Assad and the Ruination of Syria

by Hugh Fitzgerald

In the tenth year of the Syrian Civil War, Bashar al-Assad continues to rule, against all the odds. He's supported by Iran, by Hezbollah, by Russia. Meanwhile the opposition to him is splintered; there are secular liberals and Islamic fundamentalists, and everything in between, fighting to overthrow his rule but agreeing on little else. Assad now has about 70% of the country under his army's control; he's winning, but not so overwhelmingly as to assure final victory, and there might still be reversals. His main ally, Iran, now facing its own financial degringolade, cannot support him at the same level as before. Iran has already slashed subsidies to Hezbollah, Iran's proxy that has also fought alongside Assad's troops in Syria. Turkish troops are now in Idlib, and President Erdogan, an enemy of Assad, has vowed that they will remain in the country until Syria "is free," by which he means, when the Assad regime is overthrown. That may take a

very long time. What Assad has done to Syria is discussed here.

> *"War On The Gasman," raved British tabloid The Sun's kicker headline in spring 2018, ahead of an Anglo-American-French aerial assault following one of Bashar Assad's gas attacks on his citizens.*
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> *The allies fired 100 missiles at chemical-weapons facilities in Damascus and Homs, and thus "marshaled their righteous power against barbarism and brutality," as Donald Trump soon swaggered.*
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> *Two years on, that righteous cavalry is long gone, while the barbarian it confronted is alive and well, as is his rule, which this month marked its 20th year.*
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> *Whatever its future, Assad's presidency has already earned him a place in history, in folklore and in hell.*
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> *The Sun's catchy nickname, on par with notorious mobster Anthony "Gas-pipe" Casso, has accorded Assad a folkloric imprint that few other national leaders will ever stamp.*
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> *Sadly, Assad's historic imprint needs no such journalistic creativity; it lies bare for all to see, exposing the fallacy of Syrian nationhood, the crisis of Arab solidarity and the irrelevance of the West.*

The Syrian "nation" is riven by the Sunni-Shi'a split, with the Alawites, a sect of Shi'a Islam, although only 12% of the population, constituting a military caste that controls the army and assures the rule of Bashar al-Assad, himself an Alawite. There is a large Christian minority that is protected by the Alawites, and therefore supports Assad, keenly aware that among the opposition to him are Muslim fundamentalists who, if they came to power, would treat them harshly. There are Kurds in northeastern Syria who would like autonomy within

the Arab state; some even yearn for an independent Kurdistan, which would include Kurds from Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. This is what the author, Amotz Asa-el, describes as the "fallacy of Syrian nationhood," not so much a country as a collection of groups, often warring, and always scheming, to hold onto or acquire power at the expense of others.

What Asa-El describes as "the crisis of Arab solidarity" in Syria is this: none of the Arab states has managed to effect a moderating influence on Assad, much less bring an end to the civil war, none – separately or together – has issued more than pro-forma criticism of Assad. No pan-Arab force has even been contemplated, one which could enter Syria and stop the fighting. Two non-Arab states, Turkey and Iran, have their own forces in Syria, but not the Arabs. The Arab League has proven to be ineffectual; it's been unable to prevent Iranian and Russian forces from helping Assad. The League did protest against Turkish troops entering Idlib, but that protest was shrugged off by Ankara. Erdogan knew there was nothing the Arab League would do to enforce its opposition to the continuing Turkish presence.

The pan-Arab vision foundered on the rock of self-aggrandizing national leaders, none of whom was prepared to see other Arabs lead such a movement. Egypt and Syria tried, for three years, to form one nation, the United Arab Republic, but it was clear that Egypt's Gamel Abdel Nasser, so popular with the Arab masses, saw himself – not without reason – as the natural leader of this new state, which would form the nucleus of a future pan-Arab union. The Syrians, realizing that the United Arab Republic was not to be a union of equals, but a vehicle for Nasser to expand his popularity and power, called the whole thing off.

Hafez Assad then ruled Syria for 29 years. His idea, according to Amotz Asa-El, was to restore Syrian hegemony in the same lands that had once formed the Umayyad Caliphate based in Damascus. But he did not pursue it very vigorously, given that

even within Syria his rule was challenged by the Muslim Brotherhood.

> *That is how Baathist Syria emerged with its guiding principle, the creation of what it called Greater Syria, which meant Syria must expand to Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and Palestine.*
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> *The elusiveness of this vision became apparent already in 1982, when the elder Assad faced a rebellion in Hama before crushing it by surrounding the city with artillery batteries and bombing it to dust for 26 days, killing thousands….*

Tall, gangly, soft-spoken, shy, an ophthalmologist who had received his advanced training in the U.K., many expected that Bashar Assad would be a reformer, transforming the military dictatorship that he inherited from his father. No one would have foreseen that the younger Assad would fight stubbornly to crush a huge rebellion and became a mass murderer to preserve his rule.

> *…Now in its 10th year, the war Bashar Assad has waged is not only this century's longest, bloodiest and most expensive, considering that Syria's reconstruction should cost, according to the UN, $250 billion [the most recent figure, provided by outside analysts, is $350 billion to reconstruct the country to its prewar level] Bashar's war has shown that the country whose leaders wanted to gobble their neighbors was in fact incapable of digesting even what was already on its plate….*
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> *Assad didn't only bleed the Arab nation, he also deprived it of Arab land, ceding to the Russian army swaths of western Syria while foreign militias and Iranian "advisers" poured through eastern Syria, and a Turkish occupation sank roots across northern Syria….*

In order to pay back his foreign supporters, Assad gave them rights to control certain areas, but these were not, as Amotz Asa-El implies, given in perpetuity. Russian forces occupy the naval base at Latakia and several airports from which Russian bombers take off to attack Assad's foes. Iran has been given the right to establish its own bases, but try as it might, the IAF keeps bombing and destroying those Iranian attempts. The Turkish occupation in Idlib was not Assad's doing, but against his wishes.

> *…in hardly two-thirds of his father's years in power, the younger Assad has killed about 25 times as many Syrians as Assad-the-elder's toll.*

Quite a record for the soft-spoken ophthalmologist, on whom such high hopes had been placed for democratizing the country. His beautiful wife Asma appeared in an article in *Vogue* just before the civil war broke out. She was glowingly described in an article titled "A Rose in the Desert" about her British roots (she was raised in London by her Syrian parents), her taste for designer fashion, her career – as a modern Arab woman – in banking. The glowing article praised the Assads as a "wildly democratic" family-focused couple who vacation in Europe, foster Christianity, are at ease with American celebrities, and made theirs the "safest country in the Middle East," who want to give Syria a "brand essence." A few months later, the civil war broke out. The Assads would never again be vacationing in Europe; for security reasons, they cannot safely travel outside the country. Syria, which they were praised for making into the "safest country in the Middle East," has become the most dangerous place on the planet. The Syrian "brand" provokes not admiration, but disgust, fear, and rage.

This is Bashar al-Assad's legacy: first, there are the six million Syrians who have fled the country out of fear of being shot to death, or bombed, sometimes with chemicals and poison

gas. They leave behind the physical destruction of their homes and businesses, and the mass unemployment, and Weimar-level rates of inflation, that make business planning impossible, and end up living in wretched refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey. Then there are another five million Syrians who have not left the country but have been internally displaced, after the destruction of their homes and neighborhoods; they too live in temporary housing for refugee inside their own country; they too have become part of the army of Syrian unemployed.

Israel is sitting this one out. It doesn't have a dog in this fight or, rather, its dog is the fight. The Jewish state is not about to take the side of Assad-Iran-Hezbollah. And if it were to take the side, say, of those in the opposition who are secular and liberal, that would immediately tar any recipient of its help as a "Zionist tool," and hinder, rather than help, that group. Besides, what would be the best outcome for Israel? Probably, a low-level continuation of the civil war, a conflict bleeding both sides, forcing them to use up men, money, and materiel, but with no certain victor for years to come. Syria has become a Tar Baby not only for Iran and its proxy Hezbollah, but also for Turkey in Idlib Province. What could be better for Jerusalem than having three of Israel's most implacable and dangerous enemies — Iran, Hezbollah, and Erdogan's Turkey (the fourth is Hamas, which has kept out of Syria) — sinking ever deeper into the La Brea Tar Pit of the Middle East?

> *Indeed, Bashar's war on his people, while affecting the whole world, is first and foremost an Arab affair.*
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> *That is why the first question his presidency raises should be addressed to the Arab world: Bashar Assad has massacred your Arab brethren, ruined an Arab land and dishonored the Arab nation. Why don't you unseat him?*

Why indeed? Why hasn’t Jordan, for a fistful of dollars from the Gulf Arabs – Saudi Arabia and the UAE – sent its troops into Syria to prevent the formation of that “Shi’a crescent” King Abdullah is always fretting about? Why couldn’t Egypt, similarly funded by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, airlift troops to help out the opposition forces that are still fighting in Syria? Or is it that the Egyptians and Jordanians are not sure that they could withstand the blows from the triple-entente of Assad’s Alawite-led army, Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards, and Russian bombers?

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