Cycle of Trauma
Syria's History and Today's Civil War

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As the Syrian Civil War continues to descend further into chaos and confusion, searching for root causes or clear solutions to the conflict becomes increasingly agonizing, frustrating, and seemingly hopeless. Bashar al-Assad's regime has effectively created a smoke screen in the country, distorting reality and instituting extreme fear. As Nadim Shehadi describes, "It's a mind game. If you want to beat Assad, you have to disassociate yourself from his make-believe reality just as he has disassociated himself from everyone else's."[1] Beyond his aptitude for psychological manipulation, Assad has allegedly engaged in a variety of oppressive actions against opposition to his rule, according to various firsthand accounts.

In *Revolt in Syria: Eye-witness to the Uprising* by Stephen Starr and *A Woman in the Crossfire* by Samar Yazbek, the authors discuss the *shabiha*, or government-backed, 'Alawite gangs. The word shabiha is related to the Arabic word for ghosts, insinuating that the armed groups are responsible for making individuals disappear. Starr and Yazbek accuse the *shabiha* of stirring up sectarian conflict as anti-regime protests began in 2011. Starr also accuses the regime of arming 'Alawites who are not members of these gangs, and then inspiring extreme paranoia, causing them to lash out against other religious sects if they feel threatened. Other observers of Syria argue against these observations, contending that the sectarian divides were already prominent problems in the society.

The Assad family did not create the tension between religious sects in Syria since coming to power in 1970, but they did manipulate existing divisions that were vulnerable to exploitation. In this way, they perpetuated a cycle of trauma that is present throughout Syria's history. This paper will demonstrate how Syria has witnessed periods of increased unity, followed by systemic breakdown into extreme discontent and conflict. The last century of Syrian history reveals the complicated nature of the country's religious, ethnic, and cultural composition. In addition to the 'Alawi minority, who adhere to an offshoot of Shi'a Twelver Islam and comprise approximately 12% of the current Syrian population, Druze and Kurdish minorities contribute their own narratives to the nation's fabric.[2] The country's complex past illustrates a different type of legitimacy for the Syrian opposition from what is usually portrayed by the media, which mainly focuses on the Sunni-'Alawi divide. History shows that the current conflict involves more elements than a dichotomous battle between a Sunni majority and an 'Alawi minority.

The French Mandate and the Great Revolt

Before the Assad family took power in Syria, several important events occurred that would influence the makeup of the regime and the Syrian people. The origins of the sectarian divide in Syria date back to the Ottoman period due to the geographic separation of 'Alawites from the cities of Aleppo and Damascus. These cities were more connected to the empire's center than that isolated, coastal mountain regions, which were home to the four main 'Alawite tribes until the early 20th century.[3] Economic inequality between 'Alawites and Sunnis began as early as the sixteenth century because the 'Alawi peasants of the plains had been the principal food producers of the Latakia region for several centuries.[4] After the Ottoman Empire fell in the early 20th century, the country experienced a power vacuum. The 'Alawites viewed this as an opportunity to gain autonomy in the region of Jabal al-Nusayriya, where they comprised 62% of the population.[5]

Eventually, the 'Alawites gained influence under the French Mandate as they received autonomy from the centralized state and became overrepresented in the army. Yet, the 'Alawites initially created problems for the French by staging revolts and maintaining their independent bands of fighters during the first year of the occupation because it was not immediately clear how the minority group would benefit from French rule.[6] In October 1918 when Ottoman Turkish officials had completely abandoned the port of Latakia, a predominantly 'Alawite city, Sunni Muslim notables formed a provisional government, which proclaimed allegiance to the Sunni nationalist government in Damascus.[7] A month later, the first French military detachment reached Latakia from Tripoli, Algeria and

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Syrian Refugees after 1925 French bombardments. © Bettmann/Corbis

dismissed the new government.[8]

Therefore, the French interfered with the northern coastal strip of Syria more than two years before they succeeded in occupying the interior, when the French Mandate officially began in 1920.[9] Following the demise of the Sunni provisional government, Shaykh Salih al-'Ali, an 'Alawite tribal chief in the bordering district of Tartus, organized resistance to French rule. He had previously fought against Ottoman rule, and desired the protection of 'Alawite districts from external interference.[10] This resistance prevented the French from achieving military victories in the northern coastal and mountainous areas until 1920.[11] As a result, political power in the mountainous 'Alawite region did not transfer to French control until they succeeded in bringing interior cities like Damascus under their control. Once the capital fell, material military assistance from the nationalist government and additional troops from the private militias of Sunni landowning families ended.[12] Since the regionally concentrated 'Alawite minority had been receiving aid from the capital, this indicates that their relationship with the Sunni majority was not antagonistic at this time. Until the defeat of the Sunni-nationalist government in Damascus, both constituencies embraced a unifying nationalist agenda.

Despite their minority status and connections with outside groups, the 'Alawites subscribed to nationalism primarily out of self-interest. As Philip Khoury describes, "Syrian historiography has ascribed nationalist motivations to all the revolts against the French during the early Mandate. Although some uprisings were nationalist in flavor, those like the 'Alawite movement which involved compact minorities were more often inspired by local considerations, or at least, non-ideological ones."[13] By incorporating concerns important to those outside their community, the 'Alawites were able to gain significant support from other nationalist forces. For example, Shaykh Salih is remembered in the Syrian interior as a fighter for the "territorial integrity and independence of the Syrian nation."[14] However, in his own region, he is remembered as the defender of 'Alawite independence from foreign hegemony.[15] This reflects how the 'Alawite sect could not completely cast off connections with the larger population of Syria, even as they worked to preserve their regional power. Although the French Mandate provided 'Alawites with unprecedented autonomy and control, the years from 1918 through the early 1920's witnessed 'Alawite protests against the French rule and coalitions with nationalist forces in the interior cities of Syria, such as Damascus and Aleppo.

This cooperation later proved less likely as Arab nationalism became associated with Sunni Islam. The minorities present in Syria increasingly suspected Arab nationalism as a disguise for "unrestrained Sunni ascendency."[16] As a result, the minorities grew increasingly alienated from the interior cities and the Sunni majority despite initial years of cooperation and resistance to French rule. By September 15, 1922, the 'Alawite-dominated province received legal autonomy from greater Syria, ending practices such as Sunni control of court cases involving 'Alawites.[17] The French created special 'Alawite detachments, which also included other minorities such as the Druze, Kurds,

and Circassians.[18] This strategy increased French control because it isolated minorities that had previously endorsed the Syrian nationalist cause. Although the French did not create these sectarian divides, they actively manipulated the regionally concentrated minorities to weaken nationalist sentiments.

Philip Khoury argues that the French strategy for governing the area of Jabal Druze, represents their general strategy for imperial governance in Syria.[19] This involved pitting the rural areas against nationalist areas, creating a situation where elites worked against each other. The Druze inhabited a remote and inaccessible agricultural area, just as the 'Alawite sect did. Additionally, rival clans prone to severe internal conflicts controlled the local government in the Jabal.[20] Therefore, even though the French granted these ruling clans a special administrative district separate from the Damascus state, internal divisions between the Druze led to continued antagonism toward the imperial power.[21] The new system threatened the tradition of familial hierarchy that had characterized the power structure of the Jabal since the 18th century, allowing Druze chiefs who were able to gain control

of political institutions early in the Mandate period to isolate their rivals more easily than before. Similar to the 'Alawis, the Druze conducted an uprising against the French for these reasons. They connected with nationalist movements in Damascus and Amman, despite French strategic plans to prevent cooperation between these culturally distinct elements of Syria.[22]

This Druze uprising would ultimately spark the Great Revolt (1925-1927) against French imperial rule.[23] Similar to the uprisings in 2011, the rural areas erupted in protests before the urban centers in the country. Despite Druze isolation, their revolt did take on a popular, nationalist character that quickly resonated with the interior cities.[23] The French policy of "divide and rule" with the intention of instigating conflict among religious sects to justify their presence in Syria seemed to have failed.[25] Despite their lack of participation in the Great Revolt, 'Alawite separatist sentiment remained strong during this period. Yet, they could not speak with a unified voice on the subject .[26] Divided by tribal affiliation, religious sub-sects, and geography, the 'Alawites were unable to produce a common, cohesive political leadership. Even though

Druze paramilitary troops. © Maynard Owen Williams/National Geographic Creative/Corbis

many groups within the citizenry harbored separatist sentiments, some religious groups could not formulate a coherent anti-French movement. The patchwork nature of the Great Revolt is echoed in the nature of the opposition today. Rather than forming two, distinct groups—with the regime and against the regime—the Syrian people represent a spectrum of positions regarding Bashar al-Assad's government.

Syrian Independence and the Rise of the Ba'ath Party

After World War II, Syria separated from France and the new government's primary goal was to decrease and eventually eliminate regional and communal representation in the parliament. Believing the regionally compact minorities had benefitted the most from French rule, the government took immediate actions to end these perceived advantages and establish centralized rule in Damascus.[27] A new elite emerged in Syrian society after independence, as demonstrated by the early years of the Ba'ath Party. Created in 1940 as a reaction to the continued French presence in Syria, the party framed the nationalist struggle of Syrians in pan-Arab terms.[28] Still, by 1947, the Ba'ath Party had failed to "strike deep roots outside urban centers."[29] In 1952, the original party merged with a group of Arab socialists, gaining 4,500 members and extending membership to students from a rural or peasant background.[30] Following this merger, the Ba'ath Party pursued populist policies. In 1958, nationalist and communist officers in the Syrian army traveled to Nasser's Egypt, hoping to establish a union between Syria and Egypt.[31] Nasser accepted the union and began to implement Egypt's divisive economic policies in Syria, such as large-scale nationalization and redistribution of land. This won support among the peasantry and middle class, but upset the mercantile class.[32]

The "transitional" Ba'ath Party began to form during this period of union with Egypt. The Military Committee, created in secrecy in 1959, would become the center of the party's new wing, although it would remain covert until 1964.[33] Without their involvement, a coup against Nasser occurred in Syria on September 28, 1961.[34] The Ba'ath leaders then attempted to transform the military from within, starting with the officer corps.[35] By the 1960s, the 'Alawite sect would come to dominate the officer corps as successive purges cleared the army's upper ranks of Sunni officers.[36] Starting in 1963, the Ba'ath Military Committee began to purge the army extensively to make it even more ruralized.[37] Prior to this, 'Alawi strength in numbers in the army had come from the lower ranks, namely common soldiers and non-commissioned officers. But the 'Alawi officers increasingly replaced the upper leadership, leading to the decline of urban Sunni military elements.[38]

Beyond increasing the rural and 'Alawite character of the military, an introduction of "country elements" also occurred in the state bureaucracy. Especially with the re-nationalization of large corporations in 1964, the state bureaucracy willingly accepted individuals from rural and peasant backgrounds as employees.[39] This shows that the incorporation of peasants, many of whom are 'Alawite, occurred far before Hafez Assad's period of total control over Syria, which began shortly after the 1967 war.

In fact, Assad would initially supposed the economic interests of the bourgeois class rather than his rural constituencies, particularly in the city of Damascus. He wanted the regime to adopt a "modern look," so he reformed the parliament despite lacking independent authority as head of state.[40] In addition to this, Assad took advantage of the 'Alawi officers in the army and intelligence agencies, creating a strong center for the regime.[41] However, by 1980, Assad sensed that he needed to institute changes in the makeup of the Ba'ath Regional Command. In an effort to alter the public perception of the regime's "sectarian" nature, he increased the proportion of Sunnis at the level of party leadership from 57.1% to 66.7%.[42] In turn, the 'Alawi proportion decreased from 33% to 19%.[43]

Despite the salient role of 'Alawis in the Ba'ath Party and the fact that Hafez al-Assad himself was an 'Alawite, the party membership included relatively low proportions of peasants in Ba'ath organizations in the 'Alawite-dominated cities of Latakia and Tartus.[44] From 1963 until the late 1980s, many 'Alawis moved into the larger cities. Furthermore, this low statistic could be related to the declining number of peasants

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present in the country over time. In 1974, peasants comprised 25.1% of the Ba'ath Party, but by 1989, they were 12.4% of entire membership.[45] Despite smaller number of 'Alawites at the membership level, Assad appointed many members of his sect to elite positions in the armed forces, smaller military groups, and security or intelligence apparatuses. Of the 31 officers appointed from 1970 to 1997, 19 were 'Alawi and eight of those were from his own tribe—al-Kalbiyyah.[46]

Conflict with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was a prominent problem of the Assad regime, though this tension began before Hafez's rise. Even though the issue of a particular religious sect ruling the country emerged with the beginning of Assad's rule in 1970, the beginnings of the Islamist opposition to Ba'athism began in the 1950s and 1960s.[47] In April 1964, Sunni religious leaders led a campaign against the secular Ba'ath Party, including street riots that occurred mainly in Hama. Then, Prime Minister Amin al-Hafiz and General Salah Jadid ordered the bombing of Sultan Mosque, which was considered an act of atheism and secularism, rather than a sectarian attack.[48] This tension continued into Hafez al-Assad's reign.

By the late 1970s, Islamic opposition to the Ba'ath Party was discussed in sectarian terms.[49] The gradual radicalization of the Islamic movement culminated in the Brotherhood endorsing jihad against the secular party in late 1979.[50] The Fighting Vanguard, an extremist group that much of the Syrian Brotherhood rejected as members, had begun carrying out terror attacks in the country. By late 1979, the state repression of the Brotherhood, particularly in Hama, reached such an extreme level that the Fighting Vanguard and the Brotherhood formed an alliance.[51]

Hama's Muslim Brotherhood grew increasingly distant from other components of the Syrian Brotherhood because it sought to protect its hometown from the Ba'ath regime. The government was provoked by the protests, resulting in a massacre of the city with estimates of the number killed ranging from 10,000 to 40,000.[52] After the 1982 massacre at Hama, Assad faced no meaningful opposition to his rule, which allowed for the political positioning of his son, Bashar al-Assad.[53]

Bashar al-Assad's Consolidation of Power

Within two days of Hafez's passing, the ruling Ba'ath Party leadership ensured that the military leadership promoted Bashar al-Assad to commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and the interim President oversaw the Parliament's sole nomination of Bashar al-Assad for national referendum. On the one-month anniversary of his father's death, Bashar received over 97% of votes in the referendum for his presidency.[54] Stacher argues that elite from the military, intelligence services, and ruling party cooperated to prevent factionalism, since hereditary leadership selection ensured the continuity of the system's core agents. In an attempt to maintain the power they had acquired during Hafez's reign, these elites chose to make his son president. As a result, Bashar did not inherit the full powers his father had held. However, within five years Bashar rid the system of his father's elites and gained full control.[55]

Just as Hafez al-Assad reached across sectarian

divisions early in his rule, Bashar immediately focused on Syria's main cities and the private sector, despite his rural, 'Alawite roots.[56] In this way, the second Assad failed to uphold the unspoken agreement between the government and the Syrian people, which had appeased rural populations with social welfare programs and some degree of development.[57] During the first ten years of Bashar al-Assad's rule, the regime supported the creation of various NGOs in order to fulfill these needs. However, these new NGOs could not replace the popular programs that existed in Hafez's era. Despite the limited scope of civil society during his rule, state institutions and corporatist unions were successful in carrying out socialist, developmental policies. By contrast, Bashar al-Assad allowed these new NGOs to adopt tasks traditionally completed by the government, even though they lacked the same resources to fulfill the needs of these communities.[58]

The two leaders' different approaches to social welfare and sectarian balance represent one of many explanations for the 2011 uprisings. Bashar's inability to prevent opposition stems from his failure to balance the needs of different communities in Syria. The country's complex history and social divisions prevent ruling with ease. The seemingly unbreakable cycle of trauma encourages rulers to use whatever methods possible when facing difficulties. Despite the incredible amount of violence during the latest phase of Syrian history, the events demonstrate continuity with past events. Just as opposition to French imperial rule could not be divided into two neat categories, the current Syrian opposition contains many contradictions. Most observers will attribute the muddled nature of the opposition to increasing levels of foreign involvement with the civil war. However, the internal components of the conflict challenge this viewpoint.

Khaddour and Mazur argue that even in 'Alawite-dominated areas, where religious sects are more concentrated than in Sunni-dominated areas, regional identification is more important than a sectarian one. For example, the city of Tartus witnessed many pro-regime demonstrations. Even though it is more homogenously 'Alawi than the city of Latakia, it has become a refuge for elite Syrians of many backgrounds from the fighting in Homs, Aleppo, and Damascus. Despite the perceived importance of religious sects in Syria, the true indication of an individual's political views seems to be rooted more closely in their region of origin or their current city. With this knowledge, the regime can manipulate the country in a terrifyingly effective manner.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Syria's civil war cannot be understood as a dichotomous relationship between 'Alawites and the opposition to the regime. Even without considering the foreign and extremist elements playing large

Syrian National Army marches past memorial to Hafez al-Assad in 2008. © Ed Kashi/VII/Corbis

roles in the conflict, it is clear how nuanced political affiliations are in the country. Since the protests against French imperial rule, some elements of the country remain isolated from a political center and some regions rise in protest before others. Since Hafez al-Assad's rule, some sectors of the population have benefited enough from regime policies to remain silent, while others became so oppressed that they had to take action. For Syria's rulers, understanding the complications of the country's regions becomes the key to control. Bashar al-Assad has been able to manipulate vulnerable and pre-existing social cleavages to remain in power. Even after over four years of war, fear keeps Assad in a position of chaotic, loose control. This fear of vulnerability, which is the result of distrust and competition between different groups in Syria, still exists today. Without directly addressing this issue, the conflict cannot end. No Syrian leader has proven able or willing to navigate regional and sectarian divides in a manner that does not manipulate them and perpetuate the Syria's cycle of trauma. Until a figure emerges that can maneuver Syria's divisions without bias or malice, the rhythm of oppression and isolation will beat resoundingly without end.

ENDNOTES

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