



HOW DOES A GANGSTER REGIME END?

The Uprising in Syria

Don Matthews

Senator John McCain and presidential candidate Mitt Romney, among others, have demanded that the United States begin arming rebels in Syria. They claim that policy would hasten President Bashar al-Assad's removal from power and spare Syria further bloodshed. At least some advocates of this policy have another goal in mind as well. They believe that because Syria has aligned itself with Iran, putting pressure on al-Assad's regime would weaken Iran and therefore serve American grand strategy in the Middle East. The latter policy goal strikes me as cynical and immoral because the former seems unrealistic. I tend to expect that flooding Syria with weapons will not quickly terminate the regime, but will more likely intensify the country's conflict. This is because of the way the regime was constructed and maintained over a nearly forty-year period.

As I was trying to articulate for myself why I am so skeptical about arming the Syrian opposition, the news media reported the death of Henry Hill. His life in the Luchesse crime family provided the story for Martin Scorsese's classic film *Goodfellas*. That film, like Francis Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy, depicted the culture of the Cosa Nostra as being permeated by Catholicism, family and ethnic solidarity, secret oaths of loyalty, and standards of justice for the innocent and weak as

much as it was by regularized recourse to extortion, deception, and violence. The *Godfather* films portrayed Sicilian immigrants transplanting the blood feuds and clan solidarity of rural Mediterranean society into New York and within two generations adapting them to an urban, commercial, and highly politicized environment.

The media's briefly renewed attention to *Goodfellas* that came with Hill's passing oddly coincided with my rereading of the late sociologist Charles Tilly's article "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime." In it he observed, "If protection rackets represent organized crime at its smoothest, war risking and state making—quintessential protection rackets with the advantage of legitimacy—qualify as our largest examples of organized crime." Tilly arrayed "banditry, piracy, gangland rivalry, policing, and war making" along the same continuum of the global human experience. But he drew a sharp distinction between state making in Western Europe since the sixteenth century and in the contemporary Third World.

Tilly posited that citizens in Western Europe succeeded over time in constraining the extractive capacities of their states and subordinating militaries to civilian control, especially because of the civilians' control of the institutions for mobilizing the capital required for war making. In contrast, states of the recently decolonized world, particularly during the Cold War, exploited a consistent flow of military hardware, aid, and advisers that Great Power patrons offered in return for strategic partnerships or access to commodities. Third World militaries and security forces thus frequently acquired the resources to resist domestic civilian control and extended their own control over their societies' extractive and productive institutions. In short, they became well-developed protection rackets.

Tilly's reflections on state making and Third World state making in particular are useful for understanding why simply forcing the resignation of al-Assad from power is not likely to bring peace to Syria. This is because the Syrian state has maintained itself so much by extortion, the selective provision of

protection, corruption, and violence, that significant changes to the system will necessarily force its collapse. If that were to happen, the small clique of families at the center of the web of patronage and intimidation who have most benefitted by the system would not have much of a future. Their network of retainers, who would lose with them, extends throughout Syria's security forces and elite units of the military. They are well armed in the extreme and hardly new to the exercise of organized violence.

Americans who are inclined to explain Middle East conflict primarily in sectarian terms have recently added the term '*Alawite*' to their categories of analysis, alongside Sunni and Shi'ite. They accurately point out that Syria's 'Alawite community represent only about twelve percent of the country's population while 'Alawites constitute nearly the whole of the country's tiny ruling elite and probably ninety percent of the officer corps and security services. Yet it does not follow from this that ending the civil war in Syria is simply a matter of reforming the government by extracting it from the grip of an ethno-religious minority at its top. That enterprise would resemble reforming organized crime. Although the 'Alawite elite are conspicuous in the system, others, although a shrinking minority of Syrians, are implicated in it as well. They are beneficiaries of a previous generation that adroitly exploited the methods of racketeering in making the Syrian state.

It is not much of an exaggeration to say that the state that Bashar al-Assad presides over was made by his father, Hafez al-Assad. A former air force officer and fighter pilot, he became Syria's president in 1970 by a military coup—"the Corrective Movement" in Syrian official parlance. His was the tenth successful coup Syria had experienced since 1949. After his seizure of power there were none.

The army's frequent interventions in politics following Syria's independence from France in 1946 reflected the frail institutions of law and representative government that French colonial officials bequeathed to the country. That should not be surprising. French policy between the two world wars aimed

at maintaining the French empire rather preparing its colonial subjects for self-government. The indigenous leadership most capable of challenging French rule was the urban, landowning, Sunni Muslim politicians who had dominated the country's affairs under the Ottoman Empire, prior to World War I. French officials therefore sought out traditionally marginalized minorities that were willing to collaborate to offset their disadvantaged social positions.

This strategy was particularly evident in French officials' recruitment of a local military force, the *Troupes Spéciales du Levant*. It drew its recruits from the poorest rural areas and from religious minorities. These included Christians, Druze, Isma'ilis, and especially 'Alawites. The 'Alawites are adherents of a syncretic religion that incorporates elements of Christianity, Shiite Islam, and astrology, and also are noted by other Syrians for the frequency of blue eyes and light or red hair among them. Because of the 'Alawites' heterodox religious practices, Sunni Muslims had episodically persecuted them. They withdrew into the rural hill areas of northwest Syria near the port city of Latakia and organized themselves over time into four tribal confederations and a large number of constituent clans.

By the time of Syrian independence, 'Alawites constituted the entirety of several infantry battalions and the majority of noncommissioned officers in the *Troupes Spéciales*. A number of 'Alawites had by then also graduated from the Syrian military academy as commissioned officers and thus entered the new, educated middle class. That was the path Hafez al-Assad followed.

Assad was born a peasant in 1930, in a village near Latakia, to an influential clan of the 'Alawite Kalabiyya tribe. By his own account, his witnessing cruel acts of sectarian and domestic violence hardened him early in life. At age 22, he registered for the free education of the Syrian military academy, where he was chosen for flight training. Three years later, in 1955, he was commissioned as an air force officer. After a further six months flight training in Egypt and less than a year of

training on MiG fighters in the Soviet Union, Assad's formal education was complete.

He thrived in the conspiratorial and highly factionalized military, choosing the right allies during Syria's successive coups. He advanced from the rank of captain in 1960 to major general and commander of the air force in four years. Two years later, at age 36, he was Minister of Defense. The Syrian military's abject defeat in the 1967 war with Israel suggests that Assad was a better politician than military strategist. Nonetheless, he was secure enough in his position that three years later he could order military units loyal to him to arrest his main political opponents and then declare himself president.

Assad was attracted to secular, ideological politics. While still in high school he joined the Arab Ba'th Socialist Party, which was then becoming a major vehicle for the politicization of young 'Alawites in the Latakia area. They recruited fellow party members through their network of tribal and clan relations, which was reproduced in the officer corps as the Ba'thist 'Alawites rose through it. With each coup between 1949 and 1963, Syrian Sunni elite political factions repeatedly purged the army of their rivals' supporters, so that the depletion of the ranks of Sunni officers opened the way for the advancement of minority officers, particularly the 'Alawite Ba'thists. An army coup in March 1963 brought the Ba'th Party to power in a regime supported by a sizable bloc of 'Alawite officers in key positions, Assad among them. The coup of February 1966 was a savagely violent, intra-Ba'thist affair that ejected a mostly civilian faction of the party and brought 'Alawi officers to the top of the regime. Many were Assad's key supporters during the Corrective Movement of November 1970.

When Assad joined the Ba'th Party, its largely middle class, urban leadership was pan-Arab nationalist and only vaguely socialist in its outlook. By the early 1960s younger Ba'thists of Assad's generation emphasized the socialist dimension of the party's ideology. They pulled the party to the left, demanding land redistribution, state-led industrialization, and the disestablishment of the mostly Sunni urban, landowners who had long

dominated Syrian politics. Those policies appealed to the young officers of rural backgrounds.

By all indications, Assad also believed in building a non-sectarian socialist society in Syria and in promoting secular, pan-Arab nationalism. But his first concern after becoming president was maintaining power, and he succeeded for thirty years, until his death by heart attack in 2000. Assad's success was a product of his pragmatism. Unlike the Syrian Ba'athist leadership of the 1966 regime, he did not pursue a strategy of liberating Palestine, and he avoided allowing the Palestinian guerrilla organizations to drag him into a confrontation with Israel. He intended the war he launched against Israel in October 1973 with Egypt's president, Anwar Sadat, as a limited war, only to recover Syrian land lost to Israel in 1967. By the 1980s, with Soviet support, he built a huge and rather well armed military, claiming he sought "strategic parity" with Israel. That may have been true, but he used the military primarily to maintain his regime.

In terms of domestic policy, there can be no doubt that Assad did try to build a more equitable and just society, especially for Syria's largely agricultural population. His state, staffed heavily at the top with Ba'athists of rural origins, continued land reform and developed irrigation projects and agricultural cooperatives. The state extended municipal water, sewerage, and electrical service to neighborhoods of squatters who flocked to Damascus from the countryside seeking employment. It expanded educational services and government employment for university graduates.

Assad subordinated socialist ideals, however, to self-preservation. The most obvious example of this was filling military commands, elite units, and intelligence organizations with the men whom he most trusted and who were dependent on him for their prospects in life. These were principally his fellow 'Alawites from the Latakia area. It was not because they shared theological principals. Religious belief and practice was nearly irrelevant for their solidarity. More important was the fact that because they typically married within their own com-

munity, they were related to one another by blood. The security forces and elite military units were filled with brothers, cousins, and in-laws, and by extension, ‘Alawite tribes and clans.

Being ‘Alawite was not in itself sufficient to secure a position in Assad’s inner circle. His main rival in the 1970 coup, Salah Jadid, was a former ally and a Ba‘thist ‘Alawite, though from another clan. He died in the prison to which Assad consigned him after their power struggle. In contrast, Assad’s former long-serving minister of defense, Mustafa Tlas, is a Sunni of rural origin. But he was also Assad’s classmate in the Syrian military academy in the 1950s and his fellow conspirator in military politics. When ties of kinship did not bind the ruling clique, rural origins, Ba‘th Party membership, or the military profession did.

Alongside the military, intelligence services, and police, the regime also tolerated informal organizations of violence. The term *shabiha* (“ghosts”) now refers to groups of pro-regime civilians accused of perpetrating mass murders in retaliation for the current uprising. According to the BBC, criminal organizations by the same name operated from the 1970s to the 1990s in Syria’s port cities, engaging in drugs and weapons smuggling. The *shabiha*’s leaders included members of the Assad, Deeb, and Makhlof families, the last being the family of Hafez al-Assad’s wife. The organizations were reputedly armed by the Defense Companies, a praetorian guard commanded by the president’s younger brother Rifa‘at until his exile in 1984. It is not clear whether Bashar al-Assad has permitted these organizations to resurface during the present uprising or whether *shabiha* has simply become a generic term applied to pro-regime thugs.

The *shabiha* were one indication that Hafez al-Assad presided over a system of controlled corruption. Our best information tells us that he worked long hours and lived a modest life with his family. But he understood that providing patronage and opportunities for personal enrichment to the regime’s *nomenklatura* was as important to assuring their loyalty

as was surveillance and intimidation. That pattern was replicated in the lower echelons of the bureaucracy as well. When I lived in Syria in 1988, no one hid the fact that getting things done in government offices was speeded with a wad of cash or a bottle of scotch. The senior government officials took their cuts of businesses that succeeded in getting import licenses or that were permitted to operate in Syria's *dirigiste* economy.

Just how lucrative it was to be a part of the Ba'athist leadership can be seen from the lives of senior regime figures who lost out in struggles for power. A number of them fled to Europe, the UK or the US, including Rifa'at al-Assad. He maintains homes in France and Spain and, according to London's *Telegraph* newspaper, owns a £10 million townhouse in London's exclusive Mayfair neighborhood. His son, Ribal, owns a home next door. 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam had been a longtime confidant of Hafez al-Assad before he fell out with Assad's son. Khaddam now lives in Paris and evidently has enormous wealth at his disposal. (It is hard to resist pointing out that Khaddam looks and sounds like the stereotypical crime boss.)

Khaddam had long had responsibility for one of the major sources of patronage for the regime, Syrian-occupied Lebanon. Al-Assad ordered his forces to invade Lebanon in 1976 to halt a civil war there and thus began an occupation of eastern Lebanon that lasted until 2005. Even after 2005, Syria remained deeply involved in Lebanese affairs. (Khaddam's granddaughter is in fact married to the son of Lebanon's assassinated former prime minister, Rafiq Hariri.) The occupation gave the Syrian government and regime members access to Lebanon's relatively unregulated economy and banking system, which supplemented their returns from their control of Syria's statist economy.

Syrian army officers stationed in Lebanon established their own fiefdoms, running protection rackets and engaging in smuggling. I can recall at least once walking down the street of a Syrian town with a friend and his pointing to a mansion under construction, saying, "See that house over there? The owner was an officer in Lebanon." With the collapse of its gov-

ernment during the civil war, entrepreneurs in Lebanon turned to the illegal production of narcotics. The country became one of the largest suppliers of marijuana and hashish to European markets and a significant source of opiates as well. Drug smuggling became a particularly rewarding enterprise for the Syrian military and intelligence officers and officials in Lebanon. It also enabled the Syrian regime to cultivate Lebanese clients.

Hafez al-Assad as president of Syria strikingly resembled the Mafia don. He seems to have made not only major policy decisions himself, but even minor ones, such as the promotions of junior army officers. He reputedly knew from memory the names of those officers and even details about their families. Assad talked about and, to a significant degree, acted on principles of justice and protection for society's weakest. But the exigencies of maintaining power dictated that he construct a web of supporters rewarded through corruption, yet constantly under surveillance and the threat of violence, and who in turn could use violence against their rivals, and protect their own protégées. Even Assad's social reforms served that system. Government jobs for those who passed through the expanded educational system not only helped them join the middle class but also gave them an interest in cooperating with the regime.

The Ba'athists' seizure of power in the 1960s must have seemed to the urban Sunni elite like the roughest elements from the country coming to the city and bringing with them a style of politics that was menacing, obscure, and extraordinarily violent. In the event, it was not the old elite, but members of the Sunni urban lower middle class from which the regime's most significant challenge came. The Ba'ath Party's secularism and socialism had little appeal to them. They were more frequently attracted to the Muslim Brotherhood. In the late 1970s, factions of the Brotherhood began a campaign of assassination of government officials and even killed a large number of 'Alawite cadets in an armed assault on the military academy. The Brotherhood's campaign culminated in an armed uprising in the market district of the city of Hama in 1982.

The government suppressed the uprising with a military force of 12,000 troops, some of whom deserted to the side of the rebels. In the three-week operation, the army killed between 3,000 and 20,000 of the city's inhabitants. Assad afterwards had Hama's commercial district bulldozed and paved over. Syrians were repulsed by the bloodshed, but some, especially Christians, feared the Muslim Brotherhood as much as they loathed the government. The Brotherhood is probably the dominant element of the current opposition. Needless to say, its members have not forgotten Hama.

After those events, Assad developed a cult of personality for himself and, in the next decade, attempted to pass it on to his oldest son, Basil. A civil engineer by training, Basil was frequently depicted in official propaganda wearing a military uniform and was reportedly an officer of his father's personal security detail. In 1994 he crashed his Mercedes at a high speed and was killed. With his death, his father prepared Basil's younger brother Bashar for succession to the presidency.

Bashar had not previously been the object of official adulation. Neither did he have any military training or experience. He instead studied medicine and briefly practiced in London as an ophthalmologist. Soon after his brother's death, Bashar was commissioned in the army as a captain. Six years later, when he succeeded his father, he obtained the rank of lieutenant general and field marshal. The only office he had held prior to becoming president was chairman of the Syrian Computer Society.

It might push the *Godfather* analogy too far to suggest that Bashar played Michael Corleone to Basil's Sonny, but Bashar certainly turned out to be no Fredo, either. "Dr. Bashar," as he is called, was clever and ruthless enough to push aside a number of his father's associates. Within a few years of assuming the presidency, he concentrated power within his own, younger circle. It included his brother Maher, who commands two elite military units; his brother-in-law, Assef Shawket, deputy commander-in-chief of the military until his recent assassination; and Rami Makhlouf, a cousin on Bashar's

mother's side of the family. According to the *Guardian* newspaper, Makhoul owns businesses worth billions of dollars, including real estate, oil, and telecommunications companies, and Syria's only private newspaper. He has been placed on a US-government sanctions list for public corruption, and his brother, Hafez Makhoul, is chief of Syria's general security organization (the *mukhabarat*).

Early in his political ascendancy, Bashar had impressed some outside observers as a reformer. In his perfect English, he spoke convincingly of bringing the free market, transparent government, the rule of law, and human rights to Syria. Bashar did briefly tolerate the independent political clubs that sprang up in Damascus and other Syrian cities after his father's death and even released hundreds of political prisoners. This so-called "Damascus spring" lasted only until the fall of 2001, when Bashar shut down nearly all of the political salons and re-arrested a number of activists. Although the regime's repressive strategies remained in place, its capacity to deliver patronage diminished rapidly within the next decade, and the system that Bashar inherited came under stress.

As a result of the American war on Iraq in 2003, about a million Iraqi refugees fled into Syria, where their presence drove up the cost of food and housing. Two years later, an anti-Syrian protest movement in Lebanon, the March 14 Movement, compelled Bashar to end Syria's occupation of the country after the assassination of Lebanon's Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. (Bashar's political opponents accuse him of ordering Hariri's death.) The Syrian regime was consequently less able to milk Lebanon of its resources and then channel them to Bashar's clients. Just as significantly, Bashar embarked on a policy of economic liberalization and IMF-inspired reforms. Investors then began businesses without protection from regime insiders, and the flow of government resources to rural areas was curtailed, as were subsidies for consumers and opportunities for government employment.

Although the Syrian economy grew at a rate of about five percent a year until 2009, the gains shrank in 2010, and rural

areas—traditional beneficiaries of the regime’s largesse—felt the inequalities of the new order acutely. It is no surprise that the present uprising began with the arrests of youths who had written graffiti in a southern agricultural town protesting the high cost of living and lack of freedom.

The system that Hafez al-Assad constructed is coming unraveled from the outside in. But there is little evidence at this time that the tight network of families that still control the elite military units and various intelligence organizations has lost its ability to continue the civil war. Since May, Assef Shawket has been killed and Maher al-Assad severely wounded by a rebel bomb, and a few non-‘Alawites who were formerly close to the regime have been lured away, probably with generous offers of Saudi or Qatari cash. Members of the armed forces have certainly defected, but not so far as whole units. The rebel defectors have not taken any tanks, armored personnel carriers, or artillery with them. Those at the center of the regime still have a formidable force to bring to bear on the rebels and every incentive to hang together.

SOURCES AND RECOMMENDED READING

Bar, Shmuel. “Bashar’s Syria: The Regime and its Strategic Worldview.” Herzliya, Israel: Institute for Policy and Strategy, 2006.

Battatu, Hanna. *Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Black, Ian. “Six Syrians Who Helped Bashar al-Assad Keep Iron Grip After Father’s Death.” *The Guardian*, 28 April 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/28/syria-bashar-assad-regime-members>

Fitch, Asa. “Syrian Economy Faces Implosion.” *The National*, 5 December 2011, <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/industry-insights/economics/syrian-economy-faces-implosion>.

Hinnebusch, Raymond. *Syria: Revolution from Above*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.

Marshall, Jonathan V. *The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War, and the International Drug Traffic*. Stanford, Ca.: The Stanford University Press, 2012.

Planet Money Blog, "How Economic Reforms are Contributing to the Conflict in Syria" (from an interview with Ayham Kamel), 29 May 2012, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/money/2012/05/29/153916783/how-economic-reforms-are-contributing-to-the-conflict-in-syria>.

Rabinovich, Itamar. *Syria Under the Ba'ath, 1963–66*. Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1972.

Rayner, Gordon. "Syria's 'Butcher of Hama' Living in £10 Million Mayfair Townhouse." *The Telegraph*, 12 June 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8571164/Syrias-Butcher-of-Hama-living-in-10-million-Mayfair-townhouse.html>

Seale, Patrick. *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

"Syria Unrest: Who Are the Shabiha?" BBC News, 29 May 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14482968?print=true>

Tilly, Charles. "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime." In *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, 169–180. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.