

Charting Sectarianism in the Syria War

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February 8, 2018

Does Syria's climate of ethnic and sectarian hostility stem from seven years of war, or do its social fissures predate the conflict?

On February 6, Fabrice Balanche and Andrew Tabler addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Balanche is a research director at the University of Lyon 2 and a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross Fellow in the Institute's Program on Arab Politics. The event marked the release of Balanche's new Institute monograph [Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War: A Geopolitical Study](#). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

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Bashar al-Assad will not fall easily because of the ingrained sectarianism that characterizes his regime. The idea that Syria would follow the path of Tunisia during the Arab Spring or Algeria during its uprising turned out to be an illusion; that kind of change was impossible because society was too fragmented along sectarian and socioeconomic lines. The revolt was never truly democratic, and in certain locations it was anti-Alawite and anti-Shia. Today, religious and tribal loyalties are more important than Syrian national identity.

Sectarianism is not new in Syria, of course. The Ottomans were the first to divide Syrian society along sectarian lines, and the Assad family has used these same divisions to rule the country since the 1970s. Bashar has long placed tribesmen and fellow minority Alawites in key positions while balancing his administration with select figures from the Sunni Arab majority. Alawites are concentrated within military and intelligence agencies, which explains why it took the country so long to explode. When the war broke out in 2011, nearly 70 percent of state employees were Alawites, and the sense of security they felt with Assad in power kept them from joining the opposition. When the regime was weak in the war's initial stages, Assad's only areas of control were minority enclaves, especially Damascus. The protestors, mainly Sunnis at first, were never able to breach the sectarian belt around the capital.

The country's sectarian cleavages are also visible in its geography. Unlike western Syria, the eastern half of the country remains undeveloped because Assad did not extend many government development efforts there. In the south, the population of Deraa is mainly Sunni with some Christians, so sectarian violence there has been minimal. The protests originated in Deraa but stopped short of Jabal al-Druze, where most of the population remained loyal to Assad. Druze who joined the opposition were later sentenced to death by the Sunni Arab jihadist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, driving home the lesson that loyalty to one's sect is paramount, and that leaving Syria is the only other option.

Social and tribal cleavages have also played a part in the war. Aleppo is emblematic of the social fissures. The

city's Sunni middle and upper classes did not support the opposition movement among lower-class Sunnis; in fact, wealthy Sunnis in West Aleppo were quick to declare allegiance to the regime because they were afraid of an uprising. Similarly, Syria's tribes tend to support whichever side seems most likely to win. The opposition has accused the tribes of being pro-regime, which is true.

Currently, local Arabs in northern and eastern Syria are particularly frustrated by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), which has subverted tribal leadership while taking over many areas and largely ignored the recommendations of tribal councils in Manbij and other locales. Even in Raqqqa, a city with no sizable Kurdish population, street signs that used to be in Arabic now include Kurdish, and councils are headed by Kurdish officials. PYD leaders seem to believe that it is their job to show Arabs the proper way to govern, treating their occupation as a "democratizing" project. Yet the situation is stable for now because Kurdish forces provide security.

Regarding the crisis in Afrin, many Arab fighters in the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces will not be willing to fight there if asked. They joined the SDF for a paycheck, not out of any sense of duty. Assad is now waiting for them and other local Arabs to reject Kurdish leadership, hoping to exploit this sectarian fissure before attempting to secure the north.

If the United States wants to stay in Syria, it needs to invest in stabilization and reconstruction throughout areas that its allies control. Currently, aid from the U.S. Agency for International Development is nowhere to be found in Manbij or Raqqqa even though the economic situation there is terrible. Washington needs to develop a Marshall Plan for Syria—one that does not play favorites with sects but instead serves as an arbiter between them. America needs to be more involved in the north and more willing to counter Iranian interference, otherwise the Kurds are finished. If current conditions prevail, the Syrian army might be in Manbij before year's end.

For its part, Tehran continues to build roads through Iraq and Syria. It knows how to exploit local Shia and other minorities in order to prevent the Sunni majority from dominating. It may even be willing to help wealthy Syrian Sunnis gain access to Iraqi markets.

In contrast, Russia has a clear favorite, the Alawites, on whose land the Kremlin decided to build a new air base. Yet Moscow is still playing the sectarian game with the Kurds, since keeping the PYD half alive can help maintain pressure on Turkey. Likewise, Arabs in northwestern towns do not seem to welcome Ankara's involvement with open arms, viewing Turkish forces through the same lens as the Free Syrian Army. Manbij was at its worst under FSA control, with no electricity or rule of law, so Arabs will likely wait at home this time to see who wins.

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[Maps show](#) how the Assad regime has used a divide-and-rule strategy to hold onto power. Unlike Russian analysts and media outlets, Western observers have not acknowledged the importance of the country's sectarian mosaic, deeming it immaterial. Yet the regime used this very factor to turn the tide of war and reclaim much of its lost territory.

Along the way, Assad received many breaks from the United States. Washington abandoned its chemical weapons redline and has provided only narrow support for the SDF, while Iran and Russia have strongly supported the regime. This external support was a key driver behind Assad's strategy and his military progress—a factor not fully expressed in maps of regime dominance, which often fail to distinguish areas where Iranian-backed militias and other nonstate actors are in control rather than the Syrian army.

The secret to Iran's success is its ability to prop up rickety states. Tehran and its proxies are quite skillful in this regard, so Washington will need to provide aid to northern Syria if it wants locals to view America as a viable alternative to Iran. Any such plan will come with massive challenges. For now, the regime is holding much more territory than Westerners originally envisioned it reclaiming, and Syria's de facto partition is a foregone conclusion.

This summary was prepared by Jackson Doering.