

## When Minorities Rule in the Middle East (Part I):

### Syria

Dec 22, 2004



#### Brief Analysis

On December 15, 2004, Ammar Abdulhamid and Martin Kramer addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Mr. Abdulhamid, a Syrian writer and intellectual, is the coordinator of the Tharwa Project, a program designed to shed light on the aspirations and concerns of religious and ethnic minorities in the Middle East. He is currently a visiting fellow at the Saban Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the Brookings Institution. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks. [Read a summary \(templateC05.php?CID=2212\)](#) of Dr. Kramer's remarks.

When discussing the topic of "minority rule," it is worth remembering that all dictatorships in fact are a form of minority rule, whether it be ethnic, religious, or bureaucratic. Once a minority establishes control over a nation, a crisis of legitimacy for the government will naturally arise. However, after the initial crisis fades, the main objective of those rulers is to establish representative coalitions that function under their control and rules. The norm is that nearly everybody is eventually represented within a system of parochial interests. In order to democratize one cannot champion the cause of the majority, but must instead champion the cause of civic education and citizenship - otherwise, the country will fall into the trap of sectarian politics.

#### Alawite Rule

This is very clear in the Syrian example. It is not alone in the Arab world, where sectarian minority rule is more the rule than the exception. In Syria, the Alawites, considered by Sunnis a heretical sect, have established their dominion -- a dramatic psychological change for that community after centuries of being outsiders, often politically marginalized. The Alawite rise to power is complex.

At the turn of the 20th century, all form of "isms" -- communism, socialism, etc. -- were introduced into an extremely traditional world in Syria. Syrian society was in fact divided into neighborhoods, a world most accurately reflected in Syrian art. People lived and intermarried in their neighborhoods, customs about which Syrians still feel nostalgic. When the ideologies came to Syria, people could not betray their sympathies by adhering to a larger identity or nation, whether Arab or Syrian nationalism. Most Syrians simply could not make this leap. Even the political parties that emerged at the time were representative of certain sects. Communist parties soon split along ethnic lines, reflecting an Arab/Kurdish dichotomy; the Baath Party enclosed many religious minorities; and so on.

That said, the interparty competition witnessed mixed loyalties, as parties attracted people based on ideology but those same people also remained loyal to their hometowns and their sects or ethnic communities. For instance, after the Baath came to power in 1963, it was by no means only Alawite, though that was its stronghold.

After 1966, the circumstances led to Alawite domination. The army had been largely Alawite due to a French colonial policy of encouraging military recruitment among minorities, to which the Alawites responded. The disproportionately Alawite character of the military created a legitimacy problem. An indicator of that is how de facto ruler Hafez Assad left Amin al-Hafiz, a Sunni Arab, as the nominal president of the Republic until he enacted

the "corrective movement" in 1970, when he tried to create a coalition of parties in order to legitimize his rule. He appealed to several parties, Nasserite, leftists, and to a lesser extent the Muslim Brotherhood -- many of which were later enclosed in the "National Progressive Front." He considered this quota system a possible means to escape from the continuing legitimacy crises from which similar regimes constantly suffer. The entire process was, however, a sham, given the fact that the constitution states that the Baath is in fact the ruling party. The process was therefore not credible and created a certain amount of Sunni disaffection, especially among the members of the Muslim Brotherhood, who refused to take part in the National Progressive Front.

The legitimacy that Assad garnered as a result of the Corrective Movement and its aftermath, therefore, was very shaky at best. His initial approach was to present himself as a champion of secularism, a position that eventually resulted in armed clashes with the Muslim Brotherhood. But as an Alawi in power, Assad had much trouble establishing himself as the champion of secularism. After 1982, and the massacre at the city of Hama, which put an end to the Muslim Brotherhood uprising, Assad gave up on the idea of secularization, with the associated educational reforms, civil status laws, and other social changes. He focused instead on gaining legitimacy by taking a stricter stance on Arab-Israeli affairs, "imperialist designs," and other matters of foreign significance. But, here too, he failed: he did not liberate the Golan nor did he establish greater Syria including Lebanon.

#### Assad Junior

Bashar Assad inherited a weak regime in which a consortium rules over dysfunctional institutions. Even the Alawites are dissatisfied with the regime, one from which the populace, on average, benefits very little. Sectarian feelings are growing among all sects, whose coexistence is merely a superficial adjustment at this stage.

A result of that decentralization is the aid that Iraqi insurgents receive from local allies, many of which do not belong politically to the rule of Damascus. People in many regions of Syria act mainly upon local rather than national loyalties. The sad reality is that the Syrian nation per se is not widely accepted, that is, few see Syria as a national entity.

However, the past century has seen the development of a large secular current in Syria -- indeed, throughout the Middle East -- covering all the different sects and communities. This current can be seen in educational systems, modern societal norms, and cosmopolitanism. A return to the Ottoman system of communal-based rule, apparently suggested by some, would not satisfy many who have evolved beyond confessional identities.

#### Velvet Transformation

Many signs in today's Syria are positive. Civil society has become more active as a result of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The elements of uncertainty introduced into the region have brought about waves of dissatisfaction and activism, many indicators of which are clear in Syria today, even within the pro-regime element. The upcoming change should not be called a revolution, because the events that are forthcoming will not be strictly populist but will also include reformist elements in the regime as well as international actors.

It is important that change not come about from American tanks. The concept of "regime change" at the hand of outsiders is a recipe for chaos and national surrender. However, because Syria can benefit from the invasion of Iraq, the endgame should be to push for a "velvet transformation," to borrow a phrase from the Czech velvet revolution. The solution is for the state to take the initiative to open up the political system and design a modern national pact -- the alternative is a political explosion. The Arab world has a nascent civil society that can benefit both from internal dialogue and from foreign pressure in order to produce a change in the political system. This vision can be developed within an alliance of reform-minded officials, civil society figures, and global powers. ❖

## 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)