

The World's Next Genocide
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At a recent meeting hosted by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, Peter W. Galbraith, a former American ambassador who witnessed ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, made a chilling prediction. "The next genocide in the world," he said, "will likely be against the Alawites in Syria."

A few months ago, talk of possible massacres of Alawites, who dominate Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria, seemed like pro-regime propaganda. Now, it is a real possibility.

For more than a year, Mr. Assad's government has been committing crimes against humanity in Syria. As it fights for survival on the streets of Aleppo and Damascus, the risk of unrestrained reprisals against Mr. Assad's Alawite sect and Syria's other religious minorities is growing every day.

Following the rise to power of Mr. Assad's father, Hafez, in 1970, Alawites were transformed from a persecuted minority sect to the controlling force within the army and government. With a system of perks similar to those in other dictatorships, the elder Mr. Assad drew other religious and ethnic minorities into his political orbit while rebellions by members of the Sunni majority, like the one in Hama in 1982, were mercilessly crushed.

When the Arab Spring reached Syria last year, it dredged up animosities that had been lurking for decades. The protest movement was avowedly nonsectarian, attracting Syrians from all communities. But in the government's eyes, the opposition was simply a Sunni front seeking to topple the Assad family and end Alawite rule.

The Syrian government's actions have deepened the sectarian divide. As the violent repression of protests gave way to the destruction of opposition-controlled villages, the government moved from targeting individual dissenters to imposing collective punishment upon entire neighborhoods. Sunni areas were shelled by artillery and tanks, and the pro-government shabiha militia, made up mainly of Alawites, carried out ferocious massacres of men, women and children. The majority of victims were Sunni civilians.

As the civil war intensifies, Mr. Assad is increasingly outsourcing the dirty work. In Damascus, militia groups within Druse, Christian and Shiite areas are being armed by the government. While the justifications for these militias are "neighborhood self-defense" and the protection of religious sites, the shabiha emerged in a similar way before becoming killing squads for Mr. Assad. And by drawing Christians, Druse, Shiites and Alawites into the civil war on an explicitly sectarian basis, the Syrian government has all but guaranteed that there will be reprisals against these communities if Mr. Assad falls.

Indeed, as pro-democracy protests degenerated into civil war, the ideological composition of the opposition changed. The Free Syrian Army's slogan remains, "We are all one people of one country." But inside Syria those chanting "Christians to Beirut, Alawites to their graves!" have become more than a fringe element. Human Rights Watch and other groups have documented cases of rebels executing Syrian soldiers and Alawites regarded as government collaborators.

Growing numbers of foreign Sunni extremist fighters are battling not just to rid Syria of Mr. Assad, but to religiously cleanse it. As a result, many Syrian Christians now fear that their fate will mirror that of Iraqi

Christians, who were largely forced out of Iraq by war and sectarian terrorism. The city of Homs was once home to 80,000 Christians; there are now reportedly fewer than 400.

Three vetoes by Russia and China have blocked attempts by the United Nations Security Council to hold the Syrian government accountable for its crimes. But those who have opted for a proxy war in Syria and who are now financing the rebels cannot avoid responsibility for what comes next.

Governments that have publicly committed themselves to helping end Syria's misery, including the United States, must immediately do two things to help prevent a violent backlash against Alawites and other minorities. First, they must impress upon the newly united Syrian opposition that support depends on strict adherence to international humanitarian law. Armed groups who advocate fracturing Syria along sectarian or regional lines should be denied funds; there should be absolutely no aid for rebel groups who target Alawites and other minorities for reprisals or who commit war crimes.

Second, outside governments should intensify their efforts to hold all perpetrators of mass atrocities accountable at the International Criminal Court, regardless of their allegiance. That also means allocating funds for additional United Nations human rights monitors on the Syrian border in order to collect evidence and testimony for future prosecutions.

Syria has experienced untold horrors throughout its history. But it is a historic crossroads of cultures, faiths and civilizations. The real choice in Syria today is not between Alawites or Sunnis, or between Mr. Assad and Al Qaeda, but between action enabling further crimes against humanity to take place and action dedicated to ending impunity for such crimes once and for all.

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