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Why is Syria Killing its People?
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Last week, military forces in Syria bombed and rampaged through Houla, killing more than 100 civilians, nearly a third of whom were children. This is just the latest in a string of atrocities perpetuated over several months in which the Syrian army has used weapons of war to attack unarmed citizens. The massacre shows the failure of the United Nations-brokered cease-fire that supposedly went into effect in April.

The world’s nations have done almost everything it can short of military intervention to stop the slaughter, but Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has not ceased his attacks on his country’s citizens. The international diplomatic core seems stumped, unable to understand the virulent, disproportionate response of the Assad government.

This is because the response is a religious one rather than a political one. Modern Syria has often been described as being ruled by the Baathist Party, an Arab socialist party with branches in Iraq and Egypt. A careful look at the many government coups since independence in 1946, shows a steady move of members of the Alawi movement in Islam towards political power.

Alawist military officers, like Hafez al-Assad, helped bring the Baathists to power in 1963. In 1966, the Alawists reformed the Baath Party, expelling many Sunni leaders. Then in 1970, Assad himself took over the party and in 1971 became Syria’s President, even though the constitution permitted only a Sunni Muslim to hold it. Since then, Hafez al-Assad and his son Bashar have held on to that position through the use of force, firmly quelling all political dissent.

The Alawi movement in Islam has always been controversial. It originated within Shiite Islam, with most of its adherents ultimately residing in the Syrian mountains along the eastern Mediterranean coast. There, these rural villagers acquired a number of religious elements from their neighbors, both Ismaili Muslims and Christians.

These new elements of Alawism make its adherents look different from other Muslims. They neither fast during Ramadan nor make pilgrimage to Mecca, both of which belong to the five basic “Pillars of Islam.” They also lack mosques, Islamic prayer houses, leading other Muslims to question whether they even pray.

Unsurprisingly, other Muslims have questioned whether the Alawis are even Muslim. Although one Grand Mufti of Jerusalem recognized them as such, many Sunni scholars, including the still influential Ismail Ibn Kathir, saw them as pagans.

Islam has rarely treated its minority religious groups well. Since 80% of Muslims are Sunni, that majority movement has understood itself as having the God-given right to ensure correct belief and practice. It has often persecuted religious groups who have taken other paths.

The Alawites have been no exception. Sunni persecution, especially under the Ottoman Empire, explains their reputation as warlike soldiers and rebels. These conflicts have led to long-standing distrust between Alawites and Sunnis.

This history of conflict should not be surprising. Few majority religious movements in any religion tolerate splinter groups (heresies) and often try to stamp them out. In the early centuries of the Protestant Reformation, for example, European Catholicism tried hard to rid Europe first of Lutheranism and then Calvinism. The Thirty Years War between Catholic France and Protestant Germany was Europe’s longest and perhaps most destructive war, resulting in a depopulation (by death) of much of central Europe.

The Thirty Year War ended in 1648 with the Treaty of Westphalia, which said that the religion of a nation’s king was the nation’s religion, and that minority religious groups could worship as they saw fit, but only in private. This guaranteed the religious rights of individuals, but hardly on an equal basis.

Assad and his Alawite army view present-day Syria according to the same dynamics. Alawites are a distinct minority in Syria, where the majority are Sunnis. The Assad regime sees itself as the guarantor of Alawite liberty and even existence. Should the Assad regime fall, they believe the Alawites will be wiped out by vengeful Sunnis. They may not be wrong; Syrian social media is full of angry comments suggesting that the only solution to the conflict is to rid Syria not just of Assad but of all Alawites.

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