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It's difficult to recollect the euphoria of the early days of the 2011 uprising in Syria against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Reflecting on that time, Syrians speak of the breaking of the "fear barrier"—the suffocating authoritarianism and repression that had silenced them for decades. At the protests calling for freedom that sprung up across the country that spring, there was a carnivalesque atmosphere replete with dance and song. Over time, as land was liberated from state control, Syrians collectively built a creative and vibrant revolutionary culture and planted the seeds for a new democratic society. Syrians both at home and abroad were optimistic for the future. We believed the regime would fall. We thought our just struggle would win.

A decade later, pain, trauma, and despair define the Syrian experience. Much of the territory has returned to regime control. The country lies in ruins. Over half the population no longer live in their own homes, and over six million have fled the country. Many of those who remain live in dire conditions, without housing, livelihoods, or access to basic services. The "kingdom of fear" has been reinstated, not only in the form of continuing state repression, and in some areas continuing conflict, but also as a result of the power

struggle between various warlords. Yet, while the revolutionary movement appears subject to savage defeat, at least for now, it is by no means clear that "Assad has won."

Assad's tenuous grip on power is maintained by foreign forces. Since the start of the conflict, Russia has provided military aid to the regime, and it was Russia's direct military involvement in 2015 that profoundly altered the dynamics on the ground, at a time when the regime was close to collapse. While Moscow initially claimed to be targeting terrorist groups such as the Islamic State, Russian air strikes prioritized opposition-held areas and repeatedly targeted civilian infrastructure, including hospitals. This intervention, which turned the liberated areas into death zones, saw large swaths of the country return to regime control.

Russia has also been Assad's key political ally, providing the diplomatic weight needed to protect the regime from international accountability. Today, Russian power vastly eclipses that of the United States in relation to Syria, and Moscow has established itself as a dominant player in the region. The economic cost to Russia has been great, but it has been rewarded with lucrative contracts for gas and oil. The Russian company Stroytransgaz, owned by a Kremlin-linked oligarch, has been granted 70 percent of all revenues from phosphate production for the next fifty years, probably amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars or more. (Syria is estimated to have one of the world's largest reserves of phosphates, used for making fertilizers.) The company has also been granted control over the commercial port in Tartus, necessary for its export.

However, it is Iran that poses the greatest threat to any hope of Syrian self-determination. In parts of the country, Syrians are now effectively living under Iranian occupation. Tehran, which has backed the Assad regime from the outset, sees Syria as a key part of the so-called "axis of resistance" against the United States and Israel, and as a strategically important link in the Shia bloc that connects Iran and Iraq with Lebanon and the Mediterranean. Tehran

living abroad had to go to embassies to vote, which many didn't do for fear of reprisals, and they had to possess a valid Syrian passport and exit stamp, which many do not have. Those living in the 30 percent of territory that lies outside regime control, including Idlib and the Kurdish- and Turkish-controlled areas, did not participate. The Kurdish-led autonomous administration in northeastern Syria refused to hold elections due to the regime's ongoing refusal to recognize its government. In regime-controlled Deraa, activists and public figures called for a boycott. No mechanisms were established to guarantee people could vote without fear of intimidation by security services, and there was no monitoring by United Nations observers. What was the point of voting anyway, when the result had been pre-decided?

This regime will never be seen as legitimate in the eyes of free Syrians. Assad has regained a form of power in much of the country through brute force, foreign sponsorship, and an absence of international solidarity with democratic alternatives. The regime will not reform itself; it continues to savagely repress any dissent and to carry out war crimes with impunity. It is unable to respond to economic problems or attract funds for desperately needed reconstruction. Most Syrians living outside the country will not voluntarily return while Assad remains in power and do not trust regime assurances of their safety. Areas of Syria outside of regime control remain beset by humanitarian crisis, physical insecurity, and the presence of militias opposed by large segments of the population. What was once a dynamic revolutionary movement has been shattered, fragmented, and exhausted. A political solution to the conflict, a prerequisite for free and fair elections, is nowhere in sight. The future, like the present, looks bleak.

UN-led political process, ending human rights violations, and submitting to justice mechanisms.

People are both hungry and angry. Protests have broken out against deteriorating living conditions, the prohibitive costs of basic goods, and corruption in regime-held areas such as Sweida, Damascus, and even Latakia (in the regime's heartland). On social media, even regime loyalists have voiced complaints for which a number of them have been arrested under the Cybercrime Law of 2018, enacted to clamp down on such dissent. These include Syrian state television presenter Hala al-Jarf, who made posts on Facebook criticizing living conditions and shortages of basic goods. Following her January 2021 arrest, she was subsequently released in an amnesty aimed at appeasing regime supporters ahead of the May presidential election. Wissam al-Tair, editor of the hugely popular pro-regime Facebook page Damascus Now, was arrested in December 2018—likely for his criticism of the conditions endured by army conscripts and the fuel crisis—and has not been heard from since.

Indeed, many believe the Assad regime is unable to handle the crisis, even those who can't envisage an alternative. This broad-based mistrust has been compounded by the regime's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly its inability (or refusal) to furnish reliable information regarding the number of cases and the shortages of oxygen supplies, hospital beds, and vaccines. Hope for the future is also in short supply.

In the midst of the crisis, the regime held presidential elections on May 26. This charade, designed to give the regime a veneer of legitimacy in an attempt to attract funds for reconstruction efforts, made a mockery of the Syrian people's demands for democratic transition. Presidential candidates were required to have been living in Syria for the past ten years—a rule that automatically excluded refugees and key opposition members in exile. They were also required to have the support of 35 members of parliament, which meant they had to be rubber-stamped by the regime. Syrians

has supported large numbers of fighters in Syria, arranging for sectarian Shia militias from Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and has established numerous military bases in Syria (some of which are prime targets for air strikes by Israel, which fears an entrenched Iranian presence on its northern border).

Iran has been the main backer of the regime financially and economically. Since 2013, Tehran has provided Syria with credit lines to import fuel and other goods and is a major trading partner. Business forums have been established to improve bilateral economic relations and trade. Just as Russia's reward for its loyalty is Syria's natural resources, Iran's is real estate, which it is buying up in Damascus, Homs, Deir al-Zour, and Aleppo. Iranian companies, often with links to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, have been awarded lucrative contracts for reconstruction and infrastructure projects. By cementing its presence economically, Iran ensures that it will maintain influence in the event of a peace deal that calls upon foreign militias to leave.

In these ways, Iran is expanding its presence in Syria and seeks to embed itself in Syrian society in a way that Russia does not. In an attempt to build a local constituency, it purchases loyalty by paying Syrian youth high salaries (up to $700 per month) to join Iranian militias, and has established cultural and education centers and mosques to spread Iranian culture and Shiism. In Damascus, people report a noticeable change in demographics in neighborhoods such as Bab Touma and Bab Sharqi, which were previously home to a large Christian community and are now populated by members of Iranian-backed militia. Properties belonging to Syrians displaced by the conflict are now inhabited by militia members and their families. In Hama and southern Idlib, agricultural land seized by the regime has been auctioned off at symbolic prices, and the main buyers are militia members. Shop signs and adverts are often written in Farsi. While many Syrians cannot return to their home country, the regime has fast-tracked naturalization of foreigners to ensure that Iranians and others can become citizens. The forced

displacement of communities supportive of the opposition and the re-population of those areas with communities perceived as loyal is part of a deliberate strategy by the regime to change demographics to ensure an obedient constituency in areas it controls. As Assad himself said in a speech in 2015, "Syria is not for those who hold its passport or reside in it; Syria is for those who defend it." One reason why a political solution has not yet been reached may be that the regime is stalling while it creates "facts on the ground" that will strengthen its hand in negotiations.

As a result of such blatant expropriation and collusion, anti-Iranian sentiment in Syria is at an all-time high. In both Deir al-Zour and the Deraa countryside, protests regularly break out calling for an end to Iranian hegemony and the expulsion of Iranian militias. The alliance between the supposedly secular Arab nationalist Assad regime and theocratic Iran was always pragmatic rather than religious. Yet the increasing presence of Shia Muslims linked to Iran (in a country with a Sunni majority) and its policies (both in Syria and the wider region) has vastly increased the sense of victimhood among Sunnis—a contributing factor in increasing sectarianism and the rise of groups such as Islamic State.

The desperate socio-economic situation in the country is another factor causing widespread criticism of the regime, even among communities perceived as loyal. Over 80 percent of the population lives in poverty, struggling to make ends meet, and 60 percent are food insecure. The United Nations World Food Programme reports that food prices increased by 376 percent between October 2019 and February 2021. There are shortages of staple foods, medicine, and fuel. People queue for hours at bakeries and petrol stations, and still sometimes return home empty-handed. Electricity blackouts are common and have caused local businesses to close, further exacerbating high levels of unemployment. The collapse of the currency means that the salary of a state employee is now equivalent to around $20 per month, as opposed to $400 in March 2011. Many are forced to take second jobs, if they can find

them, just to put food on the table. Meanwhile, those with regime connections (and warlords) not only profit off people's misery, but flaunt their wealth and privileged lifestyles, showing off their luxury cars and properties on social media.

The primary reason for this miserable situation is, of course, the full-scale destruction of the country by the regime and its Russian ally, including physical infrastructure, housing, agricultural land, and production facilities. The economic and financial crisis in Lebanon, on which the Syrian economy and banking system is dependent, has seen conditions worsen dramatically. Regime corruption and a rampant crony capitalism that lines the pockets of the well-connected further exacerbate the situation. At the bottom, state employees demand bribes for basic services and merchants inflate the prices of their goods. At the top, regime loyalists or family members of the president are awarded advantageous contracts to construct high-end residential apartments and luxury malls, when many don't have access to basic housing. The regime's plans for reconstruction will therefore further exacerbate social inequalities and prevent the return of those displaced from low-income backgrounds—those who formed the core of the opposition.

A secondary factor has been the expansion of sanctions since Washington implemented the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019. Unlike previous sanctions, which targeted those individuals affiliated with the regime—either political, military, or security figures—these sanctions are more controversial as they also target businesses and sectors dealing in oil, electricity, and infrastructure reconstruction, thus contributing to a shortage of goods and services and negatively impacting the civilian population. While humanitarian aid is exempt from the sanctions, non-governmental organizations have reported experiencing negative effects, as people are now nervous to do business in Syria. In March 2021, 14 Syrian organizations (both in Syria and abroad) released a statement calling on the Syrian regime to end sanctions by engaging in the