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The Origins of the Syrian Insurrection

Leïla VIGNAL

The Syrian civil war has entered its fourth year and continues to take a very heavy toll on the Syrian people. In his book on Bashar Al-Asad's authoritarian regime, Souhaïl Belhadj shows how this conflict is rooted not in ethnic and religious identity, but in a profound social crisis.

Reviewed: *La Syrie de Bashar al-Asad, Anatomie d'un régime autoritaire*, [Bashar al-Asad's Syria: Anatomy of an Authoritarian Regime] by Souhaïl Belhadj, Belin, 2013, 464 pages, 25€.

In 2015, Syria seems to be sinking into a crisis whose resolution seems both uncertain and remote. Each month since the Syrian insurrection broke out four years ago, in March 2011, the toll has grown increasingly grim: 250,000 dead, more than three million refugees abroad, seven millions of people internally displaced (out of a total population of 21 million in 2011), towns and neighborhoods ravaged by air bombardments, and the mass use, on the part of the regime, of prohibited weapons—chemical weapons, as we now know, but also, more prosaically and frequently, other illegal weapons, such as fragmentation bombs. The popular uprising and anti-regime opposition groups find themselves trapped between the opportunistic strategy of jihadi groups, which have sought to establish a presence on Syrian soil since early 2013, and a regime whose strategy of full-scale repression is supported by powerful foreign allies (Iran, Russia, Hezbollah, and several Iraqi militias).

After three years of turmoil, political scientist Souhaïl Belhadj's book, *La Syrie de Bashar al-Asad* (Bashar al-Asad's Syria), which was published in 2013, represents an important contribution to the scholarly literature on Syria and authoritarian regimes. His book, which is well written, accessible, and clear, is the fruit of in-depth scholarly research undertaken in the 2000s. Its insights into the Syria of the 2000s are particularly rich to understand some aspects of the current conflict.

Belhadj's book is written from the perspective of both a political scientist and an historian. As a political scientist, he proposes a genuine “anatomy of an authoritarian regime,” to quote his book's subtitle, and, in particular, an anatomy of the institutions and power structures that allowed it to remain in place for forty years. The book's value, from this standpoint, lies in its refusal to confine itself to the president and his entourage—the mistake made by most studies of the new *raïs*—and in its contention that the regime is based not simply on a “minority” (the “Alawites,” the Islamic sect to which President al-Asad belongs) which rules over other groups, but on a broader alliance with the Sunni community which has fanned Syrian society's internal antagonisms.

Belhadj's book is also the work of an historian. He offers the reader a survey of more than sixty years of Syrian political history. He analyzes this history by focusing on the underlying problem which, he believes, lies at the root of Syria's authoritarian regime and its very distinctive form of "leadership": the conflict between various social groups competing for power and the right to participate in Syria's post-independence political order.

Social Conflict: The Aporia of Syria's Authoritarian System

Syria's proclamation of independence in 1946 set the country on a path to building a parliamentary republic. This was a period of great political instability, characterized by successive governments, coups d'état, and political ventures (such as the ephemeral United Arab Republic uniting Syria with Egypt from 1958 to 1961). At the same time, it was an unprecedented moment of political and institutional experimentation in the Middle East, in during which parliamentary culture and political pluralism took root in Syria.¹

For Belhadj, this serious political instability was the result of "contemporary elites' inability to regulate the social conflict" afflicting post-independence Syria. He accepts the very classical definition of social conflict as the competition and "struggles between antagonistic social groups." In the Syrian context, this kind of social conflict reflects the transformation of the social and political order that had prevailed in the Syrian provinces of the Ottoman Empire until the French Mandate (1920-1946). These transformations finally became visible with independence and the project of building republican institutions.

The post-independence years pitted urban elites groups consisting of "traditional, estate-owning Sunni notables and Christian entrepreneurs" against previously dominated minority groups (including ethnic and religious minorities as well as poor rural Sunnis). These antagonisms, the origins of which can be traced back to Ottoman times, were thus both class-based and ethno-religious. After independence, minorities, which had begun to emancipate themselves thanks to French rule and educational policies benefiting the younger generations, challenged the new Syrian political and social order. They challenged the dominance of urban Sunni-Christian elites, their inability to integrate new social groups into their modernizing project, and their refusal to share power. What changed during these years was that these groups, despite being deeply divided about Syria's future, agreed among themselves to bring down what they called, at the time, the "republic of notables." A further novelty was that opposition also emanated from the military, whose ranks had been mostly replenished since the Mandate through the increasing recruitment of minorities (particularly Alawites and Druze).

With the 1963 coup d'état, the balance of power tilted in favor of one of these groups: the Baath party. The coup upended the republic's social order and brought to power an "economically modest provincial counter-elite,"² consisting of Alawites, Sunni peasants, and Baathists. This counter-elite was dominated by the military, which acquired lasting authority over the party's civilian apparatus. It established a military dictatorship—marked by occasional

¹ See, for example, Matthieu Rey's 2012 article "Un parlementarisme oriental ? Eléments pour une histoire des assemblées au Moyen-Orient des années 1850 aux années 1970," in *Revue d'histoire politique*, 2012/1, n°17 L'Harmattan, p. 162-176.

² A term coined by Raymond Hinnebusch, as quoted by Souheil Belhadj. Hinnebusch R., 2001, *Syria: Revolution From Above*, London, Routledge.

internal *coups de force*—which Hafez al-Asad (Bashar al-Asad’s father) took over in 1970. The “corrective movement” that Asad launched resulted in the proclamation of the “Baathist Republic” in 1973. Yet as Belhadj shows, once in power, the Baath party did not so much resolve Syria’s social conflict as freeze it.

Anatomy of Syria’s “Authoritarian Formula”

Belhadj explains how Asad, at Syria’s helm, gradually implemented an “authoritarian formula” while simultaneously engaging in violent repression (which culminated in the bloody crushing of the Muslim Brotherhood’s uprising in Hama in 1982) and exploiting tense regional circumstances to establish his domestic legitimacy by presenting himself as a champion of pan-Arabism. The great force of Belhadj’s book lies in its carefully argued analysis of this “authoritarian formula,” based on qualitative documentary evidence acquired through research conducted over several years, resulting in previously unknown and very valuable data on Syria’s contemporary political system: official archives, notably those of the Baath Party; oral sources (interviews with Syrian leaders and civil servants, particularly Baathists), and first-hand accounts (such as of the People’s Assembly, Syria’s parliament).

Syria’s “authoritarian formula” rests on a system of political leadership that is divided between several institutions, as Michel Seurat described in the 1980s.³ In the first place, there is the military, which has prevailed over the Baath Party’s civilian leadership since the 1963 coup. This dominance was reinforced when Hafez al-Asad, who made his career in the officer corps, seized power. This is why Bashar al-Asad, as he prepared to succeed his father, had to rise rapidly through the military’s ranks. The second institution is the intelligence service, which plays a central, organizational role in security matters as well as in politics, as its agents are dispersed, for surveillance purpose, throughout the state bureaucracy and major social institutions. Lastly, the third institution is the Baath Party. Its preeminent role in Syrian political life is defined by the 1973 Constitution. Due to its executive functions, the party’s structures are closely intertwined with those of the state, which results, in practice, in the government being confined to a marginal role. Moreover, the party receives two thirds of the seats in the People’s Assembly, in addition to dominating the coalition of the National Progressive Front, which includes all authorized parties. This automatically limits pluralism and free competition. Finally, the Baath party shapes social life through many partisan, popular, and professional organizations. It is, in this way, responsible for building a new “national consensus” around the regime’s changing catchphrases: socialism and pan-Arabism in the 1970s, economic opening and redistribution in the 2000s. The quest for national consensus is intended to overcome the antagonisms of Syrian society and, in short, to neutralize the very social conflict which the baathist authoritarian rule inevitably inflames.

Syria’s Leadership under Bashar al-Asad

Thanks to this authoritarian formula, the Syrian leadership controls, in short, all the levers of power: the president dominates the government, serves as general secretary of the Baath Party, commands the armed forces, and is the only individual to whom the intelligence service and the praetorian guard reports—a prerogative that is crucial, given that these agencies, which belong to the state bureaucracy, are in theory under the Baath party’s control. But it would be inaccurate to superficially conclude that the Syrian—or the Arab—state is little more than a façade or a

³ Michel Seurat, *L’Etat de Barbarie*, [1989], Paris, PUF, 2012.

smokescreen, with real power lying elsewhere—notably with the *raïs* and his inner circle. The examples of Egypt and Tunisia have shown that leaders lose power when their militaries abandon them, while the Syrian case proves the same point negatively: as long as the core institutions remain loyal, the regime can resist challenges. The real reasons for this authoritarian regime's continued existence are thus to be found in the articulation between Syria's leadership and the Syrian system of power.

Based on analysis of Bashar al-Asad's presidency and the choices he has made vis-à-vis the legacy he inherited, Belhadj shows how Syria's political leadership has organized and made use of the authoritarian regime's strong institutionalization to stabilize itself. From this perspective, one of the book's contributions is that it does not analyze Syria's leadership solely by examining the leader himself and his inner circle, as have most of the studies of Bashar al-Asad that have appeared in recent years,⁴ and which mostly confined their analysis to assessing, in a "Kremlinological" vein, the young president's capacity and inclination to reform the system.

Belhadj offers three examples of the ways in which the president has established his authority over Syria's political leadership. One chapter is devoted to a thorough analysis of how Bashar al-Asad organized and transformed the Baath party and the government in the 2000s, and established himself as the head of Syria's political leadership. Another chapter analyzes the way in which Bashar al-Asad preserved his father's foreign policy apparatus, which allowed him to stabilize the regime's political leadership as well as his own ascendancy over the authoritarian system. Indeed, by the end of an extremely challenging decade (the 2003 invasion of Iraq, US sanctions, the Syrian military's retreat from Lebanon following the assassination of the Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, and the diplomatic isolation that followed this assassination), the president managed to strengthen Syria's regional strategic profile by relying on its allies (Russia and Iran), establishing contacts with two former enemies (Turkey and Iraq), and reestablishing relations with France. Finally, the author explains how the new president has called for a new "national formula," based on the one hand on policies of economic liberalization to reinvigorate the mechanisms for redistributing growth and, on the other hand, on the "opening" of the political system—an opening which, Belhadj rightly notes, is limited and narrow.

The Sunni-Alawite Alliance: The Heart of Syria's Political System

Crucially, particularly for understanding the dynamics of the current crisis, Belhadj shows that the continued rule of Syria's leadership does not depend on the dominance of a single ethnic or religious group (the Alawites, who make up around 10% of the population), contrary to the claims of superficial media analysts, but rather on a broader alliance, which is based on "ethnic-religious power sharing" between Alawites and Sunnis.⁵ According to Belhadj, the "long-term domination" of a "minority" is an inherently antithetical proposition, for which there is, moreover, no historical precedent. Furthermore, he maintains that this type of analysis commits us to understanding social dynamics in terms of ethnic and religious antagonism, whereas these fault lines are in fact the result of social conflicts exacerbated by the Baathists' monopolization of power.

⁴ See, for example Leïla Vignal, "Bachar al-Asad, les voies étroites de la réforme," in *La vie des idées dans le monde*, July-August, 2005, Paris.

⁵ Sunnis represent around 75% of the Syrian population.

Belhadj's book thus helps us to see that none of the groups that have seized power since the 1963 Baathist coup were organized around ethnic-religious, clan, or family lines. Moreover, he shows that the Alawites do not dominate the state apparatus, even if they are overrepresented in relation to their percentage of the population. Thanks to detailed evidence and a qualitative approach, he precisely describes the mechanisms through which power is shared between Sunnis and Alawites, which for the most part places Sunnis at the head of most of the state's power levers. The security services—a key institution which reports directly to the president and which operates, as we have seen, in unusual and specific ways—nevertheless does illustrate the way in which the president can use confessional allegiances to his advantage. The Alawites are a minority in these services, although they make up 20% of their personnel. However, if the vast majority of the heads of the services are Sunnis, their deputies are mostly Alawites, which facilitates their direct access to the presidency.

In this way, Belhadj's book diverges from a current of analysis in Syria's academia which, inspired by the work of Michel Seurat,⁶ sees *asabiya* membership as the cornerstone of the Syrian political apparatus. The term *asabiya* is used by the medieval historian Ibn Khadun to describe what is translated as the *esprit de corps*. According to this approach, the *esprit de corps* refers to an individual's primary and crucial allegiance to an ethno-religious community, and this primary identity would explain the persistence of the Baathist regime. This approach suggests, in short, a close equivalence between the Baathist regime and Alawite rule.

Yet in his book Belhadj shows that allegiance mechanisms cannot be easily superimposed onto an exclusively ethnic (or religious or familial) map, which is not sufficient to explain the structure and the persistence of the Baathist regime and its leadership. He demonstrates that if the regime's power is based on ethnic and religious groups, it rests on power sharing between two of these groups. To preserve itself, it has created a system of authority that is guaranteed by intelligence services and which is based on controlling access to political and economic resources through such intermediary institutions as the Baath party, the intelligence services, and the military.

Understanding the Syrian Crisis

The political order founded by Hafez al-Asad and continued by his son Bashar thus consists in the “establishment of a coercive and clientelist system which preserves a balance between various ethnic and religious groups.” This implies a limitation of political pluralism and the perpetuation of “policies benefiting the military, the Baathist Party, and the Alawites.” Belhadj shows that under the pretense of protecting a multi-confessional order and while presenting itself as a defender of minorities, the Asad regime has, to the contrary, reinforced all the antagonisms which traverse Syrian society, including ethno-religious, communal, and class conflicts. Rather than liberalizing the political process and running the risk of being confined to the minority, Syria's political leadership has, from Hafez to Bashar al-Asad, opted to freeze social conflict by implementing the “Baathist authoritarian formula.”

Belhadj's analysis thus allows us to see the revolutionary uprising in Syria beginning in March 2011 as the symptom of a profound social conflict, to which Syria's authoritarian system

⁶ *Op.cit.*

proved incapable and unwilling to respond. It is also a sign of the fact that, over the past decade, whereas Syrian society was changing and the Syrians developed new expectations, Bashar al-Asad proved unsuccessful in offering an alternative to social conflict. After his father's "Baathism, socialism, and pan-Arabism," his son has been unable to implement a new national formula which could bring society together. The urban "masses" and rural inhabitants, the Baath party's traditional clients, did not benefit from economic liberalization and, abandoned, watched the regime promote new economic elites.

Moreover, Belhadj offers important tools for analyzing the Syrian regime at present, in turmoil. Its capacity for resistance, over and beyond the material support provided by Russia and Iran, suggests that, for now at least, the regime's three pillars—the military, the secret services, and the party—have not abandoned the repressive option which the political leadership has chosen, even if the army and the intelligence services now prevail over the Syrian political system, at the expense of the Baath Party, which is disintegrating. The authoritarian formula still holds. Yet at a time when Syria is torn apart by a conflict that has ripped open the straightjacket in which the Baath regime has kept it, Belhadj's book suggests a different account of the regime's possible evolution. The fact that it has resorted to high levels of violence to survive opposition—in other words, like any ordinary minority regime—and that it mobilizes communitarian narratives and tactics might suggest that the authoritarian formula, based on a Sunni-Alawite alliance, is now engaged in a struggle for its own survival.

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