

Sectarian Violence in Syria's Civil War:  
Causes, Consequences, and  
Recommendations for Mitigation

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this paper are the authors', and do not necessarily represent those of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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## Executive Summary\*

Syria and its 22.5 million people are currently undergoing the severest test imaginable: a destructive, debilitating civil war that threatens to destroy the idea of non-sectarian, non-ethnic Syrian citizenship; a vicious armed struggle that has exacerbated sectarian divides and threatens to destroy the Syrian state, possibly leaving in its wake a Hobbesian nightmare of sectarian mass atrocities and forced population transfers that, in the worst case scenario, could produce genocide in certain areas.

This grave situation has been brought about by a regime that elected to respond to peaceful protests against police brutality with deadly force. Regime lethality lit a match that fell on the dry tinder of largely Arab Sunni Muslim discontent over unemployment, underemployment, and corruptly indifferent government in the hands of the Assad regime, which had long enriched itself behind the shield of brutal, unaccountable security forces. That the ruling family and most of its enforcers were members of a small (12 percent of the population) Alawite minority made the situation all the more explosive, given that the protesters were largely drawn from Syria's 65 percent majority Arab Sunni Muslims.

Over time, regime tactics have transformed a mainly peaceful uprising into armed resistance. In trying to crush that resistance the regime has opted to use the tools on which it could best rely: Alawite-heavy special forces and regime protection units from the army; Alawite-heavy armed units from the various regime intelligence services; and mainly Alawite auxiliaries loosely formed into militias. The tactics of choice were artillery and air bombardments of residential areas, incarceration and torture, and even massacres. The combination of terror tactics and the sectarian composition of units employing them has provoked responses that are increasingly sectarian in nature. Alongside an opposition that has tried to mitigate the sectarian implications of the regime's survival strategy there has arisen a jihadist presence in Syria drawn in part from al-Qaeda in Iraq. The battlefield prowess of these groups is increasing their appeal among anti-regime activists anxious to end regime depredations. At the same time, their presence alarms Syrian minorities and binds some (especially Alawites) to a regime that has sought to implicate them in its survival strategy and tactics.

How will this end? What might be done to mitigate the effects of the regime's sectarian survival strategy and the reactions it is creating? Four broad scenarios are examined, ranging

from regime military victory, to managed political transition, to opposition military victory, to state failure. These scenarios are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, but rather are intended to illustrate the fact that, regardless of the course taken by Syria in the coming months and years, sectarian violence will remain an acute danger. In attempting to influence this trajectory and mitigate the risk and effects of mass atrocities, there are several policy initiatives that the US, allies, and other partners can take:

- Work with the mainstream Syrian opposition to establish now, on Syrian territory, a government emphasizing citizenship, tolerance, civil society, and rule of law, paving the way for the US and other international actors to establish assistance relationships with that government, which would serve as a striking alternative to the Assad regime. This is the most critical step the US government can take at this time, as the Syrian opposition will not and should not move toward forming an alternative government without American support.
- Help the opposition prepare, either as an opposition or as a government established on Syrian territory, to negotiate for a broadly based post-Assad transitional government should the opportunity arise, and to identify elements of Syria's existing political and military structures that might be preserved.
- Support the near-term establishment and seed funding of an Interim Reconstruction Trust Fund for Syria.
- Work through the Syrian Opposition Coalition—and ideally a government established on Syrian territory—to establish close working relationships with carefully vetted units of the Free Syrian Army, providing those units with training, equipment, and other forms of support (including training in transitional justice).
- Work with allies and other partners to deny, to the maximum extent possible, assistance flowing from outside of Syria into the hands of jihadists.
- Work with NATO allies and others to place in support of a transitional government a military stabilization force to help restore order and protect vulnerable populations.
- Work with the United Nations and with human rights NGOs worldwide to place in support of a transitional government a corps of unarmed observers to be deployed in areas where populations are potentially vulnerable to violence.

- Make it clear, publicly and privately, to the Syrian people and the Syrian opposition that the substitution of one form of tyranny for another in Syria will attract no external support.

Left on its current trajectory, Syria is on the path to state failure and sustained sectarian violence, featuring mass atrocities and cleansing that could amount to genocide in some areas. The international community, even with active American leadership, cannot micromanage a specific "end state" in Syria. Indeed, given the ferocity of the struggle unleashed by the Assad regime, international actors' abilities to influence developments may be sharply limited, and will become even more so over time. Yet failure to try is not an option. Over time, Syria could descend into the kind of chaos that no one, for a very long time, will be able to shape or mitigate.

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## Introduction

It was on March 15, 2011 that protests against Syria's authoritarian regime first erupted. The spark came when fifteen children, all under the age of seventeen, were arrested and tortured in the southwestern town of Dara'a, having scrawled on a wall the common Arab spring refrain: "The people want the fall of the regime."

The incident provoked a groundswell of nonviolent demonstrations, with Syrians demanding justice from the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Assad responded with widespread and progressively more brutal force of arms. State violence, however, failed to crush the nascent uprising. On the contrary, regime heavy-handedness led not only to the protest movement's spread, but also, over time, to its militarization. This shift from peaceful protest toward armed resistance occurred gradually throughout the first year and a half of the uprising until, in summer 2012, the international community acknowledged that Syria had reached a state of civil war.

Syria's descent into armed conflict has been accompanied by another trend equally alarming. After nearly two years of conflict Syrian society shows increasing signs of coming apart along traditional sectarian fault-lines that, in recent years, have been suppressed under a veneer of national unity. On one side of this increasingly stark divide stands Assad's own Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shia Islam whose adherents have, historically, been persecuted at the hands of the Sunni majority. Only in the twentieth century did Syria's Alawite minority—still the poorest community in the country—manage to acquire a measure of political power and social integration, owing largely to the efforts of Hafiz al-Assad, who ruled from 1970 to 2000. On the other side stands the majority demographic of Arab Sunni Muslims, comprising some two-thirds of the population and now largely alienated from what many of its members view as a despotic, minoritarian regime. Christians and other minorities remain largely caught in the middle, uncertain whether to continue to back Assad's brutal regime, the increasingly militarized opposition, or neither.

From the conflict's outset Assad sought to lock-in the loyalty of Alawites and other religious minorities by casting the uprising in a sectarian light, painting Syrian rebels as foreign Sunni fanatics bent on implementing an intolerant Islamic caliphate. By electing to use his security services (military and intelligence, largely Alawite in composition) supplemented by mainly Alawite auxiliaries to inflict deadly force on peaceful protesters, Assad channeled his

opponents into armed resistance and then used the same security services and auxiliaries against them. Thus Alawites, in the service of a family-based regime trying desperately to save itself, have played a central role in violations of human rights and international law that include indiscriminate artillery and aerial bombardments of villages, summary executions, and massacres of civilians. Sunni Arabs, accounting as they do for a large majority of those seeking the regime's fall, have inevitably borne the overwhelming brunt of this abuse. Over time this Alawite on Sunni dynamic has produced a profoundly disturbing and dangerous mutation in the evolution of armed resistance to the regime: a progressively stronger sectarian current within the opposition and an increasingly prominent extremist element alongside it. Anti-Alawite rhetoric is on the rise, individual Alawites have been killed and religious shrines desecrated, and jihadist groups such as the al-Qaeda affiliated Nusra Front are gaining prominence.

This study examines Syria's alarming drift toward full-blown sectarian warfare, paying particular attention to the relationship between the country's Sunnis and Alawites. It offers the briefest summary of Syria's political history as a lens through which to see the conflict as it is currently unfolding—and as it may further evolve in the coming months and years—in hopes of offering a measure of insight into the policy options available to the United States and its partners in the international community. The key policy goal of those states and international organizations seeking to aid 22.5 million Syrians in their hour of distress must be that of a near-term political transition in Syria, one that could pull Syria back from the brink of sustained sectarian bloodletting and state failure. While all of Syria's ethnic and religious groups stand to suffer from the ongoing chaos, the regime's conscious and deliberate use of mainly Alawite armed men to suppress a predominantly Sunni uprising has made Alawites the most likely (though not the only) victims of large scale sectarian reprisals in a post-Assad Syria.



## Syria's Demographic Composition

Syria's politics are shaped by the country's diverse demographic fabric, with a broad array of ethnic and religious groups coexisting within artificially contrived borders drawn following World War I by competing European colonial interests. Just as Lebanon was built with a mix of Sunnis, Shia, Druze, and Christians while Iraq was established with significant numbers of Sunnis, Shia, Christians, and Kurds, European powers bequeathed to Syria a heterogeneous composition including Arab Sunnis, Alawites, Christians, Druze, Shia, and Sunni Kurds, Circassians, and Turkmen. Precise demographic numbers are elusive, as the Syrian census was eliminated during the 1960s, but some rough figures are available to place Syria's demographic landscape in perspective.

Ethnically, Arabs comprise Syria's largest group by a wide margin, accounting for roughly 90 percent of the country's population of 22.5 million. Syrian Kurds represent the second largest, making up some 9 percent of the population, while the remaining one percent comprises small communities of Assyrians, Armenians, Circassians, and Turkmen.

Syria's religious tapestry is still more complex. Sunni Islam is the most prevalent creed, professed by roughly three-quarters of the population. This majority, however, is far from monolithic: it includes Arabs as well as Kurds and other ethnic minorities. It is further subdivided by differences between relatively secular-minded Sunnis and their more conservative counterparts. Syria's second largest religious group at 12 percent of the population is the Alawites, an offshoot variation of Shia Islam. Christians make up roughly 10 percent of the population, including Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, and Syrian Orthodox denominations, among others. Syria also contains the world's largest community of Druze—a small monotheistic sect incorporating beliefs from various religious doctrines, including the Abrahamic faiths—at 700,000, or 3 percent of the population. The remaining 1-2 percent of the population is mainly comprised of Twelver and Ismaili Shia.

Syria's ethno-religious diversity is further noteworthy in that the country's various minorities are largely concentrated in discrete geographic areas. Much of the 2 million strong Kurdish population, for instance, is found along Syria's northern border with Turkey, forming what some Kurds refer to as "Syrian Kurdistan." Syria's Kurds have a particularly strong presence in the country's far northeastern province of al-Hasakah, including in the two major cities of Qamishli and al-Hasakah. They also have large communities in the northern city of

Kobane and the northwestern city of Afrin. A small portion of Syria's Kurdish population has been thoroughly integrated into the country's political life since independence, with people of Kurdish origin residing in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and other western Syrian cities.

Syria's Alawites, meanwhile, have their heartland along Syria's western Mediterranean littoral and in the adjacent Alawite Mountain region, where from 1922 to 1936 the French mandate maintained an Alawite state autonomous from the remainder of Syria. Alawites today have substantial communities throughout the majority of Syria's major cities, but their core presence remains heavily concentrated in the coastal provinces of Latakia and Tartus. This is not, however, to say that these areas are homogeneously Alawite. Indeed, while Alawites dominate northwestern Syria's rural towns, Sunnis maintain a majority in the city of Latakia—Syria's principal port city and the capital of the erstwhile Alawite state.

The Druze community is similarly concentrated in al-Suwayda province in southwestern Syria, which contains the rugged Jabal al-Druze, or "Druze Mountain," region. The country's population of over 2 million Christians is somewhat more diffuse, spread mainly throughout Syria's major cities, including sizable communities in Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs.

## Syria's Political History

The importance of the past century in defining Syria's political, social, and ethnic identity cannot be overstated. This period has witnessed the literal redrawing of the Syrian map, countless transfers of political authority, and ultimately the rise to power of an Alawite-dominated regime whose forty-year reign preached secularism only to deepen sectarian fault-lines when challenged, laying the groundwork for a civil war that has torn Syria's complex ethno-religious tapestry.

The Ottoman Empire exercised control over the territory known today as Syria from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century until 1918, when World War I completed the declining empire's collapse and the Allied powers set about partitioning Ottoman territories. The geographical expression known then as Greater Syria—encompassing territories that today comprise Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian Territories, western Iraq, and southern Turkey—was carved up, and in July 1922 the League of Nations approved plans for a French mandate in modern Syria and Lebanon, while Britain would assume responsibility for the areas that are now Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Jordan, and Iraq.

Under French administration Lebanon was established as an independent state and Syria was divided into three zones of local government: one for the Alawite-dominated northwest, with Latakia as its capital; one for the Druze-dominated southern region surrounding Jabal al-Druze; and one for the Sunni-dominated remainder of Syria, with Damascus as its capital. This arrangement reflected France's divide and rule colonial strategy, as Paris sought to gain local clients and undercut any potential threat from Arab nationalism. The French also recruited minorities into the occupation army, the *Troupes Speciales du Levant*, and levied lower taxes while providing development subsidies for minority groups.<sup>2</sup> In this way, "French mandate policies prevented the development of any cohesive or definable loyalty to a Syrian nation-state."<sup>3</sup> The mandate period witnessed considerable nationalist agitation, mostly by the Sunni majority, but also including a two year long uprising from 1925-1927 initiated by Druze who, resentful of French rule, joined forces with Sunni nationalists. France, however, deployed its own forces alongside local auxiliaries, drawn largely from other minorities, including Alawites, to suppress the rebellion.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Kaplan, "Syria: Identity Crisis," *The Atlantic*, February 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Ayse Tekdal Fildis, "Roots of Alawite-Sunni Rivalry in Syria," *Middle East Policy* XIX, no. 2 (2012).

When independence finally arrived in 1946 the Sunni majority's Damascene elite inherited both the civilian government and an army with a substantial minority presence, both in the officer corps and enlisted ranks. This government set about to build a sense of national unity and, despite initial resistance among Alawites and Druze, succeeded in establishing a sense of citizenship, drawing upon the struggles of Palestinians in the face of Israel's creation to make the case that Syrian citizenship should transcend sect.

There followed, however, a period of intense turmoil reflecting the inability of Syria's political elite to build stable institutions. National elections were held in 1947, only to have their results undermined by a series of military coups beginning in 1949 and culminating in 1954. This period of instability and fears within Syria of a sharp turn to the left prompted an ill-fated experiment in pan-Arab nationalism, with Egypt and Syria merging to form the United Arab Republic in 1958. The Egyptian-dominated UAR lasted some three and a half years before a group of Syrian army officers seized power in 1961 and dissolved the union. This was followed by another coup in 1963, this time by members of the army affiliated with the Ba'ath—or "Renaissance"—party.

It was military members of this Ba'ath Party who would ultimately seize power and impose sustained order in Syria. Founded in 1947 by Michel Aflaq, Salah al-Din al-Bitar, and Zaki al-Arsuzi (a Syrian Christian, Sunni, and Alawite, respectively), the Ba'ath espoused a secularist mix of pan-Arab nationalism, socialism, and anti-imperialism. Its secular, pan-Arab outlook made it appealing to Syrian minorities eager to level the political playing field with Syria's Sunni Arab elite, to whom 400 years of Ottoman rule had bequeathed a sense of leadership entitlement.

Its socialist underpinnings, combined with its willingness to make common cause with non-Damascene populists, helped Ba'athism appeal to poor, rural populations (Sunnis and minorities alike) who had been and continued to be disadvantaged under the quasi-feudalist rule of the Damascene Sunni elite. The party began to gain clout in the 1950s as a seeming alternative to the messy, personalized politics of individuals, family, clan, army, and sect, and made significant gains in the 1954 parliamentary elections before seizing power for itself in the 1963 coup. This first Ba'ath government was itself overthrown by rival Ba'athists in 1966, before the Ba'athist (and Alawite) General Hafiz al-Assad led one final military coup in November 1970,

ushering in four decades of systematically authoritarian rule under his leadership and that of his son, Bashar.

### *Syria's Alawites*

Hafiz al-Assad's coup marked the completion of an Alawite political ascension that had been in the making since the days of the French mandate. It is a remarkable story in light of the group's traditional place in Syrian society, and a critical chapter in Syrian history if one is to understand the sectarian dynamics of Syria's conflict today. The Alawite sect first emerged in the ninth century AD, tracing its roots to the teachings of one Muhammad ibn Nusayr, a student of Twelver Shiism. It is generally identified as an offshoot of Shia Islam for its veneration of Ali—the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law and the first Shia Imam—but it also incorporates elements of other faiths. Various Alawite practices and the secrecy of its detailed theology have led some Muslims to refuse Alawites recognition as coreligionists; instead, they have often treated them with distrust and, at times, violence. It is therefore unsurprising that members of the sect have long preferred the name “Alawites,” for it emphasizes their veneration of Ali, a figure also esteemed by mainstream Shia and Sunni Muslims. Outsiders, however, for centuries referred to them as Nusayris—for their founder, Muhammad ibn Nusayr—a name intended to set them apart from Muslims.

Alawites were thus persecuted—many have been massacred over the centuries—and confined themselves to their rugged mountainous hinterland in what today is northwestern Syria. Until recent decades, their presence in urban zones was virtually nonexistent. One study found that in 1920 771 Alawites out of a total Alawite population of 176,285 were living in cities—a mere 0.5 percent.<sup>4</sup> This rural isolation meant that Alawites were relegated not only to a status of despised religious outcasts, but of impoverished and backward peasants, lacking in education as well as political and military organization. This status was maintained when, in the mid-nineteenth century, the Ottomans (who accorded no political rights, recognition, or protection to their Alawite subjects) managed to subdue the Alawite lands, transforming the community into a class of underpaid, overtaxed farmhands in the service of Sunni Arab landlords. Historian Hanna Batatu writes: “Under the Ottomans [Alawites] were abused, reviled and ground down by exactions and, on occasions, their women and children led into captivity and disposed of by

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Pipes, “The Alawite Capture of Power in Syria,” *Middle Eastern Studies* (1989).

sale...The conditions...became so deplorable that they developed after World War I the practice of selling or hiring out their daughters to affluent townspeople.”<sup>5</sup>

It was not until the creation of the French mandate in 1920 that the Alawites’ lot began to change. As noted above, France adopted favorable policies toward Syrian minorities, granting Alawites political and legal autonomy from their erstwhile Sunni oppressors, along with low taxes and high government subsidies. They also gained disproportionate representation in the French-officered, locally recruited occupation military force, as France sought to divide Syrians along sectarian lines. This strong military presence was also driven by socioeconomic trends: members of Syria’s largely poor, rural minorities viewed military service as an opportunity for upward social mobility, while urban Sunnis often looked on enlistment with disdain, viewing the army as undignified and a tool of French imperialism. Moreover, urban Sunnis were more often able than rural minorities to pay the “redemption fee” required for exemption from military service.<sup>6</sup>

Thus it was that minorities, and particularly Alawites, came to play a role in the armed forces disproportionate to their demographic representation. Indeed, Hanna Batatu writes that, of the eight infantry battalions serving in the *Troupes Speciales*, “three consisted entirely or substantively of Alawis and none were Sunni Arab in composition.”<sup>7</sup> This situation provoked considerable bitterness among the Sunni elite, as Syria’s minorities had been essentially converted into the mechanism used by the French to suppress the majority’s aspirations for a unified, Sunni-led Syria. Indeed, Syria’s Alawites were staunchly opposed to the country’s movement toward independence and unification in the late 1930s and 1940s. This opposition largely took the form of petitions advocating a continuation of French governance, but also produced an armed Alawite rebellion in 1939.

Ultimately, however, Syrian independence in 1946 meant the country’s full unification and the devolution of power to the Sunni Arab elite. Yet despite this victory for the largely Sunni nationalist camp, Alawites and other minorities succeeded in preserving their disproportionate representation in the military. This is not to say that Sunnis were not represented in the military.

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<sup>5</sup> Hanna Batatu, "Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance," *Middle East Journal* 35, no. 3 (1981): 334.

<sup>6</sup> Nikolaos van Dam, *Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the B'ath Party* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 27.

<sup>7</sup> Batatu, 341.

Indeed, from independence until 1963 they exercised control over the upper echelon military leadership. Minorities, however, came to dominate the lower ranks, with Alawites by 1955 making up 65 percent of the army's non-commissioned officers.<sup>8</sup> This enabled them to benefit from schisms within a highly politicized Sunni military elite largely split between Damascene and non-Damascene officers. This dynamic gave rise to purges and counter-purges within the Sunni leadership, undermining the Sunnis' grasp on military power and paving the way for Alawite ascension. Indeed, after the Ba'ath-led coup of 1963 some seven hundred officers were dismissed and roughly half of their posts filled by Alawites. Most members of the Ba'athist Military Committee had minority backgrounds, and they sought to consolidate their positions by calling up officers to whom they had tribal or familial (and thus sectarian) ties.<sup>9</sup> Thus by 1963 Alawites had extended their dominion from the military's rank-and-file to its officer corps.

Aside from the military, there was another avenue through which Alawites rose to prominence in the 1950s and 1960s: the Ba'ath Party. As noted above, Ba'athism, from its inception, held a deep attraction for Arab minorities by virtue of its secularist, pan-Arab ideology. Its path to prominence, however, was paved by its 1953 merger with Akram al-Hourani's (largely Sunni) Arab Socialist Party to form the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party. Even though Hourani's party would withdraw a decade later, the merger bequeathed to the Ba'ath a solid Sunni constituency in Syria's "second cities" and rural areas: a constituency Bashar al-Assad would eventually alienate through a toxic combination of corruption, incompetence, and brutality on top of economic stagnation.

By the 1960s the Ba'ath Party had become increasingly militarized, as army officers—largely, though not exclusively, Alawite—were attracted to its ideology. Indeed, the 1963 coup was accompanied by a dramatic surge of Alawite power in the military leadership. This trend of Alawite consolidation was accelerated by systematic discrimination against Sunnis among the Ba'ath's military adherents, as Alawites sought to further enhance their control.<sup>10</sup> Unsurprisingly, this brand of sectarianism—driven by deeply conspiratorial campaigns for power—produced a rift between the supporters of President Amin al-Hafiz, a Sunni, and those of General Salah Jadid, an Alawite. Tensions culminated in Hafiz's overthrow by Jadid in February 1966, after which Sunnis were further marginalized in the party.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 341.

<sup>9</sup> Van Dam, 31-32.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 34-37.

Following the coup, Jadid emerged at the head of Ba'athist civilian leadership, trading in his official military role for the title of assistant secretary-general of the Syrian Regional Command. His key competitor was Hafiz al-Assad, another Alawite officer with strong support in the Ba'ath's military wing. A rivalry would emerge between the two based on ideological differences, with Jadid leading the more radical civilian wing and Assad heading the more pragmatic military wing. Assad emerged victorious from the ensuing power struggle, overthrowing Jadid in November 1970. Assad then assumed the role of Prime Minister, before being elected president in 1971.

From this point onward, Hafiz al-Assad set about consolidating, on the one hand, his absolute control over the Ba'ath Party and, on the other, the Ba'ath's absolute control over Syria. Drawing upon the lessons of his rivalry with Jadid, Assad reached the conclusion that Alawite cohesion would prove essential both to his own staying power and to Syria's political stability. He thus surrounded himself with a trusted, predominantly Alawite cadre of military loyalists and went to work establishing a ubiquitous cult of personality, casting himself as the savior of the Syrian nation and the guardian of Syrian stability. Meanwhile, he sought to stamp out political views diverging from those of the ruling Ba'ath. A 1973 amendment to Syria's constitution designated the Ba'ath Party as the "leader of state and society," clearly formalizing the establishment of single-party rule. All other parties were outlawed, aside from those belonging to the National Progressive Front, a coalition that accepted Ba'athist leadership. Membership in the party meant political privilege, so it grew rapidly. Meanwhile, Assad built arguably the most feared security state in the Middle East, employing multiple intelligence services reporting to him to establish a vast network of overlapping and competing surveillance and informers, sowing fear and enforcing political conformity throughout the country.

While Assad and his inner-circle were Alawites, he also appointed Sunnis and minorities to senior positions to bolster his standing among those groups. He also attempted to ingratiate himself with the Sunni majority by praying in Sunni mosques and making the pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Syria's alliance with Egypt in the October 1973 War against Israel signaled just how far Assad was willing to go and the risks he was willing to take to establish himself in the eyes of all Syrians as a genuine Arab leader and as a Syrian hero able to transcend sectarian identification. As Egypt gradually moved toward normalization with Israel later in the decade,

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<sup>11</sup> Eyal Zisser, "Hafiz Al-Asad Discovers Islam," *Middle East Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (1999).



Assad sought to position himself at the vanguard of Arab "rejectionism," a role he hoped would strengthen Syrian secularism and thereby mitigate resentment toward his own sectarian origins.

Despite these overtures, bitter opposition arose in the ranks of Syria's Arab Sunnis to Assad's absolutist rule. Another foreign policy initiative—Syrian intervention in the Lebanese civil war—undermined much of the country-wide prestige Assad had gained through the October 1973 assault on the Israeli occupied Golan Heights. In 1976 Assad chose to invade Lebanon to neutralize an important rival for the mantle of Arab leadership: Yasser Arafat and the Fatah-dominated Palestine Liberation Organization. Fearing that Palestinian fighters in southern Lebanon would drag Syria into a war with Israel at a time and under circumstances not of Syria's choosing, Assad intervened militarily to assist Lebanese Christian militias facing imminent defeat against the combined forces of Palestinians, Lebanese Druze, and Lebanese Sunni Muslims in Lebanon's bitter civil war. The spectacle of Syrian forces entering Lebanon to fight alongside Christian militiamen against the predominantly Sunni Palestinian resistance movement triggered an upsurge in the very sectarian tensions that Assad had tried so assiduously to suppress.

Opposition to the regime inside Syria was spearheaded by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and ultimately took the form of a violent, overtly sectarian confrontation with the regime, characterized by anti-Alawite propaganda and violence. The late 1970s witnessed high profile assassinations of Alawites, including a June 1979 massacre that killed 32 mostly Alawite cadets at an Aleppo artillery school. In 1980 an assassination attempt against Assad triggered a brutal response, as Assad's brother Rifaat ordered the massacre of hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood members held at a prison in Palmyra. Rather than back down, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Sunni opposition groups formed the "Islamic Front in Syria," calling for Alawites to abandon Assad's regime in favor of Islamic Revolution. This formation was followed by an escalation of anti-regime violence targeting government installations in the capital.<sup>12</sup>

The clash between the Brotherhood and the regime reached its climax when the Brotherhood launched a full-scale insurrection in the city of Hama in February 1982. The regime responded with decisive brutality: some 6,000 to 8,000 troops were dispatched, the city was

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<sup>12</sup> Van Dam, 107-108.

bombarded and tanks were sent in, with house-to-house searches, mass arrests, and reported atrocities ensuing; in the end, as many as 25,000 may have been killed over the 27-day assault.<sup>13</sup> A stark illustration of the sectarian dimension that had reemerged to dominate Syria's political landscape was the fact that, during the Hama confrontation, the Syrian military carefully calculated the Alawite-Sunni distribution within its ranks in order to guard against insubordination during the brutal operation. A number of brigades were estimated to have at least 70 percent Alawites comprising their officer corps, while Rifaat al-Assad's Defense Companies were reportedly 90 percent Alawite in its soldiers and officers alike.<sup>14</sup> This episode not only reflected the potential for brutal, openly sectarian violence between a largely Alawite regime and its Sunni majority population—a potential we are seeing borne out in full today—it left in its wake a legacy of enduring sectarian bitterness on both sides: Alawites had been deliberately targeted by Sunni Islamists, and Sunnis had been massacred by the thousands at the hands of predominantly Alawite units.

The regime's brutal crackdown in Hama dealt a hard blow to Syria's Islamist opposition, and no comparable threat to the government would emerge for nearly three decades. Indeed, the Ba'athist military regime managed to preserve—or, rather, enforce—relative stability until March 2011, when the current Syrian uprising began. Nikalaos van Dam explains that throughout this period there was very little change in the Ba'ath's upper echelon power structure as established in Hafiz al-Assad's first years in power: Assad's trusted, Alawite-dominated (though not exclusively Alawite) inner circle of military leaders was largely preserved throughout his lifetime. Perhaps the greatest testament to Assad's success in building a durable, loyal nucleus—bound together in large part by family and sectarian affiliation—is the smoothness with which power was transferred to his son, Bashar, and a new generation of mainly Alawite leaders following Assad the elder's death in June 2000. Bashar was confirmed as president through a referendum, receiving a reported 97.2 percent of votes, and assumed office without opposition. Similarly, the aging members of Hafiz al-Assad's mainly Alawite inner circle were gradually retired, replaced by “a younger generation of Alawi officers with similar regional, tribal and family backgrounds.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "Syria: 30 Years on, Hama Survivors Recount the Horror," *Amnesty International*, February 28 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Van Dam, 114-115.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

These four decades of Assad family rule gave rise to some improvement in the position of Alawites in Syrian society, even beyond those Alawites comprising the government's highest ranks and security services. As the International Crisis Group (ICG) explains, "the Baathist regime undoubtedly offered the Alawites an opportunity to overcome a second-class status to which history appeared to have consigned them. An Alawite intellectual said, 'before that we had been slaughtered, persecuted, treated like animals and infidels.'"<sup>16</sup> Alawites benefited from opportunities in the public sector, were able to move from the countryside into towns, and married into Sunni families; they achieved, in short, a measure of integration. Yet it is also important to note the bounds of this improvement. The Alawite community remains Syria's poorest, with many of its members still seeking to escape poverty through service in the party and government bureaucracies, military, and security services. However, the limited integration of Syria's Alawites does not mean that age-old prejudices have been erased. On the contrary, the Sunni-Alawite schism has remained very much a factor in Syrian society.<sup>17</sup>

The Hafiz al-Assad legacy is mixed. Although his rise to power and his ability to keep it had a strong sectarian foundation, he successfully co-opted the largely Sunni business communities of Damascus and Aleppo, attracted to his service skillful Sunni military officers and government officials, and maintained strong respect in the non-Muslim Brotherhood Arab Sunni populace generally. The Brotherhood aside, he was widely credited for stabilizing Syria after decades of non-stop political turbulence. Minorities and Sunni elites applauded his commitment to secularism, even as he took pains to portray himself as a believing, conventional Muslim and launched, in the 1990s, a mosque-building campaign intended to ingratiate his regime with Syria's majority: a gesture that may have produced unintended consequences by giving regime opponents protected places to meet and organize. Yet Assad could not free himself from the sectarian legacy of Syrian history, even as he preached Arab and Syrian nationalism. Any resistance to his rule would inevitably be countered by security forces on which he could fully rely. This meant that he and his son, in the end, would have to rely very heavily on Alawites to keep them in power.

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<sup>16</sup> International Crisis Group, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, August 1, 2012, Middle East Report N°128, 27.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

## The Rise of Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War

### *The Conflict's Sectarian Underpinnings*

It is against this historical backdrop that one may seek to understand the civil war roiling Syria today and the sectarian dimension that threatens to ruin the country for an extended period. And yet the Syria left behind by Hafiz al-Assad in 2000 was not in a pre-revolutionary state. Indeed, the greatest threat to the rule of Assad the elder had come, ironically, from another Alawite: his brother, Rifaat al-Assad.

Bashar al-Assad inherited from his father a stable system anchored in a largely Alawite security establishment featuring elite, regime-protecting military units, a multifaceted intelligence apparatus, and a Ba'ath Party led and staffed by Assad loyalists. The core of the regime was the extended Assad-Makhluf family and an inner circle of loyalist enablers and enforcers. Over time it would be Bashar's contemporaries replacing those of his father.

One key factor, therefore, had not changed in the handover from Hafiz to Bashar: any challenge to the regime emanating from the Sunni majority would be met, in the main, by an Alawite response. This fundamental fact of life in Syrian power politics had been papered over by the regime's dedication to secularism, its outreach to Sunni elites and the fact that peace and quiet reigned in the Syria bequeathed by Hafiz al-Assad to his son Bashar, a replacement for eldest son and heir apparent Basil al-Assad killed in an automobile accident. When Bashar al-Assad took power the prospects for civil war in Syria along largely sectarian lines seemed remote. Indeed, the new President's seeming openness to political and economic reform appeared to some to herald a forthcoming, regime-led transition from a police state to something more modern and liberal.

In the end, however, Bashar al-Assad proved to be devoted to holding onto political power by means of the repressive system built by his father. The main difference between father and son was the latter's carelessness in allowing, and even motivating, much of Syria's Sunni Muslim community to turn away from the regime. The "Golden Youth" of the 1980s—the children of privilege who had inherited power from fathers who worked and conspired and killed to maintain it—ensconced themselves in luxurious lifestyles in Damascus and took cuts from the foreign investments they encouraged, while the Syrian outback saw economic opportunities wither due to the combined effects of high birth rates and governmental incompetence and

corruption. Bashar al-Assad and his cronies had forgotten utterly about the people who had helped bring to power and sustain the Ba'ath Party. Indeed, even the party languished under the rule of the Golden Youth.

Assad carelessly lit the match that set Syria ablaze when he authorized security forces in the economically depressed, largely Sunni southern city of Dara'a to use lethal violence against demonstrators peacefully protesting against gratuitous police brutality. Teenage graffiti artists had been rounded up and beaten by security personnel headed by a cousin of Assad. Some were separated from their fingernails and all were denied access to their parents. Instead of going to Dara'a to apologize, hand out compensation, and bring lawless officials to justice, Assad authorized deadly force. In so doing he dropped a lighted match onto the dry tinder of deep resentment toward a regime in which presidential cousin and "businessman" Rami Makhluf served, in effect, as a personal internal revenue service for ruling family enjoying life while most Syrians—by definition Sunni Muslims—led lives of quiet desperation.

The real grievance, therefore, was with a corrupt, incompetent, and brutal regime: not with Alawites per se. No doubt the Alawite identity of the ruling family deepened the sense of bitterness and frustration felt by people whose dignity (to say nothing of their lives) was under assault by contemptuous rulers. Yet an elitist Sunni Damascene regime might have elicited much the same response as an elitist Alawite Damascene regime which, in any event, enjoyed excellent social, marital, and economic relationships with Damascene Sunnis.

When, however, the Assad regime elected to assault peaceful protesters with armed force it was, by definition, pitting mostly Alawites against mostly Sunnis. Sunnis accounted for most of the protesters. Alawites accounted for most of the troops, intelligence operatives, and police willing to do the regime's bidding. This was the implicit nature of the system Hafiz al-Assad was obliged to use against the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s and early 1980s. This was the system Bashar al-Assad chose to employ against a challenge far less threatening than that which confronted his father. There was nothing inevitable about the uprising that began in mid-March 2011: Assad had non-lethal options that could have prevented the protests from spreading like wildfire. Yet when he went lethal and then persisted with lethality, that which he made inevitable was a nasty, if gratuitous, civil war with an ever-growing sectarian dimension.

### *Sectarianism on the Rise: Galvanizing the Alawite Base*

In its initial stages the uprising was primarily non-sectarian in nature, focusing on the regime's corruption, repression, economic mismanagement, and contempt for its subjects. Indeed, protesters early on rejected sectarian designations with slogans such as "No Sunni, no Allawi, no Kurd and no Arab, we all want freedom."<sup>18</sup> Yet as nonviolent protests have given way to civil war, the conflict has taken on an increasingly sectarian hue, with a Sunni-dominated opposition facing off against an Alawite-heavy regime. The regime and its supporters characterize the rebels as primarily foreign Sunni Islamist fanatics, bent on imposing Sharia law and attacking religious pluralism, while portions of the opposition have come to associate the crimes of the regime with the Alawite community writ large. A dynamic of polarization has emerged, in which Sunnis and Alawites increasingly hold one another collectively responsible for violations real and perceived. This dynamic has given rise to a grim, self-perpetuating cycle of sectarian violence with civilians increasingly suffering on both sides, and fault-lines deepening every step of the way.

Indeed, the UN reported this past December that both the regime and the opposition appear to have been responsible for acts of violence carried out based on religious affiliation: "Government forces and militias aligned with the Government have attacked Sunni civilians... [one interviewee] stated that the militia told her that 'they would kill all Sunnis in the region and that the area belonged to them.' Another interviewee stated that he regularly witnessed Sunni commuters being pulled out of their cars and beaten."<sup>19</sup> Opposition militants have similarly targeted Alawites, with reports of rebels capturing government troops and imprisoning the Sunnis while summarily executing the Alawites. There have also been bombing attacks against Alawite neighborhoods and Shia religious shrines.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, opposition members increasingly refer to the "Alawite regime" and more extremist rebel groups have employed derogatory religious terms in their rhetoric.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> International Crisis Group, *The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution*, July 6, 2011, Middle East/North Africa Report N°108, 8.

<sup>19</sup> United Nations, *Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Mohammed Sergie, "Jabhat Al Nusra Shows Its Bloody Mark on Aleppo," *Syria Deeply*, December 15 2012.

The process by which Syria has arrived at this juncture is complex, but can largely be accounted for by two interconnected facets of the Assad regime's response to the protests: its escalating use of violence and its deliberate manipulation of sectarian tensions. A detailed account of the conflict's militarization is beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say, however, that as the regime employed ever greater levels of force to suppress an initially peaceful uprising, the opposition responded in kind. Defectors from the Syrian military helped build the armed opposition movement, as did Sunni patrons in the Gulf and Turkey willing to contribute arms. In 2012 the violence reached a fever pitch, with the regime coming to rely heavily on indiscriminate artillery and aerial bombardments inflicting massive civilian casualties while the armed opposition grew and acquired more arms from foreign patrons, smuggling, and captured regime facilities. In short, the Assad regime's tactics had fully transformed civil disobedience into armed resistance.

Meanwhile, Assad has intentionally—and, thus far, successfully—sought to prolong his own survival by whipping up fear within his Alawite base. ICG described this well in a November 2011 report:

[T]he regime in effect took the Alawite minority hostage, linking its fate to its own. It did so deliberately and cynically...[staging] sectarian incidents in confessionally-mixed areas as a means of bringing to the surface deeply-ingrained feelings of insecurity among Alawites...To stoke fear, authorities distributed weapons and bags of sand—designed to erect fortifications—to Alawites living in rural areas long before any objective threat existed.<sup>22</sup>

In a later (April 2012) report, ICG offered chilling details of the sort of anti-rebel propaganda through which the regime terrified its Alawite base into unconditional loyalty:

Security services circulated stories (and even a video) of a woman in Homs who not only drank the blood of Alawites brought to her by armed groups, but also dismembered their bodies and dispersed their parts; systematically portrayed protesters as Salafist extremists establishing Islamic emirates in regions of Syria they controlled; and broadcast purported evidence of foreign involvement, such as wads of Israeli shekels found in insurgent hideouts in Baba Amro. At the same time, they recruited Alawites into the shabbiha, armed them for self-defense and allowed them to form militia.<sup>23</sup>

Given the Alawites' history of repression, many members of the sect were readily inclined to believe such propaganda, such that "perceptions within the community as a general

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<sup>22</sup> International Crisis Group, *Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria's Dynamics*, November 24, 2011, Middle East Briefing N°31, 2.

<sup>23</sup> International Crisis Group, *Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, April 10, 2012, Middle East Briefing N°33, 4.

rule have been several steps ahead of developments on the ground.” Alawites began arming themselves well before they faced any genuine threat, and baseless rumors of Sunni brutality swept through Alawite communities around the country.<sup>24</sup> For some Alawites fear of extermination “has prompted fantasies about obliterating large swathes of society perceived as inherently threatening.” One interviewee spoke of a friend who believed the solution in Homs was to cleanse the city of all Sunnis; indeed, this language of “cleansing” has become increasingly and disturbingly widespread within Alawite communities.<sup>25</sup> Thus, while some Alawites remain ambivalent, unwilling to stand firmly behind either the regime or the opposition, others are prepared to defend Assad with their lives, taking up arms to prop up a regime they view as their best chance for survival. This is ominously conveyed by the graffiti that Assad supporters have sprayed on city walls, with slogans such as “God, Syria, Bashar and nothing else,” or “Assad [for president] or we will burn this country.”<sup>26</sup>

The regime’s ramping up of repressive measures and radicalizing its Alawite base produced an inevitable result: the regime’s brutal crack-down began to look to its victims more and more like an Alawite project. Alawite-heavy security services (units of the Syrian Army and the various intelligence organizations, with the notorious Air Force Intelligence in the lead) essentially sought to terrorize particularly the Sunni population into submission, as “arbitrary detention, torture, summary executions and the wholesale destruction and theft of property” became widespread in Sunni areas. Their practices took on a distinctly sectarian hue as they forced detainees to pray to Bashar’s picture, mistreated Sunnis at checkpoints, and employed derogatory language towards them.<sup>27</sup> The bulk of the Syrian Army (largely Sunni in composition) was kept either on the sidelines or relegated to static checkpoint duties. Indeed, military defectors and deserters have been almost exclusively Sunni officers and soldiers leaving conventional units, as opposed to Alawite-heavy special forces and regime protection formations.

An even more alarming example of the regime's sectarian survival strategy has been the rise of the *shabiha*—armed, loyalist militias primarily comprising Alawites (including active duty military and intelligence personnel supplemented by unemployed and underemployed

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 24-25.

<sup>26</sup> International Crisis Group, *Syria’s Phase of Radicalisation*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> International Crisis Group, *Syria’s Mutating Conflict*, 5.



civilian auxiliaries) hired to terrorize regime opponents and civilian populations deemed pro-opposition. At the beginning of the uprising the regime enlisted *shabiha* as plainclothes enforcers to violently suppress anti-government activity. Since then, the *shabiha* have become increasingly brutal, autonomous, and ubiquitous. Their numbers are in the thousands, if not the tens of thousands, and (having been set in motion by the regime) sometimes operate autonomously. As one analyst put it, a certain “contract” was established between regime and *shabiha*, whereby “you make sure there are no demonstrations, and you can do as you please.”<sup>28</sup> In effect, this has meant the unleashing of thousands of operatives lacking any real structure, discipline, or accountability, and driven by the conviction that non-combatants—their lives, property and dignity—were fair game. *Shabiha* are believed responsible for some of the war’s most severe atrocities, including massacres in the Sunni-majority villages of Houla and Daraya in which hundreds of civilians were killed. The *shabiha* have thus become the most potent symbol of the regime’s endorsement of wanton, often sectarian violence, enflaming sectarian tensions every step of the way.

#### *Radicalizing the Opposition: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy*

Owing to this brutal campaign by the *shabiha* and security services, a vicious cycle has been set in motion. On the one hand, each atrocity committed by regime-employed Alawites against Sunnis increases the likelihood of revenge killings, and thereby increases the incentive of some Alawites to fight hard in Assad’s defense. On the other, the escalation of regime repression and the growing ubiquity of the Alawite-dominated security services and *shabiha* have helped trigger a parallel radicalization within elements of the Sunni opposition. ICG writes of this phenomenon:

With time, the Alawites’ conspicuous role in putting down protests, disseminating propaganda and staging pro-regime demonstrations transformed anti-Alawite feelings—initially latent and largely repressed—into a perilous reality... It revived age-old prejudices about the community’s “savagery”... As repression escalated in recent months, many Syrians have shifted from blaming elements of the regime, to blaming the regime as a whole and, finally, to blaming the Alawite community itself.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Rana Moussaoui, "Shabiha Militiamen, Tools of the Syrian Regime," *Agence France Presse*, June 10 2012.

<sup>29</sup> International Crisis Group, *Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria’s Dynamics*, 2.

That report was issued in November of 2011. In the fourteen months since, the conflict has become exponentially more violent and more sectarian in tone. Thus, in August 2012, ICG observed that “blatant hatred of Alawites [had become] commonplace,” with Sunnis increasingly employing rhetoric pertaining to Alawite savagery and otherness within Syrian society. Indiscriminate killings of Alawites have been on the rise, although no large-scale massacre has yet been reported.<sup>30</sup> Hostility has even emerged toward Alawites engaging in anti-regime protests, as Alawite protestors have told of Sunni demonstrators chanting about killing Alawites;<sup>31</sup> one such slogan called for “The Alawite to the coffin and the Christian to Beirut.”<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the most notorious example of inflammatory anti-Alawite rhetoric came from the popular Saudi Arabia-based Salafi Sheikh Adnan al-Arour, who, in a video from early 2012, proclaimed that Alawites who remained neutral or supported the revolution would not be harmed, but those who stood against the revolution would be chopped up and their flesh fed to dogs.<sup>33</sup>

The regime, in sum, appears to have successfully produced a self-fulfilling prophecy: the military response and the strategy of manipulating sectarian tensions to secure Alawite loyalty have helped produce among the regime's enemies feelings of sectarian animus that the mainstream opposition has tried to avoid. The articulation of this animus in turn more securely ties the Alawite community (at least in large part) to the regime by seeming to validate Assad's narrative of an extremist, intolerant opposition threatening to subvert the Syrian state and wreak sectarian violence against the Alawites and other minorities.

An additional factor contributing to a rise in sectarian animus is the role played by external actors. The regime has received steadfast support—including direct material assistance and personnel—from Iran, Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shia. The fact that the regime's lone regional backers are Shia has further enhanced the opposition's perception that it is fighting against an Alawite regime. The rebels, meanwhile, have received arms and training from Turkey and Sunni Gulf states. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait are particularly keen to defeat Iran and Hezbollah in Syria and they often tend to process politics in sectarian terms. Thus the civil war's context

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<sup>30</sup> International Crisis Group, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, 17, 28.

<sup>31</sup> Phil Sands, "Sectarianism Casts Shadow over Syrian Uprising," *The National*, June 21 2012.

<sup>32</sup> "Syrians Still Divided over Country's Future," *BBC*, March 12 2012.

<sup>33</sup> The video, with English captions, can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGT8pZcKYL4>.

within a wider Sunni-Shia struggle for influence has further exacerbated Syria's own sectarian divide.

This regional dimension is further relevant in terms of its impact on Syrian Sunni attitudes towards Syria's small, diffuse Shia minority. Even before the uprising began, anti-Shia sentiment had been on the rise in Syria as a result of escalating Sunni-Shia tensions throughout the region and an increase in conversions to Shiism within Syria. Unsurprisingly, the unwavering support that Iran and Hezbollah have lent to Assad, coupled with the regime's widespread support among Syrian Shia, has only intensified this hostility in the Sunni community.<sup>34</sup> This trend is exemplified by rhetoric in some opposition circles that vilifies Shia and Alawites alike, and by a recent Human Rights Watch report that rebels had deliberately burned a Shia mosque.<sup>35</sup> Even more recently, the Nusra Front (discussed below) claimed responsibility for a deadly car bombing in the pro-Assad, predominantly Ismaili Shia town of Salamiyah. Such developments create concerns about the spread of sectarianism beyond the primary Sunni-Alawite fault-line and about the security of small Shia communities in the coming months and years.

### *The Emerging Jihadist Thread*

In recent months Syrian minorities and western observers alike have been alarmed by the emerging role of Salafi-jihadists alongside the opposition. This strain remains a minority of those bearing arms against the regime, but it is highly visible and tactically effective relative to other groups, and it is growing daily. As Syria's opposition has increasingly come to view the regime and its supporters through a sectarian lens, some of its elements have become more receptive to the language of religious extremism.

Over the past year these jihadist groups have earned recognition from some observers as the most combat capable of anti-Assad forces. They have reportedly received significant private funding from the Gulf and many of their members have accrued battlefield experience abroad, unlike the largely inexperienced ranks of the Free Syrian Army.<sup>36</sup> They have also aided Syrian civilians in war-torn areas and have presented themselves as less corrupt and more selfless than other opposition factions. It is also arguable that Western nations have, by declining to arm and

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<sup>34</sup> International Crisis Group, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, 30

<sup>35</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Attacks on Religious Sites Raise Tensions," January 23 2013.

<sup>36</sup> International Crisis Group, *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, October 12, 2012, Middle East Report N°131, 5.

finance Syria's more moderate opposition groups, inadvertently empowered the jihadists to accrue relative advantages over the mainstream armed opposition. This has, in turn, made other, non-jihadist rebels willing to cooperate with them: an understandable development in response to regime operations and tactics. Moreover, superior capabilities have put extremist groups at the forefront of critical operations, such as the capture of the strategic Taftanaz air base and Sheik Suleiman army base. Tactical successes in turn increase the prestige of jihadist groups and give them access to regime weapons and equipment, thereby widening their military advantage vis-à-vis more moderate groups and broadening their support within populations under assault by the regime.

The rise of such groups in the second half of 2012 has troubling implications for the conflict's trajectory for two reasons. First, Salafi-jihadist thought embraces armed struggle on a deep ideological level; this, coupled with their superior capabilities, means that they will continue to up the ante with respect to violence, including (if not centering on) terror operations. We have seen this borne out in spectacular car and suicide bombings, often with heavy civilian tolls. Second, Salafism is inhospitable to religious pluralism, especially concerning minority groups within Islam. Salafis harbor "extreme enmity towards what they consider heretical Islamic sects, including Shiism and especially Bashar al-Assad's Alawite sect."<sup>37</sup> Needless to say, this attitude—coupled with these groups' superior enthusiasm and capacity for violence—has the potential to further plunge Syria into sectarian bloodletting, and creates legitimate concerns about the safety of Alawites in a post-Assad Syria.

The most prominent case-in-point is the emergence of Jabhat al-Nusra, or the Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate (specifically Al-Qaeda in Iraq) recently designated by the United States as a terrorist group. By the end of 2012 the Nusra Front was thought to have some 5,000 members including foreign and homegrown jihadists. Several factors have made the group one of the most effective fighting forces in Syria, chief among which are its strong contingent of hardened, veteran jihadists and its rigid standards for recruitment, training, and operational secrecy. This combat capability, along with the group's reputation for interacting positively with non-combatants, have gained it increasing support from segments of the Syrian population and armed opposition.

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<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, Institute for the Study of War, September 2012, 17.

The Nusra Front stands for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate throughout the greater Levant region. Its blatantly sectarian rhetoric bodes ill for what such a caliphate would mean for religious minorities, Alawites and Shia in particular. “Jabhat al-Nusra portrays itself as the Sunni community’s aggressive defender against the ‘Alawite enemy’ and its ‘Shiite agents.’ It routinely uses the derogatory term *rawafidh* (literally: rejectionists...) in reference to Shiites... Its use of the word ‘Nusayri’ instead of Alawite is equally disparaging, intended to highlight the creed’s divorce from orthodox Islam.”<sup>38</sup> This trend is made clear by the Nusra Front’s Arabic language Twitter, which routinely makes reference to the “Nusayri army” and the number of “Nusayri soldiers” killed in a given operation.<sup>39</sup> Beyond the derogatory quality of the term “Nusayri,” this language shows a clear tendency to conflate regime forces with the Alawite community writ large. This tendency is exemplified still more clearly in one particularly inflammatory Nusra Front communiqué warning that if the regime did not stop its “massacres against Sunnis,” it would “bear the sins of the Nusayris, and what’s coming will be worse and more bitter, with God’s permission.”<sup>40</sup>

While the Nusra Front has received the overwhelming majority of western media attention, perhaps the clearest official statement of Salafi attitudes toward minorities’ position in a post-Assad Syria has been provided by the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF). The SIF was formed in December 2012 and comprises eleven Islamist brigades, most prominently *Kata’ib Ahrar al-Sham* (KAS), which has for some time stood as the most prominent Salafi-jihadist group aside from the Nusra Front. The SIF’s charter—posted to the group’s Facebook page on January 20, 2013—outlines the goal of toppling Assad and establishing an Islamic state in Syria, but it also provides some insight into the group’s view of minorities, containing a subsection entitled “Non-Muslims.” While the charter condemns “extremism” and states that “difference of religion is not a justification for injustice against anyone,” it also identifies Sunni Islam as “the principle and only source of legislation,” and explicitly rejects “the call for integration and mixing of religions and sects.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, even in an official statement that seeks to emphasize tolerance and

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<sup>38</sup> International Crisis Group, *Tentative Jihad*, 11.

<sup>39</sup> The Nusra Front’s Twitter account is available at <https://twitter.com/JbhatALnusra>.

<sup>40</sup> International Crisis Group, *Tentative Jihad*, 18.

<sup>41</sup> The original document is available on the SIF’s Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/Islamic.Syrian.Front/posts/136004689894218>; an English translation is available at <http://abujamajem.wordpress.com/2013/01/29/the-charter-of-the-syrian-islamic-front/>.

moderation, the SIF's language seems to suggest that non-Sunnis in a post-Assad Syria would be relegated to second-class citizenship.

Given these factors, it is evident that the rise of Salafi groups like the Nusra Front and the SIF threatens to intensify the sectarian dimension of Syria's civil war, and to prolong it well beyond Assad's ouster. Not only will these groups fight ruthlessly against the regime, but they will very likely continue this fight once the regime has fallen in order to pursue their goal of an Islamic state. While the establishment of such a state may seem remote, the very specter of Islamist domination will further incentivize Alawites to fight desperately, whether to preserve Assad's regime or to stave off Sunni domination once he has fallen. Viewed in the context of Assad's successful manipulation of Syria's confessional fault-lines, these Salafi groups thus add one further dimension to an already dangerous trend towards sectarian warfare. In effect, then, the Assad regime and its Salafi opponents collaborate in seeking to make the struggle for Syria overtly sectarian in nature.

### *Minority Vulnerabilities*

Sunni Arabs have thus far borne the brunt of Syria's civil war, as the regime and *shabiha* have used indiscriminate force—aerial bombardments, massacres, arbitrary detentions, and summary executions—against Sunni-majority towns and neighborhoods believed sympathetic to the opposition. Recent months, however, have seen an increase in anti-Alawite rhetoric and violence. Each passing week brings the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands, of Sunni civilians, largely at the hands of Alawite security forces and *shabiha*. The result is that the opposition becomes more inclined to see the struggle in sectarian terms and more reliant on well-armed, operationally capable Salafi actors, raising the prospects for acts of collective punishment against Alawite communities sooner or later. The uptick in anti-Alawite rhetoric, the targeted killings of Alawites, and some rebels' emerging practice of summarily executing captured Alawites all demonstrate Alawites' increasingly precarious position within Syria. Thus, according to the ICG, “the danger of widespread sectarian reprisals, indiscriminate killings, large-scale displacement...and blanket discrimination should not be taken lightly.”<sup>42</sup> Syria's small, diffuse Shia population is also very much at risk, as evidenced by the desecration of a Shia mosque, a car bombing in an Ismaili city, and the anti-Shia rhetoric of groups like the Nusra Front.

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<sup>42</sup> International Crisis Group, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, 29.

While Alawites and Shia are the most likely of Syria's minorities to be the victims of large-scale atrocities following Assad's ouster, much of the country's Christian population also fears the prospect of Islamist rule. Recent months have witnessed the looting of two churches in Latakia<sup>43</sup> and, still more troubling, reports of violence against Christians by Islamist rebels in the heavily contested northeastern al-Hasakah province, where rebels, Kurdish militias, and regime forces are all vying for control. Indeed, one man in al-Hasakah claimed to have been beaten and robbed by rebels "just for being a Christian."<sup>44</sup> Such incidents reflect the fact that, although full-blown ethnic cleansing of Christians remains unlikely, the lawlessness that could prevail in a post-Assad Syria—and which has already become apparent in some parts of the country, such as al-Hasakah—could leave Syria's Christian minority vulnerable to violence and discrimination from extremist elements, particularly given that many Christians have stood behind the Assad regime. In view of this possibility, hundreds of Christians have already begun to flee al-Hasakah, and thousands more seem poised to follow should Islamist rebels gain control.<sup>45</sup>

Syria's Kurds and Druze also stand to suffer from the ongoing conflict, and the Kurds in particular have already become embroiled in fighting for control of Kurd-heavy areas such as al-Hasakah. These groups do not, however, appear vulnerable to sectarian harassment or cleansing in the same way as Syria's Alawites, Shia, or even Christians. Syria's Druze and Kurds are geographically concentrated and militarily adept—unlike the much more diffuse Shia and Christian communities—and have largely sought to avoid taking sides in the conflict, making them unlikely targets for any sort of collective punishment.

Finally, even as one assesses possible minority vulnerabilities in a post-Assad Syria, one must also bear in mind a central reality brought about by the regime's sectarian survival strategy: to date, Sunni Muslims have suffered the overwhelming majority of sectarian violence in the civil war. One must acknowledge that Syria's ongoing civil war might continue to find Sunnis suffering more than anyone else from the crimes of those pursuing sectarian agendas.

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<sup>43</sup> Human Rights Watch.

<sup>44</sup> Susanne Gusten, "Christians Squeezed out by Violent Struggle in North Syria," *New York Times*, February 13, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

## *Opposition Commitment to Pluralism*

Against this backdrop of rising sectarianism and intense concern over the fate of minorities in a post-Assad Syria, the country's mainstream opposition groups have taken pains to emphasize their commitment to tolerance and pluralism. Despite the fact that this opposition has been heavily influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood—a group that doubtless harbors some feelings of sectarian grievance and bias left over from the violence of the 1970s and 1980s—it has thus far been able to set forth an avowedly pluralistic political program. It is, however, important to bear in mind that this rhetorical commitment to tolerance, while admirable and wholly preferable to the alternative, has not been enough to stem the rise of sectarianism in Syria, and minorities continue to stand by the regime (or flee rebel-held areas, as in the case of Christians in al-Hasakah). This fact reflects the mainstream political opposition's relative inability to influence events on the ground, and raises key questions about what must be in place before moderate Syrians can convincingly guarantee minority rights.

That said, an early example of opposition thought regarding minorities came at the first meeting of the Friends of the Syrian People Group in Tunis on February 24, 2012. Dr. Burhan Ghalioun, then president of the Syrian National Council (SNC), spoke eloquently about the opposition vision for coexistence in Syria:

To all my fellow Syrian brothers and sisters I say: Syria is our goal. With all honesty and openness, I speak before you now as a Syrian Arab citizen who happened to be born a Muslim... I say to my fearful Alawite compatriots: You are my brothers and sisters, and your unique role in rebuilding the new Syria cannot be undertaken by anyone else, because it is a right you have earned through your historic struggle for Syria. No one has the right to hold you responsible for crimes committed by the Assad-Makhlouf Mafia. You are not responsible for the actions of corrupt dictators...

To all Syrians, I say: The Syrian National Council will not accept any form of political isolation, nor any form of discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, or gender... For all those who fear what will happen as result of Assad's and his thieves' departure, I say: The Syrian National Council envisions a future Syria based on the rule of law and state institutions within a free and civil society that is founded in a prosperous, diverse, and creative nation. Syrians should never have to leave their country in search of freedom, opportunities, or a decent life.<sup>46</sup>

In July 2012 a broad array of Syrian opposition groups met in Cairo under the auspices of the Arab League to arrive at a "National Compact" setting forth a vision of what post-Assad

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<sup>46</sup> The text of Dr. Ghalioun's speech is available at the *Syrian Freedom* blog, <http://syrianfreedomls.tumblr.com/post/18310981243/the-friends-of-syria-meeting-speech-of-dr-burhan>.



Syria would look like. Although the media focused on disputes and the tossing of furniture by some exercised conference participants, the National Compact agreed upon contained some language pertinent to the issues of pluralism and minority rights:

The Syrian people are one people, whose texture was established through history on the full equality of citizenship regardless of their origin, color, sex, language, ethnicity, political opinion, religion, or sect, on the basis of a comprehensive national concurrence. No one is to impose a religion or a belief on anyone, or to prevent any one of the free choice of his religion and its practice. Women are equal with men, and it is not permissible to go back on the gains of any of their rights. Any citizen has the right to occupy any position in the state, including the post of President of the Republic, regardless of his religion or nationalism either man or woman.<sup>47</sup>

Although the SNC had members present at the July 2012 proceedings and a follow-up gathering in August, its corporate attitude toward the broad coalition represented in Cairo was negative: largely a reflection of the desire of the Muslim Brotherhood to dominate the Council and the opposition. The foot-dragging of the SNC with respect to the Cairo process led ultimately to the creation of the Syrian National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces (also known as the Syrian Opposition Coalition, or SOC) in November 2012: a new, more broadly representative umbrella group that subsumed the SNC and accepted the work accomplished in Cairo. Sheikh Moaz al-Khatib—a well-respected, moderate Sunni cleric and the former Imam (prayer leader) of the historic Umayyad mosque in Damascus—was elected president of the new alignment. One key reason for this appointment was precisely the idea that Khatib’s status as a religious figure would oblige the Brotherhood to join and cooperate with the new body. Al-Khatib spoke out on the issue of minority rights in Doha on November 11, 2012, immediately after his election:

This revolution uses “takbir” (the chanting of Allah is great) in all its corners, not to push anyone away for our brothers from all faiths are our partners. Many of our Christian brothers have joined us as we started demonstrating from within mosques and chanted “*Allahu Akbar*” in the face of the tyrant. The Islam that we carry with us is an Islam that builds civilizations and honors human beings, an Islam that embraces Christianity in the most sacred of lands, an Islam that unites people not divides them, an Islam that considers that strength is in diversity not in isolation. And at the wake of the first martyrs in Douma, it was made very clear that we are demanding freedom for every Sunni and Alawi, every Christian and Druze, every Ismaili and [Assyrian]. We feel the pain of every one of them, from the injustices perpetrated against our Arabism to the injustices

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<sup>47</sup> “Cairo Documents: The National Compact,” November 8, 2012, text available from the Carnegie Middle East Center.

perpetrated against the great Kurdish people and to the injustices dealt to every segment of our society.<sup>48</sup>

On January 1, 2013 Khatib followed up with a moving letter to the Christians of Syria, emphasizing the legacy of coexistence shared by Syrian Muslims and Christians and entreating the latter not to flee the country:

We have lived together as one in good times and bad, respecting each other's religion and identifying in each other a vital human component that made Syria the mosaic of the world and one of its masterpieces. Coexistence also made Syria one of the finest places on earth, not only in terms of sectarian tolerance and compassion but also in terms of love, security, and tranquility. Defending the dignity, blood, wealth, life, and property of Christians is tantamount to defending our own dignity, blood, wealth, and property. It is shameful that any of them would meet harm among us...

For the sake of the children; the innocent and the martyrs of God's houses; those who know naught but purity; those whose hearts are filled with serenity and fairness; for the sake of the smiles of the coming generations and the hopes of boys and girls, unite! O Christians, please do not leave, stay with us.<sup>49</sup>

It is clear that Syria's mainstream political opposition is highly capable of speaking the language of religious pluralism. Still, the SOC—and the SNC before it—have been unable to convince minority populations that they would benefit from abandoning the regime and joining the opposition. The reasons for this are relatively clear: the SOC presently enjoys only limited influence on the ground, despite having gained recognition from a broad array of international actors. Meanwhile, the SOC's military counterpart—the Supreme Military Council (SMC), formed in December to provide a unified command structure for the mainstream (Free Syrian Army) armed rebel groups—finds itself alternating between competition and cooperation with well-armed, well-financed jihadist element. As a result, events are being shaped in large measure by the growing influence of jihadists and the fact that Alawite-heavy units of the military, the various intelligence organizations, and *shabiha* militiamen continue to terrorize largely Sunni populations with artillery and air attacks as well as massacres of civilians. While these dynamics prevail, it will be all but impossible for the mainstream political opposition to convincingly articulate a program of non-sectarianism and minority protection: a program in which minorities would have faith and, on the basis of which, would take action.

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<sup>48</sup> A translation of Sheikh Khatib's speech is available at the *Levantine Dreamhouse* blog, <http://levantdream.blogspot.com/2012/11/translation-of-sheik-moaz-kahtibs-speech.html>.

<sup>49</sup> *Moaz al-Khatib*, "Letter to the Christians of Syria," January 1, 2013, text available from the Carnegie Middle East Center.

For what, after all, is an opposition in the context of minority concerns, especially one that does not feature unity of command? Why would an Alawite, or a Christian, or a Kurd regard Khatib's statements as having any weight beyond the person of the Imam? Not only is the SOC presently unable to guarantee minority rights in the face of rising sectarianism and the potential for collective punishment, it is far from clear whether it will prove capable—at any point in the foreseeable future—of reining in extremist elements and establishing stability throughout the country. Even beyond this, there are concerns that the Muslim Brotherhood current within the SOC could push for a post-Assad government that might fall short of the opposition's stated commitment to pluralism. It is therefore critical that the SOC form, as quickly as possible, an alternate government to that of Assad, founded on the principles of citizenship, civil society, and non-sectarianism, functioning on liberated Syrian territory and possessing the financial and military capacity to actually govern and deliver on its reassuring promises of coexistence and minority protection.<sup>50</sup> As long as Assad continues to hold on, the absence of such a government will compromise the credibility and persuasiveness of the message Khatib and his colleagues wish to convey to Syria's minorities.

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<sup>50</sup> The international community must inevitably play a central role in the development of such a government, an issue that will be taken up in detail in the recommendations section.

## Potential Scenarios for Syria's Future

As Syria continues its descent into communal violence, observers try to predict the course the country will take while friends of Syria in governments and international organizations try to steer that course away from state failure and widespread sectarian bloodletting. While it is impossible to specify with any certainty how Syria's current travails will play out over the coming months and years, this study posits four general paths the conflict may follow, focusing on the potential within each for increasing sectarian bloodshed.

These scenarios are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. Rather, they are meant to demonstrate that communal violence will remain an acute danger in Syria for years to come, regardless of what specific course the country takes. The Syrian opposition and its international backers would do well to recognize this now, and move quickly with measures to contain and mitigate this threat.

### *Regime Victory*

One potential outcome of the Syrian conflict is for the regime to push the rebels out of greater Damascus and reassert control over the greater part of Syrian territory. This is, by all indications, the least likely of the scenarios offered here. Compared with the Muslim Brotherhood-led uprising of the late-1970s and early-1980s (centered in Hama), today's rebellion is far more pervasive. It is neither limited to a single group nor geographic area, and the regime's governing ability has been eroded in large swathes of the country. Moreover, the regime's brutal response to nonviolent protests and its willingness to inflict indiscriminate slaughter on noncombatants seem to have convinced most Syrians that there can be no return to Assad family rule, regardless of the cost. In view of these considerations, it is highly unlikely that a regime victory would represent anything more than a temporary pause in the fight for Syria.

Nevertheless, it is possible that Assad could regain control of some significant portion of Syria owing to exhaustion in the ranks of the non-extremist armed opposition and the civilian population writ large; widespread popular disillusionment with the uprising's evolution from non-violent protest toward seemingly endless violence featuring jihadist groups like the Nusra Front; and the regime's still formidable military capacity and unwavering support from Iran and Hezbollah. If the regime were to reassert control over significant populated areas it would be extraordinarily dangerous in terms of sectarian violence. Regime security operatives (largely

Alawite) would likely work their way through overwhelmingly Sunni opposition strongholds, conducting summary executions, and conveying people to prison and torture. Alawites, meanwhile, would become increasingly vulnerable to reprisals in areas where the Sunni opposition still held sway.

The humanitarian crisis would continue to deteriorate, as the regime has already proven itself a difficult and distasteful partner for UN-led relief efforts, seeking as it has to bend these efforts to its own campaign of suppression. There would remain large numbers of internally displaced, hunger would remain ubiquitous, and health issues would wrack the country. In this scenario it is highly unlikely that Syrian refugees—probably numbering well over one million by the time it were to transpire—would return to their homes. Given this level of instability in and around the country it is virtually inconceivable that the regime could exert effective control over Syria for any prolonged length of time. Nonetheless, a string of tactical regime victories in populated areas would likely result in mass atrocities particularly aimed at the Sunni population, sustained reprisals against Alawites and other communities viewed as supporting the regime, and the long-term poisoning of Syria’s sectarian relationships.

### *Managed Transition*

A second, much more desirable but similarly remote possibility is that the Syrian opposition and elements of the regime could arrive at an agreement on a peaceful handover of power from the regime to a consensus transitional government. This managed transition is the mission of UN and Arab League Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi, who has received support from the United States and many other international actors though not, critically, any substantive buy-in from the regime itself or Russia. The essence of the Brahimi approach is an attempt to implement the June 30, 2012 Final Communiqué of the Action Group on Syria, convened in Geneva by Brahimi’s predecessor, Kofi Annan. The Final Communiqué, accepted by the Permanent Five members of the UN Security Council, envisions a “transitional governing body” being created by opposition-government negotiations on the basis of mutual consent—i.e., mutual veto (thereby ensuring that figures viewed as unacceptable by each side would not serve). This governing body, a national unity government perhaps, would receive full executive powers from those now exercising them. Although the Final Communiqué did not mention the name “Assad,” it was understood by all that the mutual consent process would render him and his

regime ineligible for any future role in the governance of Syria without requiring his resignation or departure as preconditions for the negotiations themselves.

In the event that Assad were to acknowledge that his rule has become unsustainable and cooperate with a peaceful, managed shift to a transitional government, either departing Syria or submitting to a judicial process, there would be a greatly improved possibility of avoiding widespread communal violence and atrocities. A managed transition would, by its nature, entail some level of conciliation between the main two parties and would cut short the current descent into all-out sectarian warfare. Still, some revenge killings are likely inevitable: too many unspeakable acts have taken place to wipe the slate clean, even with a system that would ideally (over time) deliver civil justice in the context of truth, accountability, and reconciliation. Moreover, the usefulness of a managed transition in avoiding further bloodletting would be contingent on the establishment of an inclusive transitional government committed to pluralism and the protection of vulnerable minorities as well as effective processes of transitional justice and reconciliation. Absent these dimensions even a managed transition could prove but a pause—and a brief one at that—in a long war set in motion by the sectarian bitterness currently playing out in Syria. It is therefore evident that even the very remote best-case scenario of managed transition bears considerable risk of communal violence and will require sustained international assistance to a transitional Syrian government.

### *Rebel Victory*

A third potential scenario is one in which the rebels succeed in capturing Damascus and controlling the better part of Syria. In this case, the persistence and scope of sectarian violence would depend largely on whether this rebel victory came about in, say, three months or three years, and the extent to which jihadist groups have managed to entrench themselves at the forefront of the opposition. One admittedly imprecise rule of thumb: the longer the Assad regime remains in place, the greater the chances of massacres multiplying and even becoming commonplace, as the regime's use of largely Alawite forces will continue to fuel the opposition's radicalization and the vicious cycle that it causes.

Such a victory would feature the regime's loss of Damascus, which might entail the killing or capturing of Assad and his key aides. Alternatively, it could involve the flight of Assad and other senior regime figures to the Alawite-heavy Latakia and Tartus Provinces, either for the

purpose of mounting ongoing military operations against the victors or as a way station preceding exile. It is also possible that Assad, his immediate family, parts of his extended family, and senior regime figures could leave directly from Damascus for exile, seeking to reunite with monetary assets hidden abroad. Regardless of the fate of the family, it is likely that significant numbers of Alawites residing in the Damascus area and other mixed cities such as Homs would relocate to the aforementioned provinces as the prospects of a regime military defeat appear increasingly likely. Indeed, there are reports of such relocations already taking place. Alawites remaining in Damascus in the wake of an opposition victory would feel substantial fear and vulnerability, particularly if jihadist groups enter Damascus as part of (or, more disturbingly yet, at the head of) rebel forces. Unless the victors are able and willing to protect Alawite quarters of Damascus and other mixed cities from such extremists, the likelihood of mass atrocities targeting Alawites could be quite high.

Largely Alawite elite units could, in the event of Damascus' fall, seek to relocate (either as intact units or smaller formations down to individual soldiers) to Latakia and Tartus Provinces. They could do so for a variety of motives, all boiling down to fear and uncertainty about what the future would hold. If the northwestern corner of Syria were to become, for all practical purposes, a self-governing entity as the consequences of a rebel victory were sorted out, Sunni populations in the cities and towns on or near Syria's Mediterranean coast could become vulnerable to sectarian harassment, including mass atrocities and "cleansing" through forced population transfers. This would be especially the case if there were parallel actions targeting Alawite population centers in Damascus and other large urban areas, in mixed areas adjoining the "Alawite heartland," or within Latakia and Tartus Provinces.

The fall of Damascus would probably prompt an attempt by the opposition to consolidate its rule in the capital and in a line stretching from Dara'a in the south to Aleppo and Idlib in the north. No doubt there would be some in the ranks of the victors who would wish to carry the battle into the largely Alawite northwest. This course of action could result in mass atrocities committed against Alawites and Sunnis alike in the region being invaded.

An additional concern arises from the lack of unity within Syria's political and military opposition, and particularly from extremist groups like the Nusra Front operating conspicuously outside the umbrella of the Supreme Military Council (SMC), which oversees the Free Syrian Army. In the event of a rebel victory, such groups are unlikely to defer to the authority of the

SMC or a new government. Thus, even if the new government and the bulk of the anti-Assad armed forces opt to consolidate their hold on the north-south line described above and protect minorities in the process, there would remain a high probability of extremists attempting to control parts of Syria and potentially targeting minorities (especially Alawites) in the confused, unstable aftermath of a military victory. Therefore, to the extent that minority protection emerges as a high priority for the victors, a parallel priority will be the neutralization of extremist elements and the establishment of an effective security apparatus throughout the country, particularly in confessionally mixed areas. An external military stabilization force, coupled with an unarmed international observer mission, will likely prove a critical tool in these endeavors.

### *Stalemate, Descent into Further Sectarian Violence, Possible State Failure*

A nightmare scenario for Syria rivaling that of a temporary regime victory is for the civil war to drag on and communal violence spread as the regime transforms into one among several militias competing for influence in what is effectively a failed state. Unfortunately this shares with the preceding scenario (opposition military victory) the highest likelihood of coming to pass. In addition to sectarian slaughter becoming more ubiquitous in this scenario than any other (except, perhaps, the very unlikely scenario positing a regime military victory), the likelihood of sectarian cleansing would be high. Alawites living with or near Sunnis would likely either displace their neighbors or themselves move, voluntarily or not, to safer, more homogeneous areas. Sunnis living with or near Alawites would likely do (or be forced to do) the same. Mass atrocities would be perpetrated by the most extreme of the contestants for power: the remnants of the regime on one side, and Salafi-jihadists on the other.

Beyond the misery such a scenario would inflict on Syria, the implications of a failed Syrian state—replete with local warlords and jihadist groups operating with impunity—on Syria's neighbors would be horrific. Lebanon's tense confessional balance would be put to the most severe of tests. Turkey could become "Pakistan" to Syria's "Afghanistan." The stability of Jordan would be shaken. Iraq—already in the throes of renewed Sunni-Shia clashes—would not escape the consequences of a lawless, stateless Syria, and neither would Israel, as evidenced by the increasing tensions involving the Golan Heights and regime weaponry allegedly bound for Hezbollah. With relatively secure havens in a large stateless entity, al-Qaeda-affiliated groups



could mount operations beyond the borders of a lifeless Syria, just as they currently do from the safe-haven offered by Libya.

If Syria should move into this stage of state failure, the prospects of outside diplomatic or military intervention succeeding in mitigating the costs, much less brokering a political accommodation, would be somewhere between slim and none. One potential outcome certainly more attractive than permanent chaos would involve the political partition of Syria, either into multiple independent states or a confederation where a government reigns in Damascus and the modern-day equivalent of feudal lords rule elsewhere, not unlike the Lebanese system (only weaker and perhaps less stable). Such an outcome might either require or would be preceded by significant population transfers, with Sunnis abandoning Mediterranean coastal areas and Alawites moving out of mixed cities such as Homs and Damascus.

### *Is Genocide Possible?*

In February 2012, Genocide Watch issued a warning that the dynamics of the Syrian civil war could be paving the way for possible acts of genocide. A year has passed since that warning, during which time Syria's conflict has become exponentially more violent and more sectarian in nature; this fact should prompt serious discussion within US and international policy circles regarding the question of whether the world's next genocide may be on the horizon in Syria.

Genocide, as defined by the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, includes "any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, *in whole or in part* [emphasis added], a national, ethnical, racial or religious group:

- a. Killing members of the group;
- b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."

Using this definition, and bearing in mind the foregoing scenarios—particularly the one involving state failure—it must be acknowledged that there is a potential for genocidal acts being committed in Syria.

That said, no evidence has been uncovered suggesting that any party now involved in Syria's civil war intends to destroy "in whole" a particular group. The regime has massacred,

terrorized, imprisoned, and tortured tens of thousands of people, mostly Sunni Arabs and mainly noncombatants. It will continue to do so until it falls. Yet no one, not even its bitterest foes, can credibly claim that the regime's objective is to destroy, in whole, Syria's Sunni Arab population. By the same token, Salafi-jihadists such as the Nusra Front—notwithstanding their overtly crude sectarian rhetoric and regressive views on religious pluralism—seem not, at least at present, to be contemplating the wholesale extermination of Syrian Alawites or any other particular group.

Rather, the greater concern in Syria is that one group might seek to destroy another “in part,” specifically by cleansing that group from a particular geographic region. One can envision several scenarios where such geographically focused campaigns of sectarian cleansing might occur:

- Contending forces in the Homs region, where Alawite and Sunni neighborhoods and towns exist in close proximity to one another, deliberately undertake sectarian killing campaigns aimed at entire local communities: directed, deliberate campaigns that not only produce gruesome body counts, but oblige survivors to leave the area, either out of terror or through forcible removal.
- Similarly, Alawite populations in Damascus and Sunni populations in Latakia subjected to directed, deliberate campaigns designed to kill many and prompt the rest to leave, either forcibly or through terror-inspired individual initiative.
- A Sunni Muslim or Alawite town or neighborhood coming under siege and being subjected to conditions of life (denial of food, shelter, medical care, and so on) calculated to bring about the community's destruction through deaths and departures.

Naturally there will be, as there have been, widespread and systematic attacks against civilians: this has been a core component of the regime's survival strategy. Indeed, some have argued that regime artillery attacks on certain neighborhoods, particularly in Homs, have aimed to empty various quarters of Sunni Muslims so as to solidify a land link between Homs and nearby Alawite areas. In some respects, there may be gray areas where the definition of a particular incident as genocide or a lesser crime against humanity may depend on the intent of the person who authorized the operation in question.

Whether or not genocidal acts have already occurred is debatable. What is certain, however, is that such acts have become a very real possibility, and that this danger will only increase for as long as the conflict continues along its current trajectory.

## *Conclusion*

Again, the scenarios offered above are by no means comprehensive or mutually exclusive. Indeed, there would likely be significant overlap and blurred distinctions between them. A managed transition involving Assad's ouster could, for instance, in many ways resemble an opposition victory, potentially yielding an Islamist-heavy government, reprisals against Alawites, and extremist groups operating beyond the reach of the mainstream opposition. Moreover, any of the first three options—regime victory, opposition victory, and even a managed transition—would almost certainly entail, to varying degrees, aspects resembling the failed state scenario, producing some measure of anarchy, warlordism, and religiously-colored militia violence in various parts of the state beyond the reach of whoever governs in and from Damascus. What these scenarios reflect is that the danger of sectarian violence may, even in the best cases, continue to loom over Syria's transition for years to come.

What we are witnessing in Syria today is, in essence, the country's attempt to resolve the identity crisis bequeathed to it by the post-World War I division of the Ottoman Empire. Although successive Syrian governments beginning in 1946 sought to establish a Syrian national identity transcending the country's longstanding sectarian fissures—and did in fact succeed in promoting some semblance of nationhood—these divisions were never truly erased. Even as President Hafiz al-Assad projected a platform of pan-Arabism (which he gradually modified to a policy of "Syria first") and reached out to members of the Sunni and Christian communities, he was also consolidating his power by stocking his inner circle and security apparatus with members of his own sect and family: people he thought he could truly trust. Thus, while preaching and promoting secularism, Assad built a system implicitly featuring the sectarian poison pill: any attempt by non-Alawites to bring down the regime would run the risk of taking the country down with it via a bitter sectarian struggle.

Today, precisely such a struggle has been set in motion by Hafiz al-Assad's son. When, nearly two years ago, Bashar al-Assad responded to peaceful calls for reform with brute force and sectarian incitement, he ensured that Assad family rule would not fall without taking a significant portion of Syria along with it. If the Syrian Revolution is to succeed in creating a Syria qualitatively better than that which preceded it, it must fight this descent into sectarianism just as vigorously as it has fought the regime. If it fails to do so a Syria based on citizenship,

consent of the governed and rule of law will, at best, be the achievement of some future generation instead of the current one.

## Policy Recommendations

The United States and other international actors surely have a role to play in supporting Syria's transition from sectarian family rule to something better, and in mitigating the radicalizing influence of regime violence and growing jihadist prominence. Yet effectively supporting the transition will be easier said than done. Indeed, the operative word underlying any Syria policy moving forward must be *mitigation*. Even if Assad were toppled soon and jihadist groups totally excluded from the country, Syrian governance would face an uphill battle against pervasive and enduring sectarian bitterness, a devastated economy and infrastructure, and an Islamist current within the political opposition that might, given power, prove less than enthusiastic in its support of a Syria where citizenship trumps sect, ethnicity, and gender.

The near-term challenge for America and its allies, therefore, is not one of trying to implant democratic, pluralistic governance in post-Assad Syria. At best such an outcome could occur over time, given wise leaders able to balance accountability and reconciliation against a backdrop of security-enabled economic reconstruction supported by the international community. Rather, the immediate goal must be a transitional government with a chance to impose law and order, protect vulnerable populations, open the country to humanitarian assistance, restore vital services and, as a general matter, preserve the state and prevent Syria from becoming an ungoverned space where extremists from both camps (regime and jihadists) are allowed to run rampant with campaigns of open-ended communal violence.

There are several specific policy options that the United States government can pursue to realize this objective, ideally with bipartisan congressional support and with allies and other partners fully sharing the associated burdens. The Atrocities Prevention Board, established by the Obama Administration in April 2012 to improve the US government's ability to identify and respond to threats of mass atrocities, can hopefully draw on this study and other relevant literature in defining a clear, comprehensive US policy geared toward preventing sectarian mass atrocities in Syria.

- **Work with the Syrian Opposition Coalition, the Supreme Military Council, and local committees to coalesce and establish now, on Syrian territory, a government comprising respected politicians and technocrats: one emphasizing religious tolerance, the supremacy of citizenship, and the rule of law.** This is the single most

important thing the US government can do to set the stage now for an eventual transitional government of national unity capable of restoring order, protecting vulnerable populations, and setting the country on the path to reform and decent governance. If enacted, this recommendation would result in the establishment of a governmental alternative to the Assad regime in those parts of Syria liberated from regime control. As matters now stand there is no credible and coherent alternative to the Assad regime on the ground in Syria: an alternative upholding the primacy of citizenship—that is, the supremacy of being Syrian over all other forms of political identification—and rule of law in the face of the regime's sectarian survival strategy and the responses it is provoking. There are limits to what an opposition per se can do, no matter what assurances it articulates, to persuade Syrian minorities and others fearful of abandoning the regime that an outcome featuring citizenship and rule of law is not only desirable, but feasible. An actual government operating on Syrian soil can fill this gap and stand as the credible, attractive alternative for millions of Syrians who see their country dissolving into sectarian mayhem. Once a government is established in parts of Syria liberated from regime control, the United States (and others) should offer it recognition as the legitimate government of Syria, enter into a security assistance relationship with it, and, in conjunction with the Friends of the Syrian People Group, ensure that the new government has the financial resources to bring humanitarian relief and the restoration of vital services to its constituents in liberated Syria. Such a government must actually govern, and, to that end, on-the-ground material and technical assistance will be vital. Yet recognition and assistance would be offered and sustained only so long as the new government's commitments to civil society, rule of law, and protection of vulnerable populations are beyond doubt. In order for such a government to be established and functioning within a reasonable period of time, planning must begin now. Syria's mainstream opposition will not and should not establish itself as a government on Syrian soil until it has the support of the US and other key members of the Friends of the Syrian People Group.

- **Work with the Syrian opposition to help it prepare, either as the opposition or (ideally) as a government established on Syrian territory, to negotiate the composition and program of a post-Assad transitional government of national unity**

**should the opportunity arise, and to identify elements of Syria's existing political and security structures that might be preserved.** To be clear, a government established by the opposition on liberated Syrian territory might well be a way station to a transitional government of national unity that would also include respectable officials and officers currently (or previously) serving in the Syrian Arab Republic Government: people of ability without blood on their hands. Indeed, a governmental alternative to the Assad regime might positively change the regime's calculations concerning the desirability of negotiations, and might be the ideal interlocutor for talks aimed at producing a post-Assad transitional government of national unity. While the likelihood of a managed transition presenting itself is slim, the opposition must be prepared to negotiate should its leader's recent offer to do so be accepted by the regime or by those who might (for example) oust it from within. In this regard, it will be important to continue to provide active support for the mission of Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi, which may yet prove instrumental in facilitating talks between the opposition and acceptable civilian and military figures within existing state institutions. Although it seems clear that Bashar al-Assad believes he can hold Damascus for the foreseeable future and possibly expand his control elsewhere, a new government in liberated parts of Syria must be prepared to move diplomatically in the event of Assad's death or sudden departure. Brahimi can be an important and useful intermediary in this eventuality. Continuity of government should be pursued to the greatest extent possible for two reasons. First, it could mitigate a security vacuum that might occur given a wholesale collapse of state institutions. Second, some degree of continuity could be reassuring to minorities who fear a complete purge of the existing state institutions with the resultant implications concerning loss of employment and livelihood. A governmental alternative to Assad in no way forecloses the principle or fact of continuity of government. Indeed, it may prove to be the only structure capable of conducting the requisite negotiations should the possibility of transition talks arise.

- **Support the near-term establishment and seed funding of an Interim Reconstruction Trust Fund for Syria, to be placed at the disposal of the aforementioned government to enable it to restore essential services in areas under its jurisdiction.** Such a fund would have two benefits: it would fill a gap between now and the time it will take for

international financial institutions to mobilize in response to Syria's reconstruction needs; and it would demonstrate to all Syrians the determination of the international community to assist materially in rebuilding post-Assad Syria. Accompanying this measure could be the rescinding, suspension, or modification of US and international sanctions to prevent their inadvertent application to the new government. It is vitally important for all Syrians to see clearly the choice between a Syria that has, under Assad family rule, become an impoverished pariah state akin to North Korea, and a post-Assad state where Syrians—including the best and the brightest—stay in Syria to build a dynamic economy and governance reflecting real self-rule and the consent of the governed.

- **Working through the Syrian Opposition Coalition and the Supreme Military Council, establish close working relationships with carefully vetted units of the Free Syrian Army, providing these units with training, equipment—possibly including lethal aid—and other forms of support.** The rudimentary beginning of this relationship was signaled by Secretary of State John Kerry's announcement in Rome on February 28, 2013, that the US would begin providing food rations and medical kits to the Supreme Military Council. Ideally this would evolve into a formal security assistance relationship between the US and a governmental alternative to the Assad regime established on Syrian territory and recognized by the US as the government of Syria. Such a relationship entails much more than simply "arming the opposition." Provision of carefully selected arms to units thoroughly vetted in terms of past performance—the ability to fight effectively while protecting and respecting noncombatants—may well be part of the picture, although a rational, functional international division of labor could involve arms and ammunition being supplied by others, with the US providing the decisive voice in determining who gets what. Yet there is potentially much more than arms and ammunition to the equation: training in weapons usage and the operational arts; providing non-lethal military equipment; assisting with timely intelligence; and training transitional justice officers and their staffs in the proper handling of prisoners including uniformed military, *shabiha*, ordinary criminals, and perhaps even senior regime officials. Training should be offered in the administration of justice in liberated areas before the onset of proper civilian authority. Moving forward into the post-Assad era, effective, transparent transitional justice could play a vital role in mitigating the likelihood of revenge killings



and collective punishment. Regardless of the specific types of assistance rendered, it is the principle that is important: if armed factions are going to have an important impact on Syria's trajectory, then supporting those elements of the armed Syrian opposition that still uphold the "One Syria," non-sectarian standard is essential. Once a governmental alternative to the Assad regime is established and functioning the relationship can be formalized under the rubric of security assistance.

- **Working with allies and other partners, deny to the maximum extent possible assistance flowing from outside Syria into the hands of jihadists.** The cooperation of the states bordering Syria will be essential to any effort to deny outside assistance to jihadist groups. Likewise, Gulf states would be called upon to dry up private sources of funding for these groups. Any such effort will be operationally difficult and far short of perfect in its results. Indeed, jihadist groups will still be able to overrun Syrian army bases and help themselves to weapons when they do. Yet making the effort to deny outside aid to jihadists is an essential complement to assisting carefully vetted FSA units, as this could help tip the balance of forces in favor of moderates.
- **Working with NATO allies and others, prepare to place in support of a transitional government a military stabilization force to help restore order and protect vulnerable populations in unstable parts of post-Assad Syria.** The European Union has recently expressed its willingness to consider such an option. While such a force need not and should not involve American "boots on the ground," US logistical, intelligence and, potentially, combat air support would be vital. Ideally such a force would receive the imprimatur of the United Nations Security Council and could, in due time, be replaced by a United Nations peacekeeping force. At the outset, however, circumstances may well dictate the deployment of a sizeable peace-enforcement bridging force manned largely by troops from Syria's neighbors and from within the region, fully backed by the US, NATO, and others, to enter parts of the country quickly and decisively. Given the acute potential for sectarian bloodshed in northwestern Syria, special attention should be given to close coordination with Turkey, which might have a special interest and formidable capabilities in helping to protect vulnerable populations in the Homs area and areas to the west.

- **Working with the United Nations and with human rights NGOs worldwide, prepare to place in support of a transitional government a corps of unarmed observers to be deployed in areas where populations are potentially vulnerable to violence.** Having witnesses on the ground to report on potential and actual problems as well as promoting reconciliation between communities and individuals can be a very useful tool to help a transitional government with its hands full trying to cope with a humanitarian crisis and the restoration of essential services. Yet, as Arab League monitors discovered in late 2011 and early 2012, effective security is a prerequisite for any effective monitoring mission. For unarmed monitors to be deployed early in the post-Assad era they would have to be accompanied, in all likelihood, by personnel from an outside stabilization force or reliable security forces of the transitional government. If a stabilization force should eventually give way to a conventional observer or peacekeeping force, human rights monitors might be attached to it.
- **Make it clear, through public statements and private correspondence, to the people of Syria and to the Syrian opposition that the United States will not support the substitution of one form of tyranny for another in Syria.** For such a warning to have credibility with the opposition, the United States must be seen as meaningfully engaged in supporting the mainstream Syrian opposition through the sorts of measures outlined above, including providing equipment and training to moderate armed elements. It will have credibility with Syria's minorities only if rhetorical specificity about national unity, the primacy of citizenship, rule of law, civil society, and accountability is accompanied by American leadership in encouraging the creation of an opposition-led governmental alternative to the Assad regime that upholds, through actions as well as words, citizenship and continuity of government as central principles. Finally, US support for a UN Security Council resolution that would refer to the International Criminal Court (ICC) the names of individuals and units believed to be responsible for crimes against humanity, breaches of international humanitarian law, and gross human rights violations during the course of the Syrian crisis is essential. Presumably the list will include not only senior members and enablers of the regime, but also the names of armed regime opponents. US backing of an ICC referral of names currently on a confidential list held by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights would send a powerful signal of American support for

full accountability, regardless of the political positions of alleged perpetrators. Although accountability will ultimately be in the hands of 22.5 million Syrians lending consent and legitimacy to leaders establishing and upholding rule of law in Syria, it seems clear that there are some individuals whose crimes call out for internationally mandated accountability and justice. Indeed, one of the first acts a new Syrian government established on Syrian territory and recognized by the US and the Friends of the Syrian People Group could undertake would be to accede to the Rome Statute and initiate procedures that would result ultimately in Bashar al-Assad and his key lieutenants standing trial for crimes against humanity in the International Criminal Court. Such a government could likewise initiate parallel procedures against jihadists and other opposition fighters suspected of such crimes.

The United States Government and its citizenry are solidly in agreement that Syria cannot become America's fight; the American taxpayer cannot take on Syria as a ward and American men and women in uniform should not be asked to fight and die in another open-ended conflict in the Middle East. By the same token, however, President Obama should have at his disposal military strike options enabling him to respond to regime human rights depredations in ways that punish the perpetrators and bring relief to the victims. American leadership is, in any event, essential to any international effort to curtail and mitigate the effects of communal violence in Syria and the prospects of a failed state. When President Obama called on President Bashar al-Assad to step aside in August 2011, he committed the United States to a leadership role in supporting Syria's transition. While American leadership cannot ensure Syria's near-term stability, its absence can guarantee the worst: for Syrians and for all of their neighbors, for decades to come.

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