



A Syrian family near a border crossing with their home country on Sunday in Bar Elias, Lebanon. Millions of Syrians are refugees.

DANIEL BEREHULAK/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Test of Loyalty
For Applicants
To Trump Jobs

This article is by David E. Sanger, Jonathan Swan and Maggie Haberman.

WASHINGTON — At the Trump transition offices in West Palm Beach, Fla., prospective occupants of high posts inside the Pentagon and the intelligence agencies typically run through a gamut of three to four interviews, conducted in recent weeks by a mix of Silicon Valley investors and innovators and a team of the MAGA faithful.

The applicants report that they have been asked about how to overhaul the Pentagon, or what technologies could make the intelligence agencies more effective, or how they feel about the use of the military to enforce immigration policy. But before they leave, some of them have been asked a final set of questions that seemed designed to assess their loyalty to President-elect Donald J. Trump.

The questions went further than just affirming allegiance to the incoming administration. The interviewers asked which candidate the applicants had supported in the three most recent elections, what they thought about the events of Jan. 6, 2021, and whether they believed the 2020 election was stolen. The sense they got was that there was only one right answer to each question.

This account is based on interviews with nine people who either interviewed for jobs in the administration or were directly involved in the process. Among those were applicants who said they gave what they intuited to be the wrong answer — either decrying the violence at the Capitol on Jan. 6 or saying that President Biden won in 2020. Their answers were met with silence and the taking of notes. They didn't get the jobs.

Three of the people interviewed are close to the transition team and confirmed that loyalty questions were part of some interviews across multiple agencies, and that the Trump team researched what candidates had said about Mr. Trump on the day of the Capitol riot and in the days following. Candidates are also rated on a scale of one to four in more than a half-dozen categories, including competence.

Karoline Leavitt, the incoming White House press secretary, declined to address specific questions about the topics being raised in job interviews. Instead, she

Continued on Page A15

INTERNATIONAL A4-11

Getting Drafted in Ukraine

After being left for dead by Russian soldiers, Mykola Kulichenko doesn't want to be forced to serve. PAGE A4

Coming to Notre-Dame's Aid

A North Carolina couple are part of a huge group of donors who helped fund the restoration: Americans. PAGE A11



NATIONAL A12-22

Pulling Fewer Over

After a report found racial bias in traffic enforcement, New Jersey state troopers started making fewer stops following a warning of being scrutinized. PAGE A21

Manhunts by the N.Y.P.D.

The two most recent fugitive searches in New York City since 2022 have involved gunmen who made seemingly improbable escapes. PAGE A22

A Teacher's Storefront School

The desks came out of a dumpster, and the computers are hand-me-downs. But in Mississippi, there is a waiting list at this private institution. PAGE A12

NEWS ANALYSIS

Fighting in Ukraine Costs Kremlin in Syria

By ANTON TROIANOVSKI

BERLIN — Lines of Russian troops in desert khaki greeted President Vladimir V. Putin in Syria in 2017. Declaring that Moscow had accomplished its mission in Syria's civil war, Mr. Putin pledged that Russia was there to stay.

"If the terrorists raise their heads again," he said on the tarmac of a Russian air base, "we will deal unprecedented strikes unlike anything they have seen."

But over the last two weeks, as rebels who Russia called terrorists swept across Syria aiming to topple one of Russia's closest allies, President Bashar al-Assad, those "unprecedented" strikes were nowhere to be seen. Instead, with Mr. al-Assad's ouster on Sunday, Mr. Putin has suffered one of the biggest geopolitical setbacks of his quarter-century in power.

Putin Forced to Watch
Fall of a Regime He
Swore to Defend

He took that blow, analysts said, in large part because his military is bogged down in Ukraine.

"Our involvement over there had a cost," a Moscow-based analyst focusing on the Middle East, Anton Mardasov, said, referring to Russia's war in Ukraine. "The cost was Syria."

By Sunday, Russia had been reduced from kingmaker to bystander. Its foreign ministry issued a statement of "extreme concern" about "the dramatic events" and announced that Mr. al-Assad had left the country. Dmitri S. Peskov, the Kremlin's spokesman, told Russian news agencies that he had nothing to

add. Mr. Putin himself has said nothing about Syria in recent weeks.

The extent of the fallout for Moscow of Mr. al-Assad's removal is still to be determined. The key question, analysts said, is whether Russia manages to strike an agreement with Syria's new government to hold on to its Tartus naval base and its Hmeimim air base, where Mr. Putin delivered that victory speech in 2017.

Mr. Mardasov said he was unsure whether Russia would be able to strike such a deal, given that Russia used those bases for overwhelming airstrikes against Syria's opposition after the Kremlin intervened in Syria's civil war in 2015. Losing the Syrian bases would thwart some of Mr. Putin's ambitions to reestablish Russia as a world power, since they are crucial to the Kremlin's ability to flex its mus-

Continued on Page A9

Flying at Extremes May Hurt Navy Pilots' Brains

By DAVE PHILIPPS

CORONADO, Calif. — To produce the best of the best, the Navy's elite TOPGUN flying school puts fighter pilots through a crucible of intense, aerial dog-fighting maneuvers under crushing G forces. But behind the high-speed Hollywood heroics that the school is famous for, the Navy has grown concerned that the extreme flying may also be producing something else: brain injuries.

This fall, the Navy quietly began a confidential project, code-named Project Odin's Eye, to try to find out. The effort will collect roughly 1,500 data points on brain function for each TOPGUN pilot who flies the Navy's workhorse fighter jet, the F/A-18 Super Hornet, according to communications by the project's staff. The goal is to understand the scope of the problem and identify pilots who are injured, the communications said.

Some pilots say the effort is long overdue. In interviews, more than a dozen current and former Navy fighter-crew members said that years of catapult launches from aircraft carriers and body-crushing, high-speed maneuvers can take a cumulative toll. At the end of their careers, they said, some top performers become confused,

Continued on Page A18



GRANT HINDSLEY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Dr. Kristin Barnes developed depression, confusion, substance abuse and mood swings after years of flying jets in the Navy.

AL-ASSAD TOPPLED
BY SYRIAN REBELS
AFTER 13-YEAR WAR

Citizens Erupt in Joy
Tempered by Loss

This article is by Vivian Yee, Raja Abdulrahim and Muhammad Haj Kadour.

For nearly all the years that the al-Assad family ruled Syria, silence reigned. No one spoke freely, fearful of who might hear. Everyone knew the consequences of dissent: disappearance into government prisons, from which few ever returned.

But as Saturday turned to Sunday — the first day in more than five decades that dawn broke without an al-Assad in the presidential palace — the streets were loud with joy.

Nonstop celebratory gunfire crackled around Damascus, the capital, like so many fireworks displays. Crowds shouted in the squares. Rebel fighters celebrated from atop their trucks.

"Our hearts are dancing with joy," Walaa Salameh, 35, a resident of the Damascus area, said in a phone interview. "We can't predict the future, and anything is possible, but the most important thing is we got rid of this oppressive regime."

It had been 13 years since those opposed to President Bashar al-Assad first hoped to follow revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya by overthrowing their own autocratic leader: 13 years of bloodshed and death, of homes and loved ones lost, of lives abandoned and ruptured.

Mr. al-Assad's opponents had to wait until Sunday. Years after most Syrians had given up on ever witnessing such moments at home, scenes familiar from past Arab Spring revolts were playing out, with unthinkable suddenness, in Damascus.

State television went from trumpeting Mr. al-Assad's strong defenses on Saturday to broadcasting an announcement by a group of nine rebels on Sunday: "By the grace of God Almighty, the city of Damascus has been liberated, the tyrant Bashar al-Assad has been toppled, and all the unjustly detained people from the regime's prisons have been released," one of them read out. "Long live a free and independent Syria for all Syrians of all sects."

News photographs showed a rebel sitting behind what appeared to be a vast, gleaming desk in an office in the presidential palace, all intricate inlaid wood and fine carpets. Others showed people wandering through Mr. al-Assad's residence, pulling down a chandelier, picking through rooms they were never meant to see.

The embassy of Iran, one of Mr. al-Assad's fiercest allies, was also ransacked, news photographs

Continued on Page A8

Reported in Moscow
as Damascus Falls

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR

The government of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, which had kept rebel forces at bay for more than a decade with Iranian and Russian military support, collapsed with astonishing speed on Sunday morning after an advance by opposition forces on the capital, Damascus.

An authoritarian leader who had gassed his own people during a 13-year civil war, Mr. al-Assad fled the country as rebel forces closed in on Damascus.

On Sunday evening, Russian state media outlets and two Iranian officials said he had arrived in Russia, where state media outlets reported that Mr. al-Assad and his family had been granted political asylum. The New York Times could not immediately independently confirm that Mr. al-Assad was in Russia, which along with Iran had helped keep him in power.

The rebel offensive had lasted less than two weeks.

The Russian Foreign Ministry said Mr. al-Assad had "decided to



OMAR HAJ KADOUR/A.F.P. — GETTY IMAGES

A portrait of President Bashar al-Assad, found in an abandoned office in Hama, Syria.

leave the presidential post and depart the country" after talks with other "parties to the conflict." He had given instructions to transfer power peacefully, the ministry said.

There was no comment from Mr. al-Assad. His prime minister, Mohammad Ghazi al-Jalali, stayed behind and said he was ready to cooperate with the rebels. The opposition forces swept into Damascus with little apparent resistance from the Syrian military, seizing control of government buildings and the state broadcaster.

For years, the Syrian civil war

Continued on Page A8

MAKING A MOVE Israeli ground forces were said to have overtly crossed into Syria. PAGE A8

A Criminal With Ties to China,
And Political Sway in New York

This article is by Michael Forsythe, Bianca Pullaro, Jay Root and Benjamin Weiser.

On a Monday in March, in the heart of China's capital, more than 2,000 delegates of a rubber-stamp advisory body to the authoritarian government of President Xi Jinping gathered for their annual meeting.

One mission of the men and women in attendance was to spread the global influence of China's Communist Party. Of the throngs of party officials, generals and business executives who watched as Mr. Xi took the stage, just 20 people had been invited to represent the country's vast diaspora, including a single person

from the United States: a 69-year-old man from Brooklyn named John Chan.

Mr. Chan's participation reflected a remarkable proximity to the highest levels of power in China, experts said, and marked him as a person on whom the country's leaders might call for favors. But it was remarkable, too, because of his position at home: He has operated as a power broker in America's largest city, with immense sway over an important subset of New York politics.

For years, Mr. Chan has exerted influence over the city's ethnic Chinese communities — reaching into back rooms and political clubhouses from Sunset Park in

Continued on Page A20

ARTS C1-6

New Fan of Christmas Movies

A teary-eyed critic discovers that she is among those who have succumbed to the allure of holiday films. PAGE C1

An Actress Drawing Attention

In the 1990s, Marianne Jean-Baptiste was an Oscar nominee. She may be again for a role in "Hard Truths." PAGE C1



SPORTS D1-8

Unleashing the Power of 12

A dozen teams were announced for the College Football Playoff, which could give a jolt to the sport. PAGE D1

On Hook for Wasted Money

A look at some of the worst player contracts that Major League Baseball teams are locked into. PAGES D4-5

OPINION A24-25

David French

PAGE A25



0 354613 9