

# An Islamist Syria Is Not Very Probable

Apr 29, 2005



Articles & Testimony

**S**yrria's Muslim Brotherhood - banned for nearly 25 years - has been increasingly vocal recently in its criticism of the regime of President Bashar Assad. Earlier this month, for example, it demanded the organization of free elections, cancellation of the state of emergency and dismantlement of special courts, warning that the ruling Baath Party would bear "sole responsibility" for the damage the country suffered if it failed to heed this call.

The Brotherhood's increasingly aggressive stance, coupled with developments in Lebanon and reports that the U.S. has held talks with Syrian opposition figures, has fed speculation as to whether Assad will survive the current tumult. Although few in the West would mourn the regime's collapse, many are concerned that such a development would allow an Islamist group such as the Muslim Brotherhood to take control, which might be even less appealing to the United States in particular. This appears unlikely, however, though the information vacuum often makes predicting internal Syrian dynamics difficult.

Several factors have sparked concern about the prospect of Islamist groups taking power in Syria. Many jihadists are traveling from and through Syria on their way to Iraq, raising questions as to how active Islamist extremists are inside Syria and how much Damascus tolerates or encourages their activities.

Syria's basic demographics are a key factor as well. Much of the Syrian leadership, including Assad, hails from the Alawite sect. Alawites represent only 15 percent of the Syrian population, while Sunnis comprise more than 70 percent. Many Sunnis would likely prefer not to live under Alawite control.

In addition, some in the West have speculated about the growing influence of Islam in Syria - as a religion and, perhaps, as a political force. A recent Washington Post article titled "Religious surge alarms secular Syrians" described several new religious trends in the country: young women are more likely to wear headscarves, privately-funded mosques are being built in Aleppo, and Muslim clerics are demanding an increased role in politics. In fact, Syrian Vice-President Abdel-Halim Khaddam, a Sunni, recently issued a statement urging citizens to act more in accordance with Muslim laws and traditions.

The Brotherhood's increasingly vocal criticism has also helped foster the impression it is a powerful opposition force. Following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, for example, the Brotherhood faxed a statement to the London-based Al-Sharq al-Awsat newspaper calling for an investigation into the murder and lamenting the sharp deterioration of relations between Syria and the "Lebanese people," who could be heard "shouting in unison 'Syria, get out.'" The statement noted that "Hariri's death might be the straw that will break the camel's back as far as Syrian-Lebanese relations are concerned," and that "no one can absolve the Syrian leadership of guilt."

The Brotherhood's statements were noteworthy in that they appeared to represent a shift in their approach during the past years, where they focused on engagement with the regime. When Bashar Assad took office in 2000, for example, the Brotherhood took steps to reach out to the new president. In May 2001, the group prepared a "National Honor Pact," accepting the democratic process and, for the first time, recognizing the regime's legitimacy.

The move appeared to pay off: In 2004, senior Syrian officials, including Assad, met with leaders who had ties to the Brotherhood. As Muhammad Habash, a Syrian parliamentarian, put it: "The commonalities between the Islamic movements and [the] national movement are stronger than at any time before." The signs were so promising, in fact, that this newspaper ran an article in May 2004 titled "Damascus, Brotherhood set to reconcile?" In the end, however, the negotiations appeared to fizzle, bringing the two sides no closer together.

As background, the Brotherhood became an important player in Syrian domestic politics in the 1950s, eventually establishing itself as a strong opposition group against the regime. In response to the Brotherhood's growing power, the government banned it as a political party in 1958. Relations with the Syrian regime turned far worse in the late 1970s, when violent clashes became frequent. The last straw for the regime was when the Brotherhood attempted to assassinate President Hafez Assad in June 1980. The following month, the government passed a law, still in place today, making membership in the Brotherhood a capital offense. The confrontation came to a head in 1982 in Hama, where the regime, demonstrating the lengths to which it would go to eliminate the group, killed 5,000-10,000 people, including many Brotherhood members. After the massacre, many of the survivors left Syria and moved to Western Europe, particularly Spain and Germany.

The Brotherhood's recent actions appeared to illustrate not only its apparent strength but also the weakness of the Syrian regime. Indeed, there have been indications the regime is taking conciliatory measures toward the Brotherhood. For example, the authorities are said to be planning to return property they confiscated from Brotherhood members in the area of Hama in 1982.

Despite these developments, the Brotherhood, or any other Sunni Islamist group, would have great difficulty filling the vacuum if Assad's regime collapsed. The Brotherhood's strength appears to be overestimated, and it never fully recovered from its clashes with the regime. Indeed, after the regime crushed the group in 1982, it abandoned its strategy of direct confrontation. Although members continued to operate and meet in mosques - often under the auspices of moderate Sunni clerics - they did not resort to violence. In comparison to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the Syrian Brotherhood has a far less educated membership, boasts a far less wealthy constituency (drawn primarily from the lower middle class), and poses a much less potent a political threat. Other Sunni Islamist groups in Syria are even less well equipped to assume control.

The Brotherhood's alleged connections to the global jihad, particularly to Al-Qaeda, are also most likely overblown. Although it is plausible that individual members have joined jihadist groups, this is not necessarily reflective of the views of the organization as a whole. By and large, members in Europe do not maintain close ties to the main organization in Syria. Moreover, the Brotherhood may realize that Western pressure on Assad will be helpful to their cause, making it unlikely to embrace anti-Western actions.

In addition, there are other forces in Syria working against a potential takeover by the Brotherhood or other Islamist groups. For example, Kamal Labwani, an opposition leader released from prison five months ago, emphasized that the opposition is fighting on two fronts, and that "the fight against the government has ... priority" over the fight "against the fundamentalists." Other obstacles include powerful Sunni merchants in Syria who have an interest in maintaining the status quo, a middle class which largely turned its back on the Brotherhood after the 1982 crackdown, and the lack of well-trained Sunnis in the military.

Any speculation on the prospects for a change of regime in Syria must, however, include the caveat that it is largely guesswork. Gauging the strength of Syrian Islamists is particularly difficult. The regime forbids research on the topic, and Brotherhood members are reluctant to speak with outsiders. That's why increased understanding of Islamist groups in Syria is vital before one can offer a definitive account of their strengths, weaknesses and

ambitions. But that said, something has definitely changed in relations between the Brotherhood and the Syrian regime, and the months ahead will show how significant this is.

Michael N. Jacobson is a Soref Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



Daily Star (Beirut)

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

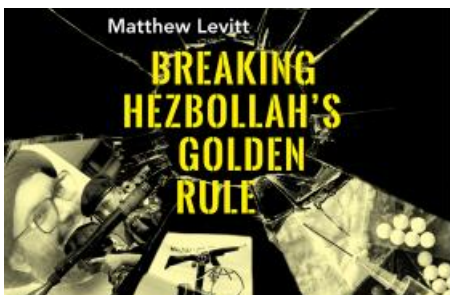
### [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

## TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)