

Syrian Alawites in their own words
By David Kenner, Foreign Affairs
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Most Western coverage of Syria understandably focuses on places and people journalists can access. There have been many articles from opposition-held areas, interviews with rebel fighters and anti-regime activists, and reports on the humanitarian crisis across the country. But getting Syria's Alawite community, to which President Bashar al-Assad and his inner circle belong, to speak candidly about their perception of the two year-old revolt has been another matter entirely.



That's why Syrian researcher Aziz Nakkash's recent report, "The Alawite Dilemma in Homs," is so valuable. Nakkash spent the summer of 2012 speaking with members of the Alawite minority in the city of Homs, getting their perspective on their communities' relationship with the regime and their opinion of the uprising. He found that the Alawite community was far from monolithic: The Alawites from the Sunni-majority regions of Homs and Hama felt excluded from the centers of power, which were in the hands of well-connected officials from the Alawite-majority coastal region. At the same time, Nakkash found that the Assad regime had been successful in militarizing the Alawite community -- Alawites, he wrote, don't see themselves as fighting for the survival of the regime, but as supporting close family members and friends in the security services.

You should read the whole report (<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/09825.pdf>), but here is how some Alawites described their view of the revolt to Nakkash.

Ghandi, an agricultural engineering student at Homs's Baath University: "Sunnis want to drive us out to the coast, which is historically where Alawites have always been chased," he says. "[Sunnis] already hated us before [the uprising]...not all Sunnis, just the Muslim Brotherhood because they want to create an Islamic religious state."

Ghandi volunteered to become a shabiha, an armed pro-regime civilian under the supervision of Assad's intelligence services. He was assigned to the restive Homs neighborhood of Khaldiyyeh. "I didn't go for Bashar [al-Assad], I went for my brothers who are working in the army and are currently fighting in Idlib and the suburbs of Damascus."

Sheikh Mahmoud, who has four sons fighting in the army: "We are modest people here, and we struggle to survive economically. This is why the young enlist in the army and secret service, so as to be able to eat, not in order to gain power."

Sheikh Mahmoud laments the looting of Sunni homes, but justifies it by pointing to his own community's poverty. "Yes, it's a sin, but what can we do when our people have so little?" he says. "It's a sin for Sunnis and Alawites to be fighting each other."

He sees the revolt as an extension of sectarian tensions that he said began with the rise of the current regime. "It started when Hafez [al-Assad] came to power, it intensified in the eighties at the time of the Muslim Brotherhood [uprising] and has continued to this day," he says. "If Bashar weren't Alawite, there wouldn't be a war." Nevertheless, he sees the current conflict as "necessary."

Fadi, a young man in his 30s who works in sales: "I use[d] to like Sunnis more than Alawites...When the revolution started, I was really excited."

However, as sectarian violence became more common in Homs, Fadi's opinions changed. "Suddenly I became scared and I changed my mind, as I realized that what was happening was no longer a revolution," he says. "I don't support Bashar, but I cannot actively oppose him, because I'm scared for my brother who works in the army, and also for myself. And in the end, I want to be able to live, and to provide a good life to my daughter."

Kamel, a taxi driver living in a mixed Alawite-Sunni neighborhood: "Salvation will come from Qardaha [the ancestral village of the Assad clan]."

Kamel's mother is Sunni, and he used to maintain good relations with other Sunnis - including his brother-in-law. But now he considers all Sunnis as "terrorists." He adds, "I hate Sunnis, and I told my brother-in-law to stop coming into our neighborhood."

Abu Ahmed, a father of eight in his 60s: "In the Secret Service, most of the officers are from the coast. We all grew up in Homs and did not think in sectarian terms, we all used to get along. But after they came, they began saying 'you are Alawite' and 'he is Sunni'. In the current crisis, the mukhabarat are playing the sectarian card...I hate people from the coast, because they see everything in sectarian terms."

Abu Ahmad still keeps in touch with his Sunni friends -- but he doesn't tell his Alawite neighbors, "because I'm afraid they'll think I'm a traitor." Despite his contempt for sectarian divisions, he is contemplating moving to the Alawite majority city of Tartous. "Even though I know nobody there, I need to find a safe place for my family to live," he says. "I've spent all my life in Homs and if it were up to me, I would never leave, but nothing is more important than the security of my family."

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