Islamisation of Civil War in Syria: the Imbroglio Deepens

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Religious fighters take hold in Syria

The Syrian conflict grinds on, continuing to claim dozens of lives every day. Though the fight between al-Assad's military and security forces and the varied opposition seems to be stuck in a deadly rut, the conflict continues to evolve. It began, like many in the Arab world did, in early 2011. The crowds were often made up of unemployed youths clamouring for social and economic reforms, the release of political prisoners, and freedom of the internet. They rallied and organized around Friday prayers and mosques, but this is merely because those structures are the typical centres of society. Despite the divide between the mostly Sunni protestors and al-Assad's Alawite dominated government, religious factors were not a major motivator for protestors.

As the conflict continues, the proliferation of different rebel groups and their need for funding means that it is impossible to state motivating factors that apply to the entire opposition. Many brigades have evolved from the original protest groups and have retained a specific regional focus. Some, such as the Falcons of Damascus, are ultraconservative Islamists. One, the al-Nusra Front for the People of the Levant, is claimed by the United States to be a direct front for the Iraqi branch of al-Qaida.

For many months, the military coordination that existed was because of the Free Syrian Army, led by a Colonel named Riad al-Asaad. Recently there have been attempts to refine the military structure by the creation of a 30-person Supreme Military Council. These efforts are partly due to international pressure, and the influence of the US and others led to the more extremist brigades being excluded from the Military Council. Politically, the main opposition group was for many months the Syrian National Council (SNC), which was led by Burhan Ghalioun and operated across the border in Turkey. In November 2012, this was consumed by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, led by Ahmed Mouaz al-Khatib, which has received the support of much of the West. Despite the new leadership, the National Coalition took over many structures and personnel from the SNC, and it is influenced by the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood like its predecessor. Likewise, Islamist fighters are influential in the brigades actually doing the fighting. A few groups, as mentioned, are almost entirely made of foreign Jihadists. Syria also has plenty of domestic religious fighters.

How it happened: Alawites, Syrian power and the Ba'th Party

The government of Syria has been dominated by the minority Alawite sect of Islam for decades. While Bashar al-Assad is and his father Hafez al-Assad was an Alawite, the dynamics of power in Syria are far more complicated than that. The Alawites, similar to other Shiite minorities like the Druzes and Isma'ilis, are, in Seale's words, 'a remnant of the Shi'i upsurge which had swept Islam a thousand years before'. These sects believe that Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's cousin, was his true heir. For this belief, they have long been branded by Sunnis as

infidels. Centuries of persecution have led to a tight knit, secretive attitude that is seen in al-Assad's government today. When building Hafez al-Assad's cult of personality, his government had to emphasize his Islamic qualities despite the fact he was an Alawite, which most Sunnis do not consider part of the Muslim community.

Alawite dominance of the government is not complete. When Hafez al-Assad took power in 1971, he crafted a government in which the presidency is, as Bar claims, 'the sole source and focus of real power ... the president controls all the pillars of power: he is the secretary general of the Ba'th party (which controls the parliament), commander-in-chief of the armed forces and the authority for all the intelligence services'. Hafez played officials and ministries against each other and delegated power according to personal ties and associations rather than formal party status. The end result was that though the Alawites are central, power rests in a coalition of various groups.

The vehicle and tool of politics in Syria since the 1940s has been the Ba'th party. Founded by Greek Orthodox Michel 'Aflaq and Sunni Salah al-Din Bitar, the Ba'th party has been a bastion of secularism and Arab nationalism since the time of its foundation. The origins of the party stem from a time in which the Arab people felt beat down by subsequent foreign occupations and defeats, from the Ottomans, the French, the Turks, and finally the Zionists. To address this malaise, 'Aflaq taught pride in the Arab nation and 'defined the shackles of Arab society as tribalism, sectarianism, the oppression of women, and the supremacy of landowners', Seale writes. 'Aflaq attempted to reconcile his Arab nationalism view with Islamism, proclaiming 'Islam as the peculiar genius of the Arab nation and the crowning glory of its history'.

The party was officially founded in 1945 and became widely popular. A young Hafez al-Assad was one of the first to join. It took power in a coup in 1963. The Alawites began gaining influence at this time because, owing to their typically lower social status, they made up a disproportionate percentage of the army and officer core. According to Hinnebusch, the party maintained popularity 'through a 'revolution from above' that broke the economic hold of the oligarchy, won the support of peasants with land reform, and created through nationalizations a public sector employing major segments of the middle and working classes'. Hafez al-Assad's faction took power in 1970 and gained legitimacy through the nationalist struggle with Israel. The party maintains power to this day, with Bashar al-Assad taking over when his father died in 2000. Before the current uprising, Bashar's political struggles regarding the party involved the struggle to replace the old guard of the party and military leadership. Since Bashar took over and enacted a mandatory retirement age for officials, over sixty percent have been replaced.

The rise of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood

Given the Arab-focused ideology of the Ba'th party, it is easy to see why its members have been in conflict

with the Islamist-focused Muslim Brotherhood. When these groups were forming, the conflict did not exist as it has for the last fifty years. Zubaida describes the evolution of the relationship between Arab nationalism and Islamism. He describes the writings of a Syrian named Rashid Rida, who worked in Egypt around the beginning of the 20th century and said 'that as a Muslim he was a brother to all Muslims, and as an Arab a brother to all Arabs, and saw no contradiction between the two'.

When the Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1928 in Egypt, it too initially did not perceive there was a contradiction between Islam and Arabism. It was not until Muslim Brotherhood leader, Sayyid Qutb, and other Islamists were heavily persecuted by the nationalist regime in Egypt that their brand of Islamism took on an anti-nationalist and anti-secular aspect. Zubaida writes that 'Qutb conceived of the Nasirist regime as a jahiliya, an age of barbarism and ignorance, to be confronted by true Muslims fortified by faith and following in the footsteps of the first Islamic vanguard of Mohammed and his followers'. Qutb and the Brotherhood's experience in Egypt was not the only strike against nationalism: François Burgat writes that during the 1960s 'the discourse of the Muslim Brotherhood ... concentrated essentially on the condemnation of Arab nationalism, because it was secular. They blamed secularism for the loss of Palestine, for political, moral, and economic corruption'.

In Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood has had a difficult path. Before the ascendency of either the al-Assads or the Ba'th party, the country was an early target for expansion of the Brotherhood. Despite this, Itzchak Weismann points out that the Syrian branch of the movement never reached the level of popular support that it did in, say, Egypt. The Brotherhood was popular in the urban lower middle class, but the Ba'th regime was successful in co-opting other large swaths of society. The Syrian Brotherhood was content to work within the parliamentary system while the Egyptian movement focused on 'peaceful propagation of the faith (da'wa) [and] occasionally also of violent action (jihad)', continues Weismann. The direct participation in the political system of the Syrian branch led to conflict with the highly successful Ba'th party.

By the late 1970s, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood became involved in a general uprising against Hafez's government. Bar states that 'the ideology of the Brotherhood at the time based its rejection of the regime on grounds of being takfir (declaring as heretics). In December 1980, the Brotherhood published a document detailing a future "Islamic State of Syria". In 1982, the revolt was finally crushed by the Alawite-dominated Syrian army, resulting in tens of thousands of civilians killed and the exiling of a generation of Brotherhood leadership. It was not until the mid-1990s that there was some rapprochement with the government.

In the time between Bashar al-Assad assuming the presidency in 2000 and the outbreak of the current conflict, some ineffectual efforts were made to further reconcile the government and the

Brotherhood. In May 2001, the Brotherhood reached out to Bashar and acknowledged the legitimacy of the government for the first time. Muslim Brothers were released from prison, book bans were lifted, and the organization had secret negotiations with the government. The official ban, however, remained in place. The Brotherhood attempted to redefine its image in a number of other areas, including renouncing violence and retracting statements equating the Alawites to infidels. The Brothers also worked to develop outside ties, both secular and religious. For instance, in October 2005 along with a number of secular parties they signed the Damascus Declaration calling for an increased emphasis on Islam, but also for "a democratic national regime" under the auspices of the al-Assad government.

Once the Arab Spring began, the Brotherhood initially continued to take a quiet role. As Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's spokesman Zuhair Salim claimed, "we are supporters, not creators. The voice of the street is a spokesperson for itself." As noted, the initial grievances of the uprising were predominantly economic and social. It is only in the later stages of the revolution that observers have been reporting on the increasing influence of the Brotherhood, primarily in the Syrian National Council and now the National Coalition. The Sunni Turkish government would look favourably on a Sunni Syrian government, and the Sunni Muslim Brothers have acted as intermediary between the political opposition and Ankara. Although the Brotherhood has downplayed its Islamist heritage, the increased relevance of the Brothers alarms some in the West, particularly when set alongside the Brotherhood's political gains in other Arab countries.

In the Syrian conflict, the Muslim Brotherhood has been particularly suited to working in the opposition. Commentators point out that the history of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has given it uncommon strength. While in countries like Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood has been in and out of the political system for decades, in Syria since 1980, it has been a capital offense to be part of or support the organization. The Brotherhood could only survive by hiding. Their methods and leaders were by necessity clandestine and as such they easily adapted to the rebellion. The influence of the Brothers combined with the influx of foreign jihadists has led to Islamism playing an increasing role in the opposition movement.

Sectarianism taking hold

It is increasingly clear that the government has been explicitly using the sectarian divisions to reinforce its base of support. All together, minority groups such as the Druze, Alawites, Christians, and Kurds add up to around 35% of the population. *NPR* quotes Fawaz Gerges, director of the Middle East Center at the London School of Economics, as saying: "The Syrian government has basically branded itself as the protector of minorities…Not just the Alawite, but even the Christians and the Druze and other minorities in Syria. So, they have used sectarianism as a political tool". The Alawite-dominated army and

security forces of Syria have long been loyal to the al-Assads, but today there are plenty of normal citizens that are out on the streets showing support for al-Assad.

In December 2012, the UN issued another warning about this phenomenon, pointing out that it is predominantly Alawites and foreign, supportive Shiites fighting domestic and foreign Sunnis. It has been confirmed that Shia group Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia, and Iranian Revolutionary Guard all have people in the country either supporting the government or fighting directly. One example of the divide is local Shiites forming "vigilante groups" to fight against rebels when the fighting came too close to a Shia shrine. Meanwhile, both sides use "disproportionate" attacks and actions are increasingly violating fundamental rules of international law. Since November 2012, domestic Christians, Kurds, and Turkmen have started participating in direct combat.

This is dangerous, for there are many examples of conflicts which ended, only to re-erupt in new waves of violence against a minority group. The alternating waves of violence against Hutu by Tutsi and Tutsi by Hutu in Rwanda and Burundi serves as a rather ominous example. The Alawites in particular, as the most obvious case of a minority dominating a majority, would be vulnerable to reprisals if a Sunni regime took power after a long and bloody struggle. There are already examples of brigades calling (even sympathetic) Alawites "pigs" and such dehumanization is a well known early signal for targeted group violence The United Nations Secretary-General's special advisers on the prevention of genocide and on the responsibility to protect have explicitly warned of the risk of future mass atrocities in Syria.

Part of a global power game

Of course, religious concerns are not the only reason why this conflict has lasted almost two years. The actions of Russia, China, and other world powers should be taken into consideration. Resolutions condemning the regime have come up in the UN Security Council, only to be vetoed by Russia and China. In this context, the conflict can be understood as a proxy battle between them and the West, or between the United States, Israel, and Iran. The fall of the Alawite government will be damaging for neighbouring Shiite Iran. The situation, thus, is an opportunity for any of these actors to reduce the influence of their opponents, or to prevent them from gaining a new foothold in the region.

In the battle for international prestige and recognition, China is making unilateral attempts to broker a resolution. At the beginning of May 2012 China hosted the head of the Arab League and SNC leader, Burhan Ghalioun, and a spokesman stated that 'China is ready to continue to play a positive and constructive role for the peaceful, fair and proper resolution of the Syrian issue at an early date.' China and Russia also have extensive trade agreements with al-Assad's government. Although Russia has called on the Syrian government to stop the violence, it has not

stopped shipping loads of tank-suitable fuel to the regime. Syria is also a major purchaser of Russian weapons. China, for its part, is still buying Syrian oil despite Western sanctions. In a major recent transaction, Iran acted as the intermediary and provided a ship for the sale.

The road to nowhere

The increasing role of the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamist fighters entering the country, and the rise of Islamism in general is a significant trend. As extremism in the opposition grows, so does the chance that after the conflict it might create a destabilized country and problems for the new government like in Afghanistan or Iraq. This chaos is also problematic for the countries neighbouring Syria. Turkey, for instance, is already dealing with some 150,000 Syrian refugees, according to NZ week, and the entire region is suffering destabilization. Even worse is the possibility of reprisal violence and ongoing sectarian conflict. Compared to areas like the Balkans, people in this area say they had religious peace for centuries. The Syrian government may be dominated by the Alawite minority group, but outside of the politically-influenced conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood there is little recent history of religious conflict. If the fight ends up creating a feedback loop of hate, the sociological outcome of the conflict threatens to be even more of a tragedy than the UN estimated 60.000 deaths.

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