



THE GHOSTS OF HAMA

THE BITTER LEGACY OF SYRIA'S
FAILED 1979-1982 REVOLUTION

ARON LUND

THE GHOSTS OF HAMA—ARON LUND—JUNE 2011

The pan-Arab revolution has reached Syria and thrust the country into the worst crisis in its modern history. On the one hand, opposition forces hope to rid themselves of the Assad family, which has ruled Syria with an iron fist for four decades. On the other hand, many Syrians fear that the protests will degenerate into violence, chaos, or even civil war.

The popular protests that erupted in the southern city of Deraa in March, have now spread to most parts of the Syria. The regime appears severely weakened. President Bashar el-Assad has failed to exercise meaningful leadership, and his promises of future reform fall well short of the increasingly radical demands of popular opinion.

By mid-June, some 1300 people are dead, and many thousands have been imprisoned, but demonstrations continue. Syrian cities keep rising against their rulers every Friday, with tens of dead as Assad's police and army forces crack down to quell protests.

This is not, however, the first time the Assad regime is faced by popular uprising. In the late 1970s, a pro-democracy revolt challenged the system, but was met with brutal force. It soon degenerated into an armed confrontation between Sunni Islamists and the minority-dominated Baathist regime. The uprising was finally put down in the city of Hama, where Baathist forces massacred thousands of civilians. These events remain part of the Syrian collective memory, despite being banned from public discussion, and continue to shape events today.

This report examines the current protests in light of the 1979-1982 events, trying to pinpoint the similarities and differences between these two Syrian uprisings, and draw some general conclusions about the likely future prospects of the Syrian revolution.

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by Aron Lund
June 2011

Table of contents

1. The Syrian uprising of 2011.....	4
2. The 'Ahdath' of 1979-1982.....	7
3. The regime.....	13
4. The opposition.....	23
5. Risks of internal conflict.....	32
6. The foreign factor.....	38
7. The future.....	41
8. List of illustrations.....	44

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1. THE SYRIAN UPRISING OF 2011



Syria's revolution

In mid-March of 2011, street protests erupted in the southern Syrian provincial town of Deraa. They originally concerned a local problem of government abuse – a group of children abducted by authorities for writing revolutionary slogans on a wall, inspired by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. When government forces fired on the demonstrations, Deraa exploded in revolt. Public burials turned into giant anti-regime manifestations, where more people were killed, and familial and clan networks soon ensured that the surrounding countryside joined in the protests.

In a matter of weeks, demonstrations had begun to spread throughout Syria, to the coastal cities of Latakia and Baniyas, the central Syrian cities of Homs and Hama, and even into the Kurdish and Arab Bedouin east, in places like Qamishli and Deir el-Zour. (So far, the two major cities of Damascus and Aleppo remain largely quiet, but there has been severe rioting in some of the suburbs and satellite towns of Damascus.) Most demonstrations occur on Fridays, after Muslim Friday prayers. By mid-June, about 100-200 locations experience protests every Friday, and small-scale manifestations continue to appear in different locations during the weeks.¹

Initially, few calls were heard for the overthrow of President Bashar el-Assad, who had just celebrated ten years as president. Bashar had inherited Syria at the death of his father, Hafez el-Assad (in power since 1970, died 2000), in a thoroughly undemocratic fashion. Even so, he quickly became popular, for carrying out some long-awaited reforms and connecting with Syrian youth in a way that his father never did. Ten years later, the hopes raised by Bashar's succession had faded, but the president retained a measure of personal popularity, despite widespread discontent with the Baathist regime's corruption, brutality and inefficiency.

As demonstrations spread, however, and more and more casualties were reported, the protests radicalized. Bashar has showed little hands-on leadership. His allies have tried to cushion him from public criticism, by insisting that the president has banned any firing on demonstrators. Initially, this may have convinced some Syrians that the problem lay with the reviled security agencies, and hardliners within the regime, rather than with Bashar himself. In particular, the president's brother Maher el-Assad attracted attention, and was portrayed as the mastermind behind government repression. But as casualty figures continued to climb, and the president did nothing to rein in his security apparatus, fewer and fewer appear willing to give Bashar's 'good cop' routine any credit. At the time of writing, in mid-June, some 1300 people have been killed, according to human rights groups, and several thousands are imprisoned.

Opposition demands have increasingly been focused on rooting out the entire Baathist system. While demonstrations have not reached the same massive size as in, for example, Egypt, the tens of thousands of Syrians who have taken to the streets is still an impressive figure. Unlike in Egypt, Syrian authorities have been killing demonstrators from day one, and the Syrian death toll is already far past the Egyptian one.

¹ Roula Khalaf, 'Complex revol puts Syria at crossroads', *The Financial Times*, June 20, 2011, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/2accdbf8-9b66-11e0-bbc6-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1Pu3lCHIB>



At the same time, the regime also retains strong support from some sectors of society. It has repeatedly tried to flaunt its power by mobilizing state-backed mass-demonstrations in favor of Bashar, in cities around Syria. Such demonstrations are nothing new to Syrians, and they reveal little about the real trends in public opinion. But there can be no doubt that, despite widespread dissatisfaction with the state of the nation, there are millions of Syrians who prefer the repressive stability of the Assad regime, to the risks of a political transition.

As the gulf widens between pro- and anti-regime forces in Syria, most Syrians remain on the fence. The situation appears to grow more desperate for both the opposition and the regime. Recently, there have been indications that fringe parts of the opposition may be taking up arms, but such reports are hard to confirm – the Syrian government is actively engaged in trying to portray the entire opposition as violent and Islamist.

A number of police officers and soldiers have been killed, and in a few instances, actual street fighting appears to have occurred. In June, about ten thousand people fled from northern Syria to Turkey, as the army assaulted the towns of Jisr el-Shoghour and Maarrat el-Nouman in Idlib Province. Fighting has been also reported from Telkalakh in Homs province, close to the Lebanese border. According to opposition sources, government forces have massacred civilians and razed villages, to the extent that some army units finally turned against the regime; according to the government, armed Islamist groups now roam the country.

The competing narratives of the Syrian government and its opposition are impossible to reconcile, and, since the regime has banned independent reporters from Syria, the outside world is left trying to piece together a credible version from whatever information seeps out of the country.



2. THE 'AHDATH' OF 1979-1982

A bitter legacy

The popular uprising that erupted in Deraa in 2011 is not the first large-scale protest to hit Syria. For example, in 1954, widespread popular protest and military-political intrigue deposed the Syrian dictator, Adib el-Shishakli.² But of more immediate relevance to the situation at hand, is the wave of anti-regime activity that rattled Syria in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

These 'events' or *Ahdath*, as they are often known in Syria, for lack of a better name, reached a violent climax between 1979 and 1982. Today, the period is mostly known outside Syria for the Hama massacre in February 1982, but this was preceded by a long period of both violent and peaceful protest.

The *Ahdath* were a drawn-out affair, and there is no clear starting point. Hafez el-Assad had enjoyed something of a political honeymoon for several years after seizing power in November 1970. Initially he was seen as a relative liberalizer, and positively contrasted with his radical predecessor, Salah Jadid. He was also widely credited for his performance in the October War of 1973. The lessening of political tensions during Hafez el-Assad's first years in power was helped by impressive economic growth, as stability returned and oil money poured in from sympathetic Gulf nations. However, by the late 1970s, the Syrian economy was hurting from corruption and mismanagement, escalating military expenditures, and a withdrawal of foreign sponsorship. This caused shortages of goods and spiraling inflation, painful to the population at large, and perhaps particularly to the politicized middle classes.

Meanwhile, Hafez el-Assad's political standing had been badly hurt by his reliance on Alawite sectarianism to control the security forces, by repeated clashes with Sunni fundamentalists (eg. in 1973, over the new constitution), by nepotism and corruption, and, last but not least, by his intervention in Lebanon in 1976. The move into Lebanon was perceived by secular nationalists and leftists as an attack on their Palestinian and Lebanese allies, in favor of rightist, Christian militias such as the Phalanges, while conservative Sunnis saw it as a conspiracy of minorities against their fellow Muslims.

By the late 1970s, three different strands of anti-regime activism were causing increasing troubles for the regime:

1. **Sunni Islamism.** A large segment of conservative Sunni opinion considered Assad's rule to be illegitimate by default, because of his Alawite background and the Baath's secular agenda. The Islamist movement had been radicalizing since the Baath takeover in 1963, and fringe factions were trying to create an armed movement as early as the mid-60s. An armed offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, called el-Taliaa el-Moqatila (the Fighting Vanguard), initiated urban guerrilla-style attacks against Baathist and Alawite targets in 1976. This helped polarize public opinion along sectarian lines, which, together with the regime's brutal countermeasures, drew the mainstream MB into armed confrontation by 1979. The tipping point was the so-called Artillery School massacre on June 16, where Taliaa gunmen killed a large number of Syrian officer cadets. The regime blamed the MB and executed several of its

² For details on the Shishakli era, and pre-Baathist Syria more generally, see Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria. A Study of Post-War Arab Politics 1945-1958*, Oxford University Press, 1965

members. The MB responded by joining the armed opposition, issuing a formal call to arms in September 1979.³

2. **Leftist-nationalist opposition.** In late 1979, five illegal opposition parties came together to form the National Democratic Gathering (NDG), under the leadership of Jamal el-Atassi. The NDG included Atassi's Nasserist party (the Democratic Arab Socialist Union) and Riad el-Turk's dissident wing of the Syrian Communist Party, as well as Baathist and Arab Socialist splinters. These parties had been around for a long time, but the Lebanon intervention and the mounting popular discontent drew them together to intensify opposition.
3. **Civil protest.** Many influential civil society leaders – intellectuals, union activists, religious clerics, journalists and many others – began drifting into open dissent by the late 1970s. Some were connected to the NDG parties or sympathized with the MB, but most were independent of the organized opposition. Professional unions and other civil society institutions which had escaped Baath Party control began issuing statements and holding protests, at first directed at specific government abuses, but increasingly as part of a generalized opposition to the Assad regime. Many of the secular civil society activists, encouraged by the NDG, apparently saw their role in the protests as offering a 'third way' between the regime and the armed Islamist movement.⁴

The regime responded by repressing violent and peaceful protest alike, but this only intensified the conflict. By late 1979, protests were so widespread that outside observers were beginning to question the regime's stability. Major protests and strikes took place in Aleppo, Hama and other cities. Prominent clerics tacitly supported the Islamist opposition, and the secular intelligentsia flowed steadily to the side of the NDG and its civil society allies. In parallel to the growing popular activism, armed clashes between the regime and the Islamist groups increased.

In 1980, things came to a head. In March, government forces shelled the rebellious town of Jisr el-Shughour in northern Syria, killing many tens of people. In protest, the opposition called a general strike, to which the regime responded with a nation-wide crackdown. Hundreds of civil society leaders and NDG activists were arrested, and the professional unions were dissolved by decree, later to be reformed under close Baath Party supervision. This more or less destroyed the secular and civil opposition, although NDG activists continued to operate clandestinely. The restive northern city of

³ For information on the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, el-Taliaa el-Moqatila, and the politics and rivalries of Syrian Islamist groups during the *Ahdath*: Faisal Derraj & Mohammed Jamal Barout (eds.), *el-ahzab wal-harakat wal-djamaat el-islamia* ('The Islamic Parties, Movements and Groups'), Vol. 1–2, Arab Center for Strategic Studies, 2006; Abu Mousaab el-Souri, *Lessons learned from the armed Jihad ordeal in Syria*, English translation by the US Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, No. AFGP-2002-600080, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/lessons-learned-from-the-jihad-ordeal-in-syria-english-translation>; Alison Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood. The Burden of Tradition*, Saqi, 2010; interviews with Ali Sadreddin el-Bayanouni (MB general inspector 1996–2010), and Zoheir Salem (MB spokesman), in London, November 2009.

⁴ This was the attitude described to the author by Salim Kheir-Bek: 'The regime told us, at that time, that if you're not with us, then you're with the Muslim Brotherhood, but the Muslim Brotherhood said that if you're not with us, then you're with the regime. [...] It was very unfair, since a majority of the people didn't support either of them. They were against both!' In March 1980, Kheir-Bek, then a young employee of SyrianAir, held a public speech in front of about 1200 attendees at a meeting called by the Syrian Engineers' Association. In his speech, he argued that 'you can't pose the problem like that. We have a third way, I said, not your way and not their way – it's the way of freedom and democracy.' Kheir-Bek, along with some 50 other members of the Engineer's Association, was duly sentenced to 13 years in prison for 'opposing the goals of the revolution'. (Interview with Salim Kheir-Bek, Damascus, January 2008.)

Aleppo was brought to heel by the army, which entered in full force in April, stationing tanks throughout the city, firing at demonstrators and arresting thousands of people.

From then on, the main current of anti-regime activism was the Islamist movement. Its armed campaign grew increasingly violent and sectarian in tone, and the Baath responded with massive state violence. In June 1980, Hafez el-Assad narrowly escaped an MB assassination attempt. The regime's response was chilling: the day after, forces loyal to the president's brother, Refaat el-Assad, murdered hundreds of Islamist detainees in Palmyra (Tadmur) prison. The following month, Law 49 was decreed, stipulating that membership in the MB would be considered a capital offence.

The Islamists – whose number was estimated at some 30,000 people in 1980 – responded with a bombing campaign in Syrian cities. In August 1981, a bomb hit the Syrian parliament; in October, the Air Force headquarters were targeted. On November 29, 1981, a bomb in the el-Azbakiye neighborhood of Damascus, directed at a security building, killed many tens or even hundreds of civilian passers-by and school children. Islamist groups also targeted individual regime supporters, particularly Alawites. Syrian society grew increasingly segregated along religious lines, as paranoia spread.

The uprising continued to grow for some time, but was already in dire straits when the MB and Taliaa bet their fortunes on an uprising in Hama in February 1982. This failed miserably, and within a couple of weeks, forces under the command of Refaat el-Assad had retaken the city, using artillery and tanks. Then, firmly in control of the situation after the city had fallen, the regime decided to make an example of Hama by leveling parts of the town and killing thousands of residents. Different estimates put the total number of dead in Hama at somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 people.⁵

The atrocities at Hama shocked Syria, and broke the back of the uprising, even if small-scale clashes would continue for some time. It demoralized the rebel movement, which had been hoping that Sunni units of the army would turn their weapons on the regime, and it caused severe internal conflicts among the Islamists. In the years that followed, the Taliaa was eradicated by the regime, but the MB survived, albeit badly crippled and in exile. The secular opposition would only reemerge in the late 1990s, weakened and traumatized.

In a final analysis, the regime of Hafez el-Assad emerged as the conflict's undisputed winner, but it lost much popular legitimacy and was internally destabilized by the effort. The 'events' of the 1979-1982 era remain as a painful scar on the Syrian collective psyche today – even if, or precisely because, discussion of them has been banned from public discourse.

Comparing the 1970s/1980s *Ahdath* and the 2011 uprising

In what ways do these two uprisings, and the regime's efforts at suppressing them, mirror each other? And in what ways are they different? Can lessons be drawn from these similarities and differences?

⁵ These figures are controversial and disputed by both sides. The Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates have put forward a figure closer to 35,000 dead, while the regime has generally refrained from commenting on the Hama events at all. Some regime supporters claim that casualties were in the low thousands, including many soldiers.

An obvious difference is the trigger causes and time frame of the two uprisings. The revolt of 2011 has taken place in a matter of months, and it wouldn't have happened without the overthrow of first Tunisia's president Zine el-Abidin Ben Ali (Jan. 14) and then Hosni Mubarak of Egypt (Feb. 11). Foreign affairs played a major part for the *Ahdath* as well: the Syrian intervention in Lebanon (1976) provoked the opposition into action, while the Islamic revolution in Iran (1979) and the murder of Egyptian president Anwar el-Sadat (1981) both served to encourage parts of the violent Islamist opposition; also, Iraqi and other state support for the rebels was crucially important to sustain the armed uprising. However, foreign inspiration did not in itself trigger the uprising. Rather, this was a long and slow slide into conflict, which built on political, sectarian and social grievances that had accumulated for years or even decades, and where foreign influences played only a secondary part.

The setting itself is also very different. While names (Assad) and places (Jisr el-Shoghour) now appear to echo through history, the Syria of 2011 is a very different place from the Syria – and Syrians – of the late 1970s. Bashar's regime is structurally similar to that of Hafez, but Syria itself has changed a lot in terms of social composition, ideological loyalties and social/religious geography.

A much-noted key factor in 2011's uprising, is the regime's lack of effective control of information. Pan-Arab satellite channels, cell phones and the Internet has left it unable to suppress information and made it much more difficult to shape popular opinion. In particular, the popular Qatari TV channel *Aljazeera* has reported heavily on the uprising, clearly positioning itself in favor of protestors. But while channels such as *Aljazeera* and the Saudi-backed *Alarabiya* may be perceived as biased, Syria's state media has even less credibility, mixing hyperbolic propaganda with warnings of increasingly surreal 'foreign plots'. The improved access to media and unmonitored communications is what makes it possible for a leaderless uprising to sustain itself without even rudimentary organizing structures. None of this was true in the 1970s, where the opposition relied on cell-based clandestine organizations and cumbersome methods of propaganda, which increased its reliance on foreign state support.⁶

Different generations, different realities

Another major factor is the role widening generation gaps in Syria. Most Syrians today have no memory of the pre-Baathist era, and of the radically different political, social and sectarian landscape that existed then, which so profoundly marked the generation of both Hafez el-Assad and his opponents in the 1970s and 1980s. Hafez and his enemies grew up in a Syria of 3 million people, still ruled by French colonialism. They struggled for independence, and got it; struggled for Palestine, and lost it. Their era was one of Sunni urban elite hegemony, little political representation for the rural majority, discrimination of religious minorities, strong sectarian segregation, etc; but also of a semi-free press, a turbulent political struggle, and democratically elected, if flawed, parliamentary institutions.

Bashar and his generation, on the other hand, came of age in a post-revolutionary society where the Baath ruled supreme over a modern party dictatorship. The rural world had recently imposed itself

⁶ One measure of the impact of foreign satellite channels is the space devoted to discrediting them in Syrian media. See for instance this rather typical 'public confession' reported by the state news agency: 'False Witness Admits He Disseminated False News on Biased TV Channels', *SANA*, June 4, 2011, <http://sana.sy/eng/337/2011/06/04/350557.htm>

on Syrian politics, Baathist class warfare and socialist reforms had brought down the old urban Sunni aristocracy; and a tiny coterie of Alawite officers from poor, rural families held sway over both the political sphere and the state-dominated economy.

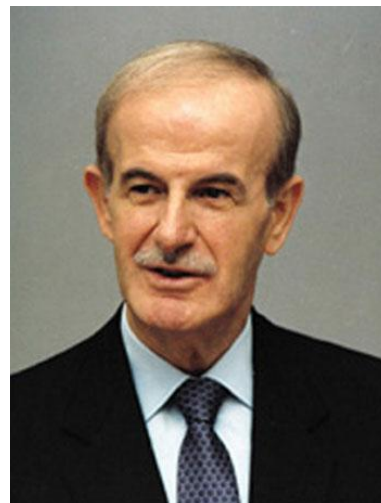
Today's young protestors – and the police officers and soldiers of the same generation trying to suppress them – in turn grew up in a third Syria. Their country, of 20 million, is one where the struggle for independence and Arab unity, and even the Baathist power-grab of 1963, are all relegated to ancient history; where religion has reassumed a central role, despite the secularizing efforts of the Baath; where the ruling ideologies are all but defunct; where class differences are returning with a vengeance; where anti-government propaganda is readily available by satellite-TV or the Internet; and in which, last but not least, they have very little memory of the austere brutality of Hafez el-Assad, and equally little appreciation for the liberalization that took place ten years ago, marking Bashar's assumption of power.

3. THE REGIME



Assad vs. Assad

Hafez el-Assad (b. 1930, d. 2000, *pictured right*) was by all accounts a highly intelligent and ruthless man with a knack for intrigue and the politics of divide and rule. He fought his way to the top through successive purges and coups, eliminating friend and foe along the way, to eventually establish the most stable and – as seen from the top – successful regime Syria has ever experienced.



When looking back at the period of the *Ahdath*, however, it's important to realize that his regime was not necessarily as solid and stable then, as it would seem in later years. The Baath had seized power in 1963, but there was little stability until 1970, when Hafez el-Assad took personal control and began reinstitutionalizing and restaffing the regime. Purges of suspected opponents within the political/security sector (eg. partisans of Salah Jadid, the previous strongman) continued into the 1970s, and not all aspects of today's system were firmly in place at the time of the *Ahdath*.

By contrast, Bashar (b. 1965), the former ophthalmologist and self-confessed computer nerd, inherited Syria's aging but basically functioning state machinery from his father – he didn't have to do the heavy lifting himself. This marked him as an unknown quantity, and many suspected he would be a weak ruler. At the time, some argued he would soon be deposed by regime strongmen, while others assumed he would act as a front man for the vested interests of the Alawi security establishment. However, he's now been in power for over ten years, and appears – or appeared, until the 2011 uprising erupted – to be firmly in charge of the state. Bashar proved himself to many by withstanding severe pressures during the 2003-2008 period, successfully fighting off a number of regional and international rivals and quashing internal dissent.

During this decade in power, he has carried out limited political and economic reform. Under the surface, however, he has continuously been tweaking institutions and occasionally shifted top figures back and forth.⁷ In this way, Bashar has been fine-tuning the system, after the abrupt turnover of the late 90s and early 00s, when army and state were put through a full-scale generational shift to secure his succession. Since about 2005, when former vice president Abdelhalim Khaddam was purged and fled into exile,⁸ there have been no reliable reports of serious elite dissent.⁹

⁷ Such as Gen. Bahjat Suleiman, formerly a major powerbroker in the General Intelligence Directorate, who had supported Bashar's rise through army and state towards the presidency. Suleiman was reassigned to a less influential posting following the Hariri affair of 2005, and then shipped off as ambassador to Jordan in 2009

⁸ Khaddam, one of few remaining top leaders from the Hafez era, was also one of the regime's few powerful Sunni Muslims. He was closely tied to the Hariri family in Lebanon, and fell out with the regime over its treatment of Hariri. After Hariri's murder in February 2005, Khaddam lost all remaining posts at the Baath Party's 10th Regional Congress in June. He soon left the country to create an opposition movement with backing from Syria's regional rivals. He remains in exile in Europe.

⁹ A possible exception is the transfer of his brother-in-law, Gen. Asef Shawkat, from Military Intelligence to the regular military command in 2009, which caused a stir of interesting rumors about infighting between Bashar and Asef and his wife, Bashar's older sister Bushra. They remain unconfirmed.

The role of Baathist ideology

Hafez el-Assad was the man who killed the Baath Party, by turning it into a vehicle for one-man rule – but it took him a while. As a modernizing and nationalist ideology, Baathism appears to have remained a serious force for regime cohesion and popular mobilization for some time into the 1980s. The ruling elite under Hafez was almost entirely made up of men who had been among the earliest adherents to the Baath, fought for it with their own lives at stake, and who had been profoundly shaped by the party's ideology and world-view. This situation persisted well into the 1990s, when the first generation of regime leaders was retired.

Today, none of this holds true. In 2011 the two-million strong Baath Party still shuffles forward zombie-like, as an administrative organ, but as an inspirational ideological movement it died long ago. The regime elite is largely made up of men of Bashar's own generation. During their formative years, the Baath was already a ruling party integrated into the Syrian state. It was (and remains) a force for the *status quo*, fronted by corrupt opportunists, and it has lost whatever ideological relevance it may still have held in the 1980s.

Of course, today's leaders have all been exposed to state propaganda and politicized education throughout their lives. Many have probably internalized elements of the Baathist world-view, such as its pan-Arab outlook, the socialist rhetoric and a generalized Syrian-Arab nationalism. But so have the anti-regime demonstrators – and that hasn't prevented them from calling for the overthrow of the regime.

Concessions and public speeches

During the *Ahdath*, Hafez el-Assad conceded nothing. He did try to appease conservative religious opinion by adding an Islamic (in fact Sunni) touch to his public rhetoric; he did toy with amnesties and secret deals with opposition factions; he did hint at forthcoming reforms; and he did launch a largely symbolic anti-corruption campaign (in 1979). However, there were no changes in the political structure. Quite the contrary: In practice, the level of repression was increased considerably, and the regime narrowed its base, more or less eschewing public support to regroup in its core constituency.

Even some of the minimally representative institutions that had existed were eliminated. On the 7th Regional Congress of the Baath Party, in Dec. 1979–Jan. 1980, a Central Committee was created. It was authorized to elect, among its members, a Baath Regional Command, which would then nominate the single candidate in Syria's presidential referendum. During the 8th Regional Congress in 1985, it was decided that the CC members would simply be hand-picked by Hafez, rather than elected by lower levels. This meant that the president would from now on personally select those tasked with reappointing him – in the words of Bertolt Brecht, Hafez el-Assad had decided to 'dissolve the people and elect another'. Thereafter, Hafez dispensed with democratic process entirely, and no further Baath congresses would be held in Syria until after his death.¹⁰ As a replacement for institutional politics, the volume of the regime's cult of personality was turned up;

¹⁰ Alan George: *Syria. Neither bread nor freedom*, Zed Books, 2003, p. 73; Eyal Zisser: *Asad's Legacy. Syria in Transition*, C. Hurst & Co. 2001, p. 184.

during the *Ahdath*, it included such bizarre events as signing loyalty oaths to the leader in human blood.¹¹

The squeeze on political life was felt far beyond the Baath Party. Even a pro-Assad organization like Khaled Bekdash's Moscow-backed Syrian Communist Party – which had been legalized in 1972 within the confines of the Baath-run National Progressive Front – was banned in 1981, apparently after overstepping some 'red line' of the government. Members were harassed and persecuted until Soviet pressures led to the party's readmittance to the NPF in 1986. The 1981 election also eliminated all 'independent' candidates from the parliament, giving 100 percent of the seats to the Baath Party and its subordinate allies in the NPF.¹²

At the same time, Hafez el-Assad, who was known as a reluctant public speaker – and in his sunset years as a virtual recluse – reacted to the crisis in early 1980 by stepping into the limelight. He held a large number of forceful public speeches throughout Syria in spring 1980, appearing energized by the gravity of the situation. In this way he demonstrated the active role of the presidency, showed himself to be in charge, laid down a clear (and unforgiving) government policy, and mobilized his Baathist supporters against the opposition.¹³

Bashar el-Assad has, by contrast, conceded quite a lot – and yet much too little. By ordering an end to the 49-year state of emergency, naturalizing Kurds stripped of citizenship for half a century, and prepare a law for political parties, he is simply fulfilling earlier promises which he has failed to deliver on for years. These would all have been meaningful reforms if carried out only half a year ago, but in the present situation they are bare-minimum changes, and have not stemmed the protests.

Overall, Bashar has shown weak leadership, with only three public speeches since the uprising began. In the first, to the Syrian parliament on March 30, Bashar appeared somewhat detached from reality, delivering vague promises of future reform, while happily basking in the absurd chants of praise shouted by his loyal parliamentarians. The speech had been preannounced by the government after the Deraa riots, and Syrian government spokespersons had prepared the ground by promising a lifted state of emergency and much else. When the president failed to live up to the expectations created, disappointment was immense; this was seen by many as a failed opportunity to appease protestors early on.

The second speech, to a new government inaugurated on April 17, was somewhat more to the point, focusing on a narrative of gradual reform and the need to separate between legitimate grievances and foreign-inspired 'conspiracies'. But by this time, the revolutionary mood had spread throughout the country, and these limited promises had little effect.

¹¹ For information on the personality cult surrounding Hafez el-Assad, and its instrumental uses, see Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination. Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, University of Chicago Press, 1999.

¹² Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 121; Thomas Collelo (ed.), *Country Study: Syria*, US Library of Congress, 1987, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field%28DOCID+sy0092%29>; Alan George: *Syria. Neither bread nor freedom*, Zed Books, 2003, pp. 89-90. 'Independent' candidates were of course also pro-Assad, since only those candidates approved by the security services could run.

¹³ Patrick Seale, *Asad. The Struggle for the Middle East*, University of California Press, rev. ed. 1995, p. 328.

The third speech, at Damascus University on June 20, promised elections by August, a national dialogue forum (presumably involving non-Baathists), and a more comprehensive reform package including constitutional reform by September. But as with previous speeches, it was sorely lacking in detail, and failed to signal a decisive turning-point.¹⁴

In his June speech, Bashar made the link between the *Ahdath* and today's problems explicit, and acknowledged that faults had been committed on the part of the government. He did not, however, discuss the repression during the *Ahdath*, or in any way apologize for past abuses. 'There are', he said



*...unsolved accumulated issues dating back three decades since confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood. That was a black phase, and generations are still paying the price for that period, like being refused government employment, for example, or not being given security permissions. In other words, we held certain individuals responsible for other the mistakes of other individuals—which is not right. We have started to solve these problems [sic].*¹⁵

Future concessions?

In a Syrian context, the reforms hitherto enacted or promised by Bashar are quite significant, but far from sufficient to guarantee a democratic transition. Furthermore, any such limited political change is liable to be undermined by the continued hegemony of the security services. For example, the intelligence apparatus has continued to arrest demonstrators without recourse to civilian courts, even after the state of emergency was lifted. In sum, far too many questions remain unanswered for these promises to have the intended effect. For example, a parliamentary election under the present system would have very limited effect if not accompanied by changes in the constitution and electoral law. Current regulations ban all opposition parties and stipulate a guaranteed majority for the Baath Party, both inside the parliament and within the ruling National Progressive Front. Any new election under these rules would thus automatically produce another loyalist parliament, and marginal representation for the opposition is not likely to satisfy protestors at this stage.

Topping the list of expected concessions in Bashar's third speech was a promise to scrap Article 8 in the Syrian constitution. This article guarantees the permanent supremacy of the Baath Party as 'the leading party of society and state'.¹⁶ Removing it would be a highly symbolic move, but still affordable to the regime, at least in the short term. Rather than clearly stating his preference for this, Bashar equivocated, referring to the process of consultation and parliamentary work. In the end, he

¹⁴ Official translations of three speeches are available on the site of the *Syrian Arab News Agency*. To the People's Assembly, March 30: <http://www.sana.sy/eng/21/2011/03/30/pr-339334.htm>. To the government, April 17: <http://www.sana.sy/eng/21/2011/04/17/341923.htm>. At Damascus University, June 20: <http://www.sana.sy/eng/337/2011/06/20/pr-353686.htm>

¹⁵ *ibid.* The restrictions named apply to many former prisoners, both Islamist and secular. As former 'enemies of the state', they are denied basic rights and barred from employment by court order (or, quite commonly, without any legal procedure at all).

¹⁶ The Syrian constitution, first issued under Hafez el-Assad in 1973, can be read in translation on http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/sy00000_.html. Note that there have been minor amendments to the 1973 version, lowering the required age of the president from 40 to 34 to ensure 34-year old Bashar's succession in 2000.

said, '[w]e want to be impartial as a state. What is important is public consensus.'¹⁷ This of course disregards the problem entirely: Syrians, or at any rate those Syrians now protesting, lack confidence in either their elected institutions or in the promises of their regime. Anything less than concrete action is unlikely to get their attention, and anything indicating that reforms could be buried by committee – as was the fate of most of Bashar's promises in the period 2000-2010 – will probably only infuriate them further.

It's quite likely that Bashar genuinely believes in his slow-and-steady approach, and that he himself has some faith in the legitimacy of the Baathist system – perhaps because, surrounded by sycophants, he is not fully aware of the vast gap between constitutionality and reality. Rhetoric of this sort has been a staple of his public speeches ever since he took power in the summer of 2000, and seems to chime well with what is known about his personality.

Furthermore, it has been a consistent feature of the Syrian regime, under both Hafez and Bashar, to move cautiously and slowly, reacting to threats rather than taking bold initiatives. Both Assads have taken great care to deny that they ever retreat under fire, and, judging from history, they generally prefer to dig in and escalate resistance, rather than allow enemies to smell fear. It would appear that there is a feeling within the regime that admitting weakness or error means relinquishing control of the agenda, and that this could be fatal to the system in the longer term.

On the other hand, it is likely that Bashar is saving a number of calculated concessions for the future, perhaps anticipating negotiations with some form of opposition entity. To simply announce a new non-Baathist constitution now would presumably not stop protests, given the heated mood in Syria and the low credibility of his reform program.¹⁸ It could very well serve only to whet the appetite of his enemies. That would be a net loss from a regime point of view, or even counter-productive.

But, as some dissidents have wryly noted, both Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak gave a total of three speeches to the public before losing power, as has now Bashar. It remains to be seen whether the rule of 'three speeches and you're out' will apply in Syria.

Family affairs

In mid-June, Rami Makhoul announced via Syrian media that he would sell off stocks in his regime-backed telecommunications company, SyriaTel, and donate the proceeds to charity.¹⁹ This concerns the financial interests of the regime core, and looks more like an actual concession. Makhoul, a cousin of the president, is a hated figure. He is widely regarded as the public face of the regime's corruption, and his businesses have been repeatedly targeted by protestors. On the other hand, this was far from the full-scale denunciation of him and his corrupt clique that many Syrians had been hoping for. Makhoul's announcement might have had serious effect if it happened earlier, but now it seems like too little, too late. The more Bashar looks to be sacrificing the country's interest to

¹⁷ Speech at Damascus University, June 20: <http://www.sana.sy/eng/337/2011/06/20/pr-353686.htm>.

¹⁸ As one dissident noted, when asked whether the regime could reform its way out of the crisis: 'The problem between us and the regime is that we don't trust each other – we know that they lie simply to gain time, and they know that we know it.' (Interview with Abdulbasit Sieda, chairman of the Council for Syrian Kurds in Sweden, in Uppsala, May 9, 2011.)

¹⁹ 'Makhoul Dedicates His Syriatel Shares' Profits to Charity', *SANA*, June 15, 2011, <http://www.sana.sy/eng/21/2011/06/16/353117.htm>.



protect rogue members of his family, like Rami Makhoul or Maher el-Assad, the quicker his own remaining popular support dissipates.

The regime has so far avoided sacrificing its own, apparently preferring to keep the core elite stable over gambling on a volatile and increasingly hostile public opinion. Many reports indicate that the president's brother, Maher el-Assad, is actively leading repression, using his command over the Republican Guard elite force and other military units. In the religiously mixed coastal cities of Latakia and Baniyas, violent gangs of so-called *shabbiha* have attacked demonstrators. The *shabbiha* are mainly Alawite thugs connected to the Assad family. They have their roots in a 1970s/1980s coastal smuggling network headed by Bashar's cousins Mondher and Fawwaz el-Assad (both sons of Hafez el-Assad's younger brother Jamil, d. 2004). As he prepared to seize power in the late 1990s, Bashar tried to improve his image by 'cleaning up' Latakia. This included reining in the *shabbiha*, who were infamous for abusing and extorting local citizens, Alawites and non-Alawites alike. Now, however, the regime has made no move to stop the rampages of these gangs.

There's been a single exception to this image of family solidarity, which has not received the attention it perhaps deserves: Colonel Atef Najib, who is a cousin of Bashar (also from the Makhoul family), appears to have been picked for punishment. As head of the Political Security Directorate's Deraa branch, Col. Najib was responsible for the abuses that initially set off the revolution, which

then spread like wildfire.²⁰ Early on, he was recalled to Damascus, and since then he has been reprimanded, publicly criticized in parliament, banned from traveling, and is now targeted by an internal investigation. This, so far, looks like serious business. On the other hand, Col. Najib is a relatively unknown junior member of the regime core, and making an example out of him will hardly satisfy protestors.

A generation earlier, Hafez el-Assad made zero concessions on the question of his family's role. Refaat el-Assad spearheaded the repression, and the president drew together relatives to sensitive postings in the capital for protection. Only after the rebellion had been broken did the president act against the excesses of members of his family, but this had little to do with winning hearts and minds. Rather, the reason was that Refaat had launched a failed *coup d'état*, during which Jamil el-Assad apparently failed to fall in line with Hafez. Refaat was exiled and Jamil, who had been running Latakia as his personal fiefdom, was more discreetly cut down to size. It was all treated as an internal family affair, and not publicized.

No elite defections

An important indicator of regime weakness in the 2011 uprisings in the Arab world has been elite-level defections: parliamentarians, ambassadors, ministers and others who join the opposition or flee abroad. Two Syrian parliamentarians from the Deraa region resigned in April, but since then, no further dissent has been heard from within the regime.²¹ In early June, French television reported that Lamia Shakkour, Syria's ambassador to France, had left her post to protest the killing of demonstrators. This broadcast was soon revealed to be based on a forgery. The faked resignation was presumably designed – by whoever was responsible – to set off a stream of defections similar to what happened in Egypt, Libya, Yemen and other states, but no subsequent resignations have taken place.²²

Syria, therefore, stands out as the only Arab state hit by serious protests which hasn't yet experienced any serious instances of high-level defection. This would appear to mean that regime cohesion and internal control has remained high, and that government insiders have not yet lost faith in, or fear of, the system's ability to recover. From the inside, then, Bashar (or at least his system) must still look like the only thing on offer. The reason may be that the Syrian state is still in better shape than it looks from the outside, or the internal checks and balances peculiar to this regime (the Alawi factor), or that the core leadership has taken precautions to prevent defections (internal surveillance, threats, bribes, hostage-taking, etc). Some combination of all three appears most likely.

During the *Ahdath*, the regime was similarly unaffected by large-scale defections. A few did occur – Syria's ambassador to the UN, former Baath leader Hammoud el-Shoufi, joined the Baghdad-based opposition in 1979 – but generally, the leadership held together on all levels. Indeed, Alawite and minority core support was clearly strengthened by the sectarian and violent character of the Islamist

²⁰ See Aron Lund: 'The Children's Revolution', April 15, 2011, at the website of the Swedish Institute for Foreign Affairs: <http://www.ui.se/eng/nyheter/syria-1.aspx>.

²¹ Katherine Marsh, 'Syrian MPs resign and 12 mourners die in continued crackdown on protestors', *The Guardian*, April 24, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/23/syria-mps-resign-mourners-die>

²² See for example *Aljazeera English's* liveblog on Syria: <http://blogs.aljazeera.net/liveblog/global/Lamia%20Chakkour>.

uprising. After the uprising, however, the party shed large numbers of 'undisciplined' members, and in some cases, these purges appear to have been related to sectarian relations. For example, during 1982 more than half of all expelled *Ansar* members (the lowest rank in the party hierarchy) were from, tellingly enough, the Hama branch.²³ But such problems were discreetly dealt with, and didn't cause any serious dissent or splits during the events themselves.

Few army deserters

In the early 1980s, there were scattered reports of army defections along sectarian lines, particularly during the Hama events in 1982. These mostly proved to be false, or isolated and inconsequential. The large-scale army defections that the MB gambled on as it rose in Hama never materialized. In 2011, there have also been several reports of army mutinies, and of elite forces or pro-regime gangs executing soldiers who refused to fire on protestors; this has been a recurring refrain of opposition groups since the early bloodshed in Deraa in March. However, apart from some individual cases – and what may have been a brief instance of serious infighting in Jisr el-Shughour in June – these reports remain unconfirmed. Absent evidence, one must assume that these defections, and in particular the reports of army infighting, have been vastly overstated by opposition propaganda.

There's also a sectarian element to such reports, or at least to the wide currency they have gained in parts of the opposition. The elite forces most involved in the repression, and the pro-regime *shabbiha* gangs active in coastal cities, are largely Alawite in composition. The implication is, therefore, that the Sunni-majority army could only be involved in repressing other Sunnis because of Alawite intimidation. There's probably a grain of truth to such accusations, but by and large, the Sunni-majority army proved eminently capable of repressing the MB in the 1980s, without fracturing along religious lines. Even so, sectarian dissent in the army remains a possibility which must worry the regime – hence the opposition's intense focus on the issue.

Effects of the 1980s uprising on the regime

The regime was significantly affected by the *Ahdath*: it was militarized and de-politicized. On a personal level, Hafez el-Assad was profoundly affected, turning increasingly paranoid and isolated.²⁴ On the elite level, the president's cronies in the security services seized command of much of the political decision-making. On the grass-roots level, civilian Baathists were armed and tasked with patrolling their local communities, pitting neighbor against neighbor. The political climate grew more constrained, police terror kept society in check, and Baathist ideology was bent out of all recognition to accommodate the cult-like worship of Hafez el-Assad as 'the Eternal Leader'.

Many opposition activists speak of the 1980s violence as a turning point in the country's history, when Hafez dropped his earlier ambitions for a populist-authoritarian consensus, and began to rule by fear.²⁵ The regime stayed in state-terror mode throughout the 1980s. Even if there was some

²³ See Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Politics and society under Asad and the Ba'th*, I. B. Tauris & Co, 4th rev. edition, 2011.

²⁴ Patrick Seale, *Asad. The Struggle for the Middle East*, University of California Press, rev. ed. 1995, pp. 339 ff.

²⁵ 'The violence between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood killed political life [...] Opposition parties ceased their activity and the parties of the National Progressive Front fell silent under the rule of the security services [...] The country disappeared into a long tunnel, from 1980 until the beginning of the 1990s.' (Author's interview with Hassan Abdelazim,

relative liberalization in the 1990s, the *Ahdath* bloodshed cast a dark shadow over Hafez el-Assad's rule for the rest of his life. The tension and pain built up by the *Ahdath* was part of the reason why a more comprehensive liberalizing effort was almost impossible until after his death.

The Islamist uprising also helped shift power over to the security sector, empowering the hard core of Alawite generals at Assad's side, while gutting civilian institutions (weak as they were already), including the Baath Party. The violence thus provided the backdrop for Refaat el-Assad's ascent within the system. By positioning himself as the most uncompromising voice in the Baath's radical-secularist and hawkish camp, he gathered important resources in the form of Alawite support, military resources (his private army, the Defense Companies, is said to have grown to some 50 000 men) and political influence. This dramatic rise only ended with his failed bid for ultimate power in 1983-1984; and, had but a few things turned out differently, Refaat could have been Syria's president today.²⁶

Common sense dictates that power dynamics within the elite are likely to be dramatically upset this time around too. The question is in what way, and when the effects will be visible. Veteran Syria watcher Patrick Seale appears convinced that Bashar is already pushed aside by hardliners in the regime, at least for the time being.²⁷ The parallels between Maher el-Assad's role as regime enforcer today and Refaat's role in the early 1980s are of course obvious, but the workings of the Syrian elite are extremely opaque, and it would be naïve to jump to conclusions. Maher's rise to infamy could turn out to be a sideshow to more important internal changes – assuming the regime survives at all.

leader of the Democratic Arab Socialist Union and spokesperson for the Natinoal Democratic Gathering, in Damascus, January 2008.)

²⁶ On the coup attempt, see Patrick Seale, *Asad. The Struggle for the Middle East*, University of California Press, rev. ed. 1995, chapter 24.

²⁷ Seale is interviewed in Samia Nakhoul. 'Analysis: Syria's Assad loses his grip to hardliners', *Reuters*, June 16, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/06/16/us-syria-assad-idUSTRE75F3H120110616>.

4. THE OPPOSITION



Leaderless vs. organized protest

The secular protests in Syria in the late 1970s appear to have been a rather well-organized affair, although there was never a unified leadership beyond the central role of the NDG opposition parties. This is somewhat in contrast to the uprising of 2011, which is driven by pan-Arab influences, but appears to have emerged locally in many different locations, with no national-level organization.²⁸

The 2011 revolt was triggered by events in Tunisia and Egypt, which ignited deeply held local grievances about Syria's corruption, poverty, and lack of freedom. The main participants are young Syrian men swept up by the revolutionary fervor, or provoked into action by the killing of friends and relatives. The opposition scene, therefore, is very confused. Veteran dissidents are certainly active in the revolution, but they are not leading or directing protests, and their freedom of movement is curtailed. Some have been arrested. In general, the traditional opposition groups both inside and outside of Syria appear to be as surprised by the surge of youth rage as everyone else. They are struggling to keep up with events, and are frantically trying to organize leading functions where there are none, while new cooperative structures are apparently growing out of the protests themselves.

No group has as of yet claimed ultimate leadership of the protest movement, but several are trying to position themselves as spokesmen for it, particularly in relation to the Western media. There is an intense jockeying going on within the exiled opposition to secure leading positions in the various new coalitions created during the past months. The Turkish AKP government's attempts to build a new opposition framework centered on the Muslim Brotherhood, but including several other currents, has attracted most attention by far.²⁹

The leaderless character of the uprising serves the opposition very well, by making it impossible for the regime to quell protest by arresting a leading cadre, as in 1980. This has led to the rapid spread of dissent, and to a pattern of spontaneously erupting demonstrations which have by now gathered tens of thousands of Syrians in defiance of the regime. In terms of the number of people involved in and sympathetic to the protests, the 2011 uprising already appears to have surpassed the *Ahdath* in only a couple of months.

On the other hand, the lack of central organization also makes it difficult for the protests to advance beyond street-level demonstrations or riots, to more sophisticated forms of political action. It makes it virtually impossible to conduct negotiations with the regime or elements of it, since there are no recognized spokesmen, no single list of opposition grievances, and no unified organization able to control the ebb and flow of protest. Even if the regime wanted to open general negotiations, which is unlikely, there's really no one to talk to.

²⁸ For a more detailed look on the groups that make up the Syrian opposition, see Aron Lund, 'Weakening regime, weaker opposition', *Near East Quarterly*, Issue IV, May 2011, <http://www.neareastquarterly.com/index.php/2011/06/15/weakening-regime-weaker-opposition>

²⁹ The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has good relations with the AKP, a reformist Islamist party ruling Turkey since 2002. The MB's leader, General Guide Mohammed Riad el-Shaqfa, was hosted for a press conference in Istanbul in April, in conjunction with an AKP-sponsored conference of Syrian exiles. On May 31—June 3, a large conference for the exile opposition was held in Antalya, where the MB played a prominent although by no means hegemonic role. The Antalya Conference's final declaration called for the overthrow of the regime. See the blog of Joshua Landis: 'The Final Declaration of the Antalya Opposition Conference', *Syria Comment*, June 4, 2011, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=10087>.

This tends to create a situation of where the only demand that resonates broadly is the emotionally charged but non-negotiable slogan chanted first in Tunisia and Egypt: *el-shaab yurid isqat el-nizam*, ‘the people wants the fall of the regime’. However, this lack of middle ground raises the stakes for all involved, and increases risks, particularly given the political and sectarian dynamics in Syria.

Internal-external dynamics in the opposition

One should, at this point, note the internal-external dynamic of the Syrian opposition. The Baathist dictatorship has forced many Syrian opposition groups abroad, where they base themselves in the refugee community. Others are entirely products of the diaspora, while some straddle both worlds. Opposition projects and debates tend to involve both communities, but imperfectly so, since the opportunities for contact are limited.

While demonstrations inside Syria now appear to take place with little input from the traditional opposition, and is led by non-organized Syrian youth, exiled groups have been making headlines in the Western and Arab press by launching new political platforms, conferences and demands. The impression, whether intended or not, is that these groups convey the demands of the demonstrators; perhaps they do, but this should not be conflated with actual leadership. The internal opposition, by contrast, whatever its role may be in organizing street-level protests, has not so far been able to effectively meet and produce significant joint statements, due to the security situation. The result is that internal opposition voices aren’t heard to the same extent as those of exiled representatives.

This author’s impression is that activists in the Syrian diaspora community tend to be distinctly more hardline and uncompromising than opposition figures inside Syria, who generally advocate a more cautious long-term strategy (although there are of course numerous exceptions to the rule). Various explanations could be advanced for this: On the one hand, the ‘internals’ may be more in touch with events on the ground, have more at stake, and are more wary of risks to stability. On the other hand, the ‘exiles’ are unconstrained by fears for their security, and may simply be voicing opinions that the ‘internals’ can not. In any case, these differences may well have been surpassed by the present revolutionary upheaval, which changes the game entirely.³⁰

The secular Arab opposition

The organized Syrian opposition was in much better shape in the late 1970s than it is today. The leftist and nationalist parties of the National Democratic Gathering had still, to varying degrees, remained semi-legal and organizationally coherent in the 1970s. Several of them, such as the Nasserist movement – represented in the NDG by Jamal el-Atassi’s Democratic Arab Socialist Union – had been serious contenders for power only some 15 years earlier. Their ideologies still seemed relevant to the day, and they commanded a dwindling but not insubstantial following. There were also pro-government parties within the National Progressive Front that had retained a measure of independence and quite large followings. Some such organizations, like the Syrian Communist Party, could plausibly have switched sides at a critical stage, given the opportunity.

³⁰ Personal interviews and conversations with a large number of Syrian opposition activists in Syria and in exile, 2007-2011.

Today the NPF is mostly a dead body, while the NDG parties were nearly crushed by *Ahdath*-era repression, and have never fully recovered since. They haven't been able to replenish their ranks, aren't well known in the country, and have no real power base. The intellectuals and dissident networks that emerged as national figures during the Damascus Spring in 2000³¹ are more or less in the same position. Individually, some are highly respected, but they lack organized support.³²

In October 2005, most internal and external opposition factions joined in signing the Damascus Declaration, a joint document focused on themes of gradual and nonsectarian reform.³³ This was an important step in streamlining the opposition message and promoting cooperation among the different groups. Two years later, the Damascus Declaration was reshaped into an organization, but it was quickly weakened by repression and infighting. A remaining faction of this group exists in exile, but it lacks the broad support of the original document, and appears dominated by a small organization in London, the Movement for Justice and Development. Even if the Declaration retains a high public profile (the MJD controls the US-funded³⁴ satellite channel *Barada-TV*) and communicates quite effectively with the West, it no longer functions in its intended role as a unity framework gathering the entire mainstream opposition. It now appears simply as a faction among others.

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC GATHERING (NDG) Spokesman: Hassan Abdelazim (DASU Chairman)	
Democratic Arab Socialist Union	Nasserist
Syrian Democratic People's Party	Social Democrat/ex-Communist
Arab Socialist Movement	Socialist/Arab Nationalist
Democratic Arab Socialist Baath Party	Left-Baathist (pro-Salah Jadid)
Workers' Revolutionary Party	Independent Marxist/Arab Nationalist
Communist Action Party (joined 2006)	Independent Marxist

The Kurds

The Kurds are the largest ethnic minority in Arab-majority Syria, with some 8-10 percent of the population. Most Syrian Kurds live along Syria's northern border, particularly in the north-east (Hassakeh Province). Large groups also reside in the major cities, particularly Aleppo and Damascus. As an ethnic minority in the Syrian Arab Republic, led by the Baath Arab Socialist Party, Kurds have been severely discriminated and marginalized. The Kurdish language has been removed from curricula and literature, Kurdish villages have been renamed in Arabic, a large portion of the community has been stripped of citizenship, and any expressions of Kurdish particularity or culture, such as celebrating Newroz, have been banned.

Kurdish groups played no noticeable role in the opposition during the *Ahdath*. Various writers have claimed that Kurdish militia units were used by the regime to put down unrest in Hama and other

³¹ For more on this period, and the activists who helped shape it, see Alan George, *Syria. Neither bread nor freedom*, Zed Books, 2003.

³² For example, former parliamentarian and industrialist Riad Seif and the independent journalist Michel Kilo.

³³ An English translation is available on the blog of professor Joshua Landis: 'Damascus Declaration in English', *SyriaComment*, November 1, 2005, <http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2005/11/damascus-declaration-in-english.htm>.

³⁴ Craig Whitlock, 'U.S. secretly backed Syrian opposition groups, cables released by WikiLeaks show', *The Washington Post*, April 18, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-secretly-backed-syrian-opposition-groups-cables-released-by-wikileaks-show/2011/04/14/AF1p9hwD_story.html.

places, souring relations with the Islamist movement,³⁵ but the Kurdish groups have always been at some distance from the Arab-majority organizations that dominate Syrian opposition politics. In many cases, dislike has been mutual: Arab nationalist organizations have suspected the Kurds of separatism and ties to foreign powers, and Kurdish nationalists have in turn resented what they perceive as Arab chauvinism. Since the Damascus Spring (2000-2001), and in particular since the Qamishli riots (2004), Kurdish groups have been working more closely with the Arab mainstream of the opposition. Seven Kurdish parties, out of about 15, signed the Damascus Declaration in 2005.

During the 2011 uprising, the Kurdish parts of Syria have been noticeably quiet, even if parts of the Kurdish diaspora are very militant in drumming up foreign pressure. The regime has made contact with Kurdish opposition parties, and tried to appease the Kurds through long-overdue attention to their grievances, eg. by granting citizenship to Kurds stripped of their Syrian nationality in 1962 and allowing Newroz celebrations. This seems to have worked to some extent. Demonstrations in the Kurdish regions have so far been largely peaceful and orderly, and the regime seems careful not to provoke violence, wary of the Kurdish movement's disproportionate street power. Even so, after 50 years of racist repression, the Baath Party is intensely unpopular among ordinary Kurds, and there is a strong potential for more serious unrest among the Kurdish minority.³⁶ In June, an important Kurdish political coalition is reported to have refused an invitation to meet with Bashar el-Assad, bowing to popular pressure.³⁷

It is important to note that the role of the Kurds matters not only because of their own home areas in the north and north-east. Should the Kurds join the uprising *en masse*, this could also spark protests in parts of Aleppo or Damascus, considering the strong Kurdish presence there.

The Islamist opposition

Islamist ideology enjoys stronger street-level support today in Syria, than it did during the 1970s. Religious conservative sentiment has mushroomed since the 1990s, but, on the other hand, Islamist groups are not as well organized politically as they were in the 1970s. Then, the Muslim Brotherhood was well implanted in the country, despite repression and internal splits.

In 2011, the MB has been out of the picture for nearly three decades. It still commands significant sentimental and moral support among religious Sunnis, and draws a disproportionate share of Western attention, but it has essentially been an exiled movement for a full generation. Even though the MB, by its own admission, has a few sleeper-cell style formations left in Syria, it hasn't been able to replenish its ranks effectively for three decades. This is due both to Law 49 of 1980, declaring membership in the MB punishable by death, and the group's own internal troubles. Before being able to rebuild a serious network in Syria, the MB will first have to maneuver its way back into centrality by picking up stronger foreign support, build alliances with independent clerics, etc. In the meantime, Islamist politics inside the country could very well take on a life of its own.

³⁵ Ismet Chériff Vanly, 'The Kurds in Syria and Lebanon', in Kreyenbroek & Sperl (ed), *The Kurds. A Contemporary Overview*, Routledge, 1992, p. 159.

³⁶ On the situation of the Kurds in Syria, see Harriet Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria. An existence denied*, Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien, 2005.

³⁷ 'Al-Qamishli: Kurdish parties refuse dialogue with Bashar al-Assad', *KurdWatch*, June 11, 2011, <http://kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1651>.

Independent Islamist forces with a serious on-the-ground presence in Syria, eg. regime-approved clerics like sheikh Mohammed Said Ramadan el-Bouti, would appear more important than the MB at this stage.³⁸ But many of these groups have thrived under regime protection, and while they may harden their tone, they are unlikely to slide into outright opposition until they decide that the regime is damaged beyond repair. This could in turn cost them support, as Sunni religious opinion is incensed by the regime's brutality, and lead to further fragmentation of the Islamist landscape. It bears recalling that during the *Ahdath*, both sides fought for the loyalty of key clerics, and some were killed for disagreeing with one party or the other. Independent Islamic figures played a major role in mobilizing strikes and protests in the run-up to the 1980s crackdown, rather than the MB alone.

Jihadist groups

The Taliaa Moqatila represented a militant strand of Muslim Brotherhood thought, its founding figure Marwan Hadid being directly inspired by Sayyed Qutb. It served as a forerunner of Jihadist organizations today, being a contemporary of the pioneering Qutbist group, Egypt's Islamic Jihad.

During the *Ahdath*, the Islamist rebellion during was consistently plagued by internal divisions, primarily between the MB and the Taliaa, but also within the MB. A joint 'Islamic Front' declared in 1981 fell apart the following year. Part of the reason lay in mutual recriminations over the disastrous uprising in Hama, and personal differences. Another cause for conflict was the ideological incompatibility between different Islamist factions, particularly the persistent attempts by some MB leaders to ally with secular opposition groups, like the Iraqi-backed wing of the Baath Party. Such politicking irked the extremist Taliaa, which deemed cooperation with secularists to be both practically useless and impermissible on religious grounds.³⁹

During the *Ahdath*, the Taliaa was considered extreme within the Islamist scene, but today, there exists a worldwide Jihadist movement structured on much the same ideological lines. While there's little information on indigenous Jihadist currents in Syria, there is a strong al-Qaida presence in Iraq, and similar groups are well implanted in Lebanon and in parts of the Palestinian refugee community. For many years they exploited Syrian territory and local sympathizers to transport foreign fighters into Iraq, apparently with tacit regime support. This would seem to indicate that there is already a baseline infrastructure for Jihadi activism in place in Syria, which could be exploited if the country falls further into chaos. While the Jihadist movement is small, and could not do real damage to the regime, even a small number of spectacular sectarian atrocities could cause interreligious conflict, as happened in Iraq. It would also be likely to draw Western attention.

Missing exiles

In the 1970s/1980s, several former military and political strongmen were active in the exiled opposition. They had been purged or fled in the 1960s, some in the 1970s, but were still involved with Syrian opposition politics. Saddam Hussein gathered many of these men in Baghdad, to form a

³⁸ For a survey of such religious figures, see Thomas Pierret, 'Sunni Clergy Politics in the Cities of Ba'thi Syria', in Fred Lawson (ed.), *Demystifying Syria*, Saqi, 2009.

³⁹ This point is laid out in detail by former Taliaa member Abu Moussaab el-Souri (real name: Mustafa Sitt-Mariam Nassar) in his after-action report to the Arab Jihadis in Afghanistan: *Lessons learned from the armed Jihad ordeal in Syria*, English translation by the US Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, No. AFGP-2002-600080, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/lessons-learned-from-the-jihad-ordeal-in-syria-english-translation>.

strong pro-Iraqi leadership-in-exile. Some names in the diaspora opposition included master politico Akram el-Hawrani (d. 1996, *pictured left*), Baath Party founders Michel Aflaq (d. 1989, *pictured right*) and Salaheddin el-Bitar (murdered in 1980, probably by the Syrian regime), former Baathist leaders Hammoud el-Shoufi (died in the USA, April 13, 2011) and Shibli el-Eisami (who recently disappeared in Lebanon, possibly kidnapped by Syrian authorities), the Arab Socialist military figure Col. Mustafa Hamdoun (d. 2010, having returned to Syria), and the Baathist former president Gen. Amin el-Hafez (d. 2009, having returned to Syria).



Following the events in Hama, several of these figures joined the exiled and demoralized Muslim Brotherhood leadership in an Islamist-secular alliance, the National front for the Liberation of Syria (1982), later expanded to the National Alliance for the Salvation of Syria (1990). As Iraqi backing subsided in the 1990s, and individual leaders drifted off from politics or made separate peace with the regime, the alliance fell apart.

While there are many thousands of Syrian political exiles scattered around the world, there is nothing like this illustrious gathering of former strongmen today. Two major regime defectors, Refaat el-Assad and Abdelhalim Khaddam, are separately active from their refuge in Europe. However, they are at a marked distance from the mainstream groups, who generally consider them to be dangerous, corrupt authoritarians. Neither of them was invited to the Turkish AKP-backed Antalya Conference for the Syrian opposition in early June, for fear that their presence would cause other dissidents to boycott.

A longtime foreign minister and vice president under Hafez el-Assad, Khaddam is a recent defector (2005). A Sunni Muslim, he enjoys good relations to Saudi Arabia and the Lebanese opposition, who backed him as he broke with the regime following the Hariri assassination affair. He doesn't seem to be in a position to do real damage to the regime, however, or he would have done so back in 2006-2008. Khaddam probably still has an impressive contact network inside Syria, but he appears to have lost his ability to wield actual influence as soon as he lost access to government funds and decision-making in 2005. For a few years after his defection (2006-2009) he cooperated with the Muslim Brotherhood in a joint National Salvation Front, but he is generally shunned by the mainstream opposition, and very unpopular inside Syria. Unless Saudi Arabia or some other regional power throws its weight behind him, Khaddam is not likely to be more than a nuisance to the Syrian regime.

Refaat is a more interesting figure. He was shut out of the regime's inner workings following his attempted *coup* against his brother Hafez in 1984, and shipped off to exile in Europe. Even so, he kept up important business interests and remained in touch with Syrian politics until the late 1990s, when his remaining supporters and assets were purged, and he was stripped of the vice presidency and declared *persona non grata*. The reason: he had publicly challenged Bashar's succession.



Refaat is almost universally loathed inside the country, and the mainstream opposition has consistently refused to work with him. His attempts to instead launch his son Ribal as an opposition leader aren't likely to fool anyone. On the other hand, his former power base in the Alawite community (particularly in the security establishment) was of such size and importance during the early 1980s, that he and his entourage of exiled relatives and supporters may still retain useful links to some people near the regime core. There were no Alawite regime defectors of Refaat's stature around during the *Ahdath*. Gen. Mohammed Omran had been murdered in Lebanon long before the crisis erupted (1972), while Salah Jadid (d. 1993) and his sidekicks were safely stowed away in Mezzeh prison. Jadid's foreign minister Ibrahim Makhous was and remains active from exile in Algeria, where he leads a small Jadidist-Baathist-Marxist splinter faction (the Democratic Baath Arab Socialist Party, part of the National Democratic Gathering). But although he was once a well-connected Alawite Baathist insider, he was never a military man, and he has been shut out of Syrian politics since 1970.

What about a *coup d'état*?

The Syrian military was boiling with political intrigue until the Baathist takeover in 1963, and remained an arena for intra-Baathist struggle until 1970. By the time of the *Ahdath*, some political groups still retained clandestine support in the armed forces, as demonstrated by a failed MB coup plot within the Air Force in 1982.

This is no longer the case. By 2011, the officer corps has been under firm party control for almost 50 years, and watched over by the Assad family for more than 40 years. It is dominated by a socially homogenous Alawite Baathist camaraderie. While political opinions may perhaps differ among members, as a group, they have prospered under this regime and are fearful of its overthrow. Even if political strains may cause dissent or even mutinies, including among leading Alawite officials and other top commanders, it's wholly improbable that any regime outsider could mount a coup. Refaat

el-Assad is probably the only opposition figure to possess meaningful links to the regime's inner security sector, but he's not likely to be anyone's choice for future leader.

One group of Syrian exile dissidents, gathered around a core of US-based hardline opponents of the regime, has issued what seems like an appeal for a *coup d'état*. In an April statement, this group wrote that 'the only institution that has the capability to lead the transition period would be the military, and especially the current Minister of Defense General Ali Habib and the Chief of Staff General Dawud Rajha.'⁴⁰

One could of course imagine a defensive move from within the system, to save it from Bashar's continued fumbling. This was essentially what prompted Refaat's move for power in 1983-1984. As Hafez fell ill, and foreign and domestic pressures kept hammering the Syrian regime, a large segment of the Alawite security elite temporarily rallied around Refaat, seeing in him their best hope to retain control over the state. But when Hafez recovered, he ordered his brother to stand down and drew together loyalists in the capital to stave off an armed challenge. Refaat was left alone and apparently began wavering – in the end, he was outgunned and forced to surrender.

Now as then, there are plenty of built-in obstacles to any attack on the presidency. Hafez el-Assad was a master of 'coup-proofing' – creating a system of units that watch over each other, with cross-cutting lines of command which make independent action difficult, and, most blatantly, placing his relatives, personal confidantes, tribal allies and dependent clients in all key command and control positions. Even if personnel changes have been very substantial since the passing of Hafez, the essentials of his coup-proofing structure appear to remain intact today, with a tangled web of military units, armed intelligence detachments and pro-regime militias covering the approaches to Damascus – and each other. If a coup is to be mounted while this system remains intact, it would presumably have support from the very core of the Alawite security establishment. Only Refaat himself stood a chance to grab power in 1983, and in the end, he failed.⁴¹

SYRIA'S MAIN INTELLIGENCE SERVICES	HEADED BY	OTHER REMARKS
National Security Office	Hisham Ikhtiar	Coordinating office
Military Intelligence Division	Abdelfattah Qudsia	Largest intelligence org.
.....MID Palestine Branch	Mohammed Khallouf	Main interrogation branch
General Intelligence Directorate	Ali Mamlouk	2nd largest intelligence org.
.....GID Internal Branch	Tawfiq Younes	Dominant branch of GID
Political Security Directorate	Mohammed Dib Zeitoun	
Air Force Intelligence	Jamil Hassan	
(Not a comprehensive list.)		

⁴⁰ Full statement available at the blog of Joshua Landis: 'National Initiative for Change' Program of Syrian Opposition: the liberal wing', *SyriaComment*, April 29, 2011, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=9450>. Both Habib and Rajha belong to minority communities (Alawite and Christian respectively). They are veteran members of the military elite, but do not, it would seem, personally control any key units in the armed forces that could enable a coup.

⁴¹ On 'coup-proofing', see James T. Quinlivan, 'Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East', *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 1999. On Bashar's system, see Eyal Zisser, *Commanding Syria. Bashar al-Asad and the First Years in Power* (I.B. Tauris & Co. 2007). On Refaat's failed putsch, see Patrick Seale, *Asad. The Struggle for the Middle East*, University of California Press, rev. ed. 1995.

5. RISKS OF INTERNAL CONFLICT



The Alawi question

Sectarian tension is a major underlying problem in Syrian politics. The Syrian military regime is strongly dominated by Alawites, the sect of the president and his family, who form some 10-15 percent of the population in Sunni-majority Syria. Traditionally, this tribal, Shia-influenced community was a poor and marginalized minority on the rural fringes of Syrian society, generally confined to the mountain ranges of western Syria. Political and economic power in Syria was held by a minority of powerful Sunni families, and some Christians, in the main cities of Damascus and Aleppo. Most members of the rural minorities (Alawites, Druze, Ismailis) were, like rural Sunnis, reduced to life as impoverished and disenfranchised sharecroppers under near-feudal conditions.

A combination of historical accident and military intrigue catapulted a small clique of Alawite officers to power, during the tumultuous years following the Baath Party takeover in 1963. This precipitated Alawite emancipation and the downfall of the urban elites which had until then controlled Syria.⁴² Since the Baathist coup, Alawites and other rural minorities have received equal treatment in public life, and their fair share of financial resources – at least – while being strongly favored for recruitment into the armed forces. While government and parliament tends to uphold a reasonably fair distribution among religious sects, the overwhelming majority of all sensitive military and security jobs are today held by Alawite associates of the Assad clan. Given the influence of the army on political matters and on the economy, this translates into an overwhelming Alawi dominance, despite the fact that many ordinary Alawites remain poor and shut out of power.

Today, the Alawi community is, at least superficially, well integrated into Syrian politics and in a national and urban setting. The social and geographical dimension to Sunni-Alawi tension is not as prominent as before. While Hafez and his co-conspirators were all rural immigrants to an urban society, a whole generation of Alawites have been born and raised as city kids since the 1970s. Such religious and rural-urban integration is far more comprehensive now than it was before the Baath takeover, which in itself modifies the way sectarian conflict and collaboration can occur.

Yet, it remains an open secret of Syrian religious relations that many orthodox Sunnis refuse to recognize Alawites as proper Muslims. Alawites themselves argue that they constitute a distinct branch within Twelver Shiism (the mainstream Shia faith, as practised in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and southern Lebanon), i.e. that they are indeed Muslims. This has not traditionally been the Twelver Shia view, but, somewhat for political reasons, many modern Shia clerics have come around to accepting this argument.⁴³ Sunni fundamentalists tend to disagree, regarding Alawites as deviant Muslims at best, but more likely as infidel enemies of the faith. A minority of hardline Sunni clerics, mainly in the ultra-orthodox Salafi movement, rely on a medieval *fatwa* by the Hanbali theologian ibn Taymiya, who said that Alawites were 'worse than Jews and Crusaders' and deserve to be put to

⁴² By far the best description of how this sectarian turnaround came to pass is Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Politics and society under Asad and the Ba'th*, I. B. Tauris & Co, 4th rev. edition, 2011. For additional detail, particularly on the social roots of the regime and the rural-urban dimension, see Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*, Princeton University Press, 1999, and Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from above*, Routledge, 2002.

⁴³ Martin Kramer, 'Syria's Alawites and Shi'ism', in Martin Kramer (ed.): *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution* (Westview Press 1987).

death.⁴⁴ Alawites are, of course, acutely aware of the anti-Alawi hatred flowing from some strands of fundamentalist Sunni Islam – but probably more so than most non-fundamentalist Syrian Sunnis, who tend to imagine that sectarian relations were just fine before the Alawi-Baathist takeover.

Along with other minorities, such as the Christian and Druze communities, Alawites generally fear the return of Sunni dominance that majority rule would bring. Even if a post-Assad government refrained from retribution against Alawites, any major purges of the security apparatus and Baath Party would shatter the standing of the Alawite community, which is by now heavily reliant on government jobs. The rise of Sunni Islamism in the Arab world since the 1970s is also a major concern to the minority religions, who fear that democracy might translate into an Islamist takeover, which they view as an existential threat to their own communities.

When he declared himself president (1971) and issued a new constitution (1973), Hafez el-Assad faced protests and rioting by Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers and other fundamentalists, who argued that a ‘non-Muslim’ should not be allowed to rule an Islamic country. This issue has continued to haunt the regime ever since. Sectarianism remains an crucially important factor in Syrian politics, despite a harshly enforced but superficial Baathist secularism.

Today, the fear of sectarian warfare is most likely more acute than it ever was in the 1970s, because of recent events in Iraq, Lebanon, and the painful heritage of the *Ahdath* period. This is likely to dampen the appetite for change among many, particularly within the religious minorities.

Looking right

Across their eastern border, Syrians see Iraq, where the violent overthrow of a Baathist regime caused several hundred thousand dead, Sunni-Shia massacres, the virtual destruction of some Christian minorities, retribalization and desecularization, massive foreign intervention and near-total loss of political independence. About a million Iraqi refugees fled to Damascus alone, and Syrians are acutely aware of the human cost of the war.

In particular, the Sunni-Shia enmity in Iraq has translated into increased Sunni-Alawi tension in Syria. The influx of a large number of Iraqi Shia refugees into Damascus, as well as Syria’s increased reliance on the theocratic Shia regime in Iran, have fed Sunni fears of ‘Shiitization’. While there’s scant evidence of any such religious transformation on the ground, Sunni Islamist groups often dwell on this point in their propaganda. In some cases, anti-Iranian rhetoric serves as a form of *ersatz* anti-Alawitism, which in a purer form would be regarded as too tasteless, too controversial, or too dangerous. This point is of course not lost on Alawites themselves.

For most Syrians, particularly among the religious minorities and secular middle classes (but to some extent excluding the Kurds), the Iraqi example of swift regime change has been seen as one to avoid at all costs. While these fears now compete with jubilant enthusiasm over the successful revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, Libya again provides a reminder of how easily a well-implemented authoritarian regime can bring the entire state down with it.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of these *fatawa*, see Yaron Friedman, ‘Ibn Taymiyya’s Fatawa against the Nusayri-‘Alawi Sect’, *Der Islam*, Vol. 82, 2005, pp. 349–363.

Looking left

In the west, there's Lebanon. The Lebanese civil war had already begun by the time of the *Ahdath*, but its full extent wasn't yet apparent. To Syria, the events in Lebanon serve as a reminder that sectarian civil war can indeed go on forever, absent a clear victory. Lebanon's war continued for 15 years until Hafez managed, through a combination of persistence, opportunism and brutality, and enabled by converging international interests, to impose *Pax Syriana* over his smaller neighbor. And that's the crux of the matter: There's no one among Syria's neighbors who is likely to be able and willing to play the role of Syria, if Syria itself should turn into Lebanon.⁴⁵

Looking back

Violence in Syria during the 1980s also shapes the prospect for violence in Syria now. The destruction of Hama is still a living memory, an untreated wound. This has raised the stakes enormously, conflating secular politics with personal hatreds and sectarian vendettas. The higher echelons of the Alawite security elite today were mid-level commanders in the Defense Companies, the Special Forces, or other elite units, then, and can hardly claim innocence. They personally have the blood of Hama on their hands, and should be happy to escape the country alive if this regime falls.

In 2011, the government has been quietly trying to stir up the ghosts of the *Ahdath* ever since the uprising began, warning of the opposition's allegedly sectarian (i.e. Sunni Islamist) agenda. Pro-regime media continuously feature pictures of weapons caches said to have been found by security forces, and 'confessions' by alleged 'terrorists' who admit to killing police officers, plotting massacres, receiving orders from abroad, being part of the Muslim Brotherhood, etc.⁴⁶ This propaganda, while crude, is designed to sow doubts about the opposition narrative of a popular nonsectarian youth revolution against tyranny. The regime is wagering that a majority of Syrians – or at least most potential regime supporters, or a large enough minority to rely on – will prefer Baathist stability over the uncertainties of political upheaval.

This is not a risk-free strategy. While most Syrians of course want to avoid the risk of civil war at all costs, there are also some who are by now likely to see internal bloodshed as an inevitable precursor of political change. As Syria grows more chaotic, such groups may feel *more* tempted to move into full-blown sectarian demagoguery and violence, on the argument that if there's going to be civil war anyway, they may as well get a head start. This is perhaps most true on the regime side, where the main takeaway from the destruction of Hama in 1982 was that, for all its horrors, it *worked*.

The social base of the regime

The original Baathist regime was firmly rooted in the Syrian countryside, particularly in the rural Shia minorities (Alawites, Druze and Ismailis), but also with a large component of rural Sunnis from

⁴⁵ Turkey would seem to be the only remotely capable candidate.

⁴⁶ Among the dispatches from the official *Syrian Arab News Agency* during a single day were found the following items: 'New Mass Grave Containing Bodies Security and Police Personnel Uncovered in Jisr al-Shughour', *SANA*, June 20, 2011, <http://www.sana.sy/eng/337/2011/06/20/353719.htm>; 'Syrian Army Discovers Huge Amounts of Weapons and Explosives in Jisr al-Shughour', *SANA*, June 20, 2011, <http://www.sana.sy/eng/337/2011/06/20/353634.htm>; 'Two Terrorist Confess to Working with Biased Channels in Media Misdirection', *SANA*, June 20, 2011, <http://www.sana.sy/eng/337/2011/06/20/353636.htm>.

peripheral regions such as the Hawran (around Deraa) and Deir el-Zour. Hafez el-Assad himself was a perfect representative of this order: the son of a poor Alawi family from the village of el-Qurdaha, high in the mountains of Latakia Province. While Alawites made up the majority of the province's inhabitants, political and economic power was concentrated in the hands of a few Sunni Muslim and Christian families in the province capital, Latakia, which functioned as a sort of outpost to the larger urban centers of Damascus and Aleppo.

The first decades of Baathist rule saw rapid improvement of living standards in the countryside, as the new rulers strove to bring electricity, health care, irrigation and education to the villages. In many cases, their relatives and tribal allies were also able to benefit more directly, by using their contacts to secure employment in the army, Baath Party or state bureaucracy.

The formerly dominant urban elites and middle classes, on the other hand, found themselves disenfranchised, and bitterly resented the new regime. This formed an important part of the setting for the *Ahdath*: the Muslim Brotherhood had recruited heavily from middle class urban Sunnis, and were financed by the former *grandes familles* who saw them as a tool with which to attack the hated Baath. But the Islamists had little reach into the Sunni rural communities, which by and large remained loyal to the Baathist regime.

As the years passed, however, the Baathist rulers have settled into their role as Syria's new upper class. Alawite military officers raised their families in comfortable villas in Damascus, sent their children to university or abroad, went into business and made millions, and intermarried with prominent Sunni families from the old urban aristocracy. Alawite integration into national politics and urban society has thus been accompanied by a process of *embourgeoisement* among Syria's ruling elite, which is now well advanced. Today's top stratum in Syrian politics remains largely composed of Alawites with familial and sentimental ties to the home region, but this second generation is as distant from the social conditions prevailing there, as their fathers were from the Sunni upper classes in Damascus: Rami Makhoul never tilled a field.

These social changes have been accelerated by the turn away from state socialism towards market reform. This process, initiated under Hafez el-Assad after the collapse of the Soviet Union and much accelerated by Bashar, is mostly driven by necessity; the old economic system has failed miserably. However, such economic restructuring is not painless, and the countryside in particular seems to suffer from the decreased attention to its needs, and by the changing economic patterns generally.⁴⁷

The socioeconomics of 2011

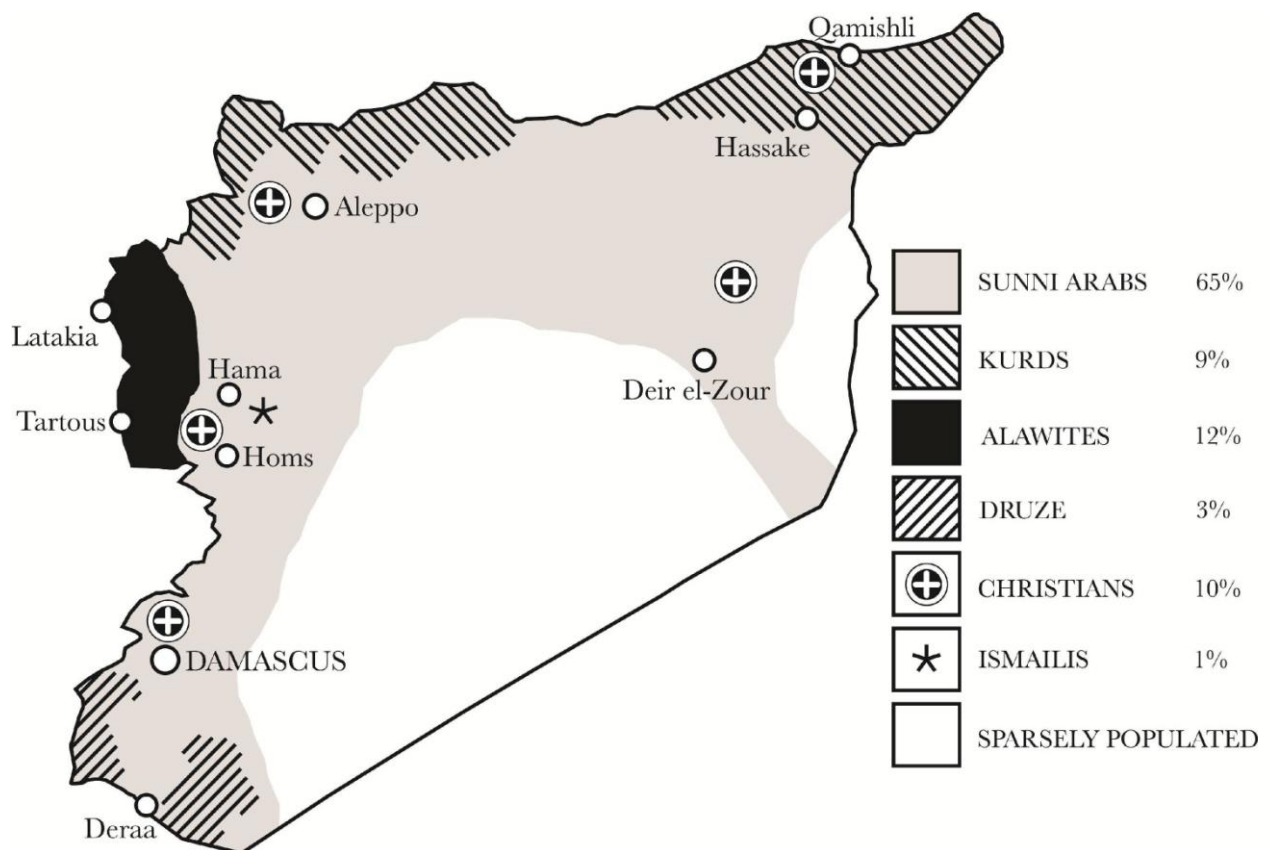
It's much too early to say anything definite about the social composition of the 2011 protests – and in any case, this author has no information on the matter – but from anecdotal evidence and media reports, it would appear that the countryside has not been as reliably pro-Baathist as it was during the *Ahdath*.

Minority communities seem to still stand by the regime, generally speaking, and some of the most severe clashes have taken place in religiously mixed areas where Sunni and Alawite communities

⁴⁷ Global price increases and a recent, very severe drought in north-eastern Syria are presumably also part of the explanation for rural discontent, but can hardly be attributed to the policies of the Syrian regime.

differ sharply in their perception of current events, such as Latakia city. But the social and geographic profile of the uprising would appear to be different from that during the *Ahdath*. The Sunni communities of the Hawran region surrounding Deraa, formerly a stronghold of the regime, were the first to rise in revolt. Similarly, the Sunni countryside in Idleb and Homs has seen some of the most violent fighting during the entire uprising. By contrast, Aleppo, which was a main center of unrest during the *Ahdath*, so far remains calm.⁴⁸

MAP OF SYRIA'S RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC DEMOGRAPHY



⁴⁸ Damascus was relatively quiet during the *Ahdath* as well, largely due to heavy regime investment in contacts with the local Sunni elite, which helped temper protests.



6. THE FOREIGN FACTOR

Syria's relations with the international community have traditionally run through Israel and Lebanon. Syria, as the last remaining Arab 'frontline state', after Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994) made peace with Israel, is key to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. As Henry Kissinger allegedly put it: 'No war without Egypt, no peace without Syria.' Syria's influence over Lebanon is even more direct. The Syrian army controlled most of the country between 1976 and 2005, when it was forced to retreat under international pressure, following the Hariri assassination affair. In 2005-2008, a fierce power struggle played out between Syria and its enemies over control of Lebanon.⁴⁹ Syria, more or less, emerged the victor, and has retained a dominant influence over Lebanese politics.

Under Hafez el-Assad, Syria became entangled in a multitude of regional disputes. This was a cause for poor relations with much of the world, but also gave Syria some leverage over other actors in these conflicts. Historically, the Syrian government has been anxious to preserve this regional influence, which helps its image as a leading champion of Arab causes. Syria's foreign policy has been genuinely in tune with popular opinion (with exceptions, such as the Lebanon intervention in 1976), helping the regime legitimizing its rule as a defender of the nation and of the Arab world against Imperialism, Zionism, etc. The sense of siege created by foreign pressures has also served as an excuse for its poor domestic performance, and repressive measures such as the 1962-2011 state of emergency.

On the other hand, both Hafez and Bashar el-Assad have proved willing to trade these political cards for favors from the international community – albeit often at a high cost. Syria's Western and Arab rivals have played their game with little interest in Syrian domestic affairs, occasionally trying to exploit Syrian opposition groups to pressure the regime, but then cutting them loose again as soon as a deal is reached with Damascus. The opposition's trust in Western rhetoric about democratization is, understandably, low.

Bashar: The devil they know

Very few governments with influence in the Levant want Bashar el-Assad toppled. While considered a regional troublemaker by the West, he's been seen as a guarantor for basic stability in Syria, and as a reformist figure in the context of the Syrian regime. Not even at the height of the cold war in the region in 2003-2008, was there a concerted effort to overthrow Bashar. The US government, for example, consistently spoke of its desire to 'change the behavior of the Syrian regime', never about 'changing the Syrian regime'. Post-9/11 events, particularly the mayhem in Iraq, have further focused everyone's mind on the dangers of civil conflict, and increased international appreciation of Syrian stability. The fear of Islamism and/or civil war has long been the regime's main argument with foreign states and minority communities in Syria: *après nous, le deluge*.

Today, AKP-led Turkey is probably the country with the strongest influence over both regime & opposition. Turkey's overriding goal is stability in Syria at any cost, and the regime still seems to regard Bashar as the least bad option. Paradoxically, this is precisely why it is trying to build an

⁴⁹ On the Syrian side, Iran stood alongside Lebanese 'March 8' factions such as the Shia's Hezbollah and Amal, and General Michel Aoun and his Christian Free Patriotic Movement. The opposing 'March 14' coalition included the Hariri-led Sunni Future Current, the Lebanese Druze under Walid Jumblat, and various anti-Syrian Christian groups; it was backed by Saudi Arabia, USA, France, Egypt, etc. For more on this period, see Nicholas Blanford, *Killing Mr. Lebanon. The assassination of Rafik Hariri and its impact on the Middle East*, I.B. Tauris & Co, 2006, and Michael Young, *The Ghosts of Martyrs Square: An Eyewitness Account of Lebanon's Life Struggle*, Simon & Schuster, 2010.

opposition bloc, eg. by enabling the Antalya Conference in late May, early June. A unified and politically mature opposition at this point seems like a *sine qua non* to avoid disaster in Syria, regardless of whether the regime falls or stays. If it falls, obviously, others will have to step into the vacuum. If it stays, it will be either through destabilizing bloodshed, or through a negotiated face-saving compromise – which would require a credible negotiating partner. This is what Turkey is presently striving to create, using its contacts in the Muslim Brotherhood and other groups.

Iraq, which was in Hafez el-Assad's day one of the biggest supporters for anti-Syrian forces, is weak and divided post-2003, and no longer as hostile to the current Syrian government. Iran, by contrast, appears stronger than it ever did under Hafez, and is solidly on Syria's side – but it can do little to help in this uprising except provide cash and perhaps some limited arms and training.

Syria itself is relatively weaker today than before, but Bashar still holds important cards in relation to Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, Iran, Iraq, which he can put to use with the US, Saudi Arabia and the EU. There might be a limit to how much his regime can sell off its nationalist credentials without alienating core support, but it is sure to try.

The recent clashes in the Golan, where Israeli forces shot and killed numerous unarmed Palestinian demonstrators trying to cross the cease-fire line, are an obvious example of Syrian manipulation of the conflict. While there's no doubting the sincerity of the demonstrators, the fact that they were – for the first time in 40 years – allowed into this heavily securitized area, was clearly a calculated move by the regime. Israel killing Palestinians on Syrian territory will remind Syrians of the regime's nationalist credentials, and distract attention from abuses inside the country.

Hafez: A devil they would have preferred not to know

Hafez el-Assad by contrast enjoyed no special favors from anyone in the West, to some extent because the fears of instability in Syria did not dominate Western policy-making at the time. He was widely respected as a shrewd and ruthless regional player.⁵⁰

Hafez did come to terms with the USA during certain periods (Nixon, Bush Sr.), almost always by way of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but during the *Ahdath*, his relations with the West were extremely tense. On the other hand, he received valuable military support from the Soviet Union.

In the Arab world, Hafez was locked in combat with the 'conservative' bloc of states over Camp David and much else, had provoked the radicals by invading Lebanon, and was generally on non-speaking terms with most of his neighbors. Libya remained useful to Hafez (granting financial aid), but regional rivals like Iraq, Jordan, Israel, Egypt, as well as the PLO and many Lebanese, all to varying degrees backed the Syrian opposition. The MB and its Jihadi offshoot, the Taliaa Moqatila, were supplied with training and arms by Jordan and Iraq on a rather large scale. Baghdad, in particular, hosted much of the anti-Assad opposition, both Islamist and secular. But exporting violence was a two-way street: Hafez, on his part, was a prodigious sponsor of armed attacks in Israel, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey and against various Gulf potentates, not to mention in Lebanon.

⁵⁰ One of many, Richard Nixon was strongly impressed by a meeting with Hafez el-Assad, claiming to have discerned 'elements of genius' in the Syrian president. See 'Remembering Hafez al-Assad', *Forward*, No. 40, June 2010, <http://www.forwardsyria.com/story/76/Remembering%20Hafez%20al-Assad>.

7. THE FUTURE



Blood in the water

Both foreign and domestic support for Bashar in the name of stability has always been reluctant and grudging – at the end of the day, no one loves the Assads. Calculations may change quickly if the regime starts being seen as a source of instability, rather than a guarantor of stability. This is where news reporting, propaganda and public opinion play their part. There's great uncertainty about what exactly is going on in Syria, including among Syrians, but everyone involved will have to make up their minds about Bashar's viability at some point, based on the information available to them.

If the current regime starts looking like a lost cause, countries like Saudi Arabia, USA and Turkey, who for various reasons support elements of the opposition, but also still regard Bashar as the only game in town, are likely to instead try to establish a foothold in the post-Assad order. The same is true for many in Syria, where the vast majority appears to remain on the fence, unsure which way the tide is flowing. This group would seem to include much of the middle class, the business community, a segment of the Kurdish opposition, some highly influential religious and tribal leaders, and many others.

If the regime fails to convince these undecided Syrians that it is here to stay, or that it is their safest bet, many are likely to cross over to the opposition's side. After four decades of exploitation, corruption and abuse, very few people are going to throw away their lives to aid the Assad clan.

Such a slow sea change may already be occurring, and the regime is now under increasing pressure to show quick results of some kind – whether in the form of a political breakthrough or through a massive crackdown. It needs to demonstrate that it remains the most viable option, or, failing that, the *only* option.

Bashar's choices

Since piecemeal reform doesn't seem to be doing the trick for Bashar el-Assad, and piecemeal repression on a city-by-city basis has also failed to stem the tide of protest, the regime will increasingly be forced to consider the two extreme choices in its arsenal. To force a conclusion, it could either try to present a final 'grand bargain' of serious concessions, and make it stick through a negotiated process or a credible referendum – or, it could attempt to eradicate open dissent through a nationwide crackdown and mass police terror, like Hafez in 1980.

Neither choice seems like a particularly appealing route to take for the regime. A negotiated political process is unlikely to work as long as there are no recognized spokesmen for the uprising who can influence the pace of demonstrations. There's also little to negotiate about, if the opposition refuses to compromise on the slogan of 'overthrow the regime'. A full-scale crackdown, on the other hand, is not at all certain to work, but it would surely destroy whatever remains of Bashar's legitimacy, could split the army, and will draw a severe international reaction.

The third alternative, to try to muddle through using carrot and stick, and bet that the opposition is going to exhaust itself before the regime does, is also a high-risk strategy for Bashar. Syria, as a country, is very poorly equipped to handle long-term unrest. The regime's legitimacy risks being fatally compromised by its failure to ensure stability, and the emergence of open dissent in a formerly closed system of president-worship will make a return to the *status quo ante* impossible.

Sectarian relations are being continuously inflamed by violence and fear, sapping trust in both the regime and its opposition, and hardening opinions on both sides.

Last but not least, as economic pressures increase, the state itself may begin to wither. The Syrian economy was in very poor shape even before the uprising began, and much of the country's economic activity is now at a virtual standstill. Without the ability to provide for the population, uphold subsidies, pay salaries and finance various patronage networks, internal dissent as well as popular discontent could mushroom, and independent power centers emerge, while old leaders still cling to their seats. Such an end to the regime risks being chaotic and bloody – with no change in political attitudes, no relinquishing of power, and no end to anti-regime action, the country may simply dissolve into civil war.

ARON LUND

Uppsala, Sweden. June 20, 2011.

Aron Lund is a editorial writer at the Swedish newspaper, Upsala Nya Tidning. His book Drömmen om Damaskus ('The Dream of Damascus'), which deals with Syria's regime and opposition movements, was recently published by Silc förlag.

List of illustrations

COVER PHOTO: Bashar el-Assad's image watching over a street corner in Damascus (2010)

PAGE 4: Anti-regime protests in April 2011 in Douma, a Damascus suburb. (Source: Wikimedia Commons.)

PAGE 6: Pro-regime demonstration at Tishrin University in Latakia, May 2011. (Source: Wikimedia Commons.)

PAGE 7: Syrian soldiers in Lebanon, 1982. (Source: Wikimedia Commons.)

PAGE 13: Soldiers in southern Damascus, under a wall painting of Hafez el-Assad. (2005)

PAGE 14: Hafez el-Assad. (Source: Wikimedia Commons.)

PAGE 17: Bashar el-Assad speaking at Damascus University, June 20, 2011. (Source: Official photo by SANA.)

PAGE 19: Undated photograph of the Assad family. Seated: President Hafez el-Assad and Anisa Makhoulf, his wife. Standing, left to right: Maher (b. 1968), Bashar (b. 1965), Basel (b. 1962, d. 1994), Majed (b. 1966, d. 2009), Bushra (b. 1960). (Source: Wikimedia Commons.)

PAGE 22: Pro-regime weather, Damascus. (2008)

PAGE 29: Akram el-Hawrani (left) and Michel Aflaq (right), 1957 (Source: Wikimedia Commons.)

PAGE 30: Refaat (left) and Hafez el-Assad (right), undated 1980s photograph. (Source: Wikimedia Commons.)

PAGE 32: The shrine of Sayyida Zeinab in southern Damascus, visited mainly by Iraqi Shia refugees and Iranian pilgrims. (2005)

PAGE 37: Map of Syria's religious and ethnic geography, excerpted from the book *Drömmen om Damaskus*. (Kindly drawn and redrawn by Carl Johan Högborg.)

PAGE 38: The wreckage of an Israeli fighter jet, on display at the October Liberation War Panorama in Damascus. (2005)

PAGE 41: Souq el-Hamidiye in Damascus. (2008)

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