow the Lebanese President. After an unsuccessful attempt, he fled to Syria, yet eventually Al-Za'im decided to turn him over to the

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<sup>6</sup> I. Burton, *The Inner Life of Syria, Palestine, and the Holy Land*, London: Henry S. King 1875, 105–106.

<sup>7</sup> For the initial period of the independent Syria the irreplaceable classical study on the subject is still the one by P. Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945–1958*, Oxford: University Press 1965. See also: S.M. Moubayed, *Damascus between democracy and dictatorship*, Lanham: University Press of America 2000.

Lebanese in exchange for their acknowledgement of his authority. In Lebanon Sa'ad was executed by firing squad, which made his comrades in Syria decide to conduct a coup. This time it was not bloodless – Al-Za'im was assassinated as was Prime Minister Muhsin al-Barazi. In his politics Al-Hinnawi attempted to fulfil the idea of Pan-Arabism through far-reaching cooperation between Syria and Iraq. This arose from his connection to Aleppo – the place where he was born and where trade with the East was more vigorous than in Damascus, located far in the south. The rivalry between the elites of Aleppo and Damascus weakened Al-Hinnawi's authority. In August 1949, he passed the position of Prime Minister to Hashim al-Atassi, a native of Aleppo, while he kept the position of Chief of Staff. Finally, he was overthrown by another, third, coup on December 19, 1949. It was led by colonel Adib al-Shishakli, a Kurdish Sunni from Hama. Initially he pursued a policy of communication with old families, and Al-Atassi was elected President by the parliament. However, the continuation of a presidential policy aimed at strengthening the relationship with Iraq and the dispute between Al-Shishakli and Al-Atassi over a person acting as the Minister of Defence led to another coup on November 28, 1951. Al-Shishakli arrested the whole government and many politicians supporting rapprochement with Iraq. He also dissolved the National Assembly. As a sign of protest President Al-Atassi resigned from office. Eventually, Al-Shishakli established authority based exclusively on the army. He introduced far reaching censorship and fought almost all major political parties: the National Party connected with the elites of Damascus, the People's Party originating from the richest groups in Aleppo, the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, the socialist Baath party, and the Communist Party. In order to gain political support, he created his own party, the Arab Liberation Movement. It was slightly left-wing, yet its main function was to support the dictator. In July 1953, after the adoption of a new constitution, Al-Shishakli proclaimed himself President. Throughout his entire rule, he expanded the army which, apart from having the obvious military function, was also his power base. As part of his economic policy, he strove to settle and develop Jazeera (i.e., more or less, the present Al-Hasakah province) which was the most backward region of Syria. He planned an agrarian reform, but it was never realized. It caused dissatisfaction among impoverished peasants who were looking for their representative in left-wing parties such as Baath. At the same time Al-Shishakli was trying to centralize the state by eliminating Druze and the Alawite autonomy and by depriving minorities of their permanent places in the parliament. This led to internal conflicts, particularly with the Druze, which later transformed into a regular war, especially in the Jabal Druze region. In foreign policy Al-Shishakli did not trust anyone and did not enter into any external alliances. Growing dissatisfaction manifested itself in a boycott of elections in October 1953 and in mass protests lasting from December 1953 to the ultimate fall of Al-Shishakli on February 25, 1954. The protests took place, of course, among the Druze, but also in Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Latakia, and later even in Damascus. When the Aleppo garrison took up arms against the dictator,

Al-Shishakli left the country. The revolt in the army showed that it was internally divided, allowing the return to civilian rule. In September 1954 elections were held and the result was that the old “patrician” groups gained a majority. These groups were the National Party and the People’s Party, however in the parliament one could see also a mosaic of other parties, including Baath. This party’s foundations combined socialism (sometimes even communism) with Islam and the idea of Pan-Arabism, and it was going to play a much greater role in Syrian politics. Meanwhile, in 1955 Shukri al-Quwatli was elected President again, which further confirmed the power of the landowners.

### 3. SYRIA BETWEEN THE WEST AND THE EAST

The history of post-war decades clearly shows that Syria is a blend of different ethnic, religious and local communities. Various individuals or groups came to power, and, whatever their names, they acted to benefit their specific base, for instance the Sunni landowners of Damascus, the merchants of Aleppo, or the Druze. The internal instability is best illustrated by these statistics: between 1946 and 1956 Syria had twenty governments and three constitutions. Nevertheless, the problem that was becoming more urgent over time was the one of taking a position in the Cold War conflict. Initially the Arab states were connected with the Western world in multiple ways. However, after the coup in Egypt (1952) led by Nasser and his choice of the USSR as his main coalition partner, a new option appeared. The still existing idea of Pan-Arabism was additional encouragement and it intertwined perfectly with socialism or communism in left-wing environments. Part of the Syrian elite idolized Nasser whom they perceived as a model of independence and the leader of the entire Arab world. An additional argument in favour of a closer relationship with Egypt was the anxiety connected with the founding of the British-inspired, pro-Western Baghdad Pact in 1955. The Pact included Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Turkey. It was a kind of extension of NATO to the Middle East to counteract communist influence. Obviously, the organization was supported by the USA. It readily offered economic and military reinforcement to those countries, under the condition that the weapons would not be used against Israel. This condition was unacceptable for Syria, being in conflict with Israel. It was rumoured in Damascus that an attack from Turkey or Iraq was possible. In summer of 1955 there was a clash between Egypt and Israel in the Gaza Strip. In this international configuration, Syria increasingly gravitated toward Egypt and Soviet diplomacy was diligently preparing an alliance. Finally, in October 1955 Syria entered into a military alliance with Egypt, and in February 1956 it joined the Egypt-USSR agreement on weapons’ supplies. During the Suez Crisis of October-November 1956 Syria clearly sided with Egypt, i.e. against Israel, France and Great Britain, although it did not take an active part in military actions. Nasser – militarily defeated, yet diplomatically victorious – was perceived by many

people in Syria as their saviour. Another argument pushing Syria towards the Eastern Bloc was the crisis of 1957. When colonel Afif al-Bizri, widely seen as a communist sympathizer, became the new Chief of Staff of the Syrian army, the USA and neighbouring countries feared that the communists would seize power and that the Soviet Union would thus extend its influence. In this situation, Turkey began to concentrate its military forces on the Syrian border, Iraq and Jordan considered surrounding Syria with a “cordon”, and Israel, during confidential talks with the USA, clearly advocated military intervention. In view of these developments, Khrushchev threatened to fire rockets on Turkey if it attacked Syria, to which the USA replied that in such a case it would attack the Soviet Union. Eventually, all sides abandoned their militant attitudes and Syria deepened its rapprochement with Egypt and thus with the USSR. In this mood, the Syrian National Assembly adopted a resolution in 1957 on union with Egypt that came into force in February 1958 after a referendum. Nasser became the President of the United Arab Republic, and Al-Quwatli became Vice-President.<sup>8</sup> The main advocate of the connection on the Syrian side was the Baath Party. With unification, it saw a chance to realize both socialist and Pan-Arab ideals. The reality of the United Arab Republic, however, soon disappointed the Syrians. There were four hundred deputies from Egypt and two hundred from Syria in the new, common parliament. Nasser, as the strongest partner, imposed his vision of full union. First of all, he dissolved all political parties, including the Syrian Communist Party, because the alliance with the Soviet Union was to Nasser the means to achieve his goals, not the goal itself. He gained full control over the army by sending Egyptian officers to Syria and moving a large number of Syrian military men to Egypt or sending them into retirement. He soon forced the Prime Minister and the Chief of Staff to resign, and the former Prime Minister, Sabri al-Asali, who negotiated the unification, and Akram al-Hawrani, one of the main leaders of the Baath Party, were appointed Vice-Presidents. These nominations did not last beyond 1959, when both had to emigrate as a result of the growing domination of Egyptians in the administration and the army. In practice, all decisions were made by officials sent from Cairo or by Nasser himself. Gradually, using the Egyptian system as a model, he nationalized banks, foreign trade companies and crucial factories, connected mainly with heavy industry and cotton. Also, the introduction of an agrarian reform, although it had been included in the Baath Party program, caused conflicts, especially in the environments of former landowners. Paradoxically, however, small scale farmers did not benefit from the changes, due to the closure of the possibility to export to Lebanon and a catastrophic drought. All social groups were discontented. Even the Baath Party, the greatest promoter of union with Egypt, split due to increasingly critical attitudes towards Nasser’s policies. When, additionally, in August 1961 Syria was simply

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. The short history of rise and fall of the United Arab Republic: E. Podeh, *The decline of Arab unity: the rise and fall of the United Arab Republic*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press 1999.

proclaimed the Northern Region of the UAR with administration appointed by Nasser and located in Cairo, and not Damascus, it became clear that Syria was no longer an independent country, but a province of Egypt. The lawlessness of the secret service increased, and there was a conflict between Abel Hamid al-Sarraj, the Syrian intendant of Nasser, and Abel Hakim Amer, the Egyptian army commander in Syria. In the end Nasser forced Al-Sarraj to resign, which meant that even the intendant of Syria should be Egyptian. The situation was ripe for rapid change. The discontented officers of the Syrian army carried out a coup on September 28, 1961; their leader was colonel Abd al-Karim al-Nahlawi, a Sunni from Damascus.<sup>9</sup> Initially they did not intend to break the union with Egypt and only demanded equality in the rights of both parts of the UAR. Nasser, however, adopted a tough attitude, refused to agree to any negotiations and ordered the Egyptian military men in Syria to quash the rebellion. It soon became clear, however, that the Egyptian commanders had been arrested by their Syrian subordinates and sent back to Egypt. The military men in Syria formed a new government composed of former politicians from the National Party and the People's Party. They also appointed a moderate Druze general, Abd al-Karim Zahr ad-Din, as the Chief of Staff. Some social changes initiated by the Baath Party and Nasser were kept, and only the most rigorous nationalizations were reversed. Civil liberties, however, were not fully restored, and the army exerted influence on the government through the established National Security Council. In foreign policy, it tried to strengthen relationships with Iraq and Turkey, clearly abandoning the alliance with Egypt and the USSR. After the parliamentary elections of December 1961, a representative of the Aleppo elite, Nazim al-Qudsi, became President, and Maarouf al-Dawalibi, also connected to the People's Party, became Prime Minister. In this way, the old conflict between the elites of Aleppo and Damascus reappeared. Other than advancing the interests of one group over the other, they had no plan for further management of Syria. This caused a permanent state of chaos and suspense. At the end of March and beginning of April 1962 there were two more coups, inspired mainly by the supporters of Nasser and the UAR, and by the elites of Damascus who felt dominated by Aleppo. Finally – mainly thanks to the Chief of Staff, Zahr ad-Din – the government managed to keep its authority through negotiations, yet it was clear that the main decisions were made by the army. Zahr ad-Din became the Minister of Defence in the new government and enforced a return to the left-wing policy of nationalization and agrarian reform, but this did not reduce internal tensions. In July 1962, there was supposed to be another coup, yet this time it had been discovered. The situation was still strained and the most important opposition party, Baath – despite inner divisions – established the Military Committee as a step towards taking power. Finally, on March 8, 1963, a coup prepared by junior officers involved in the Military Committee was successful.

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<sup>9</sup> For more about the short transition period in years 1961–1963 see: K. R. Sorby, “The Separatist Period in Syria, 1961–1963”, *Asian and African Studies* 18 (2009), 145–168.

#### 4. SYRIA TURNS LEFT

There were relatively small losses in the coup, as fewer than nine hundred people were killed.<sup>10</sup> It was led by Muhammad Umran, Salah Jadid and Hafez al-Assad (all of whom were Alawites), although officially colonel Ziad al-Hariri, the commander of Syrian forces stationed in the Golan Heights, was at the head of the coup. The perpetrators of the coup created the National Council for the Revolutionary Command (NCRC), which also included civilian members, however, the most important decisions were made by a small group of officers from the Military Committee. At the head of the NCRC – acting as the official head of the state – stood Lu'ay al-Atassi of an influential family from Homs, but he had no real power. The Minister of the Interior was colonel Amin al-Hafiz, a long-time member of the Baath Party, a Sunni from a poor family in Aleppo. Since the primary aim of the coup was to overthrow the rule of *infisal*, i.e. separatists from the UAR, it gained the support of Nasserists. It soon became clear that the renewing the union with Egypt was not the aim of the coup participants and in April and May 1963, the Nasserists were removed from the Council and senior positions in the army, despite riots in Aleppo, Damascus and Hama that were suppressed by force. On July 18, 1963, the advocates of the union with Egypt made another armed attempt at seizing power (supported by Egyptian intelligence), yet that attempt, led by Jassem Alwan, was unsuccessful. This resulted in numerous casualties and death sentences for officers who joined the coup. As part of the protests against the severe sentences from military tribunals, and partly on the grounds of his support for the Pan-Arab concepts, Lu'ay al-Atassi resigned. Ironically, when the coup attempt took place he was in Egypt and was trying to improve the tense relations between the states. The vacated post of head of the NCRC was taken by al-Hafiz, who thus became the most important person in the country. He pursued a policy of strengthening relations with the Soviet Union and introducing leftist economic reforms. Gradually, he nationalized banks and oil companies and returned to the agrarian reform that consisted of the breaking up of large estates. This led to protests that were ruthlessly suppressed by Hafiz. It resulted in losses not only in the form of people who had been killed or imprisoned, but also in the form of emigration, especially among the members of the old elites. The greatest protest was the Sunni uprising in Hama in April 1964. However, opposition movements inside the army posed a greater threat. They were largely the result of rapid social transformation that took place under the new regime. The old elite had been ousted from power, and a new one, connected with the Baath Party, was being built in

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<sup>10</sup> Many studies on the coup itself and the initial years of Baath rule were created. Among others there are (in a chronological order): I. Rabinovich, *Syria under the Baath 1963–66: the army-party symbiosis*, Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press 1972; D. Roberts, *The Baa'ith and the creation of modern Syria*, London: Croom Helm 1987; R. A. Hinnebusch, *Syria: revolution from above*, (Contemporary Middle East), London–New York: Routledge 2002.



haste. It often became clear, however, that the basic criterion in the assignment to positions to state authorities was connection to someone standing higher in the hierarchy. In this way, it became clear that relationships within families, clans and the religious groups coinciding with them were more important. Therefore, despite the secular and Pan-Arab character of the Baath Party, in reality people holding the power in Syria were chosen on the basis of their clan membership and religious affiliation. This soon led to creation, or rather strengthening, of factions within the groups holding the power within the government. Each faction was trying to gain more rights at the expense of others, and that inevitably led to conflicts. The Sunnis, despite being the most powerful, weakened their influence through relations with the Nasserists and conservative circles of landowners and became the first victims of purges. The next victims were the Druze and the Isma'ili: they tried to take power in 1966 but were unsuccessful. In this way, the Alawites gained control over the army and filled the most important positions.

It should be mentioned that the exceptionally large role for minorities in the Syrian army resulted largely from French policy in the mandate period. The elite in Ottoman Syria, having the largest estates and significant religious influence, descended from the Sunnis, therefore minorities such as the Druze or the Alawites perceived military service as the easiest way for social advancement. The French, on the other hand, admitted them eagerly, because the independence tendencies of the Sunni elites were – in their opinion – too far-reaching. Hence, already in the mandate period the minorities were overrepresented in the army. After gaining independence the situation did not change at all, as the clan-religion bonds still played a great role and made advancement easier. Additionally – since the majority of the more numerous Sunnis remained highly religious – the minorities feared their dominance and often turned towards secular ideologies. Therefore, the group that was exceptionally numerous within the Baath Party was the Alawites. In Syrian society, independent of political divisions, relationships within families and religious communities had always been the hidden agenda in the configurations of power, both at the local and at the central level.<sup>11</sup>

When the next coup took place, on February 23, 1966, this time within the Baath Party, it became clear that neither his fellow Sunnis – discouraged by reforms, brutal suppression of riots, purges in the army and a spy scandal with Israel – nor other groups in Syrian society were willing to die for al-Hafiz. The coup participants were well organized, as they were officers involved in the Baath Party conspiracy for a long time, also in the period when the party was supposed to disband at the behest of the leader, Aflaq, after the unification of Syria and Egypt (the so-called “regionalists”). Additionally, a significant group among these officers were Alawites. The coup was led by Salah Jadid, an Alawite from a small

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<sup>11</sup> Internal relationships between different parts of Syrian society in the time of Baath Party rule were described perfectly by N. van Dam, *The struggle for power in Syria: sectarianism, regionalism and tribalism in politics, 1961–1980*, London: Croom Helm 1981<sup>2</sup>.

village called Dweir Baabda near Latakia. The officers ruling in Syria belonged to the leftist, more radical, wing of the Baath Party. Jadid introduced far-reaching leftist economic reforms and got involved with the Soviet Union, enjoying its full support. He did not hesitate to purge his political opponents. For instance, the biggest wave of dismissals in the army took place after an unsuccessful putsch in late 1966 by Salim Hatum, a Druze. The person who performed these purges was no longer Hafez al-Assad, as he was Minister of Defence by that time. Moreover, he was the one who saved Jadid during the Druze putsch, when he was imprisoned in Al-Suwayda, and only the speedy action of Assad's army allowed Jadid to keep his power and his life. The result was that he trusted Assad. Differences, however, occurred after the Six-Day War, disastrous for Syria, when Assad – being criticized for the defeat – attacked Jadid, accusing him of incompetence and rejecting the concept of people's war that he had favoured instead of joint anti-Israeli activities of the Arab states. What is more, Assad tried to conduct his own foreign policy that aimed at reducing the dependence on the Soviet Union, hence he started military cooperation with China. Standing at the head of force structures Assad was gradually seizing power by filling crucial posts with his people. Jadid was not able to counteract this, especially since his trusted head of security services, Abd al-Karim al-Jundi, committed suicide and Assad took over the National Security Bureau. In 1970 Jadid and Assad parted ways during the events of Black September, when Jadid sent Syrian forces to aid the militias of the Palestinian refugees (mainly PLO) in Jordan, whereas Assad ordered them to withdraw. Jadid tried to counter-attack and during the Baath Party congress in October and November 1970, he accused Assad of defeatism and favouring imperialists. When Assad realised that he was in a minority among Party delegates, he conducted a coup he had prepared in advance on November 12, 1970. Jadid was arrested and remained in prison until his death in 1993. The change of authorities proved to be bloodless. Assad quickly subdued all the state structures and the Baath Party, itself. Given the oppressive nature of Jadid's regime, a change of power was accepted as a breath of freedom by virtually all environments. Assad called his actions a Corrective Movement, since he was trying to present these actions as inner correction, and not as military coup d'état.

## 5. ASSAD'S SYRIA

The new Syrian ruler, like his predecessor, was an Alawite and came from Qardaha near Latakia.<sup>12</sup> In his politics he was much more pragmatic than the ideologically-oriented Jadid. He revoked some of the leftist economic reforms that

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<sup>12</sup> From among the monographs devoted to Hafez al-Assad and Syria during his rule the most valuable, again, seems to be the book by P. Seale – it is apologetic to the dictator, yet still it contains an irreplaceable load of information – *Assad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*,

were causing a collapse in the state's economy and – maintaining full political control – he allowed private ownership in the economy. In this way, he managed to appease the old municipal elites in Aleppo and Damascus to a certain extent while simultaneously including them in the new political system. Additionally, it enabled him to lower food prices, and this, of course, translated into his popularity among the broad masses of society. With regard to the economy, he followed the Soviet model and relied on industry, heavy industry, in particular, including oil extraction, which, especially in the 1970s, fueled development, thanks to high oil prices. Departing from the language of class struggle he provided security for entrepreneurs, which actually bonded them with his regime.<sup>13</sup> He abandoned the negative assessment of entrepreneurs by the former intelligence and even emphasized their contribution to the struggle for independence. He called for a return of political exiles who had fled from Syria after 1963. He also emphasized national unity by accenting inner peace in the country after the fighting, coups and social experiments of previous years. On the other hand, he visibly supported minorities within the continually expanding state elite, especially the Alawites being the group closest to him – although he always did so unofficially – because in this way he was building a stable social base for his rule. It was most noticeable in key institutions concerned with security, where posts were simply filled by Assad's family members. The expansion of the state apparatus was characteristic of Assad's Syria and this behaviour was a part of state models borrowed from the Soviet Union. In this way, the new elite of socialist Baath's Syria was gradually becoming an Alawite elite, although officially the authorities were not involved in this type of politics. Full control of this whole structure lay in the hands of President Assad (after 1971). In order to provide formal grounds for his influence, he changed the constitution in 1973 and limited the role of the Prime Minister and the Government. At the same time, it should be noted that al-Assad was actually very popular among members of society independent of religious or ethnic affiliation. This popularity was to be emphasized by aggressive propaganda and a personality cult. It helped to show the Yom Kippur war lost by Assad as his victory or a would-be victory squandered by his traitorous ally who happened to be the Egyptian President, Sadat. The latter narration became the official version after the peace talks between Egypt and Israel that resulted in the Camp David Agreement of 1978.

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Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California 1990. It would also be worth referring to subsequent chapters of another book mentioned before, i.e. R. A. Hinnebusch, *Syria: revolution from above*, (Contemporary Middle East), London–New York: Routledge 2002.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the intricate economic system of Syria in the time of Assad's rule see.: B. Haddad, *Business networks in Syria: the political economy of authoritarian resilience*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2012; R. A. Hinnebusch & S. Schmidt, *The state and political economy of reform in Syria*, Fife: University of St. Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies 2009. In the latter book the part by Søren Schmidt concerns reforms introduced by Bashar al-Assad.

In this situation Assad tried to present himself as the only reliable advocate for the Palestinian issue and thus the leader of the Arab world. He tried to emphasize this in his foreign policy, although he failed to fulfil any of his Pan-Arab concepts (attempts to unify Syria, Egypt, Libya and Sudan, and later Syria and Iraq), or even a rather local idea of Greater Syria (an attempt to unite Syria, Lebanon and Jordan). These actions resulted only in the subjugation of Lebanon, torn by civil war after 1976, and the Arab League's formal agreement to the stationing of a "conciliatory" Syrian contingent in Lebanon. This was, without a doubt, Assad's political success, however in the face of continuous fighting it proved to be very expensive for Syria, both politically and economically. Syria became entangled in an endless conflict that, combined with Israeli intervention in Lebanon, could have easily turned into a war between Syria and Israel. Despite substantial reinforcements for the Syrian army, both in numbers and in technology – mainly thanks to the money from selling oil and to Soviet assistance – Assad was aware that such a conflict would probably end with another defeat for Syrian troops. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1990 caused a drastic change in the geopolitical situation of Syria. Assad quickly changed his stand and supported the American-Arab coalition attacking Iraq, which was much easier for him because of his earlier conflict with Saddam Hussein, and in the Iraq-Iran conflict he supported Tehran. Syria returned to the arena of international politics, and the USA made efforts to bring about peace in Israel and resolve the conflict around the Golan Heights and the situation in southern Lebanon. However, the talks were progressing slowly and with pauses, depending on the results of elections in Israel. Assad's other plan, to play a dominant role among Arab leaders proved, to be a pipe dream, especially when Syria had a lot of internal problems.

The biggest group that never accepted the new order in Syria were supports of the Muslim Brotherhood and the widely understood trend of Islamic revival.<sup>14</sup> Islamists' resistance to the seizure of power by the Baath Party had already begun in 1963, and its earliest manifestation was the outbreak of fighting in Hama in April 1964. The resistance of that time had connections to old, traditional families which controlled local communities through their economic, political and religious influence. This resistance was quickly broken by the army (about 100 people were killed), and the Muslim Brotherhood was declared illegal. Hama, however, remained the centre of Sunni resistance against the rule of national socialists under the sign of the Baath Party. While in the 1960s the former religious leaders focused more on social issues, in the 1970s a new generation of Islamic leaders came to the fore and they – in line with trends occurring throughout the world of Islam – radicalised their views and combined religion with political fights. Members of old families were no longer the main activists, they were replaced by students, teachers or engineers. In a Syria ruled largely by the Alawites – perceived by most

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<sup>14</sup> The newest study on Syrian Muslim Brotherhood: R. Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*. London: Hurst & Co. 2013.

Sunnis as heretics and non-Muslim – the domination of the new, radical Islamic trend meant an open clash with the socialist system of Assad. He was referred to as “ungodly”, and the Alawites were bound by fatwa that pledged them to jihad. The Muslim Brotherhood made use of democratic slogans in their program and stated that the rule of the minority (Alawite) over the majority (Sunni) could no longer be tolerated. It led to attacks on representatives of authorities in the second half of the 1970s, and in 1979 urban guerilla warfare appeared and was countered by the army. Thousands of people were killed on both sides of the conflict. Even Assad himself barely escaped death in an assassination attempt. Nevertheless, the most severe confrontations took place in 1982 in Hama. They began on February 3, after soldiers searching for the leader of the Brotherhood were ambushed. When the army sent reinforcements, there was a call from the mosques’ megaphones for a general uprising against the “infidels.” The first victims were state officials and policemen. Assad answered with brutality: he sent special forces to Hama under the command of his brother, Rifaat, and he conducted a regular siege of the city, cannonading it with artillery and air forces. Government forces captured the city by the end of February, and estimates of the number of victims ranged from 10,000 to 40,000 people. The uprising in Hama resulted in arrests and executions of real or alleged members of the Muslim Brotherhood. It seemed that the organization was finally eliminated in Syria, and its only representatives remained in exile. Officially the Muslim Brotherhood renounced violence in its political fight and focused on democratic ways to seize power. The internal fighting, however, left a mark in the form of far greater repression by Assad’s regime, all the more that he also had to face conflicts within his own family. When he suffered from a heart attack in November 1983, his brother, Rifaat, attempted to seize power. Eventually Hafez remained President, and Rifaat was exiled. When Hafez died, Rifaat repeatedly re-stated his claims to power in Syria and attempted to seize it through his contacts with different foreign secret services. He lives even today, currently in France. When the Syrian intervention in Lebanon, the conflict with Israel and the fall of Syria’s main ally, the Soviet Union, in the 1990s are added to Syria’s inner turbulence, it becomes clear that Assad, who remained in power until he died of natural causes on June 10, 2000, was a truly exceptional politician of the Middle East.

## 6. A NEW ASSAD ON THE THRONE

A new stage of Syrian history began with Hafez al-Assad’s death, the present period of Bashar al-Assad’s rule.<sup>15</sup> Originally, however, the person who was to succeed Hafez was not Bashar, but his older brother, Bassel. Unfortunately, he

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<sup>15</sup> Bashar al-Assad’s assumption of power and expectations associated with it led to publishing of at least a few books describing his rule before the outbreak of the civil war. The ones that seem to be worth mentioning are: F. Leverett, *Inheriting Syria. Bashar’s Trial by Fire*, Washington:

died in a car accident on January 21, 1994. Therefore, Bashar became “heir to the throne”, and Hafez was preparing the ground for his succession by dismissing notables whom he suspected of disloyalty to Bashar. He also sharpened the approach against the deposed brother, Rifaat, and his potential supporters in the family. By contrast, he softened his approach to the Muslim Brotherhood, releasing thousands of its supporters from prison. Apparently, he assumed that in this way he would weaken tensions and make the succession easier for his son.

Since the mid-1990s Bashar was being introduced to high society. Initially he dealt with economic issues and tried to create reforms which would lead the country out of its economic stagnation. Moreover, he was the head of the official anti-corruption campaign, that was supposed to present him as a politician with clean hands. When his father died, he quickly seized power and already on July 10, 2000 was elected President by popular referendum after the parliament had lowered the minimum age required from 40 to 34 years, i.e. Bashar’s exact age at that time. Officially, over 97 percent of voters supported him. Far-reaching reforms, both economic and political, were generally expected from the new President. The “young Assad’s” international experience raised hope not only in Syria, but also in the West, as he had studied in London for many years. These expectations seemed to be confirmed by the condemnation of the September 11, 2001 attacks and even cooperation with American intelligence. One of Bashar’s first decisions concerning internal policy was to release still-imprisoned members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other parties from prison. What is more, he was gradually softening the socialist, secular course of politics and the state began to build mosques, introduce elements of Islam in public appearances, etc. It is noticeable that the young Assad, seeing the revival of Islam, tried not to fight so much with the religion, but to subdue it and ride the wave, i.e., a bit like Saddam Hussein did in the final years of his rule. Bashar tried to combine nationalism with moderate Islam and omitted socialism which, after the fall of the Soviet Union, was no longer attractive. Instead of sending students to Moscow, as had been done before, Syria began to send them to universities in Persian Gulf countries, where they met with very conservative Wahhabi views. Easing of the state pressure in the religious sphere was regarded as safety valve to distract from opposition political activity. Although the regulations concerning political parties were made more liberal, the domination of the Baath Party was kept, and any activity of the Muslim Brotherhood was still forbidden. Despite the demands to end martial law (proclaimed in 1963!) Bashar merely suspended it. Neither did he try to constrain the omnipotence of the secret service, fearing discontent in the structures of power on the one hand, and the uncontrolled rise of organizations independent of authorities on the other hand. Another problem Bashar was facing was the situation with the Kurds demanding their rights. It became especially important after 2003, that is, after the USA defeated Iraq with the active participation of the

Peshmerga. As a result, they won their autonomy in Iraqi Kurdistan, which their brethren in Syria watched with growing hope. Therefore, Bashar allowed cultural activity, the use of the Kurdish language and regulated the question of citizenship (in the past many Syrian Kurds had not been given any documents), yet he refused to make any concessions of a political nature.

In his foreign policy Bashar maintained his father's approach, seeing Israel as the main enemy (which was obvious in the situation of the ongoing occupation of the Golan Heights), and Iran as the main ally. He supported Hezbollah in Lebanon, which exacerbated the relations with Israel, and consequently with the USA. Relations deteriorated when Syria condemned the 2003 attack on Iraq, fearing that similar tactics might be also used against it in the future. The USA accused Syria of failure to comply with the embargo on the export of Iraqi oil and even of smuggling weapons to Iraq, supporting Hezbollah and Hamas and attempting to build nuclear weapons. As a result of the last accusation, the Israeli air force twice bombed targets in Syria, in 2003 and 2007. After the beginning of land operations in Iraq, a huge wave of refugees rushed to Syria, most of them hostile towards American domination in the region. Syria not only allowed the free influx of refugees, but also an equally free return of those who wanted to fight the authorities of the "new Iraq." The Americans were against that, of course, and eventually it led to a complete cooling in relations between the two states. Another factor escalating the tension was the involvement of the Syrian secret service in the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri, in 2005. After that scandal the USA, cooperating with the anti-Syrian Lebanese opposition (the so-called "Cedar Revolution") forced Syria to withdraw from Lebanon after thirty years of military presence. Despite all the conflicts, in 2007 Bashar was re-elected President (in the absence of a rival). The reforms announced earlier were limited mainly to economic changes, which did not have much effect in the face of far-reaching bureaucratization, corruption and nepotism. There was also stagnation in the political sphere. Only the Islamists became more active and already in 2006 the first attacks on Christians on Christmas occurred. Together with the Alawites, Christians were one of the first targets of bombs planted by the Islamists.

## 7. CIVIL WAR

The outbreak coincided with the protests of the Arab Spring in other countries.<sup>16</sup> The beginnings of the civil war were quite trivial. On March 6, 2011, the police arrested fifteen teenagers while they were writing anti-governmental slogans on walls in Daraa, in the south of Syria. Their parents demanded their release,

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<sup>16</sup> The contemporary situation in Syria is being constantly reported by the media, both official and social networks. All scientific analyses are unable to keep up with the rapidly changing reality. Only in 2015 one could read extreme comments: from those at the beginning of the year, talking

and it turned into a demonstration. In the context of the ongoing protests in other Arab states and the lost hopes for liberalization pinned on Bashar al-Assad, this small incident led to demonstrations involving thousands of people in the country's most important cities, Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Deir ez-Zor and Hasakah. Initially, during peaceful rallies, the protesters demanded greater political freedom, yet slogans calling for the removal of Assad from power soon appeared. The main driving force behind the protests was the Muslim Brotherhood. The authorities sent the police against the protesters and they were arrested. When the demonstrations became more serious in July and August 2011, the government sent the army and hundreds of people were killed. Gradually districts or even whole cities fell under the control of anti-governmental activists, and military desertions escalated, especially among Sunnis who did not want to fight against their brethren. The deserters began to create the Free Syrian Army, which was the armed wing of the protests. Thus, peaceful demonstrations changed into civil war. Initially the initiative was on the rebels' side, as the government was trying to suppress the erupting protests, i.e. took action only against already existing trouble spots. Therefore, despite the fact that the FSA did not have central leadership or logistics facilities, by early 2012 more and more cities and districts were no longer within Assad's authority (for instance the vicinity of Idlib, Homs, Hama, the places near Damascus like Zabadani and the eastern outskirts of the capital city). With some help from Turkey, the Syrian National Council was created in exile on August 23, 2011. The vast majority of its members originated from the Muslim Brotherhood. It may be said that at this stage there was a resurgence of old, intra-Syrian conflicts. On the one hand, there was the Baath Party, originally gathering the poorer, rural part of the population, usually farmers, often members of religious minorities, most frequently having secular views on the state. Of course, it should be kept in mind that throughout the fifty years of its rule, the Baath Party created its own bureaucratic-party elite. The Party was no longer as attractive as it had been, however. The slogans of social equality sounded fake when spoken by the Party bosses, freedom was strictly rationed with the help of security forces, socialism was a complete failure both politically and ideologically, and secularism did not carry a sense of community, but was rather perceived as an impact of the rotten West. On the other hand, there was the Muslim Brotherhood with its strong connections to the old municipal elites dealing with trade and free professions, with highly religious views on the state and, of course, gathering the Sunnis who constituted the majority of the population. The slogans of Islamic religious revival mingled with the demands to overthrow the godless regime and

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about the upcoming victory of Assad over the divided rebels and ISIS becoming weaker under the coalition raids, through those appearing in May and June after Assad's defeats in Idlib, Daraa and Tadmur and saying that the end of the regime was approaching, to those from July, after signing the agreement with Iran, and from September, after Russia started its own air-campaign in Syria, which again saw the chance for Assad to keep the power thanks to support from Tehran and Moscow.



the hated rule of the infidel Alawite minority which had Christians as allies. It was a very attractive message, simple in its meaning and inspiring to Syrians tired of the economic crisis and weary of the official propaganda. The Islamists benefited from the political thaw after Bashar assumed power and strengthened themselves. The pessimistic warnings of some Syrian security service officers came true. They had warned that turning a blind eye to the activities of radical imams could lead not to the subjugation of Islam to the state, but to the subjugation of the state to Islam. With the Islamic revival, the Muslim Brotherhood gained a majority in society and tried to seize power.<sup>17</sup> The problem, however, was the great diversity of views within the Brotherhood, itself, and within other Islamist circles. The Islamists were using support from abroad which, at the same time, bound them with the often-conflicting interests of other states. This resulted in constant chaos within the Syrian National Council. The rise of wider representation in Doha on November 11, 2012, i.e. the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, did not change that. Theoretically, the Coalition aimed at the democratization of Syria. The members were not only emigre groups, but also representatives of local committees fighting against Assad in Syria. Among the representatives there were also individual Kurds, Christians and Alawites. It seemed that such a wide representation would ensure the stability of the Coalition, which in reality was the government in exile, yet the wide representation was causing constant internal conflicts. Suffice it to say that, since its rise the Coalition had already had five presidents, only one of whom exercised power for a year, and all the others exercised it for much shorter periods. In January 2014, the most important group in the Coalition, i.e. the Syrian National Council withdrew, which means that the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood have chosen their own way of building the new Syria, without looking at ethnic and religious minorities. The internal conflicts were intensified by the defeats of the Free Syrian Army which has been losing territories to the counter-attacking government forces or to Islamist groups with more and more extreme views, like Ahrar al-Sham, Jaish al-Islam, Jabhat al-Nusra, Jaish al-Sham, ISIS. In practice the Free Syrian Army only has some meaning in the vicinity of Daraa, in the south of Syria, where a conglomeration of different unites constitutes the so-called Southern Front. Despite being in control of the border with Jordan, through which supplies for the rebels are coming, they are not able to capture the capital city of the muhafazah in which the protests of 2011 begun. The Syrian National Council residing in Turkey currently has connections with armed groups with an explicitly Islamic character (the first three from the set mentioned above). Their leaders

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<sup>17</sup> See the analysis of the conflict between the secular Baath Party and the Islamist movement in Syria before the outbreak of the civil war: L. Khatib, *Islamic revivalism in Syria: the rise and fall of Ba'athist secularism*, Abingdon – New York: Routledge 2011 and: Th. Pierret, *Religion and state in Syria: the Sunni ulama from coup to revolution*, Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press 2013.

do not see the future Syria as a democratic state at all; they see it as a country in which sharia is the highest law and the system – depending on a party – is an emirate or a caliphate. With the growing military significance of fighters with extreme Islamist programs, other political groups are focusing around them. What is worse, the Islamists also receive support from abroad, despite official assurances of willingness to democratize Syria. In practice, however, this “democratization” is limited to overthrowing Assad’s regime.

Currently the dominant military forces are the Islamist groups, but as long as they do not combine their forces, government forces are able to counteract them. In the early spring of 2015 Assad tried to conduct two simultaneous offensives in order to surround Aleppo in the north and gain an advantage in the southern triangle Damascus – Daraa – Quneitra. However, both offensives were unsuccessful. Instead, as a result of the Saudi-Turkish agreement of March 2015, Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra combined their forces in the north of Syria and created Jaish al-Fatah, which captured the capital city of the muhafazah, Idlib, in April and later drove government forces from Ariha and Jisr al-Shugur. This means that in the north, thanks to the support the Islamist rebels receive through the Turkish border, Assad’s forces are on the defensive. Additionally, the situation shows that the key to solving the Syrian issue lies not as much in the hands of the Syrians, but more in the hands of foreign politicians deciding which trend in Syrian politics they want to support. The situation looks similar in the east of Syria, dominated mostly by ISIS – an Islamist group that is the strongest and most recognizable in the media. It is widely known that Syrians are the minority in this organization and that decisions are made by foreign fighters connected with international jihad. In 2014 ISIS captured almost all Syrian reaches of the Euphrates, apart from the government forces surrounded in Deir ez-Zor. ISIS also controls vast areas in neighbouring Iraq, approaching Baghdad. In May 2015 ISIS captured Tadmur (i.e. ancient Palmyra) and was moving towards Homs and Hama, coming closer to the western parts of Syria. This resulted in a counteraction by government forces and – as it seems – the progress of ISIS in this area has been stopped for the time being. However, the main opponents of ISIS in Syria are the Kurds who captured Rojava, i.e. the whole north-eastern part of Syria (muhafazah Hasakah), and are combining their forces with the Iraqi Peshmerga. What is more, after the successful defence of Kobane (Ayn al-Arab) they managed to push ISIS towards the border with Turkey to a large extent. In practice the Kurds act independently, and the government forces in this part of Syria have to cooperate with them if they want to avoid being defeated, as in Hasakah in July.

Given the forces seeking to overthrow Bashar al-Assad, his own base is not large. It includes the Alawites, of course, for whom the existing system of rule has been beneficial until now. Independent of internal, clan divisions, they support Assad presently because of widespread fear of Salafist Islamists seizing power, as they are the strongest group among the rebels. It is not so hard to imagine what would happen if they won, having in mind the slogans written on walls in

the cities: „Christians to Beirut; Alawites to the grave”. Christians are the second social group feeling threatened by a jihadist victory, therefore they also support the regime. Initially, when the protests were rather peaceful, the Christians participated in them, and one Christian- George Sabra – was even the leader of the National Coalition for a short time. However, with the rebel groups becoming more radical, the Christians gradually became more active supporters of Assad or migrated out of Syria, mainly to Lebanon or to the West. Another group supporting Assad – at least partly – are the Druze. In their case the support also results from their fear of radical rebels. However, they live mainly in muhafazah Suwayda in the south, therefore they are the only ones in close contact with the moderate Southern Front. If the rebels in this region become the main force, it will be hard to predict the attitude of the Druze, who avoid recruitment into Assad’s army and are trying to create their own militias. However, if the Druze face An-Nusra or ISIS, they will surely support the government in Damascus.

Collectively, the social groups supporting Assad are about 30 per cent of the population of Syria. At the same time about 60 per cent of all Syrians live in the areas controlled by the government.<sup>18</sup> The remaining territory is controlled by different groups of rebels, mainly of Islamist nature, or is in areas occupied by the Kurds. Looking at the current course of this conflict, terribly destructive to Syria, one may conclude that none of the sides is able to gain advantage on their own. Therefore, support from the outside is crucial. For the rebels the supporting countries are mainly Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and to some point the USA, whereas for Assad there are Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah and Russia. These external links of the Syrian conflict are the very question to which the present work is devoted.

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<sup>18</sup> All estimations are, of course, rough due to the large scale of emigration outside and inside the country. According to the latest poll, that was taken of 1,365 Syrians from all 14 governates within Syria by independent ORB International in July 2015, the highest percent of Syrians report Assad is a positive force (47%). The second is Iran (43%). The most negative force is ISIS (76%) and Syrian Opposition Coalition (72%); <http://www.orb-international.com/perch/resources/syria-data.pdf>. Accessed 2015–09–24.