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Itamar, let us talk about that, but also build on what has happened in Syria. You have studied Syria for a long time and written books about it, this is one of the ripples and maybe they have not stopped. What do you think?

### **Itamar Rabinovich**

In 1965, Patrick Seale, the well-known British journalist and expert on Syria, wrote a classic called *The Struggle for Syria*, in which he argued that Syria became the playground of the Middle East after 1945. It became independent and was a very weak, unstable state, with three coups in 1949 alone and it turned out that behind each of these coups, there was either a regional power, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, etc., or an international player, Britain or France. Syria escaped from this mayhem by actually merging into Egypt as the United Arab Republic in 1958, which again failed, etc. Syria only gained stability and strength or power as a state under Hafez al-Assad, who ruled for 30 years and had a Faustian deal with the Syrian public; I will give you stability, I will turn Syria into an important country in the region and sometimes internationally, but you will have to accept oppression, corruption and rule by a sectarian minority. That lasted 30 years and the son, Bashar, was not as capable as the father, and he was a so-so president for 11 years and then the civil war broke out and the regime became rotten. One of the explanations for what happened is that it was so rotten that it only took a push for the regime to fall.

I think what has happened now is that Syria again is the playground for domestic and external forces. Of course, you have the dominant element in the coalition, you have the Kurds, the Alawites, the Druse, there are many actors, and it is not clear where it is going domestically. While externally, Türkiye, Israel, Arab countries, Russia is trying to salvage something and the big question mark is the United States, because President elect Trump has said several times that they would not be part of this mess, and he used unpleasant words about Syria. I think that is a big mistake because if it is the playground for the region and everything that happens, does not just happen in Syria, it affects its five neighbors. The United States should be there and should participate in trying to create a stable situation in Syria, if it is not in the game, others will be.