

# Syria in Transition



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Welcome to Syria in Transition (SiT), a monthly delve into policy-relevant developments concerning the Syrian conflict. Crafted by practitioners with a decade-long experience in the field, SiT offers informed perspectives tailored for diplomats and decision makers. SiT goes straight to the point and shuns unnecessary verbiage – just as we would prefer as avid readers ourselves.

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## Flat on arrival

The record of Arab and UN diplomatic initiatives on Syria marketed as “steps-for-steps” has been dismal. The Arab Contact Group, the Arab League ministerial committee formed to oversee normalisation, recently suspended further meetings with the regime because of its failure to adhere to a pre-agreed roadmap. One might think that this latest setback would put an end to the idea that offering Assad political and economic benefits in return for seemingly non-strategic concessions is the way forward. But instead of eliciting a critical reappraisal of the assumptions underpinning the steps-for-steps approach that has been the UN's negotiating strategy of the last four years, the UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen has instead doubled down on it. During the UN General Assembly meeting in New York, his office circulated an outline paper of steps-for-steps proposals among relevant countries. The contents do not differ from what the Envoy had already shared verbally in previous years; but ink on paper, combined with the most detailed account of steps-for-steps in a Security Council briefing the following week, underscores Pedersen's continued commitment to his signature initiative. Unfortunately, its many fundamental flaws have not been addressed. Moreover, its contents are concerning for anyone even vaguely familiar with the ways of the Assad regime.

### Red flags and decoys

In essence, steps-for-steps is an attempt to trade Western money and political recognition for regime concessions that make the lives of Syrians more tolerable. These concessions are listed in Pedersen's outline paper, and can be divided into two groups. The first is what the regime would consider red flags because they hinder its systemic violence-based approach to controlling the population. They include detainee releases, due legal process, security guarantees for returning refugees and easing of military conscription. The second group are the decoys. These are

concessions that look good in a list and are reasonable enough, such as easier access to civilian documentation and easing detainee communication with families; but they are so minor that were the regime to implement them – anyway decidedly a long-shot – they would not inspire any trust or confidence, let alone drive forward the political process

Western incentives designed to induce regime concessions as included in the outline paper comprise sanctions waivers and increased Early Recovery assistance. Worryingly, the principal carrot that the Envoy thinks will wet Western appetites is the same as that deployed by the Arabs: refugee return. Assad would of course readily accept any cash under that heading, and would likely undertake overdue infrastructure rehabilitation while diverting a share to his cronies. What is certain is that he would ultimately ignore the protection concerns that deter the vast majority of Syrians from returning, especially as any credible verification mechanism would require independent observers on the ground. The Envoy knows that the West will not foot Assad's entire reconstruction bill, so he further suggests that sanctioning states "could make moves to facilitate" more support from regional states. In reality, however, it is highly doubtful that the Arab Gulf states, that are flooded with drugs from Syria, would be willing to play the role of financial *deus ex machina*; and it is anyway unclear how any of this might advance the Envoy's mandate.

#### Don't take the bait

Critics of the EU's principled position often argue that to alleviate humanitarian suffering and break the diplomatic deadlock Europeans should get off their high horses and formulate demands that the Assad regime can realistically fulfil. This view, however, overlooks Russia and Iran's determination not to yield an inch to their geopolitical foes, as well as Assad's deep-rooted intransigence that views any concession as an existential threat. The door to negotiations with the Europeans should open only if Assad shows interest in a way forward for Syria that is not synonymous with turning the clocks back to pre-2011. Europeans should certainly not feel compelled to respond to the Envoy's flawed strategy with knee-jerk actionism, and should instead signal that they are in no hurry. This means that they should continue to provide humanitarian aid to all of Syria, including limited Early Recovery assistance dependent on stringent rules being met on countering aid diversion and profiteering. Gener-

ous support to neighbouring host countries should also continue and perhaps even be increased. Strategic patience continues to be the smart policy.

More of the same will not restore relevance to the UN Envoy, whose office is not taken seriously anymore – including by the UN country team and UN aid and development agencies that are acting independently of his guidance. One well-placed ex-diplomat described Pedersen as "a messenger" for OCHA head Martin Griffiths, whose principal goal is to send Damascus as much aid and Early Recovery assistance as possible with little regard for political red-lines. Those in the Office of the Special Envoy (OSE) who continue to champion steps-for-steps in its current form are complicit, moreover, in delegitimising the Syrian opposition as a negotiating partner by not granting it a role in crafting or negotiating these steps. Its role remains restricted to the dysfunctional Constitutional Committee. By sidelining the opposition, the OSE is also sidelining itself.

This is evident in the Envoy's acceptance of Arab states' unilateral hijacking of steps-for-steps to frame their normalisation with Assad. His flawed policy, moreover, is discrediting the generic negotiation tactic of facilitating reciprocal concessions to generate political momentum, something that Syria diplomacy urgently needs. The problem is not the product but the recipient. Steps-for-steps was conceived as a bilateral track between the regime and the West; but a more credible process could involve pragmatic concessions between the different areas of control in Syria, on matters concerning aid, trade, energy, education, and civilian travel. That at least would mirror the Syrian-owned and -led process stipulated by UNSCR 2254. That resolution's requirements don't seem to trouble the OSE's political team, whose selective approach does not foresee a role for major players on the ground such as Turkey, Russia, and Iran, let alone local actors in the northwest and northeast. Steps-for-steps can thus be seen as a fast track to regime normalisation for little or no discernible progress at the political – or any other – level.

#### Echo chambers

Despite the clear evidence that reciprocal diplomacy with Assad does not work, the next think tank policy paper on Syria will most likely advocate more of the same: aid and sanctions relief in exchange for refugee returns, detainee releases and Captagon. The steps-

for-steps logic is presently the received wisdom. But why?

The echo chamber effect is certainly one reason. Take for instance the November 2019 paper published by the International Crisis Group (ICG) entitled “Ways out of Europe’s Syria Reconstruction Conundrum.” It outlined an engagement strategy with Assad based on the long-standing EU “more-for-more” approach. In the paper, the then High Representative, Federica Mogherini, is quoted as being in support of such an approach and even advocating it in 2017. The paper says:

*While European states continue to stick to the official line of no reconstruction assistance until a meaningful political transition is fully underway, most member states appear to agree that a more incremental approach would offer a more realistic way forward. High Representative Mogherini made the most detailed public proposal in this respect, in March 2017, when she suggested that the EU could adopt “a logic of more for more” by becoming gradually involved in certain areas, in cooperation with international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, but “only in response to concrete and measurable progress.”*

The problem is that, according to the document cited to support the quote, she said no such thing. ICG interpreted (real) remarks by Mogherini on Europe’s role in a Syria reconstruction effort being done in an “incremental way” to mean that Europeans would support a step-for-step approach regardless of whether a political transition was underway. Mogherini actually refers to stabilisation efforts exclusively in the context of a “post-agreement phase”, i.e. a political transition period *after* a deal between the regime and the opposition had been agreed. This was overlooked in the ICG report, which went on to propose a set of reciprocal concessions amounting to a watered-down interpretation of UNSCR 2254: constitutional reform, refugee returns and free elections in return for sanctions relief, early recovery, reconstruction and diplomatic recognition. Also suggested were some ‘low-hanging’ confidence-building measures (CBMs) such as amnesties for deserters and access to detention centres.

ICG’s report was picked up in another think tank paper entitled “Reconstruction in Syria,” published in July 2020 by the German Institute for International

and Security Affairs (SWP). Citing the ICG report and the Mogherini document as references, it claimed that Mogherini, “had published a ‘more for more’ approach that made European concessions dependent on changes in the regime’s behaviour.” The SWP report supported ICG’s recommendations for a set of reciprocal concessions but went further, arguing that political conditionality should be lifted for any European measures directed at “satisfying the basic needs of the population.” Earlier that year, the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) had weighed in on the same theme with its report (“Society Max: How Europe can help Syrians survive Assad and Coronavirus”) that called on Europeans to adopt a more-for-more approach with clear and realistic benchmarks and reward structures. In November 2020, meanwhile, the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) argued for stronger Russian-European coordination on Syria reconstruction in a paper entitled, “Russia and the EU in Syria: Need for New Approaches?” It was amid this chorus that Damascus and Moscow exploited the potential to champion Early Recovery assistance as a gateway to condition-free reconstruction funded by the Europeans; and that the Office of the UN Special Envoy formulated its vague steps-for-steps rationale with input from some European think-tankers.

Back then, the reading was that Russia and Iran-backed Assad could continue to reject UNSCR 2254 and get away with it. The steps-for-steps logic was thus a last-ditch intellectual salvage effort by researchers in response to a situation deemed hopeless. It was waved along by a particular approach to political realism, in which making deals with certain dictators is deemed necessary and in the best interest of the people they rule over. It is seen as an antidote to “regime change,” the hypocritical Western meddling that many think tankers detest so much. In hindsight, the EU’s decision to reject the think tanks’ policy prescriptions and stick to its “three noes” was the right thing to do. But don’t expect to read about that in the next think tank report.

## A revolt in need of a lifeline

Over the past six weeks the residents of Suwayda have been living their 2011 fantasy. Carnival-like anti-Assad protests of the kind that took place elsewhere in Syria twelve years ago are only now taking place in the Druze-majority southern province. “The people want the downfall of the regime” is being chanted once more, and not only by the usual pro-democracy activists. Now it’s also by ordinary Druze who will tell you they are sick of the regime’s endless war, its promotion of drugs, and its inability to provide a decent quality of life. Bread and butter issues are of course important; but so too are existential concerns that have intensified in recent years related to their very future in Syria. What has now dawned on a majority of Druze is that the secular Assadist state that was once their guarantee of safety when the “Sunni salafist” revolution was in full swing is now a hollowed-out shell, and has become little more than a Trojan Horse for a no less threatening form of religious fundamentalism: the Shia variety.

Groups affiliated to Iran such as Hezbollah have for years been trying to infiltrate Druze society under the cover of the Syrian state. They have long suspected the Druze of being the opposition-from-within, not least because they have long-standing connections to co-religionists in Israel and Lebanon who are avowedly anti-Iran. The National Defence Forces (NDF) militia in Suwayda is under the control of Hezbollah, as are several other militias tied to the Captagon trade operating out of the Lajat region, north of the province. Repeated attempts by Iran to expand its influence in the area, including through Shia proselytising, greatly angered religious leaders. The Druze are fiercely tribal and proud, and do not tolerate outsiders meddling in their internal affairs. When the French attempted to implement land reform in Suwayda, they were met with the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925-27 led by Druze feudal lord Sultan Pasha al-Atrash. His venerated image now stands in place of Assad’s on Suwayda’s streets and public buildings.

Like the Kurds, the Druze view the Syrian conflict as one primarily between Sunnis and Alawites, in which they have only minimal stakes. Since 2011, they’ve tried not to fight outside their province, and to restrict the Syrian army’s conscription of their young men, while

remaining loyal to “the state.” That continued loyalty, however, has come with a price tag: profound enmity from the Sunni majority and a share of the burden of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the state’s Alawite-led military.

The relationship between the two heterodox communities has historically been fraught and shaped by mutual suspicion. In his climb to the top, Hafiz Assad ruthlessly crushed the Druze factions in the army and the Ba’ath Party. The Druze were nevertheless still given a reasonably privileged place in the hierarchy of sects comprising Syria’s minoritarian ruling elite. With their open revolt against the regime, however, they are signalling that they no longer wish to be part of that elite. This is partly because the economic benefits are no longer worth it; but also because being part of that elite in 2023 Syria means being subsumed into a much wider regional “project” run from Tehran where the Druze face being instrumentalised, and perhaps even sacrificed, Hamas-style, on the altar of the Axis of Resistance struggle with Israel and moderate Arab states. That is not the future that the Druze see for themselves.

### What now?

Suwayda’s residents are realising the limits of peaceful protest. Starting in August, both Druze and Alawite activists tried to rouse their respective streets but success was achieved only with the Druze. The emergence of Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajari as champion of the anti-Assad position has given the movement a much-needed focal point and legitimacy boost. The Druze spiritual leader in Israel, Sheikh Muwafak Tarif, has lent his not inconsiderable support. The solidarity of Druze celebrities like the Al-Jazeera presenter Faisal al-Kasim (6.3m followers on X) has also been useful. Despite this, there is now a palpable sense of nervousness and trepidation among the protest movement’s organisers as they look for ways to maintain a momentum that has noticeably declined in recent weeks. The regime in fact has been banking on the protesters tiring and losing confidence, and the leadership splintering and seeking what the activists describe as “individual solutions.” This is code for: everyone for himself. Regular visitors to Suwayda, from regime-friendly civil society activists to Russian generals, offered peace initiatives designed to peel away those who were wavering. Meanwhile, the regime has been rallying its Druze supporters in Syria and Lebanon. The more time passes, the more likely it is that internal

splits will become apparent and regime-instigated Druze-on-Druze violence will commence. If that happens, expect a new refugee wave.

So far, the protesters' call is for an end to the regime through the implementation of UNSCR 2254. One can assume, however, that the demand has been carefully curated for maximum political impact abroad. Domestically, another call is resonating: autonomy. Activists describe this as the "backs to the wall option"; but the Druze already have their backs to the wall, and the call anyway does not contradict the UN resolution and may even make its implementation more likely. Two things are needed for autonomy to happen: a willingness by the Druze to raise arms and take their revolt beyond its 2011 moment; and "international protection." This will involve more than the odd phone call to Al-Hajari from Western diplomats. It will require a border crossing with Jordan and the intervention of the US base in Tanf. As Syria scholar Fabrice Balanche noted in 2016, "If Washington and its partners want this strategic minority to play any role in ousting the regime or otherwise ending the war on favorable terms, they will need to demonstrably reassure local Druze that they have a safe future in Syria without Assad's patronage."

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## Master of Chaos

Western media was rife with speculation over the extent of Iran's involvement in Hamas' 7 October surprise attack. Although smoking gun evidence is scarce, the conventional wisdom is that groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, the PMFs, and the Houthis are the result of a complex web of local grievances and interests with their own unique history of resistance; and that, as such, they cannot be seen simply as Iran proxies, even if Iran arms, trains, and finances them. This complicates attempts at understanding the timing of, and regional agenda behind, the attack.

The official Iranian line is that it had no direct hand. The statements and media leaks from Hamas and Hezbollah members, however, amounted to an unofficial IRGC press conference. In a widely circulated Wall Street Journal report, "senior members" of Hamas and

Hezbollah were quoted anonymously confirming Tehran's role in planning and green-lighting the attack, including at physical meetings attended by Iran's Foreign Minister, a major goal being the torpedoing of US-brokered normalisation talks between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Presumably, the sources quoted would not have highlighted Iran's role as puppet master without Tehran's prior approval. Similarly, Hamas military chief Mohammed Deif explicitly mentioned in an audio message released on 7 October that, "after this, there will be no more attacks in Syria," an obvious reference to Israel's not-so-shadowy war against the IRGC there.

Beyond confronting Israel's "mowing the grass" strategy, groups like Hamas help Iran implement its doctrine of strategic depth in defence through carefully calibrated offensive action. As a revisionist power, Iran has to regularly remind the world that it dictates the tempo and agenda of regional dynamics. The drone attacks on critical Saudi oil infrastructure in 2019 were a prime example; and they worked, setting in motion Riyadh's China-brokered detente. Iran was nevertheless still at risk of being isolated by multiple alliance-building efforts, including the Russia-Turkey and Arab League tracks on Syria, the US-Saudi-UAE-India economic corridor partnership (designed to by-pass the Hormuz strait), the US-Israel-Jordan security pact, growing Israel-Turkey-Azerbaijan cooperation in the Caucasus, and of course, the US-Israel-GCC normalisation track started under Trump and pursued by Biden. All exclude Iran or are implicitly or explicitly directed against Iran. Something had to be done.

For Tehran, the trend towards normalisation with Israel was deeply worrying. Iran needs Israel as an enemy to project its proclaimed anti-Zionist credentials that serve to justify its expansionist policies in the Arab world. The problem is that Iran's most powerful proxy, Hezbollah, has become tame over the years. The Lebanese group wreaked havoc in Syria to keep Assad in power – losing an estimated 2,000 fighters in the process – but on the Israel front it prefers to keep its powder dry. In Tehran, however, the battle cry of the "Axis of Resistance" must be maintained at all costs lest anyone forget what Iran is all about. This is where Hamas' goal of superseding Fatah as the sole legitimate voice of Palestinians by a spectacular display of force against an arrogant Israel intersected perfectly with that of Iran. As rockets slammed into

Israeli cities, the chorus of Resistance slogans across the Arab world easily drowned out the peaceniks. The intended message is clear: Iran is still the master of chaos, and you dare not remove it from your calculations. From this perspective, no matter what happens to Gaza, Iran has won.

### Implications for Syria

The Syrian front will likely remain quiet for now. Israel does not want a war on multiple fronts, and Assad will want to keep a low-profile because he knows that enraged Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu could easily topple his regime. He will likely bask in the warm glow of the *muqawama's* perceived victory from a safe distance, having once again proven that he is on the right side of regional alliances. Sitting this one out makes sense, but it might not be so easy. Beyond the immediate Gaza threat, Israel will turn its attention to its northern border and Iran's entrenchment in Syria. It will want to hit hard, but given the extent of Iran's penetration of Syria's military and social fabric, the means available to it are limited. Air strikes alone cannot dislodge the thousands of IRGC militiamen embedded in Syria's southern provinces.

This is where resurrecting the Southern Front model, involving militiamen fighting militiamen, might be an option. Israel, with the help of Jordan and the US, could sponsor a Syrian rebel force to police a buffer zone that keeps Assad, the IRGC, Islamic State, and drug traffickers well away from the Israeli and Jordanian borders, just as the Southern Front had done in 2014-2018. Given the atrocities committed by Assad and Iran, and the ongoing opposition in southern Syria to the re-establishment of regime power, recruitment of Sunni Arab volunteers in Daraa would not be hard. For Israel to push back against Iran would resonate with the Gulf Arabs too, who would likely bankroll the venture. Russian objections might complicate matters, but Moscow is in no position to stand in the way of a concerted US-Israeli-Arab effort.

Then there are the Druze. Given their stalled revolt against Assad, they might be the biggest beneficiaries of any proactive Israeli engagement in Syria. There's no love lost between the Druze and Iran: in September the main religious leader of the sect in Syria, Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajari, called for a *jihad* against Iranian militias. For Israel, Suwayda might be the most attractive proposition, given the number of Druze soldiers in the Israeli military with ties to relatives in Syr-

ia. Assad could have only a limited window of opportunity to quell the revolt there before it morphs into an overt Israeli-Jordanian 'sphere of influence.' For Tehran, the Druze were always a lost cause, and their alignment with Israel and its friends would help to sharpen the battle lines for the next major confrontation. As the only actor with a genuinely long-term strategy for Syria, Iran can absorb the pushback and quietly plot another "reshuffling of the cards."

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## Death from above?

Amid an unprecedented state of disillusionment and anger in Syria, manifested most vividly by the Suwayda protests and growing restlessness in the regime's heartlands, a devastating attack in Homs has reminded regime loyalists that their side remains at war. On 5 October, at a graduation ceremony for military college cadets, explosions left 129 people dead and 250 injured, including many women and children. According to official sources, the cause was a suicide drone attack. As soon as news of the incident circulated, Syrians smelled a rat. It wasn't only the usual talking heads of pro-opposition TV punditry that cast doubt over the official story, but loyalists too, some airing their suspicions on YouTube.

Syria is not short of conspiracy theories. Without hard evidence (and there hardly ever is with incidents like this) firm conclusions are best avoided. But when the case involves the Assad regime, with all that is known about how it operates and what it is capable of, it is worth hearing out the sceptics. The first thing they ask is why the defence minister and the Homs governor and other senior invitees leave the ceremony 40 minutes before the attack? And why were Russian and Iranian officials who usually attend such ceremonies conspicuously absent? They also question why the cadets and their families were kept at the parade ground a full 40 minutes after the dignitaries had left. They query the sound of gunfire in one of the earliest videos of the attack to emerge, suggesting ground attack rather than drone strike. They also question why the ceremony was brought forward a month when the traditional date was 5 November. Of course, the sound of gunfire could have been soldiers firing at

the drones, and the dignitaries leaving early a case of routine security precaution; and the last-minute date change a purely bureaucratic affair. There are always simple explanations.

But are there? The reasons for doubting the official account on this occasion are many and varied. In addition to questions about the all-too-convenient timing, political as well as circumstantial, there is the question of who knew what and when. Days before the attack, state-run media reported statements by the deputy head of the Russian Reconciliation Centre for Syria, Rear Admiral Vadim Kulit, warning that terrorists in Idlib, Aleppo, and Latakia were preparing attacks on Syrian and Russian military sites, and naming the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) as the main culprit. The TIP is a militant Uighur Chinese Muslim group that Assad and Russia often use to bait the Chinese government into contributing more to their war effort. Clearly, Russia had prior knowledge of an attack, so why were precautionary security measures not stepped up? An open-air ceremony attended by senior military and Ba'ath Party figures carries much prestige; and the military college is located within a very important "security square" in Homs surrounded by several important military bases and installations. Since the drones were large enough to cause mass casualties, it seems odd that no Russian or Syrian radar tracked them, and that no interception attempts were made, including by the much-vaunted S-400 air defence system. The following day the Ministry of Defence issued a statement claiming it had foiled a second "terrorist attack" involving drones, aimed at the Homs Military Hospital, and that all the drones had been downed. The lack of effective defence one day, and a full score sheet the next, raises eyebrows. Alternatively, what happened on 5 October could just be the result of sheer incompetence. It has been known.

What could have laid to rest any doubts about the official account was video footage clearly showing the drones slamming into the crowd. But despite the presence of hundreds on that day, many with smartphones filming the ceremony, the few pictures and video posted online do not shed any useful light on how the attack occurred and – crucially – do not provide information on the drones' origins. Surely if the regime had been confident of its drones-from-Idlib story, and wanted to elicit international sympathy, it would have had no compunction about airing as much

footage as possible, or at least would have showed the world drone fragments. Instead, the *mukhabarat* instructed all survivors not to share any footage taken that day, under threat of prosecution.

Damascus has yet to issue any detailed statement on who exactly was responsible. Within an hour of the attack, dozens of towns in Idlib were nevertheless shelled mercilessly – despite the frontline with the rebel-held province being 130 kms from the military college. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is known to use improvised drones but only with a maximum range of 30 kms and a limited payload. It seems improbable that it could have carried out such a devastating and highly accurate strike against a heavily defended security zone. As usual, there was no official investigation and no public firings, and the regime appeared keen to bury the dead, mourn for three days, and move on. Certainly, a hardening of resolve among loyalists at this time is convenient for Assad, as is a *casus belli* to further reduce the Idlib pocket.

The truth may never be firmly established, and the incident will likely enter the pantheon of Syria's great murder mysteries, alongside the 2005 "suicide" of interior minister Ghazi Kan'an, the 2012 crisis cell bombing and the 2014 killing of Ahrar al-Sham's leadership. For now, in the words of poet Wallace Stevens, "perhaps the truth depends on a walk around a lake."

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## Postcard from Beijing

Bashar Assad was in China last month for reasons that are not at all entirely clear. Officially, he was there with Mrs Assad to attend the opening ceremony of the 19th Asian Games held on 23 September in the city of Hangzhou, together with the heads of state of Cambodia, Nepal and Timor-Leste. Easily the most important guest, however, was Crown Prince Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah of Kuwait, who was there also to discuss oil deals and investment opportunities. He was accordingly seated immediately to the right of President Xi Jinping at official ceremonies and dinners, while Assad was placed some distance away. Even at photo opportunities, Xi Jinping and Assad's respective wives stood between them, a subtle suggestion

that the Chinese leader might not hold the highest regard for his Syrian guest. The Chinese government is meticulous about symbolism and protocol, and its message was clear: you are welcome, but know your place.

Plainly, the Chinese people have no great interest in Syria. They hardly know about its twelve-year conflict, and so it was understandable that commentary on the visit in China's traditional news outlets, as well as social media networks, was limited. The coverage nevertheless made clear what the Chinese government found most useful about Assad. Beijing wants to reinforce to its domestic audience the image of a beneficent China standing against a Western colonialist monster; and Assad was the perfect propaganda prop.

In the official media, the visit was spun as a win for China's "peace diplomacy." But look more closely and you catch a glimpse of what China's government really thinks of Syria. The official Xinhua news agency published an English transcript of the Strategic Partnership signed on 22 September between the two countries. Notably, the agreement says that, "China is willing to (...) increase the import of high-quality agricultural products from Syria." This sentence was not included in the Mandarin version published on the Chinese Foreign Ministry website, suggesting that it was likely a copy-and-paste error from a previous agreement that a Xinhua editor failed to spot. It is unlikely that such sloppiness would have been tolerated for a strategic partnership agreement with a country that really mattered: Kuwait for example.

Social media carried mixed reviews of the visit. Among the most approved comments on the state-censored microblogging website Weibo, with 15,000 likes, was this: "Syrian President Assad's visit to China caused a great stir on social media at home and abroad (...) The Arab world has gradually become disgusted with the West and cherishes China's friendship. The West wants to dominate the world, while China wants to be kind to others. China is a friend of the Arab world." On Reddit Real China, free from state censorship, the comments were notably less guarded: "Assad lacks money and China is doomed", opined one blogger.

Undoubtedly, Assad was in China looking for a hand-out. But for Beijing, which has not provided much support to Syria apart from protecting it at the UN Secu-

rity Council, aid would only come within the framework of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Syria signed on to the BRI in early 2022, but none of the investments announced then have materialised. Assad's delegation included several ministers (accompanied by their wives) but no businessmen, and the agreements signed did not suggest anything new or significant. China does not invest in dangerous sanctions-ridden war zones replete with jostling great powers and terrorist groups. Also, the BRI is not what it used to be.

The visit was noteworthy only for its PR value. It was an opportunity for the two dictators to message their domestic audiences. Xi Jinping wanted to flaunt his influence in the Arab world and opposition to Western "aggression"; and Assad wanted to prolong the silly illusion that China would save his country from ruin – an especially important line given failing Arab normalisation and the growing disillusionment among his own Alawite community with the spiralling cost of living and a tanking economy.

In a final tragicomic twist, as they bid farewell to China, the Assad couple filmed a cheesy video in Mandarin; but instead of saying "thank you, China", Bashar made a hash of the pronunciation and said "thank you, England." Maybe this was what the visit was really about: a nice outing for the Assad children and an opportunity for Mrs Assad to play at Princess Diana.