

## Sectarian Violence Undermines Syrian Regime

By Juan Cole

The Syrian upheaval has gone through several stages. It began with relatively peaceful protests by crowds in a handful of small and medium-size cities outside the large metropolitan areas of Damascus and Aleppo. Severe repression by the national regime led some revolutionaries to turn to guerrilla tactics. The ruling Baath government subjected the quarters held by the Free Syrian Army to heavy artillery and tank assaults. More recently, as the rebellion continued to spread in small towns, the military has provided cover to death squads that have massacred civilians in an attempt to scare them into submission. The most frightening thing about this spiral of ever greater violence and brutality is that some of the now-hardened lines have been sectarian.

The [Syrian army assault](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57453190/united-nations-observers-enter-cleansed-syrian-town-of-haffa-after-days-of-trying-to-gain-access/) ([http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202\\_162-57453190/united-nations-observers-enter-cleansed-syrian-town-of-haffa-after-days-of-trying-to-gain-access/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57453190/united-nations-observers-enter-cleansed-syrian-town-of-haffa-after-days-of-trying-to-gain-access/)) on the rebellious Sunni village of al-Haffa in Latakia province, which has left it a ghost town, exemplifies this move toward religious war. Latakia is heavily **Alawite**, and protecting members of this religious group from Sunni dominance is one of the latent functions of the regime. The upper echelons of the ruling Baath Party and its officer corps are **dominated** by the Alawite sect of Shiite Islam. Only about 10 percent of Syrians are Alawite. On the order of 70 percent of Syrians belong to the rival Sunni branch of Islam. (Many Syrian Sunnis are secularists.) The **car bomb** that recently damaged the Shiite shrine of Sayyida Zaynab in Damascus may have primarily targeted nearby Intelligence Ministry buildings, but those who detonated it may have been happy enough to hurt Shiite religious sensibilities.

The death squads, **Shabiha**, deployed by the regime against the towns of Houla and Mazraat al-Qubair in recent weeks are drawn from the Alawi sect. Many of the Sunnis being targeted have been organized by the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood. Houla and Mazraat al-Qubair are largely Sunni hamlets surrounded by powerful Alawi towns.

The black-garbed Shabiha, or “ghost gangs,” began as criminal organizations in the Alawite-dominated port of Latakia in the 1970s after the Alawite Assad family came to power in Syria, and some of its members are drawn from the Assad and related Deeb and Makhlof clans. Although the groups were curbed in the 1990s after they became too arrogant even for the Assads to countenance, they re-emerged in 2011 as paramilitary adjuncts to the army and security police. In Alawite areas, they have been accused of detaining Syrians with Sunni names at checkpoints and doing away with them.

The Baath Party was founded in the 1940s by two Christian intellectuals who advocated a secular Arab nationalism. In some ways, the “Resurrection,” or Baath, party was to resemble the Communist Party, but instead of championing the working class and being universal it would uplift ethnic Arabs and unite them to throw off the vestiges of Western, colonial domination. This attempt to subvert socialism with an appeal to essentially racist themes made the Baath an odd hybrid of fascism and Third-Worldism. Non-Arab minorities in Baath-ruled countries, such as the Kurds, often faced discrimination or worse.

Baathists came to power through coups in Syria and Iraq in the 1960s. Ironically, the Baath one-party state became a vehicle for well-organized minorities to take over the government. Thus, in Syria the Alawite Shiites dominated the Baath regime from 1970, whereas in Iraq control of the ruling Baath party was held by a Sunni clan from Tikrit (that of Saddam Hussein).

Syria’s Baath Party has lasted so long and attracted the loyalty of so many Syrians over the decades in part because it aided Syria’s transition from a rural, peasant country to an urban one. It carried out a land reform that redistributed

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land to peasants and liquidated the old big-landlord class. The Baathists built dams and irrigation works for farmers, earning the gratitude and support of many rural Sunni clans. Largely rural depot towns such as Deraa in the south near the Jordanian border were among the biggest beneficiaries of these Baath programs, and so were known as strong party backers, producing several high regime officials and officers.

Rural Syria has had a prolonged and severe drought, and the Baath government has not been good in this decade about managing water resources. Rural Sunni clans have suffered most from this water crisis.

A majority of Syrians now live in towns and cities, and their needs are different from those of their farming parents. The Baath Party's **reduction of fuel and other subsidies** (<http://www.mepec.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/political-economy-syria?print>) and encouragement of unaccountable big business have angered the urban population. (These policies, pushed by international banks and elites, are generally referred to as “Neoliberalism.”) Largely Sunni towns have seen high unemployment, especially in slums on outskirts full of former farmworkers forced to seek jobs in the cities, often unsuccessfully.

At its heart, the Syrian crisis is a conflict that pits the urban metropolises (Damascus, Aleppo and Latakia) that benefit from government largesse against the medium-size cities and rural towns that have suffered from drought and Neoliberal policies. It so happens that this divide also aligns, if unevenly, with sectarian cleavages, with the provincial cities and towns being mostly religiously conservative and Sunni, and the big-cities bastions of minority power and secular Sunni business classes dependent on the regime.

The Syrian government's resort to Alawite death squads in recent weeks, however, has threatened the big-city alliance that has allowed the Baath to survive. The sight of Sunni women and children massacred by the Shabiha in Houla and Mazraat al-Qubair drove Sunni shopkeepers in the capital to instigate a **general strike** ([http://articles.cnn.com/2012-06-11/middleeast/world\\_meast\\_syria-battle-for-cities\\_1\\_damascus-merchants-joshua-landis-daraa?\\_s=PM:MIDDLEEAST](http://articles.cnn.com/2012-06-11/middleeast/world_meast_syria-battle-for-cities_1_damascus-merchants-joshua-landis-daraa?_s=PM:MIDDLEEAST)). Protests and small insurgencies are now taking place even in Damascus.

The regime of Bashar Assad squandered whatever good will it had in rural and small-town Syria by its heavy-handed repression of the protests. Among its few remaining assets was the support of Christian, Alawi and secular Sunni middle classes in the large cities, groups that fear the rise of Sunni fundamentalism, are disturbed by the decline of security for property, and benefit from Baath government licenses and contracts. The deployment of Shabiha death squads, however, has clearly pushed many of these former supporters into the opposition. It is now the regime that is threatening public security and fanning the flames of sectarian hatred. If the Syrian revolution finally succeeds, it will be because the Baath regime betrayed its commitments to secularism, socialism and public order, becoming in the eyes of the public just another sectarian mafia.

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