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# Alawite Secessionism in Historical Perspective

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Nearly two years after the outbreak of what has become the Syrian civil war, it is evident that Bashar al-Asad's regime is doomed. It is still not certain when the regime will finally collapse or be toppled, how precisely this is going to happen and what future can be expected for the Syrian state. Is some form of agreement between elements of the regime and the opposition still feasible? Will the political opposition, most of whose members reside abroad, be able to form a new regime, or will power be taken by the militias inside Syria who bore the brunt of the rebellion? Several analysts wonder whether Syria will remain a unitary state, at least in the short run. Most scenarios envisaging a break-up of the Syrian state predict an Alawite withdrawal to the mountains along the coast in northwestern Syria and Kurdish autonomy in the northeast.

Speculation regarding the construction of an Alawite enclave or statelet rests on a number of foundations. Most important is the Alawite fear of massacre by triumphant Sunni rebels. Such fears are not groundless. The current civil war has indeed assumed the character of a sectarian conflict between an Alawite-dominated regime and a Sunni majority. In earlier decades, tensions between the Alawites and other minorities and the Sunni majority, while very much a dominant element in Syrian life and politics, were rarely articulated in an overt fashion. Arab nationalism

was the dominant ideology; all Arabic speakers were presumably Arabs, equal members in an Arab political community, and blatant expressions of communal solidarity or hostility were politically incorrect. However, reality was often divorced from the acceptable political discourse, and in the course of the current Syrian crisis, the previous approach that publicly denied the existence of communal differences was completely abandoned. Jihadis, Islamists and other Sunnis have openly denounced and fought "the Alawite regime." In mixed areas and neighborhoods, mutual killings and atrocities have occurred. The blood account kept by the Sunni majority since the brutal quashing of the previous revolt of 1979-1982 has grown dramatically since the regime began a harsh suppression of the opposition in March 2011. Many Alawites fear that the regime's fall would be followed by a brutal settling of this account. This is certainly true of the regime's mostly Alawite inner core headed by the Asads, whose personal fate may resemble that of Mu'ammar Qadhafi rather than that of Husni Mubarak. There are, indeed, indications of preparations to implement a contingency plan in which many Alawites would withdraw from Damascus and other areas back to their historical mountain redoubt after, or just prior to, the regime's fall. Furthermore, the particularly fierce fighting in Homs and its environs can be seen as a manifestation of an Alawite plan to expand the area of a future enclave and give it depth.

Such thinking is grounded not only in current reality but also in the relatively short history of the Syrian state. "Syria" as a term has a long history, but the Syrian state in its present boundaries is a relatively new creation. Hafez al-Asad, Bashar's father, famously spent a significant part of his lengthy meetings with Western visitors lecturing them on the evils of the Sykes-Picot agreement, a 1916 French-British accord that divided the core area of the Middle East among the Western allies of World War I. The area assigned to France in this agreement, with some modifications, became the French Mandate of Syria and Lebanon. France conquered the area in 1920 and carved it up, creating a Greater Lebanon but refraining from creating a Syrian state. The architect of French policy in the Levant, Robert De Caix, believed that a Syrian state would be dominated by the Arab nationalist elites of the main cities and chose to divide the area into a series of statelets. Two of them were formed around the major cities of Damascus and Aleppo and another two around the "compact" Alawite and Druze minorities. In 1925, the statelets of Damascus and

Aleppo were merged into a Syrian state, but the Alawite and Druze areas were not integrated into that state. In 1936, a Franco-Syrian treaty awarded Syria independence and merged the small statelets into the future Syrian state. Although signed, the treaty was not ratified and Syrian Arab nationalists had to wait another decade to realize their aspirations. Only at the end of World War II, with British and American help, did Syria gain independence and have the Alawite and Druze areas integrated into it. This was not a smooth process. In 1946, an Alawite secessionist, Suleiman al-Murshid, was hanged by the central government, and in the early 1950s, the Druze rebelled against the regime of Adib Shishakli.

Alawite and Druze secessionism was cultivated by the French in more ways than one. In 1936, after the signing of the French-Syrian treaty, French intelligence officers, unhappy with the decisions made in Paris, arranged for the signing of petitions by Alawite and Druze notables, opposing integration into Syria and asking to preserve their separate status. Curiously, one of the signatories was none other than Hafez al-Asad's father. When they built a local army, the French tended to staff it mostly with minorities: Alawites, Druze, Isma'ilis, Christians, Armenians and Kurds. Their working assumption was that minorities were less likely to be attracted to Arab nationalism, a movement dominated by Sunni Muslims. This was complemented by the fact that while urban Sunnis were reluctant to enlist in the service of the colonial power, rural minorities viewed military service as an attractive route for upward mobility.

In retrospect, it is clear that this French policy was one of two factors that facilitated the takeover of the Syrian state in the 1960s by members of the minority communities. Starting in 1949, the military became a major actor in Syrian politics and the large number of minority officers in its ranks gave them disproportionate political power. The other factor was the large number of young minorities, some of them army officers, who were attracted to the Ba'th Party. The Ba'th offered a secular definition of Arab nationalism, seeking to draw a clear distinction between Islam and Arabism. Of the three major figures among the party's founding fathers, one was a Christian and another an Alawite. And so in March 1963, when a military coup brought the Ba'th to power in Syria, the regime's core was made up of members of minority communities. Communal solidarity and animosity were but two of the

constituent elements in Syrian politics during the 1960s, but a series of internecine conflicts ended in November 1970 with a takeover by Hafez al-Asad, whose regime rested on an essentially Alawite inner core.

During the next thirty years, two contradictory processes took place. Hafez al-Asad built a powerful Syrian state and was his country's authoritative, and for many Syrians, legitimate leader. As part of this process, numerous Alawites migrated to Damascus and other large cities. A new elite comprising Alawites and Sunnis replaced the old urban elite. At the same time, other Sunnis, particularly the Islamists, refused to accept the regime's legitimacy. In their eyes the Alawites were not proper Muslims and a regime headed by an Alawite president was illegitimate. This antagonism burst out several times, most notably in 1979-1982 when a jihadi group took over the Muslim Brotherhood and presented the regime with its most severe challenge. The current conflict did not begin as a communal conflict but morphed into one in short order. This takes us back to our point of departure and to the issue of renewed Alawite secessionism as one possible outcome of the Syrian civil war.

The Beirut-based journalist Michael Young has made important contributions to the discussion of this prospect. Young is dubious. As he pointed out, the coastal area has a significant Sunni population and the construction there of an Alawite enclave would probably require massive ethnic cleansing. A large-scale migration of Alawites from Greater Damascus and other areas would also be required. Nor is it certain that the bulk of the community would be willing to stick it out with the Asads and their clan. These are strong arguments. Alawite secessionism thus remains a prospect, the subject of speculation, but only one possible scenario among several for a post-Asad Syria.

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