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# Making Sense of the Syrian Crisis

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Syria is clearly in a state of internal crisis. Protests organized on Facebook were quickly stamped out in early February, but by mid-March, a faceless opposition had emerged from the flashpoint city of Daraa in Syria's largely conservative Sunni southwest. From Daraa, demonstrations spread to the Kurdish northeast, the coastal Latakia area, urban Sunni strongholds in Hama and Homs and to Aleppo and the suburbs of Damascus. Feeling overwhelmed, the regime experimented with rhetoric on reforms while relying on much more familiar iron-fist methods in cracking down, arresting hundreds of men, cutting off water and electricity to the most rebellious areas and making clear to the population that, with or without emergency rule in place, the price for dissent does not exclude death. (Activists claim more than 500 civilians have been killed in Syria since the demonstrations began, but that figure has not been independently verified.)

A survey of the headlines would lead many to believe that Syrian President Bashar al Assad will soon be joining Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak in a line of deposed Arab despots. The situation in Syria is serious, but in our view, the crisis has not yet risen to a level that would warrant a forecast that the al Assad regime will fall.

Four key pillars sustain Syria's minority Alawite-Baathist regime:

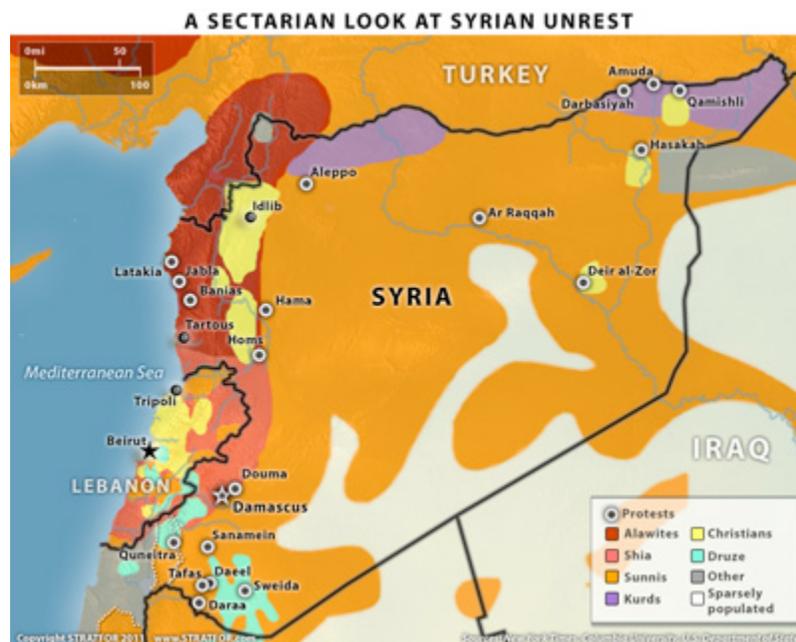
- Power in the hands of the al Assad clan.
- Alawite unity.
- Alawite control over the military-intelligence apparatus.
- The Baath party's monopoly on the political system.

Though the regime is coming under significant stress, all four of these pillars are still standing. If any one falls, the al Assad regime will have a real existential crisis on its

hands. To understand why this is the case, we need to begin with the story of how the Alawites came to dominate modern Syria.

## The Rise of the Alawites

Syria's complex demographics make it a difficult country to rule. It is believed that three-fourths of the country's roughly 22 million people are Sunnis, including most of the Kurdish minority in the northeast. Given the volatility that generally accompanies sectarianism, Syria deliberately avoids conducting censuses on religious demographics, making it difficult to determine, for example, exactly how big the country's Alawite minority has grown. Most estimates put the number of Alawites in Syria at around 1.5 million, or close to 7 percent of the population. When combined with Shia and Ismailis, non-Sunni Muslims average around 13 percent. Christians of several variations, including Orthodox and Maronite, make up around 10 percent of the population. The mostly mountain-dwelling Druze comprise around 3 percent.



[\(click here to enlarge image\)](#)

Alawite power in Syria is only about five decades old. The Alawites are frequently (and erroneously) categorized as Shiite Muslims, have many things in common with Christians and are often shunned by Sunni and Shiite Muslims alike. Consequently, Alawites attract a great deal of controversy in the Islamic world. The Alawites diverged from the mainstream Twelver of the Imami branch of Shiite Islam in the ninth century under the leadership of Ibn Nusayr (this is why, prior to 1920, Alawites were known more commonly as Nusayris). Their main link to Shiite Islam and the origin of the Alawite name stems from their reverence for the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali. The sect is often described as highly secretive and heretical for its rejection of Shariah and of common Islamic practices, including call to prayer, going to mosque for worship, making pilgrimages to Mecca and intolerance for alcohol. At the same time, Alawites celebrate many Christian holidays and revere Christian saints.

Alawites are a fractious bunch, historically divided among rival tribes and clans and split

geographically between mountain refuges and plains in rural Syria. The province of Latakia, which provides critical access to the Mediterranean coast, is also the Alawite homeland, ensuring that any Alawite bid for autonomy would be met with stiff Sunni resistance. Historically, for much of the territory that is modern-day Syria, the Alawites represented the impoverished lot in the countryside while the urban-dwelling Sunnis dominated the country's businesses and political posts. Unable to claim a firm standing among Muslims, Alawites would often embrace the Shiite concept of taqqiya (concealing or assimilating one's faith to avoid persecution) in dealing with their Sunni counterparts.

Between 1920 and 1946, the French mandate provided the first critical boost to Syria's Alawite community. In 1920, the French, who had spent years trying to legitimize and support the Alawites against an Ottoman-backed Sunni majority, had the Nusayris change their name to Alawites to emphasize the sect's connection to the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law Ali and to Shiite Islam. Along with the Druze and Christians, the Alawites would enable Paris to build a more effective counterweight to the Sunnis in managing the French colonial asset. The lesson here is important. Syria is not simply a mirror reflection of a country like Bahrain (a Shiite majority country run by a minority Sunni government). Rather than exhibiting a clear Sunni-Shiite religious-ideological divide, Syria's history can be more accurately described as a struggle between the Sunnis on one hand and a group of minorities on the other.

Under the French, the Alawites (along with other minorities) for the first time enjoyed subsidies, legal rights and lower taxes than their Sunni counterparts. Most critically, the French reversed Ottoman designs of the Syrian security apparatus to allow for the influx of Alawites into military, police and intelligence posts to suppress Sunni challenges to French rule. Consequently, the end of the French mandate in 1946 was a defining moment for the Alawites, who by then had gotten their first real taste of the privileged life and were also the prime targets of purges led by the urban Sunni elite presiding over a newly independent Syria.

## **A Crucial Military Opening**

The Sunnis quickly reasserted their political prowess in post-colonial Syria and worked to sideline Alawites from the government, businesses and courts. However, the Sunnis also made a fateful error in overlooking the heavy Alawite presence in the armed forces. While the Sunnis occupied the top posts within the military, the lower ranks were filled by rural Alawites who either could not afford the military exemption fees paid by most of the Sunni elite or simply saw military service as a decent means of employment given limited options. The seed was thus planted for an Alawite-led military coup while the Sunni elite were preoccupied with their own internal struggles.

The second major pillar supporting the Alawite rise came with the birth of the Baath party in Syria in 1947. For economically disadvantaged religious outcasts like Alawites, the Baathist campaign of secularism, socialism and Arab nationalism provided the ideal platform and political vehicle to organize and unify around. At the same time, the Baathist ideology caused huge fissures within the Sunni camp, as many — particularly the Islamists — opposed its secular, social program. In 1963, Baathist power was cemented through a military coup led by President Amin al-Hafiz, a Sunni general, who discharged many ranking Sunni officers, thereby providing openings for hundreds of Alawites to fill top-tier military positions during the 1963-1965 period on the grounds of being opposed to

Arab unity. This measure tipped the balance in favor of Alawite officers who staged a coup in 1966 and for the first time placed Damascus in the hands of the Alawites. The 1960s also saw the beginning of a reversal of Syria's sectarian rural-urban divide, as the Baath party encouraged Alawite migration into the cities to displace the Sunnis.

The Alawites had made their claim to the Syrian state, but internal differences threatened to stop their rise. It was not until 1970 that Alawite rivalries and Syria's string of coups and counter-coups were put to rest with a bloodless military coup led by then-air force commander and Defense Minister Gen. Hafiz al Assad (now deceased) against his Alawite rival, Salah Jadid. Al Assad was the first Alawite leader capable of dominating the fractious Alawite sect. The al Assads, who hail from the Numailatiyyah faction of the al Matawirah tribe (one of four main Alawite tribes), stacked the security apparatus with loyal clansmen while taking care to build patronage networks with Druze and Christian minorities that facilitated the al Assad rise. Just as important, the al Assad leadership co-opted key Sunni military and business elites, relying on notables like former Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass to contain dissent within the military and Alawite big-business families like the Makhloufs to buy loyalty, or at least tolerance, among a Sunni merchant class that had seen most of its assets seized and redistributed by the state. Meanwhile, the al Assad regime showed little tolerance for religiously conservative Sunnis who refused to remain quiescent. The state took over the administration of religious funding, cracked down on groups deemed as extremist and empowered itself to dismiss the leaders of Friday prayers at will, fueling resentment among the Sunni Islamist class.

In a remarkably short period, the 40-year reign of the al Assad regime has since seen the complete consolidation of power by Syrian Alawites who, just a few decades earlier, were written off by the Sunni majority as powerless, heretical peasants.

## **A Resilient Regime**

For the past four decades, the al Assad regime has carefully maintained these four pillars. The minority-ruled regime has proved remarkably resilient, despite several obstacles.

The regime witnessed its first meaningful backlash by Syria's Sunni religious class in 1976, when the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) led an insurgency against the state with the aim of toppling the al Assad government. At that time, the Sunni Islamists had the support of many of the Sunni urban elite, but their turn toward jihadism also facilitated their downfall. The regime's response was the leveling of the Sunni stronghold city of Hama in 1982. The Hama crackdown, which killed tens of thousands of Sunnis and drove the Syrian MB underground, remains fresh in the memories of Syrian MB members today who have only recently built up the courage to publicly call on supporters to join in demonstrations against the regime. Still, the Syrian MB lacks the organizational capabilities to resist the regime.

The al Assad regime has also experienced serious threats from within the family. After Hafiz al Assad suffered from heart problems in 1983, his younger brother Rifaat, who drew a significant amount of support from the military, attempted a coup against the Syrian leader. None other than the al Assad matriarch, Naissa, mediated between her rival sons and reached a solution by which Rifaat was sent abroad to Paris, where he remains in exile, and Hafiz was able to re-secure the loyalty of his troops. The 1994 death of Basil al

Assad, brother of current president Bashar and then-heir apparent to a dying Hafiz, also posed a significant threat to the unity of the al Assad clan. However, the regime was able to rely on key Sunni stalwarts such as Tlass to rally support within the military for Bashar, who was studying to become an ophthalmologist and had little experience with, or desire to enter, politics.

Even when faced with threats from abroad, the regime has endured. The 1973 Yom Kippur War, the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the 2005 forced Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon may have knocked the regime off balance, but it never sent it over the edge. Syria's military intervention in the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war allowed the regime to emerge stronger and more influential than ever through its management of Lebanon's fractured political landscape, satisfying to a large extent Syria's strategic need to dominate its western neighbor. Though the regime underwent serious internal strain when the Syrian military was forced out of Lebanon, it did not take long for Syria's pervasive security-intelligence apparatus to rebuild its clout in the country.

## The Current Crisis

The past seven weeks of protests in nearly all corners of Syria have led many to believe that the Syrian regime is on its last legs. However, such assumptions ignore the critical factors that have sustained this regime for decades, the most critical of which is the fact that the regime is still presiding over a military that remains largely unified and committed to putting down the protests with force. Syria cannot be compared to Tunisia, where the army was able quickly to depose an unpopular leader; Libya, where the military rapidly reverted to the country's east-west historical divide; or Egypt, where the military used the protests to resolve a succession crisis, all while preserving the regime. The Syrian military, as it stands today, is a direct reflection of hard-fought Alawite hegemony over the state.

Syrian Alawites are stacked in the military from both the top and the bottom, keeping the army's mostly Sunni 2nd Division commanders in check. Of the 200,000 career soldiers in the Syrian army, roughly 70 percent are Alawites. Some 80 percent of officers in the army are also believed to be Alawites. The military's most elite division, the Republican Guard, led by the president's younger brother Maher al Assad, is an all-Alawite force. Syria's ground forces are organized in three corps (consisting of combined artillery, armor and mechanized infantry units). Two corps are led by Alawites (Damascus headquarters, which commands southeastern Syria, and Zabadani headquarters near the Lebanese border). The third is led by a Circassian Sunni from Aleppo headquarters.

Most of Syria's 300,000 conscripts are Sunnis who complete their two- to three-year compulsory military service and leave the military, though the decline of Syrian agriculture has been forcing more rural Sunnis to remain beyond the compulsory period (a process the regime is tightly monitoring). Even though most of Syria's air force pilots are Sunnis, most ground support crews are Alawites who control logistics, telecommunications and maintenance, thereby preventing potential Sunni air force dissenters from acting unilaterally. Syria's air force intelligence, dominated by Alawites, is one of the strongest intelligence agencies within the security apparatus and has a core function of ensuring that Sunni pilots do not rebel against the regime.

The triumvirate managing the crackdowns on protesters consists of Bashar's brother Maher; their brother-in-law, Asef Shawkat; and Ali Mamluk, the director of Syria's

Intelligence Directorate. Their strategy has been to use Christian and Druze troops and security personnel against Sunni protesters to create a wedge between the Sunnis and the country's minority groups (Alawites, Druze, Christians), but this strategy also runs the risk of backfiring if sectarianism escalates to the point that the regime can no longer assimilate the broader Syrian community. President al Assad has also quietly called on retired Alawite generals to return to work with him as advisers to help ensure that they do not link up with the opposition.

Given Syria's sectarian military dynamics, it is not surprising that significant military defections have not occurred during the current crisis. Smaller-scale defections of lower-ranking soldiers and some officers have been reported by activists in the southwest, where the unrest is most intense. These reports have not been verified, but even Syrian activist sources have admitted to STRATFOR that the defectors from the Syrian army's 5th and 9th divisions are being put down.

A fledgling opposition movement calling itself the "National Initiative for Change" published a statement from Nicosia, Cyprus, appealing to Syrian Minister of Defense Ali Habib (an Alawite) and Army Chief of Staff Daoud Rajha (a Greek Orthodox Christian) to lead the process of political change in Syria, in an apparent attempt to spread the perception that the opposition is making headway in co-opting senior military members of the regime. Rajha replaced Habib as army chief of staff when the latter was relegated to the largely powerless political position of defense minister two years ago. In name, the president's brother-in-law, Asef Shawkat, is deputy army chief of staff, but in practice, he is the true chief of army staff.

The defections of Rajha and Habib, which remain unlikely at this point, would not necessarily represent a real break within the regime, but if large-scale defections within the military occur, it will be an extremely significant sign that the Alawites are fracturing and thus losing their grip over the armed forces. Without that control, the regime cannot survive. So far, this has not happened.

In many ways, the Alawites are the biggest threat to themselves. Remember, it was not until Hafiz al Assad's 1970 coup that the Alawites were able to put aside their differences and consolidate under one regime. The current crisis could provide an opportunity for rivals within the regime to undermine the president and make a bid for power. All eyes would naturally turn to Bashar's exiled uncle Rifaat, who attempted a coup against his brother nearly three decades ago. But even Rifaat has been calling on Alawite supporters in Tripoli, in northern Lebanon and in Latakia, Syria, to refrain from joining the demonstrations, stressing that the present period is one in which regimes are being overthrown and that if Bashar falls, the entire Alawite sect will suffer as a result.

While the military and the al Assad clan are holding together, the insulation to the regime provided by the Baath party is starting to come into question. The Baath party is the main political vehicle through which the regime manages its patronage networks, though over the years the al Assad clan and the Alawite community have grown far more in stature than the wider concentric circle of the ruling party. In late April, some 230 Baath party members reportedly resigned from the party in protest. However, the development must also be viewed in context: These were a couple of hundred Baath party members out of a total membership of some 2 million in the country. Moreover, the defectors were concentrated in southern Syria around Daraa, the site of the most severe crackdowns. Though the defections within the Baath party have not risen to a significant level, it is easy

to understand the pressure the al Assad regime is under to follow through with a promised reform to expand the political system, since political competition would undermine the Baath party monopoly and thus weaken one of the four legs of the regime.

## The Foreign Tolerance Factor

Internally, Alawite unity and control over the military and Baath party loyalty are crucial to the al Assad regime's staying power. Externally, the Syrian regime is greatly aided by the fact that the regional stakeholders — including Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United States and Iran — by and large prefer to see the al Assads remain in power than deal with the likely destabilizing consequences of regime change.

It is not a coincidence that Israel, with which Syria shares a strong and mutual antipathy, has been largely silent over the Syrian unrest. Already unnerved by what may be in store for Egypt's political future, Israel has a deep fear of the unknown regarding the Syrians. How, for example, would a conservative Sunni government in Damascus conduct its foreign policy? The real virtue of the Syrian regime lies in its predictability: The al Assad government, highly conscious of its military inferiority to Israel, is far more interested in maintaining its hegemony in Lebanon than in picking fights with Israel. While the al Assad government is a significant patron to Hezbollah, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, among other groups it manages within its Islamist militant supply chain, its support for such groups is also to some extent negotiable, as illustrated most recently by the fruits of Turkey's negotiations with Damascus in containing Palestinian militant activity and in Syria's ongoing, albeit strained, negotiations with Saudi Arabia over keeping Hezbollah in check. Israel's view of Syria is a classic example of the benefits of dealing with the devil you do know rather than the devil you don't.

The biggest sticking point for each of these regional stakeholders is Syria's alliance with Iran. The Iranian government has a core interest in maintaining a strong lever in the Levant with which to threaten Israel, and it needs a Syria that stands apart from the Sunni Arab consensus to do so. Though Syria derives a great deal of leverage from its relationship with Iran, Syrian-Iranian interests are not always aligned. In fact, the more confident Syria is at home and in Lebanon, the more likely its interests are to clash with Iran. Shiite politics aside, secular-Baathist Syria and Islamist Iran are not ideological allies nor are they true Shiite brethren — they came together and remain allied for mostly tactical purposes, to counter Sunni forces. In the near term at least, Syria will not be persuaded by Riyadh, Ankara or anyone else to sever ties with Iran in return for a boost in regional support, but it will keep itself open to negotiations. Meanwhile, holding the al Assads in place provides Syria's neighbors with some assurance that ethno-sectarian tensions already on the rise in the wider region will not lead to the eruption of such fault lines in Turkey (concerned with Kurdish spillover) and Lebanon (a traditional proxy Sunni-Shiite battleground between Iran and Saudi Arabia).

Regional disinterest in pushing for regime change in Syria could be seen even in the April 29 U.N. Human Rights Council meeting to condemn Syria. Bahrain and Jordan did not show up to vote, and Saudi Arabia and Egypt insisted on a watered-down resolution. Saudi Arabia has even quietly instructed the Arab League to avoid discussion of the situation in Syria in the next Arab League meeting, scheduled for mid-May.

Turkey's Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) has given indications that it

is seeking out Sunni alternatives to the al Assad regime for the longer term and is quietly developing a relationship with the Syrian MB. AKP does not have the influence currently to effect meaningful change within Syria, nor does it particularly want to at this time. The Turks remain far more concerned about Kurdish unrest and refugees spilling over into Turkey with just a few weeks remaining before national elections.

Meanwhile, the United States and its NATO allies are struggling to reconcile the humanitarian argument that led to the military intervention with Libya with the situation in Syria. The United States especially does not want to paint itself into a corner with rhetoric that could commit forces to yet another military intervention in the Islamic world (and in a much more complex and volatile part of the region than Libya) and is relying instead on policy actions like sanctions that it hopes exhibit sufficient anger at the crackdowns.

In short, the Syrian regime may be an irritant to many but not a large enough one to compel the regional stakeholders to devote their efforts toward regime change in Damascus.

## Hangin on by More Than a Thread

Troubles are no doubt rising in Syria, and the al Assad regime will face unprecedented difficulty in trying to manage affairs at home in the months ahead. That said, it so far has maintained the four pillars supporting its power. The al Assad clan remains unified, the broader Alawite community and its minority allies are largely sticking together, Alawite control over the military is holding and the Baath party's monopoly remains intact. Alawites appear to be highly conscious of the fact that the first signs of Alawite fracturing in the military and the state overall could lead to the near-identical conditions that led to its own rise — only this time, power would tilt back in favor of the rural Sunni masses and away from the urbanized Alawite elite. So far, this deep-seated fear of a reversal of Alawite power is precisely what is keeping the regime standing. Considering that Alawites were second-class citizens of Syria less than century ago, that memory may be recent enough to remind Syrian Alawites of the consequences of internal dissent. The factors of regime stability outlined here are by no means static, and the stress on the regime is certainly rising. Until those legs show real signs of weakening, however, the al Assad regime has the tools it needs to fight the effects of the Arab Spring.

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