American Foreign Policy Council

Syria

QUICK FACTS

Population: 22,457,336

Area: 185,180 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Arab 90.3%, Kurds, Armenians, and other 9.7%

Religions: Sunni Muslim 74%, other Muslim (includes Alawite, Druze) 16%, Christian (various denominations) 10%, Jewish (tiny communities in Damascus, Al Qamishli, and Aleppo)

Government Type: Republic under an authoritarian regime

`GDP (official exchange rate): $64.7 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated September 2013)

For the past five decades, Syria has used terrorist tactics to advance its goals internally and throughout the Middle East, utilizing methods that have varied according to its needs and circumstances. In the past, Syria has used both its own agents and proxy organizations to engage in Islamist terrorism. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has not limited his support to specific ideological strains of Islam. His government, working in tandem with the Islamic Republic of Iran, supports the Shi'a Hezbollah militia in Lebanon, even as it has offered varying degrees of assistance to the Sunni Salafi Fatah al-Islam in northern Lebanon. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 2003, Syria also served as the primary gateway for foreign jihadists entering Iraq. While the regime sought a balance between the promotion of secularism domestically and Islamism abroad, it began improving relations with Islamic circles both inside and outside of Syria in the 1990s. The

year 2005 marked a watershed period in the regime's turn toward Islamic themes and its closer engagement of Iran. The retreat of secularism in the years since has led religion to assume a greater role in daily life throughout the Middle East.

The protests that began in Syria in March 2011 show no sign of abating (as of this writing) and were not originally designed to bring about a more robust role for Islam in the government. Nevertheless, mosques have been central to the Syrian protest movement, influencing the trajectory of the uprising and giving Islamism a greater role in the opposition movement. Islamic motifs are evident from organization at the mosque level to the naming of Friday demonstrations and radical insurgent groups. Salafis remain a minority force in the uprising but their prominence is increasing. The "Syrian Spring" has also provided an opportunity for Islamist groups to organize and emerge as part of the exiled opposition. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood—for which membership in Syria is a capital offense—has capitalized on the opportunity to reinvent itself. It dominates the Syrian National Council that was formed in Turkey and exists in exile. Other Islamic opposition forces have joined the Council, though a common political and religious platform has proven elusive. Given Syria's cultural mosaic, the longer the conflict continues, the more likely Syria will descend into a sectarian civil war between the Sunni Muslim majority and the 30 percent religious and ethnic minority groups, including the Alawis, who are represented most prominently by President Assad.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

There are two distinct capacities into which Islamist organizations fall in Syria: state-supported and opposition-oriented. Syria is rather unique in this respect, as although the ruling regime under the Assad family has been stringently Ba'athist (secular) and has fiercely opposed Islamist groups like the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB), it has also employed radical Salafi and Shi'a Islamist groups to promote state interests abroad.

The first phenomenon was embodied by the struggle between the Syrian government under Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafiz, and the opposition Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s. An uprising by the Brotherhood in 1982 was eventually quelled when the elder Assad shelled the city of Hama, killing tens of thousands. The episode virtually eradicated the Muslim Brotherhood's influence in Syria for the following three decades. The struggle between the Brotherhood and other Sunni Islamists and the Ba'athist government in Baghdad has been rekindled in the form of the Syrian civil war, which began in earnest in March 2011.

However, in the interim the Syrian regime made peace with other Sunni Islamist groups that aligned with the regime's interest, including one of the

Brotherhood's most infamous offshoots, Hamas, whose exiled leaders had long enjoyed safe haven in Damascus. More famously, the Syrian government has been a principal supporter and conduit to the Shi'a terrorist group Hezbollah, channeling Iranian arms and funds to the Lebanon-based militia.

When demonstrations against the Syrian regime first erupted in March 2011, most of the indigenous Sunni Salafi groups operating in Syria remained supporters of the regime, having trained to target its enemies in Iraq and Lebanon.[1] The Ba'athist regime in Syria worked with Salafi cells in serving as the primary gateway for foreign *jihadists* entering Iraq after the downfall Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003.[2] However, as the regime crackdown grew more brutal, many of those same *jihadists* came to play a part in the uprising, forming new terrorist cells.[3] Hamas leaders were forced to flee their longtime home in Damascus in January 2012.[4]

The civil war began in March 2011 when state security forces arrested 15 teenagers for spray-painting anti-regime graffiti on a wall in the southern city of Deraa. Their detention sparked massive demonstrations in the city, which in turn were met by a brutal government crackdown using live fire and tear gas. Bashar al-Assad's heavy-handed response led to an expansion of the protests, which soon spread across the country and continued into 2013, claiming as many as 100,000 lives in the process. As in other Middle East states experiencing the so-called "Arab Spring," the protests were not originally designed to serve Islamist purposes, but Islamists gradually assumed a greater role in the opposition.[5]

When the violence first erupted, Syria specialist Gary Gambill assessed:

> Secular liberal dissidents took to the streets in relatively small numbers and avoided confrontations with the police, while Kurdish groups largely abstained. In contrast, the demonstrations in… predominantly Sunni [areas] were 20 to 30 times larger, organized under the semi-inviolable protection of mosques and clearly intended to provoke the security forces. While it is premature to characterize the protests as an Islamist uprising, there is little doubt that those most eager to risk death or severe bodily harm are overwhelmingly Sunni and deeply religious.[6]

By February 2012, al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri had issued a statement urging Muslims inside and outside of Syria to fight against the Syrian government: "I appeal to every Muslim and every free, honorable one in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon, to rise to help his brothers in Syria with all what he can, with his life, money, wonders, opinion, and information."[7]

Experts are divided as to precisely how much of the opposition consists of al-Qaeda and its sympathizers. Syrian president Bashar al-Assad has been quick to blame "foreign elements" in an attempt to cast his brutal crackdown as part of a wider fight against Islamist militants and al-Qaeda-affiliated cells. There has in fact been a sharp increase in suicide bombings since December 2011. On May 10, 2012, a twin suicide car bombing in Damascus detonated outside a regime military intelligence building, killing 55 and wounding some 372 people, according to Syrian officials.[8] It was the deadliest terror attack since the protests began.

Most outside experts now believe that radical Salafis make up an important and growing, but not yet predominant, component of the opposition. Nir Rosen explains:

> The word 'Salafi' haunts the Syrian uprising. The regime has turned this conservative practice of Islam into a smear of the opposition, hoping to associate them with *jihadist* Salafis like those of al-Qaeda in Iraq. In nearly every demonstration I attended opposition songs dismissed the notion that they were Salafis. In four months traveling through Syria, I found Salafis to be a minority within the uprising, but nevertheless they play a growing role.[9]

Meanwhile, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's Andrew Tabler and David Pollock explain:

> To be sure, at least one armed group in Idlib is led by a Salafi sheikh, but that is the exception which proves the rule. Syria's Sunni community is extremely diverse, and it would not be surprising to find pious men with long beards fighting in the conservative northwestern Idlib province, men in more tribal attire fighting in eastern Syria or Deraa, or all of the above around Homs, where the country's cultural mosaic comes together. But that does not indicate they are Salafists, let alone *jihadists* or al-Qaeda.[10]

A newer Salafi *jihadist* organization called *Jabhat al-Nusra* (The Victory Front or the *al-Nusra* Front) claimed responsibility for the May 10 car bombing in a statement posted on a *jihadist* website a couple days after the attack.[11] The organization had first appeared just months earlier in a January 2012 video statement taking credit for another attack in the city of Idlib in northwest Syria.[12] Since its creation, *al-Nusra's* media campaign under the banner *al-Manara al-Baida* (The White Minaret) has grown in both quantity and quality as the terrorist attacks they claim credit for have grown in sophistica-

tion and lethality.

Jabhat al-Nusra claimed responsibility for several attacks throughout 2012, including a January 6 suicide bombing in Damascus; a February 10 double suicide car bombing in Aleppo that struck a military security building and the barracks of the Security Preservation forces, killing 28; a March 17 bombing in Damascus that struck the Air Force Intelligence and Criminal Security department, killing at least 27; an April 20 suicide bombing near Hama; an April 24 bombing at the Iranian Cultural Consulate in the al-Marajah Square in Damascus; an April 27 suicide attack in the Midan neighborhood of Damascus during Friday prayers; and a May 5 twin suicide bombing on a central Damascus highway. In all, *al-Nusra* claimed credit for nine attacks in Damascus between April 20 and May 3, 2012.

The group can count some important religious figures among its supporters. On March 6, 2012, senior Salafi *jihadi* cleric Abu Mundhir al-Shinqiti released a fatwa on the Salafi website, *Minbar Al-Tawhid Wal-Jihad*, urging all capable Muslims to join the ranks of *Jabhat al-Nusra*.[13] Other important *jihadi* ideologues have also given their approval, including the prominent online essayist Sheikh Abu Sa'd al-'Amil, the prominent Jordanian Salafi Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Tahawi, and the popular Lebanese Sheikh Abu al-Zahra' al-Zubaydi.[14] While information on the leadership of the terrorist group is scarce, according to their own propaganda, *al-Nusra* is led by Sheikh al-Fatih Abu Muhammad al-Julani.

With the advent of the Syrian uprising, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has sought a more prominent role in the opposition in exile as it seeks to reinvent itself. The SMB's attempts to steer the opposition, however, have been hampered by several factors. Since 1980, membership in the Brotherhood has been a capital offense. The devastation wrought upon the party since 1982 also made other anti-government figures wary of political Islam as an effective tool to challenge the regime and unsure of how to engage the group that has had no operational base within Syria for decades.

Notwithstanding the difficulties in organizing and influencing events on the ground in Syria, the SMB played a prominent role assembling the opposition abroad to establish the Syrian National Council (SNC) in August 2011 in Istanbul.[15] Although the Council in exile is fractious, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood holds the largest representation in the SNC with around a quarter of the seats.[16] In early 2012, the remaining seats were held by recently exiled clerics and recently founded movements.[17] In October 2011 the SNC announced the names of 19 of the then 29-member council. Syrian analyst and commentator, Barry Rubin, observed that 10 of the 19 "are identifiably

Islamist. At least 4 of them are members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover two-thirds of the 15 Sunni Muslim Arabs are Islamists."[18] According to its website, the SNC would affirm national unity among all components of Syria society.

Initially, the SNC rejected foreign intervention and hoped to safeguard "the non-violent character of the Syrian Revolution." Within the group itself, there are divisions over whether it should accept foreign intervention, and if so, whether it should be in the form of Arab or Western intervention.[19] However, beginning in 2012, the SNC called for foreign military intervention with the goal of stemming both civilian casualties and refugee flows.[20] As of this writing, the SNC and its partner group, Syria's National Coordinating Committee (NCC) are cooperating with Russian and U.S. chemical weapons handover plans, as well as continuing to press for a "Geneva 2" political resolution.[21]

On March 25, 2012, the SMB published a document, "A Pledge and Charter by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood," detailing its views of a post-Assad Syria. In the document, they commit to strive for a modern civil state with a civil constitution and a parliamentary republican regime chosen through free elections. They further commit to a state that practices religious, denominational, civil, and gender equality in an environment of dialogue, partnership, commitment to human rights, and combating terrorism.[22] Nevertheless, they also seek the gradual implementation of *Sharia* law, albeit in a civilian pluralist state. They have also advocated for a market-oriented economy. While the movement renounced violence in 2001, it does not recognize Israel but remains open to engagement with the U.S. and Europe despite their criticism of Western policies in the region.[23]

Two other Islamist organizations based abroad are vying for influence, namely the National Action Group, and the Syrian National Movement. Obeida Nahas, a 36-year old marketing executive, is a founding member of both The National Action Group and the SNC. He described his allies as "religious conservatives rather than Islamists, not unlike Turkey's governing party, which they call an inspiration but not a model. The age of ideology is dead, Mr. Nahas said… Instead, he said, the generation that fomented the Arab Spring wants a limited, nonideological state that treats all its citizens equally."[24] Nahas explained, "We are trying to find common ground, something that would create a national identity that would include all political groups."[25]

The Syrian National Movement (SNM) or *al-Tayyar al-Watani al-Suri,* was founded in December 2011 by 12 members of the SNC.[26] Thomas Pierret,

a Syria specialist and lecturer in contemporary Islam, explains that while the SNM is not a formal party, it serves:

> As an umbrella for five different groups: liberal Islamists, members of mosque-based educational groups, Salafis, secular liberals based in the West, and left-wing secularists based in Syria. The common ground is acceptance of the 'Islamic reference,' or *al-Marja'iyya al-Islamiyya*, whether as a source of legislation for Islamists or as the cultural and civil identity of Syria for secularists.[27]

From his Istanbul office, Emad ad-Din al-Rashid, a former assistant dean at the Islamic law college of Damascus University and member of the SNM, spends his days lobbying hundreds of his former theology students to join his movement, hoping that the network will one day become the Islamist movement's power base.[28] They now hold 12 of the 310 seats on the Syrian National Council.

Also represented in the SNC is the Movement for Justice and Development (MJD) or *Harakat al-Adala wal Bina*. It was founded in London in 2006 by economist Osama al-Munajjid and geologist Anas al-Abda (who currently serves as Chairman). The MJD promotes a post-Islamist identity, but draws its inspiration from the ruling Turkish AKP or Justice and Development Party. While they make no reference to the concept of an Islamic state and stop short of calling for the implementation of *Sharia* law, its program calls for a constitution that would call Syria a country of "Islamic civilization and culture." The "people's will" is to be the source of laws.[29] The group's website describes itself as "committed to peaceful, democratic change in Syria, and the creation of a modern state which respects human rights and promotes economic and social development."[30] They hold five seats on the SNC.

Another network of moderate Islamic activists, the Democratic Independent Islamic Trend or *Tayyar al-Islami al-Mustaqill al-Dimuqrati*, was active in Syria but fled the country after March 2011.[31]

Inside Syria, meanwhile, the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCC) represents many of the opposition groups bearing the brunt of the Assad regime's atrocities. The Committee at one time rejected foreign intervention outright, although it has since softened its stance.[32] Then there is the more nebulous Free Syrian Army (FSA), which was founded in July 2011 by Colonel Riad al-Asa'ad. It was formed in order to protect innocent civilians when the protests first erupted and Syrian security forces and irregular armed thugs, or *shabbiha*, began attacking unarmed civilians.[33] It is comprised of former Syrian soldiers who have defected, youth from urban

centers, and former gang members. It is believed to have some 30,000 to 50,000 soldiers[34], although others estimate that number to be as much as two thirds lower. The FSA also enjoys support from abroad, with Syrian expatriates in Qatar, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia known to have provided the group with money and material resources. Engaged in the day-to-day fighting with regime forces, the FSA has become frustrated with the SNC and calls for a no-fly zone or buffer zone. This reflects both a realization that the current stalemate on the ground is unlikely to be broken without outside assistance and a recognition of the threat that opposition forces face if the Assad regime unleashes its full military might.

From January 12-26, 2012, Ilhan Tanir gathered information on the FSA within Syria, interviewing more than a dozen FSA leaders as well as armed members and activists before he was arrested and deported by Syrian security forces on January 26. In his report, "Inside the Free Syrian Army," he claimed that one FSA leader said that, before being allowed to join, recruits swear on the Koran that they will give up their guns when the revolution is over. Regarding the FSA's religious composition, Tanir explained:

> FSA leaders insist that there is no presence of Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) within their ranks and that this is simply propaganda spread by the regime. Though activists and people connected with the FSA admit that between 5-10% of the FSA could be comprised by Salafis or the MB, it is currently impossible to confirm. On the other hand, other Syrian opposition activists insist that there is not a single MB member left in the country since they were dispelled years ago. My own informal polling suggested that, given Syria's Sunni majority, if the MB were to participate in the first election in a post-Assad period, it would earn a considerable percentage of the vote.[35]

The jockeying for power among the many political organizations outside of Syria has alienated many Syrians inside the county. Some claim that members of the SNC are focused more on gaining future appointments that they can use for leverage and domestic influence later, rather than focusing on unity in the present, which would help defeat the Assad regime.[36] Meanwhile, most of the Islamist groups are not currently advocating divisive social issues such as veiling women or banning alcohol, perhaps reflecting a realization that their first priority should be toppling the current regime. Other secular Syrian politicians are less sanguine about the differences between the Islamist groups and the true goals of the SNC. Kamal Lebwany, a dissident physician released from detention in November 2011 after nearly a decade in a Syrian jail, quit the SNC in February 2012. He laments: "The Muslim Broth-

erhood monopolizes everything—the money, the weapons, the SNC… The SNC has a liberal peel covering a totalitarian, nondemocratic core," he said, adding that the long exile of many of the Islamists has rendered them out of touch with Syrian reality.[37] Randa Kassis, member of the SNC and president of the general assembly of the Secular Democratic Coalition in Syria lays responsibility for the persistence of the violence with the regime and the Islamists. She says it "falls first on the regime that is immersed in a so-called security solution. Second, responsibility falls on the Islamists who are trying by any means to Islamize the Syrian uprising in order to enable their exclusion of different groups. Third, the responsibility falls on the groups in Syria that refuse to participate in this uprising and impose themselves as true partners."[38]

Yet those gathered in Syria's streets have not yet coalesced around a central ideology or political platform, nor has the SNC meeting in exile with different factions split over the issue of foreign intervention. The SMB do not yet possess anything tangible to offer the secular protesters. However, the longer the protests remain in a stalemate, the more appealing the Muslim Brotherhood's organization skills and funding may become. After all, despite the Brothers' limited organizational ability, it remains one of the oldest anti-government movements in Syria and maintains loose, external affiliations with other Arab Muslim Brotherhood movements.[39] The longer the uprising drags on, the larger the role the Brotherhood may play in the future of Syrian politics if the Assad regime falls.[40]

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

The Syrian uprising has been indelibly influenced by the country's religious and ethnic divide. Syria's population of 23 million is the youngest in the Middle East outside of the Palestinian territories.[41] Today, 53 percent of Syrians are below the age of 20, while one-third of the population is below the age of 15.[42] The population doubled in 25 years from 5.3 million in 1963 to 10.6 million in 1986, and more than doubled again during the last quarter century. Approximately 90% of Syrians are ethnically Arab, while the remainder is made up of a mixture of Kurds, Armenians, and a plethora of regional expatriates.[43] Although 60-70 percent of Syria's population is Sunni Muslim, the 12 percent minority Alawite sect from which the Assad family hails controls all the levers of power.

The Alawis split from Shi'a Islam in the ninth century over their belief in the divinity of Ali bin Abi Talib—the fourth Islamic caliph. In the centuries that followed, the sect suffered constant discrimination: Alawis have been branded as heretics by most Sunnis and as extremists by most Shi'a, and they

suffered several massacres at the hands of Sunni Muslims.[44] Historically, the Alawi community has been poor, under-educated, and lacked professional opportunities.[45] They once lived in roughly four dozen villages in the back-country of northwestern Syria.[46] Since Ottoman times, many Alawis joined the military as a means for socio-economic advancement, whereas their Sunni counterparts tended to shun army careers. By 1963, they represented 65 percent of noncommissioned officers in the Syrian army, which helped pave the way for the Ba'ath coup that year and Hafiz al-Assad's subsequent ascent to the presidency.[47] In the decades that followed, the Alawis consolidated their control of the country.

The Assad family is part of the Alawi sect and Kalbiyya tribe hailing originally from the northwest Syrian town of Qardaha, just east of Latakia. In order to rule Syria, Bashar al-Assad and his father before him had to tailor their approach to the country's numerous ethnic groups, at times appealing to them, oppressing them, or setting them against each other. The task of unifying such a diverse mix is difficult given Syria's patchwork demography, and it explains, in part, why Ba'athism is the regime's ruling ideology where the most common denominator of Arabism is preached.

The majority of Syrians, meanwhile, are Sunnis of the moderate Sufi variety, opposed by conservative Salafis because they strive to create a more individual, mystical relationship between the believer and Allah.[48] Aside from the Sunni and Alawi population, Syria is home to a diverse range of religious and ethnic minorities, including Druze, various Christian groups, Kurds, Shi'a sects, and a small number of Yazidis.[49] Collectively, these minorities constitute around a third of Syria's population. Additionally, between 7-15 percent of the Sunni Muslim population is ethnically Kurdish, as opposed to Arab.[50] As of this writing, the minority communities are standing with the regime for fear of Sunni sectarian reprisals and massacres should the regime fall.

The Kurds, who represent 10 percent of Syria's population[51], have historically posed the most serious challenge to Bashar al-Assad's ability to maintain power. In part, this is the result of the nature of the Ba'ath regime, whose legitimacy rests on its support for Arabism or pan-Arab nationalism. By definition, the ideology excludes Kurds in Syria, whereas their counterparts in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey have been more politically active.[52] Most have no citizenship, legal standing, or medical care, their language is not recognized, and their culture is oppressed.[53] Qamishli, the Kurdish capital, has been a consistent focal point of tension with the Arab majority.

While Shi'a Muslims currently constitute only around two percent of Syria's population, their numbers have grown considerably from 1953, when they

numbered no more than 0.4 percent of the Syrian population. Official and reliable statistics pertaining to the birthrates among confessional groups in Syria are tightly regulated by the regime—prying into sectarian issues may be discouraged in much of the Middle East, but in Syria it is illegal. Nevertheless, an increase in conversions from Sunni to Shi'a can be clearly observed. This increase is, first, the consequence of geography and history. The Shi'a of Syria possess a considerable number of institutions and shrines in the country, such as the tomb of Sayyida Zaynab and the Mosque of the Drop in Aleppo. Numerous pilgrims who help disseminate Shi'a ideas and doctrines visit these sites. The Shi'a also build houses of study next to their shrines and establish religious authorities there, which has given them more independence with respect to religious rulings.

Increased numbers of Sunni conversions were also a function of a concerted effort by Iran in the wake of the Shi'a Hezbollah's self-proclaimed victory over Israel in the summer 2006 Lebanon war. Rumors spread of Iranians wandering the Syrian countryside handing out bags of cash and macaroni in order to convert families—even whole villages— to Shi'a Islam.[54] Iranian donors also financed the restoration of at least six Shi'a tombs and shrines across the country and built at least one Shi'a religious school near Damascus named after Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader.[55] By 2007, the Shi'a in Iraq were sponsoring several Arabic Internet portals and satellite TV shows with religious programming, most of which were available in Syria.[56] According to the leader of Syria's Shi'a community, Sayyid Abdullah Nizam, the size of Syria's Shi'a community is less than one percent of the total population.[57] Meanwhile Syria's Sunni Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmad Badr Eddin Hassoun estimates that six to eight percent of Syrians follow the Jaafari School, which is the mainstream Shi'a jurisprudence in Iran and Lebanon.[58]

Although on the surface Syria is a secular society with religious and ethnic minority rights guaranteed by the state, a drift toward greater expression of Islamic sentiment within Syrian society has received extensive coverage in the media in recent years.

Even before the Syrian uprising more women began wearing the *hijab*, while more men grew beards and declined to wear wedding rings.[59] There has also been an increase in the number of Islamic bookshops and Islamist sayings that have replaced Ba'ath Party slogans.[60] Additionally, numerous nightclubs and restaurants that serve alcohol have been shut down.[61] Mosque attendance has grown, along with participation in Islamic study centers. One group the Syrians call the *Qubaisiaat*—named after the female religious leader, Munira al-Qubaisi, who runs the organization—has seen its influence spread rapidly under the rule of Bashar al-Assad.[62] It has been part of an Islamic revival for

women in Syria.[63]

A month after the 2011 demonstrations, some assessed that "there are few traces of radical Islamism in Syria. While such an absence could be tactical, evidence indicates that should Bashar al-Assad fall, the chance of Syria turning into an Islamic state is almost nil."[64] Supporting that assertion was a survey of opposition activists conducted by Prechter Polls in December 2011.[65] Only one-third held a favorable opinion of the Muslim Brotherhood, nearly half expressed a negative view of the group, and the remainder was neutral. Many respondents supported religious values in public life, yet only a small fraction favored *Sharia* law, clerical influence in government, or a significant focus on Islamic education. Twenty percent said that religious leaders heavily influence their political views. When asked which country they would like to see Syria emulate politically, 82 percent gave Turkey a favorable rating, while the U.S. was seen as favorable by 69 percent. Tunisia and Egypt were rated at 37 and 22 percent respectively. Iran garnered the lowest rating in the survey with less than 2 percent having positive views of the Islamic Republic as a political model. Ninety percent saw Hezbollah as unfavorable.[66]

Nevertheless, the protests have grown increasingly Islamist in nature. Nir Rosen, a veteran journalist who spent months reporting and conducting interviews in Syria during the unrest observed the following in March 2012:

> Syria's uprising is not secular. Most participants are devout Muslims inspired by Islam. By virtue of Syria's demography most of the opposition is Sunni Muslim and often come from conservative areas. The death of the Arab left means religion has assumed a greater role in daily life throughout the Middle East. A minority is secular and another minority is comprised of ideological Islamists. The majority is made of religious-minded people with little ideology, like most Syrians. They are not fighting to defend secularism (nor is the regime), but they are also not fighting to establish a theocracy. But as the conflict grinds on, Islam is playing an increasing role in the uprising.[67]

The increasingly Islamist tone can be observed in the naming of Friday demonstrations following afternoon prayers. Each week, the main Syrian Revolution Facebook page posts a poll calling on Syrians to choose among slogans submitted by major activist groups. In April 2012, the name "The Armies of Islam: Rescue Syria" lost only by a hundred votes after a last-minute campaign against it by prominent activists.[68] The first Friday demonstration in March 2011 was called the "Day of Dignity." Other early demonstrations were named "The Friday of Anger" and the "Friday of Defiance." As

the violence escalated over time, Friday names shifted to calling for support for the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and international protection. Later slogans began to adopt religious connotations, such as, "If You Support God He Will Grant You Victory."[69]

The names of insurgent groups within Syria have also become increasingly Islamist, bordering on Salafi in tone, such as the *Abu Dujana Battalion*, the *Abu Ubeida Battalion*, the *Muhajireen wal Ansar Battalion*, and a group named after Yazid—a figure from Islamic history respected by religious Sunnis but hated by the Shi'a.[70]

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Syria has been a stronghold of Arab secularism since the Ba'ath Party seized power in 1963. As scholar Eyal Zisser observed, "The regime forbade preaching and religious education outside the mosques, increased its involvement in the appointment of clerics to religious institutions in the country, took over the management of the Waqf institutions, and did not hesitate to arrest or even execute clerics who demonstrated against it."[71] The chief political and economic casualty from the rise of this coalition was the urban class in which the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) was grounded.

In 1976, Islamic militants, some of whom were former Muslim Brotherhood activists, rose up in a violent struggle against Hafiz al-Assad's regime with the goal of toppling the government and replacing it with an Islamic state. The SMB joined this struggle soon thereafter, drawing their support from the urban Sunni middle class, especially in the northern region of the country. While the Sunnis represented between 60-70 percent of Syria's population, half the number lived in rural areas and the periphery and did not support the Muslim Brotherhood's vision.

The Islamic Revolt lasted from 1976 until 1982, reaching its peak in 1980. It ended in February 1982, when Assad quashed the Muslim Brothers in Hama, Syria's fourth-largest city, obliterating the movement. Tens of thousands were killed while many others were forced to serve long prison sentences. The group's leaders were forced into exile.[72] According to the Brotherhood, some 17,000 party members are either missing or detained inside Syria.[73]

The 1990s saw an improvement in the regime's relations with Islamic circles both inside and outside of Syria. The new direction was aimed at endowing Syria with an Islamic look and feel, but stopping short of full religious substance. Official Syrian sponsorship of Islam had the express purpose of

preventing the mosque from becoming a source of rebellion. This was manifested through greater official openness to demonstrations of religious faith among Syrian citizens, and the release of many members of the Muslim Brotherhood who had been held in Syrian prisons since the suppression of the Islamic Revolt.[74] However, the regime continued to repress the Brotherhood, refusing to allow it to resume its activities in Syria.

Bashar al-Assad became president after his father's death on June 10, 2000, and he continued efforts to promote an Islamic posture, including further efforts to Islamize the Alawi community. The Muslim Brotherhood, for its part, tried to forge a relationship with the regime in Damascus following Hafiz al-Assad's death, driven by hopes that the organization—whose leaders had become increasingly irrelevant after years of exile—could again become a player in Syria's political scene. These aspirations proved futile, however; the regime under Bashar showed little readiness for compromise.

The regime's decision to promote a state-sponsored version of Islam left no alternative means to express any other form of political Islam. The only other prominent Islamic party was the Islamic Liberation Party (*Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami*), and its members are subject to frequent arrests by Syrian authorities. The group, which calls for restoring the Islamic caliphate, is banned in most countries and has only a small following in Syria. Assad's regime remained vigilant in arresting and detaining those suspected of Islamist activities with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.[75]

The assassination of the Lebanese Sunni politician Rafiq Hariri in Beirut on February 14, 2005, and the subsequent international outcry and investigation that pointed to Syrian involvement was a watershed in the Assad regime's turn toward Islamic themes and further embrace of Iran. Bashar al-Assad responded to the growing pressure with a speech delivered on November 10, 2005 at Damascus University, telegraphing the state's turn toward Iran and Islam. He urged his people to remain strong against "cultural and psychological warfare." "If someone in Syria raises his voice in tandem with foreigners, he is being controlled by foreigners… This region has two options: chaos or resistance. In the end, we are going to win, one way or another, even if it lasts a long time." He ended the speech with a popular saying—but it was a sentiment never before spoken by the distinctly secular Ba'ath Party: "Syria is protected by God."[76]

Syria held its first Koran reading competition at Damascus University—a site traditionally reserved for presidential speeches and Ba'ath Party functions.[77] Two weeks later, Assad lifted the ban on mosques being open between prayer times in order to allow for Islamic instruction.[78] The following week, Aleppo

was named the Islamic cultural capital of 2006 amidst great celebration with President Assad in attendance.[79] On April 5, Assad issued a decree establishing an Islamic college in Aleppo. The same month, the Syrian military announced that Islamic clergy would be allowed to give lectures to military cadets for the first time in 43 years.[80] Defense Minister General Hassan Tourkmani announced that the decision was in response to "the thirst for God in the barracks."[81]

Religious and ethnic considerations have figured prominently in Bashar al-Assad's deployment of the military to try to bring the protest movement to an end. It was estimated in 2011 that in Syria, 70 percent of career soldiers and 80 percent of officers come from the Alawi clan.[82] According to Syrian scholar Radwan Ziadeh, Alawis account for the vast majority of the some 700,000 security and intelligence personnel and military officer core in Syria.[83] Former Syrian General Akil Hashem estimates that more than 150,000 Alawis serve as officers in the elite units of the armed forces and intelligence units.[84] So pervasive are Alawis in Syria's security apparatus that Syrians are said to often speak with an Alawi accent if apprehended by intelligence officers in the hope of receiving better treatment.[85]

In the last decade, Bashar left his brother Maher in charge of the organization of the security sector with the support of his uncle and cousins. Within a few months of the beginning of the demonstrations—with the regime's response growing in brutality—the army purged many officers and soldiers to lessen the chance of revolt, including many who had been loyal Sunni troops.[86] With the conflict increasingly becoming an Alawi versus Sunni battle, Bashar has turned to his 4th Division, composed almost completely of Alawi loyalists and led by Maher.[87] In other instances, the Assad regime has used Christian and Druze troops against Sunni targets.[88] Where Sunni, Christian, or Druze generals are in command, an Alawi deputy usually enforces the order. The army, loyal to Assad, is backed by organized thugs, the *Shabbiha*, who form militia units in civilian clothes, much like the *Basiji* in Iran.[89] The predominantly Alawi *Shabbiha* paramilitary gangs have moved into hundreds of Sunni villages, threatening, shooting, and kidnapping residents who support the uprising.[90]

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