

The Syrian Jhad, Sectarianism and Al Qaeda's Newest Affiliate

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The current revolt against the Syrian regime has strong historical antecedents. The Muslim Brotherhood insurgency from 1978-1982 challenged Hafez al-Assad Baathist regime's right to rule. The Baathists were secular Arab nationalists who borrowed from European fascistic, anti-Semitic and communist ideas. They embraced a sectarian policy of support for minorities building upon the colonial era patronage of Muslim and Christian minorities within the context of a secular socialist state. They, however, were careful not to alienate the Sunni majority and under successive regimes forged alliances with Sunni economic elites.

Assad's 1970 seizure of power in a military coup against a party rival reinforced the position of Christian, Druze and Alawite minorities in Syria building upon France's colonial manipulation of sectarian fissures. Geographically concentrated in impoverished coastal northern mountains, Druze and Alawite minorities had been exploited for generations by the dominant Sunni landed gentry. They saw the Baathists state and party as a catalyst for upward social mobility.

The Islamists opposition to Baathist rule grew dramatically in the 1970's with the Muslim Brotherhood mounting a serious challenge to Assad's regime. The Brotherhood's antipathy toward Assad's government was driven by many factors. The government's secular Pan Arabist socialist ideals offended the Brothers Islamist world view that was exacerbated by the presence of Alawite Muslims in top political and security positions. The Alawites are the followers of a 10th century religious movement that evolved from the Shia branch of Islam that believe that 12th imam will liberate the world from injustice during the final days of humanity. Given the Christian parallel in Jesus' return to destroy Satan's rule, the Sunni Brothers considered the Alawites to be polytheistic heretics. The Islamists, moreover, wanted to reassert Sunni post-colonial hegemony over Syrian politics.

Baathist rule exacerbated sectarian, economic and ideological tensions and sparked the Brotherhood's 1979-1982 rebellion. The revolts were especially strong in cities like Homs and Hama that became a center of Sunni resistance to Assad's regime. The regime was merciless unleashing the army and its shabiya militias to destroy the insurgency. Ten to twenty thousand Muslim Brothers and their civilian supporters were killed by government forces in Hama in the early 1980's. As Fouad Ajami notes in his book *The Syrian Rebellion* the 1982 Hama massacre cast a significant shadow over the current rebellion in which Islamist and jihadist elements are becoming more pronounced.

Long thought impregnable by many observers the 2011 rebellion against Bashar Assad came as a surprise. Bashar assumed the Presidency after the death of his father in 2000 and Western analysts had hoped that the London trained optometrist would unshackle the regime authoritarian system. Western governments engaged Bashar hoping that he would renew peace negotiations with the Israeli's to resolve the Golan Heights territorial dispute. Despite such expectations, Bashar continued to use the Israeli threat to justify his Baathist dictatorship.

Bashar did, however, change the state's economic direction. He unshackled state controls and liberalized key service industries and agriculture. Privatization benefited party insiders and Assad loyalists. Some analysts believe that the economic inequality and crony capitalism of Bashar's regime contributed to popular resentment that surfaced in

Deraa in March 2011 after security forces tortured and killed teenagers who sprayed anti-regime graffiti on some of the town's walls. Hundreds turned out in civil disobedience to condemn the killings. Despite their peaceful character, protests in the town were brutally repressed by the regime.

Throughout 2012 protests became bigger and more numerous as hundreds of thousands streamed out into the squares and plazas of Syria's towns, cities and villages. The demonstrations were matched by the severity of the regime repressive actions with shabiya militias and secret police brutalizing protesters. Government forces have destroyed mosques that are a key meeting place and symbolic center for the resistance movement.

Assad's regime has alternated between repression and conciliation. The Baathist state's abolition of an emergency law that allowed security forces unprecedented power to detain "terrorists" was an effort to placate the opposition. Assad's continued detention of protesters and opponents makes a mockery of this cynical and hollow gesture.

The 2011 protests had a pronounced sectarian caste with Sunni towns and cities marked by violent demonstrations. As they had in the early 1980's cities like Homs and Hama were centers of anti-regime resistance and fervor. Homs in particular was devastated by the fighting that victimized many civilians. Much of the city is destroyed, but it continues to be a defiant symbol of resistance. Fouad Ajami compares Homs to Bosnia's Sarajevo a Muslim city which was repeatedly savaged by Serbian militias some two decades ago.

With Assad's brutal repression that killed thousands and imprisoned multitudes, peaceful protests catalyzed into armed rebellion. Unlike Egypt and Tunisia, the Syrian army did not stand aside. The Alawite character of the officer corps, Special Forces brigades and militias facilitated Bashar's repressive tactics. The military and security apparatus is tied to the regime's survival. Widespread fear of a Sunni fundamentalist revolution additionally has forced Syrian Christian and Muslim minorities to support the regime.

Dominated by exile groups like the Syrian National Council and military deserters who formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the resistance movement is fractured. Hundreds of local militias have also arisen to wage a military campaign to dislodge the regime. Like Libya, the rebels are a loose amalgamation of militias and vigilante groups. These groups often quarrel and clash. Kurdish and Syrian nationalists have fought each other close to the Turkish border to control territory and smuggling roots.

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Received April 16, 2013; **Accepted** April 20, 2013; **Published** April 23, 2013

Citation: Celso AN (2013) The Syrian Jhad, Sectarianism and Al Qaeda's Newest Affiliate. *Polit Sci Pub Aff* 1: e105. doi:10.4172/2332-0761.1000e105

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Despite these obstacles the rebels have conquered much of rural Syria by March of 2013 and the regime struggles to control key cities like Damascus and Aleppo. Continuous fighting in these city's suburbs illustrates the regime's precarious position. This pattern is reinforced by the fall of government airstrips and military bases to rebels.

Syrian jihadists and foreign fighters from Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan have joined opposition forces. What began as largely a secular uprising now has an increasingly Islamist character punctuated with Al Qaeda like suicide operations and massive car bombings. Jihadists are a critical part of the resistance movement. The Al Nusra Front has emerged as the strongest jihadist movement that has mounted spectacular suicide operations against the regime's security, party and intelligence apparatus.

In January 2012 the Al Nusra utilizes foreign fighters from Libya, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Jordan for suicide operations. The group's coordinated car bomb explosions and suicidal jihadists have killed thousands and many of the Al Nusra's operations are filmed and posted on Islamist web sites. It has also been responsible for summary executions of Baathist loyalists and soldiers. Within a year the Al Nusra Front has emerged as a key player in the Syrian resistance. It may be able to field up to 10,000 combatants. ISI provides fighters, money and logistical support for the group. Along with the foreign dominated Abdullah Azzam Brigade and Fatah al-Islam group, Al Nusra and ISI hope to overthrow the regime and replace it with a Sunni fundamentalist state.

In April 2013 ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced that Al Nusra was a territorial extension of his network and that he has provided the group with half of its resources. While probably an exaggeration of ISI dominance, Al Nusra web sites have confirmed the merger of the two organizations. The union promises to accelerate attacks in Syria and Iraq that increasingly have a sectarian cast.

The ascendance of jihadi organizations in the Syrian rebel movement is not surprising. Syria was a logistical network for the Iraqi resistance movement after the 2003 U.S. invasion. The Assad regime actively supported the smuggling of foreign fighters and assisted AQI's development of a Syrian logistical infrastructure. The regime is now on the receiving end of a network that it helped develop and Bashar presents his regime as being in the front line in the war against Al Qaeda. As the war's virulence and death toll intensify, the rebel movement is likely to become more extremist and sectarian. Al Nusra's popularity is growing and it is considered to be a vanguard jihadist group capable of attracting considerable numbers of Syrian and foreign fighters. The group is beginning to coordinate military action with the Free Syrian Army whom has formed its own Islamist brigades

The flow of Qatari, Kuwaiti and Saudi money and weapons to extremist jihadi organizations amplifies this radicalization. The reluctance of Western nations to militarily intercede in Syria has exacerbated the violence and reinforced the growing role of jihadist organizations. The Obama Administration's reticence to arm the rebels is predicated upon fears that it could empower jihadists ISI recent merger with Al Nusra and their joint declaration of an Islamic state intensifies these concerns.

Two years of civil war have resulted in more than 70,000 deaths and 2 million displaced people [1]. Syria's neighbors and international relief agencies are straining to meet the refugee needs. The sectarian fighting threatens to unleash a contagion of violence across the region. Lebanon has seen Sunni and Pro-Hezbollah forces clash in Tripoli. The restive Sunni minority in Iraq experiencing with the loss of U.S.

military protection and a Shia dominated government may take up arms. The ten year anniversary of Iraq's liberation was greeted by a series of car bombs and terror attacks aimed at government installations and Shia religious institutions and ceremonies. These attacks have the imprimatur of AQI and ISI operations. Kurdish rebels in northern Syria, furthermore, could stoke secessionist pressures in neighboring Turkey.

With 50,000 well armed troops and militias led by relatives and co-religionists the Assad's regime may be able to stand for a year or more. Assad appears paranoid and may spare no measure to ensure his regime's survival. Some analysts believe the Baathist dictatorship is likely to fall and its remnants may retreat to Alawi dominated coastal areas, mountain villages and their Latakia refuge to mount one last stand [2]. The resulting sectarian bloodbath could have profound regional ramifications as fighting spreads to neighboring Lebanon.

The collapse of the Syrian Baathist regime is likely to fuel a sectarian bloodbath. While jihadi organizations may join in violence against Christian and Alawite minorities, such a development is counter to bin Laden and Zawahiri admonitions of sectarian war. The cycle of violence and revenge in a post Assad Syria offers the possibility that Shi'ite and Sunni extremists will kill each other.

ISI's partnership with Al Nusra to create a Syrian base of operations will intensify efforts to dislodge them. The ISI-Al Nusra sanctuary will invariably be targeted by their Alawite, Shi'ite, Christian and Druse enemies. The jihadist war in Syria and Zarqawi's fall in Iraq is vivid evidence that foreign jihadists need to craft a strategy congruent with local interests but also furthers AQ's war against the United States. So far such a balanced strategy has been not been easy to achieve.

Al Qaeda's efforts to create a transnational jihadist state in Iraq floundered against the needs and priorities of indigenous insurgents. Foreign jihadi attacks against Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar Province forced them to align with the Americans. Jihadist penetration of the Syrian rebel movement, moreover, has exacerbated sectarian fissures that work against AQ's far enemy strategy. The Syrian jihad may result in more sectarian conflict and internal wars across the region. Success or failure of Al Qaeda affiliates and insurgents operating in Somalia, Yemen and the Maghreb will be dependent on whether they have learned from the failure of its Iraqi jihad. Judging from jihadist past failures the future is anything but encouraging.

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