# Quneitra, Syria:
## An Icon of Past Destruction

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Syria's ruling Ba'th Party first came to power in 1963. The manipulation of the symbols of secular Arab nationalism became an important tool for consolidating control over Syria. A particularly forceful image promoted by Hafez al-Asad's (1970-2000) minority 'Alawi based regime and directed at Syrians of all faiths and communities was that of a benevolent and popular central government, which the regime contrasted with the dangerous and destructive Israeli enemy. In the 1970s, Hafez al-Asad's regime emphasized its popular legitimacy through the symbolic use of the Golan Heights town of Quneitra, many of whose buildings were said to have been flattened by Israel before withdrawing its forces from there as part of the Israeli-Syrian disengagement agreement a few months after the October 1973 War.[1]

Today, however, in the midst of Syria's bloody and destructive civil war, Quneitra serves as a different sort of symbol. Moreover, there is a connection between the regime's struggle for survival on the military front and the struggle to maintain control of the symbols that legitimate and represent the *raison d'être* of the party. The regime showed this when it reacted unusually quickly to restore control of the Quneitra border crossing  on June 6, 2013, after rebels briefly forced the regime's forces out and raised the rebel flag.[2] The Asad regime

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[1] For an alternative account, which places primary responsibility on the 1967 war and subsequent Syrian shelling between 1967-73, see Daniel Pipes, "Quneitra, Why in Ruins?," Lion's Den Blog, June 27, 2009, http://www.danielpipes.org/blog/2009/06/quneitra-why-in-ruins.

[2] An IDF officer present on that day, who was not authorized to identify himself, made this observation in an interview two weeks after the event.

continues to manufacture its own narrative to explain away the destruction of Syrian urban spaces, mosques, shrines, historical monuments, and unique artifacts, blaming it on externally sponsored plots carried out by terrorists. However, in the age of YouTube, these events can be witnessed almost in real time, so that viewers can make up their own minds about the perpetrators of the violence. In contrast to the public display of Quneitra's destruction, the regime has suppressed the historical commemoration of other bloody urban episodes, particularly the devastation of Hama in 1982, which followed a three year struggle between Syria's Sunni Islamist community and the Asad regime.

Quneitra, as an emotive symbol for the regime, holds symbolic significance of fundamental importance for the Syrian state under the Ba'th Party. However, in the current civil war, many important historical urban centers have been wholly or partially destroyed—to the point that the memory of the historical destruction of Quneitra no longer holds primacy. The increasingly sectarian Syrian civil war, which now involves a large number of foreign actors on both sides, has undermined the state's self-image, and brought the very notion of Syrian sovereignty into question.

Quneitra, which lies on a plain just east of the high ground of the Golan Heights, was occupied by Israel at the end of the June 1967 War. It was transferred back to Syria following the October 1973 War and January 1974 Disengagement Agreement, which was orchestrated by the U.S. without any direct negotiations between the two countries.[3] Despite Hafez al-Asad's unenthusiastic signing of the agreement, the date of the transfer, June 26, 1974, is annually commemorated in Syria as a national triumph, with promises to liberate the rest of the Golan Heights still under de facto Israeli control.

Following the 1974 Disengagement Agreement, the rhetoric of the regime focused on the continuing confrontation between the Arab nation versus Israel, but new challenges arose for the 'Alawi minority-based regime that were not directly related to Israel. For instance, Hafez al-Asad's decision to repress PLO forces in Lebanon in 1976 shocked many Syrians, as it stood in sharp contrast to Syria's ideological commitment to the Palestinian cause. Indeed, the undercurrent of criticism among the educated urban elites led the regime to arrest a large number of its leftist opponents in the early 1980s. From a different

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[3] Aryeh Shalev, *Israel and Syria: Peace and Security on the Golan* (Tel Aviv University, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 1994), pp. 37-42.

direction, an Islamist opposition movement gained steam from 1976, culminating in a violent confrontation in Hama in 1982 —a heavily Sunni majority city that had become the center of the Muslim Brotherhood activity— causing the deaths of as many as 25,000 citizens. Although no one dared to say it at the time, the physical destruction of Hama resembled that of Quneitra, but in the case of Hama, it was the regime and Bashar's younger brother Rifʿat al-Asad, as the head of the special forces in the operation, who carried out the role attributed to Israel in Quneitra.[4] In addition to the loss of lives, portions of the city were pulverized. Local sources also say that Rifʿat al-Asad's men looted ancient artifacts from the town, whose history dates back to at least Biblical times, and which is still famous for its restored Roman-era waterwheels.

The Syrian regime generally did not discuss the Hama episode. Despite this, the Syrian public, and particularly the urban religious Sunni population, has not forgotten the events. One of Syria's most famous filmmakers, Muhammad Malas, who was born in Quneitra, brought them back to public consciousness in his 1992 film, *The Night*. The film was produced with government funds and under government supervision, but nevertheless, despite eager anticipation around the Arab world ahead of its release, it was never allowed to be shown in Syrian cinemas. The probable reason for this, according to Miriam Cooke, was the highly provocative juxtaposition of Hama's famous Roman waterwheels with images of destroyed Quneitra.[5] The regime would not allow for Syrian viewers to connect the destructive power attributed to the Zionist enemy with that which occurred in Hama in 1982.

Conscious of the brutal nature of Hafez al-Asad's three decades of oppressive rule, some observers, both inside and outside of Syria, welcomed the ascension to power of his son Bashar in 2000 as heralding a more liberal economy and perhaps a gradual opening of the political arena. For instance, in a shift from his father's practice of not rebuilding Quneitra, Bashar al-Asad's regime undertook an urban expansion project to increase the civilian population of Baʿth city, adjacent to old Quneitra, which began as a small administrative center in the 1980s. Indeed, a Western reporter optimistically wrote that perhaps this would transform Quneitra "into a tangible symbol of Syria's conviction that its claim to

[4] Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry* (Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 230-237, p. 274.

[5] Miriam Cooke, *Dissident Syria* (Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 100-120.

the occupied Golan Heights will never be settled through war."[6] However, this was probably not the impression the new regime intended to create, and now it is clear that there never was a *transformation* from Hafez to Bashar, since the core of the regime remained a collection of a number of families who governed in essentially the same strong-armed fashion as during the father's era.

A Syrian uprising began during the first wave of the Arab Spring in March 2011. It quickly escalated following regime's suppression of popular demonstrations, which were often led by Sunni Arabs, the majority sect in Syria. The initial public reaction in Syria to acts of violence and destruction during the first months of the uprising demonstrated the strength of the regime's narrative. In particular, ethnic and religious minorities and the urban middle class of Damascus and Aleppo accepted the regime's argument that security measures were necessary to protect citizens from foreign-inspired "terrorists." In response to pro-regime measures against demonstrators, many of the Sunni ulama—religious clergy—resigned or came out in support of the popular uprising. However, some religious figures continued to support the regime, such as Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti, the famous Sunni Grand Mufti of Damascus, who is of Kurdish descent. For months following the start of the uprising, he argued that the violence showed evidence of "Zionist fingers," and, in response to the regime's shelling of Homs in early 2012, he denounced the "Israeli war against Syria." Yet the regime noticed it was losing the support of moderate clerics in central Syria, and initially denied YouTube video evidence that the army had destroyed the minarets of mosques in Homs and Deir al-Zur. By Ramadan in August 2011, as the Syrian military was carrying out an offensive against Hama, an influential imam, Sariya al-Rifa'i, lamented, "I could not imagine that the crimes of our military, which used to defend the people, would reach the point where it turns its rifles and tanks against the sons or our dear homeland, all of this during the sacred month."[7]

The regime's steely determination to survive, even if it destroys the entire country, has caught many long-time observers of Bashar al-Asad by surprise. As the regime fights for its survival—aided by Russia, Iran, and Hizballah—with helicopters, fighter jets, and even Scud missiles firing down on urban spaces throughout Syria, and as the battle-lines have become increasingly sectarian, the

[6] Neil MacFarquhar, "In a Long-Ruined City, Talk of Lifting the Clouds of War," *New York Times*, October 22, 2004.

[7] Quoted from Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni ulama from coup to revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 212-234.

long-standing regime narrative pitting a constructive 'us' versus a destructive 'them' hardly makes sense anymore. Yet even if the Asad regime survives to rule over the territory of Syria again, it is unclear that Bashar will be able to regain any legitimacy when the historic symbols of the regime, such as ruined old Quneitra, may not provide simple binary choices for Syrians as they once did. Conversely, if Asad's regime is toppled, or if the state is effectively broken up into rival zones of control, the symbols adopted by the various protagonists may take on sectarian tones. The rebels, for instance, have also contributed to the destruction of sacred sites, including the destruction of Shiʿi shrines, which may incite Shiʿis in Iraq to join directly in Syria's civil war. In any case, for a majority of Syrians, the image of the Asad regime's destruction of Hama in 1982 will likely outlive the regime's allegations of Israel's destruction of Quneitra in 1974, for the perfidy of the Zionist enemy is now outweighed by the horrible trauma which began unfolding in March 2011 and whose end is nowhere in sight.

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