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# SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE SOCIAL ROOTS OF SYRIA'S RULING, MILITARY GROUP AND THE CAUSES FOR ITS DOMINANCE

*Hanna Batatu*

**A**T the heart of Syria's regime stands a cluster of military officers. They hold in their hands the crucial threads of power. This much is obvious. Their common military profession, however, does not explain why they cling together and act in concert. Far more significant in this connection is the fact that the ruling element consists at its core of a close kinship group which draws strength simultaneously, but in decreasing intensity, from a tribe, a sect-class, and an ecologic-cultural division of the people.

Thus, figuring among the officers who are decisive for the holding together of the entire power structure, in order of importance are: Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad, the President of the Republic and the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces; Rif'at al-Asad, the Commander of *Sarāyā al-Difā'*, or Defense Units; Jamīl al-Asad, the Commander of a special unit of *Sarāyā al-Difā'* concerned with the security of the 'Alawī community; and 'Adnān al-Asad, commander of *Sarāyā al-Şira'* or Struggle Companies. The task of *Sarāyā al-Difā'* which comprise at least 12,000 and possibly as many as 25,000 men, is to protect the regime. They surround Damascus and control all the access routes to the capital. The *Sarāyā al-Şira'*, which embrace some 5,000 men, play a similar protective role. 'Adnān is a cousin and Rif'at and Jamīl are brothers of Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad. Two nephews of the President also occupy sensitive posts in the Defense Units. Moreover, a brother-in-law of Asad, 'Adnān Makhlūf, was for several years the Deputy Commander of the Defense Units but it would appear that he was relieved of his post in May 1979.

Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad and his blood relations belong to the Numailatiyyah section of al-Matāwirah, one of the four tribes into which most of Syria's 'Alawīs are divided, the others being al-Ḥaddādīn, al-Khayyāṭīn and al-Kalbiyyah. To

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Asad's tribe, al-Matāwirah, belong a number of other major figures in the regime, including Brigadier Muḥammad al-Khawlī, Adviser to the President, Chief of Air Intelligence, and Chairman of the Presidential Intelligence Committee; Brigadier 'Alī Dūbah, the head of Military Intelligence; Brigadier 'Alī Aṣlān, the Deputy Chief of Staff and the Chief of the Bureau of Military Operations and Training; and Major General 'Alī Ṣālīḥ, Commander of the Air Defense Forces and the Missile Corps. Incidentally, 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Khaddām, the Deputy Premier and Minister for Foreign Affairs, who is Sunni, married in 1954 a woman from al-Hawwāsh, a family that provided the chiefs of al-Matāwirah in Ottoman times.<sup>1</sup> To the same tribe belongs, in all probability, a considerable number of the noncommissioned officers and rank-and-file of *Sarāyā al-Difā'* and *Sarāyā al-Ṣirā'*. The members of these units, which were formed in 1971 and 1973 respectively, were chosen with extreme care and it seems unlikely that preference in selection would not have been given to men with close tribal links to Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad. Many of them are even said to be from his birth place, the village of Qardāḥah.

But of course, Asad does not rely exclusively on his own tribe, which constitutes only about one-fifth of the million or so 'Alawīs of Syria, or 2.3 per cent of its total population, and can provide only a thin basis for his power. His reliance on the 'Alawīs generally is clear from other significant military appointments. Thus Yūnis Yūnis, commander of the Ninth Armored Division, is from the tribe of al-Ḥaddādīn. Again, Tawfiq al-Jahanī, who headed the First Armored Division from 1971 to 1978, is from the Raslān section of al-Kalbiyyah. Moreover, 'Alī Umrān, who commanded until recently one unit of the Special Forces, is from al-Khayyāṭīn. A reserve regime-shielding unit, the Special Forces, comprises from 5,000 to 8,000 commandos and parachutists and is led by 'Alī Ḥaydar, who, according to an 'Alawī source, belongs to the 'Alawī tribe of al-Ḥaddādīn but, according to a Shi'i source, descends from a landed Shi'i family of Salamiyyah that in the past employed members of the Asad family on its farms in Qardāḥah.

There are other military 'Alawīs of consequence, such as Ibrahim Ḥasan, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, or 'Alī Ja'ja', the Commander of the Third Armored Division, but their tribal affiliation could not be determined.

A note of caution is in order here. To assert that Asad depends for his power upon his tribe or his co-religionists is not to assert that Asad is necessarily tribal or sectarian in his outlook or motives or in his economic or political line of conduct. While some of Asad's policies—for example, his

1. People from Ṣafitah, where the woman taught school, still recall that the *muqaddam* or initial portion of her bride-price paid by 'Abd -al-Ḥalīm Khaddām in 1954 was only one piastre but that her *mu'akkkhar* or the amount held in reserve for her in case of divorce reached as high as 100,000 Syrian pounds. Later Khaddām apparently took for second wife a woman from the Sunni family of al-Ṭayyārah.

grants of land in the plain of al-Ghāb to peasants from the 'Alawī Mountain—have been at least partly affected by his 'Alawī background, broader considerations have been at the basis of other actions taken by his regime. In illustration one could cite Asad's limited economic "open door" policy (consult p. 340) or his decision to cooperate with Egypt in preparing for, and eventually waging, the war of October 1973.

To this another word must be appended in clarification. As far as political decision making is concerned, only two men are crucial in Syria's regime: Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad and his brother Rif'at. In this sense whatever control other men have over the lives and behavior of Syrians is not fundamental but derivative; it springs from their relationship or loyalty to one or the other or both of the Asad brothers. This is true of the Sunnis who occupy conspicuous posts in the regime, such as Premier 'Abd al-Ra'ūf al-Kasam or Minister of Defense Muṣṭafa Ṭlās, They clearly draw their authority from Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad and have no power base of their own.

## II

In order to throw more light on the nature of the social support of Syria's military rulers, it is appropriate at this point to say a word or two about the 'Alawīs.

Until recently the 'Alawī community was in an objective sense a sect-class. In its province of origin, the province of Latakia, which is in the north-west of Syria, there was at least until the late 1950s, a close although not complete correspondence between the sectarian and ecologic-class divisions. To a preponderant degree the urban population was Sunni, the rural population 'Alawī. In the plains to the west, south and east of the 'Alawī mountains the most numerous and poorest peasants were invariably 'Alawī. They cultivated the soil for the relatively middling Christian and Sunni landowners from the towns of Latakia, Jablah, and Banyās, as well as for the big Sunni proprietors of Ḥamāh and al-Akkār.

The 'Alawīs were the food-producers of many of these parts for centuries. As long ago as 1317, in the days of the Mamlūks (as can be read in the pages of Ibn Baṭṭūṭah), the Sultan at Cairo, having learned of a violent uprising by 'Alawīs in the district of Jablah, ordered that they be put to the sword. "But these people," urged the Chief of the Amirs of Tripoli in protest, "work the land for the Muslims and if they are killed, the Muslims will be enfeebled."<sup>2</sup> The rebels were thus spared on account of their vital economic function.

2. Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, *Tuhfat al-Nuẓẓār fī Gharā'ib al-Amṣār wa 'Ajā'ib al-Asfār* (*The Gem of the Observers of the Marvels of Cities and Journeys*), Arabic text edited by C. Defremery and B. R. Sanguinetti under the title *Voyages d'Ibn Baṭṭūṭa* and annotated by Vincent Monteil (Paris, 1968), p. 179; and René Dussaud, *Histoire et religion des Noṣairis* (Paris, 1900), pp. 23–24.

The lot of the 'Alawīs was never enviable. Under the Ottomans they were abused, reviled and ground down by exactions and, on occasions, their women and children led into captivity and disposed of by sale.<sup>3</sup> In the plains, even in villages, that had once belonged to them, the 'Alawī peasants worked as mere *murābi'*s, that is, they were allowed only one-fourth of the proceeds of their labor.<sup>4</sup> A large number of their originally *mushā'* or collectively held villages, with appertaining lands and livestock, passed in the course of the nineteenth century into the hands of Christian or Sunni merchants or notables through legal manipulations and other unfair practices.<sup>5</sup> Their income became so meager—their yearly share in the closing decade of Ottoman rule in the district of Jablah was, according to a contemporary estimate, as low as five and no higher than ten Turkish liras<sup>6</sup>—that frequently in desperation they seized part of the crop or refused to pay the assessed state tax, thus inviting the wrath of the law. We have here but another confirmation of the old truth to which Rousseau gave expression: "the law is always useful to those who possess and harmful to those who have nothing." The conditions, even of the more independent and less downtrodden 'Alawī peasants in the inaccessible mountainous regions became so deplorable that they developed after World War I the practice of selling or hiring out their daughters to affluent townspeople. Some were sold in their childhood for life as servants but most were, for an agreed price, merely indentured, so to say, for a given period of time.<sup>7</sup>

It is such conditions, which scarcely improved under the French mandate or in the post-independence period—the average daily income of the peasants in 1938 was only about 22 Syrian piastres while the daily cost of living per capita was approximately 50 piastres<sup>8</sup>—that drove the 'Alawīs to enroll in great numbers in the state's armed forces.

Despite their vulnerability and sunken status, the 'Alawīs for long did not present a common front. There were several reasons for this. For one thing, they were split into tribes, as already noted. For another, they were religiously divided into Shamsīs, Qamarīs and Murshidiyyīn. The Shamsīs (a derivative of *shams* or sun, the astral symbol of Muḥammad), a section of detribalized 'Alawīs, form a minority in Syria and are said to pay more

3. For the last-mentioned point, see, for example, Shaykh 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Biṭār, *Ḥilyat al-Bashar fī Tārīkh al-Qarn al-Thālith 'Ashar (The Ornament of Mankind or the History of the Thirteenth Century of the Hijrah)*, Part III (Damascus, 1963), pp. 1600–1601.

4. Jacques Weulersse, *Le Pays des Alaouites*, Tome I (Tours, 1940), pp. 224–225.

5. Muḥammad Amīn Ghālib al-Ṭawīl, *Tārīkh al-'Alawīyyīn (The History of the 'Alawīs)*, (Beirut, 1966), p. 406.

6. 'Abdallah Ḥannā, *Al-Qaḍīyyat al-Zirā'iyyah wa al-Ḥarakāt al-Fallāḥīyyah fī Sūriyyā wa Lubnān. 1820–1920 (The Agrarian Question and the Peasant Movements in Syria and Lebanon. 1820–1920)*, Part I (Beirut, 1975), p. 141.

7. 'Abd-ul-Laṭīf Yūnis, *Thawrat al-Shaykh Ṣāliḥ al-'Alī* ("The Revolt of Shaykh Ṣāliḥ al-'Alī") (Damascus, 2nd edition, n.d.), p. 178.

8. 'Abdallah Ḥannā, *op. cit.*, Part II, 1920–1945 (Beirut, 1978), p. 49.

reverence to the Prophet Muḥammad than to 'Alī, his cousin and son-in-law. The majority section, the Qamarīs (after *qamar* or moon, the astral symbol of 'Alī), allegedly regard 'Alī as the *ma'na* or "meaning" of the divinity. The Murshidiyyīn split off from the Qamarīs and are followers of Sulaymān al-Murshid. A humble shepherd, al-Murshid claimed prophetic powers in 1923 at the age of 17 and on that account and for seditious proclivities suffered death at the hand of the authorities some 20 years later. His sect attracted many adherents and spread widely among the tribe of al-Khayyāṭīn. President Asad's sect, the traditional Qamarīs, is led by Sulaymān al-Aḥmad, who is usually referred to as "the Bedouin of the Mountain" (*Badawī al-Jabal*) and carries the official title of "Servant of the Prophet's Household" (*Khādīm Abl-il-Bayt*). He has his center at Qardāḥah, Asad's village, and belongs to Asad's section, the Numailāṭiyyah, of al-Matāwīrah tribe.

It should be mentioned parenthetically that the leaders of the 'Alawīs deny any connection or affinity with astral gnosticism or other deviations from conventional Shi'ism. In a formal proclamation issued in 1973, 80 religious personages, representing the various parts of the 'Alawī country, unqualifiedly affirmed that their book is the Qur'an, that they are Muslim and Shi'i, and, like the majority of Shi'is, Ithnā 'Ashariyyah or Twelvers, that is, partisans of the 12 imams, and that whatever else is attributed to them has no basis in truth and is a mere invention by their enemies and the enemies of Islam.<sup>9</sup> In this connection, it is significant that when General Ṣalāḥ Jadīd, Syria's 'Alawī strongman in the second half of the 1960s, voiced apprehensions at the rise of sectarian feelings in the country and his Ismā'īlī Minister of Information, Sāmī-j-Jundī, suggested, as an answer to the problem and a check to the suspicion nursed by the other communities, the publication of the secret books of the 'Alawī sect, Jadīd sharply rejoined: "If we did this, our shaykhs would crush us."<sup>10</sup>

The 'Alawīs were divided not only from the religious or tribal standpoints but also in a geographical sense. There was, first, the division between the 'Alawīs of the Mountain and the 'Alawīs of the plains. The latter, although originally from the Mountain, had in time become less spirited, less hardened, and more submissive than the montane 'Alawīs. But more conducive to the weakness of the 'Alawī peasants generally was the fact that they tended to be thinly scattered. None of their villages was very large. For example, in the 1930s in the plains the average 'Alawī village counted between 100 and 250 inhabitants.<sup>11</sup>

9. The 'ulamā' of the Islamic 'Alawī Sect in the Syrian Arab Republic and in Lebanon, *Al-'Alawīyyūn. Man Hum wa Mā 'Aqīdatubum (The 'Alawīs. Who are They and What are their Beliefs?)*, undated and unplaced, pp. 6–7, 16–20, and 27.

10. Sāmī al-Jundī, *Al-Ba'th* (Beirut, 1969), pp. 144–145.

11. Jacques Weulersse, *Le Pays des Alaouites*, I, p. 239.

Recently the 'Alawīs have also become economically more sharply stratified. In the Ottoman period the economic distance between their peasants and religious and administrative chiefs—the *shaykhs* and *muqaddams*—was not wide or pronounced. Their conditions did not become more markedly unequal in the first half of this century. However, since their rise to power, an upper class has been differentiating itself from the rest of the community and, within the ranks of this class, even a group of millionaires, waxing rich from fat commissions on state contracts, has reared its head. This may under certain circumstances weaken the attachment to the regime of the least favored segments of the sect. Significantly enough, in 1969 when 'Alawī peasants launched a rising in the Ghāb district over debts owed to the Agricultural Bank, the 'Alawī rulers did not sympathize with them but put them down by force.

All these divisive factors—tribal, religious, geographical and economic—explain in part (there are also personal elements and new ideological influences at play) the factionalism that 'Alawī politics has exhibited since 1963. But working for cohesion at the present juncture is the strong fear among 'Alawīs of every rank that dire consequences for all 'Alawīs could ensue from an overthrow or collapse of the existing regime.

### III

Syria's ruling group does not or did not draw strength merely from the Maṭāwirah tribe or the 'Alawī community but also, as stated at the outset, from an ecologic-cultural division of the Syrian people.

The divisions between town and country or between the main cities and the country towns are very old social and cultural divisions and, historically, their interests have tended to be intrinsically at variance. For long the peasants lived at the mercy of the cities. From their standpoint, the cities obtained benefits and brought only injury. The cities, especially the capital, symbolized for them the foreign ruler, the *kapi kulus*—the imperial janisseries—the gendarmes and the tax-collector. Moreover, men from the cities owned their villages or, if they did not own them, controlled the markets in which they had to sell their produce. Over and above this, in recent times the main cities have increasingly been attracting to themselves much of the energy and wealth of the population and have been growing rapidly at the expense of the rest of the country.

How people of rural origins or from country towns feel towards the capital city is reflected in their common descriptions of its inhabitants. They regard the Damascenes as grasping, inhospitable, imperious and disdainfully proud. "The Damascene merchant," they maintain, "will extract profit even from his father." They also gloat over the old saying: "Every Damascene has distinction but is also ignoble" (*kullu shāmī fīhi 'alāmah wa fīhi la'āmah*).

The peasants recurrently sought to liberate themselves from the influence of the cities. There were, for example, risings by 'Alawīs under indigenous chiefs in 1806, 1811, 1815, 1844, 1852, 1855, 1858, 1918–1921 and 1935. But these risings were isolated and localized and, therefore, historically ineffective. Of deeper structural consequence were the struggles that took place *within the cities* between the chief representatives of urban power on the one hand and former peasants or former country people on the other. Connected with these struggles is a phenomenon that repeats itself: rural people, driven by economic distress or lack of security, move into the main cities, settle in the outlying districts, enter before long into relations or forge common links with elements of the urban poor, who are themselves often earlier migrants from the countryside, and together they challenge the old established classes.

Thus, the struggles, that broke out from time to time in the eighteenth and the first third of the nineteenth century between the troops of the governors and the *zarbāwāt* (the disadvantaged and refractory mass of the *yerliyya* or local janissaries) in Damascus, or between the *ashraf* (the claimants of descent from the Prophet) and the counterpart of the *zarbāwāt* in Aleppo, were, in their more serious aspects, struggles between, on the one hand, the dominant families, who lived in the inner parts of Damascus or Aleppo and held most of the surrounding villages and, on the other hand, the men of the people from the outer part of these cities, who were largely former peasants or former bedouins and constituted the cities' menial workers or artisans of inferior standing.<sup>12</sup> For a time the *zarbāwāt* and their leaders gained the ascendancy, at least in their own districts, if not over the entire city, as at Aleppo. In Damascus, in the words of a contemporary chronicler, "they all spoke with one tongue as if they were a soul in one body" and their chiefs gathered such strength that they defiantly boasted: "If ten pashas came to us, accompanied by the Sultan, we would take no account of them and would tear their tails with our *ṭabanjas*."<sup>13</sup> The ascendancy of these forces was short-lived by reason of the intervention of the Ottoman

12. The *yerliyya* had their strongholds in the districts of al-Maydān and Sūq Sārūjā in Damascus and Bānqūsa and Bāb an-Nayrāb and their extensions in Aleppo. These districts were largely inhabited by people of rural or nomadic origins. For this and the points in the text, consult Aḥmad al-Budayrī al-Ḥallāq, *Ḥawādith Dimashq al-Yawmiyyah*, 1154–1176 A.H. (*The Daily Events of Damascus, 1741–1762*), as revised by Muḥammad Sa'īd al-Qāsimī and edited by Aḥmad 'Izzat 'Abd al-Karīm (Cairo, 1959), pp. 18, 63, 66–70, 77–78, 97–98, 127–129, 197, 200, 202, and 213–217; Muḥammad Khalīl al-Murādī, *Silk al-Durar fī A'yān al-Qarn al-Thānī 'Ashar* (*The String of Pearls or the Biography of the Notables of the Twelfth Century of the Hijrah*), III (Cairo, 1883), pp. 90 and 286–287; Bülus Qara'li, ed., *Abammu Hawādith Ḥalab fī al-Nisf al-Awwal min al-Tāsi' 'Ashar* (*The Most Important Events of Aleppo in the First Half of the 19th Century*), based on a manuscript by Bülus Arūtin, Maronite Bishop of Aleppo, 1788–1850 (Cairo, n.d.), pp. 56 and 58; and Herbert L. Bodman, *Political Factions in Aleppo. 1760–1826* (Chapel Hill, 1963), pp. 57–64 and 100–102.

13. Al-Murādī, *Silk al-Durar*, III, p. 286; and al-Budayrī al-Ḥallāq, *Ḥawādith Dimashq*, p. 69. A *ṭabanja* is a type of pistol.



government but the underlying tensions they represented have remained a factor in Syrian politics.

In recent times the most serious urban-rural clashes also occurred within the cities—in the 1960s within Aleppo, Damascus and Ḥamāh, and in 1979–1981 within Ḥamāh, Aleppo and Latakia. At the bottom of much of the anger of the Ḥamawīs, who put up the fiercest opposition against the existing regime, is the fact that since 1966 Syria's rulers have been bringing down peasants from the 'Alawī Mountain and giving them title to lands in the very rich and recently developed plain of al-Ghāb which had formerly been in the possession of wealthy or influential people from Ḥamāh. In the clashes in this as in the other cities, in sharp contrast to the outcome of the urban-rural conflicts of past centuries, the country people clinched a more enduring, if unstable, victory by virtue of their deep penetration of the Syrian army.

If, therefore, in the long-drawn conflict between city and country, the city has been more and more overshadowing the countryside and growing in size, power and significance, the original city people themselves have been falling under. Even so the city is having the final say, inasmuch as the country people, who are on the top of the heap now, are themselves being urbanized and transformed into citizens.

#### IV

Can one adduce more concrete evidence in support of the generalization that Syria's regime depends heavily on people of rural origins?

In 1968, in an internal publication,<sup>14</sup> the Ba'th command provided the following figures on the social composition of the Ba'th Party:

Social Category	Full Members (Per cent)	Candidates (Per cent)
Workers	12	14
Peasants	16	28
Students	20	32
Employees	32	7
Teachers	16	4
Others	4	15
	100	100

14. The National Command of the Socialist Arab Ba'th Party (Syria), *Al-Taqrīr al-Tanzīmī li al-Mu'tamar al-Qawmī al-Istithnā'ī al-'Āshar* (*The Organizational Report of the Extraordinary Tenth National Congress*), Damascus, 1968.

Of course, these statistics are not conclusive as to the nature of the support of the regime in the year in question. They are silent about the proportion of workers, students, employees and teachers who are from a rural background.

There are, however, other indications. In the first place, there is the frank admission by Ba'thīs or ex-Ba'thīs that Damascus has never been a Ba'thī stronghold and that the party's support there was drawn essentially from rural-based students and teachers.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, in the last comparatively free elections held in Damascus, those of 1961, the Ba'thī candidate received from the city's inner districts of 'Amārah and Qaymariyyah only 17.4 per cent and 17.7 per cent of the votes respectively, but 31.5 per cent, 31.7 per cent, and as high as 49.1 per cent of the votes from, severally, the capital's neighboring villages of al-Qadam, Kfar Sūsah and Dummar-Kīwān.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, there is the telling fact that in the 1960s and in the last twelve months or so the government had on occasion to bring in peasants from the countryside to counter the demonstrations and strikes that broke out in Ḥamāh, Aleppo and Damascus. It is also significant that, out of the 600 or so members of the Ba'th's Nationalist Guard in Syria's capital in 1964, only 12 were Damascenes.<sup>17</sup>

Over and above this, it is clear that since 1963 the Ba'th regime derived support at one point or another not only from the rural-inclined 'Alawī military element but also from one or the other, or from all, of three other major army groups of rural background, the Druze group of Jabal al-'Arab, the Sunni group of Ḥawrān, and the Sunni group of Dayr al-Zūr.

In fact, almost all the Sunni officers who rose to conspicuous military positions during the Ba'thī period hailed from country towns or rural areas or from city districts inhabited by former peasants. Thus, Mūsa al-Zu'bī, Chief of the Missile Corps in 1965–1966, and Aḥmad Suwaydānī, the Chief of Staff in 1966–1967, are from the Ḥawrān. Nājī Jamīl, the Commander of the Air Force from 1971 to 1978, is from Dayr al-Zūr. Ḥikmat Shahābī, the present Chief of Staff, is from al-Bāb and the Minister of Defense, Muṣṭafa Ṭlās, is from Rastan. Again, Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ, who played a leading role in the Ba'th regime from 1963 to 1966, hails from Bāb al-Nayrāb, an outlying quarter of Aleppo inhabited by people of rural origin (and in the first third of the nineteenth century, interestingly enough, by members of the *yerliyya* corps).

In view of the fact that the city people, and in particular the members of the professions and the commercial and industrial middle and lower middle

15. See, for example, Sāmī-j-Jundī, *Al-Ba'th*, p. 38.

16. The percentages are based on the detailed results of the elections provided in *Mudhakirrat Khālid al-'Azam* (*The Memoirs of Khālid al-'Azam*), Volume III (Beirut, 1972), p. 222.

17. Conversation, December 1964, with a knowledgeable member of the Ba'th Party who did not wish to be identified.

classes in Damascus, Aleppo, Latakia, Ḥamāh and Ḥimṣ, form a very significant element in terms not only of numbers but also of skills, education, administrative competence and economic *savoir faire*, the neglect of their interests by the Baʿth leaders in the 1960s, through the application of insufficiently considered socialist measures, and the fierce hostility that this aroused, exposed the Baʿth regime to great perils. It is the realization by Asad of the necessity of moderating the urban-rural conflict that formed a principal point of strength of his government in the 1970s. By propitiating the urban middle classes, through the adoption of a limited “open door” economic policy, Asad added to the durability of his regime. This policy explains to no little degree why the Damascenes, its main beneficiaries, did not join, in any serious manner, in the violent urban risings of 1979–1981 against Asad’s government. But also at play in their relative quiescence is the fact that the Damascenes have become a minority in their own city, largely by virtue of the great migratory waves from the countryside: the population of Damascus grew from 345,237 in 1961<sup>18</sup> to about 1.2 million in 1981. Moreover, the state, while paying insufficient attention to the economy of Aleppo or Ḥamāh, has heavily invested in the infrastructure of the capital. Over and above this, the commercially-minded Damascenes, who essentially desire greater freedom of profit-making under conditions of comparative stability, do not see in Syria’s political horizon any acceptable alternative to the present pragmatic partly statist partly capitalist system.

## V

What made possible the political dominance in Syria of the ‘Alawī military element when the members of their community add up to less than one-eighth of the population of the country? Leaving aside two general explanatory factors—the fragmentation of the social structure and the political ineffectiveness of the mass of Syrians—the question resolves itself into one of determining what made possible the decisive control by the ‘Alawī military of the Syrian armed forces.

First, it must be made clear that on the level of the officer corps the ‘Alawīs, contrary to a widespread impression, were not as important numerically as the Sunnis prior to 1963. They derived much of their real strength from the lower ranks of the army. In an arithmetical sense, they had

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18. Great Britain, the Board of Trade, *Syria, Review of Commercial Conditions 1951–1952* (London, 1952), p. 4.

a plurality among the common soldiers and a clear preponderance among the non-commissioned officers. As early as 1955, after the assassination of the Deputy Chief of Staff 'Adnān al-Mālikī by Sergeant Yūsuf 'Abd al-Karīm, an 'Alawī member of the Parti Populaire Syrien, Colonel 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Sarrāj, Chief of the Intelligence Bureau, discovered to his surprise that no fewer than 65 per cent or so of the non-commissioned officers belonged to the 'Alawī sect.<sup>19</sup> How can one account for this state of affairs?

One factor, that is frequently brought up in this connection, is the minority-oriented policy pursued by the French from 1921 to 1945. It is indeed true that out of the eight infantry battalions in the Troupes Spéciales serving in Syria under the French mandate, three consisted entirely or substantively of 'Alawīs and none were Sunni Arab in composition. It is also true that out of the 12 cavalry squadrons on which data are available, only one, the 24th, consisted of rural Sunni Arabs from Dayar al-Zūr and al-Raqqah and two others, the 21st and the 25th, comprised some Sunni Arab elements from the tribe of Shammar or from the towns of Idlib and Ḥimṣ. All the other units were drawn from the Druzes, Circassians, Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians or Isma'īlīs.<sup>20</sup>

However, the pre-independence character of the army, that is, its character prior to 1946, cannot account for its 1963 or its present composition, at least in any decisive sense. The reason must be obvious. In 1963 Syria had standing armed forces of about 65,000,<sup>21</sup> and now has nearly a quarter of a million men under arms, whereas the Syrian contingent of the Troupes Spéciales that it inherited from the French in 1946 counted only 7,000, and was by 1948 reduced to 2,500 men,<sup>22</sup> because the ruling landed and mercantile families of the day regarded the contingent as too large and too financially burdensome. (Incidentally, the fact just cited does not support the notion so often heard that Syria at that time harbored aggressive intentions against the Jewish community in Palestine. When one harbors aggression, one prepares for it and the decrease of one's armed forces from 7,000 to 2,500, in a period when the Palestine question was approaching its highest point of crisis, is scarcely a sign of hostile preparation.) At any rate, it is clear that the strong foothold of the 'Alawīs in the Troupes Spéciales cannot explain their present dominant influence in the army.

A more significant causal factor that was at work as relentlessly in the post-independence period as under the French was the depressed economic condition of the 'Alawīs. Enough has been said about this subject in the

19. 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Sarrāj, conversation, April 1980.

20. I am indebted for the details relating to the composition of the Troupes Spéciales to Professor R. Bayly Winder, who kindly provided me with a copy of an unpublished paper on the subject prepared by him in March 1959. Pages 14–15, of the paper have reference.

21. *The New York Times*, April 26, 1963.

22. *Jaysh al-Sha'b (The Army of the People)*, Damascus, No. 995–996 of August 3, 1971, p. 10.

foregoing pages. Also relevant as an explanation for the superior numerical weight of the 'Alawīs, at least among the rank-and-file draftees, is the matter of the *badal* ("financial substitute"). Prior to 1964 Syrians were permitted to buy exemption from military service for the sum of 500 Syrian pounds.<sup>23</sup> In 1964 the practice was severely restricted and the *badal* raised to 2,000 pounds for holders of college degrees, 1,000 pounds for secondary school graduates, and 600 pounds for other Syrians.<sup>24</sup> In 1968 the maximum *badal* was increased to \$3,000 and more recently to as high as \$5,000, and must now be discharged in hard currency.<sup>25</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, however, the Sunni of the cities, no matter how humble in condition, could as a rule afford to part with 500 or 600 Syrian pounds to avoid one and a half or two years of compulsory service. But for the peasants, especially the 'Alawīs, 500 or 600 pounds represented the value of several seasons of arduous labor. Moreover, peasants were seldom free from debt.

Ultimately, however, it was the rise of the 'Alawīs to dominance in the officer corps that assured their decisive control of the armed forces. In this regard what above all worked to their advantage was the fact that, whereas the 'Alawī officers were overwhelmingly of rural origins, peasant extraction, common regional provenance, and, after 1955, Ba'thī in persuasion, the Sunni officers were hopelessly divided in political, regional and class terms. Thus, the Sunni officers were clearly differentiated into urban and rural officers. Among the urbanites the most active and the most politically distinguishable were the Damascenes and the Ḥamawīs, among the country officers the groups of Dayr al-Zūr and the Ḥawrān. The Damascenes were in part Nāṣirites but identified themselves mostly with the Secessionists, who represented a maze of discordant elements, ranging from groups with roots in the affluent landed, commercial and industrialist parts of society, to Muslim Brethren, socialists and independent leftists from the middle and lower middle classes. The Ḥamawīs largely sympathized with socialist-minded Akram Ḥūrānī and partly with the old elite. Some of the officers from Dayr al-Zūr and the Ḥawrān were Nāṣirites, but most threw in their lot with the Ba'th Party.

By virtue of these divisions in the ranks of the Sunni officers—and I am here simplifying somewhat a very complicated situation—Sunnis of one persuasion ended up purging Sunnis of another persuasion, or low or middle class Sunnis joined with 'Alawīs or Druzes in purging upper class Sunnis, or

23. Article 1 of Decree No. 746 issued on October 24, 1953, by Syria's Ministry of National Defense, *Al-Jarīdat al-Rasmiyyah li al-Jumhūriyyat al-Sūriyyah* (*The Official Gazette of the Syrian Republic*), No. 69 of November 12, 1953, p. 5326.

24. Article 7 of Decree No. 35 of March 4, 1964, issued by the chairman of the National Council of the Revolutionary Command, *Al-Jarīdat al-Rasmiyyah* . . . . No. 10 of 1964, p. 2493.

25. Article 2 of Decree No. 7 of January 10, 1978, *Al-Jarīdat al-Rasmiyyah* . . . . No. 49 of November 21, 1978, p. 117.

rural-oriented Sunnis joined with 'Alawīs and Druzes in purging city-based Sunnis. In political terms, the Secessionists, the Ḥūrānists, the Nāṣirites, the group of the independent Ziyād Ḥarīrī, and the supporters of the Ba'thī Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ were successively purged between March 1963 and February 1966 and, with every purge, the Sunnis in the officer corps decreased in number and significance. A blow in September 1966 against the Druzes—the group of Salīm Ḥāṭūm—and a blow in February 1968 against the remaining bloc of rural Sunnis—the Ḥawrān group of Aḥmad Suwaydānī—left the 'Alawī officers in clear command of the field.

In this struggle the 'Alawī officers were greatly aided by their control of the Military Section of the Ba'th Party. This came about largely as a result of the fact that officers from their sect constituted the core of the Ba'th Secret Military Committee which took shape in Cairo in 1959, served soon after as a center of attraction for disaffected Syrian officers, and eventually played a leading role in pulling off the military coup of March 1963.

The control by the 'Alawīs of the Ba'th Military Section enabled them, in the first place, to act as Ba'this rather than as 'Alawīs. But this observation must be qualified. The 'Alawī officers were not all the time acting consciously as 'Alawīs. They were, it must be remembered, also people of rural and humble origins and acting as such, that is, acting according to the instincts and tendencies that their structural situation engendered. At any rate, by dint of their control of the Ba'th Military Section, they were able to regulate the admission into the military academies and to shuffle and reshuffle the commands of military units in manners answering to their purposes. They did this at first—in the second quarter of 1963—with caution but determinedly after July 1963 and more so from February 1966 onwards. Moreover, by virtue of a tactic devised during the secessionist period—the period from 1961 to 1963—the tactic of planting Ba'this in clandestine military organizations of every coloring, they were kept posted on the intentions and plans of all their rivals.

Also greatly contributing to their eventual triumph was the fact that they concentrated upon, and succeeded in gaining control of, powerful striking units that were of direct relevance to the making and unmaking of military coups, that is, such units as air squadrons, missile detachments, and armored brigades in or around the capital, not to mention intelligence and counter-intelligence forces.

Of course, many Sunnis are still in the officer corps but, if they are important, they are important not as a group but as individuals and more in the professional than in the political sense.

## VI

It remains to point out how remarkably similar, in their basic outlines, are the characteristics of Syria's rulers to those of Iraq's governing element,

despite the different balance of ethnic and sectarian forces in the two countries (53 per cent of Iraq's population are Shi'i Arabs, 20 per cent Sunni Arabs, and 18 per cent Sunni Kurds, whereas in Syria 63 per cent are Sunni Arabs and 12 per cent 'Alawī Arabs, to mention only the most numerous groups).

Thus, the core of the ruling element of Iraq also consists of a kinship group (closely related members of the Begāt section of the Albū Nāṣir tribe); rests essentially on members of a minority sect (Sunni Arabs) and on country rather than city people (on middle and lower middle class families from the country towns of the Arab north-western part of Iraq); and reflects the balance of forces in the army rather than in the country at large (the relative strength of the bloc of military officers originating from the country town of Takrīt).

How can one explain these similarities of the ruling groups in Syria and Iraq? They are obviously a natural reflection of the similar level of social development in both countries and of similar past struggles between the countryside and the main towns or capital city or, more concretely, between disadvantaged rural or partially urbanized forces and privileged city-based groups.

To this a final observation should be added, which is perhaps a tautology: when in Syria or Iraq disadvantaged or previously disadvantaged rural or partially urbanized people—representing a level in social evolution different than that of relatively long established urban groups—tend in their political actions to adhere to or cooperate more markedly with kinsmen or members of their own clan or people from their own sect or region, this is not so much a manifestation of narrow cliquishness, although their behavior bears this aspect, as it is they are really acting in a natural manner, merely obeying, so to say, the logic of their fundamental structural situation.