



## FORUM

# Conflict in Syria: An Historical Perspective

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*Please note that this article reflects the personal views and reflections of the author and should not be read as a statement of British Government policy*

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Mention the word 'Syrians' in the Caribbean and the immediate association is not the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic which has, according to UN figures, cost over 100,000 lives<sup>1</sup> and created over 2.2 million refugees.<sup>2</sup> In the Caribbean region the word 'Syrian' is most readily associated with the economically influential Caribbean Syrian-Lebanese community. Whilst small in number, this community includes such household names such as Sabga, Aboud and Matouk; families that have assumed prominent roles in the region's business environment over several generations.<sup>3</sup> The existence of a so-called 'Syrian' community in the Caribbean may appear to have nothing to do with the tragic conflict currently enveloping the Syrian Arab Republic. However, this community exists for reasons that are closely linked to some of the underlying causes of the Syrian conflict and its intensity.

Both the current Syrian conflict and the Syrian Caribbean community have their roots in the economic conditions of the late Ottoman Empire. Under the Ottoman *millet* system, religious minority groups such as Christians were granted a measure of autonomy over their own populations.<sup>4</sup> The *millet* system ensured

the dhimma, non-Muslims would be protected, could practice their own religion, preserve their own places of worship and to a large extent run their own affairs provided they recognized the superiority of Islam ... Its impact can be summed up in three words that described Muslim and non-Muslim communities: separate, unequal and protected.<sup>5</sup>

The *millet* system has been advanced as an early example of religious tolerance,<sup>6</sup> but by the late nineteenth century, the 'Eastern Question' of the status of Ottoman Christians had become a *cause célèbre* in Western Europe. It suited nineteenth century European leaders to describe the conditions of their Ottoman co-religionists as close to enslavement and to denigrate the Turks as brutal oppressors. Few did this with greater oratorical firepower than British Prime Minister William Gladstone, who said of the Turks: '[t]hey were, upon the whole, from the black day when they first entered Europe, the one great anti-human specimen of humanity.'<sup>7</sup> Gladstone's hyperbolic outbursts reflected a genuine evangelical Christian concern for his Eastern co-religionists at the same time as seeking to justify an imperialistic desire to limit the power and influence of Ottoman Turkey.

### **SYRIAN-LEBANESE EMIGRATION TO THE AMERICAS**

Whilst Gladstone overstates his case, it would be simplistic to ignore injustices suffered by minorities in the Ottoman Empire during this period. The late nineteenth century saw huge population movements throughout the Ottoman Empire as a result of wars and major socio-economic upheavals. This internal migration generated considerable tensions and competition for resources between different communities and was one of the *push* factors behind the huge waves of emigration from Ottoman lands, largely by the Christian minority. '[T]he available evidence indicates that the total of Ottoman emigrants to the Americas in the period from 1860 to 1914 probably came to 1,200,000', of which nearly ninety per cent were Christians.<sup>8</sup>

Syrian emigration to the Americas (including the Caribbean) did not happen in isolation. At the same time as the main waves of emigration to the Americas, millions of Muslim refugees from former Ottoman territories such as the Crimea, Balkans and Caucasus came into Ottoman lands in response to decades of war, particularly between the Russian and Ottoman empires.<sup>9</sup> These waves of new arrivals put pressure on the existing populations at

the same time as a booming economy in the New World gave the (often Christian) more educated and motivated populations a good reason to seek a better life there. At the same time, attacks against Christians, for example the Druze revolts of 1896 and 1909, created a stronger incentive for that community to leave.<sup>10</sup> As the 'Syrian' community in the Americas grew and prospered, in itself it became a pull factor that encouraged other (mainly Christian) Syrians to follow in their footsteps. '[A]fter the first wave of migrants had become established, family ties became one of the dominant motives for travel across the Atlantic'.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, this migration was not simply a case of an embattled community fleeing persecution: it was also an example of growing prosperity of the emigrant community generating momentum.

The mass movement of Christians (with small numbers of Muslims) illustrates a period in late Ottoman history of considerable upheaval, exacerbated by a polity (the Ottoman Empire) that formally divided and defined itself on the basis of religion and ethnicity. The Arab world, in particular Syria, is not a monolithic Islamic society. Many of the Ottoman-era sectarian divisions continue to be relevant to conflicts in the modern Middle East, particularly Syria. A look at the modern-day religious and demographic composition of Syria is instructive.

**Table 1 – The Syrian Ethnic Mosaic**

<b>Ethnic/Religious group</b>	<b>Percentage of Syrian population<sup>12</sup></b>
Sunni Arabs	65
Alawis	13
Kurds	10
Christian	10
Druze, Turkmen, Ismaili etc.	2

The Alawis of Syria represent around 1.3 million people and 13 per cent of the Syrian population. The Alawis, personified by the Assad family of current President Bashar Al-Asad and his father and predecessor Hafiz Al-Asad, in spite of their relatively small numbers, 'hold in their hands the crucial threads of power'<sup>13</sup> in

Syria and have done so since taking power in 1966. However, such dominance is a relatively recent phenomenon: for many years the Alawis were regarded as the poorest, least politically influential group in Syria. As recently as the 1950s,

it was common for upper-class Syrian families, mostly urban Sunnis, to have Alawi maidservants. The practice was indicative of the extreme poverty and low status of the Alawis, whose most needy families indentured their daughters to domestic servitude.<sup>14</sup>

The economically marginal Alawis were historically used as agricultural labourers for the wealthy Christian and Sunni landowners. After an uprising in the fourteenth century, the Sultan at Cairo ordered that the restive Alawis be put to the sword. This did not find favour with the ruling classes of Tripoli (in modern-day Lebanon) who responded: 'But these people work the land for the Muslims and if they are killed, the Muslims will be enfeebled'.<sup>15</sup> Well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Alawis were on the lowest rung of Syrian society. There is, for example, very little evidence of Alawi emigration to the Americas. This is illustrative of a well-established phenomenon in studies of international migration: the very poorest in society do not migrate, as they lack the resources to do so.<sup>16</sup>

### **ALAWISM: AN UNORTHODOX CREED**

The Alawis' low status and poverty was in part a reflection of their unorthodox religious views. Whilst the modern Alawi state in Syria has sought to emphasise its connection to Shi'a Islam, Alawis are at the fringes of mainstream Muslim ideology and fell outside the Ottoman *millet* system. In making this point, it is worth a brief description of the denominational landscape of Islam. Most readers will be familiar with the terms Sunni and Shi'a as describing the two main sects within Islam, with an estimated 87–90 per cent being Sunni and a smaller number of Shi'a, estimated at 10–13 per cent.<sup>17</sup> The origin of the distinction between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims is in the earliest years of Islamic history. The word Shi'a (sometimes anglicised to Shiite) derives from the Arabic phrase '*shi'at 'Ali*' (شيعة علي). This translates as 'party of 'Ali' and is effectively a descriptor: Shi'a Muslims derive their name from their origins as supporters of the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib. 'Ali was the fourth Caliph of Islam and the last of the 'rightly-guided Caliphs', a term used to describe the earliest

Muslim rulers seen as exemplars of piety. 'Ali came to power as Caliph in 656 AD, after the assassination of his predecessor 'Uthman. The years of 'Ali's reign (656 - 661) saw a civil war within Islam, which culminated in the battle of Siffin and the assassination of 'Ali. This conflict, and the subsequent assassination of 'Ali's son Hussain in 680, established the division between Shi'a and Sunni which in some forms persists to this day.

In theological terms, the distinction between Sunni and Shi'a Islam is limited, technical and lies beyond the scope of this article. It may be sufficient to observe that Shi'as revere their leading clerics (known as Ayatollahs) whereas the Sunni focus more heavily on the example of the Prophet Muhammad and his teachings (the 'sunna'). A significant minority of Sunni Muslims, according to a comprehensive survey by the Pew Forum from 2012, do not regard Shi'a as legitimate members of their faith given the differences in their religious practice.<sup>18</sup> As the Pew Forum further notes:

[o]nly in Lebanon and Iraq – nations where sizable populations of Sunnis and Shias live side by side – do large majorities of Sunnis recognize Shias as fellow Muslims and accept their distinctive practices as part of Islam.

Within the broad divisions of Shi'a and Sunni Islam are numerous subdivisions of varying degrees of orthodoxy and significance. Of these, Alawis are a marginal group, both numerically and doctrinally. Alawi doctrines date from the ninth century and have their roots in Shi'a Islam but are largely distinct from mainstream Shi'ism. Alawi beliefs and practices appear to have drawn from Christianity and other traditions and involve un-Islamic practices such as the drinking of wine. Alawis celebrate certain Christian festivals, including Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and Palm Sunday and they honour many Christian saints: St. Catherine, St. Barbara, St. George, St. John the Baptist, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Mary Magdalene.<sup>19</sup>

Some aspects of Alawism are particularly challenging to mainstream Sunni Islam: Alawis revere 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the fourth Caliph of Islam (from whom they derive the name of their sect). In this they may appear superficially similar to Shi'a Muslims. However, Alawis consider 'Ali to be a divinity (analogous to the Christian belief regarding Jesus). This is significantly at odds with mainstream Islamic thought, and is considered to be the sin of

'shirk' (in Arabic: كرش), literally, 'sharing' one's devotion with more than one deity. According to the Qu'ran, *shirk* is an unforgivable sin:

God does not forgive the joining of partners with Him: anything less than that He forgives to whoever He will, but anyone who joins partners with God has concocted a tremendous sin.<sup>20</sup>

Such is the heterodox nature of the Alawi religion that many Muslims do not regard Alawis as members of their faith. In addition, 'the specifics of the Alawi faith are hidden not just from outsiders but even from the majority of the Alawis themselves,' the mysteries only being revealed to males at a certain age if of 'pure' Alawi parentage.<sup>21</sup> This secrecy has been strenuously maintained by the Alawi hierarchy: in the 1960s it was suggested to the Syrian Alawi ruler General Salah Jadid that suspicion of Alawis could be allayed by the publication of the secret books of the Alawi sect. Jadid responded: 'If we did this, our Shaykhs [religious leaders] would crush us'. It was perhaps for this reason that in 1973, 80 prominent Alawi religious leaders publicly affirmed their adherence to Shi'a Islam, without choosing to reveal details of their own practices and beliefs.<sup>22</sup>

## **THE ALAWI RISE TO POWER**

Syria gained full independence from France in 1946. As a marginal group, ambitious Alawis had an incentive to gravitate towards two relatively classless institutions in post-Independence Syria: the Ba'th party and the army. As the number of Alawis in senior positions in both entities increased, so did the attractiveness of these institutions to greater numbers of Alawis, thereby creating a self-reinforcing tendency. When military coups beset Syria in the late 1960s, the Alawis by 1966 had taken control of Syria, a position they still hold nearly fifty years later.<sup>23</sup>

The implications of a small, historically marginal and theologically unorthodox group holding the reins of power are clear: from the start they have had a strong incentive to shore up their power-base through inter-marriage, self-enrichment and repression of the majority. Where a country's communities are defined largely by religious affiliation, the orthodox majority (in this case, Sunni Muslims) are also likely to respond to repression with a more ostensibly 'religious' identity. This in turn has fed membership and support for religious extremist groups. In the current Syrian conflict, the Al-Qa'ida affiliated Jabhat Al-Nusra is

one such example. However, this sectarian tension is not new: examples of it exist throughout Syrian history. In 1979 Alawi cadets were murdered in Aleppo by Sunni militants. The Muslim Brotherhood (a Sunni Islamist movement) was blamed and membership of that organisation became a capital offence. In 1982 Hafiz Al-Asad crushed an uprising in Hama led by the Muslim Brotherhood with considerable brutality, according to Amnesty International killing over 25,000, including civilians.<sup>24</sup> This was an avowedly sectarian act of repression. 'The use of excessive force was then a clear sign of the regime's determination and sectarian nature; the forces sent to retake Hama were largely Alawi'.<sup>25</sup>

The Arab Spring, which begun with largely peaceful regime change in Tunisia and a troubled transition in Egypt, has long since given way to a harsh Syrian winter. But the study of the marginal and impoverished history of Syria's Alawi rulers reminds us that Syria's ruling regime has much to lose, perhaps more so than in other Arab countries. And the events of 1982 serve as a reminder that extreme brutality is a familiar methodology for the Syrian regime. As Abd al-Hadi al-Rawani, a former Hama resident now living in London told Amnesty in 2012: 'What is happening in Syria now is the same [as] what happened in Hama in 1982; the people want freedom and the regime is suppressing it'.<sup>26</sup>

### **WHY IS THE SYRIAN CONFLICT SO VIOLENT?**

A central question today is why has the Syrian uprising been so much bloodier than other manifestations of the Arab Spring? After all, the origins of the conflict were broadly similar to the political tumults in other Arab countries. At the earliest stages in March 2011, small scale protests took place in Syria, soon after the resignation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Reporting at the time spoke of 'hundreds' of protesters and small numbers of arrests.<sup>27</sup> The earliest Syrian protests were not sectarian in character and did not call for regime change. In some respects these early-2011 protests, calling for the release of political prisoners, mirrored the events of the so-called Damascus Spring, a period of intense opposition activism and tentative political liberalization that followed the death of Hafez al-Assad in the year 2000. Whilst the Damascus Spring proved abortive, it had demonstrated to Syrians that the regime under President Bashar Al-Asad could make limited steps towards reform. In November 2000, for example, the Mezze prison closure led to the release of

hundreds of political prisoners.<sup>28</sup> Similar actions occurred in March 2011 with the release of more than 200 political prisoners.<sup>29</sup> However, only one month later the situation had descended into armed conflict as tanks were sent into the town of Dara'a. Even at this stage an increasingly sectarian character to the conflict was becoming clear. As a Sunni resident of Jabla, a coastal city populated by both Sunnis and Alawites commented in April 2011: 'There's strife between us now, it's been planted, and the problem is going to exist forever in Jabla'.<sup>30</sup>

Aspects of the situation in Syria have been seen in other regional armed conflicts. The leading Syria scholar Joshua Landis has pointed out that '[t]he Syrian regime—the Baathist Alawite-dominated regime of Assad—is the last minoritarian regime in the Levant'. Landis cites as examples the Christians of Lebanon who fought a civil war against a mosaic of largely Muslim factions; similarly, Iraq's Sunni Muslims, who were largely in control of the country under Saddam Hussain, fought an insurgency against the Shi'a majority that assumed power after the US-led invasion in 2003.<sup>31</sup> On this analysis it is easy to see similarities with the Syrian case: a minority group that was once-dominant finds itself under attack from a majority population that feels able to mount a challenge. The sectarian nature of these conflicts, particularly in the Iraq case, is also consistent with the Syrian example.

However, in Syria the buried tensions may be far more severe, for three reasons. The first of these is that Syria's Alawis assumed power from a position of only recently-acquired strength; recall that only two decades before the Alawi seizure of power it was common to find Alawis in domestic servitude in wealthy Syrian households. Compare this with the Christians of Lebanon or the Sunnis of Iraq: both of these populations have historically represented an economically-successful elite group within society. The second reason is demographic: Iraq's Arab Sunnis number around 20 per cent of that country's population;<sup>32</sup> in Lebanon at the beginning of the civil war Christians were a minority, but a significant one: at around 40 per cent of the population they were the single largest confessional group.<sup>33</sup> Compare these two examples with the 12 per cent of Alawis in Syria. The third reason for the exceptional severity of Syria's conflict is religious. The viciously sectarian nature of the insurgency in Iraq, particularly in the years 2005 - 2006, should not blind us to the fact that, whilst there is a long history of hostility between Shi'a and Sunni Islam, there are many examples of coexistence. By contrast, from the

earliest days of the existence of Alawism it has been attacked by Sunni Islam's highest authorities. For example Ibn Taymiyya, a 14th century Islamic scholar who is one of the inspirational figures in orthodox Sunni Islamic thought, wrote three fatwas condemning Alawis. The fiercest of these fatwas states: 'they [the Alawis] are heretic apostates whose repentance is not accepted, and they must be killed wherever found, and to be cursed as described . . . their scholars and [notables] must be killed so that they would not lead others astray'.<sup>34</sup> The significance of Ibn Taymiyya to modern Sunni Muslims of the Wahhabi-Salafi tradition (the orthodox brand of Islam practised in Saudi Arabia) is hard to overstate. For this reason, modern fatwas against Alawis make reference to Ibn Taymiyya's views, such as one given by Saudi cleric Hamoud bin 'Aqla' al-Shu'eibi in 2000 and cited on a contemporary jihadist website. Back in 2010, before any conflict had broken out, Nibras Kazimi was able to identify Syria's Alawis as the Jihadists' 'perfect enemy',<sup>35</sup> due in part to their unorthodox religious views. Subsequent events may have proved this right: estimates of the numbers of foreign fighters joining the 'jihad' in Syria range from 6,000 – 11,000.<sup>36</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

The Alawis demonstrate three factors which have proved a worst-case scenario in propelling an ultra-violent conflict: a history of powerlessness, demographic weakness and religious unorthodoxy. The history of the Alawi rise to power is in some way the mirror-image of the Christian waves of emigration from Syria to the Americas. Both groups faced persecution within the society. The Christians, with their superior resources and international connections responded to this challenge by emigrating and sending remittances to their community that remained in the East. The Alawis remained in Syria, not because their lives were enviable; they remained because they had little alternative. It is fair to assume that the reverberations of the Arab Spring would have shook Syria, whatever the nature of its regime. We cannot discount the probability that a range of international players would have intervened. However, it is because Syria's rulers are themselves a marginal group that their response has been so determined and so ruthless. If the Alawis had been able to migrate to the Americas in nineteenth and twentieth centuries, or had Alawis come to the

Caribbean to open shops and businesses, perhaps they would never have seized power in Syria. Perhaps today Syria would be at peace.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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## NOTES

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