

# What the Assad family feud means for Russian-Syrian relations?

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**Abstract:** Criticism of Syrian President Bashar Assad published by a number of Russian fringe outlets, and complaints voiced by Assad's cousin, Syrian tycoon Rami Makhlouf, have been widely interpreted as part of the Kremlin's pressure campaign against Damascus. It has also been claimed that Moscow intends to replace Assad with a more suitable candidate. However, in reality both these narratives appear to be false. Even though the Syrian power struggle (especially within the Alawite clique) may affect Russia's position, Moscow is not inclined to consider a radical break away from the Assad regime. This article explains why, even despite oil prices falling and Damascus' unyielding stance, the Kremlin's conservative strategy in Syria is likely to continue. The paper also examines the reasons behind Russia's limited leverage in the country.

In April this year, Russian media outlets published a series of articles criticizing Syrian President Bashar Assad. Many observers saw this as evidence of the Kremlin-directed media campaign against the Assad regime. It was argued that Moscow's mounting disagreements with Damascus had reached a critical mass and the Kremlin was looking to substitute the recalcitrant Assad with a more agreeable leader; who could be relied upon to deliver constitutional reform in the country, in turn helping to release Syria from western sanctions and unblock the much-needed reconstruction funds. Reports of Moscow's increasing dissatisfaction with Damascus also set the tone for a rift which emerged between Bashar Assad and his cousin, Syria's wealthiest man Rami Makhlouf. Once a chief bankroller of the regime, Makhlouf has recently published three Facebook videos accusing the government of seizing his assets and arresting his associates and employees.

Meanwhile, Syria is expected to hold presidential elections next year which poses a fresh dilemma for the regime as to which approach to adopt. Damascus could carry on with its existing approach of holding uncompetitive elections to showcase stability in the country. This was the option used by the regime in the previous presidential elections held in 2014 and more recently, in the 2018 municipal elections.<sup>1</sup> Another option, encouraged by Russia, envisages Damascus taking a more conciliatory approach to the opposition and holding more transparent polls, while also implementing (largely inconsequential but eye-catching) constitutional reform. However, as the Syrian intra-elite power struggle accentuates, another scenario appears to be unfolding in which the Syrian regime will try to emulate 'democratic' elections without attempting any political reforms.

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### **Anti-Assad PR campaign**

Also in April this year, the Israeli expert Edy Cohen asserted that Russia is planning to replace Bashar Assad with Fahad Almasri, a little-known Syrian dissident currently residing in France.<sup>2</sup> Despite the speculative nature of Cohen's comments, they garnered widespread support in the Arab media and paved the way for the criticism of Assad which later appeared in Russian media outlets.

One such source of criticism was a poll allegedly conducted by the Foundation for National Values Protection in Syria,<sup>3</sup> a think-tank linked to the businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin who is the purported owner of the private military company Wagner Group (two of the foundation's experts were previously detained in Libya over concerns they were meddling in elections).<sup>4</sup> The poll showed that a third of respondents would vote for Assad in the 2021 election, yet significant doubts remain as to whether it was really possible for the think-tank to conduct such a politically sensitive survey among Syrians within the regime-controlled territory, given the presence of security services in those areas. Those doubts are multiplied when one considers the reports that this poll is said to have been conducted by phone and not in person.

Uncertainty over the poll's veracity did not stop a Prigozhin-linked publication, RIA FAN, to use its findings as a springboard for its PR campaign against the Syrian regime. This criticism was subsequently picked up by other media, including the Pravda.ru website (unrelated to the former Soviet official propaganda newspaper). The fact that Pravda's article contained multiple links to RIA FAN,<sup>5</sup> and was seemingly written by a ghost writer under a pen name, suggests that the piece was likely paid for. Only a few days later the critical content was removed from Prigozhin-associated websites, with the RIA FAN editors claiming in a statement that their website had been hacked.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, the quality newspaper Kommersant also published an op-ed by a former diplomat criticizing the Syrian government's poor handling of the economy in April.<sup>7</sup> At first glance, the column may appear to be an official cover for Prigozhin's negative PR campaign, but on closer inspection, the timing of the article's publication is in fact accidental. The diplomat in question, Alexander Aksenok, has held a consistent and well-augmented position regarding the Damascus regime's drawbacks and has been voicing his criticisms for years, so it is hard to suspect him of any foul play.

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The final installment of the supposed PR campaign against Syria comprised fake news in Russian news aggregators with reputations for sensationalist, yet uncorroborated stories. Examples of this fake news include allegations that Syrian officers were dissatisfied with the Russian-provided air defense systems,<sup>8</sup> or that experts at Russia's top foreign affairs think-tank, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) were expecting regime change in Damascus.<sup>9</sup> In truth, publications regarding Russian air defense systems contained many military inaccuracies, while the RIAC did not publish articles discussing Assad's imminent departure.

This media background has affected the wider coverage of events in Syria and even spilled over into the political sphere. For example, the Arabic version of the Russian government-sponsored TV channel Russia Today, published an interview with the Syrian dissident Firas Tlass, only to then pull it off air.<sup>10</sup> In the political sphere, the US special envoy for Syria engagement, Ambassador James Jeffrey, said that he believed reports of simmering tensions between Russia and Syria to be 'accurate'.<sup>11</sup> Adding that; "We have talked to the Russians

at various levels over the past year. The Russians are not happy with Assad."

The anti-Assad publications in Russia provoked a reaction in Syria's political circle, leading to Khaled Al-Aboud, an MP from the southern Daraa, to defend the Syrian leader from criticism and suggest that the Kremlin cannot impose its will on Damascus.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Al-Aboud, along with other pro-government politicians and activists from Middle Eastern countries submitted a petition to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov demanding Moscow shows President Assad more respect.<sup>13</sup>

Despite all the noise and political accusations generated by anti-Assad articles, suggestions of the Kremlin's direct involvement in the media campaign, as well as attempts to unseat the Syrian leader, appear highly implausible. Firstly, if the Kremlin wanted to send a message to Damascus, it would have chosen a more reputable intermediary than the fringe publications linked to the Western-sanctioned Prigozhin. Secondly, Jeffrey's claims can hardly be considered proof of any concerted plan on behalf of the Kremlin to get rid of Assad.

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The Kremlin's general weariness of the regime in Damascus is common knowledge among informed observers. Indeed, Russian diplomats had in the past demonstrated readiness to go beyond its declared position and even plot behind Assad's back. For example, Moscow has held discussions with the Syrian opposition in Cairo and Geneva in the absence of regime representatives.<sup>14</sup> Moscow has also held talks with the Americans in Amman on the prospects of the regime-opposition,<sup>15</sup> a move which dissatisfied Iran.

Russia's approach to Syria throughout the civil war has been distinctly two-faceted: On the one hand, Moscow has been helping Bashar Assad strengthen his authority and keep the opposition at bay and this has served to portray Russia as a defender of the country's national sovereignty. On the other hand, the Kremlin has been positioning itself as a powerbroker in the hope of rebuilding dialogue with the West.

Even with Russia encountering more domestic hurdles, and prospects of the Syrian peace process ever uncertain, any radical change by Moscow's course is still a distant prospect. Russia does not have a credible alternative to Assad who could be relied upon to solve the country's long-standing problems of cronyism and corruption. Some speculate that regime change could help Syria and its backers secure western funds for the country's reconstruction. Yet the Kremlin does not hold out much hope for western financial help anyway, especially given that Moscow itself is using 'grey-area schemes' to expand its economic footprint in Syria, such as through Kremlin-linked businessmen and private military companies. From Moscow's vantage point, Assad's departure could endanger Russia's investment in the country and would risk precipitating its capitulation in the Syrian campaign.

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It is difficult to argue with any certainty what factors drove the anti-Assad PR campaign launched by the Prigozhin-linked media, and taking into account the content of this campaign, and the way in which it was organized, several explanations seem plausible. These include:

■ **Special interest lobbying.** The article published by Pravda.ru in particular contained accusations of oil smuggling levelled at Syrian businessmen, including associates of Maher Assad, the President's younger brother. This negative coverage might have served as a juxtaposition between corrupt Syrian business and a more credible alternative in Prigozhin's own enterprises. According to reports, Prigozhin-linked companies have already begun oil exploration in Syria.<sup>16</sup>

■ **Agenda-setting.** Before the onset of the anti-Assad campaign reports concerning the brutal execution of a Syrian man by a group of Wagner's mercenaries,<sup>17</sup> there had been a high-profile rolling story in both western and Russian media. Articles criticizing Damascus helped divert media attention away from the subject of torture and execution.

■ **Political reasons.** It is conceivable that the anti-Assad campaign was designed by political consultants to emulate open discussions within Syria and readjust Russia's image. Seen in this

context, such a campaign would paint an image in which Russia is less readily portrayed as the enabler of Damascus's worst instincts (including its economic missteps and alleged attacks on civilians) and the Syrian regime can tolerate dissent, including debates on relations with Moscow within its ranks.

### **Russia and the Makhlof saga**

Media furor over the anti-Assad publications in Russian media formed a backdrop to the row within the President's family. Rami Makhlof's pleas to Assad which he posted on Facebook, therefore came to be viewed not merely as a part of Syria's internal power struggle, but also as a product of Russia's pressure on the regime. Moreover, when reports of Makhlof's tensions with the regime first appeared in 2019,<sup>18</sup> they were explained by Moscow's impatience with Damascus's failure to repay US\$3 billion in war loans. This only added further credence to the claims that it was at the behest of the Kremlin that Damascus launched its campaign against the cash-rich Makhlof family, who were reported to have acquired luxury property in Moscow worth millions of dollars.<sup>19</sup>

However, any substantial evidence corroborating the hypothesis of Moscow's involvement in the Makhlof case is still lacking. Russian diplomats whom this author spoke to denied Moscow ever raising the issue of US\$3 billion with Damascus. Besides, claims of the Kremlin's impatience

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over loan repayments do not fit well with either its wider strategy or its past behavior. Moscow provided equipment for the Syrian land formations, air force and navy on its own volition in order to prop up the country's governmental institutions and avoid having to intervene in the conflict using its own regular army. Pressuring Assad to repay those loans now, when Syria already faces an acute shortage of funds for the country's reconstruction, does not make much sense. When disagreements over loan repayments arise between Russia and its partners in the Middle East, it is generally on the level of private actors, not governments. For example, it was reported that the Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar is yet to repay US\$150 million to the Russian private military company Wagner Group.<sup>20</sup>

### **Russia's Syrian equilibrium**

Russia's chief objective in Syria is to preserve the equilibrium built in the years since its intervention. Any disruption to this equilibrium is seen as a threat which could plunge Syrian institutions into crisis. Accordingly, Russia has kept its disagreements with Damascus and Tehran as subdued as possible and in doing so, the Kremlin ensures those contradictions are not amplified in public discussions.

Overall, several factors account for Moscow's approach to Damascus and Tehran:

- A)** Moscow keeps communication channels open with their allies' rivals.
- B)** Each member of the Russia-Syria-Iran triangle uses its alliance with the two other players as leverage in separate negotiations with parties outside the triangle.
- C)** The Sunnites make up the majority of Russia's Muslim population. Therefore, Moscow is careful not to appear too close to either the Syrian Alawites or Iran's Shiite leadership. This diplomatic distancing helps Moscow to negotiate on equal terms with the West and keep Damascus and Tehran on their toes and extract concessions from them.

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Safeguarding this system of checks and balances is a critical task for Russia going forward. Present circumstances allow Moscow to assume the role of a global power broker, as opposed to inward-looking 'besieged fortress', while at the same time not being subsumed into Syria's power struggle, which would require additional resources. This course of action is congruent with Moscow's original objective when it intervened in Syria: relying on local forces to conduct military operations and nudging key players within Syria towards cooperation with the regime, ensuring the latter's financial sustainability. Under those conditions Moscow positions itself as an arbiter in disputes between Syria's political factions, while also gaining access to the Mediterranean theater to boost its international prestige and geopolitical clout.

The Russian-controlled Khmeimim airbase operates air traffic to Libya, the Central African Republic and Sudan.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, alongside official diplomatic channels Russian non-state actors have cultivated informal links with local players, generally with a view to expanding their commercial interests. As those non-state actors become more established in the Syrian context, Russia can rely on them to expand their

influence not just via state bureaucracy, but also through more flexible and sustainable relations with local players. Thus, a lion's share of Russia's economic projects in Syria, with the notable exception of grain exports, is handled through companies associated with the two Kremlin-linked businessmen, Yevgeny Prigozhin and Gennady Timchenko (who has interests in oil, phosphates mining and received a contract to operate the Tartous port).<sup>22</sup>

However, having said that, the share of economic activity generated by Russian businesses remains modest, therefore preventing them from having a say on the rules of the game in Syria. The Kremlin, for its part, feels reluctant to intervene in Syria's shadow economy and smuggling practiced by local players, including Makhlouf, Maher Assad and their associates. Moscow has limited itself to raising the smuggling issue with Damascus only during the active phase of war.<sup>23</sup>

Moscow's fear of upsetting the current equilibrium is evident not just in its strategy, but also in its tactics too. Russia treads carefully vis-à-vis Iran, applying tentative pressure on Tehran to try to squeeze it out of south west Syria, yet makes up for this by pursuing partnerships with the Islamic



Republic in other areas. For example, Russia allows Iran to use the Khmeimim airbase for safe transportation of its supplies.<sup>24</sup> Iran, in turn, grants Moscow permission to use the Hamadan airbase to rotate its air force personnel in Syria. And while Syrian military reform remains an area in which Russia and Iran compete, Moscow can neither establish a full monopoly on training security personnel, nor cultivate formations that would be fully independent of Iranian influence. Accordingly, Russia still has to show some respect to Tehran, who, among other things, offers training to Syrian aircraft pilots.<sup>25</sup>

Two primary security forces in Syria receive backing from Iran:<sup>26</sup> One is the 4th armored division led by Maher Assad. The other is the Republican Guard, an elite unit established in 1976 under the regime of Bashar's father, Hafez Assad, to guard the Presidential palace against possible coups. Both units are actively recruiting new cadres. The 4th division attracts recruits from Shiite militias like Liwa al-Imam Hussein and the Liwa Sayyaf al-Mahdi, the military wing of the now-disbanded Al-Bustan organization (formerly led by Makhoul) and former opposition. The Republican guard draws recruits from Local Defense Forces.

Instead of upholding regular military formations, Moscow has opted for the creation of networks which are not properly institutionalized. For instance, the Russian military advisers opted for a nonstandard numbering system to label brigades and regiments within the 5th Corps, thus avoiding suggestions of their regular status and affiliation with the Syrian Arab Army. As a result, various formations, including Liwa al-Quds or the Islamic State Hunters, are trained by the Russian military and act under the 5th Corps' command, despite not formally belonging to it.<sup>27</sup>

Another case in point is the umbrella system of the Tiger Force,<sup>28</sup> which was commanded by General Suheil al-Hassan and overseen by Russian special forces, before becoming the 25th Special Forces Division under the Syrian Arab Army control.<sup>29</sup> Damascus has been trying to undermine Suheil al-Hassan and launched the anti-corruption campaign against the system. The privileged position afforded to the Russian-backed general cast a shadow on his relations with the Alawite clan, who feel their authority over the military was challenged.<sup>30</sup>

Despite Russia's involvement in Syria's economy and the military, its fear of upsetting local equilibrium, combined with maneuvers by an intransigent Damascus to assert its power on the domestic arena, prevents the Kremlin from exercising a tighter grip on the regime. Those same factors limit Moscow's ability to cultivate a Syrian lobby which would serve a counterweight to Assad.

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### **Political risks ahead**

Hafez Assad's regime was built on an alliance between Alawite security services and the Sunnite bourgeoisie. The civil war has accelerated the impoverishment of the Sunnites, while new backers of the regime like Rami Makhoul have taken advantage of the Bashar-led privatization of state assets. The tycoon's position was further solidified by his ability to circumvent western sanctions in his business activities.

The campaign carried out by the regime against Makhoul points to Damascus's desire to assume greater control over national wealth rather than sharing it with others. And while Makhoul became the most high-profile victim of the regime's 'anti-corruption' drive, he was far from the only one. Reports of Assad's intentions to secure a tighter grip on the private sector first surfaced in 2019 and in the ensuing period the regime has arrested many businessmen, including those from the middle class,<sup>31</sup> under the guise of tackling corruption and illegal currency transactions.

The outbreak of the civil war saw Syrian elites throwing their weight behind the regime to safeguard the vestiges of stability and ensure their survival. Today Bashar

Assad is seeking to consolidate the elite groups around the presidency and uses repression to achieve this goal. In this new order, Syrian businessmen involved in smuggling and the shadow economy, have to pay taxes and plead their loyalty to the president.

The government's campaign against the Makhoul clan carries political risks. The Alawite community, whose heartland used to be in Latakia, is now scattered across the Syrian territory and their attitudes towards the regime are as divided as their geography. This potentially creates an auspicious ground for the formation of new political blocks, a process which could sweep through civilian institutions as well as the military. This could in turn trigger a renewed bout of political instability and military coups, akin to those experienced in Syria from 1949-1970.

This brings the issue of the regime's fragility into sharper focus. If Assad is serious about completing his purge of the Makhoul clan, which was once a backbone of the regime, the President should at least take symbolic steps towards 'opening up' the political system and economic reforms, not least to draw capital in from abroad. In this context,

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Makhlouf's public video pleas might actually help Assad by playing into this narrative of 'opening up' the system to dissenting voices. For example, Mahmoud Tlass Farzat, who was accused of financing the revolutionary effort and fled the country in 2012, was allowed to return to the country by security services in 2018.<sup>32</sup>

Going forward, Assad's consolidation strategy involves his continuing reliance on the sectarian army command,<sup>33</sup> new purges of security apparatus from Makhlouf sympathizers, and cultivating the so-called 'secular Islam'<sup>34</sup>. This syncretic religious movement helps the regime preserve the equilibrium between ethnic factions and pays heed to the Baathist party's archaic ideology. However, there is also a danger that propagation of secular Islam may breed dissent among Sunnites in provincial towns who do not accept the notion of mufti being a secular title.

Regarding foreign affairs, Damascus will still look to capitalize on Iranian-Russian contradictions not only by receiving direct help, but also by appealing to powers interested in constraining Iran. However, improving political ties with those powers, for example with the UAE, have not translated into any serious economic investments in Syria.<sup>35</sup> Instead, the largest share of foreign investment in the country comes from expatriates or the Shiites.<sup>36</sup> Reflecting on Syria's alliance with Russia more specifically, Assad would prefer this relationship to evolve towards a more flexible model as practiced by other regional players. Meaning that Moscow turns from a protector of Syria's sovereignty, who endorses the regime's every initiative, into a source of leverage in negotiations with third parties.

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#### **ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM**

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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