

## THE ASSAD REGIME'S HOLD ON THE SYRIAN STATE

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Since the early days of the Syrian uprising in 2011, President Bashar al-Assad's regime has made it a priority to keep state agencies running, allowing Assad to claim that the regime is the irreplaceable provider of essential services. Breaking the regime's monopoly on these public services and enabling the moderate opposition to become an alternative source of them would weaken the regime and prevent the radical jihadist Islamic State from emerging to fill power vacuums across the country.

### How the Regime Tightened Its Grip

- Syrians depend heavily on the state for income, essential goods and services, and administrative documents. Once its survival was at stake, the regime intensified efforts to entwine itself with state institutions that provide these necessities.
- The once-sprawling bureaucratic functions of the Syrian state have been consolidated during the war into highly defensible urban power centers under the regime's control.
- To maintain its monopoly on the provision of essential services, the regime destroyed alternative structures that the opposition created in liberated areas.
- The rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State—which has brutally suppressed populations under its control—as the only other entity in Syria able to provide a degree of public administration has reinforced the regime's narrative that it is the sole real option Syrians have if they are to receive essential services.

### What International Actors Can Do to Break Assad's Monopoly

**Look past a military strategy.** The opposition's Western and regional state backers—in particular Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar—should move beyond simply providing military assistance to opposition factions and also support the restructuring of armed rebel factions and the political opposition into a more coherent and unified entity that can take on new roles within Syria.

**Empower an alternate authority.** In areas where the moderate opposition has taken over militarily, opposition groups must be encouraged to carry out the functions of the Syrian state, and they must be supported in those efforts.

**Protect state institutions.** The regime must be prevented from destroying these institutions—and the opposition's ability to run them—after military forces loyal to Assad withdraw from an area. To accomplish this, the United States and its Western allies should provide air protection from regime attacks after Assad-aligned forces retreat.

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