

Name: Alert ID: TMML2024032885724 BEIRUT, Lebanon — When protests erupted in March in the forlorn Syrian border town of Dara'a, demonstrators burned the president's portraits, then set ablaze an unlikely target: the local office of the country's largest mobile phone company, Syriatel, whose owner sits at the nexus of anger and power in a restive country. Syriatel is owned by Rami Makhlouf, first cousin and childhood friend of President Bashar al-Assad and the country's most powerful businessman. In the past decade, he has emerged as a strength and a liability of a government that finds its bastions of support shrinking and a figure to watch as Mr. Assad's inner circle tries to deal with protests shaking his family's four decades of rule. Leery of the limelight, he is alternatively described as the Assad family's banker or Mr. Five Percent (or 10, or whatever share gets the deal done). His supporters praise him for his investment in Syria, but they are far outnumbered by detractors, who have derided him in protests as a thief or worse. Sometimes more than Mr. Assad himself, he has become the lightning rod of dissent. "We'll say it clearly," went a chant in Dara'a. "Rami Makhlouf is robbing us." Egypt had Ahmed Ezz, the steel magnate who favored tight Italian suits (and now faces trial in white prison garb). In Tunisia, it was Leila Trabelsi, the hairdresser who became the president's wife, then a symbol of the extravagance of the ruling family. Mr. Makhlouf, 41, is Syria's version, a man at the intersection of family privilege, clan loyalty, growing avarice and, perhaps most dangerously, the yawning disconnect between ruler and ruled that already reshaped authoritarian Syria even before the protests.