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Unity, Freedom and Socialism: The Assads, the Ba'ath and the Making of Modern Syria

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Introduction

In the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1993, Robert Kaplan wrote of what he saw as Syria's "…day of reckoning…" when Hafiz al-Assad would exit from Syria's political scene and the ramifications it would entail for the country's existence. Claiming that the country "…has yet to come to terms with the problems of [its] post-Ottoman boundaries…," Kaplan was sure that, once the late President Hafez al-Assad, the 'Alawi military strongman who "… has so far prevented the Balkanization of his country…" left Syria's political scene, Syria would collapse.[1] Yet more than ten years have passed since Assad died in 2000 and his son Bashar succeeded him, and Kaplan's belief that Ba'athist 'Alawite military rule in Syria would die with the elder Assad has not materialized. It must seem strange to Western observers of Syrian politics that, in a region so beset by religious and ethnic strife, a traditionally marginalized religious minority group such as the 'Alawi can exert control for so long over a majority Sunni Arab country. But the story of the Assads should not be surprising, for the elder Assad was not only President of Syria, but a leader of Arab resistance to perceived Western and Zionist aggression. Feeding off anger over the failure of the country's early democratic experiment and the belief that the dream of a "Great Syria" had been thwarted by Western machinations and neighboring "imperialist" Arab monarchies, Assad and the 'Alawi dominated military, formed during the French mandate, were eventually able to take complete control of the state.

A Single Country

One can only understand how an 'Alawi army colonel, born to peasants, could rule his country longer than all of his post-independence predecessors combined by understanding the unique concoction of ideological movements and ideals that led to the creation of the Syrian military state.[2] Even before Assad, Syrian politics had been defined by militaristic paternalism, secularism, and competition between the Damascene elite and the unheard "other," made up of rural farmers, religious and ethnic minorities and the urban poor. Cycles of ineffective civilian rule followed by military intervention, dressed up in populist language, gradually eroded the civilian base of power. If the Assads are unique, it is only in their longevity. Early dissatisfaction with the country's democratic leadership was only compounded by events abroad, such as the emergence of an

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[1] Robert Kaplan, "Syria: Identity Crisis," *The Atlantic*, February 1993, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1993/02/syria-identity-crisis/303860/ (Accessed October 7th, 2012).
[2] Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, rev. ed. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 5, 76 and 164.

independent Lebanon and military defeat after defeat at the hands of Israel. The a lack of faith in civilian leadership, which presided over these perceived disasters, created multiple opportunities for the military to seize power, which they gladly did whenever the opportunity presented itself. The Ba'ath Party, which was able to co-opt the nation's officer corps with its pan-Arab yet nationalistic, anti-Damascene yet economically progressive and anti-Western yet secular message, was able under Assad to create an efficient political machine, even though the operator was viewed by a substantial portion of his own population as a heretic.

For Syrians, 1946 seemed a welcoming, if uncertain, beginning. The last French troops had left Syrian soil on April 17, 1946, ending the French Mandate which had been established in 1920. Syria's government was the first true democratically elected one in the region and the first republic in the Arab world.[3] The ruling elite in Damascus had united under the banner of the *Kutla al-Wataniya*, or "National Bloc," a group of people of disparate backgrounds and ideals brought together under one goal, to create a democratic, secular Arab republic free of any foreign entanglements.[4]

The greatest challenge the leaders of the new nation faced was the question of Syria's place within the Middle East, and indeed, what is meant to be Syrian. The very question was inevitably irredentist in principle. To many Syrians, the greatest tragedy of the French occupation was that the *bilad al-Sham*, or "Land of Damascus," was split between several new nations in the region. Indeed, the provinces that comprised Ottoman Syria before World War I spread over 300,000 square miles, as compared to the Republic of Syria's 185,190 square miles. Most painful was the fact that the coastal cities of Tyre, Sidon, and Tripoli, Damascus' traditional sea ports and vital centers of Levantine culture, were detached from Syria and made part of the Republic of Lebanon. Most Syrians believed the new nation to be a completely ahistorical and artificial construct of colonial intrigue. These facts were an embarrassment to Syrians of all classes, ethnicities and faiths and would have great import for the region as a whole.[5] Neighboring Jordan, which gained its independence from Great Britain in March 1946, proclaimed in November of that year that one of the guiding principles of Jordanian foreign policy was the idea of a "Greater Syria," which would presumably be under Hashemite rule. In an interview with the Egyptian newspaper, *al-Ahram*, King Abdullah of Jordan laid down a formulation that would perhaps come to haunt him in later years. "There is neither great nor little Syria… [But] a single country bounded to the west by the sea, to the north by Turkey, to the east by Iraq, and to the south by the Hejaz – which constitutes

[3] Seale, *Asad*, 33.
[4] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 2nd ed. (London: I.B.Tauris & Co., 1986), 24-25.
[5] Seale, *Asad*, 15-16.

Syria."[6] No country emerging from the shadow of colonialism could ignore such a poignant issue, particularly one with as ancient and rich a history as Syria, even if the cautious politicians in Damascus wished to do so.

"The Land Belongs To Him Who Works It"

By 1949, the country's experiment with democracy had already come to a tragic end. On December 19, 1949, Colonel Abid al-Shishakli carried out the third and final coup Syria was to experience that year.[7] Obstinately trying to prevent Syria's merger with Hashemite Iraq, Shishakli sounded what was perhaps the first shot of the countryside's rebellion against the Damascene elite. In his first address to the nation, Syria's new leader proclaimed that the coup had been necessary because "…professional politicians…" were threatening "…the security of the army, the structure of the state and the republican army." By framing his actions in the language of national sovereignty, Shishakli gave voice to a current within the army and within a large part of the population. They believed that popular sovereignty is not synonymous with Western style liberalism and that many of the elite in Damascus were strangers within their own land, holdovers from the French occupation.[8] Hence came the second challenge that would bedevil all future Syrian rulers; Syria is a culturally, geographically, religiously and ethnically heterogeneous country, and any attempt by one faction to centralize power will inevitably result in a backlash from the others. As the socialist agitator, Akram al-Hawrani said, "…the land belongs to him who works it," a sentiment that Syrians of all classes would echo when faced with perceived encroachment on "their" rights.[9] However, as a new state desperately in need of economic reform and modernization, the necessity of the centralization of political and economic power in Syria was apparent to all. Shishakli paved the way for future military officers to intervene in Syrian politics, which they would henceforth do regularly. However, it was not be until the elder Assad ascended to power that the country came to possess the political stability so lacking since independence. The structures which allowed him to exercise control had been put in place by the French, the country's last true rulers.

Under the French Mandate, Syria experienced a degree of centralized control unknown during Ottoman times. However, the bifurcated nature of the French administrative authority, and their policy regarding the treatment of minorities within the mandates would greatly affect Syria's future. The chief

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[6] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 13.
[7] Seale, *Asad*, 46.
[8] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 86.
[9] Seale, *Asad*, 42.

colonial officer for both Syria and Lebanon was a French Foreign Service bureaucrat called the "High Commissioner for Syria and Lebanon" stationed in Beirut, who exercised two important powers which gave him almost unlimited control over the two Mandates. He enjoyed veto powers over anything that the Secretary-General, or governor of Syria, did, the most important being the appointment of provincial governors. Secondly, he controlled the administration of the services called the Common Interests, such as Customs and the Postal and Telegraph services, which were extremely important for revenue and patronage. Therefore, even though the Mandate governments, whose chief officials were chosen by the civilian government in France, theoretically exercised internal control, the French Foreign Service had final say over matters within Syria.[10] This system of highly arbitrary shared powers would carry on into the independent republic and heighten the likelihood for conflict between the country's executive and legislative branches.

For the legislative branch in most countries, patronage becomes a standard part of electoral politics and coalition and party building. Yet in a country like Syria, where political parties existed as little more than vehicles for an individual's ambitions, political leaders enjoyed little popular legitimacy and support. When Syria had its first general election in July 1947, the two main political parties, both breakaway factions of the National Bloc, were made up of religious and economic interests in Damascus, who differed on only one issue; *al-Hizb al-Watani*, or "The Party of the Nation," sought to ensure the reelection of President Shukri al-Quwatli, and the *Hizb al-Sha'b*, or "Party of the People," sought to ensure that the president would not be reelected. The National Party was also seen, to a certain extent, as a front for business leaders in Damascus and central Syria, while the People's Party gained more support from business leaders in smaller cities such as Aleppo and Hama in northern Syria.[11] With such inconclusive platforms came inconclusive results; the People's Party, along with a smattering of small parties and independents allied with them, won a plurality in parliament, but the National Party controlled the presidency. al-Quwatli would be reelected a year later. With a series of minority governments or coalitions aligned with the People's Party in parliament, it fell to the president to exercise strong leadership.[12]

Whether al-Quwatli could have risen to the task, became a merely hypothetical question after Syria experienced a crushing defeat in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. With no deep reservoir of popular support for the civilian

[10] Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 77 and 78.
[11] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 28.
[12] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 31.

government, it was relatively easy for the military, as the only institution which came out of the war not looking ineffectual, to seize power. It was the only force within the country which could move without fear of popular reaction. Being able to couple coercive force with blood-and-soil patriotism, it railed against the discredited national government of al-Quwatli and the National Party and the opposition People's Party, of which a not insignificant number had backed union with Iraq.[13] It was the failure of civil government in these early years of the republic which allowed the Ba'ath Party to later consolidate so much control over the various institutions such as the military and impose one-party rule over the country.

An Arab Renaissance

Ba'athism, more than merely the political ideology of a single party, began as a worldview and a perceived system of values that, after adopting pan-Arabism early on, was able to win the loyalty of many in the Syrian army. The word *ba'ath* in Arabic loosely means "renaissance," and was adopted by two Syrian radicals, the Greek Orthodox Christian Michel 'Aflaq and the Sunni Muslim, Salah al-Din Bitar, both Sorbonne-educated schoolteachers in Damascus, to describe their vision of a *haraka*, or movement. Proclaiming that their fellow Arabs had been repressed first by the Ottomans, then by the French, and in modern times by Arab monarchists and Zionists, 'Aflaq and Bitar both hoped to ignite a spark in Syria which would eventually engulf the whole of the Arab world.[14] However, the concept of an Arab renaissance had originated with Zaki al-Arzusi, a Francophile 'Alawite who, like 'Aflaq and Bitar, was a schoolteacher educated in the Sorbonne. He became an avid Syrian-Arab nationalist after he saw his native Antioch province detached from Syria by the Turkish military in 1939 with no objections from the French.[15] Arsuzi's idea of Arab exceptionalism remained a key Ba'ath principle, but 'Aflaq introduced several ideas that made Ba'athism a more expansive ideology. To 'Aflaq, the problems that bedeviled the Arabs, such as tribalism, sectarianism, and the oppression of women, were introduced by the chaos following the collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258), and were propagated first by the Ottoman Turks and then by European colonialists. The solution, as 'Aflaq put it, could be summed up in three words: "Unity, Freedom, [and] Socialism."[16] The Arabs, in 'Aflaq's view, are one ancient nation, not separated by state or religion with one "eternal message." Though

[13] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 86.
[14] Seale, *Asad*, 24 and 34.
[15] Seale, *Asad*, 27-28.
[16] Seale, *Asad*, 30 and 31.

'Aflaq was a Christian, he believed that the essence of Arabism was expressed in Islam, which, as a special Arab religion revealed in Arabic to the Arabs, lifted the Arab people from their previously insignificant place in history to conquer the Middle East.[17]

Ba'athism, however, should not be seen as mere Arab chauvinism; otherwise, it would not have attracted so much support from minority groups such as the 'Alawi, who were suspicious of movements that might infringe upon their traditional culture. It is not hard to understand why ideologies such as pan-Arabism or socialism could hold such appeal to Syria's Arab religious minorities, particularly the 'Alawi. If, in the eyes of your Syrian brothers, everyone is an Arab and all Arabs share essentially one common culture and philosophy, then the accusation of being a heretic loses its poignancy. It was a fortuitous intersection of the legacy of French colonial policy, the failure of the civilian government and the military's subsequent intervention in the country's politics which allowed the 'Alawis to gain an unprecedented degree of power not only within their country's political system, but also within its society generally.

In many developing countries, the military often has served as one of the only institutions through which the poorest, most persecuted, and most heterodox elements of society can gain power and influence. This trend could be seen at work in Syria, for, once a well-to-do male citizen served out his two years of service, he would be able to make a comfortable living outside of military service. This left the military as an institution made up of the country's poorest members, the majority of whom, including its officers, came from the country's ethnic and religious minorities. It is not unsurprising, therefore, that it would have much different economic and ideological interests than a government dominated by educated professionals and Sunni and Christian Arabs from the country's urban centers.[18] When the French took possession of Syria from the Ottomans, they found a complacent Arab aristocracy that was not willing to enforce French imperial control over the "provinces," nor subvert their own economic interests to that of their new masters. This meant the French could not rely on the majority population of the Mandates to rule themselves. Therefore, in those early years, the main French military presence in Syria and Lebanon was the *Armee du Levant*, or "The Army of the Levant," mostly made up of French Foreign Legionnaires from North Africa, Madagascar, and Senegal, veterans of the trench warfare of World War I, who were not welcomed by the locals and who were seen by Arabs as an affront to their dignity. They also brought the additional problem of excessive cost. By 1927, the budget of the Mandate of Syria committed 27 percent of its total annual budget to the home government's military presence in the Levant, an

[17] Seale, *Asad*, 30-31.
[18] Seale, *Asad*, 39.

amount that became intolerable when the Great Depression made its entrance two years later. Financial concerns were the primary reason why, in 1936, French Premier Leon Blum negotiated with the Syrians to set the time and conditions for Syria's independence.

To escape this financial burden, the French realized that they would need to raise an indigenous force among the Syrians, one that would be completely loyal and dependent to their imperial interests.[19] The forces of this new *Troupes Speciales du Levant*, or the "Syrian Legion," were raised almost entirely from rural and poor Sunni Arabs and religious and ethnic minorities such as the Ismai'lis, 'Alawis, Circassians, Armenians, Kurds and Druze. Entrance into the Legion was by examination and both the rank-and-file and officers were trained by French instructors. As in Ottoman times, the French exempted Arab land owners from military service. This meant that when Syria became independent, the new country already had a professional, Westernized military infrastructure, but one drawn entirely from the country's lower classes.[20]

For groups such as the 'Alawis, the benefits of French rule became apparent immediately, and not just within the military. French colonial policy in general was to carve out administrative jurisdictions and districts by religious and ethnic affiliation. The 'Alawis, living in the mountainous Jabal Ansariyya region around the port of Latakia, made up 62 percent of Latakia province, but the land they lived on was owned mostly by rich merchants in the city of Latakia itself, which was then 80 percent Sunni, with small minorities of Orthodox Christians and 'Alawis. In Ottoman times, as a way to soften their resistance to Turkish rule, the Sunni and Christian Arabs had been left free to govern the area, including regulating commerce in the mountains, as long as Turks had the exclusive right to taxation among the 'Alawi mountaineers. Sunnis had to promises that the local *'ulama* would not incite violence against or tamper with the heterodox religious beliefs of the peasantry. The French, however, favored the more loyal 'Alawis over the aloof Sunni Muslim and Christian residents.[21] All across Syria, minority groups, formerly content to stay out of the attention of the government to avoid scrutiny or retribution, now were being integrated into the state's apparatus. Though there were initially suspicions from Sunni and Christian Arabs that these groups might now represent an anti-nationalist "third rail" in Syrian society, these fears quickly faded with the departing French.[22]

The lingering influence of the Syrian Legion was noticeable in the post-independence military. Though Shishakli and other generals who carried out the

[19] Khoury, 79-80.
[20] Khoury, 80-81.
[21] Khoury, 154.
[22] Seale, *Asad*, 23.

earliest coups were Sunni Muslims, it is notable that all had served as soldiers first in the Syrian Legion and that Shishakli himself spoke the language of the countryside, not of the landed elite in Damascus or the north.[23] When Assad and his fellow 'Alawi officers brought the country under Ba'ath rule in 1963, it was merely the logical conclusion to forty years of history.

On September 28, 1961, a right-wing coup carried out by Lieutenant Colonel 'Abd al-Karim Nahlawi ended the United Arab Republic, Syria's short-lived union with Egypt, and supposedly returned the government to civilian control. Many young minority and pan-Arab officers within the military, several of whom had trained in Egypt and hoped for the union to bring the Ba'ath, as Nasser's main supporters in Syria, to a place of higher authority, were forced out of the military for their "radical" sympathies. Though enraged at Nahlawi's "reactionary" coup, Ba'ath officers like Assad, however, were also bitter was that 'Aflaq, as *'amid*, or secretary general of the international Ba'ath council, did not protest the coup or push for reunion with Egypt. Instead, he choose to compromise with the new government.[24] Assad, along with two fellow 'Alawi and two Ismai'li Ba'ath colonels, had formed a "Military Committee" in 1960 as a possible arm of Ba'ath power in the military. But after Assad had been temporarily relieved from his post in the Syrian Air Force for suspected pan-Arab leanings, he and five officers turned the Committee into what became an official opposition group within the Ba'ath.[25] When the five members carried out a coup on March 8, 1963, the newly renamed "Regional Ba'ath Council" now controlled Syria, and though by 1970 only Assad remained, he never let go of power.[26] Though a non-Sunni Muslim had not previously assumed the august title of President of the Syrian Arab Republic, Assad did so in 1970. Only then did the disengaged Sunni majority awaken to the fact that they did not completely control "their" country. [27]

Islands Left By the Tide

To conservatives, this "arrogation" of power by an obscure Shi'a group that was thought of by many of the Muslim *'ulama* as pagans, seemed to be a well-orchestrated conspiracy against the outwitted majority. Historian Martin Kramer posed it as a class issue, though in a way that would give succor to the most paranoid in Syria's Sunni population: "Once poor peasants, they beat their

[23] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 86.
[24] Seale, *Asad*, 34 and 67.
[25] Seale, *Asad*, 70-72.
[26] Seale, *Asad*, 76.
[27] Seale, *Asad*, 164.

ploughshares into swords, first becoming military officers, then using instruments of war to seize the state." [28] The irony of this statement is not that, chronologically, it is incorrect, but that it credits 'Alawis with ambitions of which few of them ever dreamed. In September 1920, the French required the people of the Jabal Ansariyya to classify themselves as *'Alawiyyun*, or "followers of Ali," on their census form to distinguish themselves from other Shi'a Muslim sects living within the region.[29] The 'Alawis had learned long before that to bring attention to oneself was to bring scrutiny, and until the French came they generally managed to avoid confrontation with their neighbors. Thus, much of our knowledge of their history and beliefs is fragmentary.

Before 1920, the 'Alawites were most often referred to as Nusayrites, after their mysterious "founder," Ibn Nusayr, a supposed 9th century courtier of the Buyid emirs in Baghad and pupil of the eleventh Shi'a imam, al-Hasan al-'Askari, who 'Alawis claim imparted supposed esoteric knowledge to him. However, the real founder of 'Alawism was most likely Ibn Nusayr's pupil, al-Khasibi, believed to have lived between the late 9th and mid-10th centuries, who began his career by propagating Twelver Shi'ism in the suburbs of Baghdad and was tasked by the Buyids, who were Ismai'li Shi'a, to convert the inhabitants of Byzantine Latakia to Shi'ism.[30] Though the French authorities treated the 'Alawis as Muslims, the question for many Shi'a theologians on this issue had been clear for centuries. They were so despised by many within the Syrian *'ulama* that the prominent 13-14th century Syrian theologian, Ibn Taymiyyah, proclaimed them to be more of a threat to the sanctity of the Islamic faith then the Christians or Tatars and that it was every pious Muslim's duty to wage *jihad* on them.[31] The first real historical record of the 'Alawis is by Ibn Battuta, who, while traveling through the Jabal Ansariyya in the 14th century, noticed that the local people, despite appearing to be Muslim, did not build mosques. In the 19th century, this fact was so uncomfortable for the Ottoman authorities that, after the 'Alawis began to draw attention from French missionaries in Lebanon, who thought the 'Alawis might be "lost" or "degenerate" Christians, they began to pressure them to build mosques, even if they did not use them.[32] It was not until 1936 that the 'Alawi *shaykhs*, or chiefs of the clans, proclaimed that no 'Alawi could claim to be a true 'Alawi unless they proclaimed the *shahadah*, or declaration of faith, along with the other four Islamic pillars of faith. In other words, no one could be an 'Alawi and not be

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[28] Martin Kramer, "Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism," in *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, ed. Martin Kramer, 237-254 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press Inc., 1987), 237.
[29] Kramer, 241.
[30] Heinz Halm, *Shiism*, trans. Janet Wilson. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 159.
[31] Seale, *Asad*, 10.
[32] Seale, *Asad*, 10 and Kramer, 239.

a Muslim.[33] The Sunni grand mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husayni, recognized the proclamation as binding. [34]

However, it was not until 1973 that a Shi'a religious figure recognized the 'Alawis as Muslims, when the Lebanese Imam Musa al-Sadr recognized the 'Alawis as Twelvers after the 'Alawi *shayks* agreed to abide by the Jafari school of Islamic jurisprudence.[35] No members of the Twelver *'ulama* from Qom, Kufa, or Najaf, however, have done so.[36] This is because, in mainstream Twelver Shi'as eyes, the 'Alawis are *ghulat*, or "exaggerators" of the Prophet Muhammad and members of the *ahl al-Bayt*, or family of the Prophet. In turn, 'Alawis consider other Shi'a to be *muqassira*, or "those who fall short" by denying the divine status of Ali and other members of the *ahl-al-bayt*.[37] 'Alawis believe in four tenets which mainstream Sunni and Shi'a believe to be acts of *shirk*, or idolatry, i.e. "associating things with god." These are *hulul*, the belief that God can become incarnate within the bodies of the imams; *tanasukh*, belief in metempsychosis, or the transmigration and reincarnation of the soul; *ibaha*, or antinomianism, the belief that only faith is necessary for salvation; and a belief in a divine triad with 'Ali as the incarnation of God on earth, Muhammad as his "veil," or prophet, and the companion Salman al-Farisi as his "mirror," or proselytizer.

Other unorthodox beliefs 'Alawis hold include that the imams of Twelver Shi'ism, along with Muhammad, Fatima, and other important members of the *ahl al-bayt* are also "veils," that triads similar to the one consisting of 'Ali, Muhammad and al-Farisi appear regularly in human history, that souls are imprisoned in human bodies and will not be released until judgment day, that only the *shaykh*s are initiated into the esoteric secrets supposedly imparted by the imams, so prayer is not obligatory, and is in fact discouraged by some 'Alawi officials except in cases of holidays or festivals and a form of Docetism in which the Battle of Karbala in 680 was a mirage of God and Husayn's martyrdom was an illusion.[38] 'Alawis, along with the *Ahl-i Haqq* in modern Luristan in Iran, are the only two known *ghulat* sects that exist today, remnants of a vigorous tradition stretching back to the time of the caliphate of Ali (656-661), or as journalist Patrick Seale wrote, "…islands left by a tide that had receded."[39]

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[33] Kramer, 241.
[34] Kramer, 242 and 244-247.
[35] Kramer, 239. This anachronism was a remnant from the Ottoman period, when the courts used the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, the dominant Sunni school utilized in the Ottoman Empire.
[36] Kramer, 244.
[37] Kramer, 238.
[38] Halm, 156-157 and Kramer, 238.
[39] Halm, 156 and Seale, *Asad*, 8.

Tanks Speak

As established before, it is not hard to see why the military and the Ba'ath Party would be such appealing institutions to 'Alawites such as Assad. However, in power, they differed little from previous Syrian military regimes, particularly that of Shishakli, who had already shown that a determined military leader, using the language of national unity, could stay in power by pursuing a radical and ambitious agenda. Assad and the Regional Council used this template to maintain total control over Syria. Assad himself remarked that "Never in my life have I been for anarchy, nor will I ever be." Anarchy, as defined by Assad, was any attempt to destabilize or delegitimize the national authority of the ruling power. To Assad, the experience of civilian rule between 1946-1949 and 1961-1963 proved that only absolute military power and one-party rule, as exemplified by Shishakli, was sufficient to maintain peace.[40] Shishakli responded to the opposition of the landed gentry by redistributing state lands, settling Bedouin and making them register for identity cards and giving literate women the suffrage.[41] In a similar vein, The Regional Council responded to the 1964 riots by taking over the collection and distribution of funds for religious property, cutting out a major source of income that conservative religious families used to support the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic organizations in Syria. In addition, they extended state ownership over power plants, oil distribution, and cotton ginneries.[42] Though Assad would not hesitate to use lethal force against the civilian population when his rule was threatened, as he did in 1982 against the city of Hama, he made sure to respond in kind to the elites opposing him. In the case of 1982, he responded to the opposition of Sunni business owners and *'ulama* in the northeast to his regime by imposing tight price controls on business and reducing the amount of land individuals and corporations could own.[43] No matter how deep the hatred of the ruler in Damascus, as long as that ruler was able to harness the even deeper mistrust of the aristocracy and use the powers of the state to combat it, the military state would not be subverted.

Based on our popular preconceptions of the Middle East as a hotbed of militant religious fundamentalist, theocratic governments and constant internal strife, one would think that it would be unacceptable to the Syrian population to be ruled by a family hailing from a historically marginalized religious minority group heading a party that preaches a socialist, secularist, and pan-Arab ideology as its creed. Though it is true that the Middle East can be a harsh and unforgiving

[40] Seale, *Asad*, 157.
[41] Seale, *Asad*, 47.
[42] Seale, *Asad*, 92.
[43] Seale, *Asad*, 338.

battleground of ideologies, it is also true that in the contest of ideas, over the last half century Syrians have, as a whole, seemed to prefer the comfort of Ba'athist nationalism to chaos and constant internal instability. Though it would be an obvious disservice to the complexities of Syrian history to say that the country's politics is completely based on a sense of victimization and historical grievance, it does a greater disservice to ignore the legacy of Ottoman and French imperialism and the failure of democracy and republicanism to benefit the average Syrian. To deny the allure of stability and order to a nation residing in a region where such elements can be fleeting, is to deny not only any real attempt to come to terms with the reality of the contemporary Middle East, but a great deal of the West's own past. As Seale wrote, "Tanks speak a language more forceful than parliamentarians."[44]

Conclusion

But recent events in Syria and the Middle East as a whole raise the question of whether stability and order are enough for the average Syrian anymore. More than a year ago today, the city of Deraa in southern Syria rose in revolt, and since then the protestors of Syria's Arab Spring have seen some of the most bloody and violent retaliation of any within the region, and have responded in kind. The insurgency within Syria has seen large numbers of Syrian military officers defect to its cause – almost all of them Sunni Arabs – and revolts have erupted within cities such as Damascus and Homs, where Ba'athist nationalism has never taken hold. As one Lebanese politician broadly sympathetic towards Assad noted, "… Syria is heading for civil war, sectarian war… [And the] Alawites see it as a battle for survival." Many who support the regime like to compare the situation to the one the elder Assad faced in Hama thirty years ago, and Westerners would be wise to take the fears of the regime and its supporters seriously. Having come to power after the country's failed democratic experiment, weakened by decades of colonial rule and multiple coups, the 'Alawis in Syria are under no illusions about their fate should their protector fall.[45]

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[44] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 88.
[45] Miriam Karouny. "Insight: Syria's Assad Set For Long Conflict," *Reuters*, February 3rd, 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/03/us-syria-assad-idUSTRE81219220120203 (Accessed October 7th, 2012).

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