



MIDDLE EAST

Who Controls Syria? The Al-Assad family, the Inner Circle, and the Tycoons



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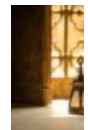


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Ever since Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1971, the three pillars of the Syrian regime have been the Ba’ath Party, the Alawite minority and the army. The current Syrian elites were formed around these three forces. The tip of the pyramid is represented by the so-called inner circle: a small group of people most trusted by the head of state. Their influence on the decision-making process stems not so much from the posts they hold, as from their being members of – or otherwise close to – the al-Assad family. The inner circle

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during the course of the civil war. At the same time, some of Bashar al-Assad's former confidantes have been forced to flee the country and effectively defect to the opposition.

The Defectors

The latter include, among others, the influential Tlass clan of Circassian origin. Until his death in 2017, the Tlass family was headed by Mustafa Tlass, who was minister of defence from 1972 to 2004 and one of the closest associates of former President Hafez al-Assad. It was Mustafa Tlass who largely facilitated Bashar al-Assad's inauguration following the death of his father, despite the fact that a portion of the Syrian opposition was calling for Bashar's brother, Maher al-Assad, to become the new president.

The Tlass clan managed to become Syria's second-most-influential family after the al-Assads. They were as significant as the Makhlouf clan, relatives of Bashar al-Assad's mother. Mustafa Tlass's son, Firas Tlass – one of the most influential Syrian magnates – had interests in many branches of the country's economy. He was Syria's second wealthiest person, after Bashar al-Assad's cousin Rami Makhlouf.

Mustafa and Firas left Syria in 2011 and joined the opposition. Firas Tlass subsequently financed the Farouq Brigades operating in the Tlass family's native district of Al-Rastan in Homs Governorate. Firas's younger brother, Manaf Tlass, former Brigadier General of the Syrian Republican Guard's 105th (other sources say 104th) Brigade, subsequently emigrated to Jordan and attempted to form an opposition military force intended to replace the Syrian armed forces. The project proved a failure.

One other member of the al-Assad family's inner circle to have fled Syria since the beginning of the uprising is Ali Habib Mahmud, another former minister of defence (2009–11). Unlike the Sunni Tlass family, Mahmud is an Alawite. He may be viewed as the highest ranking representative of the Alawite minority to have pledged allegiance to the Syrian revolution. Mahmud initially led the operation to suppress the uprising, and was even subjected to sanctions for this. However, after losing his post he established contact with the militants and left the country.

There are reasons to believe that the Tlass family and Mahmud fled Syria not because of their support for the opposition, per se, but rather due to the alignment of forces within the Syrian leader's inner circle. Bashar al-Assad's relatives found a way to get rid of their most influential rivals, accusing them of sympathizing with the opposition and maintaining contacts with them, while criticizing their inability to stifle the uprising. In this situation, the Tlass family and Mahmud had nothing left to do but join the opposition.

The Tlass family and Mahmud may yet theoretically make a return to Syrian politics, as they are seen as acceptable politicians both by the opposition and by some of the Ba'ath functionaries. Everything will depend on the progress and direction of the peace process. If a national accord government is formed, then members of the Tlass family might be



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Another important development that reshaped the inner circle was the explosion at the National Security headquarters in Damascus that took place on July 18, 2012. Liwa al-Islam (now known as Jaysh al-Islam) claimed responsibility for the attack. The blast killed several influential representatives of Al-Assad's inner circle; the most prominent casualty was Assef Shawkat, husband of Bashar al-Assad's sister Bushra, who had enjoyed significant clout with the Ba'ath leadership.

Shawkat had been on rather strained terms with some of the al-Assad family members. On the one hand, he was believed to be a close confidant of Bashar al-Assad since his return from London following the death of his brother, Basil Shawkat. On the other hand, Assef was in conflict with Maher al-Assad. According to some reports, Maher had [fired a shot](#) at Assef in 1999, wounding him in the stomach. Nevertheless, it was the trio of Assef Shawkat and the al-Assad brothers whom experts named as the central figures of the inner circle. Shawkat held senior official posts in the Syrian government: he was head of Military Intelligence in 2005–10, deputy chief of staff in 2009–11 and, from April 2011 until his death, deputy minister of defence acting as chief of staff of the armed forces.

Maher al-Assad and Rami Makhoul at the Top of the Pyramid

The flight of the Tlass family and Assef Shawkat's death promoted Bashar al-Assad's younger brother Maher and his cousin Rami Makhoul to senior roles within the inner circle. The two came to have a decisive say in the decision-making process, despite the fact that they do not hold key posts in the government.

Maher al-Assad is currently described as the second most important figure in Syria after the president. He is the de-facto commander of the 4th Armoured Division (Maher's official military post is that of commander of the division's 42nd Brigade, whereas the division is officially commanded by Major General Mohammad Ali Durgham), and also supervises the Republican Guard, the elite force charged with guarding government installations and defending the capital city.

Apart from holding command posts and being represented in the central committee of the Ba'ath Party, Maher al-Assad is a financial magnate. According to [some reports](#), he earned up to \$1 billion supplying food to the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, and further increased his wealth through a money-laundering scheme involving the Lebanese bank Al-Madina, which subsequently folded. Sources have indicated that Maher controls the Sheraton hotel network in Syria and certain media outlets, including Cham Press. This means that, in addition to the loyal 4th Division and the Republican Guard, Maher al-Assad commands significant financial influence.

Maher is on rather difficult terms with Rami Makhoul, another influential member of Bashar al-Assad's current inner circle. The two may be partners on certain projects: it is [known](#) that they used to do business together in Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates

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One of Maher al-Assad's important partners is believed to be [Muhammad Hamsho](#), who represents his interests in the business community. The latter is involved in financing a range of pro-government media outlets, such as Addounia TV, and owns Hamsho International Group, as well as stakes in Middle East Marketing, Syria International for Artistic Production and Al-Sham Holding. Hamsho also acts as the middleman for the business structures of Maher al-Assad and Rami Makhlouf.

Overall, Maher al-Assad is a fairly independent actor. He can afford to openly express his disagreement with Bashar al-Assad's decisions and is capable of imposing his own views on the president. Maher is the main advocate of the "party of war" in Damascus. He is also named as one of the key conduits of Iran's interests in the Syrian leadership. Maher reportedly has contacts with the Iranian special services, and is reported to have voiced the idea to involve Iranian military experts in the early phase of the [Syrian conflict](#). In addition, the military units under Maher's control are being used to form branches of Shiite paramilitary forces. For example, the Shiite battalion Liwa Sayf al-Mahdi operates as part as the 4th Division.

Maher's contacts with Iran previously provided grounds for rumours disseminated by pro-opposition sources about his conflicts with Bashar al-Assad. In 2016, reports began circulating which alleged that Maher al-Assad had been dismissed as commander of the 42nd Brigade, promoted to major general and assigned a secondary role within the General Staff. Sources [explained that the "honorary exile" was the result of an alleged quarrel between the brothers](#). In January 2017, rumours emerged accusing Maher of [an attempted military coup against the president with the support of Iran](#), allegedly over Maher's disagreement with the Syrian leadership's course towards joining the peace process and initiating talks with the opposition. However, in summer 2017, Maher al-Assad was [sighted commanding the 4th Division during an operation in Daraa Governorate in the south of Syria](#).

Nevertheless, the very existence of rumours alleging a conflict between the al-Assad brothers does reflect certain concerns. Namely, that should the peace process reach a stage at which it will be necessary to form a national accord government, the hardliners and the Ba'ath conservatives maintaining contacts with Iran might roll out Maher as their candidate. Maher al-Assad has the necessary clout with the security agencies, commands serious financial resources and, most importantly, is prepared to make any sacrifice in order to secure his goals, as he has repeatedly demonstrated in the past, including in the form of cruel reprisals of civilians during the first phase of the Syrian revolution.

The next most significant and influential actor in Syria after Maher al-Assad is Rami Makhlouf, the country's wealthiest person with an estimated fortune of [\\$6 billion](#). Makhlouf co-owns Syria's largest mobile network operator Syriatel and the corporation Cham Holding. The latter used to control the most profitable services in the country,

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Bank and Bank of Jordan in Syria. The Makhoul family is known to have close ties with UK business. In particular, they have invested in the British oil and gas exploration and production company Gulf Sands Petroleum. Rami Makhoul also controls such media outlets as Al-Watan, Ninar, Dünya TV and Promedia. According to some estimates, he controls up to 60 percent of the country's economy.

Despite the sanctions imposed against him, Rami Makhoul is using his connections, influence and resources to seek ways for the al-Assad family and other representatives of the ruling circles to bypass the international sanctions. For this purpose, he has been using three Syrian companies linked to the government: Maxima Middle East Trading, Morgan Additives Manufacturing and Pangates International. Rami has also used the Panama-based legal firm Mossack Fonseca to open shadow companies in the Seychelles. He is also using his Eastern European companies, DOM Development Holding of Poland and Rock Holding of Romania, to the same end.

The Al-Bustan Association

An important component of the Makhoul empire is the Al-Bustan Association, which was set up as a charity fund intended to address the humanitarian aspects of the Syrian civil war. The association is known to have received [payments](#) from UNICEF to the tune of \$267,933. In reality, Al-Bustan has turned into the primary source of financing for different Shabiha paramilitary units unrelated to the official Syrian security agencies. In effect, Rami Makhoul is using Al-Bustan to set up private military companies controlled by himself. The most prominent such units are Liwa Dir' al-Watan (Homeland Shield) and the [Fahud Homs \(the Leopards of Homs\) special units](#). It is believed that by bankrolling these forces, which are linked to the Air Force intelligence service, Rami Makhoul has secured his own positions within the latter. He thus took advantage of the civil war to develop all the requisite attributes of personal influence, primarily financial resources and a personal army.

Rami Makhoul may be characterized as a proponent of the peace process, as he is interested in having his frozen assets abroad released and the Western sanctions against him lifted, but this will only become possible if he makes a personal contribution to the peaceful settlement of the conflict. He has already filed an [appeal](#) with the Swiss courts. On the other hand, it is obvious that Makhoul's financial welfare will largely depend on whether the current Syrian regime stays in power.

The Father of the Desert Hawks

One Syrian actor worth mentioning among those who have managed to strengthen their positions during the course of the internal conflict and can influence the Syrian leadership's decisions is [Ayman Jaber](#).

An oil tycoon, Jaber used to control oil and gas extraction at most of the fields located in

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runs numerous private military companies. Some of these have been turned into elite assault units, including Liwa Suqur al-Sahara (Desert Hawks) and the Syrian Marines. The two units were previously commanded by Ayman Jaber's brothers, Mohamed (who also has a business in Russia) and Ibrahim. At some point, the independence enjoyed by these groups became excessive. In summer 2017, the Desert Hawks stopped a governmental convoy from entering an area under their control. This incident resulted in Ibrahim Jaber's arrest. The Desert Hawks were disbanded and reassigned to the 5th Voluntary Assault Corps and to the [Syrian Commandos](#), which are financed by Ayman Jaber.

Another influential Syrian oil magnate close to the country's leadership is [George Haswani](#), who owns the company HESCO. Haswani finances Dir' al-Qalamoun (Qalamoun Shield Forces), which is a part of the Syrian Army's 3rd Armoured Division. Turkey and Western powers are [accusing](#) Haswani of having sold oil extracted by so-called Islamic State from seized Syrian fields. He is also linked to Russian business circles and has contacts with [Stroytransgaz](#) and [Gazprom](#). According to some reports, he holds Russian citizenship.

The Old Guard and the Special Services

Representatives of the so-called Old Guard (who were close to the previous president of Syria) and also special services continue to have a modicum of influence on the decision-making process within the country. One influential veteran of Syrian politics is 77-year-old Minister of Foreign Affairs Walid Muallem, who served as Syrian ambassador to the United States during the final years of Hafez al-Assad's presidency.

Standing out from the other heads of Syria's numerous security agencies is Ali Mamlouk, former head of the General Security Directorate (GSD). He retained his influence in the GSD following his appointment as head of the National Security Bureau, which coordinates the work of Syria's entire intelligence community, in 2012. A number of sources report that Mamlouk is an experienced politician who manages to manoeuvre delicately between Russia and Iran and secure support for his initiatives from both countries. In addition, he is the only member of the Syrian leadership with whom the Gulf monarchies and Turkey are prepared to talk. Mamlouk is trusted to conduct sensitive talks behind closed doors with external opponents of the Syrian regime. These opponents view the head of the Syrian special services, who is also a Sunni, as a person with whom they can negotiate. It is noteworthy that Mamlouk [visited Saudi Arabia](#) in 2015.

Elements of Matriarchy

Women are also a force in the decision-making process in Syria. Anisa Makhlof, the late mother of Bashar and Maher al-Assad, certainly played a significant part in keeping the ruling family in balance and mitigating disagreements between the two brothers. Some observers note that the relationship between the men started [to deteriorate](#) after Anisa's death in early 2016.

transferred by international organizations to support the victims of the Syrian conflict, despite the fact that she was under sanctions. Another influential woman in the al-Assad family, Assef Shawkat’s widow Bushra, also retains some influence and has business ties with Rami Makhoul.

Possible Transformation of the Political Architecture?

All the main threats to the Syrian regime have been staved off by now. However, it must be noted that this was possible thanks exclusively to external interventions. Russia and Iran played a key role in keeping the al-Assad family and their closest associates in power. Without the participation of these two countries, the armed confrontation would most likely have resulted in the toppling of the regime.

On the other hand, the regime may have won the war, but it has not yet won peace. All the problems that caused the revolution in the first place only worsened in the course of the war, including runaway corruption and the concentration of capital in the hands of a small group of people. Unless serious and comprehensive reforms are carried out in Syria, the country may well face collapse and a new wave of violence.

On the other hand, no actual reforms appear possible for as long as the al-Assad family remains in control. The only things possible are half-measures and window dressing. It therefore appears advisable to proceed from the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, including as applicable to the formation of a new executive body.

The most agreeable scenario might be to transform Syria into a parliamentary republic and strip the head of state of a significant portion of powers and access to administrative levers. Whatever the case, any positive change will be difficult to implement without the full involvement of the opposition, including armed opposition factions, seeing as there are otherwise no factors that might prompt the government to carry out tangible reforms.

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Published 3 hours ago on July 28, 2021

By **Dr. James M. Dorsey**

A recent analysis of Middle Eastern states' interventionist policies suggests that misguided big power approaches have fueled a vicious cycle of interference and instability over the last decade.

Those approaches are abetted, if not encouraged by US and Chinese strategies that are similar, if not essentially the same, just labelled differently. The United States has long opted for regime stability in the Middle East rather than political reform, an approach China adopts under the mum of non-interference in the internal affairs of others.

As a result, both the United States and China de facto signal autocrats that they will not be

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By **Abir Bassam**

It turned out that the Biden-Putin summit on May 16 has established a wider effect than anyone would expect.

It exceeded by far political analysis, especially in Lebanon. The summit almost coincided with the Russian economic delegation's visit to Beirut on the 18th of the same month and the announcement of its study results to initiate investments projects in Lebanon.

The results revealed the Russian delegation's future plans in rebuilding the oil refineries in Zahrani and Tripoli and rehabilitating the latter's port. Regardless of the projects, the Russian companies intend to deal with, if they are approved and encouraged by good

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By **Antonia Dimou**

President Joe Biden meets with Jordan's King Abdullah II in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, Monday, July 19, 2021. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

King Abdullah of Jordan is the first Arab leader who met American President Joe Biden at the White House. The visit has reaffirmed the strong and long-standing Jordan-US strategic partnership and reinvigorated the bilateral engagement for working together on security issues, and economic development on the basis of shared values and priorities. The King's visit to Washington reaffirmed Jordan's value as a reliable ally who plays a critical role for stability in a highly volatile region.

Jordan's value is multi-dimensional and ranges from bilateral military cooperation, intelligence sharing and joint global counterterrorism operations including as a member of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS and the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation

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