Sam Dagher, Assad or We Burn the Country: How One Family's Lust for Power Destroyed Syria, New York: Little, Brown, 2019, 592.

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Sam Dagher, an American-Lebanese journalist, provides an insightful chronicle of the Syrian civil war through interviews with regime insiders and activists. The subtitle of the book, How One Family's Lust for Power Destroyed Syria succinctly foretells the end of the book and the situation right now in the country. Tinged with the activists 'memories and the author's own impressions of the early phases of the civil war in Syria, the book lays down the grim context for readers by explaining how Bashar Assad has survived to be the leader of a brutal dynasty, and the country which has come to be known as Syria is actually deemed to be "Assad's Syria" (p.28). Recounting the birth of the regime established by Hafez al Assad, the author also accounts for the support he has received from other Baath members like Mustafa Tlass, who despite their sectarian difference, worked together with Hafez to work "their way to the top with raw ambition, intrigue, and a trail of blood" (p.97).

The Assad family had already monopolized the army, politics and economy of the country through a mafia-like network and by appointing family members to pivotal positions. By then Bashar Assad had adapted himself to the contingency of becoming Syria's next president by following the footsteps of his deceased brother, the expected successor of Hafez. The Tlass family helped Bashar Assad to take over the rule as smoothly as possible at the expense of being side-lined by the Assad and Makhlouf family members, including now Asma Assad's relatives, who altogether usurped the power in accumulating wealth over wealth.

By 2010, the disgruntlement of Syrian people, particularly Sunnis, reached to a point of no return and the Syrian opposition, as it is hinted at by the author, began to be formed around such dare-devil individuals as Mazen Darwish and early protestors who realized the potential of social media after the Green Revolution in Iran. The fire of the protests was lid in Daraa, when the youth of Daraa took to the streets and the regime forces stormed Daraa's masjid and massacred peaceful protestors and two paramedics after a trap deal. The regime insisted on seeing the protests as "a foreign conspiracy, a sinister plot against Bashar Assad and against Syria. Manaf Tlass 'efforts to stop Bashar and his aides, as it was told to the author in person after he defected, culminated in a standoff between Manaf Tlass and Bashar Assad, finally resulting in the former's backing down and leaving the country for France.

The regional power struggle had an effect on the unfolding of events and Bashar's insistence on brutally cracking down on protestors. While Bashar was relieved in receiving the support of Hezbollah and Iran, he also seemed to be listening to advice coming from Qatar and Turkey whose leaders tried to dissuade Bashar from turning the country into a bloodbath. Appalled by the popular uprisings around itself, Saudi Arabia was more precautious than proactive in dealing with Bashar. The French and the U.S. ambassadors' visit to Hama in the summer of 2011 did nothing

but exasperate Assad and his shabihas' contempt against and brutal crackdown on protests. Cognizant of unabated support of Iran and Hezbollah in quelling the opposition, Bashar Assad was confident and even brazen when he signaled to the U.S. administration as well as European powers that "any move against Bashar could trigger retaliation against Israel and Western interests in the region" (p.393). Also, Putin came to his help in stopping a potential UN/NATO/Western intervention like the one that toppled Libya's Gaddafi. Assad wanted to radicalize the protestors to prove his point, that the protests were instigated by enemies of the state inside and outside. For the author, it was mostly those with Islamist agendas that fell into this plot. Therefore, the civil was exasperated by the regime's invariable brutality and the regional actors' lust for power, the author concludes. Referencing an unnamed defected army officer turned rebel leader and a wall-street journal article (penned by the author himself), the author claims that Qatar and Turkey helped channeling Gulf money and pillaged Libyan arms to budding anti-regime militias in Syria and the U.S. and the West turned a blind eye to what is happening in Syria due to the former's willingness to keep a distance from and the latter's inability to understand what is going on in Syria. Enraged by Qatar's ambition to direct events in Syria, Saudi Arabia began supporting armed groups in Syria as well as fuelling the sectarian warfare through its Al-Arabiya.

In early 2012, after Russia and China vetoed a Security Council resolution demanding the ousting of the regime and Obama condemned the regime and promised not to leave Syrians, the Assad regime stormed Baba Amr, resulting in a scene resembling the Hama massacre, three decades earlier. Finding a solution to the massacre of Syrians and their flee in huge numbers was almost impossible since "the United States and its European allies stuck with an already bankrupt and failed UN process to deal with the crisis" (p.487) and due to the unwavering support of Russia and Iran for keeping Assad in power.

Together, the U. S. and Western powers, tried not to topple Assad but weaken him significantly (p.46) by providing nonlethal and financial aid to opposition groups in Syria. Assad even got away with the consequences of using chemical weapons against his people by already crossing "the red line" drawn by Obama, and leaning against Russia's ambition to take up the reins in the region and indeed the whole world, as the author draws attention to.

Meanwhile, most of the money and humanitarian aid international organizations, mainly the UN, designated for victims of the war went into the hands of the regime and used either as punishment for those who defied or as reward for those who obeyed. By the time Putin entered the war in Syria and changed the stakes in Bashar's favor in the fall of 2015, Obama had already declared it a fantasy for the opposition to overthrow the regime with American guns. Soon after the November 2015 Paris attacks, a UN Security Council resolution was passed in December unanimously calling for a ceasefire in Syria but excluding the Islamic State, the Nusra Front, and unspecified "other terrorist groups," which henceforth gave the coalition regime of Russia, Iran and Syria a green light to crush all opposition to the regime, including civilians living in the oppositional areas. The whole world watched as this coalition committed war crimes by massacring civilians with banned bombs and munitions. And, ordinary Syrians had to bear the brunt of the war's brutality and the regime's lies as the Assad's reign of fear and terror was reinstated due to the complacency and indifference of the Western powers and the new president of the U.S., Donald Trump, who happily conceded to the fact that Putin was the new sheriff in town.

Assad or We Burn the Country is a descriptive and often gruesome portrayal of the repression of the Syrian rebellion. The author puts Western observers and humanitarian organizations under the spotlight by criticizing their policies calling for Assad's possible survival in power and for local ceasefire negotiations. In

addition to the complacency of Western powers, the author implies that the peaceful protests led and organized by leftist and secular protestors could have succeeded had it not been for Islamists, who hijacked the resistance, and the competing agendas of regional powers. All in all, the book provides a significant contribution to the literature on the Syrian civil war, and scholars as well as students of international relations and Middle East studies will find the book particularly easy and interesting to read because of various links to YouTube videos and dozens of insightful interviews which vividly supplement the case history.