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## II. French Imperial Roots

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# The Alawite sect's service to France

In 1921, in the aftermath of World War I, France added Syria to its empire, by virtue of the Sykes-Picot accord, which provided for the division of the Mideast between Britain and France. In 1936, six leaders of the Alawite sect of Syria sent an urgent petition to French Prime Minister Leon Blum. The leaders stated that the overwhelming majority of their sect rejected their proposed attachment to a French-ruled Syrian republic, and wished to remain under separate French administration. Among these six was Sulayman al-Assad, the father of current Syrian dictator Hafez al-Assad.

"We, the leaders and dignitaries of the Alawite sect in Syria," they said, represent a people who "are different from the Sunnite Muslims." The Alawites "refuse to be annexed to Muslim Syria," because in Syria, "the official religion of the state is Islam, and according to Islam, the Alawites are considered infidels." They reported that "the spirit of hatred and fanaticism imbedded in the hearts of Arab Muslims, against everything that is non-Muslim, has been perpetually nurtured by the Islamic religion."

The Alawites, as we shall detail below, are neither Muslim nor Christian; some believe that they have their origins in ancient Babylon.

The dignitaries compared their plight to that of the Jews of Palestine: "These good Jews contributed to the Arabs with civilization and peace, scattered gold, and established prosperity in Palestine, without harming anyone or taking anything by force, yet the Muslims declare holy war against them, and never hesitated in slaughtering their women and children, despite the presence of England in Palestine, and France in Syria." Imploring France to come to their aid, they emphasized that the Alawites are "a loyal and friendly people threatened by death and annihilation, who have offered France tremendous services."<sup>1</sup>

France did not comply with the Alawite request, this time around, and the minority was attached to Syria, despite

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1. The original letter from the Alawite leaders to Prime Minister Blum, was on file at the French Foreign Ministry archives (E. 412.2, file 393,8) until the ministry discovered in the late 1980s that it had, somehow, inexplicably disappeared. The full text of the letter is reproduced in *The Extremist Shiites: the Ghulat Sects*, by Matti Moosa (Syracuse University Press, 1983, pp. 280-291).

their protests.

But the letter, indicating the Alawite relationship to imperial France, goes a long way toward explaining how Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970, and how he has remained in power for the past 26 years. The reason is that Assad is not a leader of the Arab world, but rather a legacy of French imperialist domination of the Mideast, which continues to dominate Syria to this day.

But the French, of course, are not the only imperial power in the region. There are also the British. They, too, as the record shows, had great interest in the Alawite sect, and the Assad family.

In 1942, the Arab Bureau of British Intelligence, headquartered in Cairo, sent one of its top officers to wartime Lebanon, Capt. E.E. Evans-Pritchard. Evans-Pritchard, who would become famous as the profiler of southern Sudan, and author of the bogus concept of the "Nilotic peoples," was asked to do an in-depth study of the Alawite sect. Following British SOP in such matters, Evans-Pritchard compiled a detailed profile of the sect's leaders. Among them, he cited Hafez al-Assad's father. In order to do the study, Evans-Pritchard relied on a prominent informant, a friend of Hafez al-Assad's father, who was also the son of the sheikh who ruled the Assad family's village, and another co-signer of the Alawite dignitaries' letter.<sup>2</sup>

### How the Alawites took over Syria

French imperial policy toward Syria during its post-World War I occupation, followed the standard practice of inflaming ethnic and religious divisions, to prevent unified opposition to its rule. Carving out minority states from the Syrian region it had seized, and favoring oppressed minorities in their conflict with the majority, was one way to accomplish this.<sup>3</sup>

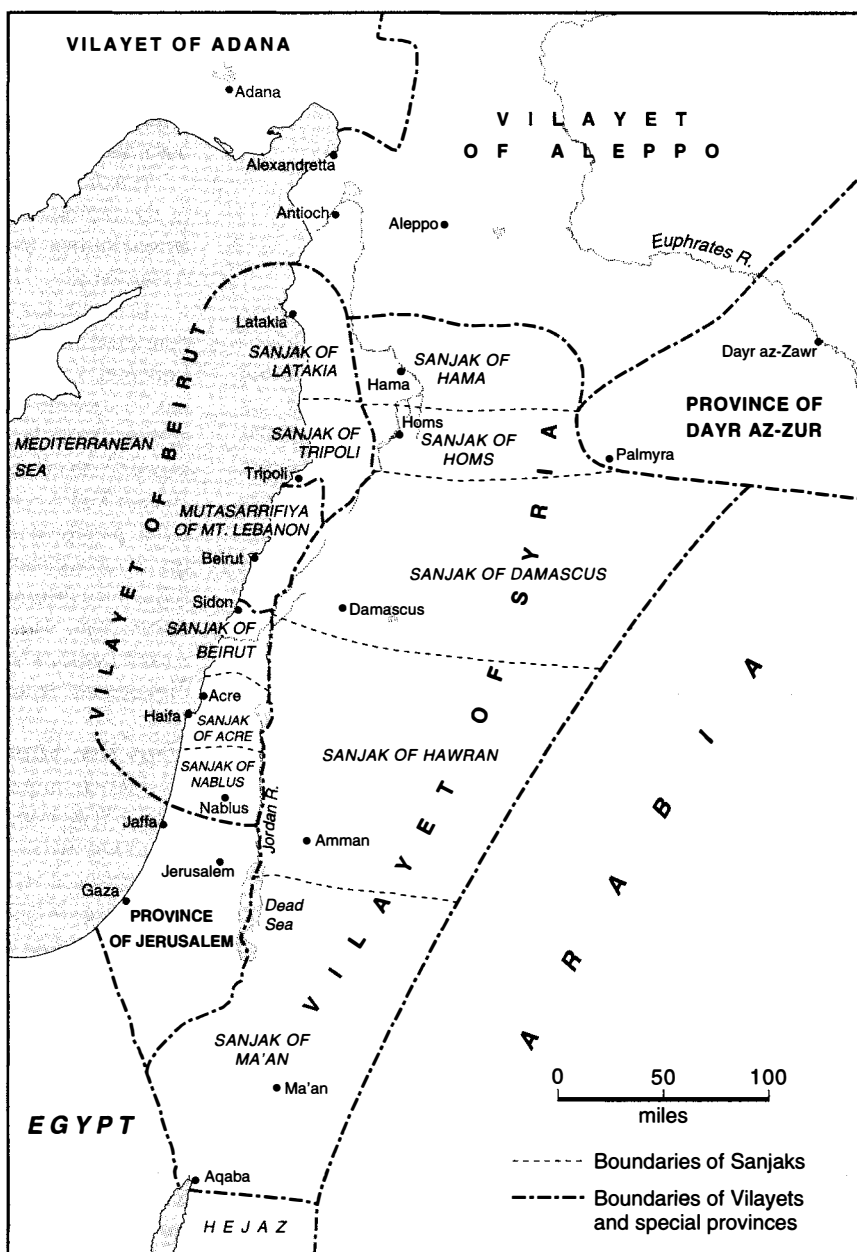
Even before its 1921 Mandate, the French had singled out the Alawites, as important future clients. The future French governor of the Alawite state, which the French carved out of its Syrian lands, had already emphasized that they "could be extremely useful, perhaps even indispensable. They are all armed and possess weapons, and if they wished could put up a stiff resistance to us. We have the greatest interest in gaining their good feelings and even favoring them." They were, he added, "perfect musketeers, even in their pillage and brigandage one finds among them a well-tempered soul, a virile char-

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2. Evans-Pritchard's unpublished intelligence report is cited in *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, by Patrick Seale (University of California Press, 1988, pp. 13, 497). Seale reports that Evans-Pritchard was aided by Ahmad al-Ahmad, the son of the village sheikh. How Seale acquired access to the unpublished intelligence report is not explained.

3. For a general history of French colonial policy, see *The History of French Colonial Policy, 1870-1925*, Sir Stephen H. Roberts (London: Cass, 1963, 2nd edition). For a diplomatic and administrative history of the mandate, also see *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate*, by Stephen Hemsley Longrigg (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1958).

MAP 3  
Pre-World War I Ottoman Syria



During the Ottoman Empire, the eastern Mediterranean coastal region was divided into the three governates (*vilayets*) of Syria, Aleppo, and Beirut, further divided into districts (*sanjaks*). The province of Jerusalem was separately administered by Istanbul directly. Because of French pressure, the Mutasarrifiya of Mt. Lebanon, dominated by Roman Catholic Maronites, had a special status within the *vilayet* of Beirut. The region as a whole, comprising what is today Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan, was a coherent economic and geographic unit known as Syria.

acter, something dignified.”<sup>4</sup>

Acting according to this policy, the French heavily recruited the Alawites and other minorities, into their native military units, while virtually banning the recruitment of the

4. “The Syrian Armed Forces in National Politics: The Role of the Geographic and Ethnic Periphery,” by Alasdair Drysdale, pp. 53-73, a chapter in *Soldiers, Peasants, and Bureaucrats*, edited by Roman Kolkowicz (London: Allen and Unwin, 1982).

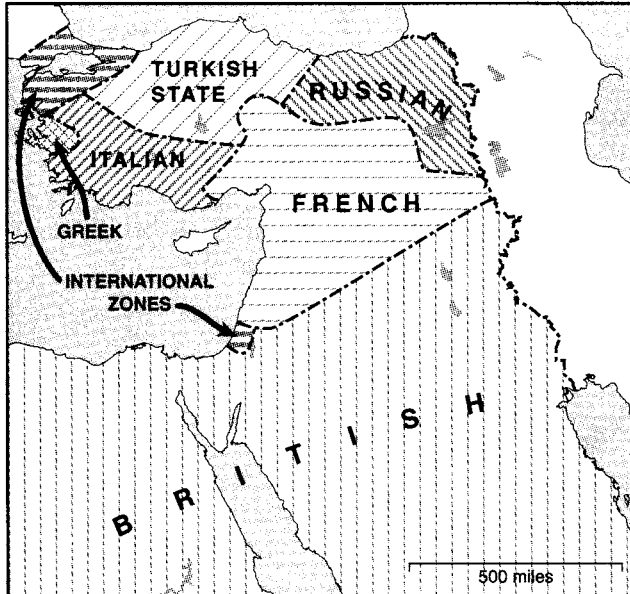
Sunni Arab majority.

French Foreign Ministry statistics tell the story:

The Alawites and Christians comprised 46% of all the soldiers in the Auxiliary Troops (*Troupes Auxiliaries*), for example, one of the three native units, in the years 1924-28. According to the Foreign Ministry, “the majority of [native] officers were Christian.” The total Alawite plus Christian population among the general Syrian population at the time, was 22%. Similarly, three of the eight infantry battalions in an-

MAP 4

## Sykes-Picot agreement plotted breakup of Ottoman Empire



Under the 1916 Anglo-French war-time agreement negotiated by Sir Mark Sykes and George Picot, Britain and France, along with Italy, Greece, and Russia, intended to carve up the German-allied Ottoman Empire after the war. France would take present-day Syria and Lebanon, a huge region of present-day Turkey, and oil-rich northern Iraq. Britain would take Egypt (which it already effectively controlled), Arabia, the present-day Persian Gulf states, and southern Iraq. The strategic Bosphorus Strait and Palestine, were to be put under “international,” that is, joint Anglo-French, administration. The rest of Asiatic Turkey was to be carved up by Russia, Italy, and Greece, relegating a new Turkish state to a small section of the Anatolian peninsula.

other native unit, the Special Troops (*Troupes Speciales*), were composed mainly or entirely of Alawites, during the entire 1921-45 Mandate period. None of battalions were Sunni in composition. And out of the 12 cavalry squadrons on which data are available for those years, 9 were composed of Alawite, Druze, Circassian, Armenian, Assyrian, or Ismaili minorities. Only three were made up of Sunni Arabs, and of these Sunnis, all were drawn from isolated border regions.<sup>5</sup>

The method by which the French put down the 1925-27

5. “Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria’s Ruling Military Group and the Cause of Its Dominance,” by Hanna Batatu, *Middle East Journal*, vol. 35, no. 3 (Summer 1981), pp. 331-44; and “Minorities in Power: The Alawites of Syria,” by Peter Gubser, in *The Political Role of Minority Groups in the Middle East*, edited by R.D. McLaurin (New York: Praeger Press, 1979), pp. 17-47. See also Drysdale, *op. cit.*

MAP 5

## Post-World War I Mideast



France and Britain did not get all that they wanted, because Mustafa Kemal Ataturk created the Turkish republic out of the remains of the Ottoman Empire, and kept control of much of the region which Britain, France, and their allies had intended to seize. Nonetheless, Turkey lost the Ottomans’ Arab lands. Britain took over present-day Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, the Arabian peninsula, and Egypt. France’s gains were much less than it expected. In addition to France losing vast amounts of present-day Turkey, to Ataturk, Britain betrayed the Sykes-Picot agreement, and grabbed northern Iraq, which had been promised to France. Britain also seized Palestine, which, under the plan, was supposed to be put under joint British-French control.

Sunni revolt against their rule, is instructive. Among the shock troops used, were the Supplementary Troops (*Troupes Supplétives*), which had been specially raised to crush the revolt. The force included six Druze, eight Circassian, three Kurdish, and several Alawite units, but no Sunni units at all. Over 6,000 people were killed during the revolt, and over 100,000 people (mostly Sunni Arabs) were left homeless. The bloodbath deeply embittered the Sunnis against the French, but also deflected some of that rage against France’s native collaborators.<sup>6</sup>

However, French “minority politics” was not the only reason that the French championed the Alawites. There was also a religious fascination, since French and British officials believed the Alawites were, or could be made into, Freema-

6. Batatu, Gubser, *op. cit.*

## Post-World War I division of Greater Syria

### Key to Map 6

One of France's first objectives after occupying Syria and Lebanon, was to reorganize the region, in order to provoke its population into internecine conflict. Accordingly, Gen. Henri Gouraud, of the French High Commission, established four French-administered "autonomous states" in the seized region within six weeks of his forces' entry into Damascus in July 1920. These states were:

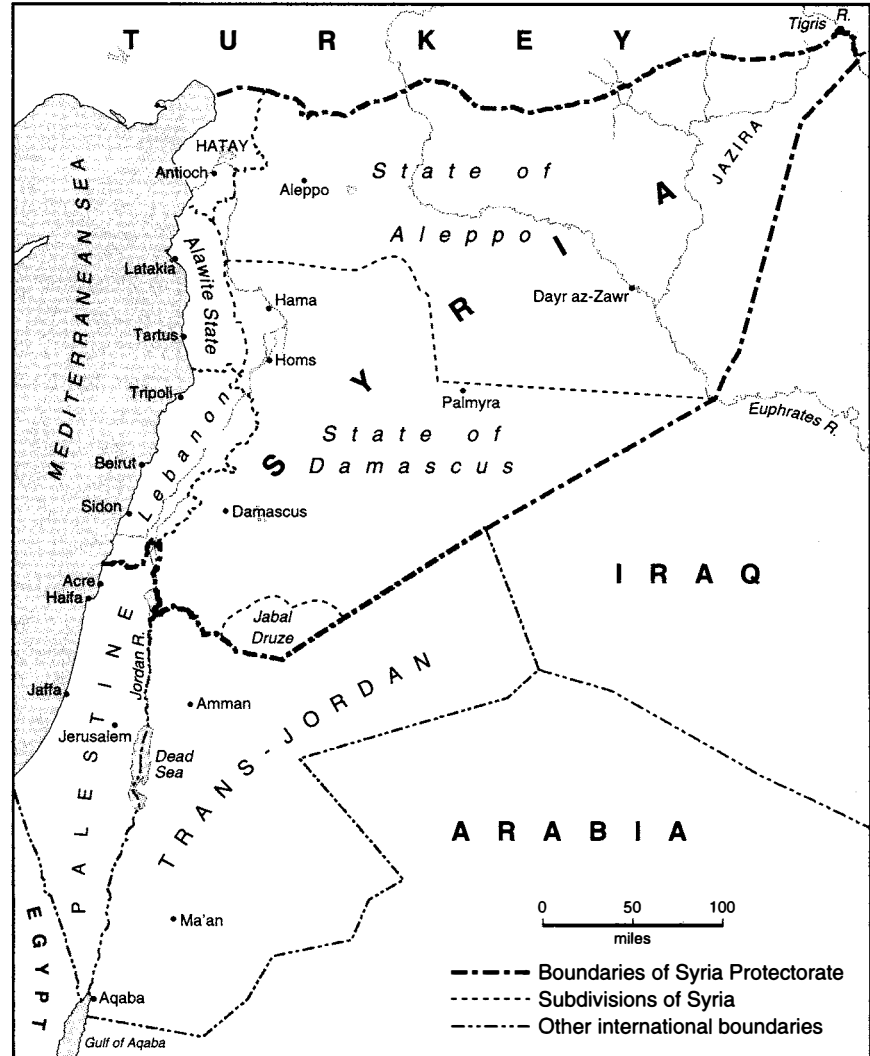
**Greater Lebanon:** The original Mount Lebanon *sanjak* was a relatively homogeneous district inhabited by Roman Catholic Maronites, who had been French clients for a century. Greater Lebanon, on the other hand, included many other areas that had never been under Maronite control, and were inhabited by populations which had been in conflict with the Maronites for, in some case, hundreds of years. Among the lands added to this new mini-empire were the half-Muslim city of Beirut; most of Tripoli, the overwhelmingly Muslim, natural gateway to Syria; and the whole of the Bekaa Valley, where Muslims outnumbered Christians two to one. It also included the districts inland from Sidon and Tyre, where Christians were a distinct minority. The new Maronite overlords constituted the largest community, but one which was less than half of the whole population.

**The Alawite state:** This isolated coastal region, north of present-day Lebanon, was carved out of the old *sanjaks* of Latakia and Tripoli, and handed over to the Alawites, a despised Muslim heretical sect, as their own, French-administered nation. The Alawites were almost entirely impoverished peasants, who lived in remote enclaves in the mountainous interior, and barely comprised a majority in the new state. The towns, the traditional seat of power and the residences of the Alawites' landlords, were largely Greek Orthodox or Sunni. The result was necessarily tumultuous.

**The state of Aleppo:** The old *vilayet* of Aleppo, named after the powerful merchant city which was its capital, also became a separate state, but was shorn of almost all of its old northern Kurdish territory, which had been lost to the new republic of Turkey. The Kurdish area that remained in Aleppo (Jazira) was separately administered by the French as a "military territory," as was its inland-desert that was inhabited by bedouin tribes. Aleppo's coastal district of Antioch (Hatay),

with its large Turkish population, was also placed under French administrative control, and was later lost to the new Turkish republic.

**The state of Damascus:** The old *sanjak* of Damascus also received a new status as a state, but was shorn of much of the Syrian *vilayet* of which Damascus had been the capital. The Druze mountains to the south (Jabal Druze) were severed, and put under separate French administration, while some of the eastern districts, such as the Bekaa Valley, were given to Greater Lebanon. Moreover, southern Syria, as per the Sykes-Picot accord, was severed from the rest of Syria, put under British colonial administration, and made into the new state of Transjordan and the Mandate of Palestine. This further inflamed the Sunni population of Damascus, in particular, because Britain made clear that it intended to turn over Palestine



to European Jews. As a result, Damascus, which viewed itself as the capital of the entire Syrian region, including present-day Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel, was left as a landlocked, desert territory.

The creation of these four states within French-held Syria was enthusiastically favored by the minority Alawites and Maronites, but was bitterly opposed by the Sunnis, who comprised two-thirds of the total regional population. Such conflict also served French interests.

Having set this turmoil into motion, the French changed gears and, in July 1922, suddenly proclaimed the "Federation of the Autonomous States in Syria," which created a single federation of Damascus, Aleppo, and the Alawite state, while preserving their autonomy. Lebanon was not included, and its status as a separate, French-administered state was finalized. By the end of the year, the French changed course again, dissolved the federation, and combined Damascus and Aleppo into one state, with a parliament. The state of the Alawites, on the other hand, was declared fully autonomous, and no longer linked with the rest of Syria.

### Syria's 'compact minorities'

When France took over Syria and Lebanon, its population (estimated in 1912) was 3.2 million, of whom 1.8 million were Muslim, 1 million Christian, and 400,000 members of various sects. The overwhelming majority of the population was Arab. Although detailed census data on the population living within current Syrian borders at that time are not available, an estimate of the relative strength of minorities can be made, based on later data, because the comparative change would have been minimal. In 1964, for example, 80% of Syria was ethnically Arab. Its principal ethnic minorities were Kurds (9%), Armenians (4%), Turcomans (3%), and Circassians. Religiously, Syria was 70% Sunni Muslim. The principal religious minorities were the Alawites (11%), Druze (3%), Ismailis (2%), and various Christians (14%, of which the largest component, comprising one-third, was Greek Orthodox).

The sectarian and ethnic minorities have typically lived in small enclaves, within which they comprised the majority. Even in 1964, some 75% of the Alawites of Syria lived in the Latakia region on the northern coast, where they comprised 60% of the population (and where the Greek Orthodox constituted another 15%). Similarly, 90% of the Druze lived in the southern province of al-Suwayda (roughly the same as the old province of Jabal Druze), where they constituted 90% of the population. The Kurds were a majority in the northeastern province of Jazira, where the Christians were also strongly represented. Roughly 80% of the Ismailis lived as a minority in the central province of Hama, which is another Christian stronghold.

sons. That certainly was the view of Rev. Samuel Lyde of England, who lived among the Alawites from 1853 to 1859. According to his 1860 *The Asian Mystery*, which later served as one of the handbooks of the French occupation, the Alawites' secret handshakes, passwords, and ceremonial regalia, all attest to a possible link with the masonry.<sup>7</sup>

Part of the reason for that view is that the Alawite sect is a secret society, which does not reveal its canonical books to non-believers. The hidden doctrines of the sect's higher grades, are not even revealed to the general body of the faithful.<sup>8</sup>

The Alawites are so named, because they worship Ali as the incarnation of God, in contrast to the most basic tenets of Islam. (Another name for the group is the Nosairis, after their ninth-century founder.) According to their doctrine, God revealed himself in the form of a Holy Trinity on seven occasions. In his final emanation, God created Ali, who, in turn, created Muhammed. According to the sect, the first Alawites were stars in the world of light, into which an Alawite is transformed at death. If an Alawite sins, he is reincarnated as a Jew, Christian, or Muslim. The sect also syncretically incorporates various non-Islamic rituals. For example, it celebrates Christmas and Easter, and uses wine in its services.<sup>9</sup>

The French and British were particularly entranced by the "Moon sect," the largest Alawite denomination. According to their studies, the Moon sect's belief that Ali lived in the Moon, as well as their rituals, proved that the sect, and the Alawite religion in general, was pre-Islamic in origin, with possible ties to ancient Babylon. One of the six notables who sent the 1936 letter to Prime Minister Blum, was the leader of the Moon sect. Assad's village was the sect's traditional headquarters.<sup>10</sup>

### Independence, but not quite

In 1946, Syria became an independent nation, but like many newly independent former colonies, it faced an enraged,

7. Moosa, *op. cit.*, pp. 409-418.

8. For such reasons, the Alawites are condemned by Muslims as *al-batiniyah*, referring to the esoteric nature of their cult.

9. Discussion of Alawite religious doctrine and practices is available in several works. The most comprehensive is Moosa, *op. cit.*, in which pp. 215-418 are devoted to a detailed analysis of the sect's doctrine and history.

The Sunnis and Shia have repeatedly issued religious opinions against the Alawites, because of their doctrine and practices. For example, the twelfth-century Shiite theologian Ibn Shahr Ashub, condemned the Alawites as "nihilists who relinquished Islamic worship and religious duties and permitted immoral and forbidden acts." The fourteenth-century Sunni Sheikh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyya ruled that "those people who are Nusayriyya [the derogatory name for the Alawites], together with the Qaramita, are more infidel than the Jews and Christians; nay, they are more infidel than many polytheists." The nineteenth-century Sheikh Ibrahim al-Maghribi issued a ruling that it was lawful for a Muslim to kill an Alawite and confiscate his property—which no Muslim could lawfully do to a Jew or Christian. See Moosa, *op. cit.*, pp. 277, 414-415.

10. Seale, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20.

separatist, minority bloc, which had enjoyed special privileges under the empire. Revolt soon followed. The Alawites, led by Sulayman al-Murshid, rose in armed revolt. Al-Murshid was another of the six dignitaries who had sent the 1936 letter to Prime Minister Blum. His forces were soon crushed, and he was executed. In 1952, Murshid's son led another uprising, also crushed. In 1954, the Druze revolted. The suppression of the Druze revolt succeeded, temporarily, in making Syria a unified nation.

But, in a stunning irony, by 1963 the French-patronized Alawite secessionists had succeeded in taking over all of Syria, and rule it to this day. How was this possible?

A Syrian government study of the Syrian Army in 1949, gives an insight. The study found that "all units of any importance, as well as the important parts [posts], stood under the command of persons originating from religious minorities."<sup>11</sup> Even after independence, the Alawites still joined the military at much higher rates than the Sunni majority, where they were secured advancement by their officer brethren. In 1955, the Sunni head of the Army intelligence bureau, Col. Abd al-Hamid al-Sarraj, found to his reported astonishment, that 65% of the Army's non-commissioned officers were Alawites.<sup>12</sup>

On the civilian front, the Alawites scored increasing advances through their political front, the Baath (Renaissance) Party.

The Baath Party was founded in Damascus in 1940 by Michel Aflaq, a member of a Greek Orthodox grain-trading family, and Salah al-Din Bitar, a Sunni Muslim. Both had studied at the University of Paris, where they had been indoctrinated in the radical social theories that the French had used to undermine traditional society within their colonies. The Baath Party called for creating a socialist, secular society, through unifying the entire Arab nation, all the way from Morocco to Iraq.

Following independence, the party became a cloak for the reemergence of Alawite power in Syria. The party's advocacy of a secular state and society, particularly appealed to repressed religious minorities; their utopian call for unifying the Arab world, served to undermine the Syrian nationalist organizations, which tended to be dominated by the Sunni majority. Their call for class conflict helped mobilize the Alawite masses, many of whom were exploited peasants under the thumb of Sunni landlords.<sup>13</sup>

The main Syrian nationalist political parties were natu-

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11. *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Sectarianism, Regionalism and Tribalism in Politics, 1961-1980*, by Nikolaos Van Dam (London: Croom Helm, 1981), p. 41. This exhaustive study, by a Dutch Foreign Ministry official, gives a detailed account of Syria's demographic and tribal structure, and its relationship to its political history, and especially the history of its army.

12. Moosa, *op. cit.*, pp. 294-295.

13. The use of the Baath Party as a vehicle for Alawite advance is detailed at great length in Van Dam and Moosa, *op. cit.*

rally dominated by the Sunni Arab majority, who made no secret of their view that the minorities were untrustworthy French collaborators.<sup>14</sup>

Syrian politics was turbulent and violent from its independence, as was the politics of the region as a whole. In 1952, the coming to power of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, however, gave new promise to the Mideast. Nasser's Pan-Arabism found powerful support within Syria, especially after the 1956 Suez crisis, when Egypt, because of its backing by the Eisenhower administration, defeated the combined military forces of Britain, France, and Israel. In 1958, Syria merged with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic. Although the union reflected Pan-Arabist principles that the Alawites claimed to espouse, the Alawites within the Baath Party opposed the union. The union, however, was supported by the Sunni population.

The United Arab Republic, however, did not function, and, in 1961, it broke apart after a military coup in Syria. By 1963, however, after a confusing period of turmoil and purges, the Baathists took power in a military coup, establishing the regime which later brought Hafez al-Assad to power.

## How Hafez al-Assad earned his leash

Hafez al-Assad was born in 1930 to a family of French collaborators, and from a village that was the seat of one of the principal religious dignitaries of the Alawite sect, who was also a French collaborator.

In 1939, Assad moved to the port city of Latakia, to attend a *lycée*, which was then administered by Vichy France. Latakia, the main city in the Alawite region, was then a center of contending radical political movements. Assad fell under Baath Party influence, and joined the party there in 1947, after

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14. The Sunni Arab nationalist movement in Syria, however, was under no less foreign imperial manipulation, than the minority separatist movements it fought. But the Sunni organizations tended to be under British, rather than French, control. The leading Sunnite organization in Syria, the Syrian-Palestinian Congress, formed in 1918, was a product of the Anglo-French-created Young Turks—who ran the Ottoman Empire during 1908-19, and Sheikh Muhammad Abduh of Egypt, a protégé of the Egyptian viceroy, Lord Cromer. All of the Syrian Sunni factions were controlled or manipulated by Lawrence of Arabia or his networks. See *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920-45*, by Philip S. Khoury (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 514-534; and "Factionalism among Syrian Nationalists during the French Mandate," by Philip S. Khoury, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 13. no. 4, 1981.