

Assad regime responsible for rise in religious sectarianism in Syria

The sectarian regime is the cause of sectarianism among the opposition

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Much of the criticism of the Syrian resistance to the Bashar al-Assad regime is based on the fact that Sunni sectarianism has become an important element within it, in particular sectarianism against the Alawites, the sect to which Assad belongs. This criticism is justified, especially with reference to the extreme jihadist elements, but is also greatly exaggerated and generalised to unjustly cover all the resistance, which is also anti-sectarian in large part.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that there has been a gradual drift further towards sectarian discourse even among non-jihadist parts of the resistance. Often this is merely verbal, on the part of such groups, and (unlike the jihadist-sectarians) does not correspond to any propensity to engage in armed sectarian attacks. But this very fact, of groups that seemingly have no history of or ideological dedication to sectarianism adopting sectarian language, raises the question of what is driving the sectarian dynamic of the struggle – a struggle that began in 2011 as an anti-sectarian democratic struggle to overthrow a tyranny.

One of the answers most commonly given is that it has been driven by the sponsorship of parts of the resistance by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Gulf states, who are supposedly driven to divert the democratic struggle into a sectarian Sunni-Shia conflict in order that the democratic spirit of the Arab Spring does not reach their own tyrannical regimes. This is certainly a factor, but a hard look at the reality forces me to say that this factor has been greatly exaggerated and misunderstood (including in some pieces I have written [\[1\]](#)).

One factor that has received not nearly enough discussion has been the role of the regime itself as the chief cause of sectarianism. As Gilbert Achcar wrote in a recent piece:

“Let us take Syria for example. It is obvious that the transformation of the armed forces by Hafez el-Assad into a Praetorian guard of the regime, based on minority religious sectarianism, was likely to feed sectarian rancours within the majority. Let us imagine that the Egyptian president were Coptic Christian, that his family dominated the economy of the country, that three-quarters of the officers of the Egyptian army were also Coptic and that the elite corps of the Egyptian army were close to one hundred per cent Coptic. Would one be astonished to see “Muslim extremism” thriving in Egypt? Yet the proportion of Alawites in Syria is comparable with that of Copts in Egypt, that is to say approximately one tenth of the population” [\[2\]](#).

Recently, in some discussion, Assad apologists have tried to tell me that the sectarian nature of the regime has been exaggerated, or is merely a reference to the religion of Assad himself. They point to the fact that there are a number of top positions occupied by Sunni (e.g., vice-president, foreign minister). For anyone in doubt, you ought to take a look at a revealing map of the regime [\[3\]](#).

All the dark green are positions held by Alawites, light green Sunni and yellow “Others”. First, don’t be confused by most of the yellow — nearly all of this is only yellow because it refers to businesses

connected to the regime and so is only “other” in the sense that they are not individuals, and therefore cannot be given a sect. The only regime individuals I can see that are “other” (presumably Christian, Druze or Shia?) are four positions.

For the same reason, we can for the moment omit several dark green and light green squares which refer to regime-connected Alawite or Sunni businessmen, but who are not in the regime as such.

Counting just the regime individuals, we find there are 23 Alawites, five Sunni and four “others”. That is, Alawites, some 10-15 per cent of the population, occupy some 72 per cent of the regime. Sunni, some 75-80 per cent of the population, occupy under 16 per cent of the regime. The “others”, with four positions, about 12 per cent, would be slightly, but not enormously, over-represented (though given the regime discourse that it is the protector of “minorities,” we could thus say that “minorities” make up 20-25 per cent of the population but 84 per cent of the regime, and the vast Sunni majority only 16 per cent of the regime).

Then we need to look at other aspects.

First, a large part of the Alawite regime people are connected to Assad by family, so the regime is both sectarian and family run.

Second, Alawite elements are absolutely dominant within the military and security elements of the regime — including head of the Republican Guard, chief of staff of the armed forces, head of military intelligence, head of the air force intelligence, director of the National Security Bureau, head of presidential security. What this means is that the appointment of a few loyal Sunnis to the officially top positions — defence minister and interior minister — takes on the nature of being largely cosmetic, ceremonial.

Third, looking now at all the yellow-coloured regime-connected businesses. These are of course the Syrian bourgeoisie — the big bourgeoisie, who absolutely dominate the economy. They are connected via two main branches. All the top right of the chart shows large companies (oil, banking, telecom etc.) connected via Alawite, and Assad-family connected, members of the regime. This includes Assad’s cousins, the Makhoul family, who reportedly control some 40-60 per cent of the Syrian economy.

But of course, if the regime is absolutely Alawite dominated, where it can claim to be a little more “multicultural” in relation to the capitalist class — you wouldn’t want to exclude traditionally dominant big Sunni capital. So the whole bottom-right of the chart shows big businesses connected via the “Sunni business elite” who are in turn connected by marriage to Maher al-Assad, the president’s brother and head of the Republican Guard (wow, talk about the state as the “bodies of armed men” defending the capitalist class — hard to get it more open than that).

So to the extent that the regime isn’t entirely Alawite, it is the Sunni mega-capitalist class that is its chief non-Alawite support base.

So now let’s further summarise, the regime is:

1. Alawite sectarian
2. Assad family-run
3. The executive committee par-excellence of the Syrian mega-capitalist class.

So when an Alawite-sectarian regime that has ruled for decades launches unlimited war against its

population who rise up for democratic rights, and the majority of the rising population (though by no means all of it) just happen to be Sunni, then Achcar is right that this “was likely to feed sectarian rancours within the majority”.

And it works the other way as well. As Thomas Pierret explains:

“The kin-based/sectarian nature of the military is what allows the regime to be not merely”repressive“, but to be able to wage a full-fledged war against its own population. Not against a neighboring state, an occupied people or a separatist minority, but against the majority of the population, including the inhabitants of the metropolitan area (i.e. Damascus and its suburbs). There are very few of such cases in modern history ... No military that is reasonably representative of the population could do what the Syrian army did over the last two years, i.e. destroying most of the country’s major cities, including large parts of the capital. You need a sectarian or ethnic divide that separates the core of the military from the target population. Algeria went through a nasty civil war in the 1990s, and Algerian generals are ruthless people, but I do not think that the Algerian military ever used heavy artillery against one of the country’s large cities” [4].

But it is not only the presence of a totally sectarian regime waging war against its people that promotes a sectarian dynamic. It is also the fact that the regime early on set up sectarian Alawite militias (the Shabiha) to terrorise specifically Sunni populations, including through mass murder of hundreds of people at a time (the list is well known: Houla, Tremseh, Bayda and Banyas etc.), and ethnic cleansing, not to mention the wholesale destruction of districts and cities where Sunni live. To again quote Pierret:

“The problem is that many people do not even recognize the sectarian character of these atrocities, claiming that repression targets opponents from all sects, including Alawites. In fact ordinary repression does target opponents from all sects, but collective punishments (large-scale massacres, destruction of entire cities) are reserved for Sunnis, just like they were reserved for Iraqi Shiites and Kurds under Saddam Hussein.”

A sectarian, anti-Alawite response is thus to be expected as much as we find anti-Jewish responses among many Palestinians (and check Hamas’ virulently anti-Jewish founding charter if you don’t believe me, largely based on the Protocols). I believe Hamas has moved on a great deal since its founding charter, and I don’t think this characterises its politics today. However, such discourse understandably remains a factor among many Palestinians, and the address for those responsible for this is in Tel Aviv.

That of course does not make it alright. But the point of this contribution is not to justify real sectarian politics among some sections of the opposition, but to analyse its cause. A number of points can be made.

First, the fact that sectarian views have been rising among sections of the opposition, and that this had led to a number of actual sectarian attacks and crimes, and even at least one large-scale sectarian crime – the monstrous ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria group) attack on Alawite villages in Lattakia in August 2013, when nearly 200 were massacred [5] – is evidence that the regime’s crimes are the major factor making life insecure for the Alawite masses, in the same way as the crimes of the Zionist regime occupying Palestine are the main factor making life insecure for the Jewish masses.

Second, the massacre just referred to is the only one on that scale, i.e., on a similar scale to the kinds of massacres of Sunni that regime militias regularly carry out. That does not mean that smaller scale ones are OK. What it means is that, by and large, most sectarian attacks on Alawites by

opposition forces have been opportunist attacks by undisciplined elements, not part of a strategy of any of the leading groups other than ISIS, and cannot be compared to the massacres organised by the regime.

It is also important to be aware of fake “sectarian massacre” stories spread by the regime, such as the alleged massacre of Shia villagers in Hatla in June 2013 [6], the more recent faked “Adra massacre” [7], the alleged large-scale massacre of Kurds by jihadists last August (where the jihadists did carry out crimes in their war against the Kurds, but not of this nature or scale, see [8], among others.

As for Lattakia itself, ISIS is of course widely reviled by the rest of the opposition, who see it as either a front for the regime or a dictatorship that must also be fought, and since early January 2014 all the other resistance forces have been engaged in a frontal war on ISIS.

Third, therefore, it is wrong to call the entire war a sectarian conflict or to call the entire anti-Assad uprising a sectarian uprising. In such a wide-ranging revolt against the murderous regime, there is a huge spectrum of opinions on everything. The task of supporters of the Syrian revolution is to do our best to support the best, anti-sectarian elements.

To take one example, the contrast between the ISIS-led massacre of Alawites last August, and this appeal by the local Free Syria Army (FSA) Battalions and Committees of the Sahel (Coast) in solidarity with Alawites in Lattakia who were waging their own struggle against the regime [9], speaks volumes about the differences between elements of the opposition. This is also the case with many Islamist groups outside the jihadist-sectarian fringe, for example, Liwa al-Tawhid, the large moderate-Islamist militia that dominates Aleppo, makes a point of protecting Christians [10].

Fourth, however, the fact of this sectarian aspect, even if only from part of the resistance, makes it all the more difficult for the Alawite masses – which, if we take out those in the ruling elite, are, like most Sunnis, often poor rural folk – to break with the regime and join the ranks of the revolution. Even many of those who despise the regime. Of course this is a Catch-22 however – because to the extent that Alawites are seen to be blocking with a sectarian regime that is slaughtering the majority, anti-Alawite sectarianism will increase, whereas if a powerful anti-Assad group of Alawites did emerge, it would nullify such a trend. This adds weight to the view that a purely “military situation” is impossible, and that if some kind of ceasefire could be forced out of the regime, which allowed for the civil struggle to resume, it could be a good thing for the revolution if such space were used right.

Finally, however, the fact that this sectarianism has been created, driven, perpetuated by the regime, also means that purely “diplomatic solutions” that aim to save the regime with some cosmetic changes will also not work – the chief cause of the cancer cannot be the “shield” against it, as some imagine.

Both diplomacy and military struggle, like civil struggle, are tactics, parts of an overall “revolutionary solution”, which removes the regime. Even to get to a ceasefire that aids the struggle – i.e., the opposite of one that merely allows the regime to go on killing behind a façade after the revolutionary forces have demobilised – will require not nice talk to a regime that has waged all-out, unlimited war for three years, but real military pressure on it via the opposition being able to get real arms in relevant quantities.

And if we have to accept that at this stage part of the resistance has become sectarian due to the regime’s sectarianism, and that little can be done about it until the regime is removed, by the same token all the non-sectarian parts of the resistance need to wage a relentless struggle against the

influence of this destructive, reactionary sectarianism within its ranks – the war currently being launched against the ISIS by the rest of the resistance being a very positive step in that direction.

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P.S.

* The sectarian regime is the cause of sectarianism among the opposition:

<http://mkaradjis.wordpress.com/>

Footnotes

[1] e.g.,

<http://mkaradjis.wordpress.com/2013/09/24/the-geopolitics-of-the-syrian-uprisinginsurgency>

[2] See on ESSF (article 31089), [What remains of the Arab Spring? – “Ancien régime”, islamism, socio-economic dead end and regional revolutionary process.](#)

[3] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Maps/Syria-Regime-Chart-20130826_2

[4] <http://angryarab.blogspot.com.au/2013/04/angry-arab-interviews-thomas-pierret-on.html>

[5] <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2013/10/11/you-can-still-see-their-blood>

[6] see <http://blog.you-ng.it/2013/06/17/hatla-fabrication-of-a-massacre>

[7] see <http://www.interpretermag.com/the-massacre-in-syria-that-wasnt/> and especially <http://lopforum.tumblr.com/post/70411153632/alleged-adra-massacre-collated-media>

[8] <http://claysbeach.blogspot.com.au/2013/08/breaking-news-assad-iran-you-lie-on.html>

[9] <http://darthnader.net/2012/10/13/and-then-there-was-hope/>

[10] <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Sep-21/232025-christian-hostel-in-aleppo-has-own-view-of-jihadist-rebels.ashx#axzz2gfb4z1J2>. Indeed there are Alawite, Christian and Druze units of the FSA; here is an important article about anti-Assad Alawites: <http://freehalab.wordpress.com/2013/06/04/the-free-alawite-front/>