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Don’t Overthink the Assad-Makhlouf Feud

Oula A. Alrifai

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The Syrian leader’s dramatic war of words with his massively wealthy cousin may seem like a major fracture inside the regime, but the dynamics of past and present family disputes paint a different picture.

Over the past three weeks, President Bashar al-Assad’s cousin Rami Makhlouf has taken to social media to express frustration with the regime’s latest threats against his business empire, which reportedly constitutes a colossal 60-80 percent of Syria’s economy. Assad and his wife, Asma, have publicly accused Makhlouf of corruption, both to deflect blame for the country’s economic turmoil and pressure him into remedying it. The tycoon’s numerous holdings include telecom monopoly Syriatel and substantial firms in the oil, gas, banking, construction, retail, and real estate sectors. In 2011, *Le Monde* estimated his net worth to be $6 billion; that fortune, coupled with his ties to Syria’s inner circle of power, played a massive role in both financing Assad’s crackdown on the 2011 uprising and keeping the regime afloat through nine years of conflict.

Given his major leverage over the country’s economic future and his tendency to avoid public spats with Assad, Makhlouf’s three recent video messages—on April 30, May 3, and May 17—came as a shock to many observers. Yet the family has long been riddled by internal fissures, and even when senior members issue (or carry out) threats against each other, it does not necessarily signal the regime’s imminent demise.

THE ASSADS HAVE SURVIVED WORSE RIFTS IN THE PAST

Nearly four decades ago, the regime had to deal with what seemed like an even more direct existential threat involving Bashar’s father, President Hafiz al-Assad. On April 13, 1984, Hafiz’s youngest brother Rifaat marched on Damascus with the aim of taking over the government, spurred in large part by the president’s sharply deteriorating health (including a serious heart attack). Rifaat’s supporters blanketed the streets of the capital with posters of him to rally public support. More alarmingly, he used his position as commander of the Internal Security Forces and the Saraya al-Difa paramilitary to mobilize nearly half of Syria’s army in a matter of days. He then positioned tanks in two particularly threatening locations around Damascus: the Kafr Souseh district, where the cabinet and Foreign Ministry were located, and Mount Qasioun, which overlooks the heart of the capital.

According to former defense minister Mustafa Tlass, the showdown between the two brothers eventually ended when their mother, Naisa Shalish, intervened in support of Hafiz. To be sure, the incident was not without serious consequences: Rifaat was stripped of all his powers and political posts, and within a month after the attempted coup, Hafiz permanently exiled him from the country. Yet the regime forged on much like it had before the crisis.

A similar showdown apparently unfolded nearly thirty years later, this time with Bashar in power. On July 18, 2012, his brother-in-law, Assef Shawkat, was killed under still-mysterious circumstances during a meeting at the national security headquarters in the heart of Damascus, targeted as part of a “crisis management cell” in which senior military and security officials were tasked with containing the protests and suppressing the revolution by all means possible. The regime’s deputy defense minister at the time, Shawkat had previously served as head of military intelligence from 2005 to 2009, at one point becoming Assad’s closest security advisor.

Yet this proximity masked a longtime rivalry between the two men that never fully dissipated. At the time of Hafiz’s death in 2000 and Bashar’s unconstitutional elevation to the presidency, Shawkat was one of the regime’s most influential figures. He and his wife—Bushra al-Assad, Bashar’s elder sister—considered themselves more worthy of the top post given Shawkat’s long career in the security sector, and this sentiment apparently festered for years. Yet Shawkat’s personal background ensured that Bashar and his brothers would never fully trust him, let alone give him a chance at the presidency. Like many Bedouin tribes, Shawkat’s family migrated out of Syria’s desert region in the 1950s due to drought, settling along the Mediterranean coast in the Alawite village of al-Madehleh. Thus, while he grew up among Alawite co-religionists of the Assad family, his apparent Sunni Bedouin origins produced suspicion within the clan when they learned of his secret marriage to Bushra in 1995. They also never forgot how he had worked with Rifaat al-Assad in developing Saraya al-Difa, one of the units that threatened Hafiz’s rule in 1984.

Given the Assad family’s reputation for settling accounts and protecting their power by murdering close cohorts, many observers believe that Bashar ordered Shawkat’s assassination in 2012. At the time of the attack, only the regime could have carried out such a sophisticated operation in its own backyard. Moreover, rumors of a possible military coup orchestrated by Shawkat were circulating shortly before his murder, and defections of army

commanders and senior regime officials were on the rise.

THE CURRENT MAKHLOUF SAGA

In light of Syria's dire economic circumstances, both the Assads and Makhlouf understand that they will need to settle their dispute in order to prevent a complete collapse. Therefore, negotiations are already underway in the form of public tussling and other moves. Makhlouf holds a strong set of cards in this game—not just because he owns so many Syrian businesses, but also because he oversees Iran's socioeconomic interests on the ground through his al-Bustan Foundation, Bena Properties, and other entities.

Taking his case to social media was one way of messaging his many allies within the Alawite community, which is not immune to the impoverishment looming over much of the country. Asma al-Assad has seemingly recognized the regime's vulnerability on this front, using Facebook and special workshops to address some of the concerns Makhlouf voiced in his videos; for example, she recently promised to provide for "poor families" among the regime's security and military apparatus affected by the war. Meanwhile, Bashar is reportedly considering Makhlouf's son Mohammad as a candidate to take over Syriatel, the sprawling mobile provider that serves most of the population and was registering annual profits of 40 billion Syrian pounds as of 2018.

For his part, Makhlouf publicly declared that Syriatel does not owe any taxes to the government and warned that the company's "collapse" would mean the collapse of the entire economy—yet he still agreed to pay $100 million in taxes. As he emphasized on May 17, he is devoted to protecting Syria and its economy, and all three of his videos make clear that he is willing to continue negotiating for the "greater good" of a country that "the world has abandoned." That is likely why he pleaded for forgiveness even as he asked the government to reconsider all the risks attendant to moving against his empire during this "sensitive and dangerous" period.

CONCLUSION

Despite the conventional wisdom that recent fissures signal the regime's potential demise, both the Assads and Makhlouf need each other to keep Syria from financial collapse. The economy declined by over 70 percent from 2010 to 2017 alone, so further damage could prove fatal. They are therefore unlikely to escalate into the type of internecine violence seen in past family crises, let alone take steps that threaten the regime's very existence. Nine years of war, ongoing international sanctions, and the widening coronavirus pandemic have made the country too fragile for anything more than political theater, however dramatic it may seem.

Thus, even as the push and pull continue, a settlement appears inevitable, and signs of concessions are already visible. Bashar and Asma desperately want to squeeze Makhlouf for funds, but the regime's "precautionary" seizure of his assets may be more a warning than a permanent confiscation, with the aim of pressuring him into further tradeoffs. For his part, Makhlouf went public to protect himself, but he still seems keen on negotiating a deal. Although Syria's dire economic situation leaves both parties with rapidly diminishing wiggle room, they may be able to keep the regime in the game by doubling down on some of its current tactics, such as diverting humanitarian aid, smuggling goods from abroad, maintaining a war economy, and siphoning funds from offshore accounts.

In short, whatever internal reshuffling may occur, the regime appears to be just as durable as it was before the crisis. If coup attempts, assassinations, and years of war did not break it, airing dirty laundry on social media certainly won't either.

Oula Alrifai is a fellow in The Washington Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics.