SYRIA'S 31 PERCENTERS: HOW BASHAR AL-ASAD BUILT MINORITY ALLIANCES AND COUNTERED MINORITY FOES

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As the Syrian revolution against Bashar al-Asad's rule enters its first year, Asad appears to have a good command over Syria's large and fractious minority community. Three of the most prominent minority groups include the Christians, Druze, and Kurds. Asad's control of these groups was not happenstance but the result of a number of hard- and soft-power moves executed by the regime. These calculations did not simply involve direct internal dealings with said minorities, but also outreach to their populations living in neighboring states and abroad. Due to the regime's many policies, minority support may continue for some time.

> *Our way of government is not identical with that which is pursued with such conspicuous success in highly civilised and settled countries like your own. We leave the various communities and tribes alone to settle their internal differences. It is only where tribe wars on tribe, religion on religion, or their quarrels stop the traffic on the Sultan's highway that we interfere. What would you have, mon ami? We are here in Asia!*" – *An Ottoman governor in Syria to author Marmaduke Pickthall*, late nineteenth century.[1]

INTRODUCTION

Minority alliances in the Middle East have been a constant reality for groups under threat from perceived "majority" interests. Most of these alliances were military in nature and often covert. Israel has reached out to Christians in Lebanon and Kurds in Iraq.[2] Berbers in Morocco have also engaged Israel.[3] In their shared effort to fight Turkey, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) entered into an alliance with the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA).[4] Yet in Syria, where minority Alawites dominate the government and find themselves in conflict with not only the Sunni majority but other minority groups, minority alliances take on a new precedence in their efforts to control the country.

Syria has been described as a "safe haven, in a region where religious minorities often struggle for survival."[5] However, Syria is currently descending into what may become a sectarian civil war, with the mainly Alawi minority-run Ba'thi regime of Bashar al-Asad facing off against Syria's majority, Arab Sunni Muslims. This Levantine state is morphing from a quasi-paradise into a boiling cauldron. The way the Asad regime gained and retained its increasingly important allies in the Druze and Christian communities, and a general quiescence from the Kurds, can be used to chart how long the regime can stay in power, in addition to establishing the solidity of Damascus's important minority alliances.

It is well known that Syria's ruling elite itself comes from a minority, namely the Alawi sect. It has also been asserted that because of the Alawite's own precarious position vis-à-vis Syria's Sunni majority that they are natural allies for most of Syria's other minorities.[6] Through a mixture of patronage networks,

fear of massacre at the hands of Sunni Muslims, and a wish not to cede power, most Alawites have remained loyal to their coreligionist rulers.[7] Though, support for the Ba'thists from other minority groups has not always followed this specific model.

Unlike other Arab Spring states, such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, Syria is home to a wide and diverse range of ethnic and religious minorities. These groups include the dominant Alawites, Druze, various Christian groups, Kurds, Shi'i sects, and small numbers of Yazidis. According to most estimates, the collective numbers for these minorities range between 25-36 percent of the Syrian population.[8] What is more, around 7-15 percent of the Sunni Muslim population is not Arab, but ethnically Kurdish.[9]

The minority position in Syria reflects the dire nature of most minority groups in the Middle East. The region often witnesses different sects forced to choose the uncertainty of a revolution or the stability of autocratic rule. Many minorities have looked at events in Iraq, which saw wide scale ethnic and sectarian violence and ethnic cleansing. The rise of anti-minority Islamists in Egypt has also provided an example to some minority groups of what could befall them in a post-Asad Syria. This contemporary fear, exploited by Damascus, has served as a great benefit to the regime.

However, fears of an Islamist takeover are not the only factors influencing minority support for Bashar al-Asad. Since the rule of Bashar's father, Hafiz al-Asad, the Syrian regime has been cultivating links with minority groups in the hope of establishing easily manipulated allies to support the administration's influence and grow the Ba'thi powerbase. According to an anonymous regime official, "there are 360 diplomats within the Syrian Foreign Ministry. Of these, 60 per cent are Nusayri [Alawite]. The number of Sunni diplomats does not exceed 10 per cent."[10] Clearly, the Alawite sect has provided the regime with its backbone of support. Nevertheless, if the numbers are correct, this would necessitate that minority groups, other than the Alawites, are recognized as having an important place within the Ba'thi regime.

The Ba'th Party's nationalist agenda of pan-Arabism has also affected how the regime engages minorities. Initially, Arabism was seen by some minorities as a way to secure relative safety and retain political influence in lands where they historically faced persecution. Concurrently, the same inclusive Arabism has also excluded certain groups like the Kurds or has disparaged other minority quests for self-identity by those that Arabists considered "Arab." Doctrinaire Arabism would hardly allow for incorporating or accepting "separatist" ideals.

The Iraq War and the 2005 Syrian pullout from Lebanon also resulted in new awakenings among Syrian minority populations and weakened Arabism's predominant position. In 2005, a spokesman for the banned Syrian party, the Assyrian Democratic Organization, told the *New York Times*, "[i]n Syria, gradually it's becoming safer to talk about minority rights and human rights… The interaction between minorities in Iraq and its neighboring countries really depends on how particular minorities view their own situation."[11]

This new and undeniable reality caused the Asad regime to shift how it dealt with sects that openly embraced non-Arab identities. Nevertheless, while the Asad regime continues to push and reaffirm the primacy of Arabism, it has recognized the need to engage certain minority groups' changing ideologies and identities. This has led to Asad playing a Janus-faced game, incorporating some non-Arab cultural and nationalist organizations into the regime's Syrian narrative, while attempting vocally to reestablish Arabism's dominance in Syrian affairs.

Syria's unique and strategic place in the Middle East is another variable that has weighed on Ba'thi-minority relations. Syria's minority groups are often geographically spread throughout many neighboring states. This has made it harder for Damascus specifically to court Syrian minority groups without addressing the concerns of their own diaspora or neighboring coreligionists. Syria's near-abroad, hosts large numbers of minority groups on which the regime relies for internal support but also contains groups they view as threats. In Lebanon, Christians of many denominations form a large and powerful piece of the country. The political and religious leadership for the Druze, around three percent of Syria's population, also lives in Lebanon.[12] Turkey and Iraq have large Kurdish populations. This has resulted in the regime engaging external organizations in an attempt not only to influence its own internal minority populations, but also pursue foreign policy interests.

Simply because the regime has consciously supported minorities with many high positions, this does not necessitate that all minority groups contain regime stalwarts. Some minorities and minority organizations have been seen as threats to the regime's power. To deal with the multifaceted minority issue, Asad's courtship and relations with Syrian minorities often demonstrate a Machiavellian cynicism. For many years, the Asad apparatus has sent mixed-messages; at times embracing certain groups with incentives, while using hard-power against the same groups later on.

As with many autocratic governments, Asad often engages in one practice while denying it or pinning the issue on an outside enemy. Historically, there is no denying that the Asad regime has pitted minorities against one another and against majority populations. This tactic has also been utilized during the current revolution. In a meeting of the U.N. Security Council, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted, "It appears as though Asad and his cronies are working hard to pit Syria's ethnic and religious groups against each other, risking greater sectarian violence and even descent into civil war."[13] Analyst Shashank Joshi wrote, "The Asad regime cynically uses Christian and Druze troops against Sunni targets."[14]In response to these assessments, Asad's official mouthpiece, the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) reported, "His Excellency… expressed… rejection of using religions as a tool to fragment countries, stressing that all religions call for love and reject division attempts, especially in our region."[15] Despite fervent denials by Asad, there has been a long-term strategy to engage minority groups in bolstering the regime.

ASAD'S KURDISH DILEMMA

Damascus has had a long and tumultuous history with Syrian Kurds. The state plays host to a number of blatantly discriminatory practices punishing Kurdish business owners, enforced a policy that deprived hundreds of thousands of Kurds of citizenship, banned the teaching of the Kurdish language, and clamped down on Kurdish political activities.[16] In the summer of 2009, one *Wikileaks* cable reported, "Drought, unemployment, economic & cultural discrimination, political repression, arbitrary arrest, unexplainable deaths [by supposed government sponsored assassinations], and statelessness contributed to a miserable first six months of the Kurdish New Year."[17] Later in 2010, Human Rights Watch reported that since Bashar al-Asad had taken power, no policies vis-à-vis the Kurds had changed from when his father ran the country.[18]

Despite the extremely hard conditions Syrian Kurds face, this has not meant that they were not engaged by the Syrian regime. Though, in the words of one journalist, "The Syrian authorities are unpredictable with the level and type of dissent they permit."[19] Along with violent actions, and secretive engagement, the general course of action with the Kurds was one of imbalance; promises made but with little delivery. Bashar al-Asad was and is under no illusion that Kurds could be completely brought under his dominion. Through the use of force, Kurds could be kept at bay. Covert engagements with Kurds abroad and domestically were used to change the direction in which Kurdish political discourse was directed.

For Bashar al-Asad, the Kurds have presented the most pressing challenge to his maintenance of power in Syria. The regime's legitimacy is predicated on its support for pan-Arab nationalism (Arabism), which specifically excludes the ethnically and linguistically dissimilar Kurds. Kurds also form a politically active compact minority that has sought autonomy in other locations they inhabit (such as Iran, Iraq, and Turkey).

Syria's quest to gain domestic influence with the Kurds began with Hafiz al-Asad in the 1980s. In 1987, one *Wikileaks* cable stated, "Kurds form one of the important minorities of Syria and the ruling Alawis have reached out to them–as to minority Christians, Druze and Ismailis–to form the coalition which is needed to offset the great majority of Syrians, who are Sunni Arabs."[20] Today, this alliance of convenience against Syria's majority Sunni Arabs persists at a low level. Many Kurdish groups were initially upset with anti-regime Sunnis when they continued to push for recognition of Syria as an "Arab state."[21] For many Kurds, this continuation of Arabism would be far more detrimental to their gaining of minority rights.

However, the issue of Arabism was minor when compared to renewed hopes for regional Kurdish autonomy. Asad's difficulty with Kurdish self-determination rose significantly after the 2004-2005 creation of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in neighboring Iraq. This led Syrian Kurdish groups to cooperate together and push against the Syrian government. Asad took a multifold path. Prominent Kurdish regime critics were assassinated or jailed, rifts between Kurdish parties were exploited, and Damascus made a number of tentative promises to Kurdish groups.

In 2004, Kurds, showing Kurdish nationalist symbols, rioted after a soccer game in the northern Syria town of Qamishli. Responding to this clear challenge, the Syrian government killed tens of Kurdish demonstrators and arrested thousands.[22] In 2005, Shaykh Muhammad Mashuq al-Khaznawi, a prominent Kurdish Sufi cleric critical of Damascus, was reportedly kidnapped, tortured, and murdered by the regime.[23]

Around the same time, Syrian officials opened lines of communication with Kurdish political groups. According to a confidential U.S. embassy cable, "the SARG [Syrian government] made multiple promises in 2005 and early 2006 to resolve the Kurdish citizenship issue imminently, but concrete action has yet to been [sic] taken."[24] In 2009, the regime enlisted the support of former Syrian parliamentarian Issam Baghdy to initiate secret contact with the Secretary General of the Kurdish Democratic Front (KDF), Abd al-Hakim Bashar.[25] The KDF is a coalition of nine left-wing Syrian Kurdish parties. In 2011, this number increased to 11 parties. The move was interpreted by the Kurds as Asad being serious about engagement. According to a leaked U.S. cable, and pointing to Damascus's concerns, Baghdy asked Bashar these questions:(1) What was the political relationship among Syrian Kurdish parties, as well as with parties in Turkey and Iraq; (2) What was the KDF's position on the continuity of the regime; (3) What was KDF's position on the unity of Syrian territory; (4) What was the KDF's position on the Damascus Declaration; and (5) Was the KDF prepared for a direct dialogue with the SARG?[26]

Syria's assistance to outside Kurdish organizations was another regime strategy to keep domestic Kurds under control. In Iraq, where the most politically active Kurdish groups are located, Asad smuggled arms and equipment to Kurds fighting Saddam Hussein.[27] Backchannels between Damascus and Iraq's Kurds were kept open, even after the fall of Hussein. The net effect of these historical alliances and covert engagements with external Kurdish groups was beneficial for Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad.

Often, Iraq's main Kurdish parties have their own Syrian branches. The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria is closely linked to Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani. The Kurdish Democratic Alliance is closely linked to Jalal Talabani's Iraq-based Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).[28] In 1975, the PUK was even allowed to open an office in Damascus. Because of these backchannels, Kurds seeking assistance from their Iraqi cohorts were denied. In 2009, a KDP political officer told one Syrian Kurdish activist, "We cannot support Kurdish parties in Syria," while a PUK representative "rebuffed" the same Syrian activist's calls for help saying, "We hope to have good relations in the future."[29]

Foremost among these external groups with domestic influence has been the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The PKK had been engaged in a guerilla war with Syrian adversary Turkey. Beginning in the early 1980s, the Syrians allowed the PKK to establish training camps in Lebanon's Beq'a Valley and even hosted PKK leader Abdallah Ocalan in Damascus. This arrangement was officially ended in 1998, though it is rumored links between Damascus and the PKK have continued to persist.[30] According to some estimates, 20 percent of the PKK's members, including the head of the PKK's military wing, Fahman Husain (A.K.A. Bahoz Erdal) are originally Syrian.[31]

The PKK also established the Democratic Union Party (PYD) to retain its presence within Syria. Occasionally, the government would crack down on PYD members, but the party, even during mass protests, maintained a generally friendly approach toward the regime.[32] In addition, the PYD was an open critic of anti-regime dissident Mash'al Tammo.[33] Tammo was assassinated in October 2011, and some analysts surmised he was assassinated by the PKK.[34] The Turkish press reported, "15 soldiers of the Free Syrian Army… were captured by PKK forces near the Syria-Iraqi border over the weekend. The sources, who spoke to *Today's Zaman* from the northern city of Qamishli on the condition of anonymity, suggested that the PKK may have handed over the soldiers to the Syrian military."[35] In March 2012, the PKK responded to calls by Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan who was pushing for the creation of a "safe-zone" for Syrian refugees on Syrian territory. According to Reuters, a PKK field commander stated, "The Turkish state is planning an intervention against our people… Let me state clearly, if the Turkish state intervenes against our people in western Kurdistan [Syria], all of Kurdistan will turn into a war zone." [36]

Since early 2011, Kurdish protests have not materialized like those of their Sunni Arab neighbors. At the beginning of the demonstrations against the regime, Asad issued public pronouncements that certain Kurdish demands would be met. These included the repeal of Decree 49 (the ruling that often deprived Kurds of land ownership) and allowed for the issuing of citizenship for Kurds deprived of that right.[37] It has also been reported that "[t]he military crackdown has also been less harsh in Kurdish areas."[38] These recent moves by Asad have lessened Kurdish pressure on the regime. Asad's covert engagements of the external Kurdish community have also kept Kurdish groups from causing the regime problems. By taking the middle-path and not fully supporting or opposing the regime, Syrian Kurds hope that if Asad wins, he will follow through on his promises.

CHRISTIANS AND THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

The most successful engagement program for the Asad regime has been with Syria's Christians. As with many autocratic regimes, fear was often a selling point used by the regime to retain support. Traditionally, the Asad regime kept control of their Christians through proxies in their near-abroad via violence. While these tactics were retained, the Syrians sought to attain more legitimate external and internal Christian allies. Damascus also courted Christian organizations that were ideologically opposed to the beliefs of Syria's rulers and supported a number of cultural programs. With the influx of Christian refugees from Iraq, the regime gained further de facto allies, and Christian acceptance.

Regionally, Christians are declining in population and political power. The dire situation of Christians in Iraq weighs heavily on many decisions made by the Christian communities within Syria. Many of these Christian groups share coreligionists of the same sect in Iraq. Currently, Syria is hosting over one million Iraqi refugees; of that number around 40 percent are Christian.[39] Many of these Christians come fresh from attacks and discrimination by Arab Islamists and Kurdish groups, making them predisposed to favor the stability of the Asad regime and natural allies against regime foes.

The Asad regime shares other elements in common with Christians. The same pan-Arabism endorsed by the Asad regime originally began life as an ideal among Christians.[40] Both groups also share a very real fear of Sunni Islamism, especially in the wake of the Iraq War and post-Arab Spring Egypt. Christians have also attained positions of importance. Replacing an Alawite, Greek Orthodox General Dawoud Rajiha was appointed as Minister of Defense in 2011.[41] Daniel Pipes notes that as a sect, Alawites have "by far the greatest affinity… with Christianity… 'Alawis tend to show more friendliness to Christians than to Muslims."[42]

Within Syria, Christians form a vibrant community. Their population is spread throughout the country, particularly in urban areas. Christians are broken into a number of sects, including the Greek Orthodox, Maronites, Syriac Orthodox and Catholics, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Armenian Catholics and Orthodox, and a small number of Protestants. Christians also maintain a strong economic presence in the country. Christian economic strength also plays into how it interacts with the regime.[43] With the stability of *Pax-Asad* protecting their livelihoods and allowing some modicum of normality for religious practices, Syrian Christians have come to back the regime, even if begrudgingly.

Nonetheless, for many Middle Eastern Christians, Syria's Ba'thists would not constitute "natural allies." During the 15-year Lebanese Civil War, Christian autonomy and power was crushed in Lebanon and thousands of Christians were killed by Syrian forces. Lebanese Christian leaders were repeatedly assassinated or politically countered by pro-Syrian forces. Further decreasing Asad's viability as a "Christian ally" in Lebanon, was that the Syrian regime had initially exploited alliances with small Christian groups based on family connections or through the utilization of hard power.[44]

Despite the distrust many regional Christians have exhibited toward the regime, regional events have helped Asad. Even though the regime was forced out of Lebanon during the 2005 Cedar Revolution, Damascus did gain enormous influence among Syrian Christians via new Lebanese allies. Michel Aoun, a

popular former Lebanese general and Maronite Christian, had fought Syria during the Lebanese Civil War. After years of exile he returned to Lebanon as leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). He then shifted to the pro-Asad realm in 2006, after his signing of an alliance with Asad-ally, Hizballah.[45]

With Aoun, the Syrians found a well-respected Lebanese nationalist who could legitimize Syrian policies. The move also disrupted any attempt to mobilize a united bloc of traditionally anti-Syrian Lebanese Christians against Damascus.[46] Since Aoun allied himself with the Shi'i Islamist Hizballah, his actions also created a potent Shi'i-Christian alliance. This alliance fed into part of Damascus's new vision of a minority alliance.

The new alliance was welcomed by Christians supportive of Aoun who were hoping for a new era in Shi'i-Syrian-Christian relations. One Beirut youth official with Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement remarked, "We [Christians] are forced to be in this alliance. It's a good one. The Sunnis are like al Qaeda and more numerous. Throughout history they have held down both the Shia and Christians. Assad isn't occupying Lebanon and has moderated. We all face the same enemies to our existence."[47]

Often in conflict with Damascus, the Lebanon-based Maronite community has 53,000 members living in Syria. Following the opening of links to Aoun and the further legitimization of Syria in regional Christian ranks, the Ba'thists began a number of small efforts to court the region's Christians. Following a 2011 visit to Syria, Aoun stated, "[Christians must return to] our roots and get out of isolation… Our goal is to return to our environment, to our roots."[48]

In 2006, the Syrian Ministry of Tourism began organizing Christian pilgrimage trips to the Aleppo area.[49] By September, 2010, Syria allowed the Maronite Church to hold a conference celebrating the 1600 year-old death of the church's founder, Saint Maroun. The event clashed with the official Lebanese-based celebrations the Maronite Church was holding, and served as a symbol of Syrian power within the Christian community.[50]

Historically, Arab identity among Christians, especially in Lebanon, had a harder time taking hold. During the Syrian occupation of the country, Arab identity was promoted, but was often rejected. As a result, Lebanese Christians have often set an example for other Christians in the region for the adoption of a non-Arab identity.[51]

Almost immediately following the 2005 Syrian pullout, groups supporting non-Arab Christian identities found new life and regional influence.[52] In the aftermath of the Iraq War, calls for Christian autonomy in Iraq based on ethnic and religious differences from Arab Muslims and Muslim Kurds, grew louder.[53] This new reality was not countered by Damascus with its traditional proclivities of violence, but with a Janus-faced policy of rejecting Christian nationalism while absorbing some of its concepts into the official Syrian narrative.

Language has held an important place in Christian identity formation. For many Middle Eastern Christian churches and nationalists, the Aramaic language retains a significant importance. In their liturgy, the Maronite, Syriac Catholic and Orthodox, Chaldean, Assyrian (though, they call the language Assyrian), and Melkite Churches all use Syriac, the written version of Aramaic. These churches are collectively referred to as Syriac Christians and have adopted their own non-Arab ethnic identities ranging from calling themselves Aramean, Assyrian, or Chaldean.[54]

In addition to being the historical land once ruled by Arameans, Assyrians, and Chaleans, Syria contains one of the few Aramaic-speaking locations in the Levant, Ma'aloula. For Christian nationalists, the 7,000 Aramaic-speaking residents are living symbols of the ancient ethno-linguistic elements that were once commonplace in their cultural-cradle. However, after years of forced Arabization by the Ba'th Party, the language was slowly dying out. Under the reign of Hafiz al-Asad, the state had strictly forbidden the teaching of the Aramaic language.[55]

Things changed in 2004, when Damascus announced a program to help revive the Aramaic language in Ma'aloula.[56] The regime saw that increased attention to Aramaic and the town's unique history and status could bring in tourist dollars. However, tourism was not the only reason for the program. The regime understood that the goodwill created from it giving attention to Aramaic and the culture could benefit the central government with Christians at home and abroad. Even openly anti-Asad Aramean groups, such as the Lebanon- and Sweden-based Aramean Democratic Organization, praised key members involved in the Syrian government's Aramaic revival program.[57] Eventually, in 2007 the University of Damascus opened a branch in Ma'aloula to teach the Aramaic language. In the words of one Ma'aloula resident, "Thanks to President Asad, we even have an institute teaching it [Aramaic]."[58]

These moves were followed up by a visit to Syria from the Syriac Universal Alliance (SUA). The SUA is one of the largest organizations that pushes for Aramean self-determination. It is also firmly against the adoption of Arab identity–the same Arab identity pushed by Damascus–by ethnic Arameans.[59] When asked about Arabism's effect on Aramean populations, SUA President Johny Messo noted:

> *Pan-Arabism turned out to be a failure for the Arabs, Muslims and Christians. It has affected the Arameans (Syriacs) in that some of us really believed that they would be accepted as equal citizens if they would adhere to this idea. Those who upheld this belief have been Arabicized to a noticeable extent or have been identifying themselves as Arabs. That is, they have forgotten their own Aramaic language at the expense of Arabic or one can notice the big impact of the Arabic language, culture and thought on those who still speak Aramaic. There are also cases of Aramean Christians who have relinquished their heritage and have decided to identify themselves as "Arab Christians" or, when they have abandoned their Christian faith, as "Arabs" who adhere either to Islam or to no faith at all. One should add, however, that the same is true for some "Turks" and "Kurds" today.*[60]

As a counter to the anti-Arabism of Christian groups the regime wished to court, Asad attempted to combine Aramean culture into Arabism. Simultaneously, the move gave Arameans positive mention, while asserting their culture was an integral piece of Arabism:

> *I congratulate you here in Syria, which many Arabs call the "throbbing heart of Arabism." But in order for the heart to throb, blood is needed, and you are the blood that arrives from all parts of the Arab body, carrying with it all the vital Arab components that supply power and stamina to the heart. And these components are based on two main things: The first is Islam, which is*

> *tightly and strongly bound to Arabism, which will never be separated from Islam. The second thing is Christianity, which emerged from our midst and was spread about the world in an Arabic language, that is, Aramaic.*[61]

Other Aramean nationalist groups followed suit and showed favorable positions to Asad. In a 2009 letter to Bashar al-Asad, Gabriel Sengo of the Netherlands-based Aram-Nahrin Organization, outlined much of the advances (in addition to a few withering criticisms) Asad had made with Christian-Aramean nationalists:

> *We write you to express our gratefulness for your noble efforts to revive and strengthen the Aramaic language in the lands of the Aramean forefathers. This is a shining and commendable example to the entire Middle-East.*
>
> *We wish also to underscore our appreciation for your hospitality to offer shelter to thousands of refugees from Iraq who have been forced to flee to Syria and other countries because of violence and insecurity since the start of the war in 2003.**[62]***

Later, in August 2009, SUA officials met with prominent Syrian leaders. These officials included the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, Syria's Minister of Culture, Minister of Information, and the pro-Asad Sunni Grand Mufti, Dr. Ahmad Hassoun.[63]

Despite all of the outward support from Ba'thi officials, the regime's reasons for embracing distinct Christian cultural practices had more to do with using them as counterpoints against other internal threats. The lack of a geographic concentration for Christian groups makes it harder for nascent non-Arab nationalism to take foot, but still allows for these proclivities to be exploited. According to one *Wikileaks* cable, when a "senior official" with the Syrian Ministry of Culture was asked why the ministry was backing Syriac Christian culture, the official answered, "We have to do something to counter the influence of the Kurds."[64]

Syrian officials also recognized how to exploit and benefit from intra-Christian tensions. In 2010, the Syrian government moved to clamp down on evangelical Christians. *The Economist* reported that "the main reason for the clampdown is that Orthodox and Catholic leaders, disgruntled by the success of these new churches, have complained to the government."[65] The regime's move allowed for the populous and more easily controlled traditional churches to have their interests served while increasing positive perceptions of the government among church leaders.

Even with all of the advances of goodwill made toward the Christian community, the regime still took a heavier-handed approach to dealing with some Christian political groups. Parties promoting liberal or reformist agendas often faced crackdowns. While it reflects certain pragmatism to use nationalist groups to voice regime-backed concerns, it also demonstrates the government had limits.

The Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO), considered the Syrian branch of the Iraq-based Assyrian Democratic Movement (*Zowa'a*), is one such example. When ADO signed the 2005 reformist Damascus Declaration, it caused the group to suffer a number of government crackdowns.[66] In May 2011, the group's Qamishili offices were raided by Syrian security forces. According to an ADO press statement, "the overwhelming majority of the individuals who were arrested did not participate in the protests today [May 20 protests against the regime]."[67]

Due to the different natures of other Syrian minority groups, the same model could not be applied to other groups. Despite the random crackdowns, Asad's outreach to Christians has been successful and their alliance with the regime will be a continuing trend.

SYRIA'S DRUZE: ASAD'S FRIENDS BY NECESSITY

After almost a year of protests, a shift to support anti-Asad protesters by the primary (though based in Lebanon) Druze political leader, Walid Jumblatt, Syria's Druze have not yet withdrawn support for Asad. According to the Emirati paper, *The National*, Suwaida the main Druze population center "is still seen as a bastion of at least tacit support for Mr. Al Asad's regime, 11 months into an uprising against his rule."[68] According to some reports, between 31 to 100 Druze have been killed fighting for Asad.[69]

Druze support for Asad appears to be predicated on the fact that the minority is but three percent of the population, making them easily quashed by any new Sunni-dominated government. Many Druze are also reliant on the state for employment. Asad's tactics of marginalization while giving the Druze incentives, such as autonomy if his rule is supported, have also won support. When major Druze figures have backed Asad's domestic foes, the Syrian dictator has moved quickly to consolidate and publicize foreign and domestic Druze support for his regime.

The esoteric Druze sect, an eleventh-century offshoot of Isma'ili Shi'ism, has firm roots inside Syria and like the Kurds and Christians has extensions into Syria's near-abroad (namely Lebanon and Israel). As with the Kurds, the Druze also form a "compact-minority." Within Syria, the sect is mostly found in the hilly and volcanic Jabal al-Druze (also known as Jabal al-Arab) region south of Damascus. Syria's Druze are descended from settlers who arrived in the area from Lebanon in the early eighteenth century.[70]

This minority is also noteworthy because of its strong beliefs in communal defense and willingness to defend militantly the sect's interests. The Druze position has further complexity due to its religious practice of *taqiyya* (dissimulation). The Druze version of taqiyya "is not only the practice of pretending to follow the dominant religion… but also of joining the side that seems likely to win."[71]

While Druze have their own distinct regional identity, unlike the Christian or Kurdish minorities, they did not develop a distinct ethno-nationalist ideology. Pan-Arabism, especially the Arabism espoused by the Ba'th Party, was welcomed by most Druze. Due to their geographic compactness, small population, and interlinked political and religious leadership, Syria's Druze still maintain close links with their coreligionists abroad, especially those in Lebanon. This has served as both a benefit and threat to regime domination of the sect's loyalties.

The martial Druze also have a long history of rebelling against central authority in Syria. From 1909-1910, Syrian Druze launched an unsuccessful rebellion for autonomy against the Sunni Ottoman authorities in the Jabal al-Druze region.[72] Druze also led the 1925-1927 Syrian nationalist rebellion against French Mandatory officials.[73] After the formation of the independent Syria in the late 1940s, Druze were "at first

reluctant to join an independent state dominated by the Sunni establishment that they generally distrusted."[74] In 1949 and 1954, the Druze revolted against the Sunni-dominated Damascus-based government. In the latter revolt, the Druze were suppressed using extreme force.[75]

While the Druze had trouble with Sunni politicians, this does not mean they didn't have difficulties with the Asads. In the 1960s, the Ba'thi government that preceded Hafiz al-Asad's was ruled by the Alawi Salah Jadid and Druze Salim Hatoum. In 1966, Hatoum along with some Druze army units attempted to take power from Alawi Salah Jadid. However, their plot was thwarted by Hafiz Asad, who threatened airstrikes. Hatoum was later executed and then Jadid was overthrown by Asad. As Hafiz al-Asad rose in power, from 1966-1970, Druze who once led "were expelled from the top echelon."[76] This led to a slow reintegration process with the new Asad regime.[77]

Under Hafiz al-Asad, Lebanese Druze leaders who went against Damascus were assassinated or marginalized. The most infamous example was the 1977 murder of the main Druze political leader, the Lebanese Kamal Jumblatt.[78] The regime was also slow to work with its own Druze, and the minority did not gain any exclusive rights or privileged positions. Only in 1985, 15 years after Hafiz al-Asad's ascension to power, did he allow Druze to attain leadership positions. Though, according to Robert Brenton Betts, "not in significant numbers or positions of influence where they could reasonably hope to threaten the dominance of the… Alawis."[79]

These conditions remained the same throughout the rule of Bashar al-Asad. In November 2000, less than five months after Bashar's ascension to power, Syria's Druze demonstrated their unhappiness with the government. What began as intercommunal violence between Bedouin Arabs and Druze, quickly morphed into a Druze mini-revolt against the central government. The Druze reaction to Bedouin encroachment was not to vent all of their energy into retaliation against that group, but to burn down government buildings, blocking the main road from the Druze zone to Damascus, and demanding the government "provide protection."[80] The Syrian government was later forced to pay restitution to Druze killed and wounded in the violence. Despite the violence, after Bashar al-Asad's power had been solidified, the Druze could do little to counter the government.

Under the rule of Bashar al-Asad, Druze who have opposed the government-line still face repression and a reduced position within the Ba'th Party. Essentially, the Druze existed as token minorities. In 2009, when Asad selected a new cabinet, only one Druze was appointed.[81] Jabr al-Shoufi, a Druze signer of the reformist Damascus Declaration, was arbitrarily arrested in 2007 only to be released in 2010. He and other reformists were charged with "weakening national sentiment… [and] encouraging conflict among sects."[82]

At best, the Druze did maintain their much coveted sense of autonomy, and Damascus's response to the Druze was to give them space. When compared to their previous conflicts with Damascus, Asad provided unmatched stability. To demonstrate dissatisfaction with the regime, the most the Druze could do was to vote in fixed elections for those the regime did not fully support.[83] However, in an autocratic system, this had little effect. Nevertheless, the status quo was much preferred by many Syrian Druze.

With Walid Jumblatt's call for Syrian Druze soldiers to disobey orders, Asad's commanders, and his openly-declared support for Syrian demonstrators, the regime faced a new threat to its control over the marginalized but generally loyal Druze population.[84] In response, Asad has mobilized, leaned on, and publicized the comments made by his Druze allies in Lebanon. On November 1, 2011, Lebanese Druze

parliamentarian, Talal Arslan met with Asad, bringing other prominent pro-Asad Druze political leaders and leading Druze religious leaders. This was repeated on December 8, 2011, when Asad met another delegation of Lebanese Druze religious leaders and Arslan.[85] During both meetings, Arslan stated the need to support the Asad regime.

Wiam Wahhab, leader of the Hizb al-Tawhid al-Arabi (Arab Unification Party), is widely regarded as one of Asad's Lebanese Druze mouthpieces. Wahhab was employed by the regime to sow discontent with Jumblatt and build support for Asad among the Lebanese and Syrian Druze. Intimating a Druze sectarian backing for Asad, on February 13, 2012, Wahhab "proposed sending a delegation of Lebanese Druze religious leaders and politicians to the predominantly Druze region of Jabal al-Arab in Syria 'to explore views on the best interest of the Druze community' there."[86] Later, Wahhab criticized Jumblatt's backing of anti-regime elements by telling Jumblatt "not to bring the battle into the Druze community."[87]

So long as Asad feels there is a legitimate threat to his control over the Druze, he will continue to use members from that community. This strategy exerts pressure on both Lebanese and Syrian Druze, assisting in the development of a narrative that Druze can only be secure with Asad.

CONCLUSION

Bashar al-Asad has specifically tailored his approach to numerous minority groups, based on their utility to his regime and on how he could best keep them within his fold. Working to appeal to, oppress, or pit minorities against each other and against the majority has been of extreme benefit for the regime. Engaging coreligionists and coethics abroad has also created a far more complicated and dynamic relationship within these minority communities. These further complications have only added to the influence Asad has been able to wield within Syria.

Even with major political leaders backing demonstrations, the pragmatic Druze will only move against Asad if it is certain that anti-Asad forces will win. Although Syria's Druze were among the last to be engaged by Asad, they have recognized a value in staying quiet. This is a clear sign that any Druze moves will be predicated on how they can best retain the autonomy and safety of their community. While Asad did little to back Druze cultural interests, his support for their autonomy and enforcement of stability gave the group enough reason not to turn against his rule.

The fractious Kurds, longing for a more formal autonomy, have seen some of their major wishes granted by the regime. They too are playing the waiting game. Even after over 40 years of discrimination, Asad's support to some Kurdish groups has created a mixed impression for Syria's Kurds–one of an oppressor and ally. These opposing tactics have given rise to a Kurdish paralysis.

The destruction and oppression of the region's Christians has also caused the group to back the proverbial "lesser of two evils." Asad's recent pushes with the community have built a form of loyalty from the community. Now Asad can pose as a more legitimate defender of Christian rights. With Asad, Syrian Christians have found security, access to political leadership, and a quasi-acceptance of their unique cultural attributes.

As those backing anti-Asad movements become more militant and Asad reacts with a heavier hand to counter them, minorities will do their best to remain out of the crossfire. The fact that minorities are attempting to remain neutral suggests some of Asad's tactics to win the favor of these groups have been successful. In the wake of anti-minority Islamist takeovers in other post-revolutionary Arab states, some minority groups see that the only way to protect their hard-won stability and cultural recognition is by backing the devil they know. In this current environment, Asad will continue to hold sway among Syria's minorities.

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