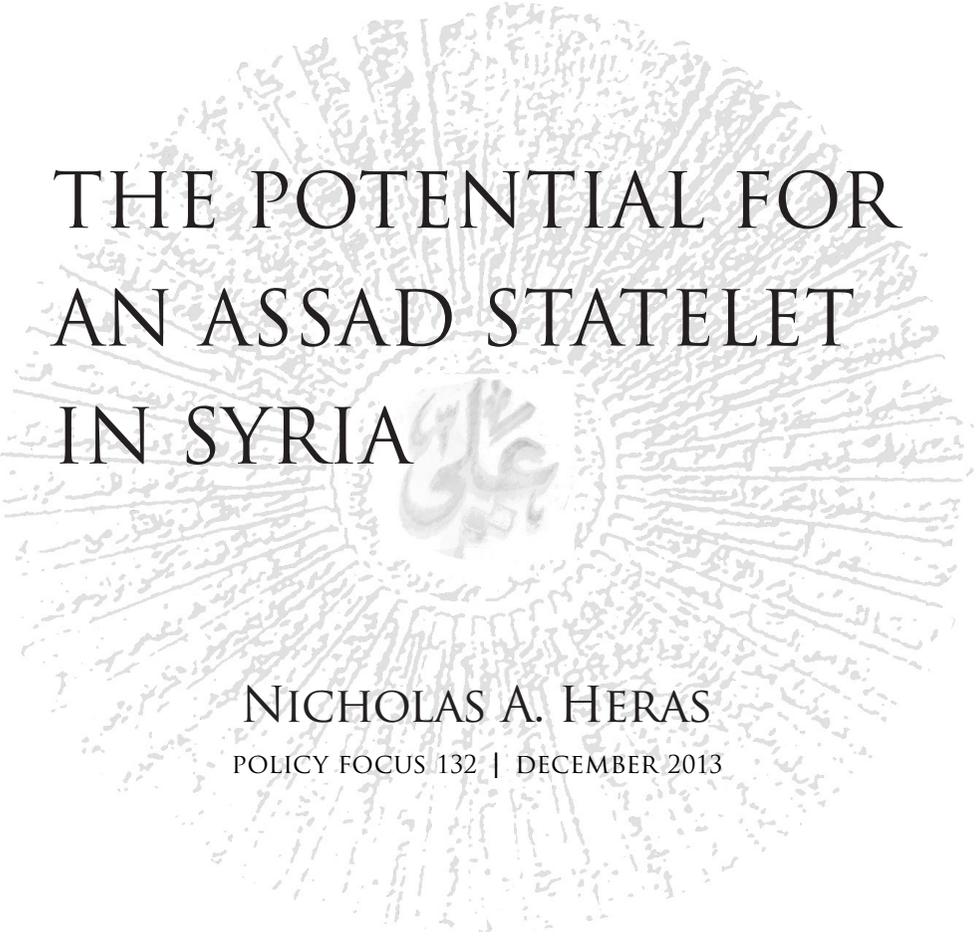




THE POTENTIAL FOR
AN ASSAD STATELET
IN SYRIA

NICHOLAS A. HERAS



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MAPS

Fig. 1 based on map designed by W.D. Langeraar of Michael Moran & Associates that incorporates data from National Geographic, Esri, DeLorme, NAVTEQ, UNEP-WCMC, USGS, NASA, ESA, METI, NRCAN, GEBCO, NOAA, and iPC.

Figs. 2, 3, and 4: detail from *The Tourist Atlas of Syria*, Syria Ministry of Tourism, Directorate of Tourist Relations, Damascus.

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Cover: Digitally rendered montage incorporating an interior photo of the tomb of Hafez al-Assad and a partial view of the wheel tapestry found in the Sheikh Daher Shrine—a 500-year-old Alawite place of worship situated in an ancient grove of wild oak; both are situated in al-Qurdaha, Syria. Photographs by Andrew Tabler/TWI; design and montage by 1000colors.

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Nicholas A. Heras
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Introduction

SINCE THE MARCH 2011 UPRISING in Syria, the possible establishment of an Assad-led statelet in the western part of the country has been a topic of conjecture in response to perceived ebbs and flows in the fighting.

And the fighting, despite significant international pressure applied to both sides through the Geneva peace talks to negotiate a political settlement, continues without signs of abating—and without a decisive edge for either the Bashar al-Assad regime or its opponents in the armed opposition. The most committed and successful armed opposition groups, many of them either Islamist or militant Salafist in ideological orientation, are seeking the creation of an Islamic caliphate in Syria, and the Syrian government, Syrian communities sympathetic to the government, and its allies such as Lebanese Hezbollah—which view the conflict as an existential war of survival—are not likely to stop the fighting. Al-Qaeda’s establishment of its Levantine “capital” in the central-eastern Syrian city of Raqqa and the participation of thousands of additional foreign fighters in the conflict indicate the degree to which the Syrian civil war is being viewed by jihadists as a generational conflict that will determine the future of the greater Middle East.¹

A significant development emerging from the Islamist armed opposition is the November 2013 announcement of the formation of the al-Jabhat al-Islamiyya (Islamic Front) coalition by several powerful groups with an estimated combined strength of fifty thousand fighters, and this group’s call for the military overthrow of the Syrian government and the establishment of an Islamic state in Syria. Several of the constituent fighting groups in the Islamic Front, particularly Liwa al-Islam (Islamic Brigade), Suqur al-Sham (Hawks of the Levant), Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya (Islamic Movement of the Free Ones of the Levant), and Liwa al-Tawhid (Divine Unity Brigade), are major combatants against the Syrian military and its allies

in several strategic areas in western Syria. Acknowledging the threat that an Assad-led statelet would pose to these groups' ability to rule a postwar Syria, several of the Islamic Front's battalions are participating in campaigns aimed at cutting off the Damascus-based Assad regime from its core constituencies of support in the Latakia, Tartus, and Homs governorates.²

Should an Assad-led statelet be developed, this would reflect a de facto partitioning of the country, with significant and potentially very bloody ramifications for its future. Such an entity, led by Assad and the remnants of the Syrian military, could include a swath of western Syria possibly constituting 40 percent of the country's land area and encompassing some 60 to 70 percent of its population.³ Achieving control over the statelet's territory and defending it from the armed opposition, including committed jihadist fighters aligned with al-Qaeda, could possibly lead to intractable conflict, forced migration (or ethnic and sectarian cleansing), and permanent restive Syrian refugee populations in neighboring countries, among other long-term potential consequences.

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1

Conceptualizing the Statelet

AN ASSAD STATELET in western Syria would likely emerge in three governorates—Latakia, Tartus, and Homs—that have remained largely under the control of the Syrian military and security services. The communities in the areas covered by a potential statelet have likewise remained comparatively supportive or tolerant of the Syrian government. The statelet's boundaries, meanwhile, would largely be determined by the strength of the Syrian military and by loyal communities' control over their areas at the time of the statelet's formation. Stronger Syrian government control over the country combined with a retreating armed opposition movement would lead to a larger statelet; weaker regime authority combined with a retreating Syrian military would lead to a smaller statelet (see fig. 1).

Two major conceptual frameworks have been discussed with regard to a future statelet's boundaries. One envisions the development of an Alawite sectarian enclave territorially bound to areas of the northwestern Syrian governorates of Latakia and Tartus that have historically had a large concentration of Alawites. This enclave would most likely not control the country's capital, Damascus. The second scenario, covering a larger area and constituting the main focus of this piece, would encompass not only the Alawite community's traditional areas of control but also areas where other communities loyal to the government are predominant—including cities such as Idlib, Hama, and Homs that have not fallen completely to the armed opposition. This statelet would most likely be able to maintain control over Damascus as its capital. Both frameworks are adapted from the social, cultural, political, and historical experience of the Alawite community and contemporary sociopolitical reality, according to which minority groups and regime-loyal communities are found in greater concentrations in western Syria.

Elaborating on the first framework, an Alawite-dominated sectarian enclave would likely have an Alawite majority population and a Mediterranean coastal administrative capital in either Latakia or Tartus. While resembling the original French Mandate-era autonomous Alawite-majority region established in 1925 as the “Alawite State” and renamed the “government of Latakia” in 1930, this sectarian enclave would not hypothetically expand to include all the historical territory given to the Alawites. The government of Latakia and its successor, the governorate of Latakia, also included the minority Ismaili Shiite community of Masyaf and its outlying districts in what is now the northwestern governorate of Homs, near the provincial border with Tartus, and the Greek-Orthodox-Christian-majority villages of Wadi al-Khudra (“Green Valley,” popularly referred to as Wadi al-Nasara, or “Valley of the Christians”), in the Talkalakh district of the Homs governorate, near the Lebanon-Syria border.¹

The Assad-led statelet of the second framework would stretch from Latakia in the northwest along the coast of Tartus and then west to the city of Homs and northwest to Hama and through the al-Ghab plain, potentially as far north as Idlib, and south and west from Homs along the spine of the Anti-Lebanon mountain range to encompass Damascus. The statelet would very likely keep its capital in Damascus as long as the Assad government could retain its power in the city. After postwar reconstruction, it would have—via its control of Damascus, Homs, Hama, and the al-Ghab plain through to Idlib—a greater industrial and agricultural capacity than an Alawite sectarian enclave.

A driver behind the possible creation of a statelet is the Alawite community’s feeling of being under siege, in a war for its survival, and thus in need of a sectarian bastion to secure its ancestral homeland in a postwar, potentially Assad-less Syria. This motivation dovetails with the Assad government’s need to maintain its legitimacy as the sovereign authority over the entire country. The Assad government could thereby presumably pursue the development of a sectarian stronghold in the Alawite coastal regions and assert its authority nationally. Securing the M5 highway from Damascus to Homs, securing a northeastern logistical corridor to supply its war effort around Aleppo, and maintaining control over the route known as the Homs Gap—an entry point to the potential Assad-led statelet—could be ways for the regime to achieve multiple objectives.²



Notes

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2

Mapping the Boundaries of the Statelet

MIDDLE EAST MEDIA OUTLETS have speculated on the exact contours of an Assad-led statelet. The generally agreed boundaries, at least according to the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation and Al-Arabiya, essentially encompass every major Alawite and sectarian minority area in western Syria, with the notable exception of Damascus, the capital, where a large number of minority communities live. These media outlets further postulate that the statelet would roughly encompass the western coastal regions of Syria, from the Turkish province of Hatay in the north to the Lebanese province of Akkar to the south, and would be bound in the east by the M5 highway, running south to north from Homs to Hama, and the M45 highway, running south to north from Hama to Idlib. The entirety of both the Latakia and Tartus governorates would be included in the statelet, along with the districts of Masyaf, al-Suqaylabiyah, and Mahrada in the Hama governorate and the districts of Talkalakh, al-Qusayr, and Rastan in the Homs governorate.¹

Several intergovernorate highways, which have stayed within the relative control of the regime throughout the civil war, delineate the basic borders of a possible Assad-led statelet. The M5 highway, for example, is reinforced by regime-tolerant areas such as the Christian city of Saidnaya, which has produced irregular Assad regime units known as Popular Committee militias and has cooperated with other Assad government military efforts. Serving as one of the statelet's eastern boundaries, the M5 highway would wheel around Hama to join with the M56 highway, which runs through the al-Ghab plain and is anchored by pro-government towns—prominently, the Alawite town of Tal Salhab and the Christian city of al-Suqaylabiyah.

The statelet's central-southern gate would be the generally regime-tolerant district of Wadi al-Khudra in the Homs governorate, which has

a large Christian population. Essential to securing this boundary would be uninhibited regime control of the M1 highway, running westbound in close proximity to the Syria-Lebanon border from Homs to the coastal city of Tartus, including through formerly restive districts of Homs such as the town of Talkalakh. Also essential would be support from the Lebanese military as a counterterrorism and interdiction force to hinder the flow of opposition fighters and war materials from Lebanon's northern coastal city of Tripoli, its suburbs, and the surrounding Akkar region.

The M5 Highway: A Strategic Boundary

The M5 highway would not only provide the vital connection between Damascus and the heartland of a future Assad-led statelet, it would also be one of the western boundaries of the regime's contracted territory. At present, two multifactional, armed opposition coalition campaigns are developing along the M5 highway, with the explicit aim of cutting off Damascus from the western coastal governorates. The two campaigns, one targeting the northern M5 highway between Hama and Homs and the other focusing on the M5 highway north of Damascus between Homs and the capital, demonstrate both the necessity of the thoroughfare as a conduit for government control and the vulnerability of a statelet with a capital in Damascus—with its strongest demographic support and most secure territorial control located hundreds of miles to the northwest.

Known as the Marakat Qalamoun, the campaign by the armed opposition to cut Hama and Homs off from Damascus is building east of the former two cities in the semiarid steppe separating the Syrian Desert from the more fertile valleys to the west. The Marakat Qalamoun is being waged in the Hama governorate district of Salamiya, southeast of the city of Hama, and in the districts of al-Mukharram and Tadmur in the Homs governorate, northeast of the city of Homs (see fig. 2).² The areas east of Homs toward the desert city of Tadmur (Palmyra) are under tenuous Syrian military control, with the presence of the armed opposition strongholds of Rastan and Talbisah in the northern Homs suburbs further testing the Assad government's strength in this potential western boundary of the statelet.

The Qalamoun area, northwest of Damascus near the Syria-Lebanon border, is the other emerging site for an armed opposition campaign that, if successful, could severely weaken the Assad government and complicate its ability to rule over a state claiming Damascus as its capital. Qala-

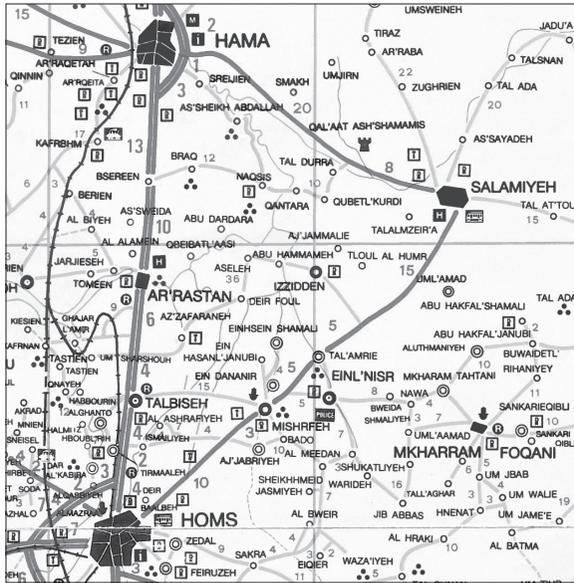


FIG. 2 Conflicted area on eastern boundary of statelet.

mountain is approximately fifty miles long and twenty-five miles wide, and has historically been a lightly patrolled border region that served as a profitable way station for smuggling and frequent legitimate cross-border trade between villages. Critically, the M5 highway cuts through the highlands of the Qalamoun region between Homs and Damascus. Al-Qusayr, the formerly key node in the armed opposition's logistics network for attacks against pro-regime targets in its heartland of support, is located in the plains that stretch westward from Qalamoun, further demonstrating the importance that control over this region of Syria gives the antagonists in the civil war.³

The rugged area around Qalamoun—constituting the foothills of the Anti-Lebanon range—marks the boundary between Lebanon's Beqa Valley and Syria. Qalamoun is located relatively close to the large Sunni-majority, pro-opposition Lebanese towns of Aarsal and Masharee al-Qaa in the northern Beqa Valley, the armed-opposition-controlled towns of Yabrud and al-Nabak, which straddle the M5 highway, and the militant Islamist armed opposition strongholds in Douma and Ghouta in Damascus's eastern and northeastern suburbs, through which the M5 highway runs northward. The Syrian military and Hezbollah consider the armed-

opposition-controlled villages on both sides of the border in the Qalamoun region to be staging points for attacks against them, including rocket attacks against Hezbollah-controlled Hermel in the northern Beqa, and to represent a grave threat given their use as training grounds for Syrian militant Salafist and foreign Salafist jihadist fighters (see fig. 3).⁴

Yabrud, approximately thirty-seven miles northeast of Damascus, is considered an important munitions supply center for the armed opposition and the origin of the car bombs used to attack the heavily Shiite Beirut southern suburbs of Bir al-Abed and al-Ruwais on July 9, 2013, and August 15, 2013, respectively, attacks that reportedly killed 27 people and injured more than 250.⁵ Aarsal and Masharee al-Qaa are important staging points for the Syrian armed opposition, providing a strategic rear and facilitating lines of communication and supply with strongly pro-opposition areas in and around the northern coastal Lebanese city of Tripoli and the Akkar plains, which stretch along Lebanon's northern border with the Syrian governorates of Tartus and Homs. Following the June 2012 defeat of armed opposition forces at al-Qusayr, Qalamoun's strategic location and proximity to armed opposition areas of strength make it a logical focal point for rebel ambitions to sever Damascus's lines of supply with the coastal heartland of pro-Assad support.⁶

The Christian-majority villages of Maaruna and Maaloula (ten and thirty-five miles northeast of Damascus, respectively) and the city of Saidnaya (seventeen miles northeast of Damascus), in the al-Nabak district of the Rif Damascus governorate, are emerging areas of importance in the battle to control the Qalamoun region.¹² These communities have a combined population of approximately fifty thousand and are located on hilltops that peer over the M5 highway as it runs northward toward Homs. The towns are reported to have sent a joint letter asking the Russian government for citizenship, so that as dual Syrian-Russian nationals they would have the necessary support to confront the armed opposition. Expressing fear regarding "the conspiracy of the West and the hateful fanatics [Salafist jihadists] who are waging a brutal war against our country," the letter states bluntly that the residents

do not have any mistrust in the Syrian army or government... [W]e prefer death to exile and life in refugee camps, and so we will defend our land, honor, and faith, and will not leave the land on which Christ walked.⁸

Saidnaya has raised a reportedly large and strongly pro-Assad National Defense Army (NDA) militia. It is also believed to be the site of the Syrian military's strongest outpost on the M5 highway running north between Damascus and Homs.⁹ Maaloula, with an approximate prewar population of 7,000 (5,000 Christian, 2,000 Sunni Muslim), was being considered as a possible UNESCO World Heritage Site, given that many of its residents speak a form of Aramaic linked to that spoken by Jesus. Yet in early September 2013, the town became one of the first areas attacked in the armed opposition's campaign to capture the M5 highway in the vicinity of Qalamoun. Weeks of fighting reportedly forced most of the townspeople to flee, and the surroundings have become a hotly contested battleground.¹⁰

Assad's Patchwork National Authority

An Assad-led statelet would have the potential to maintain patchwork rule beyond its hypothetical core regions in western Syria, using its military outposts and the cooperation of regime-tolerant local actors and minority communities. Currently, the Syrian military maintains a semblance of influence in and around the cities of Hasaka, Qamishli, and Dayr al-Zawr, in the northeastern governorates of Hasaka and Dayr al-Zawr; in the cities of Idlib and Jisr al-Shughour and the large Shiite-majority towns of al-Fua and Kefraya, in the Idlib governorate; in many areas of the city of Aleppo and in the large Shiite-majority town of Kafr Nabl and village of Zahra northwest of the city; in the city of Deraa, in the southern governorate of Deraa; in the city of Quneitra, in the Quneitra governorate, which borders the Golan Heights; in the city of al-Suwayda and its outlying areas in Jabal al-Arab (also referred to as Jabal al-Druze, or "Druze Mountain"), in the sectarian Druze-majority governorate of al-Suwayda; and in the oasis city of Tadmur, in the Syrian Desert region of the Homs governorate. The Assad regime's continued patchwork rule, or significant influence, over areas throughout the country represents an important characteristic of its continued claim to sovereignty over the entirety of Syria.

Certain towns and cities that are now part of the outpost authority of the Syrian government would hypothetically help designate boundaries determining the stability of the statelet. One such locale is Jisr al-Shughour, a city in the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib near the Turkish border. The site of brief but intense combat between armed opposition groups and the Syrian military in 2011, Jisr al-Shughour saw hundreds of its Sunni

Syrian residents flee to Lebanon's Akkar region, where most still remain. Sporadic fighting continues today, with regime control of the city allowing it to apply pressure to opposition-controlled areas of Jabal al-Akrad (Kurds' Mountain) and the northern al-Ghab plain, where a number of Alawite villages and military outposts are located.

In noncontiguous, government-controlled areas of Syria, the Assad regime can be expected to seek to maintain outposts in order to pressure the opposition and maintain the ability to extract rent, even if limited, from the oil facilities in northeastern Syria. For the near term, the Assad regime will likely continue to seek to maintain such outposts, and the corresponding ability to project military power, in outlying regions of southern, northwestern, and northeastern Syria now controlled considerably by the armed opposition. Maintaining outpost authority in areas with a tenuous government presence also allows the Assad regime and its agents to confer with potential allies of the moment, such as Kurds, Christian minorities, and Sunni Arab tribes that share an interest in countering the influence of militant Salafist organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra.

The Statelet as a Political Tool

A further use of the statelet by the Assad regime and its allies could be as an added lever of power in dictating the terms of the statelet's postwar reintegration into a territorially united Syria. As much as possible, the Assad government would likely seek to entrench its patchwork rule, with the aim of preventing the establishment of an organized, territorially contiguous rebel authority within the country. While the consolidation of its rule over a western Syrian statelet would present an attractive fallback option should the regime's outpost authority collapse in rebel-dominated areas, the Assad government and its Syrian supporters are highly unlikely to accede to ruling a shrunken statelet rather than maintaining authority over Syria as a united, national entity. Even current supporters of the regime, which rose to power forty years ago, might rebel against its rule should the perception arise of a regime retreat from asserting its national authority.

The attempt to maintain patchwork rule over the greatest area of Syria possible would also be natural for the regime based on the system of oligarchic patronage central to the prewar system. This system was not dominated by Alawites alone. The Baath power structure, formed under former

Syrian president Hafiz al-Assad and maintained with some modifications by Bashar, had its base in a wide range of social and communal organizations across Syria. With the exception of a narrow slice of Alawite elite tied to the Assad family, most Alawites, along with other sectarian minorities, were not subject to special privileges.¹¹

Despite Syrian military losses, and the ceding of significant swaths of territory, particularly in the country's northern and eastern areas, the Assad government has upheld its communal ties. The regime, in turn, has maintained its authority by working with select identity groups, such as tribes with Arab lineage (e.g., the Jabbour) in northeastern Syria that might favor reforms over outright revolution and that have been infiltrated by militant Salafist organizations. In addition, sectarian minorities such as Druze in the al-Suwayda governorate and Christians in the Homs governorate, and members of the merchant and business classes in cities such as Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Damascus, may prefer the old order to the uncertainties of postrevolutionary Syria, allowing for consultations with the Assad regime. The regime, thus, will likely seek to use these relationships to maintain the broadest possible sway over the country. Trusteeship over a coastal statelet, even if augmented by patchwork rule elsewhere and considered an Alawite oligarchical syndicate, would likely occur in the context of a grand bargain for partition devised by outside actors. From the regime's perspective, such an outcome would reflect the height of desperation to survive in any form.

In the event of a grand bargain struck over Syria, the negotiating power of the Assad-led statelet would most likely be enhanced by the destabilization of rebel-controlled areas and struggles by the opposition to create a successor state. A position of relative power would also require that the statelet enforce obedience within its boundaries. Complicating such an effort at present would be the areas in coastal western Syria—such as the northern suburbs of Homs, the countryside surrounding the city of Hama, the eastern bank of the Orontes River in the al-Ghab plain, and the Jabal al-Akrad area northeast of the city of Latakia—that have a significant armed opposition presence. The Damascus suburbs, particularly in the Hawran area south of the city and the Zabadani district to its northwest, are also sites of armed opposition.

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3

A Basic Human Geography of the Statelet

BOTH THE LBC AND AL-ARABIYA postulate that the statelet would have a population of approximately 4 million, with an Alawite majority representing about 55 percent, joined by Sunnis at some 37.5 percent, an Ismaili Shiite population of 8.5 percent, and Christians of various denominations constituting 5 percent. While these numbers add up to more than 100 percent, and may thus be called somewhat into doubt, it is nonetheless interesting to note that the figures provided by two television stations not known for their strong support of the Assad regime give the Alawites a majority—but, all the same, a majority perhaps threatened by a substantial Sunni presence.¹

Population Transfer, Sectarian Cleansing

The May 2–3, 2013, massacres of Sunni civilians in the villages of al-Bayda and Ras al-Nabaa near the port town of Baniyas in the northern Tartus governorate indicate the realization by pro-regime forces of the grave necessity of winning the demographic battle in the territory that would form the statelet. According to a United Nations report, approximately 450 people were deliberately targeted and executed—150–250 in al-Bayda, 200 in Ras al-Nabaa—by NDA and Popular Committee forces, with the support of the Syrian military. Interviews conducted by the UN with witnesses and survivors of the attacks lead the international organization to conclude that the massacres were meant to deliver a message to any potential opposition sympathizers living in the core governorates of Assad government control.²

In response to these massacres, several armed opposition groups with significant strength in the northern areas of the Latakia governorate, the southwestern areas of the Idlib governorate, and the Hama and Homs governorates issued a joint communiqué declaring their allied participa-

tion in a military campaign intended to punish the Assad government and its supporters. The military campaign, referred to as the Marakat al-Jasad al-Wahad (One Body Battle), is primarily being carried out in the al-Ghab plain.³ Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, one of the most powerful militant Salafist armed opposition groups in Syria, a leading organization in the Islamic Front, and the most powerful organization in the One Body Battle, is reported to have coordinated its efforts with the al-Qaeda affiliates Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS to attack Alawite villages in the Latakia governorate and execute villagers on August 4, 2013.

In an extension of the One Body Battle, the militant Salafist campaign in the northern areas of Jabal al-Ansariyya targeted ten Alawite villages within close proximity of the Assad family's ancestral town of Qardaha. Human Rights Watch reports that 190 Alawite civilians were killed and 200 captured in the attacks. Interviews by Human Rights Watch with witnesses and survivors indicate that the attacks were well planned and executed, and intended to send a strong message to pro-regime communities.⁴

The targeted massacres near Baniyas and in Jabal al-Ansariyya represent grave warnings to the international community, and to policymakers, about the potential for bloody communal violence as Assad forces and their militant Salafist antagonists battle for demographic supremacy in mixed areas in the emerging statelet.

Alawites: The Statelet's Communal Core

Whether in an Assad-led statelet or an Alawite enclave, Alawites will be the core population. Alawites now constitute approximately 13 percent of Syria's population of 23 million, or almost 3 million people.⁵ In Damascus, the tenuous capital of an Assad-led statelet, the Alawite community is believed to number in the hundreds of thousands and to be concentrated in the defensible northwestern hilltop neighborhood of Mezze 86 and on Jabal Qasioun, an important military site dominated by Alawite-majority units of the Syrian military. Many of the Alawites who migrated to this area of the capital were members of the elite Defense Companies, now disbanded, led by Bashar al-Assad's uncle Rifaat up until the mid-1980s. Alawite residents of the community would be among the first targets of the armed opposition if the Syrian military could not hold the city and the armed opposition were to attempt to seize it.⁶

Most residents of Mezze 86 are from Jabal al-Ansariyya in the Latakia

governorate, a heritage they are reported to hold with distinctive pride. Mezze 86 is now considered an armed camp, with hundreds of young men organized into Popular Committee militias. A significant number of its residents are believed to be officers in the Syrian military, some settled in the neighborhood by Rifaat al-Assad in 1982.⁷ Mezze 86 has been the recipient of armed opposition mortar fire and a November 2012 suicide car bombing that targeted civilians, killing eleven.⁸ Syrian Alawite analysts assert that the residents of Mezze 86 have suffered higher casualties in the civil war than their sectarian peers in the coastal governorates of Latakia and Tartus, heightening sectarian solidarity and emphasizing a shared feeling of steadfastness against the armed opposition.⁹

The Arab nationalist character of the Syrian regime allows it to draw support from a wide range of Syrian sectarian and ethnic communities, socioeconomic classes, and tribal groups. The air force, for example, gives Assad one of his greatest tactical advantages over the rebels in the civil war. Assuming that the majority of Syrian air force pilots are Sunni, the regime is not likely to forgo a major tactical advantage, and the corresponding hold on national power, for ethnic reasons. The draw of a unified Syria would likewise be greater for the Alawite political and military leadership than a portion of a divided state.¹⁰

The core region of the Alawite enclave would be the coastal governorates of Latakia and Tartus, in which the Alawites are estimated to constitute 50 percent of the population.¹¹ Within the Latakia and northern Tartus governorates, the Jabal al-Ansariyya (also referred to as Jabal al-Alawiyya and Jabal al-Nusayria) mountain range runs north to south and forms the ancestral homeland of the Alawites, including the Assad hometown of Qardaha on the central, coast-facing side of the mountains in Latakia. The Latakia governorate is estimated to be about 70 percent Alawite, with these residents distributed throughout its territory.¹²

Syria's leadership under the Assad family since 1970 has been a mixed blessing for the country's Alawites. The government, as has been observed, has demonstrated both intense nationalist devotion and, at times, a specific concern for the Alawite minority. While cultivating the Alawite community as the regime's demographic base, the government has positioned the coastal governorates—which also have significant populations of other minorities—as distinct and worthy of protection. At the same time, the regime has expressed resolute pride in and willingness to defend the ter-

ritorial integrity of Syria.¹³ In line with this broader nationalist vision, the Assad government will likely emphasize the continued dream of a united Syria and not push for the creation of an Alawite-led statelet—which would be tantamount to advocating for the Alawites to return to their mountains. The government is apt to promote such a vision of unity even as it benefits from the fears of minority communities and a wartime atmosphere that encourages communal and sectarian seclusion.¹⁴

The Assad family, too, has encouraged the Alawites to branch out from their insular rural existence in Jabal al-Ansariyya in order to reap the benefits of urban life. Both Hafiz and Bashar have sought to position Alawites as “mainstream” Muslims, and Bashar’s marriage to a Sunni woman set an example of secular-minded integration.¹⁵ Even if the Alawite community under Assad were to seek to create its own state, or be the dominant sectarian group in an Assad-led statelet, it would likely not be comfortable relinquishing control of Damascus, the political and emotional capital of the country.

From the beginning of the revolution in 2011, reports of harsh sectarian slogans directed against the Assad government and those Syrians who tolerate or actively support it were a major driver of communal tensions. An early, infamous slogan—the apocryphal “Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the grave,” attributed to the Sunni-majority opposition movement—became one of the most often cited justifications for Assad’s continued rule.¹⁶ This fear of the strength of Salafist jihadism among the armed opposition in Syria, now proven to be justified, provides cause for Alawites to support the present leadership. Reflecting this fear, an Alawite soldier in the Syrian military stated to a foreign reporter,

I know that Assad is a thief who rules this country by force, not by justice, but to abandon him means abandoning ourselves because he is the only one capable to lead us in this war.¹⁷

This tension between playing on Alawite fears and communal *asabiyya* (group cohesion) and, at the same time, supporting a “supra-confessional political community in Syria”—an important dilemma faced by the Assad government—would likely remain central in an Alawite enclave or a western Syrian statelet.¹⁸ Strong *asabiyya* within the Alawite community, even when some members have agitated for more equitable distribution of the spoils of power in an Alawite-led state, has been a useful instrument in the

rise of the Alawite community's elite in modern Syria.¹⁹ In the context of the current conflict and a potential postwar political scene that includes an Assad-led statelet, Alawite communal *asabiyya* would need to be a part, even an exceedingly important part, of a more inclusive wartime and postwar *asabiyya*. This broader *asabiyya* would emphasize the right of all Syria's communities to sovereignty in their own state. Any bargain struck with the opposition and its international backers would thus need to be rooted in a shared, strong desire to resist foreign designs on Syria.

Latakia and Tartus: Forming an Alawite Geographic Core of the Statelet

A potentially complex site of communal relations in the Alawite core of an Assad-led statelet is the coastal plain to the west of Jabal al-Ansariyya. Two major port cities, Latakia and Tartus, and two ancillary coastal cities—Jableh in the Latakia governorate and Baniyas in the Tartus governorate—and their suburbs represent mixed sectarian areas. It is reported that the Syrian military is using its auxiliary NDA and Popular Committee militias, many of which are organized from Alawite and Christian communities in the coastal region, to maintain an at-times tense peace in the area.²⁰ From the beginning of the uprising against the Assad government, an underlying tension has existed in these coastal cities between the Sunni Muslim community, representing a minority in the coastal regions of both the Tartus and Latakia governorates, and the majority population, particularly Alawites but also Greek Orthodox Christians.

Latakia, home to the country's largest and most modern port, which would be a site of particular importance to the statelet's economy, is consistently referred to as a potential capital should the Assad government withdraw from or lose Damascus. Arab Sunni Muslims constitute a plurality in the city of Latakia and its near suburbs.²¹ The city was the site of intense anti-Assad demonstrations from March to August 2011, which were crushed by a combined Syrian navy and army operation. The recent fighting between the Syrian military and its auxiliary forces and the armed opposition in Jabal al-Ansariyya is reported to have led to a significant migration of Alawite villagers from the mountain region to Latakia, further complicating the sectarian balance in the city and raising tensions among its residents.²²

Banias houses Syria's second largest oil refinery and is similar to Latakia in that it represents a potentially vicious communal flashpoint in the coastal regions of a future Assad-led statelet. The city, and its nearby hamlets such as al-Bayda, is majority Sunni Muslim and is surrounded by foothills dotted with majority Alawite villages. Much like Latakia, though for the briefer period of April to May 2011, Banias was the site of intense opposition demonstrations and sporadic armed insurrection. Although the Banias uprising was defeated by the Syrian military in May 2011, small and consistent anti-Assad demonstrations still occur in the city. In response to opposition sentiment in the Banias area, Alawites in the surrounding hillside villages reportedly formed Popular Committee militias out of a fear that they would be targeted by vengeful Sunnis, further militarizing communal sentiments in the area.²³

In May 2013, these communal tensions came to a head, and members of the area's Alawite security apparatus led ruthless assaults against al-Bayda and Banias aimed at rooting out a potential Sunni threat to Alawite enclaves. In a pattern now typical in these coastal regions, thousands of residents have reportedly fled south to solidly regime-controlled Tartus, adding to the port city's population of displaced residents seeking refuge in a more stable area.²⁴ Although al-Bayda and Banias would be relatively minor areas of the statelet, and would not seriously threaten its existence—except in that opposition control of Banias would limit regime movement along the coastal highway from Latakia to Tartus—the conflict in these towns reflects broader sectarian tensions and their ramifications across Syria's coastal areas. Minority sectarian fear, even in coastal areas such as those in Latakia and Tartus where minority communities are actually in the majority, has been a pernicious element in the region since the March 2011 outbreak of anti-Assad uprisings.²⁵

Tartus, a predominantly Alawite and Greek Orthodox Christian city, has emerged as a *de facto* haven from the raging Syrian civil war for members of all Syria's communities, including those fleeing areas associated with the opposition.²⁶ The site of Syria's second largest port, Tartus is reportedly being explored by the Assad government as a possible location for a large commercial airport, potentially for use for international flights, which would replace Damascus International Airport in the event the capital were to fall to the opposition.²⁷

Moving off the coast, the northern Latakia governorate also has a sig-

nificant Sunni Muslim population, especially along the mountainous border with the Turkish Hatay province, including the armed-opposition-controlled and heavily forested Jabal al-Akrad, which overlooks the Mediterranean Sea and serves as a northern boundary for the Alawite-dominated Jabal al-Ansariyya. This area of Latakia, with a prewar population estimated at 150,000, is composed mainly of culturally Arabized, tribally organized ethnic Kurds and Turkmens who support the Syrian opposition.²⁸ Alongside the majority Sunni—and ethnically Kurdish and Turkmen—population is a minority population of Christians, particularly in the Christian town of Kinsabba and the mixed Sunni-Christian town of al-Haffah. Rebel offensives in Jabal al-Akrad, supplied from Turkey and launched from the opposition village of Salma, which serves as a logistical base, have presented a persistent and difficult challenge to overcome for the Syrian military and its locally organized auxiliary forces, many of them from surrounding Alawite villages.²⁹

Al-Ghab Plain

Jabal al-Ansariyya divides the coastal plain region of western Syria from the Orontes River, which flows south to north from Lebanon's Beqa Valley through the Syrian governorates of Homs, Hama, and Idlib into Turkey and the Mediterranean. The al-Ghab plain on the eastern side of Jabal al-Ansariyya, extending across the eastern Latakia, southern Idlib, and northwestern Hama governorates, is fed by the Orontes and considered one of Syria's most fertile regions, if not its most fertile. This area is also the site of ongoing communal conflict. A significant number of Alawite villages are situated particularly on the western bank of the Orontes, from which the Syrian military and local NDA units and Popular Committee militias battle with opposition-controlled communities on the river's eastern bank.³⁰ The Alawite communities in the al-Ghab plain constitute an important front line in the regime's battle against the armed opposition, serving not only as a strategic eastern flank of a potential statelet but also as a source of abundant agricultural output should the plain be seized and fully integrated within the statelet's boundaries (see fig. 4).

The subdistrict of Qalaat al-Madiq, located in the Hama district of al-Suqaylabiyah, which had a prewar population of almost 90,000, is mainly split between Alawite and Sunni farming towns, offering an example of the complicated battle set to be waged in the al-Ghab plain. The Sunni armed

opposition controls the village of Qalaat al-Madiq, surrounded by Alawite villages, over which a strategic Syrian-military-controlled medieval fort commands the approach to Jabal al-Ansariyya.³¹ The battle for the al-Ghab plain is also important for control of the Apamea Dam, situated near the village of Qalaat al-Madiq and the Greek ruins of Apamea, a formerly popular tourist attraction. Water from the dam is necessary for the continued use of farmland held by both Alawite and Sunni farmers, although fighting in the area has prevented farmers from fully exploiting their crops.³²

In the Idlib and Hama governorates, and along the Orontes River basin in Homs's northern suburbs, a significant population belongs to Sunni Arab tribes. In taking up arms, these tribal groups generally remain sympathetic to their own clansmen, but some fight for the Assad regime while others fight as part of the armed opposition. In Idlib and Hama, members of the al-Muwali, al-Damaakhla, and Bani Khalid tribes are resident. Further south, in Homs's northern suburbs, including the towns of Rastan and Talbisah, can be found members of the Bani Khalid tribe and branches of the Anaza and Ougaidat tribal confederations. The Ougaidat tribe is particularly widespread throughout Syria, and its members were reportedly represented in large numbers in the Syrian security forces prior to the civil war.³³

At the eastern margins of the al-Ghab plain, north of the city of Hama, another conflict is occurring between a cluster of Alawite and Sunni towns for control of the land that sweeps toward the major M5 highway between Homs and Hama and the M45 highway between Hama and Idlib.³⁴ Centered on the Alawite town of Maan, the battle for the Hama plain, like the conflict further northwest at the foot of Jabal al-Ansariyya, is a complicated skirmish on the territorial fringe of a potential Assad-led statelet. The Hama and Idlib governorates would likely represent the easternmost boundary of the statelet if the Assad government were forced to contract from its outpost control of Aleppo and the cities of Hasaka, Qamishli, and Dayr al-Zawr in northeastern Syria.

Homs Governorate

Moving south, the Homs governorate has significant sectarian diversity, including significant populations of Sunnis, Alawites, Christians, Ismaili Shiites, and other Shiites. Alawites are represented in large numbers in the city of Homs, including at about 10 to 20 percent in the city's southern and



FIG. 4 Conflicted area of the al-Ghab plain.

eastern sections. Alawites also live in farming belt to the city's northwest, in the district of Talkalakh extending into the Hama governorate, and to its east in the district of Makhram. It is reported that the Alawites who inhabit the areas around Homs maintain a distinct identity from their sectarian compatriots further north in the coastal regions of Latakia and Tartus; in belonging to the *dakhel* ("hinterland") community of Alawites, they are on the front lines of communal conflict in the Homs city and governorate.³⁵ The large, pro-regime Ismaili Shiite and Alawite city of Masyaf, located in the Alawite farming belt northwest of Homs, is another example of the sectarian solidarity that would need to proliferate in an Assad-led statelet.

Sunnis predominate in the city of Homs and its northern suburbs of Rastan and Talbisah, throughout the Orontes River basin stretching northward from Homs to Hama, and in the large towns of Houla and Talkalakh, in the valleys near the Lebanese border. Sunni communities in and around Houla are situated near Christian and Alawite villages, presenting another complicated challenge for the internal security of a potential Assad-led statelet. Sunni communities in Homs include ethnic Arabs and Turkmens suspected of having pro-opposition sympathies and providing bases of support for the armed opposition, making them the target of Syrian military operations as well as attacks from their regime-tolerant

neighbors.³⁶ The town of Talkalakh, once an armed opposition stronghold, has reportedly participated successfully in an Assad regime program, the Reconciliation Committees, that disarms, demobilizes, and reintegrates former opposition fighters into the local security apparatus of the NDA in cooperation with the Syrian military.³⁷

One key demographic group in an Assad-led statelet would be the Christian communities of Homs—communities that would make up the statelet’s largest concentration of Christians. The Homs governorate is home to approximately 250,000 Christian residents, belonging to denominations including Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, and Roman Catholic.³⁸ These Christian communities are located close to the Lebanese border, in the central-southern district of Talkalakh, in an area known as Wadi al-Khudra, or Wadi al-Nasara. A majority of these Christian communities are considered pro-regime, and Christian militias in the area are organized in a network calling itself “Lions of the Valley.” While reportedly majority Christian, the network includes other sectarian groups, primarily Sunnis and Alawites. The Lions of the Valley have a reputation for ferocity in battle against militant Salafist armed opposition groups.³⁹

Homs’s Talkalakh district and its outlying Orontes River valley would constitute a particularly diverse area of a future statelet and serves as a bellwether regarding the possible coexistence of Syrian Christians and Syrians of other sectarian backgrounds, including Alawites and Sunnis. The Orontes River valley has a particularly complex social demography, with approximately 30,000 residents inhabiting twenty-five villages who claim Lebanese citizenship, a majority of them Shiites, along with smaller populations of Christians, Alawites, and Sunnis. Among the Sunnis, members of an Arab tribe, the Dandash, live on both the Lebanese and Syrian sides of the border.

Although a large number of Christians lived in the city of Homs before the war, with the highest concentration in the Hamadiya and Bustan al-Diwan neighborhoods, most have apparently fled the fighting to live with their coreligionists in the relatively safer villages of the Wadi al-Nasara, or to Christian-majority areas across the border in Lebanon.⁴⁰ Prior to the conclusion of fighting in al-Qusayr, threats against the city’s Christian community are reported to have displaced most of its prewar population of approximately ten thousand.⁴¹ The recent seizure of the rebel district

of Khalidiya in Homs, effectively ending major combat in the city, and the significant presence of Syrian military, Hezbollah, and local Popular Committee and NDA fighters following the capture of al-Qusayr may coax Christian residents of both cities back to their homes.

Damascus

The Assad regime appears to be turning Damascus into its heavily militarized stronghold in the interest of holding the city as its capital for as long as possible. Major Syrian military campaigns in Damascus have focused on pushing the armed opposition from the suburbs that ring the city and then demolishing them to prevent their return. Although two elite Syrian military units, the Republican Guard and the Fourth Mechanized Division, are based in the capital, defend the city's central districts, and control a large military complex atop Jabal Qasioun, overlooking the city, Syrian military operations in Damascus are being greatly assisted by locally organized NDA units and Popular Committee militias in regime-tolerant neighborhoods and by Shiite jihadist brigades primarily operating in and around the Sayyeda Zainab shrine in the southern suburbs.⁴² The Qods Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is reportedly establishing branches of the Jaish al-Shabi (People's Army) under the NDA structure, drawing from Syria's Alawite and Shiite communities in Damascus and its suburbs and presenting another significant manpower boost for the regime. With the considerable training assistance provided by the Qods Force and by Hezbollah, the emergence of the Jaish al-Shabi could be a substantive step toward a Hezbollah-like, proto-Shiite militia that gives Iran another lever of influence within pro-regime areas of Syria.⁴³

The NDA and Popular Committee militias are expanding their range of responsibilities from simply erecting checkpoints to participating as auxiliary forces in operations in neighboring armed-opposition-controlled districts. NDA and Popular Committee fighters have reportedly become very important to the Syrian military's operations in the southern Damascus suburbs, through which the key southbound thoroughfares of Damascus International Airport Highway and Highway 110 run.⁴⁴ Shiite jihadist militias, especially those composed of veteran fighters from Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and other Shiite communities, are reportedly being supplemented by elite Hezbollah fighters, further bolstering Syrian military operations in the capital's southern suburbs.⁴⁵

As an Assad-led statelet is formed, a type of grim sectarian cleansing could take place through the expansion in strategic areas of the government's systematic demolition of Sunni-majority slum areas that have served as centers of gravity for the armed opposition. According to Syrian government officials in Damascus, slum areas account for more than 20 percent of the city's 26,500 acres of settled land, and these officials assert that the demolition plans have been ongoing since 2008 and are not part of a policy of forced expulsion. Illegally built neighborhoods, believed to account for more than 40 percent of Syria's prewar housing construction, were generally tolerated by Damascus officials and in some areas connected to utilities including electricity, potable water, and landline telephone service. Many of the inhabitants of these neighborhoods were impoverished migrants, a large number of them ethnic Kurds and ethnic Arab Sunni Muslim tribesmen from rural communities in Syria's north-eastern Jazirah region (Raqqqa, Hasaka, and Dawr al-Zawr governorates) and in the Houran plain and Deraa governorates south of Damascus.⁴⁶ One particular slum area in northwest Damascus, a Sunni-majority neighborhood nicknamed Mezze Basateen, is particularly noteworthy because it was being demolished while the large adjacent Alawite-majority neighborhood of Mezze 86 was left intact.⁴⁷

Brutal, months-long Syrian military sieges of five strategic Sunni-majority neighborhoods in the Damascus suburbs—al-Moadamiya in the west, Ghouta and Douma in the east, and Yarmouk and al-Hajar al-Aswad in the south—threaten to inflict both defeat upon the armed opposition and human suffering upon civilian populations.⁴⁸ Starvation in al-Moadamiya has become so acute that local clerics have issued a fatwa permitting the consumption of dogs, cats, and donkeys. Clerics sympathetic to the armed opposition in Douma have declared that only property owned by non-Sunni sectarian communities, specifically Christians, Druze, and Alawites, may be seized and sold for purchasing weapons or used for humanitarian purposes.⁴⁹

Humanitarian relief convoys into these besieged, opposition-controlled areas of Damascus often cannot reach the most at-risk civilian population.⁵⁰ United Nations undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief Valerie Amos has been particularly blunt about the scale of the military pressure and the destruction being experienced in the besieged, rebel-held Damascus suburbs. She stated:

The politics of Syria are everywhere, but the people are not. I have just been to Damascus, where the situation is continuing to deteriorate. The sound of mortar fire is constant, never-ending. Whole suburbs are being shelled indiscriminately and entire towns are under siege. People and communities who have lived peacefully together for generations are turning on each other.⁵¹

The battle to retain control over Damascus, perhaps more than in any other Assad-government-controlled area of the country, combines the application of the Syrian military's conventional advantages in artillery, airpower, and mechanized warfare with the steadfastness and aggression of government-supported communal militias. Damascus's restive suburbs, including the regime stronghold of Mezze 86, more than its central, administrative districts, are where the Assad government will seek to retain its rule over the city. Fighting in these suburban areas, while not entirely a straightforward battle between sectarian communal groups, is increasingly exacerbated by local grudges rooted in longstanding economic rivalry. The pattern of conflict, particularly in the city's western and southern suburbs, is coming to closely resemble the ethnic and sectarian firing lines of Beirut and Tripoli in Lebanon, and Baghdad, Kirkuk, and Mosul in Iraq.

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4

Imagining the Economy of the Statelet

AN ASSAD STATELET WOULD face vexing economic issues right from its start as an autonomous political entity, as it would be threatened by the country's extremely high rate of unemployment, the severe disruption, amounting to more than 67 percent, of farming, trade, and manufacturing, and the \$18-billion-and-growing cost of prosecuting the war and lost economic productivity. The United Nations reports that approximately 5 million Syrians, or one quarter of the country's prewar population, are internally displaced. Most of the estimated 200,000 internally displaced Syrians in the Latakia governorate are believed to be Sunnis.¹ More than half of Syria's hospitals are not functioning or are destroyed, one fifth of Syrian families do not eat a week out of each month, and the cost of rebuilding damaged housing and public infrastructure is currently estimated at \$30 billion and growing.²

One way in which the regime has reportedly sought to keep a hold on the industrial sector is by entrenching loyalists to dominate industries not disrupted by the war, further strengthening the oligarchical relationship of the state and loyalist syndicates.³ And even as a statelet would inherit an economy severely damaged by the war, Assad confidently implied in a recent interview that his government is already in talks with Chinese firms to plan for the rehabilitation of Syria's industries following the war's conclusion.⁴

A recent report released by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Food Programme studied the impact of the civil war on Syria's economy. Because the report's drafters were only given access to government-controlled areas in the Homs, Tartus, and Hasaka governorates, with Homs and Tartus likely to be part of an Assad-led statelet, the report's findings are particularly pertinent to its potential economy

coming out of the war. Economic challenges to a potential statelet identified included a loss of agricultural and manufacturing capacity, overpopulation and rising labor costs, and severe pressure on Syria's food security that could result in significant levels of starvation. Relatedly, the report identified a more than 100 percent increase in the cost of labor in cities likely to fall within the statelet, such as Tartus and Homs; the halted production and dwindling availability of livestock vaccines; the severe decrease in the production of important crops such as sugar beets, cotton, and wheat, along with reduced production from livestock; and, due to a near collapse of the wheat and flour supply chain, greater difficulty in obtaining and higher costs for state-subsidized bread, which is essential to the average Syrian's daily caloric intake. Bread is essentially only available to the average Syrian from government-controlled distributors and subsidized bakeries.⁵

The statelet's potential control of the country's two major port areas, Latakia and Tartus, would be a benefit only if the Mediterranean could be used to move products from rehabilitated industrial areas such as those in Homs and if imports intended for Lebanese markets, for instance, can be moved on land routes across the Tartus and Homs governorates.⁶ The destruction and disruption caused by the fighting in and around the city of Homs amounts to another obstacle for an accelerated recovery of Syria's once-growing industrial economy. Homs, one of Syria's most important manufacturing areas and perhaps its most important manufacturing area for agricultural and chemical products, is also located, like most of the potential Assad-led statelet, in the fertile Orontes River basin, making agriculture and agricultural industries its most important economic activities. Prior to the war, Homs was considered Syria's most important site for the manufacture of petroleum products, the production of refrigerators and air conditioners, food processing, sugar processing from the country's large sugar beet industry, and the treatment of phosphate for fertilizer.⁷

Homs's relative proximity to the Syrian Mediterranean ports of Tartus and Latakia, and the northern Lebanese port of Tripoli, made it a popular destination for cargo trucks in the region. Homs's strategic position on these routes made it a prime location for the development of nascent prewar export industries, including car assembly plants for Iran's Khodro Company and oil refineries.⁸ While the conflict in the southern

Homs governorate has disrupted overland routes traditionally traveled by trucks to Homs, such traffic could return in the event that security imposed by the Syrian military and its auxiliary forces holds. This is particularly important for Lebanon's agricultural economy, as western Syria has traditionally been the primary transit route through which Lebanese farm produce is exported to regional markets, especially Turkey.⁹

Another possible avenue for economic development in the statelet would be Syria's natural energy reserves, with a particular focus on the potential offshore resources in the Latakia basin. The Assad government would have a few options for profiting in the energy arena, such as from current oil wells situated in the Jazirah region of northeastern Syria and potential offshore energy reserves in the Latakia basin of the eastern Mediterranean. In order to have some means to extract revenue from oil wells now outside of government control, the regime would need to maintain its patchwork influence via its northeastern outposts in and around the cities of Dayr al-Zawr, Hasaka, and Qamishli, and its tacit ties to newly autonomous local actors in these regions, such as the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) and Arab tribes. Tribal groups in eastern Syria are reported to have engaged in business dealings with agents of the Assad government involving the sale of oil extracted from the region, unintentionally helping the regime sidestep sanctions imposed on the sale of Syrian oil by the European Union.¹⁰ While this arrangement may not necessarily continue into a postwar period, it does demonstrate that the Syrian government can work pragmatically to maintain its patchwork influence even in areas dominated by the Kurds or the opposition.

The country's potential offshore energy resources, which would be located off the coast of regime-controlled areas, would promise to provide the greatest potential future energy-related revenue for an Assad-led statelet. The exploration and development of potential energy resources off the coast of the Latakia and Tartus governorates would need to be developed in consultation with the Assad government, which would presumably still be the statelet's *de jure* sovereign authority, and the exploration and extraction could be undertaken by a number of actors. In an interview in June 2013, Assad suggested that his government had already been in contact with Russian energy firms to proceed with exploration and potential exploitation of Latakia basin resources in the near future.¹¹

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5

For and Against the Creation of a Statelet

FROM THE ASSAD REGIME'S perspective, maintaining control of all Syria's prewar territory is the preferable outcome of the civil war. All the same, the regime might derive certain advantages from ruling over a contracted area. The various upsides and downsides of a statelet are outlined here.

Cases for the Statelet

A central argument for the creation of an Alawite statelet would be to prevent further bloodshed and communal conflict in Syria. The reasoning would be that, given the destruction, displacement, and killing that have occurred in the war, the Syrian government and its supporters (i.e., the Alawite community) would be unable to coexist with Syria's Sunni majority.¹ Here, one might find an analogy in the late twentieth-century Balkan states, where members of various ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups could not reconcile their subnational loyalties with a genuinely felt patriotism. In this scenario, unable to rule in the name of Arab nationalism, the Alawite community would most likely retreat to Jabal al-Ansariyya and forge an autonomous political entity with allies in other minority communities, including the Christians and Ismaili Shiites of the western governorates of Latakia, Tartus, and Homs.²

The possibility of ethnic splitting in Syria was foreshadowed in a 2010 study covering Syrian perspectives on the potential for Islamist militancy and sectarian conflict. The widespread awareness of such a possible outcome centered on potentially bitter conflict between Alawites and Sunnis—but those surveyed also identified an opportunity for the Alawite community to retreat to Syria's coastal regions. In particular, Alawites were referred to as belonging to the "coast," as being akin to foreigners

in Damascus, as being “internal Jews,” and as being acceptable as equal Syrians and true Muslims only if they converted to Sunni Islam, thereby removing their exclusionary sectarian identity. Implied in the survey results was an undercurrent of ill will toward the perceived totalitarian and practically foreign rule of the Alawite community over the country. The resulting social tension was seen by some Sunni respondents as hypothetically necessitating the separation of Alawites, presumably in their own coastal enclave, from the country’s Sunni majority.³

Parallels to the possible movement and concentration of ethnic populations in Syria may be found in the Lebanese civil war of 1975–1990. In the Lebanese conflict, aggressive sectarian groups (whether Maronite, Sunni and Shiite, or Druze) sought to clear antagonistic communal groups from their enclaves; in the Syrian context, the “aggressive” groups may be seen as the Alawites, the antagonists as the Sunnis. By creating a buffer zone between its enemies and its coastal homeland, the Alawite community would be able to fight from a position of strength and consolidate itself in a defensible region, thus helping ensure its survival against all foes. Rather than try to hold on to power in Damascus, the Alawites, under the command of Bashar al-Assad, may eventually be more likely to retreat to their stronghold and engage in a protracted war with their communal enemies, with the assistance of foreign patrons, a precedent that occurred in Lebanon.⁴ For Assad’s allies, such as Iran and Russia, the potential benefit of a statelet would be to serve as an additional proxy with Hezbollah for Iran and to provide Russia with another strategic ally in the Mediterranean to curb U.S. interests.

Cases against the Statelet

While Bashar al-Assad’s ally Iran might want to create an Alawite party and militia that would be the Hezbollah of Syria, the cost of propping up an entirely independent Assad-led statelet against likely resistance from regional foes such as Israel and Turkey might argue against the creation of such an entity.⁵ The Turkish government, in particular, which has a significant Alawite population in its southern Hatay province, bordering Syria’s Latakia governorate, in a historically disputed region, would potentially feel threatened enough by the prospect of Turkish Alawite secessionist sentiment to intervene against the creation of an Assad-led statelet along Turkey’s southern border.⁶

As appealing as a statelet might be to the Assad government and its supporters, Arab nationalism may well serve as another ideological impediment to its creation. Across the Arab world, sentiment still adheres to the idea of a unified Syria, as carved out, along with the other states of the modern Middle East, by the French and British empires from the Ottoman remains in the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement. On this count, the population transfers of Greeks from Turkey and Turks from Greece following the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, and between India and Pakistan following partition in 1947, are unlikely to be repeated in Syria due to Arab nationalist objections. According to this line of argument, even though de facto partitioning occurred in Lebanon as a result of the civil war, the sectarian enclaves that were formed were never intended to receive distinct legal status.⁷

Notes

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6

Hezbollah and the Axis of Assad's Narrative of Resistance

THE MILITARY INTERVENTION of Hezbollah in the Syrian civil war has drawn considerable attention. Confirmed Hezbollah involvement has occurred, first, in restive spots directly adjacent to the areas of Lebanon where the organization has large constituencies, such as al-Qusayr, the Zabadani exurb of Damascus, and Qalamoun. These areas either border or are close to Hezbollah's traditional Beqa Valley stronghold. A second area of Hezbollah involvement is tied to its sense of religious obligation to protect Damascus's southern suburbs around the Shiite shrine of Sayyeda Zainab. Hezbollah fighters, in collaboration with Iran's IRGC, are also reported to be essential to the training of NDA and Popular Committee fighters and in specialized roles in force reconnaissance of armed-opposition-controlled districts. They further serve in assassination squads seeking to eliminate charismatic and powerful rebel leaders.¹

The numbers of casualties suffered by Hezbollah's military due to its involvement in the Syrian conflict are highly disputed, with hundreds reported to have been killed.² Often, slain Hezbollah fighters are brought back to Lebanon after having "died performing their jihadi duties." Suggestions from its Lebanese and regional opponents that Hezbollah has been bleeding its manpower in Syria rather than confronting Israel have been met with scorn by the party's leadership.

Hezbollah's military forces may yet emerge from the Syrian conflict stronger than they were before, especially if some semblance of the Assad government's rule is maintained. The party's military forces are gaining invaluable experience in clear-and-hold urban warfare, mountain warfare, and counterinsurgency combat generally against disciplined and committed militant Salafist and Salafist jihadist armed opposition foes who are as convinced as Hezbollah that they are fighting an epochal battle for the con-

trol of Syria. Military techniques reinforced to Hezbollah fighters in the course of the Syrian civil war could prove extremely useful in future communal wars in Lebanon or in a potential Hezbollah invasion of the Galilee region of northern Israel. Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah declared in a February 16, 2011, speech that Hezbollah soldiers would be able to seize the Galilee from Israel, and Hezbollah-controlled media have even gone so far as to produce an interactive graphic representation for an international audience depicting the manner in which the group might conduct its invasion.³

Echoing this message, one important Hezbollah official, Nabil Qaouk, stated, “Despite the Syrian crisis, and despite political and media pressures, the resistance today is at the highest levels of readiness. Tens of thousands of Hezbollah fighters in the South are ready at any time to respond to an Israeli attack and emerge victorious from it, creating the Galilee equation that Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah promised.”⁴

Hezbollah’s Existential Battle in Syria

Rather than focus on the dangers of intervention in Syria and whether or not that intervention furthers Hezbollah’s stated goal of defeating Israel, the organization’s leadership prefers to emphasize the parity between its resistance in Syria and its past activities against Israel in Lebanon. Nasrallah has effectively established the tone of the evolving narrative of resistance delivered to pro-Assad partisans in Syria and Lebanon; the emphasis is on the need to wage a defensive jihad against the forces of al-Qaeda and the cavalcade of Salafist jihadist fighters in Syria supported by Gulf Arab states. The Hezbollah chief also asserts to his potentially war-weary constituents that not only has Hezbollah been committed to the survival of the Syrian regime, it has also been prepared to join Shiite jihadists from Iraq, Iran, and other Shiite regions around the world to defend the important Sayyeda Zainab shrine.⁵

The Hezbollah role in the Syrian-military-led campaign to capture al-Qusayr has become a symbolic victory used by the Lebanese group’s leadership as an example of the steadfastness required to confront and overcome a foreign-backed, Salafist-jihadist-led campaign against the Syrian and Lebanese people. Justifying Hezbollah’s commitment to helping the Assad government defeat the Syrian revolutionary movement at al-Qusayr, Hezbollah’s deputy secretary-general, Naim Qassem, built on Nasrallah’s narrative and stated to his constituents, “The al-Qusayr accom-

plishment is a severe blow to the project of the American-Israeli-Takfiri trio and a glowing point for the project of the resistance in Syria.”⁶

Nasrallah asserts that the conflict in Syria continues primarily due to the intransigence of the Saudi government, which he describes as the “tap” from which all the armed opposition groups draw resources. He further states that the Saudi-led project in Syria has failed and that the Saudi government is “very angry because it did not achieve its goals...they brought tens of thousands of fighters from all over the world, sent money and weapons.”⁷ Hezbollah’s logic of resistance in Syria, which has been closely adopted by the Assad government for use with the Syrian people, offers a potentially powerful recalibration of the themes of struggle and resistance to oppression that are traditionally utilized by the organization and its Syrian and Iranian allies in the “Axis of Resistance.”

In an increasingly unstable regional atmosphere, Hezbollah’s theme of steadfastness in support of beleaguered communities resonates, especially given the prospect of ethnic and sectarian cleansing linked to a foreign plot. The coverage by outlets sympathetic to Hezbollah and the Assad regime of wartime events affecting the pro-regime, Shiite-majority towns of Kafr Nubl and Zahra, in the Aleppo governorate, usefully exemplify the application of the resistance narrative. Coverage of the siege at Kafr Nabl and Zahra emphasized that a blockade imposed by armed opposition “*takfiri*” and “Wahhabist” groups, especially Jabhat al-Nusra, was subjecting the towns to a humanitarian crisis. The reported beheading of thirty young townsmen who were resisting attacks from the armed opposition groups, which had accused the victims of belonging to paramilitary *shabbiha*, was highlighted as an example of the horrifying threat posed by the Syrian armed opposition to civilian populations who disagreed with the revolution’s objectives.⁸ Kafr Nabl and Zahra, like al-Qusayr, were positioned by media sympathetic to Hezbollah and the Assad government as the next site for Hezbollah humanitarian military intervention.

Although the Hezbollah leadership’s arguments for intervention in the Syrian civil war may be unconvincing to the group’s local, regional, and international opponents, the perceived existential threat presented by Salafist jihadists in Syria and their regional comrades-in-arms and allies in neighboring countries worries non-Sunni communities in Lebanon and Syria.⁹ Nasrallah’s statements on the anniversary of the end of the July 2006 war with Israel succinctly capture the ethos of the pro-Assad-axis

resistance narrative. These remarks were also made in response to the July 9, 2013, and August 15, 2013, car bombings in the Shiite-majority southern Beirut suburbs of al-Ruwais and Bir al-Abed that, together, killed 27 and wounded more than 250. Responsibility for the attacks was claimed by a little-known Syrian Salafist armed opposition group, “Aisha, Mother of Believers, Brigade for Foreign Missions.” Nasrallah attempted to move beyond the bald language of sectarian mistrust and communal fear and toward a universal message that could appeal to a pan-sectarian, even Sunni, audience. Nasrallah, in his remarks, emphasized the theme of righteous steadfastness in a long, twilight existential struggle against forces bent upon murder and destruction. He stated:

If you claim that you are defending the Syrian people and punishing Hezbollah over its intervention in Syria, I tell you two things: You, the *takfiri* groups, are the harshest killers of the Syrian people. You even kidnapped and killed Christian priests who are supporters of the opposition. You kill children and explode mosques. As for us, we fight with our values. We have never killed a captive, while you prosecute captives in daylight. We have never killed citizens, and in some of our battles, a large number of martyrs fell in order to protect citizens, and all of what is said about massacres committed by us are lies and fabrications.... One of our responses to such explosions is: If we had 1,000 fighters in Syria, they will become 2,000, and if we had 5,000, they will become 10,000, and if the battle with those terrorists required that I go with all of Hezbollah to Syria, we will all go for the sake of Syria and its people, Lebanon and its people, Palestine and al-Quds, and the central cause. We put an end to the battle, and we set a time for this battle to end, as we triumphed in all our wars with Israel, if you wanted us to enter a fierce battle with you, I assure to everyone that we will triumph against *takfiri* terror.¹⁰

Applying the Resistance Narrative to the Syrian Conflict

The Assad regime’s evolving narrative of resistance used to justify its continued authority would be important for the maintenance of its rule in a western Syrian statelet. The statelet’s survival would depend upon regime-tolerant communities holding their ground and joining the fight against the

armed opposition, particularly the most dedicated militant Salafist fighters. Correspondingly, the resistance narrative promoted by the regime is developing in the context of sectarian animosities and communal strife, demonstrating to its adherents that Syria is engaged in a long, twilight struggle against an al-Qaeda-sponsored enemy supported by the imperialist designs of Israel, the West, and Gulf Arab nations.

In the first months of the demonstrations, Bashar al-Assad never missed an opportunity to refer to a foreign conspiracy, implying imperialist forces behind the unrest.¹¹ The head of Saudi Arabia's intelligence services, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, was a particular early regime target regarding accusations of a foreign plot behind the demonstrations.¹² More broadly, regime narratives of resistance have been useful in alternately establishing the government as the defender of particular sectarian communities, such as Alawites, Christians, and Druze, or as the torchbearer of Arab nationalism (or regional resistance) against imperialism. On this count, reports indicate that early in the demonstrations, regime agents sought effectively to aggravate communal fears, particularly among Alawites, against the predominantly Sunni opposition, which was widely reported to be infiltrated by foreign conspirators bent on weakening the resolve of the Syrian people to confront regional imperialism.¹³

Developing a narrative of resistance against a conspiracy supposedly concocted by hostile foreign states is not new for an Assad-led government. Bashar's father, Hafiz, insisted that the civil conflict waged between the government and the militant Islamist Fighting Vanguard organization from 1976 to 1982 was directly linked to a CIA and Israeli scheme to weaken the Syrian state and impose imperialist objectives on the Middle East region.¹⁴ Certain characteristics of the resistance narrative propagated by Hafiz, especially the qualities of steadfastness, struggle, and sacrifice, are well established in the popular consciousness of pro-regime loyalists.¹⁵ These concepts are particularly well suited to regime-tolerant communities in the current conflict, the worst in the country's modern history and one of the direst in the region's modern history.

Regime appeals to its supporters to remain steadfast and to struggle against a vicious enemy encompass the glorification of martyred Syrian army soldiers and their adjunct local defense force fighters. Drawing martyrs from all regime-tolerant Syrian communities, whether minority or Sunni, the Assad government is attempting to develop a wartime narrative according to which all Syrians are engaged in a great existential struggle

that will either secure the country's future or see it fall into ruin.¹⁶ The Assad government's emphasis on the virtues of martyrdom, struggle, and resistance to its loyalist communities parallels Hezbollah's justification for its involvement in the Syrian civil war, and the credibility and survival of both the Assad regime and Hezbollah's leadership are now tied to victory in the war.

All the same, the image of a united war front in pro-regime communities within a potential future statelet has been shaken by reports of local militia leaders, particularly in the Alawite-majority areas of Latakia and Tartus, who are asserting their authority. These militias are believed to be operating semiautonomously, instigating sectarian violence, and profiting from the war through bribes extracted at checkpoints they erect and war spoils they collect from local (mainly Sunni) communities.¹⁷ The potential social power structure in a contracted Assad-led statelet would be determined not only by the wartime experience of local *qabaday* ("strongmen") who have risen to support the regime but also by the means through which minority communities support the Assad government and the willingness of former armed opposition communities to reintegrate into an Assad-led polity following the cessation of their hostilities. It is likely that the Syrian military will try to reduce the influence possessed by these newly empowered strongmen, including perhaps by subordinating their militias under a formal Syrian security force structure. Such moves are apparently already under way.¹⁸

Even with the armed opposition's challenges to its rule, the Assad regime would still maintain a strong ability to exert its authority in the statelet's core regions of western Syria. In addition to retaining its conventional military power, including the advantages that come with having an air force and substantial artillery, the Assad government can maintain its power with the support of often communally organized armed forces that have been guided by the IRGC's Qods Force, Hezbollah, and—in Damascus—militant Iraqi Shiite groups with ties to Iran. Apart from the Shiite jihadist groups located principally in Damascus's southern suburbs around the Sayyeda Zainab shrine, these fighting groups promote pan-sectarian affiliation, although they tend to assume the dominant affiliation of their communities of origin and include the NDA, Jaish al-Shabi, and Popular Committee militias.

In the event that the current conflict continues into the foreseeable future, NDA units and the Popular Committee militias will likely continue

to form the nucleus of a battle-tested, locally oriented “regional guard” within the statelet. These military forces provide a means for regime-tolerant Syrians to participate in the conflict in a manner that fits the Assad government’s “official terms of national citizenship,” which stress both obedience and loyalty to the state and the current civil war’s sociopolitical reality of communal tension and conflict.¹⁹

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7

Toward an Assad Statelet

WHATEVER SIZE OR SHAPE a contracted Assad-led entity might take, it must be emphasized that this outcome, through the de facto partitioning of Syria, would represent a defeat for the Assad government. It is highly doubtful that the current Syrian government would expect, if it survives, to emerge from the civil war with anything less than complete or, at worst, limited control in regions it once governed, such as the more remote Kurdish-majority areas in the northeastern Hasaka governorate. Logic dictates that under the war's present circumstances, given the Assad regime's patchwork control in areas beyond its western coastal and Damascus bases of support—and given the reportedly successful integration of NDA and Popular Committee militias as auxiliaries to the Syrian military—the regime has little incentive to cede its rule. This even applies to areas where rebel rule is strongest, such as the Idlib, Aleppo, and Dayr al-Zawr governorates.

Likewise, the long-term and perhaps permanent contraction of the government's authority to cover a mere statelet would necessitate an event on the magnitude of sustained international military intervention, or an active Assad government calculation that pulling back from its nationwide rule would be the best means to bargain for power in a postwar period.

The formation of an Alawite-dominated coastal enclave in Latakia and Tartus would likely indicate the armed opposition's success in overcoming the Syrian military at different contested fronts throughout the country, and would almost certainly result in the Assad government's abdication and the corresponding disappearance of the Damascus-based security state. An exact process through which the Alawite enclave would be formed, build a viable economy, and maintain international relations,

and the extent to which it could maintain defensive deterrence over its would-be assailants, would be determined by the scale of Syrian military resources it could muster and locate within the enclave. Also, the Alawite enclave's degree of autonomy from the rest of Syria would depend on factors potentially outside its control, principally whether or not international military intervention had caused the Assad government's drastic contraction and which of the victorious armed opposition forces had caused its retreat and thus could subsequently dictate the terms of a transitioning Syria. The formation of an Alawite enclave would also likely result from a weak and divided postwar national government administering the transition from Assad's rule.

Further, the likelihood of an autonomous Alawite enclave will be lower should an effective and inclusive political transition from the Assad-dominated state be executed, and greater if a process of contraction is enacted by the Alawite core of the Syrian security apparatus. This process would likely lead to the gradual withdrawal of Syrian state support for the National Defense Army/Popular Committee security scheme, except in locales such as the northern al-Ghab plain and northern Latakia where organized fighters in Alawite villages would be useful to "hold the line" in tense village wars against potential enemies of the enclave. Significant, and forced, Alawite "return migration" from areas where community members had settled in large numbers, especially in the Homs and Hama governorates, and in the city of Damascus, and the reciprocal forced migration of Sunnis from the Tartus and Latakia governorates, could very well be the sad price paid for the negative peace won through autonomy or sectarian partition.

While an autonomous Alawite enclave seems an unlikely outcome should the opposition triumph over the Assad government, militant groups associated with the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army, and by extension the Syrian National Coalition, may—under pressure from U.S. and other international backers and allies—countenance an Alawite enclave or autonomous region within a postwar federal government in Syria. This would perhaps hold up as long as Assad, his family members, and their allies representing the core of the old security state were removed from power, exiled, or put on trial for crimes against humanity. The powerful armed opposition Islamic Front coalition and militant Salafist groups seeking the imposition of an Islamic caliphate in Syria and the wider Levant, including al-Qaeda affiliates ISIS and Jabhat

al-Nusra and their international jihadist allies fighting in the country, are more likely to fight to evict any autonomous Alawite enclave on ideological grounds, regardless of any standing political bargain struck between the opposition and core Alawite communities.

The more likely scenario than that of a postwar Alawite enclave comprising just the Latakia and Tartus governorates would be a larger and more inclusive Assad-controlled entity in western Syria. In such a scenario, whether or not the Assad government eventually sought to retake areas fallen to the opposition, the statelet's long-term economic and demographic stability would necessitate the territorial authority of the Assad regime over more than an Alawite enclave in northwestern Syria, with or without continued control of Damascus. Further, the demographic and social heterogeneity of Syria, particularly in the western coastal regions and the wider Orontes River basin where the statelet would be formed, suggests that the Assad government will continue promoting itself as the guarantor of a once and future secular order and as a bulwark resisting the flood of murderous Salafist militancy.

An Assad-led statelet would also likely seek to assuage the anxieties of Sunnis, who represent not only a national majority but also a majority of those Syrians resisting the regime's rule. Emphasis is likely to be placed on programs such as the Reconciliation Committees, the promise of an avenue to protest for reforms in return for refraining from participation in or support for the armed opposition, or Sunnis' agreement to form local Popular Committee militias under the government's authority. Other opposition-supporting communities, such as the Ismaili-Shiite-majority village of Salamiya, east of Homs, are also likely to be offered such bargains in exchange for tolerance of the Assad regime's rule. Yet those communities and armed opposition groups that do not demobilize and reintegrate themselves into the statelet's authority will most likely be confronted militarily. Should they be defeated, these groups' members will be either captured or killed or forced to migrate either to areas of Syria under opposition control or to neighboring countries. The presence of Syrian refugees, now numbering an estimated 2.5 million, particularly in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, is testing the resources and patience of the leadership in these countries.

A related and highly difficult challenge to be resolved by an Assad-led statelet would be the degree to which it would accept the resettlement of internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refouled refugees forced to leave

areas sympathetic to the opposition. These areas could include the city of Homs and its northern suburbs such as Rastan and Talbisah, Sunni villages in the Orontes River-fed al-Ghab plain of Hama, and opposition-sympathetic districts of vital coastal cities including Latakia, Baniyas, and Jableh. One component of the difficulty in deciding whether to accept such IDPs and refugees would be economic, given already high rates of inflation and the increased cost of living in regime-controlled cities of coastal Syria owing to in-migration from disputed areas. A further obstacle is found in the damaging effects of warfare and international sanctions. Each of these factors throws into question what the statelet could sustain regarding migration from war-affected communities outside its control. Indeed, in a postwar Syria—for the regime or the opposition—caring for and reintegrating Syrian refugees into their previous regions of residence, with many communities significantly damaged and abandoned, will be one of the most pressing challenges.

8

Policy Implications of an Assad Statelet

RECENT STATEMENTS ATTRIBUTED TO opposition leaders associated with the Syrian National Council and its allies focus on battlefield successes as a measure of the country's future direction.¹ Nevertheless, the Syrian regime and its security forces—along with adjuncts such as the National Defense Army and the Popular Committee militias—have generally acted with more unified purpose and cohesion than the more diverse and fractious political and armed opposition.

As noted before, a future Assad-led statelet's functioning will depend as much on the strength and effectiveness of its Syrian nationalist ideology (equivalent to support for the present government with a few tweaks) and its resistance narrative as it will on its proficiency in areas associated with defense, economics, and international relations. The social and ideological cohesion of the statelet would hinge largely on the extent to which residents agree that the continued functioning of the Syrian Arab Republic has a positive impact on their lives. In turn, policymakers must be mindful that military support for the armed opposition, in whatever form it takes and especially if it involves significant and direct military intervention, is likely to exacerbate tensions directed toward the United States and its allies by the large segment of the Syrian population that remains tolerant of Assad's continued rule.

Although support for the Assad government may, in many instances, have resulted from the regime strategy of exploiting communal tensions, such support has evolved over the course of the war—and often reflects an authentic belief in the narrative claiming a foreign conspiracy against the country. Support may also emerge from a memory of stability and the regime's relative tolerance for diversity prior to the war. Sadly for Syria,

the logic of communal violence and sectarianism that struck its neighbors Lebanon and Iraq is now a major factor influencing decisionmaking in the war. Further, the government-tolerating segments of Syria's population may be reorienting themselves toward a highly sectarian and communally organized form of social mobilization that relies on individual group solidarity in the face of ascendant Salafist jihadist organizations among the armed opposition.

The potential Alawite control over the Syrian coast, which would include the country's two international ports, would not likely be accepted by the opposition or a post-Assad government that served as a rival to the Alawites. In the event that Syria is partitioned, perhaps the best-case scenario for a sectarian Alawite polity would resemble the federal system used by Iraqi Kurds to create the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq, an effort that was largely driven by civil conflict and insecurity in the rest of Iraq.²

Another negative impact of the development of the statelet would be a gerrymandered political entity with tenuous boundaries that viciously guards its autonomy and has an uncertain relationship with its regional neighbors and other potential political entities to be formed within Syria's territory. Indeed, a heavily armed and recalcitrant Assad-led statelet would prove difficult to reintegrate into a politically transitioning Syria and would provide the regime with an improved negotiating position in the context of a "grand bargain" political settlement to the conflict.

It is in this context that policymakers should be mindful of the difficulty of convincing government-tolerating Syrians, a number of whom have taken up arms and become acculturated to the war, to willingly exchange loyalty to the government for faith in the political opposition. Short of signs of the complete collapse of the Assad government, Syrians who tolerate its rule are not likely to switch their allegiance. An Assad-led statelet would reflect the *de facto* partitioning of Syria and would lead to a negative peace, likely resulting in bloody sectarian and ethnic cleansing, with long-term geopolitical consequences for the region.³

Such an outcome would indicate the failure of the most important effort in a postwar Syria: the long confidence-building project of engendering intercommunal trust among Syrians, both by concerned actors within the international community and by Syria's diverse sectarian and ethnic communities.

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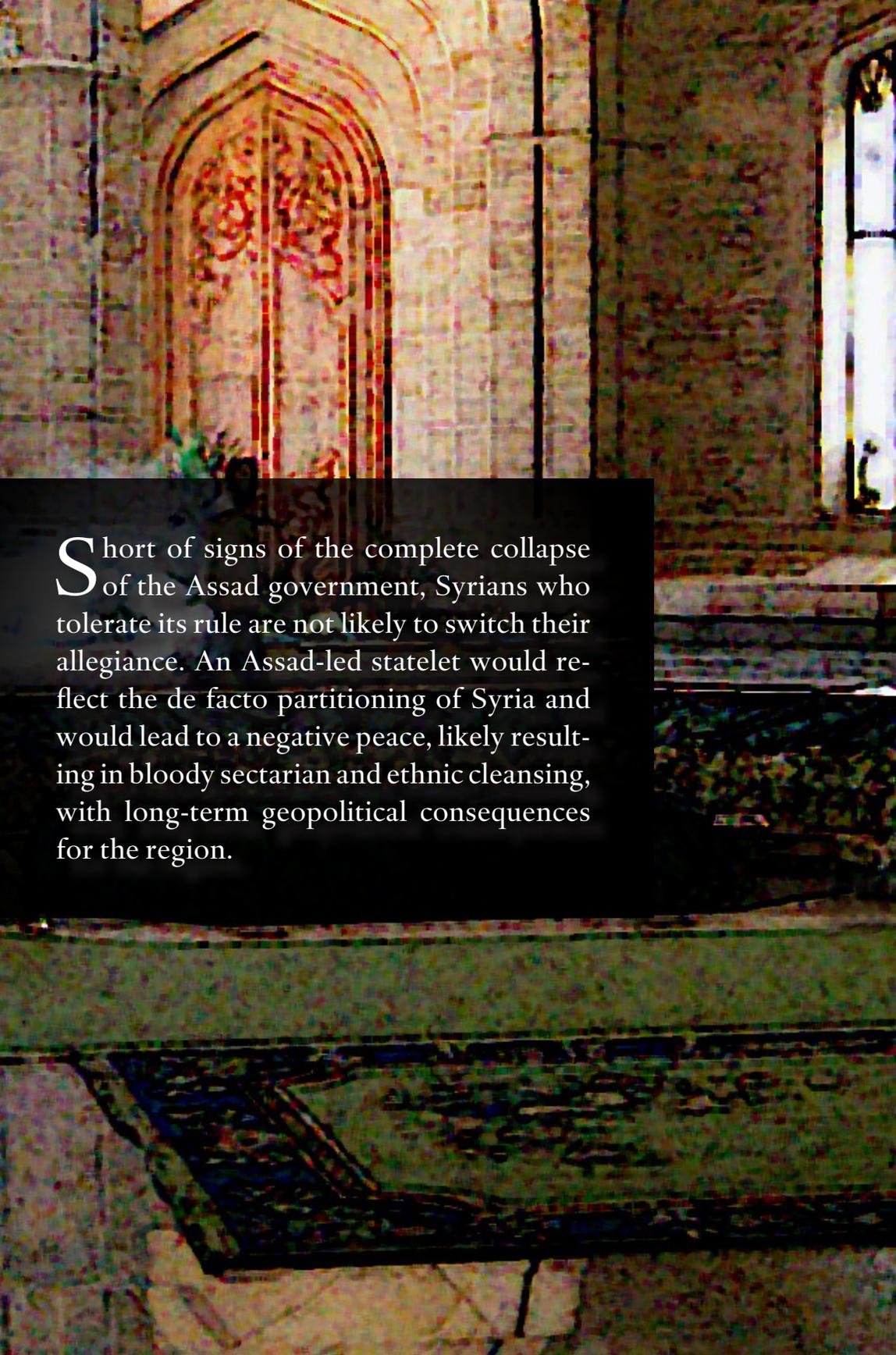
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