

Not Alright With Syria's Alawites

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Assad's power base is not monolithic, and rising discontent could serve as a vital opportunity to reconcile various Syrian religious groups.

Within Washington policy circles, many officials regard Syria's minority Alawite sect as a homogenous bubble within Syria. However, in recent months, there have been signs of infighting within Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's crony clan and growing resentment among Alawites, many of whom belong to the military and state security apparatus and upon whose support Assad's power rests. In fact, the Alawites who want to see the end of the Assad regime may finally be over their fear of losing power to the Sunni-led opposition. Washington would do well to pay attention to these fissures between the families of the Assad regime and its Damascus associates, as well as to the pro- and anti-Assad communities residing in the coastal region along the Mediterranean Sea.

Signs of rising tensions within Assad's close circles first emerged in August when Douraid al-Assad, the president's cousin, called for the resignation of Syria's defense minister, Fahd Jassem al-Frej, following the execution of around 120 Syrian soldiers at the Tabqa airbase by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). According to state media outlets, another cousin of Assad, Hafez Makhoul, the intelligence chief in Damascus, "voluntarily" stepped down. Meanwhile, Alawite activists along the country's coastal region called Freij "the minister of death" in their #Speak Up Against Assad campaign, protesting against the high number of Alawite deaths since the start of the conflict. That same month, a pro-regime lawyer was arrested after initiating [the Twitter hashtag meaning "where are they."](#) (<https://twitter.com/syriasky4>) to ask for the names of the 120 or so soldiers whom ISIS was holding captive. Alawite activists have increasingly called for regime change, as noted in a recent statement by one group that calls itself the Syrian Alawite Congregation.

More than 8,000 pro-regime military personnel from the Jableh district in the primarily Alawite coastal region of Latakia have reportedly been killed since the beginning of the revolution, not to mention the thousands from other Alawite regions who have died. Grieving families took to the streets in Latakia in August demanding the return of

their sons' missing bodies and chanting, "God willing we will attend your son's funeral." In early October, hundreds of Alawites in Homs angrily called for the ouster of Governor Talal al-Barazi after a car bomb exploded near Akrama Al Makhzomi Elementary School, killing 17 and injuring dozens of others, mostly children. Protesters have similarly called for Assad's toppling in the port city of Tartus, and, according to activists on the ground, prominent families from the Alawite community in Latakia are secretly discussing Assad's replacement.

The division in the Alawite community isn't new: it reflects the backlash against Assad's favoritism toward the so-called al-Kallasieh clan, to which his family belongs. This clan has been protected in its coastal enclave from the burdens of war while other Alawite communities, such as the Haidariya, are forced to go out to the front lines and fight the Syrian opposition. These resentments underline the class tensions among the Alawites: families of government officials live in luxury while families in the rest of the community struggle to feed their children. Also, Alawites who live in the capital are far more connected to the Assad family and have more privileges and access to power. In contrast, the average farmer or small shopkeeper residing in the Latakia mountains or even in Qardaha, the hometown of the Assad family, has little political leverage unless he has family members working for the regime.

Ironically, Alawites who have lived in Damascus for many years tend to identify as Damascenes, except when it is necessary or advantageous to note their privileged relationship with the political elite. Such a connection gives them access to cherished services and greater freedom to, on occasion, shirk the laws and norms of the land, even those enshrined in the constitution. It is often enough to speak or pretend to speak in an Alawi accent, considered the accent of power, on the streets of Damascus to get away with practically anything and to scare non-Alawites into submission.

In Latakia's mountainous region, the socioeconomic division is highly visible: both extreme poverty and extreme wealth can be found in a single neighborhood, including Qardaha. Members of the Assad clan and their friends and allies were known to flaunt their fancy villas, motorcycles, and cars, which often lacked license plates, indicating that they were smuggled into the country. Driving past the barefoot children who live in small mud homes with shoddy electricity and water, these privileged few behaved like royalty, even if perhaps they were. Today, these humble villagers are the ones paying the heavy price of the war, as Assad's government uses their sons and daughters as human shields at the front lines; they are also the ones rebelling against the regime, but they are powerless. In fact, the leaked photos of Syrian torture victims -- surreptitiously given to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum by a member of the Syrian military who goes by the name of Caesar -- serve as vital evidence that members of the Alawite community were also victims of Assad's brutality.

The emergence of a split within the Alawite community into pro- and anti-Assad camps, however, isn't necessarily good news for the Syrian opposition. For example, during the recent Tartus demonstrations, Alawite protesters called for toppling both the Syrian opposition and Assad. A military coup against Assad also appears unlikely, since some hypothesize that, as discontent rose in Assad's inner circle, he orchestrated the 2012 assassinations of members from his own crisis-control cell, including his brother-in-law, Assef Shawkat.

Although the Alawite political elite has become associated with corruption and abuse of power, some of the Alawite communities in the countryside are less tainted. Bashar's father, former president Hafez al-Assad, who ruled Syria from 1970 until his death in 2000, was considered not only a political leader by the Alawites but also a patriarch and a religious figure, despite his early disdain for Alawite traditions. Therefore, the broader Alawite community would not rebel against the son of its revered leader. In an ideal world, Alawites and Sunnis would reconcile their differences and cooperate in toppling Assad and defeating ISIS. But the reality remains that such an option is unlikely. There is a massive lack of trust between these two sides, and also between Sunnis and the religious minorities, such as the Syrian Kurds and Christians. The explosive distrust comes from the lack of any social contract that defines the rights and responsibilities of each group and from the failure of the Syrian opposition to

address what would become of the Alawites and these myriad communities should it take power.

The Syrian revolution in 2011 was peaceful for the first six months, during which all segments of society protested against Assad's dictatorship. But it ultimately devolved into sectarian bloodletting as a result of Assad's partnership with Iran and of the emergence of jihadists within the opposition force. An end to the current conflict requires not just removing Assad but doing the tough work of undoing his entire autocratic regime. Replacing Assad with another leader, as some Alawite families allegedly advocate, is not enough. A regime makeover that would put in place a democratically elected president is only the first step in resolving the current conflict in Syria. To do so, building trust among all Syrian communities is key, through power-sharing agreements and an inclusive new constitution.

For now, Assad still has the support he needs from Alawite families -- and perhaps the fear for their fates under a rebel-controlled Syria is the main reason he does. But it is crucial to highlight that the Alawite community is not monolithic and that discontent has become manifest in recent months, which could serve as a vital opportunity to reconcile the various religious groups. Washington should not limit its allies in Syria to moderate rebel forces and local tribes; opposition-minded Alawites are just as important. Alawites need the right to protest against Assad, and the Syrian opposition should be prepared to take advantage of this situation as a starting point to reconciliation. Political and military support from the leaders of the free world, particularly the United States, is also needed to bring an end to the Syrian conflict; but such support needs to recognize the nuanced divisions within the sectarian divide in order to help alleviate the political imbalances within Syria rather than add to them.

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