

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."¹¹ 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.¹²

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.¹³

The main Syrian nationalist political parties were natu-

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

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

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.

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.*

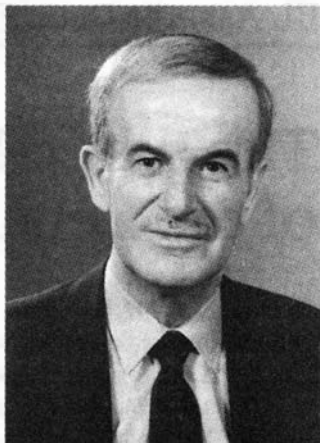
it was made legal. In 1951, Baathist student leader Assad was elected president of the nationwide Union of Syrian Students. He also entered the Military Academy in Homs that year, which had served as the springboard for military Alawite advancement.¹

In 1955, the Syrian government sent Assad, then a young Air Force officer, to Egypt, for further training. He returned to Syria in 1958, where he married into the prominent Makhluḥ family.

By 1959, Assad was back in Egypt, at which point he conspired with four other young officers stationed there, to form the Military Committee, a secret society within the Baath Party. Its other members were future Syrian President Salah Jadid and Muhammad Umran, both Alawites; and Abd al-Karim al-Jundi, the future head of Syrian intelligence, and Ahmad al-Mir, both Ismailis. In 1963, Umran, Salah, and Assad would oversee the military coup that brought the Baath Party to power.²

The initial blueprint for the coup, however, was not made at party headquarters, but at a 1960 meeting of Alawite religious leaders and elders in Assad's family village of Qardaha. Attending were Assad, Jadid, and Umran, now returned to Syria. The first step, it was decided, was to strengthen Alawite officer dominance of the Baath Party, in preparation for taking power. The elders decided to grant Umran the rank of *bab*, the highest degree in the sect; while Jadid was given the rank of *naqib*. At the follow-up meeting in 1963, immediately prior to the coup, Jadid was assigned the responsibility of leading the Alawites within the Army, while Assad was granted the rank of *naqib*.³

Once in power, the Baath Party systematically began to purge Sunnis from the officer corps. Sunnis were also discriminated against in recruitment to the Baathist military party organization; to the Baathist National Guard, the political branch of the military; and to the intelligence services—while



Alawites, and also the Druze, Ismailis, and Greek Orthodox, were given preferential treatment. Moreover, Sunni officers were transferred to less important posts, while Alawite officers who were their subordinates by rank, held virtual dual power in the regiments.⁴

By 1966, the Alawites were strong enough to run another coup to deepen their power over the Sunni nationalist parties, and over the military. Hafez al-Assad, who had been head of the Air Force since 1964, became minister of defense. Soon, Assad and Jadid held undisputed power in Damascus.⁵

Countdown to Assad's coup

The 1966 coup and its aftermath had succeeded in putting France's old clients, the Alawites, in power in Syria. But, at this point, a power struggle between the Assad and Jadid factions broke out, over who would gain total control.

The two factions put forward differing party programs. The Jadid group argued that Syria's priority had to be the "socialist transformation" of society. Jadid advocated closer ties with the Soviet Union to accomplish this, and rejected military and political cooperation with Jordan, Lebanon, or Iraq, which he termed "reactionary," rightist, and pro-Western. Jadid argued that the rejection of such cooperation was necessary, even if it were to be at the expense of the struggle with Israel.

The Assad group, on the other hand, argued that armed struggle against Israel had to be Syria's top priority, even at the expense of Syria's socialist transformation. It advocated military and political coordination with Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, despite their reactionary nature, as long as this benefitted the struggle against Israel.⁶

Despite the Assad group's fulminations against Israel, its actions were not exactly the most brilliant during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Assad's Defense Ministry announced the fall of the Golan Heights before it had actually occurred, leading to a rout of Syrian forces there.

The 1967 Arab-Israeli war turned out to be a repeat of the Suez imperialist adventure, but this time with the United States joining the French, British, and Israelis, against Nasser's Egypt.

The conditions for the war were laid, when Syrian jets engaged in provocative dogfights with Israeli jets on the Syrian/Israeli border, raising tensions to a fever pitch. Nasser was foolishly lured into ordering the blockade of Israeli

1. Patrick Seale, *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 24-40.

2. Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Sectarianism, Regionalism and Tribalism in Politics, 1961-1980* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), pp. 43, 49-50; Matti Moosa, *The Extremist Shiites: the Ghulat Sects* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1983), pp. 296-97.

3. Moosa, *op. cit.*, pp. 297-303. David Roberts, the British ambassador to Syria and Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s, also references this meeting, citing confidential diplomatic sources. See David Roberts, *The Baath and the Creation of Modern Syria* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), p. 50.

4. Van Dam, *op. cit.*, pp. 43, 52-53; Moosa, *op. cit.* p. 229.

5. Statistics again tell the story. The Alawites, who constituted 11% of the general population, soon constituted 38% of the officer corps. The Druze and Ismailis (who constituted 3% and 2% of the general population, respectively) soon constituted another 9% each. Reflecting the Alawite dominance of Latakia, 63% of the officer corps came from there (whether Alawite, Christian, or Sunni). See Van Dam, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-102, Moosa, *op. cit.*, pp. 294-95.

6. Van Dam, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-84.

access to the Red Sea, in response. The blockade entrapped Egypt into an act of war with Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol was reluctant to retaliate with full-scale war against Egypt and the other Arab states. But, he was overruled by a war party, led by Shimon Peres, Moshe Dayan, Ezer Weizman, and Chaim Herzog, who ran a cold coup against Eshkol, and placed their operatives in the key positions of power. Israel launched a surprise attack against Egypt on June 5.⁷

The actions carried out by Syrian Defense Minister Assad during the war, are inexplicable from a military point of view.

First of all, during the critical first 22 hours of the war, Assad took no action against Israel—and this was at a point when Israeli forces were overwhelmingly concentrated in the south, on the Egyptian and Jordanian borders. Assad completely ignored Egyptian pleas for military aid, and stood back while the Israeli Air Force systematically destroyed the Jordanian and Egyptian air fleets on the ground. Moreover, Assad took no action to protect Syria's own Air Force, which remained on the ground, and was later destroyed there.

Even after losing air cover, Assad could have ordered an armored land invasion of Israel. The Israeli Army was then locked in combat on its southern front, and a Syrian invasion would have preempted any Israeli move on the Golan Heights. Instead, one day prior to the June 10 Israeli attack on the Golan Heights, Assad's brother Rifaat, then a tank commander in the Golan Heights, and Jadid's brother Izzat, turned their tanks around in retreat to Damascus, in order to "protect the revolution." Their action stripped the strategic Golan Heights of most of its tanks.

The next day, the Israeli Army invaded. Radio Damascus broadcast a report that the Golan had fallen, before it had occurred, triggering a rout that ensured defeat.

In 1968, the former Syrian ambassador to France, Sami al-Jundi, supplied some insight into Assad's strange behavior. In an interview with *al-Hawadith*, al-Jundi reported that he had met with Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban in Paris, two weeks before the war, on instructions from Damascus. Eban assured him that "the Israeli forces will not go beyond Qunaytira [the Golan Heights], even though the road to Damascus will be open."⁸

Although both Jadid and Assad were implicated in these disastrous actions, only Jadid seemed to suffer from them politically. On Feb. 25, 1969, Assad made his first coup attempt, which was not successful, but which did not weaken his own position.

It would take Black September to clinch the deal.

7. Umar F. Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria* (Berkeley, Calif.: Mizan Press, 1983), pp. 57-63. Also see Moosa, *op. cit.*, pp. 307-309, and Seale, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-141.

8. See Moosa, *op. cit.*, p. 308.

III. Assad's Drug Franchise

The narco-history of the Lebanese war

On Nov. 23, 1992, the House Subcommittee on Crime and Criminal Justice, under the direction of Rep. Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.), issued a preliminary staff report entitled *Syria, President Bush and Drugs—The Administration's next Iraqgate*. The report, based on an exhaustive review of classified and unclassified information, accused the Bush administration of having systematically whitewashed the role of the Syrian government in making Lebanon into a center of the international dope trade.

"The U.S. Government now possesses extensive intelligence information implicating many Syrian Government officials in the Lebanese drug trade," the report states, "although the Administration acknowledges that a few Syrian officials are involved in the Lebanese drug trade, it simply refuses to admit the extent to which drug corruption has been institutionalized in the Syrian military forces now occupying Lebanon. Without Syrian military participation, the present system of growing, producing, and transporting drugs in Lebanon today would simply collapse."

According to the report, "the level of drug corruption rises much higher than a few low-ranking Syrian soldiers. President Hafez Assad's own brother Rifaat; Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass; General Ali Dubah, Commander of Syrian Military Intelligence; and General Ghazi Kenaan, Commander of Syrian Military Intelligence in Lebanon, are all intimately connected with drug traffickers operating out of Lebanon."

The report concluded: "The present administration refuses to recognize overwhelming evidence and admit that the Syrian government benefits from the [Lebanese] Bekaa Valley drug trade. . . . It is clear from the record that this Administration's failure to prosecute the drug-running Syrian generals is consistent with, and apparently driven by, its current attempts to court the Assad regime."

In fact, as *EIR's* investigations have determined, Lebanon emerged as one of the world's most important dope plantations during the 1980s, because Vice President and then President George Bush handed Lebanon over to Hafez al-Assad, and protected his narcotics business.

As a direct consequence of these policies, Lebanon's dope production skyrocketed. By 1989, it was producing over 900 metric tons of hashish and 4.5 metric tons of heroin annually. Syria's potential revenue from the dope trade that year was \$7.9 billion, while the official total value of all of Syria's