

WHY SYRIA'S REGIME IS LIKELY TO SURVIVE

August 21, 2011

gloria-center.org

Examining the differences between the uprising in Syria and those in Tunisia and Egypt offers important clues as to why Syria's regime is likely to survive. The Tunisian and Egyptian armies refused to kill demonstrators and even supported the revolution. Syria's Alawi-led forces, on the other hand, do not hesitate to kill, as the Tadmur and Hama massacres show. The Syrian regime has been skillful at exploiting the conflict with Israel and the patience of Western powers with the dictatorship. The Syrian government has shown a strong ability to manipulate Islam for its benefit as well. While these tools do not work as effectively as they used to, they still give the Syrian government many advantages over its deposed counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt.

POPULAR UPRISINGS IN TUNISIA AND EGYPT

On December 17, 2010, Muhammad Bouazizi, a 26-year-old vegetable street vendor from the poor town of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia (200 miles south of Tunis, the capital) set himself on fire in front of the governor's office, igniting a series of popular protests and clashes with the police that engulfed the country. Bouazizi had been humiliated by the confiscation of his vendor cart, and following the municipality's refusal to see him about the matter, he self-immolated. He died on January 4, 2011, as a result of his burns. Bouazizi's actions sparked widespread protests against President Zine al-Abidine bin Ali's non-representative corrupt regime, high unemployment, brutal security forces, and single political party dictatorship, among other issues. Less than a month later, on January 14, 2011, bin Ali fled to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, after 23 years of rule.

The Tunisian uprising was swift, effective, and inspirational to the Arab masses everywhere. Within days, Bouazizi had motivated men in a number of Arab countries to self-immolate as a result of desperation over poverty, unemployment, repression, and corruption. In Egypt, at least five men followed Bouazizi's example, with one dead in Alexandria.^[1] On January 25, 2011, a few days after bin Ali's flight, thousands of anti-government protesters demanding the end of President Husni Mubarak's almost 30-year rule clashed with riot police in Tahrir Square in the center of Cairo. The protests spread to other cities. During the first week of the demonstrations alone, the violence resulted in some 300 deaths, according to UN estimates.^[2]

By February 5, 2011, President Mubarak had announced a series of concessions. He replaced the cabinet, appointed a vice-president for the first time, and declared that he would not run for re-election for a sixth term in September 2011. He also replaced the politburo of the ruling party, including his son Gamal, and pledged dialogue with opposition parties.^[3] Earlier, on January 31, 2011, the Egyptian army declared its respect for the legitimate rights of the people, stating that it would not use force against protesters. Egypt's new vice-president, Umar Sulayman, invited all protest groups and opposition parties for immediate negotiations on constitutional reform.^[4] Six groups, including the banned Muslim Brothers organization, met with the vice president for the first time on February 6, 2011. The participants agreed to form a joint committee of judicial and political figures tasked with proposing constitutional amendments.^[5] On February 8, 2011, it was reported that 6 million public sector workers received a 15 percent pay increase.^[6] On February 11, 2011, President Mubarak resigned, handing over Egypt's affairs to the high command of the armed forces, headed by the defense minister.

In an Arab world ruled by dictatorial monarchs and military presidents who—unless assassinated in a coup d'état—typically remain in power for life, popular uprisings are alien. What then is the possibility that the Tunisian and the Egyptian popular uprisings will be copied in other Arab countries? This article addresses the question as it relates to Syria.

COMPARING SYRIA WITH TUNISIA AND EGYPT

Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, on one hand, and Tunisia's bin Ali and Egypt's Mubarak, on the other, share common characteristics but also differ in many regards. In all three countries, a politicized military is the kingmaker, the supreme power. They have in common non-representative, non-participatory governance; single political party dictatorship; a rubber-stamp parliament; politicized judiciary; the absence of press freedom; brigades of brutal security forces infamous for appalling human-rights abuses; and a presidential cult of personality. They are also alike in the rampant corruption, absence of transparency or accountability in government finances, high unemployment, and huge disparities of income—poverty for the great majority of the population and great wealth for the tiny minority of the ruling elites and their business associates who violate the law with impunity.

On the other hand, Syria's Asad differs from bin Ali's Tunisia and Mubarak's Egypt in three respects. It is these differences that make a successful popular uprising leading to regime change in Damascus unlikely, at least in the immediate future. First, Syria is ruled by the Asad clan of the minority Alawi sect, unlike the former Sunni-majority-led government under bin Ali. Second, Tunisia's secularism differs greatly from Asad exploitation of Sunni Islam. Last, the geopolitical environment dictates different domestic and foreign agendas in Damascus and Tunis, especially regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Asad regime in Syria also differs from Egypt in three respects. Again, Syria's Alawi-minority rule differs from the Sunni majority-led government of former President Mubarak in Egypt. Second, the Muslim Brotherhood organization in Syria is relatively weak, unlike the well-organized and forceful Muslim Brothers organization in Egypt. Third, Syria is in a state of war with Israel, whereas peaceful relations have existed between Egypt and Israel since March 26, 1979.

Reducing the desire for major revolt in Syria are memories of the hundreds killed by Hafiz Asad in Tadmur in 1980 and the many thousands killed in Hama in 1982 (see below), and the fear of similar savagery in 2011. Also sobering are reminders of the civil war in neighboring Lebanon (1975-1990) and the destruction in Iraq since the 2003 U.S. occupation, with more than a million Iraqi refugees in Syria. Further, a young Bashar Asad, with a stylish British/Syrian wife, continues to give some people hope for genuine reforms.

Damascus attributes the Tunisian uprising to bin Ali's reliance on "fair-weather foreign allies."^[7] The Ba'th Party's newspaper also predicted that the uprising would restore Tunisia to its historical role as a supporter of Arab national causes, especially the confrontation with Israel.^[8] Damascus' rhetoric on Tunisia applies to Egypt as well. Asad claims that Syria is insulated from popular uprisings because he understands the needs of the Syrian people and his policies fulfill their aspirations. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* on January 31, 2011, Asad said he was very closely linked to the beliefs of his people.^[9]

Notwithstanding Syria's government boasting that it does not rely on fair-weather foreign allies, that it has always supported Arab national causes, and that Assad is very closely linked to the beliefs of his people, just one week after bin Ali fled Tunisia, Damascus released S£16 billion (US\$360 million) in fuel subsidies to state employees and retirees, granted S£12 billion (US\$270 million) in assistance to more than 400,000 poor families,[10] and rolled back price increases announced earlier on certain pharmaceuticals.[11] On February 17, 2011, the government announced it would cut taxes on basic foodstuffs. On May 25, 2011, the price of fuel oil dropped by 25 percent (from S£20 to S£15) per liter.[12]

While these actions may have been in the making for some time—as the government had stated—the uprising in Tunisia must have accelerated their announcement. In any event, the sudden generosity failed to buy peace. On March 18, 2011, a popular uprising erupted in the southern city of Dara'a. The uprising quickly spread to other cities as well. Tanks rolled into Banyas, Dara'a, Hama, Jabla, Jisr al-Shughour, and Homs, among others. Within a few weeks, more than a thousand citizens had been killed, thousands more injured, thousands fled to neighboring Turkey, and many thousands were arrested and tortured.

Syria's regime is built upon three pillars—brutal sectarian security forces; exploitation of Sunni Islam; and maintaining a state of no-peace, no-war with Israel. In what follows, these characteristics will be discussed and related to bin Ali's Tunisia and Mubarak's Egypt.

SYRIA'S ALAWITE MINORITY RULE AND THE READINESS OF ITS SECURITY FORCES TO KILL DEMONSTRATORS

The populations of Tunisia and Egypt are homogeneous. By contrast, Syria is home to a colorful tapestry of religions, religious sects, and ethnicities, with a sectarian minority in power since the mid-1960s.

Population Composition in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria

Tunisia's population of 11 million is 98 percent Arab, 98 percent Muslim,[13] and 98 percent Sunni Muslim.[14] The Tunisian army, being drawn from a homogeneous non-sectarian society, struck a mortal blow to the bin Ali regime. It refused to obey the president's orders to shoot at protesters. In its refusal, the army transformed Tunisia's popular uprising into a coup d'état against the president. In an interview with *Le Parisien* newspaper, quoted by Reuters, Admiral Jacques Lanxade, a former French chief of staff and later ambassador to Tunisia said, "The chief of staff of the land army, General Rachid Ammar, resigned, refusing to get the army to open fire, and it is probably he who advised Ben Ali to go, telling him 'You're finished'." [15]

Egypt's population of 81 million is, to a great degree, homogeneous—99.6 percent Egyptian Arab, about 90 percent Muslim (mostly Sunni), and about 9 percent Coptic.[16] The Egyptian army, being non-sectarian, declared on January 31, 2011, that it respected the legitimate rights of the people and would not use force against the protesters.[17]

Syria's population is 22 million. Almost three-quarters of Syria's population is Sunni Muslim. There are

minorities of Alawites, estimated at about 12 percent; Christians, around 8 percent; Druze, some 3 percent; and Isma'ilis, around 2 percent. Arabs make up a majority of about 90 percent. Ethnic minorities of Kurds, Armenians, and others make up the remaining ten percent.[18]

The Asad clan has ruled Syria with brutality since the mid-1960s. It belongs to one of the seven main tribes of the Alawi community, the Kalbiyya Tribe. The Alawites are thought to be a heterodox Isma'ili sect, despised by orthodox Sunnis. The famous Sunni theologian Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), condemned the Alawites as being more dangerous than the Christians and encouraged Muslims to conduct jihad against them.[19] To many Alawi clerics, the howls of jackals that can be heard at night are the souls of Sunni Muslims calling their misguided coreligionists to prayer.[20]

The Alawites have inhabited Syria's northern Mediterranean mountainous region since the tenth century. Until Alawi officers took power in 1963, their homeland was destitute. Poverty was so abject that poor families were compelled to send their daughters, sometimes as young as ten years of age, to live and work for paltry wages as housemaids in the homes of affluent families in nearby cities. While other parts of rural Syria were also poor, the Alawi region was worse. Centuries of Sunni persecution and neglect left deep scars on the collective memory of this minority.

To put Syria's rule in perspective, the historical progression of this minority's ascension to power would be useful.

Changes to Syria's Power Structure in the Twentieth Century

For centuries, Syria's wealthy urban Sunni families and notables enjoyed a privileged position under the stratified society of Ottoman rule (1517–1918). However, this came to end with the French mandate (1920–1946). The Syrian urban elite had hoped to rule an independent Syria and thus supported the Arab Revolt during World War I against the Turks, which eventually led to the Ottoman defeat. However, in the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, France had secretly agreed with Britain to divide natural Syria between Paris and London. As a result, Syria's embittered urban elite led the nationalist resistance against French rule, driving France to rely on Syria's ethnic and religious minorities. The French recruited infantry and cavalry units composed exclusively of Alawites, Armenians, Circassians, Druze, Isma'ilis, and Kurds.

After the French left Syria in 1946, Damascus' early governments were mainly composed of the country's urban notables. They resented a Syrian army composed of ethnic and religious minorities left behind by the French. From 1946 to 1948, the size of the army was reduced from 7,500 men to 2,500 men.[21] Army commanders reciprocated the resentment, and the army became politicized. A series of military coups followed.

During the next 15 years, young Alawites, most of whom could not afford a university education, sought careers in the military. The military academy in the city of Homs offered free education and board in addition to a monthly salary. On March 8, 1963, Hafiz Asad, a 33-year-old air force captain along with five other low to middle-ranking Alawi officers staged a coup d'état that seized power from the legitimate government of President Nazim al-Qudsi and the country's democratically-elected parliament. Since then, Syria has been governed by an illegitimate, non-representative Alawi minority dictatorship.

The Asad clan has been in absolute power since 1970, when Hafiz Asad succeeded in eliminating the last of his original five comrades. In March 1971, he was made president in an uncontested referendum securing over 95 percent of the votes. Four referendums followed, each for a seven-year term. Once again, Asad won over 95 percent of the votes each time. Hafiz Asad died in 2000. Shortly after, a constitutional amendment was enacted to lower the minimum eligibility age of the president from 40 to 34 years, and Hafiz Asad's son 34-year-old son Bashar became president in a similar uncontested referendum. Bashar followed his father's footsteps, securing 97.3 percent of the votes. In the May 27, 2007 uncontested referendum, the young president won another term, this time winning 97.62 percent of the votes.

A Ruling Clan United

Syria is a police state. At the heart of the Asad clan's political and military hegemony is a multiple above-the-law security services (Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, General Security Directorate, Political Security Directorate, National Security Bureau, among others) infamous for cruelty and appalling disregard for human rights. Stories of political opponents being arrested never to be heard from again and of relatives of dissidents being taken away as hostages so as to force them to surrender are abound. Trusted Alawi officers occupy every position of importance in the security forces. They control the important military units, especially in and around Damascus. The president's youngest brother, Maher, with a reputation of being unstable, heads the Presidential Guard brigades.^[22] Conceivably, an Alawi general/s could stage a successful coup d'état against Bashar Asad, but that would not change the regime's sectarian nature.

The Asad regime has long had a reputation of violence and cruelty. In response to the Muslim Brothers' acts of violence against the symbols of Alawi power between 1977 and 1982, Hafiz Asad sent 12,000 soldiers that crushed the Brothers in a horrifying massacre of historic proportions. For three weeks in February 1982, Hafiz Asad's military forces pulverized Hama. Depending on the source, between 3,000—according to the government and its apologists— and well over 20,000—possibly 38,000, according to Thomas Friedman^[23]—were killed, tens of thousands injured, and entire city districts were demolished.

Earlier, on June 27, 1980, the day after a failed Muslim Brotherhood assassination attempt on Hafiz Asad, two units from the Defense Companies, controlled by Hafiz's brother Rifa'at, were let loose on the Tadmur prison in Palmyra, deep in the desert, where Muslim Brothers were being held. The units were given orders to kill everyone inside. "Some five hundred inmates died in cells echoing to the fearful din of automatic weapons, exploding grenades, and dying shrieks of 'God is great.'" Shortly after, on July 8, 1980, membership in the Muslim Brotherhood became a capital offense.^[24] In the aftermath of Hama, thousands of Muslim Brothers migrated to Saudi Arabia, where they continue to live.

While the world did not lift a finger and has quickly forgotten both the Hama and Tadmur massacres, the Sunni masses, especially the Muslim Brothers, will neither forgive nor forget. Self-preservation has driven the regime's security generals to act promptly, decisively, and viciously at the slightest hint of an uprising.

The Likelihood of a Successful Popular Uprising in Syria

Stirrings on March 18, 2011, in the southern Syrian city of Dara'a resulted in the killing of at least three demonstrators by the security forces.[25] Foreign reporters are banned from entering Syria. By March 26, 2011, demonstrations had spread to other Syrian cities, including Damascus suburbs, with 61 deaths confirmed.[26] On April 25, 2011, the army entered the city of Dara'a with tanks. A week later, tanks rolled into several towns near Dara'a as well as Banyas, Hama, Jabla, Homs, and others. On May 11, 2011, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan revealed that, "more than 1,000 civilians had died in Syria's upheaval." [27] Thus far, the attack in mid-June 2011 on Jisr al-Shughour, near the Turkish border, has forced some 10,000 residents to flee to Turkey. Thousands were also injured and many more thousands were arrested and tortured. Braving bullets, tanks, arrest, and torture, demonstrations have grown in size and have become features of the noon prayer on Fridays and during the burial rituals the next day in dozens of cities, towns, and villages.

On May 18, the United States imposed sanctions on President Bashar Asad.[28] On May 23, 2011, the European Union imposed sanctions on the Syrian president.[29]

There is little likelihood that Asad will engage in genuine reforms in order to end the Ba'th Party's monopoly on power, conduct democratically contested parliamentary and presidential elections, ensure crude oil sector transparency, and stop human rights abuses. Genuine reforms would put an end to the regime's hold on power, which would have serious consequences to the Alawi communities and possibly the Christian minority as well. In his public address to the parliament on March 30, 2011, Asad was defiant. He repeated the well-known cliché used by the other Arab rulers that the protests against him were a disguise for a foreign conspiracy to "fragment Syria... an Israeli agenda." Asad insisted that Syria's protesters had been "duped" into damaging the nation on behalf of its enemies.[30] While acknowledging popular demands for reform, he effectively declared that it would be either his regime or the gun.

The president's speech on March 30, 2011, was reiterated by his notorious 41-year-old billionaire cousin, Rami Makhlouf. Makhlouf has been under U.S. sanctions since 2008 for "manipulating the judicial system and using Syrian intelligence to intimidate rivals." In an interview with the *New York Times* reported on May 10, 2011, Makhlouf revealed the workings and thinking of the Asad family's inner circle. He warned, "Syria's ruling elite, a tight-knit circle at the nexus of absolute power... will fight to the end." He continued, "The ruling elite... had grown even closer during the crisis" and that "the decision of the government now is that they decided to fight." Makhlouf, who holds no official position, further postured, "If there is no stability here, there's no way there will be stability in Israel." [31]

The Asad regime is likely to survive this round of protests. To choke the rebellion, Syria's security units have been shooting to kill demonstrators and torturing those arrested. Slim as it may be, however, the demonstrators have hope on two fronts. First, should the demonstrations persist and spread to downtown Damascus and Aleppo, the security forces would be overwhelmed, rendering a Hama or a Palmyra-type atrocity more difficult, especially before a world audience on the internet, Facebook, and YouTube. If the demonstrations continue and become more widespread, more Sunni clerics would join the uprising. Ultimately, the demonstrations could increase enough for even the palace ulama to turn against their benefactor. Second, if units of the army, which is a conscripted institution, refuse to kill citizens or if the army stands up to the republican guards and the intelligence brigades, the regime might very well collapse. Like a pressure cooker, the longer the Asad dictatorship survives, the greater the revenge of the masses will be.

Minority sectarian tyrannies cannot rule forever. Now that the barrier of fear has been broken, discontent and poverty could drive Syrians to revolt for the second, third, and fourth times until the Asad regime is overthrown. Syria's high population growth rates mean that 48 percent of Syria's population today is under 19 years of age, and 58 percent is under the age of 24 years.[32] Billions of dollars, which Syria does not have, are needed for investment in basic infrastructure, including new schools; universities; hospitals; housing—with electricity and water that run all the time, not a third of the time, as the case is in most cities today; and in economic stimulus initiatives to create hundreds of thousands of new jobs. In the absence of substantial foreign aid, Syria's per capita GDP is unlikely to grow sufficiently to keep the masses of the poor off the streets for too long.

Hafiz Asad has saddled the Alawi community with a terrible burden. Does Bashar Asad endanger the Alawites more by maintaining his regime or by ending his family's 40-year-long rule?

THE SYRIAN REGIME'S ISLAMIC AGENDA

As the only secular country in the region, Tunisia is unique in the Arab world. Bin Ali's tight embrace of state secularism denied him the right to invoke those parts of the Koran and the Sunna that demand blind obedience to the Muslim ruler. In the case of Egypt, on the other hand, the country's Sunni leadership has chosen to promote Sunni Islam. As for Syria, the Alawi leadership is neither secular nor sincere in its promotion of the Sunni creed. To President Asad, Islam is a strategy for blackmail legitimacy—a tool to mollify the Sunni majority and to use the Islamist alternative to frighten Syria's Christian and other minorities as well as Israel and the Western powers.

Tunisia's Separation of Islam from the State

Despite its population being almost entirely Sunni Muslim, Tunisia is the only secular Arab country. For a half a century, there has been a separation between Islam and the state. Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba (in office from July 1957 until November 1987), was the most avowedly secularist leader in the Arab world. To Bourguiba, Islam symbolized the past; modernity represented the future. Bourguiba was careful to secularize within the framework of a modernist reading of Islam. He presented reforms as the product of *ijtihad* (individual philosophical reasoning of Shari'a), not a break with Islam. He implemented a genuine program of secularization and modernization, abolishing Shari'a courts and polygamy. He reformed education and banned the headscarf for women. Bin Ali followed in Bourguiba's footsteps.[33]

Egypt's Islamic Credentials

Ninety percent of Egypt's population is Muslim, mainly Sunni. Egyptian Muslims have a strong attachment to Islam. An international survey of 68 states conducted by Gallup International for the BBC World Service program *Who Runs Your World* found that 87 percent of Egyptians named religion as their most important

defining characteristic, giving Egypt the most robust religious identity of any country surveyed.[34] Given the affinity of the great majority of Egyptians to Islam, Cairo's government promotes the Islamic creed. Article 2 of the 1971 constitution, as amended in 1980, 2005, and 2007, names Islam as the religion of the state and Shari'a law as the principal source of legislation.[35]

The Mubarak administration precluded the Muslim Brotherhood from openly fielding candidates in Egyptian elections. In response, the Brothers ran as independents. In the November-December 2005 elections, the organization became the major parliamentary opposition, winning 88 seats, or 20 percent. [36]

Syria's Exploitation of the Islamic Creed

Syria is neither secular nor sincere in its promotion of the Sunni creed. Syria's promotion of Sunni Islam contradicts the ruling Ba'th Party's secular constitution but is politically convenient. The party's holy trinity is Arab unity, freedom, and socialism. There is no mention of Islam in the Ba'th constitution.[37] The regime uses five main strategies with regards to Islam, all which show its lack of sincerity toward its secular roots.

The first strategy is the enshrinement of Islam in the constitution, promulgated in 1973 under Hafiz Asad. [38] Article 3.1 makes Islam the necessary religion of the president. Article 3.2 names Islam "a main source" of legislation. Having failed to abolish articles 3.1 and 3.2 and to remove a barrier to his presidency, in 1973, Hafiz Asad appealed to Imam Musa al-Sadr, an influential cleric and head of the Higher Shi'i Council in Lebanon, to issue a fatwa that the Alawites were indeed a community of Shi'i Islam. [39] Sadr consented.

The second strategy is to safeguard the country's Shari'a laws and courts in personal status, family, and inheritance affairs (non-Muslims follow their own religious courts). Shari'a law is the antithesis of the liberal laws of the modern age. It denies women many legal rights and impinges on their human rights—a Muslim man can marry four wives and divorce any one of them without giving reason (with limited child custody rights, housing, or alimony), a Muslim woman is prohibited from marrying a non-Muslim man while the Muslim man is allowed to marry non-Muslim women, a woman cannot pass her nationality on to her foreign husband and children while the man can, the punishment for "honor killings" of women by male relatives is only a light sentence, and two women equal one man in legal testimony, witness, and inheritance. Nonetheless, the regime, its apologists, and public relations propagandists have made great efforts to project at home and abroad an image of secularism, modernity, and equality between the genders.

The third strategy is the use of an Islamic curriculum in Syrian elementary, middle, and high schools. Muslim students are taught Sunni Islam regardless of the Islamic sect to which they belong. The textbooks do not contain a single reference to the beliefs or interpretations of the Islamic creed according to the doctrines of the Alawi, Isma'ili, or Druze minorities.

The fourth strategy is to flaunt the regime's Islamic image on religious occasions. During Islamic feasts,

the president is sure to attend prayers in Damascus' famous Umayyad Mosque to media fanfare. Religious events are national holidays. During the month of Ramadan, government and private offices have different working hours and close early. Special religious programming takes over the airwaves on government radio and television. More mosques, larger congregations, and a greater number of veiled women than ever before have become the order of the day in Syrian cities. Under the direction of President Bashar Asad, a special rain prayer was even performed throughout Syria's mosques on December 10, 2010. This is a far cry from the secular vision of the Ba'th Party's founding fathers.

In order to gain support from the Sunni palace ulama and to mollify the Sunni street following the violent confrontations in March 2011 between the security forces and protestors in several Syrian cities, Asad attempted to appease the Sunni community. Popular Sunni cleric Muhammad Sa'id al-Bouti praised Asad's positive response to many of the requests submitted to the government by a number of Sunni clerics. For example, on April 5, 2011, in his weekly religious program airing on Syrian government television, Shaykh al-Bouti applauded Asad for readmitting *niqab*-wearing (black face cover) female teachers to the classroom, after they had been transferred to desk duties in July 2010.[40] Interestingly, al-Bouti had previously attributed the drought in December 2010 to their removal from the classroom. Shaykh al-Bouti also praised Asad for the formation of the Sham Institute for Advanced Shari'a Studies and Research, and for the establishment of an Islamic satellite television station dedicated to proclaiming the message of "true" Islam.[41] In another gesture, Syria's first and only casino, which had enraged Islamists when it opened on New Year's Eve 2011, was closed.[42]

The fifth strategy is support of the Sunni Hamas in the Gaza Strip, the Shi'i Hizballah in Lebanon, and of theocratic Iran. This strategy not only demonstrates the regime's commitment to Islamist causes but also politicizes Islam in the domestic discourse.

What is the reason for the regime's exploitation of Islam? Since the Asad clan belongs to the heterodox Alawi minority sect, appeasement of the Sunni majority works in Asad's favor. Instead of wading in the muddy waters of Shari'a reform and secularization, as called for in the Ba'th Party constitution, the regime has chosen a more beneficial strategy: to uphold the influence of Islam and to appoint as many Sunnis as possible to high government positions—though excluding those in the elite security forces.

ISLAM'S APPEAL TO MUSLIM DICTATORSHIPS

The Koran and the Sunna enjoin Muslims to obey the Muslim ruler blindly. In verse 4:59, the Koran orders, "Obey God and obey God's messenger and obey those of authority among you." The effects of this verse transcend all layers of hierarchy—the male over the female, the father over the children and wife (or wives), the teacher over the student, the employer over the employee, the ruler over the ruled, and so forth. Sunna traditions amplify the Koran. In response to the question of how a Muslim should react to a ruler who does not follow the true guidance, Muhammad reportedly said, according to *Sahih Muslim*: "He who obeys me obeys God; he who disobeys me, disobeys God. He who obeys the ruler, obeys me; he who disobeys the ruler, disobeys me." [43] This and similar wording appears two dozen times in *Sahih Muslim*. Abi Da'ud (d. 888) and Ibn Maja (d. 886) quote Muhammad as imploring Muslims to hear and obey the ruler, even if he were an Ethiopian slave. [44] Al-Bukhari (d. 870) quotes similar traditions. [45] In

addition, the palace ulama invoke the thousand-year-old opinions of famous jurists such as al-Ghazali (1058-1111), Ibn Jama'a (1241-1333), and Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328). These men taught that the Muslim ruler must be obeyed blindly, because even an unjust ruler is better than societal unrest.

Like other Arabs, the Syrians' embrace of Islam is tight. The Koran describes the Arab race as the "best race evolved to mankind" (3:110). Muhammad, his companions, the Koran, and the holy Muslim sanctuaries in Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem are all Arabic. Arabs feel they are the guardians of an Arabic religion. In addition, political frustrations at home and abroad during the past half-century have been drawing most Arabs closer to Islam.

The Syrian masses are obsessed with the belief in predestination, a core belief in the Islamic creed. Generally, Muslims attribute all good and bad in life to the will of God. Bad rulers are accepted as if they were ordained by God's will. Islam has thus become a psychological weapon in the hands of the Asad regime. The palace ulama threaten the Muslim faithful with eternal damnation if they fail to obey the president (*wali al-amr*). Shaykh al-Bouti has been energetically calling upon the demonstrators to "repent to God" and to stop demonstrating against the Asad regime.

THE RELIGIOUS FOUNDATION BEHIND THE ISLAMISTS' REBELLION

While verse 4:59 has a strong influence on the majority of the masses gross injustice, torture of political prisoners, abject poverty, high unemployment, and rampant corruption cannot be tolerated forever. Ultimately, there comes a breaking point that makes calls for rebellion against tyranny appealing. That breaking point was reached in Tunisia on December 17, 2010, when Muhammad Bouazizi burned himself to death; and in Egypt, on January 25, 2011, when thousands of Egyptian anti-government protesters clashed with riot police in Cairo's Tahrir Square. Inspired by Tunis and Cairo, popular uprisings erupted in Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, and Syria.

Sunna traditions sanction rebellion against the Islamic ruler if he becomes impious or unjust. *Sahih Muslim* as well as hadiths collected by Abu Dawud and Ahmad bin Shuayb al-Nasai attribute to Muhammad the saying, "Whoever of you sees an evil action, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart."^[46] The two contradictory edicts were invoked in mosques during Friday's prayer in Tripoli, Libya on February 25, 2011, in the midst of the popular uprising that started on February 17, 2011, against Colonel Qaddafi's 42-year rule. In one mosque, a pro-Qaddafi cleric called upon his congregation to obey Colonel Qaddafi (*wali al-amr*) in order to accord with verse 4:59. In another mosque, an anti-Qaddafi cleric implored his congregation to rise against the colonel in order to accord with the prophetic tradition to change evildoers. Anti-Qaddafi clerics both in and outside Libya have called upon the faithful to disobey Colonel Qaddafi. Likewise in Syria, while the Sunni palace ulama order obedience to Bashar Asad, opposing Sunni ulama urge rebellion against him.

THE LIKELIHOOD FOR ARAB DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

What is the likelihood that popular uprisings will usher democratic rule to Arab countries? Aside from minor reforms, the short answer is that it is unlikely. To rise against poverty, corruption, and injustice is one thing; to democratize and prosper is a different matter. Three main factors may be cited as obstacles to democracy and prosperity in the Arab world; namely, certain interpretations of Islam, the palace ulama, and the military generals.

For democracy and prosperity to evolve, Islam must be separated from the state. Democracy is not only free elections. Democracy is also equality for all citizens—equality of women with Muslim men and equality of Christian citizens and other minorities with Muslims. Islam discriminates against women and non-Muslims.

How likely is it that Islam be separated from the Arab state? This too is unlikely, due to the affinity of the great majority of Arabs towards Islam. Popular uprisings thus would not separate Islam from the Arab state. They might lead to free elections, but not to equality among all citizens. Uprisings might also end the state of emergency, but would not lead to the replacement of seventh century Shari'a courts and family law with a modern legal system and family code. Uprisings could institute presidential term limits, but would not substitute the Islamic school curriculum with the teaching of comparative religions or ethics. Uprisings might also lead to transparency in state affairs, but not the belief in free will and science to replace the belief in predestination.

The palace ulama will maintain their dogmatic teaching in schools, mosques, and the media. They will persist in cementing those interpretations of the Koran and the Sunna that accord with the political agendas of the governments they serve. They will also continue persecuting those with ideas and interpretations that differ from the sanctioned discourse. In addition, Arab military generals will remain the kingmakers. They will not take orders from civilian politicians.

THE GEOPOLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Syria's geographic proximity to Israel plays a major role in its domestic and foreign politics. By contrast, Tunisia, being a good distance from the immediate theatre of the Arab-Israeli conflict, is not as closely wedded to the dispute at the government or the popular levels as Syria. As for Egypt, the country signed a peace treaty with Israel on March 26, 1979, and the two governments normalized relations. The Egyptian masses, however, remain cool to the treaty, frustrated by the lack of progress in peace negotiations between Israel and other Arab parties.

Israel and the occupation of the Golan Heights since 1967 make the Arab-Israeli conflict a core issue in Syria's domestic and foreign politics. The Asad regime promotes the confrontation with Israel as Syria's, and the Arab world's, greatest duty to support. Asad projects himself as the leading defender of Palestinian rights, Arab honor, and Syria's sovereignty. To Damascus, the Arab-Israeli conflict has

become the benchmark against which patriotism is measured. Syrians are not likely to rise against the Asad regime over this issue, despite its huge financial burden and the curtailment of personal liberties in Syria, which in the event produced little other than under-development and poverty.

A daily diet of nationalistic rhetoric helps mobilize the masses behind the Asad regime. The long list of restrictions in Syria in the name of the confrontation with Israel is in reality a means to secure the regime's hold on power and to maintain the privileged status and wealth of the country's leaders and their relatives. Free press is banned. Advocates of reform are imprisoned indefinitely without trial or accused of the absurd charge of weakening the nation's spirit. The conflict justifies allocating a substantial proportion of the country's scarce resources in order to maintain a huge standing army, which has performed poorly in all of its confrontations with Israel and with no hope of improvement in the future.

Meanwhile, desperately needed investment in infrastructure, health, and education is ignored. As for military spending, not even the parliament can ask any questions. The confrontation justifies lack of transparency and accountability in state finances, particularly crude oil revenues and spending—a black box of dark secrets. It also means prison and torture for whoever criticizes or raises questions regarding the legitimacy of the regime, sectarianism, the Ba'th Party, the president and his family, the military, the security machine, human rights, Syria's politics in Lebanon, government finances, and the conflict with Israel (save for the official line). A steady diet of exaggerated and invented victories provides psychic rewards. Like its exploitation of Sunni Islam, the Asad regime has turned the conflict with Israel into a security pillar to control the masses and prolong its hold on power.

With such a state of affairs, the question becomes how a future peace treaty with Israel, if ever achieved, might affect the nature of Syria's police state. Will such a treaty lead to vocal demands by the people for an investigation into the Asad family's wealth; or lead to democratically contested presidential elections with term limits; or to a major reduction in the military budget and size of the army; or to a true accounting of the country's oil revenues? The regime's response would test its level of commitment and desire to end the state of no-war, no-peace with Israel, despite the benefits of the continued conflict for its domestic agenda. It is, however, highly unlikely that Asad would be willing to sacrifice domestic control in return for a peace with Israel.

ISLAMISM AS A MEANS TO FRIGHTEN WESTERN GOVERNMENTS

Damascus plays the Islamist card effectively. For Asad, the threat of an Islamist takeover in Damascus has become an instrument of blackmail legitimacy. Asad allows the Islamist threat to remain sufficiently alive but too weak to pose a serious threat to the regime itself. Islamists are regularly rounded up, and since 1980, membership in the Muslim Brotherhood has been punishable by death.

Post-September 11, there has been the fear that Islamist regimes could polarize their differences with Western cultures and politics. The U.S. war on terror granted Arab rulers an added lease on life. America needs the cooperation of Arab rulers in this fight.

**Elie Elhadj, born in Syria, is a veteran international banker. He was Chief Executive Officer of the Arab*

National Bank in Saudi Arabia during most of the 1990s. After retiring, he received his Ph.D. from London University's School of Oriental and African Studies.

NOTES

[1] "Egyptian Workers Burn Themselves to Protest Transfers," *al-Masry al-Youm*, January 21, 2011, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/news/egyptian-workers-burn-themselves-protest-transfers>.

[2] "Egypt Unrest: Protesters Hold Huge Cairo Demonstration," BBC, February 1, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12331520>.

[3] "Egypt Unrest: US Disowns Envoy Comment on Hosni Mubarak," February 5, 2011, BBC, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-12374753>.

[4] "Egypt Protests: Army Rules Out the Use of Force," BBC, January 31, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12330169>.

[6] "Egypt Unrest: Anti-Mubarak Protesters Seek New Resolve," BBC, February 8, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12388844>.

[8] "Tunisia's Revolution... From the Authoritarian State to the Nationalistic State," *al-Baath*, January 23, 2011, <http://www.albaath.news.sy/user/?id=1044&a=92552>.

[11] "Fearing Street Reaction, Ministry of Health Reverses Decision to Raise Prices," All4Syria, January 25, 2011, <http://all4syria.info/content/view/38200/113/>.

[12] "The Government Reduces the Price of Fuel Oil from S£20 to S£15 per Liter," All4Syria, May 25, 2011, <http://all4syria.info/web/archives/10098>.

[14] "Pilgrimage to Karbala; Sunni and Shia: The Worlds of Sunni Islam," PBS, March 26, 2007 <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/episodes/pilgrimage-to-karbala/sunni-and-shia-the-worlds-of-islam/1737>.

[15] William Maclean, "Tunisia Army Pivotal to Ben Ali Ousting: Reports," Reuters, January 17, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE70G52B20110117>.

[17] "Egypt Protests."

[19] Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995), p. 10.

[21] Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 629.

[22] “Bashar al-Assad’s Inner Circle,” BBC, April 27, 2011,
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13216195>.

[23] Thomas Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (London: Harpers Collins, 1998), chapter 4.

[24] Seale, *Asad, the Struggle for the Middle East*, pp. 329-34.

[25] “Middle East Unrest: Three Killed at Protest in Syria,” BBC, March 18, 2011,
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12791738>.

[26] Mark Landler, “Unrest in Syria and Jordan Poses New Test for U.S. Policy,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2011,
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/27/world/middleeast/27diplomacy.html?ref=global-home>.

[27] Khaled Yacoub Oweis, “Syrian Tanks Shell Towns with at Least 19 Killed,” Reuters, May 11, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/11/us-syria-idUSLDE73N02P20110511>.

[28] “U.S. Imposes Sanctions on Syria’s Assad,” Reuters, May 18, 2011,
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/18/us-syria-idUSLDE73N02P20110518>.

[29] “Syria: EU Imposes Sanctions on President Assad,” BBC, May 23, 2011,
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13500395>.

[31] Anthony Shahid, “Ally of Assad Says Syria Will Fight Protests Till ‘the End’,” *New York Times*, May 10, 2011,
http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/11/world/middleeast/11makhlouf.html?_r=1&ref=global-home.

[32] Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, “Population and Demographic Indicators, Proportional Structure of Population (Urban-Rural) by Age Group and Sex in mid year 2010,” *Statistical Abstract*,
<http://www.cbssyr.org/yearbook/2010/chapter2-EN.htm>.

[33] United Nations Development Program—Program on Governance in the Arab Region, *Tunisia: Conditions of Women*, <http://www.pogar.org/countries/gender.asp?cid=20>.

[34] “Mid-East Extremes in Power Survey,” BBC, September 14, 2005,
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4246764.stm.

[37] *The Constitution of the Baath Arab Socialist Party*, <http://www.baath-party.org/eng/constitution2.htm>.

[38] *Syria—Constitution*, http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/sy00000_.html.

[39] Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, p. 173.

[41] “The Leadership Responded Positively to the Demands of the Men of Religion,” *Syria Steps*, April 6, 2011, http://www.syriasteps.com/index.php?d=110&id=65907&in_main_page=1.

[43] *The Six Books Sahih Muslim*, traditions 4746 to 4763, pp. 1007-08 and traditions 4782 to 4793, pp. 1009-10.

[44] *Ibid.*; *Sunan Abi Da'ud*, tradition 4607, p. 1561; and *Sunan Ibn Maja*, tradition 42, p. 2479.

[45] *Ibid.*; *Sahih al-Bukhari*, traditions 7137 and 7142, p. 595.

[46] *Ibid.*; *Sahih Muslim*, tradition 177, p.688; *Sunan Abi Da'ud*, tradition 4340, p. 1539; and *Sunan al-Nasai*, tradition 5011 and 5012, p. 2411.