

Who Rules Syria?

Bashar al-Asad and the Alawi 'Barons'

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Jun 21, 2000

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.



Brief Analysis

The orderly transfer of power following the death of President Hafiz al-Asad, in accordance with Syria's constitutional succession mechanism, has highlighted the role of the formal power structures of the Syrian state: the presidency, cabinet, National Assembly, and, above all, the Ba'th party. It has, however, obscured the crucial role played by members of the informal power structure--the Alawi "Barons" who head key army and security posts--in the accession of Bashar al-Asad.

Although the formal power structure imbues the regime with an aura of republican respectability, the members of the informal power structure ultimately ensure its survival. The Barons generally played a minor role in day-to-day decision making under Hafiz al-Asad, who tended to rely on civilian advisers and cabinet ministers--many of them Ba'thist apparatchiks--for advice on domestic, foreign, and economic policy. Yet, the Barons played a prominent role in fighting the Islamist opposition between 1976 and 1982, in thwarting Rif'at al-Asad's 1984 coup attempt, and in ensuring a smooth succession following the death of the president. They are likely to continue to play a vital role in the coming months, as the regime consolidates power and either tries to stay the father's course, or charts a new course under Bashar. How Bashar manages his relationship with the heads of the army and security services will be key to his survival and the stability of Syria in the coming years.

The Regime's Informal Power Structure. Following the death of heir apparent Basil al-Asad in 1994, the president began laying the groundwork for Bashar's succession, incrementally removing those commanders believed to be opposed to a hereditary succession or who, because of their seniority, might be expected to harbor ambitions of their own. Today, nearly all the members of the informal power structure are men appointed by the elder Asad in the last six years, but it is not clear this process had run its course before he died.

The Security Services. . . . The regime has four key security organs that monitor the population for signs of dissent or opposition, while keeping an eye on the activities of the other intelligence services. Military Intelligence (MI) is headed by Maj. Gen. Hassan Khalil (Alawi), who succeeded long-time MI chief Lt. Gen. 'Ali Duba (Alawi) upon his early retirement February this year. Maj. Gen. Ghazi Kanaan (Alawi), MI chief in Lebanon, is second in rank to Khalil, and he reportedly has ambitions to lead MI. Nevertheless, Maj. Gen. Assef Shawkat (Alawi) is considered de facto

head of MI; though junior in rank to Khalil and Kanaan, he is close to Bashar and is married to Bashar's influential older sister, Bushra. Shawkat reportedly enjoys far-reaching powers by dint of his Asad family ties. The General Intelligence Directorate (GID) is headed by Maj. Gen. 'Ali Hourri (an Ismaili), though real power is exercised by internal branch chief Brig. Gen. Bahjat Suleiman (Alawi), and external branch chief Brig. Gen. Ayyad Mahmud (Alawi). Maj. Gen. Muhammad Nassif (Alawi), who served as de facto head of the GID under a series of non-'Alawi directors in the 1990s and was considered a pillar of the regime under Hafiz al-Asad, is currently deputy chief of the GID, though his influence appears to have waned. Air Force Intelligence (AFI) is headed by Maj. Gen. Ibrahim Huwayji (Alawi), who succeeded longtime AFI head Maj. Gen. Muhammad al-Khuli (Alawi) in 1987, as a result of a bungled attempt to place a bomb on an Israeli El Al airliner in London in 1986. The nature of Huwayji's relationship with Bashar is unclear, though the organization is considered less influential than it was under al-Khuli. Finally, Political Security is headed by Maj. Gen. 'Adnan Badr al-Hassan (Alawi), who has been the point man in recent security talks with Turkey. Nothing is known, however, about his relationship with Bashar.

... And the Praetorian Guard. Several military units near Damascus have key regime maintenance roles. The Republican Guard, the most important unit, is an armored division and the only military unit allowed in the capital. It is headed by Maj. Gen. 'Ali Hassan (Alawi), who succeeded Maj. Gen. 'Adnan Makhluaf (Alawi) as commander in 1995 after the latter (a nephew of the late president's wife) had a tiff with Bashar. Bashar's younger brother, Maher, is a colonel in the Republican Guard and commands a brigade (as did Bashar before he became president), while Bashar's personal secretary, Brig. Gen. 'Abd al-Fatah al-Qudsi, heads Republican Guard security. Unit 549 (an antitank regiment also known as the Struggle Companies), which is headed by 'Adnan al-Asad (a cousin of Bashar), provides an outer ring of defense for the capital, in conjunction with the 3rd and 4th Armored Divisions (the last of which is Rif'at al-Asad's old Unit 569--the Defense Companies.) Finally, the Special Forces--consisting of eight to ten independent commando regiments and the 14th Airborne Division--are deployed in the vicinity of the capital and Lebanon. They are headed by Maj. Gen. 'Ali Habib (Alawi), who succeeded 'Ali Haydar (Alawi) in 1994, after the latter reportedly expressed opposition to a hereditary succession. Several of these units played a key role in quashing major outbreaks of antiregime violence in Aleppo in 1980 and Hama in 1982, and they were involved in the succession struggle between Rif'at al-Asad and his rivals in early 1984.

Other key officers include Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. 'Ali Aslan (Alawi), who is considered an apolitical professional officer and Bashar loyalist, and the army's three corps commanders, who command forces on the Golan (I Corps), in Lebanon (II Corps), and in central Syria (III Corps).

Bashar's 'Inner Circle.' In recent years, many members of the "Old Guard" have been replaced by younger officers who owe their position to Bashar's accession. The most important members of Bashar's inner circle are "Young Turks" in their thirties or early forties, such as Assef Shawkat, Bahjat Suleiman, Ayyad Mahmud, 'Abd al-Fatah al-Qudsi, Mahir al-Asad, and Firas Tlas (the son of the defense minister). The inner circle also includes several "uncles" from the Old Guard--men in their sixties such as 'Ali Aslan, Mustafa Tlas (the public face of the informal power structure), and perhaps Muhammad Nassif. All are Alawis, except for Tlas and his son, who are Sunnis (though some members of the Alawi inner circle have forged marriage or business ties with members of the Sunni community, to broaden the social base of the regime). The status of several members of the Old Guard--men such as 'Ali Duba, Muhammad al-Khuli, and 'Ali Haydar--is unclear. (Duba and Haydar reportedly opposed Bashar's succession and are probably being closely watched.) It is possible that they (with Bashar's exiled uncle Rif'at) could pose a nuisance should they desire to do so.

Future Challenges. Although still relatively inexperienced, Bashar is no neophyte at Syrian politics--having had six years to prepare for the presidency--and he is surrounded by young but seasoned advisers. It remains to be seen whether Bashar has the sang froid required to rule Syria. But several men around him--Mahir and Shawkat in

particular--reputedly possess the necessary qualities, should the need arise, to play the role of ruthless enforcer (the role Rif'at played in the past). At any rate, the selection of Bashar probably forestalled a violent power struggle among the Old Guard. Preventing destabilizing power struggles among his inner circle will remain one of Bashar's greatest challenges.

Bashar is now the hub of the vast, intricate security apparatus his father created, which he is running with the help of several seemingly loyal security chiefs. To ensure his own survival, he will have to become a consummate master of this system, playing his security chiefs off against one another while ensuring that none grow too powerful, and that rivalries do not get out of hand. This will require constant tending, deft personal diplomacy, and a Machiavellian touch. Cleavages in the informal power structure will likely derive from competition over what really matters in a thugocracy--power and money. Solidarity, however, will be based on personal friendships, marriage and business ties, and the survival imperative. Rumors of trouble already exist: Mahir is reputed to dislike Shawkat and reportedly shot him during an altercation last November. Finally, Bashar will need to thwart possible alliances between army and security personnel; neither have the means to stage a coup on their own, but together, such a confederation could spell danger for him. He will also have to worry about possible plotting by those who feel slighted by the succession--particularly disgruntled members of the Old Guard who have been put to pasture. Time will tell whether he is up to the challenge.

Michael Eisenstadt is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.

Policy #472

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

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



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

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

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

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

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Lebanon \(/policy-analysis/lebanon\)](/policy-analysis/lebanon)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)