

# 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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## Triple Nexus Syria version

In Syria, humanitarian aid has long been wielded as a tool of conflict. Contemplating its potential role in peacebuilding is therefore considered unorthodox. Humanitarians are wary of anything that could further complicate their access to those in need and compromise their apolitical identity, codified by the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. Nonetheless, discussions abound on the intersection of humanitarian assistance, development and peacebuilding. Given the limitations of life-saving aid in enabling stabilising areas to embark on effective peacebuilding, attention was always likely to shift to developmental support. However, where aid ends and development assistance begins is never quite made clear, and the inherently political nature of aid and development assistance is never adequately addressed.

The situation is best understood in Robert Louis Stevenson’s novella *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Dr Jekyll creates a potion to separate and suppress an undesirable part of his personality, but his rigid and ultimately unattainable rules led him to be consumed by his dark side, and he transformed permanently into the monstrous Mr Hyde. To continue the analogy, it might be wise for humanitarians and their donors to embrace the political nature of aid instead of attempting to contain it.

One attempt to acknowledge the intersection of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding activities was made by the UN in 2016, when António Guterres introduced the Triple Nexus framework. In Syria, the Triple Nexus was a bit of a non-starter given that major donors had ostracised the Assad regime and conditioned development assistance on an irreversible political transition. Despite this, the Triple

Nexus principle gained some traction, albeit without explicit mention of “development”, leaning instead on less contentious concepts such as Early Recovery whose implementation did not require formal diplomatic relations with Damascus. This led to a progressive expansion of the grey zone between aid and development assistance, with UN agencies persistently lobbying for stretched donor principles to allow for bigger budgets and leeway in programming.

### Early Recovery and peacebuilding

The UN’s Agenda for Humanity initiative in 2016 empowered resident coordinators to become the highest-ranking development representatives of the UN system in their respective countries. The UN Syria country team includes individuals with certain sympathies for the regime, which is known to do its homework when it comes to ‘vetting’ the UN staff to whom it grants visas. The resident coordinators’ newfound authority as development chiefs was illusory, however, as long as donors rejected development assistance. This is why the calls of some UN agencies for transcending established divisions between humanitarian and development activities grew louder. At the same time, increased humanitarian needs intensified demands for a more comprehensive and sustainable response; and lobbying of Western capitals on increasing Early Recovery assistance was done under that rubric. Yet there were no concerted efforts to design Early Recovery programming with a clear peacebuilding agenda. Instead, Early Recovery became merely a carrot in the UN’s flawed steps-for-steps initiative, and a Western concession in Russia’s annual Security Council blackmail on extending the cross-border mandate.

The consequences of this failed approach are still evident today, with the regime demanding more Early Recovery assistance to facilitate refugee returns – a proposition some still believe might work. From the perspective of INGOs and their Syrian partners, the Triple Nexus appears promising on paper but is largely seen as just one of many *en vogue* concepts. Without donors attempting even to conceptualise what a strategic peacebuilding element of an Early Recovery programme could look like, “peacebuilding” has largely been interpreted by UN agencies and large humanitarian implementers as a low-risk element that aligns conveniently with established practices of empowering communities and marginalised groups. This naturally has meant an emphasis on increasing the “resil-

ience” of communities – a noble objective, yet a reactive and passive interpretation of what peacebuilding is, insofar as it avoids the Track I level. To truly harness the power of the trinity that is the Triple Nexus, genuine peacebuilding components in Early Recovery programming that concern the Track I level need to be seriously considered and implemented. This not only would constitute a new and promising approach to peacebuilding; it would also mitigate the risk of increased Early Recovery funding becoming a slippery slope for normalisation with Assad and condition-free reconstruction. If peacebuilding is actually about building bridges between Syrians divided between “areas of control,” the Syria version of the Triple Nexus might best be termed “cross-area stabilisation.”

### Cross-area stabilisation

The concept of cross-area stabilisation arises from the conflict realities of 2023. Syria is a *de facto* divided country where different areas are controlled by competing local actors but are nonetheless interconnected and mutually dependent in terms of economics and services. They also share common challenges such as high trade costs, limited markets, lack of reliable water and energy supplies, and skills shortages. Joined-up solutions are increasingly essential for survival.

Cross-area stabilisation projects aim to create mutually beneficial outcomes for multiple conflict stakeholders by engaging local authorities across the frontlines on durable and sustainable solutions to everyday problems. For instance, the Alouk pumping station in Hasakah is the focus of persistent and unnecessary conflict over water and energy that engender tactical rather than strategic approaches to a resolution. Further possible such endeavours include water infrastructure and distribution agreements in the Idlib-Hama-Latakia triangle, and energy initiatives in northern Aleppo. This type of cross-area coordination posits peacebuilding as an essential goal of Early Recovery programming, rather than merely a desired secondary benefit. Such projects commence at a modest, technical level but harbour considerable potential as entry points for intra-Syrian discussions on safety and calm across the frontlines. Cross-area stabilisation – in practical terms the Syrian version of the Triple Nexus – therefore builds a bridge between conflict management (what the Astana process and the US-Russia deconfliction line are all about) and conflict reso-

lution (what the UN is meant to be working on). This is why it defers large-scale development assistance until a political transition is in progress. It does, however, involve increasing investment in Early Recovery assistance for projects designed to meet humanitarian and peacebuilding objectives in equal measure. After a decade marked by the weaponisation of aid, exploring its potential as a tool for peace is surely worthwhile.

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## Timeless beauty

Almost eight years after its adoption in 2015, it appears that UNSCR 2254 is ageing more like milk than wine. The resolution remains the primary reference for Syria diplomacy, with official support from everyone except the Assad regime, mainly because it offers diplomatic bonus points without associated costs. Yet, there is a quiet sentiment that the changed political and military realities render the resolution unimplementable. Some suggest that it is an outdated tool for regime change in light of Assad's reconquest of much of the country. Such notions coming from think tankers or retired diplomats are predictable. It's different, though, coming from practitioners with political mandates who are supposed to work on the resolution's implementation.

UNSCR 2254 was negotiated and passed after the tumultuous spring of 2015 when numerous Syrian armed opposition groups launched an offensive together with Jabhat al-Nusra, the predecessor to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. In April that year the provincial capital of Idlib fell, emboldening rebels in other parts of the country to double down on struggling regime forces. The momentum faded rapidly, however, as the US and its allies restrained tens of thousands of fighters from the Southern Front from marching on Damascus, Iran and Russia escalated their military support for the regime and Washington prioritised the nuclear deal with Tehran. Russia's full blown military intervention in September, as the world was sitting in New York for the UN General Assembly, decisively turned the tide. It became clear that Assad's reign had become much more secure. Against this background, Assad showed no interest in implementing UNSCR 2254, echoing the disinterest of the Rus-

sians, whose strategic bombing of the opposition and of civilian areas was a clear statement of their disregard for Syrians' legitimate political aspirations and human rights.

### A timeless call

Contrary to what critics of UNSCR 2254 claim, the situation today isn't vastly different from 2015. Assad and his key patrons weren't inclined to implement the resolution then, nor are they now. The Kerry-Lavrov bilateral dialogue of 2015 may have looked promising in front of TV cameras, but in reality it was a castle in the air relying on goodwill from Russia that simply didn't exist. Implementation demands external pressure to force the regime to the negotiation table and to compel the opposition to retract maximalist demands (which it has already done without compromising on UNSCR 2254's principles). Those with the means of exerting such pressure, particularly the US, however, weren't as willing or able to act in 2015 as they are now. Of course, the US and wider Western relationship with Russia has reached a new low since the invasion of Ukraine; but it's not like key players in 2015 were eager to sit together and have a constructive talk about Syria's future. Importantly, if UNSCR 2254 is not implementable under prevailing circumstances, it doesn't mean that it should be thrown out. Its beauty lies in its timeless call for a peaceful transition of power, granting Syrians their legitimate political aspirations, dignity and freedom.

The four elements - ceasefire, governance, constitution, elections - of the political process that the resolution outlines are as simple as they are valid. A genuine political process cannot be initiated while fighting is raging, hence the need for a ceasefire. A legitimate (transitional) government is required to mandate constitutional reform. A reformed constitution is needed to pave the way for free and fair elections and guide the country towards a peaceful future. All of this stands distinct from the notion of regime change, an idea that Russia would never have supported anyway. Mandated officials are expected to engage in good conflict management and facilitate new opportunities for implementation. While this may take time, sacrificing Syrians' legitimate aspiration on the altar of alleged 'pragmatism' would be both morally wrong and senseless in terms of advancing the political process and serving their own security and migration interests.

### A question of realism

A 'pragmatism' that involves lifting sanctions and normalising relations with Assad would entail a delusional belief in a 'return to (a new) normal' with Assad. This is unviable: foreign cash injections won't provide Assad sufficient resources to suppress the unrest stemming from decades of his clan's dictatorship and a decade of civil war. The cards in Syria have been reshuffled permanently, and time is required to establish a new equilibrium reconcilable with regional and international power dynamics. Discussions about appropriate sanctions, the extent of Early Recovery assistance, and suitable economic and security arrangements must continue. Amidst these deliberations, however, the principles of UNSCR 2254 must never be overlooked. The situation in Israel/Palestine serves as a constant reminder of how UN resolutions can become utterly disconnected from real-world politics. Though a momentary power balance may suggest stability and therefore feel somehow natural, the reality is that every balance of power is created politically. The constant truth is that people will do whatever it takes to fulfil their natural urges to live in dignity. This lies at the heart of UNSCR 2254. Syrians have a lengthy path ahead, and fortunately UNSCR 2254 outlines intermediate stages. What's certain is that Syrians need allies on this path, not defeatists. Mandated officials don't need to be morally-guided idealists to fulfil this role; they simply need to be realists.

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## Gaza's silver lining

As the Gaza war continues into its second month, many are now asking if there is a silver lining to the unfolding tragedy. The civilians gunned down in cold blood or blown to bits by JDAMs, the rubble where a school or hospital once stood, the displacement, the tears, the heartbreak. Surely something good will come out of all this. God cannot be that cruel.

For Palestinian activists, the global outpouring of sympathy and support for Gaza was a gift from heaven. It forced younger audiences in the West in particular to choose sides based on the popular idea of a "matrix of oppression." A previous generation found its *cause celebre* in opposing apartheid South Africa; today's

Millenials and Gen-Zs in Europe and America view Israel pretty much in the same way, with Hamas militants seen as freedom fighters much as the ANC guerillas had been thirty years ago. That is quite an achievement and one that will have serious implications for future Western policy towards Israel.

For Arabs in the region, the potential silver lining is a resolution of the 75-year-old Israel-Palestine conflict. Not resolution Oslo-style, i.e. kicked into the long grass with interim agreements, elastic deadlines, and endless prevarication. But agreed, settled, ended. The issue is not purely about Palestinian rights, including the right to self-determination and an independent state, important as that is; it's also about denying Iran the use of the Palestinian card for its violent power plays, and allowing the kind of stability to take hold that would promote economic growth. These are real and pressing interests that require an internationally-negotiated and guaranteed solution based on international law and the democratic wills of Palestinians and Israelis.

If history is anything to go by, such a possible silver lining is not entirely hypothetical. In the immediate aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, the US pushed for peace between Israel, its Arab neighbours, and the PLO partly because it felt a need to make a gesture to the Arab world after having destroyed an Arab state that was Israel's main military adversary at the time. Today's war on Gaza and Hamas, waged with the US's unconditional support, may create a similar urge to re-balance the region in a manner that precludes the emergence of a Hamas 2.0. The Arab world is expecting such an approach, with Saudi Arabia ready to lead a unified Arab and Palestinian position based on King Abdallah's 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.

If a political solution is to be found, two things must happen. First must come a re-commitment to UN resolutions on the status of Israeli occupied territories, including on illegal settlements. This concerns especially the US whose loyalty is surely better placed with legitimate UN resolutions than a messianic and far right Israeli government. Second, a political investment must be made in the only Palestinian party that is ready and willing to negotiate peace: the PLO. Better known as the Palestinian Authority these days, the PLO has been weakened by successive Israeli governments as part of a strategy to avoid negotiating seriously. The PLO has also been talked down as "illegit-

imate”, “corrupt”, and “unpopular” by pro-Palestinian Western commentators who, in the same breath call for a Palestinian state and say that Hamas is “popular”. The latter two positions are irreconcilable: a Palestinian state requires a strong PLO, not a strong Hamas. The PLO leadership of today is undoubtedly deficient, but it would be a grave mistake to write off the PLO. Its decline was a feature, not a bug, and Palestinian politicians are not corrupt by nature. Undermining the moderates as weak and feckless while bigging up the radicals only leads to political deadlock and more violence. It also contributes to Israeli disingenuous Israeli claims that there’s no partner for peace.

The lesson for Syria is clear: successful negotiations require two sides. Assad and his allies have worked tirelessly to silence, discredit, and manipulate moderate voices. It is crucial for the West not to fall into the trap and to recalibrate its expectations of the political opposition in line with realities on the ground. Delegitimising the opposition by pointing to its dependence on Turkey, for example, is misguided. In an internationalised civil war, you are only as good as your patrons. Lose them, and you lose. Yasser Arafat understood this only too well. Given the West’s commitment to UNSCR 2254, robust support for Syria’s moderate opposition should be seen as a long-term investment. Should the Gaza war lead to a resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict, Syria could be next in line. When the time comes, the West will need a strong Syrian political opposition.

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## Shadow wars

Regime- and Hezbollah-enabled narco-trafficking gangs plying their trade along the Syrian-Jordanian border have become a menace to society. Drug addiction among almost all demographics has sky-rocketed as narcotics are promoted locally as well as cross-border, and associated ills such as robbery, kidnapping, and domestic violence have all risen as a result. Illicit drugs – mainly hashish, Captagon, and crystal meth – are readily available at prices “cheaper than a headache pill”, according to a knowledgeable source. Promoters of these substances target young teenagers who, once addicted, become drug pushers and mules

working for those further up the chain. The Syrian regime’s security forces not only turn a blind eye to all this, but provide security and legal cover for the drug dealers. The judicial police, whose job it is to execute arrest warrants, do not dare apprehend anyone linked to the major gangs, even if caught red-handed, because of the protection provided by Hezbollah and the security agencies (mainly Military Security and Air Force Intelligence). Where drug smugglers or promoters are apprehended by locals and handed over to the police, the courts routinely release them on bail, after which ‘higher ups’ ensure that the charges against them are dropped.

Apart from the breakdown in law-and-order, the drug trade has upset the balance of power between Daraa’s clans, with smaller clans involved in drugs accumulating money and political power at the expense of the larger clans who are not. Moreover, the regime is rebuilding its support networks in Daraa on the back of the billion-dollar trade, and this puts at risk rival networks of reconciled Free Syrian Army (FSA) commanders who are embedded within local communities, possess arms and know-how, and are still broadly aligned with the US and Jordan. Some of them have taken matters in their own hands.

Enter the anti-drug trafficking vigilantes: ex-rebels like Abu Murshid al-Bardan, Abu Kinan Kassir, and Mahmoud al-Aqra, who are now community leaders in western districts of Daraa after reconciling with the regime in 2018. They have formed a covert organisation made up of informants and hit teams that operate to eliminate those involved in the drug trade. Individuals identified as drug dealers are closely monitored and then warned. Sometimes, their drug warehouses and financial assets are targeted to send a message, but if they persist, the response can be deadly. Last year, they assassinated Anas al-Nazal, a trafficker, which prompted members of his gang to flee the area. Sometimes, the vigilantes find themselves taking on former comrades-in-arms, given that many reconciled FSA commanders were recruited into the drug trade by Hezbollah and the Syrian security forces. One such example was Anas al-Shalal, formerly of the FSA, who was shot dead in January 2021 in the town of Jilin.

The vigilantes are organised geographically. In the Tal Shihab-Kharab al-Shahm border region, west of Daraa city, former FSA commander Radi al-Hashish leads a group that eliminated Farfahina al-Homs and

Abu Shihab Umyan, two traffickers linked to Hezbollah. In Daraa city – the Tijuana of Syria – the key vigilante leaders are Abdurashid Masalma and Mohamed Muhaimeid. The most highest-profile victim has been Mustafa al-Kasm Masalma (sanctioned by the US Treasury) who fell to a vigilante IED in Daraa city in August 2023. The order to target him allegedly came from Amman, which maintains contacts with the vigilante groups and provides them with limited resources. Another sector is the town of Naseeb which since the nearby border crossing with Jordan re-opened in September 2021 has become a hub for contraband smuggling of every kind. There, a major gang leader named Fayez al-Radi was gunned down together with associate Musa al-Sharif in March 2023 by a hit squad from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which occasionally lends support to the vigilantes. Abdulrazaq al-Masri heads vigilante groups in the towns of Nawa, Jasim, and Sanamayn. In eastern parts of Daraa province, meanwhile, Ali Bash and Abu Ali Mustafa, two commanders in the Russian-backed Eighth Brigade of the regime army's Fifth Corps, lead coordination efforts with vigilante groups.

The vigilantes' work is complicated by clan protection. Successful traffickers become useful benefactors for their clans and receive their protection in return. "Whacking" someone who enjoys clan backing risks a blood feud with the whole clan, and so vigilantes often resort to apprehending their target, interrogating him, and releasing him with a stern warning. This is often enough to convince the trafficker to relocate. Avoidance of inter-clan blood-letting is especially important in Daraa where smaller clans like the Radis, the Ruwais, the Masalmas and the Abu Zureiks are increasingly challenging the dominance of the three larger clans that have shunned the drug trade: the Mikdads, the Hariris, and the Zo'bis. The latter depend largely on agriculture and view the drugs trade as a major disruptor that has lured young men away from working the land. Another complicating factor is the protection afforded by the regime. Maj-Gen Louay al-Ali, the Military Security chief in southern Syria, is known to intercede on behalf of traffickers for a price. One such example is Mohamad Suwaydan, released by the Eighth Brigade in May 2023 after spending two months in prison and paying a \$100,000 fine.

A further complication are the internal complexities of the drugs trade itself. Some traffickers eliminate their

rivals by occasionally cooperating with the vigilantes. Military Security and Air Force Intelligence compete over taxes imposed on the trade and are known to exploit the vigilantes to settle scores. Indeed, several vigilante groups are formally contracted to Military Security as part of the post-2018 reconciliation agreements, and these must tread a fine line between placating Maj-Gen Al-Ali and furthering their own agenda. Islamic State, which maintain a covert presence in Daraa, sometimes eliminates drug dealers but affords protection to others in return for a cut of the proceeds. The weakness of the regime's security grip and the complex nature of power dynamics in southern Syria has allowed an eco-system of local armed groups to flourish, with the vigilantes being an element that checks the unrestricted growth of the narco-traffickers. Vigilante activity is not entirely welcomed by the regime, but neither is it seen as an existential threat.

The vigilantes like to portray their actions as being for the greater good; but wider agendas are at play. Combating the drug trade in Syria intersects neatly with the fight against Hezbollah and the IRGC, whose activities are funded in-part by drug money. Israel might now be targeting Hezbollah and the IRGC from the air more aggressively than ever before, but on the ground the vigilantes have for years been using the anti-drug crusade as cover to target Iranian-backed individuals and groups. In this they are supported by a Sunni Islamist and nationalist support base that, like the Druze next door, are fearful of the rapid spread of Shia influence within their communities. Jordan too is fearful of rising Iranian military influence on its border and regards the vigilantes as useful assets. Should the war expand from Gaza to southern Syria, they are likely to be called upon to do their duty.

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## No way out

Over the summer, members of the Alawite community in Syria spoke out against Assad – and his wife – more forcefully than ever before. In widely circulated videos on social media, Assad was described as a liar, thief, butcher, and foreign puppet. On the streets of Latakia, Jableh, and Tartus, however, the anger at rampant corruption, power shortages, and spiraling living costs

has not led to the kind of anti-Assad street protests that rocked the southern province of Suwayda. Alawite and Druze activists had originally aimed to instigate a protest movement fuelled by resentment about bread-and-butter issues in both their communities at the same time. The failure of the “Alawite street” to be roused into open opposition has been portrayed as evidence of continued support for Assad. In reality, his support base has been collapsing fast, a process accelerated by his failure to seize on Arab normalisation to bring economic relief.

There may still be plenty of Alawites motivated by sectarianism who will stick with Assad to the bitter end; but for the majority, the decision not to take to the streets was driven by factors drawn from their own lived experience. The first and most obvious is that the regime has an incredibly low tolerance threshold for dissent, especially among Alawites. In the 1980s and 90s the mostly Alawite cadres of the Communist Action Party were decimated, with bouts of imprisonment of up to 20 years. In 2002 Dr Aref Dalila, the dissident Syrian economist of Alawite descent, received a ten year prison sentence while oppositionists from other sects received sentences of only two to four years. More recently, Alawites like Ayman Fares, Ahmed Ibrahim Ismail, and Bashar Najla who made critical comments on social media have been swiftly arrested and not heard of again. Others, such as *ex-shabiha* member Lama Abbas, who spoke out against Fourth Division looting and corruption were intimidated into silence by online smear campaigns.

The second factor that makes Alawite opposition particularly difficult is the near impossibility of organising clandestinely within a community that is more heavily penetrated by informants than any other in Syria. Known popularly as *awaniya*, these informants record the most intricate details of daily life, everything from who said what at a village elder’s meeting to the intimate goings on inside a school or courthouse. Any word of protest, let alone any inclining of a nascent opposition organisation, is quickly exposed and nipped in the bud. This is what happened to the network of Alawite activists known as the “10 August Movement”, which intended to organise protests parallel to those of Suwayda but failed because it was so thoroughly penetrated by *awaniya*.

The third factor, which gets lost in the simplistic “Alawite vs Sunni” approach, is that Alawites are not

a single, homogeneous bloc. Divisions among Alawite clans, for example, are said by one insider to be more vicious than those between rival Sunni Islamist groups. This sometimes leads to decades-long blood feuds and the prohibition of marriages between certain clans. Linked to this is the absence of an overall religious leadership or hierarchy that can serve as a focal point. Each clan has its own religious authority that the Assads keep in competition with other clans for state patronage. This is in stark contrast to the Druze, whose religious leadership was not assiduously targeted by the regime.

A fourth factor is the lack of a regional patron that can guarantee Alawites a soft landing should they turn against the regime. In large part this is the result of a stereotypical view of Alawites as regime stalwarts, which has greatly diminished their options in terms of local and regional alliance-building. Alawites don’t have a Turkey or an Iran that patronises them and gives them direction and legitimacy distinct from that of the regime. Alawite opposition politicians are therefore viewed with much suspicion by ordinary Alawites, who think that they are foolish and naïve to throw in their lot with the anti-Assad cause without sufficient “guarantees”. Unsurprisingly, disillusioned Alawites think twice before going public. The Alawites have been so type-cast that no one – including states that back the opposition – really believes that that there is any point in engaging with them with a view to peeling them away from Assad. Although a misunderstanding of the state of the Alawites, it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Fear of reprisals and collective punishment should Assad go is a fifth factor dissuading Alawites from joining the anti-Assad movement. During the past five decades, Alawite society has been heavily militarised with the army and the security forces as major employers. That has resulted in a heavy death toll in Alawite-majority provinces – and a linked heavy burden of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Alawites are deeply sensitive to accusations of collective guilt, and regard the West’s pursuit of “accountability” as being directed against them specifically. They fear that a political transition away from Assad would leave them vulnerable to pursuit in local and international courts, and could open the door to individual or collective acts of revenge, particularly if Assad’s army crumbled and Sunnis assumed command of the military. Many Alawite families today have resorted to

sending their precious surviving sons abroad to save them from military conscription and any massacres that may befall the sect.

Finally, there is the not insignificant factor of drugs. Syria's coastal region is rife with drug producers and smugglers connected to the Assad family, and they have caused a massive spike in drug addiction. "Twenty five per cent of Alawite youth is high on Captagon" said one knowledgeable source. That is not entirely surprising, nor an exaggeration. Partly it is linked to long years of dreary military service and a lack of economic opportunities. The widespread addiction limits the extent to which "the street" can be galvanised; while the well-heeled drug gangs have become a new source of support for the regime and would punish any Alawite street protest movement that dared to emerge.

Alawites want to escape the cage in which they have been placed by the Assad family; but this does not mean that they will rebel against their captors. It's just too risky. Physical escape is an option; but Europe is increasingly difficult to reach, and in the region only Iraq is seen as at all welcoming of Alawite refugees. For lack of alternatives, a mental escape will have to suffice.