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Syria's Alawites and the Politics of Sectarian Insecurity: A Khaldunian Perspective*

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Abstract

Since 2000 there has been varied academic analysis about the nature and direction of modern Syrian politics. The Syrian political crisis which began March 15, 2011 however, came as a surprise to most, and will no doubt spark a new round of debate about its causes and possible effects. One aspect that has been widely overlooked or misread is the critical role of the Syrian Alawite community in determining Syria's future. Ongoing Alawite support to the Asad regime is by no means assured. The foundations of Alawite approval of the regime have steadily eroded during the second generation of Asad rule in a process, which resembles Ibn Khaldun's theory for the decline of group 'asabiyya in the second stage of dynasties. The one resilient factor that ties the Alawite community to the Syrian regime however, is sectarian insecurity. The Asad regime requires, and promotes, Alawite insecurity in order to preserve its power. Nevertheless, there remains an opportunity, and a precedent, for Alawites to break free from this political deadlock and participate equally and openly in a 'new' Syria.

Keywords: Syria, Alawites, Ibn Khaldun, "Asabiyya", Sectarian Insecurity, "Arab Uprising".

Suriyeli Aleviler ve Mezhepsel Güvensizlik Politikaları: Halduncu Bir Bakış

Özet

2000 yılından beri modern Suriye siyasetinin yapısına ve gidişatına ilişkin çeşitli akademik analizler yapılmaktadır. Yine de 15 Mart 2011'de başlayan Suriye'deki siyasi kriz birçok kişi için sürpriz olmakla beraber hiç şüphesiz söz konusu krizin sebeplerine ve yaratacağı muhtemel etkilere ilişkin tartışmalar da artacaktır. Büyük ölçüde gözden kaçan veya yanlış değerlendirilen bir nokta ise Suriye'nin geleceğinin belirlenmesinde Suriyeli Alevi topluluğun oynadığı kritik roldür. Esad rejimine verilmekte olan Alevi desteği hiçbir şekilde garanti değildir. İbn-i Haldun'un, asabiyedeki ikinci aşama olan kavimlerin düşüşlerini açıklayan teorisine benzer bir şekilde Suriye'deki rejimin Alevi temelleri Esad yönetiminin ikinci kuşağı sırasında hiç durmaksızın sarsılmaktadır. Buna rağmen, Alevi topluluğunu Suriye rejimine bağlayan asıl etken, bu topluluğun duyduğu mezhepsel güvensizliktir. Esad rejimi kendi gücünü korumak adına hem Alevi güvensizliğine ihtiyaç duymaktadır hem de bu güvensizliği teşvik etmektedir. Yine de, Alevilerin, siyasi çıkmazdan kurtulmak ve "yeni" Suriye'nin oluşumuna ser-

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bestçe ve eşit bir biçimde iştirak etmek adına önlerinde bir fırsat ve bir emsal bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriye, Aleviler, İbn Haldun, "Asabiye", Mezhepsel Güvensizlik, "Arap Ayaklanması".

العلويون السوريون وسياسات عدم الثقة الطائفية نظرة خلدونية بقلم : ليون كولدسميث

خلاصة :

هنالك الكثير من التحليلات الأكاديمية التي تجري منذ عام ٢٠٠٠ حول هيكلية ومستقبل السياسة السورية المعاصرة. ومع ان الأزمة السياسية التي بدأت في سوريا اعتبارا من ١٥ مارس ٢٠١١ تعتبر مفاجأة بالنسبة للكثيرين، فان مما لا شك فيه ان الجدل والنقاش سوف يزداد حول اسباب هذه الأزمة والتأثيرات المحتملة التي ستولدها. اما النقطة التي لم تلاحظ جيدا او التي يجري تقييمها بشكل خاطئ، فهي الدور الرئيسي الذي يلعبه العلويون السوريون في مضمار تحديد مستقبل سوريا. ان التأييد العلوي الممنوح لنظام بشار الأسد حاليا ليس بأمر مضمون اطلاقا. وكما هو وارد في نظرية ابن خلدون التي يوضحها في «العصبية» بصدد سقوط الاقوام في المرحلة الثانية، فان الأسس العلوية لنظام الأسد في سوريا تتعرض للاهتزاز والتصدع دون انقطاع في الجيل الثاني لنظام الأسد. على ان العامل الرئيسي الذي يربط المجتمع العلوي بالنظام السوري، هو ما يستشعر به هذا المجتمع من عدم الأمان الطائفي. ان نظام الأسد يعمل في سبيل حماية قوته الشخصية على ترسيخ وتشجيع فكرة عدم الثقة هذه لدى العلويين. ومع ذلك فان ثمة فرصة وثمرات نموذج امام العلويين للخلاص من هذا المأزق السياسي والمشاركة بحرية وبشكل متساو في تكوين سوريا «الجديدة».

الكلمات الدالة : سوريا ، العلويون ، ابن خلدون ، «العصبية» ، الطائفية ، انعدام الأمن ، الثورات العربية.

Introduction

On January 10, 1401 the Tunisian scholar Ibn Khaldun stood before the gates of Damascus with the great Mongol conqueror, Timurlane.¹ The meeting was a defining moment for Khaldun, who saw in Timurlane and his warriors, the embodiment of his theory for the rise and fall of dynasties based on their level of tribal solidarity, or 'asabiyya.² Ibn Khaldun, whose experience of *Bilād al-Sham* (geographic Syria) was mainly confined to the long settled cities of Jerusalem, Damascus and Halab (Aleppo), wrote that tribes capable of strong 'asabiyya, no longer existed in Syria.³ However, fewer than two hundred kilometres to the north of where Khaldun and Timurlane were meeting, in the coastal mountains of North West Syria, resided the Alawites, a group with a distinct religion and a strongly tribal structure. In 1970, the Alawite, Hafiz al-Asad, founded a dynasty in modern Syria with the help of his group's sectarian 'asabiyya. This dynasty remains in power at the moment of this writing.

Syria's Alawites are part of the broader Alawite population who mostly live in the north eastern arc of the Mediterranean littoral, between northern Lebanon and the Cilician Plain in Turkey. In Syria, the Alawites comprise 12-15 percent of the population, or approximately three million people.⁴ Ethnic Arabs, they are generally considered, and consider themselves, a part of Shi'a Islam.⁵ Despite the political importance of Syria's Alawites, they remain vague to outside observers. Academics and international media have seldom focused with any intensity on the Alawite political role. This is largely due the Syrian regime's suppression

1 Allen Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p.1

2 *ibid*, p.3

3 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah, an Introduction to History*, translated by Rosenthal, F. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), p.283

4 It is impossible to know the exact Alawite population as there has been no census data containing sectarian information since 1960. Demographer Onn Winckler argues however, that the Syrian Alawite population is possibly much higher than the usual estimate of 12 percent. See Onn Winckler, *Arab Political Demography: Population Growth, Labor Migration and Natalist Policies*, 2nd ed. (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), p.34

5 See for example, Yaron Friedman, *The Nu ayri – 'Alawis: An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria*, (Netherlands: Brill, 2010); That Alawites strongly consider themselves part of the Shi'a tradition was apparent in interviews with three separate Alawite Shaykhs conducted in Antakya, Turkey in March 2011

of any open expression of Alawite identity. On infrequent occasions when the Alawite political role in Syria is raised, a common interpretation describes 'a dominant minority which universally supports the Asad regime.'⁶ In reality, the Asad regime is not a confessional based 'Alawite regime,' but rather a family dynasty,⁷ which actively manipulates Alawite sectarian insecurity as a key pillar of its stability.

This article proposes that sectarian 'asabiyya can function similarly to Ibn Khaldun's social or tribal 'asabiyya in terms of the rise and decline of dynasties. Sectarian 'asabiyya is however, more resilient than tribal or social 'asabiyya because of a tendency towards sectarian insecurity. This extra insecurity dimension can be a valuable political asset for a dynasty as a means of maintaining a group's support, even when other foundations of that support have eroded. This perspective is of great relevance to questions of whether the Asad regime in Syria will survive the challenges to its rule in the early months of 2011.

Ibn Khaldun's 'Asabiyya and Syria's Alawites

Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) is beginning to receive attention among social science scholars as a relevant source of theory for modern political concerns.⁸ Thus far, there are few dedicated applications of his theories to modern case studies.⁹ Ibn Khaldun did not mention sectarian identity in his theories about 'asabiyya and the rise and fall of dynasties. This was due to his own historical context and personal beliefs, which precluded deviation from the religious mainstream of Sunni Islam. In the modern Syrian context however, and indeed across the Middle East, issues of sectarian iden-

6 See for example, Mahmud Faksh, 'The Alawi Community of Syria: A New Dominant Political Force,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.20, No.2 (April 1984), pp.133-153; Daniel Pipes, 'The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Oct., 1989), pp. 429-450

7 This view was offered by former Lebanese Foreign Minister Elie Salem, interview with the author, Lebanon March, 2011.

8 Syed Farid Alatas, 'Ibn Khaldun and Contemporary Sociology,' *International Sociology*, Vol.21, No.6, November 2006, pp.782-795

9 Ghassan Salame, 'Strong' and 'Weak' States, a Qualified Return to the Muqaddimah,' in *The Foundations of the Arab State*, Vol. 1, Ghassan Salame (ed.) (New York: Croom Helm, 1987); Syed Farid Alatas, 'Ibn Khaldun and the Ottoman Modes of Production', *Arab Historical Review for Ottoman Studies* (1990) 1-2: 45-63; Syed Farid Alatas, 'A Khaldunian Perspective on the Dynamics of Asiatic Societies', *Comparative Civilizations Review*, (1993) 29: 29-51.

tity play a large part in political equations. It is no surprise therefore, that Yves Lacoste and Fuad Khuri have already raised the need to incorporate sectarian identity into the Khaldunian discourse.¹⁰

First of all it is necessary to adopt a definition of Ibn Khaldun's intended conception of 'asabiyya.¹¹ The term 'asabiyya actually predates Ibn Khaldun, The Prophet Muhammad is believed to have spoken: "Does 'asabiyya mean loving one's people? No, 'asabiyya means helping one's people in unjust actions,"¹² a definition which had obvious political connotations. Ibn Khaldun later went on to use 'asabiyya to explain the political potential of tribal groups. There is not an entirely satisfactory translation for the word in English.¹³ The root of the term 'asabiyya (عصبية), could be found in the Arabic consonants -s-b (ص ب), meaning 'to bind,'¹⁴ or in the word asab, (meaning nerve).¹⁵ It is clear therefore, how Franz Rosenthal arrived at his literal translation of 'asabiyya as 'group feeling.'¹⁶

The general consensus among scholars of Ibn Khaldun is that 'asabiyya is a notion that relates directly to the activation of latent tribal solidarity, or 'blood ties,' for the achievement of political ends.¹⁷ Thus 'asabiyya refers to something other than just a group psychology based on shared kinship. 'Asabiyya refers to how 'group feeling,' acts on the formation and endurance of states or dynasties. In short, a group with high 'asabiyya has the potential to give rise to a dynasty; then as the group's 'asabiyya declines the dynasty becomes weak and vulnerable. There is no reason to suspect that 'asabiyya cannot operate in the same way for groups with a common religious identity.

10 Yves Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldun: The Birth of History and the Past of Third World*, (London: Verso, 1984) p.90; Fuad Khuri, *Imams and Emirs, State, Religion and Sects in Islam*, (London: Saqi Books, 1990), p.52.

11 Al-Azmeh, A. *Ibn Khaldun in Modern Scholarship, A Study in Orientalism*, (London: Third World Research Centre, 1981), p.30.

12 *Hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad cited in Lacoste, 1984, p.103

13 See Al-Azmeh, 1981, p.150, for a discussion on the limitations of English translations of the original Khaldunian texts.

14 Lacoste, 1984, p.103

15 Al-Mawrid Al-Quareeb, (Beirut, 2008), p.260

16 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah, an Introduction to History*, 1967.

17 For example see, Al-Azmeh, 2003, p.30; Lacoste, 1984, p.116.

So how can the religious identity of the Alawites reconcile with Khaldun's 'asabiyya? The Alawites are comprised of several main tribes with numerous sub-tribes, therefore, can an 'asabiyya command the collective Alawite tribes? According to Khaldunian theory,

Even if an individual tribe has many houses and an internal diversity, there may exist a group feeling that is stronger than all other group feelings... and in which all the diverse group feelings coalesce, as it [was] to, become one greater group feeling.¹⁸

The common denominator for the Alawites is their distinct religious beliefs. Thus, it is possible that the religion of the Alawites across numerous centuries has constructed a form of sectarian 'asabiyya. The sectarian solidarity of the Alawites is akin to Khaldunian *asabiyya*, without the exclusive tribal agnatic characteristics of his original concept. In the modern context, a conception of *asabiyya*, which incorporates sectarian identity, may well prove more resilient than Ibn Khaldun's, social or tribal 'asabiyya. This resilience is however, closely related to the phenomenon of sectarian insecurity.

The Roots of Alawite Insecurity

A primary problem for the Alawites throughout their political history has been their somewhat mysterious religious identity, which confused observers and produced suspicion among political authorities. The academic literature on the religion of the Alawites remains minor¹⁹ and often polemic.²⁰ The best impartial definition we can apply to the religion of the Alawites is perhaps Tord Olsson's who states:

[...] The Alawites belong to a secret sect of Shia type, with striking Gnostic features. Except for the Mandeans, the Alawites seem to be the only living group of people who adhere to a mythological gnosis that has been transmitted for centuries as a religious legacy.²¹

18 Lacoste, 1984, p.106.

19 René Dussaud, *Histoire et Religion des Nosairies*, Paris, (1900); Samuel Lyde (1860); and more recently, Bar Asher & Kofsky (2003); Yaron Friedman, (2010). See also chapters in: Matti Moosa (1988), Fuad Khuri (1990), and Tord Olsson (1998).

20 Olsson, 1998, p.176.

21 *ibid*, p.168.

Without delving too deeply into the theological particulars of the Alawite religion, their Gnostic and secretive religious traditions, their belief in the divinity of Ali,²² along with their devotion to pagan beliefs such as metempsychosis,²³ have caused them to be often singled out as 'heretics'²⁴ or *Ghulat* (extremists)²⁵ by orthodox Muslims. Although Olsson states above that the Alawites belong to the Shia 'type,' their variance (perceived or real) from orthodox Twelver Shi'ism has been sufficient to cast doubt upon their religious classification.²⁶

Uncertainty about Alawites religious identity has caused them to suffer regular persecution. The early proponents of the Alawite faith fled to Syria from Iraq in the tenth century.²⁷ In the eleventh century they were forced out of the Levantine cities and into the inhospitable coastal mountains of north western Syria, ahead of the Sunni Seljuks.²⁸ Alawite marginalisation was then entrenched by three *futya* (singular, *fatwa*) by Sunni scholar, Ibn Taymiyya, between 1305 and 1318, which essentially proclaimed their creed as heresy.²⁹ Thereafter Alawites suffered major repression by the Mamluk authorities,³⁰ and further misfortune during the Ottoman period from 1516.³¹ In general, Alawites

- 22 For a good explanation of the Alawites beliefs about Ali ibn Abi Talib see, Fuad Khuri (1990) pp, 136-137.
- 23 Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, The Descendants of its Lesser Notables, and Their Politics*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), p.18.
- 24 A *fatwa* by Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya (1268-1328) proclaimed that the "*Nusairis* [Alawites] are more infidel than Jews or Christians...they are always the worst enemies of Muslims." See Daniel Pipes *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.163.
- 25 Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988), p.34.
- 26 Moosa, 1988, pp.409-410.
- 27 Friedman, 2010, pp.22-23; Matti Moosa, 1988, p.265.
- 28 Xavier de Planhol, *Minorités En Islam, Géographie Politique et Sociale*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2007), p.85.
- 29 Yvette Talhamy, 'The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 46: 2, (2010).
- 30 According to Ibn Battuta 20,000 Alawites were killed in Mamluk repressions in the early 14th century, cited in *ibid*, p.180; see also Sato Tsugitaka, *State & Rural Society in Medieval Islam*, (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp.163-175 for evidence of Mamluk repression.
- 31 Matti Moosa, 1988, p.275; M.G. Al-Tawil, *T'arikh al-Alawiyyun*, 4th ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1981), pp.394-5, cited in Talhamy, Yvette, 'The Nusayri Leader Isma'il Khayr Bey and the Ottomans (1854-58)', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 6, 895-908, November 2008, Routledge, p.895; Yvette Talhamy, 'The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 46: 2, 2010, pp.181-182; Daniel Pipes, 'The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Oct., 1989), p.436.

were treated with disdain as non-Muslims, a common Ottoman practice, for example, was to behead Alawite transgressors who stepped outside acceptable bounds.³²

This legacy of persecution firmed Alawite self reliance and particularism and was therefore a key element in the development of their sectarian 'asabiyya. In modern Syria the religious identity of the Alawites still has the potential to cause them problems in a country with a large Sunni orthodox majority. Not the least of these problems is a resurgence of conservative Islamic values in recent decades.

Alawite 'Asabiyya and the Rise of the Asad Dynasty

A ruler can achieve power only with the help of his people. They are his group and his helpers in his enterprise. He uses them to fight against those who revolt against his dynasty. (Ibn Khaldun, 1377)³³

It is incorrect to speak of Hafiz al-Asad's ascension to power in 1970 as a sectarian takeover.³⁴ There is little doubt that Hafiz al-Asad's political aspirations extended well beyond sectarian concerns.³⁵ Moreover, it was the secular aspects of Ba'athism and Arab nationalism which held considerable promise for marginalised Syrian minorities.³⁶ In the turbulent arena of Syrian politics in the middle decades of the twentieth century, however, it was only by mobilising Alawite 'asabiyya that the Asad regime could be consolidated.³⁷ The key elements of the regimes security apparatus were placed in the hands of trusted co-sectarians.

32 تاريخ ولاية سليمان باشا العادل ١٨١٩-١٨٠٤ (History of the Province of Suleyman Pasha the Just, 1804-1819), Ibrahim al-Awra, pp.205-206, translated by the author and Jean-Luc Payan, 2010.

33 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah, an Introduction to History*, p.146.

34 For examples of this interpretation see, Annie Laurent, 'Syria-Liban: faux frères jumeaux,' *Politique Étrangère* 48 (1983) p.598, Matti Moosa, 1988, pp.301-302.

35 Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Interview with this author, Paris, September 16, 2009.

36 Raymond Hinnebusch, *Peasant and Bureaucracy in Ba'athist Syria: The Political Economy of Rural Development*, (London: Westview, 1989), p.18.

37 See, Hanna Batatu, 'Syria's Muslim Brethren,' *MERIP Reports*, No. 110, Syria's Troubles (Nov. - Dec., 1982), p.19; Massimiliano Trentin, 'Modernization as State Building: The Two Germanies in Syria, 1963-1972,' *Diplomatic History*, Vol.33, No.3, June 2009, p.494; Gordon H.Torrey, 'The Ba'th: Ideology and Practice,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Autumn, 1969), p.469; Hanna Batatu, 'Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Summer, 1981), pp. 331-344.

While Hafiz al-Asad mainly established his own clan into key positions in the regime apparatus, he also took care to distribute some of the “spoils” of power with other tribes, thus preserving a broad ‘asabiyya’.³⁸

According to Ibn Khaldun, the moment a group gains power, the original ‘asabiyya’ that allowed for the capture of the state begins to decline as a result of urbanization and the resulting luxuries. The Alawites gained some benefit from having one of their own in power, although it is debateable that they were disproportionately favoured as a whole, or that they became a ‘dominant’ minority. Their living conditions, long amongst the most degraded in the Arab world, did however improve considerably under Hafiz al-Asad. In keeping with Ba’athist ideology, Hafiz al-Asad’s development programs had a genuine rural focus. Thus, the largely rural Alawites benefitted from infrastructural advances such as electricity and water supplies and new roads linking their villages.³⁹ Economically, they benefitted through agricultural subsidies and employment opportunities in the army and the large state bureaucracy.⁴⁰ In addition, patronage networks extending downwards from the Asad dynasty connected Alawites to funding through the ‘informal economy’.⁴¹ The Alawite ‘strongman’, Ghazi Kana’an, for example provided personal funding for community projects in his home village B’hamra and the surrounding region.⁴²

Overall, Alawites felt a connection with the Asad dynasty, a good example of this can be seen in the way Hafiz al-Asad would stand in the street of his hometown Qurdaha, and listen to the requests of ordinary people.⁴³ Also, there was a real sense of pride that one of their own had raised himself to such a high position. Alawites would proudly

38 Tony Badran, ‘Divided They Stand: The Syrian Opposition,’ *Mideast Monitor*, Vol. 1, No.3, September-October 2006.

39 Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 63-69.

40 ibid, see also Raymond Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba’thist Syria: Army, Party and Peasant*, (Boulder: Westview, 1990).

41 For analysis of the informal economy in Syria see, Steven Heydemann, *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East: the Politics of Economic Reform Revisited*, (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004) .

42 Anthony Shadid, Death of Syrian Minister leaves Sect adrift in ‘Time of Strife’, *Washington Post*, October 31, 2005.

43 James F. Clarity, Reporters Notebook: Syrians Are Served News In Confusing Portions, Well Spiced by Rumors’, *New York Times*, October 10, 1976.

observe “Uncle Hafiz” on television and in the newspaper.⁴⁴ Essentially, Hafiz al-Asad was an inspiration to the long impoverished Alawite community.

In the early stages of Asad rule, these socio-economic advances and sense of connection with the regime, helped uphold a broad Alawite ‘*asabiyya*’ which was not so much dependant on sectarian insecurity but rather, genuine approval of the Asad regime. Moreover, in the early 1970s, Alawites had cause to believe that their long history of social marginalisation, the result of their unorthodox religious identity, was coming to an end. The Asad regime’s bitter struggle with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which took place in Syria between 1976 and 1982, shattered that growing belief, and Alawite insecurity resumed.

Language expressed by the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters, only served to magnify Alawite insecurity, for example, Umar Abdallah wrote in his account of the conflict, “[...] it has always been the consensus of the Muslim ‘*ulama*, both Sunni and Shi’i that the Nusairis (Alawites) are *kuffar* (disbelievers, rejecters of faith).”⁴⁵ Alawites were desperate to avoid returning to their previous pitiful socio-economic circumstances and, with the notable exception of Alawite liberals who called for moderation,⁴⁶ the community backed the Asad regime resolutely in its confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood. The culmination of this struggle was the battle for Hama in early February 1982, where Alawite (but also some Kurdish)⁴⁷ troops brutally exterminated the challenge to Asad rule.⁴⁸ This catastrophic event, which claimed the lives of around 20,000 people,⁴⁹ effectively tied the fate of the Ala-

⁴⁴ *New York Times*, October 10, 1976.

⁴⁵ Umar F. Abdallah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1983), pp.48, 211.

⁴⁶ Alawite liberals, concerned about long term consequences for the sect, began questioning whether the President should “include more Sunnis in his regime...” *New York Times*, August 20, 1979; see also, Hanna Batatu, 1999, p.271.

⁴⁷ Jordi Tejel says that Kurds were also highlighted as targets for retribution after the events of Hama, 1982, see, Jordi Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds: History Politics and Society*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p.67.

⁴⁸ Omar Ilseley, ‘Syria: Hama Massacre,’ in Heribert Adam (ed.) *Hushed Voices , Unacknowledged Atrocities of the 20th Century*, (Berkshire Academic Press, 2011), pp.125-137.

⁴⁹ This figure is derived from population records of the city of Hama between 1979 and 1983, see Onn Winckler, *Demographic Developments and Population Policies in Ba’thist Syria*, (Brighton & Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), p.72.

wites to the Asad dynasty. From that moment forth the politics of Syria was dominated by the politics of sectarian insecurity.

Alawites live with the knowledge that the fall of the regime could lead to revenge against their community for the events of Hama. Paradoxically, this sectarian insecurity has proven a far more effective mode of maintaining Alawite 'asabiyya for the Asad dynasty, than if earlier Alawite hopes for genuine open emancipation in the Syrian state had occurred. For the remainder of his rule therefore, Hafiz al-Asad enjoyed Alawite support on two levels: A Khaldunian 'asabiyya, based on Alawite recognition of his authority as the leader of their community, who had brought significant improvements to their socioeconomic situation, and the added political advantage of strong Alawite support based on their sectarian insecurity about the possible consequences of a political upheaval.

Alawite 'Asabiyya in the Second Stage of the Asad Dynasty

[...] with the approach of the second stage, the ruler shows himself independent of his people, claims all the glory for himself, and pushes his people away from it with the palms of his hands. (Ibn Khaldun, 1377)⁵⁰

According to Ibn Khaldun the second generation of the dynasty, born into power and privilege, loses touch with the original 'pillars' that helped create and support the dynasty at the beginning.⁵¹ The Alawites however, expected a hereditary succession to produce a similar system to that of Hafiz al-Asad. One comment from an Alawite attendant at Hafiz al-Asad's funeral summed up this sentiment, "[...] for us the most important [thing] is that the president should come from the Asad family."⁵² Bashar al-Asad's slogan at the outset of his reign, "change through continuity,"⁵³ would have reassured Alawite expectations for continued security and socio-economic progress under the next gen-

50 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah, an Introduction to History*, translated by Rosenthal, F. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1967, p.146.

51 *ibid.*

52 *New York Times*, June 22, 2000, Susan Sachs, 'Assad Patronage Puts a Small Sect on Top In Syria'.

53 Gary Gambill 'The Lion in Winter: Bashar Assad's Self-Destruction,' *Mideast Monitor*, Vol.1, No.1, February 2006.

eration of Asad rule. The slogan was interpreted by the Sunni Syrian majority however, as an invitation to push for political change.⁵⁴ As it happened though, Bashar pursued a different strategy by changing the distribution of the “spoils” of power, while attempting to preserve the political status quo.⁵⁵

Bashar al-Asad initially conveyed a message of economic and political ‘reform’ which encouraged opposition movements and foreign observers.⁵⁶ While political reform was quickly dispensed with following the brief ‘Damascus Spring,’ economic reforms were pursued further. These included such measures as privatisation of state owned companies,⁵⁷ the encouragement of foreign investment and the opening of the Damascus Securities Exchange (DSE).⁵⁸ These ‘reforms’ ran counter to the interests of a large number of Alawites employed in the bureaucracy.⁵⁹

In effect, the Asad regime’s economic reforms opened the way for what former Syrian vice president, Abd al-Halim Khaddam, called the ‘corporatisation of corruption.’⁶⁰ Bashar al-Asad’s cousin Rami Makhlouf exemplifies this new mode of corruption whereby individuals close to the regime use family connections for “predatory self-enrichment” in the private sector.⁶¹ This new approach did not sit well with many Alawites, for example a former government employee from Qarir village spoke in 2005: “it’s like people don’t even know we live in the country...every person sitting in the chair of power cares about money, not about the people.”⁶²

54 Susan Sachs, ‘Syrians See In the Heir Possibility Of Progress’, *New York Times*, June 11, 2000.

55 Tony Badran, ‘Divided They Stand: The Syrian Opposition,’ *Mideast Monitor*, Vol. 1, No.3, September-October 2006.

56 Susan Sachs, June 11, 2000.

57 Søren Schmidt, ‘The Developmental Role of the State in the Middle East: Lessons from Syria,’ in *The State and the Political Economy of Reform in Syria*, R.Hinnebusch (ed.) (St Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria, 2009) p.33.

58 Syria launches long-awaited stock exchange as part of moves to liberalize economy’, *Daily Star*, Beirut, March 11, 2009.

59 Kjetil Selvik, ‘It’s the Mentality Stupid: Syria’s Turn to the Private Sector’ in *Changing Regime Discourse and Reform in Syria*, (University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2009), p.48.

60 Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Interview with the author, Paris, September 16, 2009.

61 Schmidt, 2009, p.30.

62 *Washington Post*, October 31, 2005.

The regime and its familial clients appropriated unchecked power and wealth at the expense of the great majority of Syrians, including the majority of Alawites. Political, and economic, power regressed into a small inner core that includes Bashar al-Asad, his brother Maher al-Asad, sister Bushra and her husband Asef Shawkat, along with cousins the Makhloufs and the Shaleeshs.⁶³ All critical posts in the military and security intelligence apparatus are under the control of closely related families. While an outward Sunni civilian face for the regime is put forward, usually in the form of Foreign Minister Walid Mu'alleem,⁶⁴ or Political and Media Advisor Bethaina Sha'aban, these individuals are basically functionaries or well compensated employees.⁶⁵

A Strained Alawite 'Asabiyya

President Hafiz al-Asad succeeded in keeping Alawite 'asabiyya unified in support of his rule. Moreover, he very skilfully managed to keep opposition currents, both inside and outside Syria, divided. After the 2005 murder of Rafiq al-Hariri and the humiliating exit of Syrian forces from Lebanon, opposition movements increasingly united against Bashar al-Asad's regime.⁶⁶ If Alawites joined with these opposition movements, or divided their loyalties, the regimes central pillar could collapse.⁶⁷ It is quite paradoxical therefore, that as Alawite support was becoming more vital to the Asad dynasty, the foundations of that support were actually eroding.

Alawites have, of course, been subject to the same repressive political climate as the rest of the population, and so, may feign support for the regime out of necessity.⁶⁸ It is therefore very difficult to know with

63 Gary Gambill, 'The Lion in Winter: Bashar Assad's Self-Destruction,' *Mideast Monitor*, Vol.1, No.1, February 2006.

64 Muallem has assumedly been 'rehabilitated' by Bashar after being retired by his father in 1997, see: *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, 'Rifa'at Assad and the Syrian Political Crisis,' Vol.1, No.10, October 1999.

65 Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Interview with the author, Paris, September 16, 2009.

66 Tony Badran, 'Divided They Stand: The Syrian Opposition,' *Mideast Monitor*, Vol. 1, No.3, September-October 2006; see also *Reuters*, March 17, 2006, for details of the formation of the National Salvation Front (NSF).

67 Ibid.

68 Lisa Weeden, *Ambiguities of Domination*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) , p.65.

any certainty the exact nature of the relationship. It is safe to assume that support for the regime is definitely not unanimous. A rare example of observable dissent by an Alawite is the prominent economics professor Aref Dalila, who was sentenced to seven years in prison for criticising the regime.⁶⁹ Dalila was involved in political activism during the ‘Damascus Spring.’⁷⁰ Alawite dissenters like Dalila seemingly receive harsher punishment than non-Alawites,⁷¹ which shows that the regime is highly conscious of a potentially “lethal” breakdown of Alawite ‘*asabiyya*.’⁷²

Another example of Alawite dissent was visible among the growing number of internet users who utilize online platforms for political activism. In June 2007 seven students were sentenced to prison terms for online dialogues about political reform.⁷³ A comment by the arresting officer was revealing, he reportedly explained that, “these youths are more dangerous than al-Qaeda, because they come from all sects.”⁷⁴ From the fact that two of the students received seven year sentences and the others, five, it could be surmised that the two more heavily punished students were Alawites. The regime has allocated significant resources to suppressing the threat of online activism, which connects Alawites, Christians and Sunnis, as well as individuals from other communities, in a kind of ‘cyber civil society,’ which can act to reduce sectarian insecurity.⁷⁵ The speed of technological advances, the ingenuity of young Syrians in bypassing government restrictions, and the sheer saturation of the country with computers and mobile telephones, many of which are internet capable, has made this element incredibly difficult to monitor completely.⁷⁶

69 Andrew England, “Damascus spring’ fades from memory”, *Financial Times*, September 13 2008.

70 David Schenker, ‘Opposition in Syria is dying with dissident’, *Los Angeles Times*, March 10, 2009.

71 Tony Badran, 2006.

72 *ibid.*

73 ‘U.S. attacks Syria sentencing’, *UPI*, Washington, June 22, 2007.

74 O. Winter, ‘Syrian Oppositionists Criticize Oppression of Young People in Syria’, *Memri*, July 31, 2007, ‘Inquiry and Analysis - No. 378’, available at, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/2315.htm>

75 ‘Syrian Intelligence Training New Recruits in UK, Germany.’ *AINA*, Washington, September 30, 2007.

76 ‘Syria: Minister of Defense says world lives in “foggy stage” After Bush Administration’, *ISRIA*, France, June 1, 2009, available at, http://www.isria.com/pages/1_June_2009_19.htm

The death of a prominent Alawite on the periphery of the new inner core, the Interior Minister and Alawite patron, Ghazi Kana'an, provides another sign of tensions between the regime and various sections of the Alawite community.⁷⁷ Ghazi Kana'an represented an alternative source of influence among the Alawite community and was widely viewed as a strong protector of Alawite interests across the various tribes. According to some sources, he was endorsed by anti-Syrian Lebanese politicians and the United States Bush administration as a possible alternative to Bashar al-Asad,⁷⁸ a move that could have effectively shifted Alawite 'asabiyya to a new leader. Kana'an and the veteran Sunni politician Abd al-Halim Khaddam enjoyed good relations and were possibly working together to bring about political change in Syria in 2005. The death of Kana'an, ostensibly by suicide, followed by the self exile of Abd al-Halim Khaddam, terminated that immediate challenge to the Asad dynasty. Among the Alawite community Kana'an's death was widely blamed on the regime. This belief caused further erosion of Alawite 'asabiyya, at his funeral mourners angrily shouted, "Why did you kill him?"⁷⁹

The dichotomy for the Syrian regime is that by harshly repressing all Alawite dissent,⁸⁰ it risks permanently undermining its support in the Alawite tribal regions. There is a general feeling emerging in many Alawite villages that the Asad regime no longer represents the Alawites, that it is a ruling family worried only with its own survival.⁸¹ Bashar al-Asad was born in Damascus into an environment of power and privilege, far from the Alawite heartland, whereas his father was born in a small stone house in Qurdaha in the Alawite Mountains. Moreover, Bashar took a Sunni wife, which proves to many Alawites that he has abandoned his sect.⁸²

Economically, many Syrian Alawites have reason to feel aggrieved with the regime. There is an increasing appropriation of wealth by the

77 Anthony Shadid, 'Death of Syrian Minister Leaves a Sect Adrift in a Time of Strife', *Washington Post*, October 31, 2005.

78 Gary C. Gambill, 'Why did Kanaan die?', *The National Post*, Toronto, October 17, 2005.

79 Kim Ghattas, 'Syria's minority Alawites fear for future', *BBCNews* November 22, 2008.

80 *ibid.*

81 Anthony Shadid, October 31, 2005.

82 Asma (Emma) al-Asad was born and raised in the Britain but is from a Sunni family from Homs.

families directly associated with the regime, while the majority of the Alawites remain impoverished.⁸³ During field research in 2009 and 2011, increasing Alawite inequality was observable in the mountains of the Alawite territory. This was symbolised by the contrast between the luxurious residence of the Asad family in Qurdaha and the tired looking houses and infrastructure of the rest of the town. Thus, serious inequality was emerging even among the Asad's own tribe. In villages in other parts of the Alawite region it was obvious that much of the socio-economic and infrastructural advances enjoyed by Alawites during the first phase of Asad rule, had slowed or even reversed.⁸⁴

According to the 'Khaldunian paradigm, as the *'asabiyya* of the original group declines the dynasty begins to rely on mercenary actors.⁸⁵ An example of this type of process is perhaps evident in the Syrian regimes increasing reliance on Iran, Hizballah, to a lesser extent Hamas, and radical Islamist groups such as Fatah al-Islam.⁸⁶ This strategy is part of the Syrian regime's reinvented 'resistance' discourse that replaces the rhetoric of 'reform'.⁸⁷ It is a dangerous strategy however, and certainly a cause of concern amongst the Alawites. There can be little doubt that the vast majority of Islamists remain fully aware of the sectarian affiliation of the Asad regime, seventeen years in the wake of the brutal repression of the Muslim Brotherhood at Hama.⁸⁸

Despite the apparent decoupling of the regime from ordinary Alawites, it is possible the *'asabiyya* of the community is actually reinforced when it appears the regime is endangered. Such a threat has been embodied in the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL).⁸⁹ This fortifica-

83 Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria, Bashar's Trial by Fire*, (Washington: Brookings Institute, 2005), p.229; see also: Kim Ghattas, 'Syria's minority Alawites fear for future,' *BBC News*, November 22, 2008.

84 This observation was also made by Anthony Shadid in 2005, see *Washington Post*, October 31, 2005.

85 Ibn Khaldun, 1967, p.148.

86 Michael Young, 'Gaza Hides a war over Arabs Future'; *Naharnet*, Beirut, July 18, 2007, *Daily Star*, January 1, 2009, 'Report: Fatah al-Islam linked to Bashar Assad's Brother-in-Law, available at, <http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/0/1928E602F2D4AEE4C225731C004D856F?OpenDocument>

87 Sami Moubayed, 'Syrian President Whips up Religious Fervour', *Gulf News*, January 18, 2009.

88 See Daniel Pipes, 1990, p.182 for a good discussion of the events that occurred at Hama in 1982.

89 Assad under pressure, Hariri tribunal worries Syria...', *Ynet*, March 20, 2009, 'available at, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3689304,00.html>

tion of Alawite 'asabiyya is perhaps demonstrated in these comments from the Alawite territories in 2005: "[Alawites] worry about the regime and the accusations against the regime [...] what would they do if the regime collapsed? [...] The people in Damascus will return to the village, and they'll find protection with their people."⁹⁰ These comments reflect the sectarian insecurity that keeps Alawites clinging to the Asad regime, rather than the type of wholehearted 'asabiyya that Hafiz al-Asad enjoyed.

The perception by Alawites that their fate is linked to the regime is actively cultivated by the regime. A bombing in Damascus on the 27th September 2008 is a good example of this. An interesting interpretation of the incident, offered by Tony Badran, involved a possible Syrian Intelligence operation that served to remind Alawites of the potential consequences of a regime collapse.⁹¹ It was also possibly part of an internal struggle within the Asad dynasty that was waged in the first half of 2008, which had claimed the lives of Brigadier General Muhammad Sleiman⁹² and possibly also top Hizballah operative Imad Mughniyeh.⁹³ Either way the Asad regime seized the opportunity to blame 'radical Islamists' who were supposedly entering Syria from northern Lebanon.⁹⁴ This served regime interests by keeping Alawite sectarian insecurity on edge.

The periodic sectarian fighting that has occurred between Alawites and Sunnis in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli since 1983 has also helped to keep Syrian Alawite insecurity intact. The last major outbreak of fighting occurred in the summer of 2008.⁹⁵ The long standing tension between the Sunni neighbourhood Bab al-Tebbaneh and the Alawite area in Jabal Mohsen has its roots in the sectarian fighting in

90 Anthony Shadid, October 31, 2005.

91 Tony Badran, September-October 2006.

92 'A Murder Mystery in Syria,' *Newsweek*, August 9, 2008, 'available at, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/151745>

93 *Die Welt*, Germany, June 7, 2008, cited in Gary C. Gambill, 'The Mysterious Downfall of Assef Shawkat,' *Mideast Monitor*, Vol.3, No.2, August 2008; see also 'German report: Assad's brother-in-law attempted coup', *Ynet*, Israel, July 6, 2008, available at, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3552992,00.htm>

94 'Syrian TV airs 'confessions' of Damascus Bombing Suspects', *Jerusalem Post*, November 7, 2008.

95 Riad Yazbeck, 'Return of the Pink Panthers,' *Mideast Monitor*, Vol. 3 No.2, August 2008,

Syria between 1976 and 1982, after which, many Muslim Brotherhood fighters fled to Tripoli.⁹⁶ Statements by Rifa'at Eid, the leader of the Tripoli Alawite community betrayed an acute awareness of his communities' vulnerability: "...we are a minority we need weapons before we need food,"⁹⁷

The Asad regime has held up Tripoli's violence as an example of how Sunni fundamentalism and intolerance of Alawites is always just beneath the surface and that the Asad regime is the only protection against this threat. Rifa'at Eid seemed to be making this point when he told a journalist in 2008, "only the capable state that has a strong army...can protect the Alawites and minorities."⁹⁸ The argument that strict authoritarian rule, is the only way to prevent sectarian violence between Alawites and Sunnis, is belied however, by the peaceful co-existence of these two communities in Hatay and Cilicia in southern Turkey.⁹⁹

Six years into Bashar al-Asad's rule it appeared promotion of sectarian insecurity was the primary method for holding Alawite 'asabiyya in place. Syrian opposition movements appeared to observe this opportunity and sought to splinter the 'asabiyya of the Alawites by reassuring them of their future security. With this goal in mind former Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leader Ali Bayanouni reached out to the Alawites in 2006, stating:

The Alawites in Syria are part of the Syrian people and comprise many national factions... [The] present regime has tried to hide behind this community and mobilize it against Syrian society. But I believe that many Alawite elements oppose the regime, and there are Alawites who are being repressed. Therefore, I believe that all national forces and all

96 '3 Syrians Killed in Ambush in Lebanon', *New York Times*, June 21, 1982.

97 Nicholas Blandford, 'Lebanese Sects aim to end clashes', *Christian Science Monitor*, September 12, 2008.

98 Interview with Kuwaiti Newspaper, Al-Rai, cited on *Naharnet*, Beirut, September 9, 2008.

99 This impression was gained during field research conducted in Antakya in March 2011; see also Prochazka-Eisl, G. and Prochazka, S. *The Plain of Saints and Prophets, The Nusayri-Alawi Community of Cilicia (Southern Turkey) and its Sacred Places*, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010).

components of the Syrian society, including the sons of the Alawite community, must participate in any future change operation in Syria.¹⁰⁰

This statement differed dramatically from the tone of previous Muslim Brotherhood statements about the 'heretic' Alawites, which accused them of full complicity with the Syrian regime. For example, the previous Muslim Brother leader, Hassan Howeidy, said in 2005, "All the problems in Syria are because the power is not with parties but with the Alawites...the majority of Muslims hate following Alawite rule."¹⁰¹

Another aspect that needs mentioning, without delving deeply into a complicated and large issue, is the regional political/sectarian situation. The stabilisation of a multi-sectarian and democratic Lebanon, or Iraq,¹⁰² would seriously undermine the Syrian regime's attempts to portray the 'perils' of political reform in Syria. Sectarian harmony and stability in the regional environment may reassure the Alawite community that they can 'survive' in the region beyond the Asad regime. It is clear therefore where the best interests of the Asad regime lay – a destabilised region with persistent sectarian tensions.

The 'Arab Spring' and Crisis for the Asad Dynasty

In early March 2011 a wave of pro-democracy demonstrations (the so called 'Arab Spring'), which began in Tunisia and swept across the Maghreb, reached Syria. This was despite the pronounced belief of Bashar Al-Asad in late January that his regime was immune to civil unrest, a belief he based on his 'close alignment to the beliefs of the Syrian people.'¹⁰³ Yet socio-economic pressures, especially upon Syria's large rural population, which notably includes most Alawites, had been building within Syria for several years. Major causes for this were

100 *Al-Jazeera*, Qatar, TV Broadcast August 17, 2006, cited in 'Syria comment, The Bayanouni - Khaddam Link-up: Is the Opposition Real Now?' available at, http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2006/03/bayanouni-khaddam-link-up-_114264946582158617.htm

101 Lucy Ashton, 'Syria's retreat from Lebanon emboldens Islamist opposition', *Financial Times*, 6 May 2005.

102 For example of the type of regional development that worries the Asad regime see, 'Secularism prevails in crucial Iraq vote', *National Post*, Toronto, February 4, 2009.

103 'Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad', *Wall Street Journal*, New York, January 31, 2011.

the drought of 2007-2010, high unemployment, inflation, and dwindling oil reserves. The overt disparity of wealth between most Syrians and those connected to the regime, also served to exacerbate the Syrian people's frustration and disillusionment. Important also, was the persistence of harsh and arbitrary political repression, which has eroded Bashar al-Asad's long cultivated facade as a reformer. In short, the combination of minimal economic prospects, lack of freedoms and the overt corruption and extreme wealth of regime figures, has finally led many Syrians to push through the "Wall of Fear" and challenge the regime.¹⁰⁴

This writer arrived in Syria on March 17, 2011, two days after the first major demonstrations in Dera'a in southern Syria. An atmosphere of tension, and almost excitement was palpable; there was a sense that change was imminent, everywhere people watched news broadcasts and were engaged in deep conversation. Ironically, this resonates with the excitement at the accession of the thirty four year old Bashar al-Asad in mid 2000.¹⁰⁵ At that time many hoped for relief from the repressive political climate of the previous three decades under Hafiz al-Asad, a hope that turned out to be futile.

For my Alawite acquaintances however, the surge of dissent against the Asad dynasty in March 2011 was a source of extreme anxiety. Despite the fact that none of them benefitted greatly from Asad rule and most live extremely poor lifestyles, there was genuine concern that the fall of the regime would bring disaster for their community. This belief has its roots in the history of Alawite marginalisation and persecution at the hands of Sunni Muslims. Also apparent is a fear among Alawites that there will be a price to pay for the events of Hama in February 1982. Moreover, the Asad dynasty's policy of constantly reminding Alawites about the perils of sectarian chaos and the threat of fundamentalist Islam, seem to have struck a chord for many Alawites who are unprepared to abandon their support to the Asad dynasty.¹⁰⁶

104 This has been a common theme emerging from the protest movement in Syria, see for example *Human Rights Watch*, May 15, 2011, available at, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/05/15/syria-targeted-arrests-activists-across-country>

105 See 'Leaders of Syria building support for son of Assad', *New York Times*, June 12, 2000; *The Economist*, June 15th, 2000.

106 The same applies for Syrian Christians. This was apparent from numerous conversations by this author in the Christian Quarter of Damascus in March 2011.

A clear distinction must be drawn between the conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood of 1976-1982 and the current upheaval. In the former case, the Muslim Brotherhood tried to inflame sectarian differences in Syria in order to destabilise the Asad regime but only succeeded in consolidating Alawite 'asabiyya and, ultimately, the rule of Hafiz al-Asad. Alawites had cause to fear the Islamist ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, which seemed to draw from the same general philosophy as Ibn Taymiyya's 14th century *futya* against the Alawites. The current demonstrations however are not religiously based. There have been numerous signs that many Syrians are perfectly aware of the Asad dynasty policy of playing on Alawite insecurity, and wish to dispel those fears. A telling display of cross sectarian solidarity occurred in Latakia, when a Sunni Imam led prayers for Alawites, while the Alawite Shaykh led prayers at the Sunni Mosque.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the frequent protest chant, "Syrians are one!" indicates strongly that demonstrators are determined not to let their attempts to bring about political change be subverted by fears of sectarianism.¹⁰⁸

In numerous conversations with Sunni acquaintances, during the early stages of the demonstrations, anti regime sentiment did not display any resentment against Alawites, or contain any kind of sectarian hostility. A comment from one Sunni acquaintance summed up the root of Syrian discontent, "we have in Syria some [p]roblem because the people want to live."¹⁰⁹ In other words Syrians, especially the bulging demographic of 20 to 30 year olds, of whom my friend belongs, are literally dying for the chance at a decent life. The vast majority of Alawites are, in fact, united with their fellow Syrians in suffering the effects of economic mismanagement, corruption and political repression. The demonstrators in Syria are not religious radicals and recognise the system of sectarian insecurity that the Asad regime propagates. Former Syrian Vice President, Abd al-Halim Khaddam, was at pains to emphasise that point to this writer: the average "Syrian person/citizen is not a radical, is not aggressive, they know who is ruling the country; they understand what is going on."¹¹⁰

107 Anonymous source, cited in *World Tribune*, Washington, May 14, 2011.

108 *The Economist*, April 12, 2011, 'No End In Sight,' available at, http://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/04/unrest_syria?page=1

109 Anonymous primary source in Syria.

110 Abd al-Halim Khaddam, interview with the author, Paris, September 16, 2009.

Alawite fears that a political upheaval will see them on the wrong side of a revanchist Sunni majority are however genuine and persistent. This writer was in Latakia on Friday March 25, 2011, as demonstrations erupted in Sharia Ramadan, the main boulevard containing a large statue of Hafiz al-Asad. The speed with which the demonstrations broke out took many people by surprise, the reaction of my Alawite companion, as well as other Alawites nearby, was one of terror. His reaction was not based on affection for Bashar al-Asad, who had done little to alleviate his poverty, but rather the possible implications, for Alawites like him, of the prospect of the Asad dynasty losing its grip on power.

In Syria today the sectarian insecurity component of Alawite *'asabiyya*, is the key element in the Syrian political equation. Unless this aspect is addressed quickly it appears the country will slide inexorably towards a bitter and protracted sectarian conflict. The Asad regime has already signalled its willingness to drag the Alawites, the Syrian state, and even the region, down with it into violent sectarian chaos if it continues to be challenged.¹¹¹ This worst case scenario is not a foregone conclusion however. According to a Khaldunian perspective, the Asad dynasty has run its course and Alawite *'asabiyya* is actually in decline. In the absence of wide Alawite support within the military security apparatus, the Asad dynasty would not be able to maintain its resistance to political reform and a democratic transition. The key to unlocking the last element of Alawite *'asabiyya*, therefore lies in delivering firm guarantees of Alawite security in a post-Asad Syria, as former Muslim Brotherhood leader, Ali Bayanouni tried to do in 2006.

There is one very relevant precedent for a major Alawite political realignment. In 1936 Alawites faced a difficult decision whether to integrate with the new Syrian state,¹¹² or to fight for their autonomy,¹¹³ which the French had provided for them in 1920.¹¹⁴ At that critical

111 'Syrian Elite to Fight Protests to 'the End', *New York Times*, May 10, 2011.

112 Gitta Yaffe-Schatzmann, 'Alawi Separatists and Unionists: The Events of 25 February 1936,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Jan., 1995); *League of Nations Official Journal*, 93rd and 94th Sessions of the Council, Annex 1622, November 1936, p.1354.

113 Peter Shambrook, *French Imperialism in Syria, 1927-1936*, (Reading: Ithaca, 1998), p.223.

114 *League of Nations Official Journal*, 95th Session of the Council, Annex 1629 'The Mandate' July 24th 1922, January 1937, Article 8, p.47.

moment the influential Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Muhammad Amin al-Husayni (1895-1974) issued a *fatwa* which, astonishingly for a Sunni cleric, strongly vouched for the Islamic credentials of the Alawites.¹¹⁵ This *fatwa* effectively reassured Alawites that their security would be guaranteed in the predominantly Sunni Syrian state. Subsequently, the leaders of the Alawite community pragmatically opted for unity with the new Syrian state.¹¹⁶

The level of violence the Asad dynasty committed against its own citizens in early 2011 means that its domestic and international legitimacy cannot realistically be restored to any constructive level. The best option for the Alawite majority, therefore, is to distance themselves from the Asad dynasty and its key supporters. Some type of reassurance[s] similar to the one delivered by Muhammad Amin al-Husayni in 1936, would to make this decision easier.

Last of all, the words spoken by Ba'ath Party co-founder Salah al-Din al-Bitar in 1980, are profound in reflection on the Syrian political situation in 2011:

It is necessary to distinguish between the regime and the great body of Alawi who had no role in establishing it and are part of the silent majority of the people who resist its crimes, at least with their hearts.¹¹⁷

The fact that al-Bitar's outreach to the Alawites was quickly curtailed by his assassination days after the publication of this statement, (in all likelihood by a Syrian agent)¹¹⁸ illustrates vividly the real nature of the Asad-Alawite relationship. There was never a more appropriate time than 2011, for parties interested in Syrian stability, to take heed of al-Bitar's call and reach out to the Alawite community to prevent a descent into sectarian conflict.

115 R. D. 'Une fatwa du Grand Mufti de Jérusalem sur les Alawites,' *Syria*, T. 22, Fasc. 3/4 (1941), p. 299, Institut Français du Proche-Orient; Yvette Talhamy, 'The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, 46: 2, 2010, pp.185-186; *Ash Sha'b*, Damascus, July 31, 1936.

116 Gitta Yaffe-Schatzmann, 1995, p.35.

117 Extract cited in Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, The Descendants of its lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999) , p.229 .

118 *New York Times*, July 22, 1980, 'Former Syrian Premier is Slain at Paris Office by Unknown Gunman'; *The Times*, London, July 22, 1980

Conclusion

From a Khaldunian perspective, Syria's Alawites seem to have come almost full circle. The development of Alawite sectarian '*asabiyya*' took place across numerous centuries and was largely a result of their religious persecution and social marginalisation. Hafiz al-Asad mobilised this Alawite '*asabiyya*' in order to consolidate his rule and support the establishment of the Asad family dynasty.

Ironically, without the Muslim Brotherhood led insurgency from 1976, Alawite '*asabiyya*' would possibly have declined naturally, in accordance with Ibn Khaldun's theory. The more secure Alawites felt about their place in Syrian society, the less willing they would have been to support an authoritarian regime. As it happened, sectarian insecurity emerged as the dominant feature of Syrian politics in the wake of the Hama catastrophe. This was a major political asset for the Asad dynasty as it kept Alawite '*asabiyya*' strongly intact.

The nature and direction of the second generation of the Asad dynasty, under Bashar al-Asad and his narrow inner core, led to the decline of Alawite '*asabiyya*' in every respect except sectarian insecurity. The purging of this last factor will not be easily achieved, if it does occur however, it will complete a cycle of Ibn Khaldun's rise and fall of a dynasty according to group '*asabiyya*'.

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