



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

A PRIMER ON THE SITUATION IN SYRIA

BY PETER SLUGLETT

On Tuesday 5 November 2013, the UN Secretary General's representative in Syria, the Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi, announced with obvious weariness and regret that there would be no Geneva conference on the future of Syria this month. The reasons are both clear and familiar; the opposition is profoundly divided, the Syrian government considers that there is no need to talk about a transition, and, it seems, the US and Russia are unable to agree on whether Iran, a critical regional power and a vital ally of Syria, should take part. In general, while the Syrian government expects to take part in whatever negotiations emerge, the opposition is adamant that President Bashar al-Assad should step down as a precondition for the government's participation in the talks.

The present crisis in Syria is part of the general movement of pressure for political liberalization that swept the Middle East and North Africa in late 2010 and early 2011. Although the protests in Syria began in March 2011, that is, some weeks *after* the ouster of both Ben Ali of Tunisia and Mubarak of Egypt, they are of course symptomatic of the general crisis of legitimacy in and around the region. The most obvious cause is the corruption, cronyism and kleptocracy of the regimes, but there are broader political and economic issues. These include:

1. The absence of democratic institutions and/or democratic elections, mostly since the 1950s.
2. Dictatorial governments, both monarchies and republics, maintained in power by the armed forces and the security services, and often tacitly supported by external powers, notably the United States

3. Unacceptably high levels of unemployment and the lack of employment prospects, particularly for educated young people
4. The application of neo-liberal economic doctrines, which have impoverished governments and rendered them incapable of subsidising basic necessities or social services for the poor.
5. The fact that many Islamist associations have stepped into the breach and have been providing social services in contexts where the state can no longer do so. (The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, but also Hizbullah in Lebanon)

At least since the 1990s, the privatisation of state assets has greatly reduced the capacity of states such as Egypt, Iraq,¹ Syria and Tunisia to provide employment. At the same time, the prospect of spending a few years working in the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia, once a traditional safety valve, no longer beckons, since the skilled and unskilled positions once filled by Egyptians and Syrians are now filled with Asians on fixed term contracts.² In addition, long-standing employment opportunities in Europe for North African nationals have been severely curtailed as a result of the European sovereign debt crisis beginning in 2008.

The Ben Ali regime in Tunisia and the Mubarak regime in Egypt fell quite quickly, although recent events in Egypt have caused observers to question the extent to which any substantial transformation has actually taken place. These two regimes fell largely because the armed forces either remained on the sidelines or did not attempt to defend them. This was not the case in Syria, where the composition of the army and the security services is so deeply implicated in the current structures of the state that they had, and have, every interest in defending and maintaining the status quo. Originally, when it was clear that the regime would not yield, or reform itself, those elements of the Syrian armed forces that favoured change broke off to form the 'free Syrian army', the main opposition to the regime in 2011 and much of 2012. The fact that international media were not permitted to enter

¹ 'The privatisation of key sectors of the Iraqi economy left a large section of the salaried population ... vulnerable to malnutrition and black marketeering.' Dina Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom and Remembrance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, 148.

² Especially after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. While Arabs formed between 70 and 90 percent of the labour force in the Arabian Peninsula in the 1970s and 1980s, the proportion had dropped to about 30 percent by 2005 (and to less than 20 percent in Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the UAE). This enabled the Gulf states to import labour 'while avoiding the formation of a working class'. Philippe Fargues, 'Immigration without Inclusion: Non-Nationals in Nation-Building in the Gulf States', *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 20, 2011, iii-iv, 273-92.

Syria until 2013 enabled the opposition to present itself as winning, which, as is now obvious, was far from being the case. Typically, in civil wars where the state is fighting a breakaway faction, the state's resources are infinitely larger,³ and of course the Syrian state's monopoly of air power (and the fact that the 'rebels' do not have effective anti-aircraft weaponry) has so far proved decisive.

90 percent of the population of Syria, about 23 million is Arab, and about 9 percent Kurdish; most Kurds live in the north of the country, and of course there are large Kurdish populations beyond the borders of Syria, in south-eastern Turkey, northern Iraq and western Iran. 74 percent of Syrians are Sunni Muslim, about 12 percent Christian, and about 11 percent Alawite—proportions which have remained more or less the same since the first modern census in 1943. The Alawites, whom we will hear more of, are a heterodox Shi'i sect, originating in and largely confined to, the mountains behind Latakia—with no connection to the rather more ecumenical and mystically inclined Alevis of eastern Turkey.⁴ 'The rest', perhaps 5-6 percent of the population are other non-Sunni Muslims: Twelver Shi'is, Isma'ilis and Druze.

Although Syria had fairly low rates of internal migration in the 1990s,⁵ a long period of drought between 2006 and 2010 led to the migration of some 1.5 million people to the urban centers. The government ignored urgent issues of water access and sustainable agriculture, which led to the complete destruction of a large number of farming communities and placed immense strain on the urban centers. It is difficult to assess how this has fed into the conflict, but allowance has to be made for the sharp rise in rural to urban migration, which it does not depict. Also, the geographical distribution of religious minorities in Syria has changed dramatically over the last few years.

However, there are certain constants: most Christians continue to live in Damascus and Aleppo and the larger provincial towns (Idlib, Latakia, and Tartus). 90 percent of the Alawis originate in Latakia Governorate, especially in the rural areas of the Jabal al-Nusayriyah, although, again, significant numbers have migrated to the cities since the advent to power of Hafiz al-Asad, Bashar's father, in 1970, and many high ranking officers and officials married the daughters of affluent Aleppines and Damascenes. Most of the population of the Jabal al-Druze, a mountainous region in the southwest of the country, is Druze. The

³ Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

⁴ In Turkish, Alawites are called Arap Aleviler.

⁵ Marwan Khawaja, *Internal Migration in Syria; Findings from a National Survey*, Oslo, FAFO, 2002, 98-101.

Isma'ilis are concentrated around Salamiyah and Latakia, and there are about a quarter of a million Twelver Shi'is, members of the same sect as the majority of Iranian and Iraqis (and 40 percent of Lebanese).

I need to say something about Sunnis and Shi'is, although this is obviously a bigger topic that certainly requires more attention than I can give it here. First, the numbers. There are no really reliable statistics, as many states—including Iraq—do not specifically count their Shi'i populations. Vali Nasr estimates that they form about 10-to-15 percent of the Muslim world, somewhere between 165 to 190 million people.⁶ More to the point, however, is that in the **Arab Middle East and Iran** they account for some 70 percent of the population of Bahrain, 90 percent of Iranians, 65 percent of Iraqis, 46 percent of Lebanese, and 15 percent of Saudis, and recent events have turned them into a political force to be reckoned with in the area between Lebanon and Pakistan. It is also the case that the Arab Shi'is constituted the poorest of the poor in Iraq, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, so their recent rise to political and economic power is a matter of class as well as sect. The Shi'is are divided into a number of sub-sects (including the Alawites and the Isma'ilis whom I've already mentioned in the Syrian context), but most of those living between Lebanon and Pakistan are Twelvers or Ja'faris; Iran is the only contemporary state in which the Shi'i version of Islam is the 'state religion'. The difference, in broad terms, is over the nature of the succession to the Prophet, who had made no specific arrangements for a successor on his death in 630.

So what has this to do with contemporary Syria? Quite a lot, but not in a narrowly doctrinal sense. In the first place, as the result of a series of almost fortuitous accidents, the Alawites have been ruling Syria since the mid-1960s. When the French took the League of Nations mandate for Syria in 1920, they feared the nationalist aspirations of the urban Sunnis, and gave power to the compact minorities by creating mini-states in the Alawite mountains and the Druze area. In addition, they encouraged the recruitment of minorities into the army, with the result (and here I'm cutting some corners) that when the French left in 1946, the Alawites, who were then, as now, about 11 percent of the population, formed 19.1 percent of the army rank and file. Even more crucially, some 65 percent of NCOs were Alawites by 1955. By the early 1960s, Alawite members of the Ba'th Party had taken control of the Party's military section. These Alawite officers all came from the same rural

⁶ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, New York, Norton, 2006.

and regional background, while the Sunni officers, who were equally if not more numerous, came from different parts of Syria, and very few were from elite or powerful families.⁷ By 1966 the military Ba'thists had taken over from the civilian Ba'thists, and in 1970 Hafiz al-Asad took over the state; after 1970, there were no more military coups.

Of course Syria's enemies in the region, both conservative (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia⁸ in particular) and leftist (Iraq, the 'other' Ba'thist regime) were not slow to allege that the country's ruling clique were not 'real' Muslims (and it is true that even mainstream Shi'is are not entirely comfortable with Alawites). As part of the widespread rise in Sunni fundamentalism in the Muslim world, the Syrian Muslim Brethren, financed by Jordan and Saudi Arabia, began to organise riots and demonstrations in Aleppo, Homs and Hama—Anwar Sadat's assassination in October 1981 was symptomatic of the atmosphere of this period. In February 1982 there was a major rising in Hama, which the regime put down with exceptional brutality; tens of thousands, perhaps 40,000 out of a population of 220,000 were killed, and much of the town destroyed by bombing.

The revival of militant Sunni Islam—which continues, fuelled by Saudi and Gulf money—coincided with an even more earth-shattering event that would have major consequences for the Middle East and the Muslim world: the Iranian Revolution of 1979. This showed, first, how 'people power' could unseat one of the most powerful regimes, and the United States' staunchest allies in the region; second, how a form of Islamic radicalism could be transformed into political power, and third, how a religious regime could propagate a powerfully anti-imperialist message, especially to peoples bored and irritated by the hollow claims of Arab nationalism and the hypocrisy of the Gulf monarchies. It also gave hope and impetus to Shi'i movements throughout the region, including the Lebanese Shi'i groups Amal and Hizbullah and the Iraqi Da'wa Party. Iranian support for Hizbullah was crucial in making that group a key player in Lebanese politics; in addition, Syria took Iran's side against Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, a manifestation of pan-Shi'ism, as it were. The past three and a half decades have seen the rise of the Islamic republic of Iran as a major regional power whose influence is widely felt; Iran remains

⁷ See Hanna Batatu, 'Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance', *Middle East Journal*, 35, 1981, 331-44.

⁸ An 'Islamic Front in Syria' (*al-jabha al-Islamiyya fi Suriyya*), which brought ulama and lay Islamists together, was set up in Saudi Arabia in October 1980: see Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: the Sunni 'Ulama from Coup to Revolution*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, 189.

Syria's staunchest regional ally, and continues to send troops and arms in support of the Asad regime. Needless to say, the Asad regime is also supported unswervingly by Hizbullah.

It is misleading to regard the conflict in Syria simply as a Sunni vs. Shi'i sectarian battle, the reflection of 'time-immemorial hatreds'. The existence of the sects, and their animosity towards each other from time to time is a matter of historical record, but the conflict is more than that. It began as a political struggle, as a protest against dictatorship, the dictatorship's brutal over-reaction and then things spiralling out of control into civil war. In such conflicts people tend to retreat into primordial identities and antagonisms; Alawites bond together in part because they fear being slaughtered in Sunni revenge killings if Asad loses. For their part, Sunnis see Alawite militias forming and thus begin to perceive all Alawites as their enemies, so they start attacking Alawites, which in its turn made other Alawites more likely to form sectarian militias.

This is undoubtedly true, but in broader terms the conflict reflects the extreme tensions, and the struggle for influence, between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the latter being a resolute if currently somewhat erratic ally of the United States. Saudi Arabia,⁹ the Gulf states and, it turns out, Turkey, have been supporting the 'Sunni opposition', which now includes *Jabhat al-Nusra* and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, two al-Qa'ida franchisees composed of Sunni *mujahidin* whose goals are to overthrow the Asad government, to introduce shar'ia law and to restore the caliphate. Such groups resemble members of the 'Sunni insurgency' in Iraq, who are still active with car and suicide bombings.

At least in principle, most western countries, most Arab countries, and Turkey would welcome the fall of the Asad regime, not least because this might well bring some easing of the appalling refugee situation affecting Syria's neighbours, notably Jordan and Turkey, and more recently northern Iraq. Had the regime actually fallen some time in 2011 or the first half of 2012, the international community would most likely have breathed a collective sigh of relief, but as the conflict dragged on, the more the extremist Sunni elements have become involved, raising serious questions about who the opposition actually were and are. Russia (and to a lesser extent China) have blocked any concerted international settlement which might involve outside intervention; this partly reflects

⁹ Yezid Sayigh, 'Unifying Syria's Rebels: Saudi Arabia Joins the Fray', *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 28 October 2013. <http://www.carnegie-mec.org/2013/10/28/unifying-syria-s-rebels-saudi-arabia-joins-fray/greh>

pique over Libya, Vladimir Putin's desire to make his mark internationally, a general distrust of US motives, a long history of Russian and Chinese support for Syria (there is a Russian naval base at Tartus), and the general apprehension on the part of the Russians¹⁰ (and the Chinese) at the prospect of external interference in a state's internal affairs—think Chechnya or Tibet. Inevitably, this has paralysed any United Nations efforts to resolve the humanitarian crisis; while intervention would indeed be fraught with unanticipated consequences, and while few outside the Arabian peninsula view the victory of Islamic extremists with any relish, the lack of progress on the refugee issue is a tragic example of the failure of the international community to produce workable solutions to major crises of this kind.

I have no idea how this is going to end. Theoretically, presidential elections are due in Syria in 2014, but it is almost inconceivable that Asad will stand down and/or allow competitive elections. The US has little or nothing to offer the Russians; on the contrary, the Obama administration is in the curious position of being grateful to Russia for finding it a fairly dignified retreat out of what seemed to be the impasse created by the chemical weapons crisis. The 'Arab Spring' seems to have run out of steam; although the situation in Tunisia still seems fairly hopeful, events in Egypt, Libya and Yemen do not give many grounds for optimism. Perhaps the most sobering aspect of the current crisis in Syria is that there is no outcome that would be unequivocally beneficial to a people who have been suffering in gridlock for more than two and a half years. Bashar al-Asad will have to go, but there are no widely appealing candidates for the succession. Meanwhile the conflict grinds on; all are losers, and there are no winners.

Peter Sluglett Visiting Research Professor at MEI, formerly Professor of Middle Eastern History, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, 1994-2012. He has published widely on Iraq, including *Iraq since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship*, 3rd edn. (2001, with Marion Farouk-Sluglett) and *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* (2007). He has also edited and contributed to *The Urban Social History of the Middle East 1750-1950* (2008), *Syria and Bilad al-Sham under Ottoman Rule: Essays in Honour of Abdul-Karim Rafeq* (2010, with Stefan Weber), and *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges* (2012).

¹⁰ There is a useful discussion of the Russian position in Jacques Lévesque, 'Russia returns', *Le Monde Diplomatique* (English edition) November 2013, p. 1.