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**THE POWER OF THE ALAWITE SECT AND THE SYRIAN INTELLIGENCE SERVICE**

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*“Everyone imposes his own system as far as his army can reach”- Joseph Stalin<sup>i</sup>*

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Power - defined as access to national assets and possession of territorial integrity has to be always ensured by someone. It is always ready to be guarded by force if needed and by the civil order of the people in order to perpetuate it. Whether it is purely religious, political dogma or indoctrination, all facets of society have to be uniquely harmonized in order to be effective. The unity of ruling power often assures this either through ethnical, religious, professional, even tribal congeniality or their combination. Even the most narcissistic ruler needs close allies in the military corps and intelligence so he will not lose this power. Although there are too many historical examples where kings or dictators were assassinated by those entrusted with their safety, it is still expected for those ruling within an elite minority to retain this unity. In return, the safety of one assures the rise of the other within the clique, at least professionally. With the rise of one of their own to the top, patronage dictates that a brother, cousin, member of the tribe or even sect will benefit as well.

This article is a continuation of articles published earlier regarding the influence of religion within the intelligence services. Syria in its own right is a unique country with myriads of historical uprisings and enforced religious plurality. By examining the relationship between religion and Syria's intelligence community, it is important to mention that at the time this is published Syria's Sunni majority is ruled by the Alawite minority (considered as one of the sects of Shi'a).

Historically, the mountainous regions of Syria have always served as safe havens for many minorities seeking safety. Three Muslim groups found their refuge there: the Assassins (Nisari Isma'ilis), Druze and the Alawites. Of the three, Alawites are unique in that they base their beliefs on the extreme 'Twelver Shi'a' doctrine. Complicating their dogma is the belief that Alawism is mixed with syncretic Christian and pagan influences. The Alawi religion as it is also known has a strong gnostic base and further characterized by Syrio-Babylonian, Hellenistic, Persian as well as the Christian influences. Alawites are believed to be descendants of an ancient community that kept its pagan basis but consequently assimilated elements of newer religions as they came through: Particularly Christianity during the Roman-Byzantine period and Shi'a Islam after the Muslim conquest.<sup>ii</sup> Although it is hard to define their true ethnic background, it is known that most of Alawi religious leaders were of Persian origin.

To better understand the attitude of the general population, particularly the majority Sunnis towards Alawites, it is significant to mention that as a community Alawites are very secretive. Their religious doctrine remains enigmatic even to fellow Muslims. Perhaps this speculative dimension is

another reason that so many scholars pay so much attention to study them. As for Sunnis this only breeds further contempt and distrust towards them.

If that is not complicated enough, the aspects of the Alawi faith are not only hidden to outsiders but even to the majority of Alawites themselves. First 'Alawism' permits only males to be initiated.<sup>iii</sup> Second, the Alawi community further distinguishes those who are initiated to become religious leaders (called "*Khassah*") from the rest of the community that are not (called the "*Ammah*"). This initiation becomes an extremely important ceremony with special signs of recognition used to identify members.<sup>iv</sup> Descriptively, this is almost comparable to the Masonic order in Europe and North America or India's caste-based community. Such strict adherence is a common trait of such tight-knit groups where tribal minorities strictly follow their hierarchy, exercising full control over their community. Even though they were the most repressed minority over the centuries, Alawites still rose to power in Syria. Despite the unrest in Syria today, this rule still appears unshakable despite public outcry. How did this rise occur to begin with?

The rise of the Alawites is associated with the French Mandate from 1920-1946. Given French efforts to cooperate with minorities, the Alawites gained political autonomy and escaped suppressive Sunni control. As a result the *State of Latakia* was established in 1922. "This gained the Alawites legal autonomy, low local taxation and a sizable French subsidy. In return, the Alawites helped to maintain French Rule, supporting the elections while others boycotted. The Alawites provided a disproportionate number of soldiers to the government as well; forming about half of the eight battalions of infantry making up the *Troupes Spéciales du Levant*. To round out their support, they provided sizable numbers of police as well serving as intelligence officers".<sup>v</sup>

The original French model used to establish the military intelligence service in Syria was called *Deuxième Bureau*. Later there was a Department of Civilian Security (*Sûreté Générale*) that was responsible for the search of persons engaged in subversive activities. Initially this service was subordinate to the Interior Ministry. In subsequent years, the intelligence officers became extremely active in Lebanon and northern Israel, but in general the civilian intelligence arm or *Sûreté* was nothing more than the executive branch of *Deuxième Bureau*.<sup>vi</sup>

At the Qarna'il Conference in August 1933, about fifty radical Arab nationalists founded the League of National Action. Following ethnic and religious lines, this organization soon spread into the urban areas of Syria except in Shia stronghold Aleppo.<sup>vii</sup> Nonetheless, the emergence of these Arab Nationalists gave some ground for action by British Intelligence as well. Despite its declared policy of post-war decolonization, "Great Britain viewed the use of intelligence as an essential tool to retain their hold over the entirety of Middle East both during the war (First World War) and after. Britain could publicly declare its neutrality towards the three Arab dynasties while its secret agents and diplomats backed their traditional allies: the Hashemites against their regional rivals, King Farouk of Egypt and Ibn Sa'ud of Saudi Arabia"<sup>viii</sup>. Those were years when 150,000 people were unemployed and by 1933 Syrian exports fell by one-half while imports dropped 38%.

The State of Latakia eventually lost its autonomy by 1939. This was the result of several 'poker-like' political machinations between the Sunni Nationalistic Bloc as well as French and British interests competing for hegemony in Syria and Lebanon. To better understand the loss of French support for the Alawites and the return of Syria to Sunni rule it is significant to examine the missing dimension of covert warfare between France and Great Britain. In opposition to the French Mandate, the Sunni Nationalistic Bloc carried the regional banner of 'Arab Unity.' This meant that territorial integrity

under a single unified Arab bloc would run contrary to the vital independent interests of Alawites and their State of Latakia.

The British role then is an interesting one given their public role as mediator in the conflict between France and Syria while at the same time British agents worked behind the scenes. Their mission was to expel France from Syria and Lebanon in an attempt to incorporate the two countries into Britain's sphere of influence. This underscored their desire to integrate Syria into a 'Greater Syria' or even a 'Fertile Crescent Confederation' dominated by Iraq. The goal was to ensure the collaboration of all unified Arab leaders even after their independence. By doing so pitted Britain's access to oil over that of the emerging United States while at the same time prevented Soviet entry into the region.<sup>ix</sup>

Although the establishment of Syria's intelligence services was closely tied to the French Mandate, the German influence during World War II left an indelible mark as well. The German invasion of France in the spring of 1940 resulted in the collaboration of Vichy France being imposed on Syria and Lebanon. In August, the German and Italian commissions arrived in Beirut with Herr von Hentig from the German Foreign Office sent to spread Nazi propaganda.<sup>x</sup> This was the beginning of Nazi involvement in the internal affairs of Syria after WWII. It is believed that former SS officer, and assistant to Adolf Eichmann, Alois Brunner took the role of mentor to Syrian Intelligence. It is known that he arrived in Syria 1954, after his fake name had been uncovered while sheltered in East Germany. He was three times convicted to the death penalty by the French court. Despite multiple attempts of both Austria and France to extradite Brunner from Syria, nothing compelled Damascus to comply with the request. Finally in 2010, the Greek authorities made the very last attempt to extradite him for killing 95% of Thessaloniki's Jewish community during WWII.<sup>xi</sup> If still alive, he would be over 100 years old!

Following the Second World War, Sunnis were once again administering rule over Syria. Although the Alawites did try to resist submission to the central government, they clearly realized that their future was within this notion of a 'Greater Syria.' In order to rise again to power, they undertook a strategy to infiltrate the four main pillars of Syrian power: military, police, intelligence and the emerging Ba'ath party. What distinguished Alawites from the Sunnis was namely the fact that Sunnis entered these organizations as individuals while Alawites entered as members of a religious sect. While the Sunni political elite endured endless infighting, the Alawites kept bringing their co-religionists to the Ba'ath Party.<sup>xii</sup> Sunni dominance ended due to some very fundamental mistakes: 1) First they ignored the importance of the army as tool of a state; 2) Second they misjudged the power of intelligence in consolidating national power; 3) Tribal unity for Sunnis remained elusive while 4) the Alawites pursued a coherent agenda of supporting one another.

With the 1950s giving way to the 1960s, two Ba'ath doctrines were embraced by the Alawites. The first was socialism. With the prospect of economic growth and assistance from the Soviet Union, this official stance of state secularism also offered the religious balance they desperately sought. By 1970, Air Force officer Hafez Asad obtained the consensus and support of the armed forces to seize power. In 1980, Hafez Asad signed the Pact of Friendship with the Soviet Union, signaling solidarity and protection of all 'party-line Marxists' throughout the world. By that same token this move also marginalized his influence in the Arab world where Saudi Arabia dominated.<sup>xiii</sup> What the Soviet Union gained in return was both access to the regional markets and the establishment of a foothold in the Mediterranean.

Given the role of terrorism in carrying out international class struggle, the support of Syria's intelligence service has been not only consistent but international in scope. Political assassinations started right after Hafez Asad's rise to power. Among the killings organized by Syrian security forces were Lebanese Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt in 1976. In 1982, Lebanese President Bachir Gemayel was assassinated. In 1983, Syrian forces also killed the leader of the PLO Sartau Isam in Portugal. That same year Jordanian ambassadors were wounded in India and Italy while attempts to take the lives of diplomats in Romania and Turkey were successful. Perhaps the starkest example of Syrian involvement was the successful 2005 bombing of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's motorcade in Beirut.<sup>xiv</sup> What distinguishes these assassinations from others were the fact that the motivations were just as religious in significance as they were political – a motivation that could only have benefited an Alawite-ruled Syria.

The efforts of Syrian intelligence however were not restricted to opportunities of eliminating high-value opponents. Syria's long-term efforts to destabilize Turkey were designed by Hafez Asad to attract Soviet support. Through the Soviet bloc, assistance, weapons and training by East German and Bulgarian "security advisors" were conducted in Syrian Camps while members of terrorist organizations went to the Soviet Union and East Europe for specialized instruction.<sup>xv</sup>

Since his accession to power, Hafez Asad made every possible effort to tie the Alawite community to his regime.<sup>xvi</sup> Given this religious connection, the total number of those employed in Syrian security went from 65,000 officers in 1965 to 530,000 by 1991. As late as 2004, numbers exceeded 700,000. Proportionally only 59% of Syria's populations are above the age of 15, meaning there is one intelligence officer for every 153 adult citizens, one of highest ratios in the world.<sup>xvii</sup>

This background sets the stage for what is occurring in the present. The father, Hafez Assad portrayed himself as a vanguard of the Arab world. By his isolation from the west, he could not be conciliatory to Israel as Egypt was nor represent the traditional ruling families such as the Hashimites and Sauds. By embracing the principles of the Ba'ath Party, his platform was that he was defending against Zionism and Imperialism. With this legacy fairly intact something happened with the transition from father to son. Hafez Asad had a number of followers that were Sunnis and in turn he delicately balanced favoritism between Sunni and Alawites. No doubt the provision in the Syrian Constitution that the President must be Sunni is such a concession however this was never implemented. When Bashar Assad took power, he conducted a political cleansing of these main pillars where power resided. From 2000-2004 he forcibly retired 15% of the senior officials of which the brunt affected the military. By October 4, 2004, Bashar Assad made further major changes in the government, dismissing ministers of internal affairs, economics, information, justice, industry, labor, health and religious issues.<sup>xviii</sup>

What Bashar Assad could not rearrange was the intelligence service. Rifaat Assad, youngest brother of Hafez Assad and uncle to Bashar Assad still laid claim to the succession of power in Syria. The significance of this is that the uncle had been firmly entrenched in leading the intelligence service for more than two decades. As a result, Bashar Assad is too distant to wrestle control from his uncle nor does he share the internal political nuances spanning over 20 years. Further, Rifaat resides outside of Syria. Not only has this complicated Bashar's consolidation of power but waiting on the outside has all but assured that Rifaat Assad is too late to salvage what his nephew has wrought in the country.

Then we have to consider Syria's traditional allies such as Iran, Russia and perhaps China. For Iran, losing Shia regimes in the region has catastrophic consequences. If Bashar's regime falls money

transactions from Iran to Hezbollah will be cut off leaving Iran further isolated. Russia's loyalty to Syria at the UN Security Council demonstrates its vital interests as well. Russia is not willing to lose their access to the Middle Eastern market and its most loyal customer. Further, the internal Russian threat within the Federation such as Chechnya is Sunni-supported. This means Russia and Syria's Shia (Alawite) regime share a common enemy of which the Sunni rebels could be supported by members of Al-Qaeda. 'Even though the international community has been against Russia's position, arms shipments to Syria's regime will most likely continue instead of decreasing.'<sup>xix</sup> China as well has blocked efforts in the UN Security Council. Major purchases of Chinese goods aside, such support could be as simple as the currency exchange rate.

This Russian and Chinese angle deserves a closer examination. Like Iran, Syria still has a place to go to do international business. Recently, Syrian National Bank Chief Adib Majaleh disregarded the impact of sanctions by noting that Syria's Central Bank will transition to Russian Rubles and Chinese Yuan; in other words business as usual.<sup>xx</sup> With Syria's purchase of these currencies (in addition to Iran) their value goes up. Regarding Balance of Payments (BoP), higher currency means imports become cheaper for Russia and China. Conversely, Russia and China are exporting countries, meaning that purchasers of energy (Russia) and manufactured goods (China) may have to pay more but the inability to compete leaves them with few to no alternatives in the short term.

What is clear then is the prospect of 'lose-lose' outcomes. Bashar Assad will not step down to stop the massacre only to take over accommodations at The Hague. How can an international tribunal even build a case against him when observers were not able to enter the country for over a year? What we have learned in a matter of days is that 'Chabiha' – the Alawite pro-government military group carried out wholesale executions in the town of Houla.<sup>xxi</sup> Despite worldwide revulsion over the number of children killed the wave of expulsions of Syrian diplomats from numerous countries<sup>xxii</sup> miss key critical points: Is Assad is really in charge? If he has no control over some of his units or even the Alawites is he targeted for assassination from within? Who does the world community need to negotiate with?

What we do know is if this continues unchecked, what can the international community really do to stop the struggle, especially when UN resolutions are blocked by Russia and China? Other permanent Security Council members such as France, Great Britain and U.S. are still involved to varying degrees in Afghanistan. While France is not as involved as the others, the prospect of going in without a UN Resolution places them at odds with their 2003 position regarding the entry of the U.S. into Iraq. The best they can hope for is another vague and tenuous UN Chapter 'Six-and-a-Half.' Even if the current regime did fall, the Alawite massacre that would ensue would be equally ruthless.

In the end, the Sunni rebel push for national unity and independence is yet another disjointed effort that prevents them from culminating victory in Syria. That fractious approach is ultimately what enabled the Alawites to take power in Syria in the first place.

### ***Endnotes:***

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