The history of Syria in the 20th century is marked by foreign domination, imperialism and the difficult formation of a Syrian identity, linked to questions of territorial integrity and national unity. The creation of a small independent state for the Alawis, under French mandate, after World War I is of great significance in light of current events in Syria.

DIVIDE AND RULE
THE CREATION OF THE ALAWI STATE AFTER WORLD WAR I

BY **NECATI ALKAN**

In his installation *Repair. 5 Acts*, exhibited in the summer of 2013 at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, the German-based Algerian artist Kader Attia addresses the fragility and imitation of the body in various situations such as war, art, cults, and natural history. The work includes wooden carvings of the faces of soldiers disfigured in war, and totem masks exhibited alongside stuffed animals. Photo: Stefan Weidner © Goethe-Institut

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1918, at the end of World War I, its enemies vied with each other for control of its provinces. France conquered the province of Syria (consisting of modern Syria, Lebanon, and Alexandretta / Hatay in Turkey) in 1920, and in the same year the League of Nations assigned it the mandate for that region, including the hinterland of Latakia, the Nusayri (Alawi) territory on the eastern Mediterranean coast, which has for centuries been their main area of settlement.

The Alawis, previously called 'Nusayris' by the Ottomans and Europeans, are Arabic-speaking members of a heterodox sect with roots in Shia Islam. They had lived in Ottoman Syria for centuries, keeping their faith secret and living in seclusion, as they feared persecution by the Sunni orthodoxy.

FROM NUSAYRIS TO ALAWIS

The initial negative attitude of the Ottomans – who had conquered Syria in 1516 – toward the Nusayris changed considerably from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. One factor was increasing intervention by the European powers in internal Ottoman politics. The Ottoman state was forced to recognise the Nusayris as a religious community with their own rights. Another factor that encouraged the Ottoman administration to get closer to the Nusayris was the expansion of missionary activities by English and American Protestants among heterodox Muslim minorities. The missionaries' infiltration of the Nusayris compelled Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909) to integrate the latter into the Muslim community and draw them closer to the official

Hanafi school, one of the four Sunni schools of law. The construction of mosques and madrasas (educational schools) in the Nusayri region, and in other places where similar groups were living, was aimed at turning the 'heretics' into good and loyal subjects.

Official Ottoman documents refer to the conversion of tens of thousands heretics to Sunni Islam: yet Abdülhamid's 'civilising project' was ultimately unsuccessful. In the same vein, the missionaries, who had been trying to establish a new social order based on the millenarian belief, had little success in converting heterodox Muslims. The Nusayris also underwent a collective process of transformation during this period, by choosing to refer to themselves as 'Alawi' (Turkish: *Aleviler*, Arabic: *'Alawiyyun*). My hypothesis is that this change in self-designation was part of a socio-political process of dissociation from the Ottoman Empire that got underway in the last decades of the nineteenth century, before its final collapse.

The name 'Alawi' gained acceptance after World War I, with the short-lived 'State of the Alawis' (*Dawlat al-'Alawiyyin*) under French mandate in Syria as a half-autonomous region, and later as one of the 'Federation States of Syria'. It is common knowledge that the Alawis were transformed into a dominant sect by the French, who were trying to counter Sunni hegemony in Syria. Research also suggests that the Alawis had already been prepared for this role by the tension between the Ottomans and the Western powers.

THE MANDATE POWERS IN SYRIA AFTER WORLD WAR I

Ottoman rule ended with the defeat of the Empire and its final dissolution at the end of the First World War. As the victors, Britain and France divided the Arab provinces according to their own interests. Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Israel, as we know them today, were geographically known as 'Greater Syria'. Their borders were artificially created and imposed by the two European powers, against the will of the population. The aim was to make use of their religious, sectarian and ethnic diversity and apply the principle of 'divide and rule'.

For the first time, World War I provided France with hegemony and a mandate in the region now called the 'Middle East', rather than with military victories. Its desire to gain power and land in the Middle East dates back to the years immediately prior to the war, with the start of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. After occupying Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, France felt the need to control Greater Syria in order to balance its power in the Mediterranean. Italy had conquered Tripoli / Libya in 1911, and in so doing had dealt a heavy and lasting blow to Ottoman hegemony in North Africa. During World War I, France's military duties were in Europe, and its weak military presence in the Middle East prevented it from assuming an important role in the region. For these reasons, and because they feared that Britain was trying to disadvantage them, the French resorted to the power of negotiation.

In accordance with Woodrow Wilson's Principles, the old Ottoman provinces could not openly be colonised, and were thus divided into territories, called mandates, assigned by a 'general association of nations', i.e. the future League of Nations (14th Principle). Mandates were given to powerful countries in order to ensure that the regions they had authority over attained self-determination and became independent. Gilbert Murray, the British delegate to the League of Nations, said with regard to Turkey that members of 'this great Society of Nations' were to assist one another in carrying out 'a most difficult task', imposed not only by the treaties but also by the 'historical necessities of the present time'. Talking about 'the treaties for the protection of minorities' and 'the application of the clauses', he remarked that 'there is no question of a foreign nation interfering with the domestic affairs of another nation in order to protect the interests of some minority with which it feels special sympathy.'

The Western Powers saw themselves as the source of enlightenment and moral leadership, the bearers of the torch of civilisation, which they had to take to the regions they colonised in order to illumine them. France undoubtedly had an idealised image of itself as a 'civilised nation', as opposed to the 'uncivilised' non-state of Syria, which was a society divided by religions, sects and ethnic groups; 'fanatical' people and 'savages' who were fighting each other, and needed to be disciplined by the French. A French study on the Kurds, for example, stated: 'The half-wild races must spend numerous years in tutelage before governing themselves … A great power must accept the mandate to administer their country and make the teachings, which among other nations are the fruit of the experience of centuries, enter their hearts.'

DIVISIONS ACCORDING TO WESTERN WHIM

The decisions that Britain and France took at the Conference of San Remo in 1920 regarding the partition of the Middle East sealed the fate of the people in the region. In the ten years after San Remo, Britain and France divided the population of the Middle East according to their whim. France went further, creating semi-autonomous provinces under a national government in Syria. Self-rule and independence aside, the two powers drew new, artificial borders and generated social barriers which over time gave rise to regional disruptions. What Wilson had envisaged as the 'undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development' for the non-Turks under Ottoman rule (12th Principle) did not become a reality for the Arabs. San Remo was a turning point in the history of the Middle East. Both countries determined how the mandates would look. Not being in agreement with the borders, the French left Palestine and Mosul to the British and accepted about one-fourth of the petrol in Mosul.

Greater Syria was a region with an Arab majority, and Pan-Arab nationalism was the dominant ideology, especially among Sunnis. Local and political particularism provided a welcome opportunity for the French to divide Syria and rearrange it in accordance with their interests. They claimed that by emphasising social differences they were complying with the political realities and requests of the people. This notion suited their desire to weaken Arab nationalism and get closer to Francophile minorities in order to strengthen French hegemony. Thus, the establishment and continuity of the French Mandate was dependent on a weakened and disunited Arab nationalism. The strategy was first to create administrative units in Syria in order to prevent nationalist feelings and movements, and then to install a local puppet government that would facilitate French rule.

When France occupied Damascus in July 1920, it divided Syria into five parts: 1) Greater Lebanon, which consisted of important cities such as Tripoli, Beirut, Sayda (Sidon) and Sur; 2) the Syrian State (Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Damascus); 3) Jabal al-Druze (Mountain of the Druze); 4) Latakia Governorate; and 5) Sanjak of Alexandretta (Iskenderun) or Hatay, which in theory was part of Syria but in practice had special administrative status. Two years after the occupation of Damascus, the Mandate of Syria and Lebanon was handed over to France. Even before 23rd October 1923, when the Mandate of Syria became effective, France had already made arrangements to shape the borders in such a way that the League of Nations could not cancel the establishment of French rule there.

THE EXAMPLE OF LEBANON

In this process of partition, the first step was the creation of a Greater Lebanon. Modern Lebanon within its existing borders was never a state, or even a geographical region, but it had been part of the Ottoman Empire since the 16th century. In religious terms, it consisted of Christian Maronites, the Druze, Shiites, Sunnis, and other groups such as the Greek Orthodox and the Catholics. The Maronites saw France as their saviour, supported it from the beginning, and were already prepared to rule the region. With the establishment of Greater Lebanon their dream came true. Yet the Muslims in this region, whose number equalled that of the Christians, did not want Maronite rule. Over the following years the Sunnis fought to become part of Syria. The powerful Jumblatt (Canbulat) and Arslan families, the leaders of the Druze, also opposed French rule. The Shiites, haunted by the past, wanted to maintain ties with Syria, because of their fear and distrust of both the Sunnis and the Christians.

Syria's artificial regional and ethnic partition was the result of classic colonial 'divide and rule' politics. After the Aleppo and Damascus States were created they were ruled by governors appointed by the local population who were supported by French advisers. Hatay, most of whose inhabitants were Turks, was *de jure* part of Aleppo but *de facto* autonomous. France went further, persistently emphasising the differences of the regionally compact Nusayri and Druze people. By then France had begun to call the Nusayris 'Alawis' (Alawite). Sunni Arab nationalism threatened French interests, Christians, and these heterodox Muslim communities. Hence France needed to foster friendly relations with the two peoples. In 1922 the Druze Mountain (Jabal al-Druze) south of Damascus was inhabited, as its name suggests, by a Druze majority, and France had announced a Druze State with its own governor and elected assembly under French authority. Latakia, with its mountainous area (Nusayriyya / Ansariyya Mountains) and its large Alawi population, also became a separate administrative unit and was named Alawi State.

After 1922 the regions outside Jabal al-Druze were united in the Syrian Federation. In 1924 this was replaced by the Syrian State, which included Aleppo, Damascus and the Sanjak of Iskenderun. The latter was then named Hatay and became an autonomous state in September 1938. Nine months later, in June 1939, Hatay was handed over to Turkey after two years of difficult negotiations: the French took this step to try to ensure Turkey's non-interference in Word War II. The Alawi State was not included in the Syrian Federation. Except for the years 1936 to 1939, the Alawi and Druze States were administratively separate from Syria.

The separatist and particularist propaganda of France *(politique minoritaire)*, which highlighted geographical, religious, sectarian and social differences, had encouraged a minority identity, and this negatively influenced Syria's politics long after the period of the French Mandate. This strategy, which was applied during almost the whole period of the Mandate, had limited the scope and influence of the Arab nationalist movement. France had succeeded in keeping rising Arab nationalism out of the minority areas, and also prevented its influence on the periphery of cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, Hama and Homs.

Most of the religious and ethnic minorities, such as the Armenians, Kurds, Jews and Eastern Christian communities in Syria, were loose groupings, and as they did not have a political and geographic basis there was no political coherence. By contrast, the Alawis and the Druze were concentrated in geographical areas and were also politically coherent. France had supported their autonomy wholly in order to obstruct Syrian unity. With their imperialist policy, the French were inimical to national independence. The strategy was to deepen and instigate social differentiation in order to nurture separatism. The separatism and particularism of religious and national minorities was encouraged by giving autonomous status to the regions where they formed a majority.

A MANDATE TO PREVENT DEVELOPMENT?

Throughout the Mandate, the French did not fulfil the provisions of the regulations of the League of Nations, and consciously avoided educating people who might become capable statesmen and rule the country. The fact that Syria was redivided into regions and sub-regions several times during the Mandate prevented the creation of a class of administrators able to act in concert. When the last French soldiers left Syria in April 1946, the biggest ongoing barrier to political unity in independent Syria was a strong regionalism, even localism. In addition to this, the different political leaders in post-mandate Syria refused to agree on a common vision and goal of Arab unity. They hesitated between Syrian nationalism, a Pan-Arab union, and their own interests. Probably the major tension was between a political union comprising all those who shared the Arab language and culture, and local or regional concerns.

The great task the Syrian nationalist leaders faced after independence in 1946 was to integrate scattered minorities, such as the Kurds, Circassians and Armenians, as well as the Alawis and Druze, who were compact minorities. The post-independence government of Syria envisaged lessening the number of Alawi and Druze representatives in parliament, gradually shutting them out altogether. In the same vein, it planned to take away the rights of those two minorities, which had been given to them by the French. This, of course, caused a conflict when the decision was made to abolish these rights in favour of the establishment of a centralised administration. The Sunni leaders in Damascus integrated Latakia into Syria and so virtually abolished the Alawi State. The Alawi seats in the parliament and the courts, which secured their civil rights, were abolished as well. They became Syrian citizens and had to give up the dream of the Alawi State. This change, which did not seem particularly important at that time, gave way to the beginning of a new era: the political rise of the Alawis in subsequent decades.

During the mandate period Syria was ruled by French administrators and advisers who effectively acted in their own interests. Long after the French Mandate, independent Syria was still a country deprived of self-governing institutions and regional unity. Due to the imperialist French policy, Syrians were denied loyalty to a nation state; local and regional loyalties, despite Pan-Arab sentiments, were strong. Although it had become independent in 1946, Syria was far from being a nation state and did not have a viable political leadership.

Syria's present situation is the result of the counterproductive policies of Britain and France, and their failure to fulfil the regulations of the mandate as set down by the League of Nations. The whole Middle Eastern region has suffered, and continues to suffer, from unresolved problems whose origins lie in the weak administrations and states established by the two European powers. Instead of assisting the states they created in Greater Syria – Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel and Jordan – they made not just their borders problematic, but their very existence. We can say that the imperialist policies of Britain and France are the main cause for the ongoing wars, disagreements and political problems in the Middle East. The seeds of dissension that France sowed in Syria produced complex regional problems, resulting in constant tension and bloodshed.

THE ALAWIS' RISE TO POWER

The rise of the Alawis, who have ruled Syria since 1970, took place over about fifty years. In 1920 they were still the deprived minority, as described above, but by 1970 they had a firm grasp on political power in Syria. This transformation occurred in three stages: 1920–1946 – the period in question, that of the French Mandate; 1946–1963, the years of Sunni authority; and the period of Alawi consolidation in 1963–1970.

The Alawis were pro-French even before the Mandate, because they opposed King Faisal, the Sunni Arab ruler of Syria from 1918 until 1920, and feared his domination. In 1919 they rebelled against him using French arms, hoping for the downfall of the Ottoman Empire. They informed the French that they wanted a Nusayri union under French protection. Although the Alawis rebelled against the French only two years later, under the leadership of Salih al-Ali, the revolt was in fact directed against the alliance of their enemy, the Isma'ilis – another heterodox Islamic sect – with the French. After France granted the Alawis autonomy, the latter offered their support. More than any other group, the Alawis profited from French rule after World War I. For them, co-operation with France meant escaping the control of their Sunni overlords, and thus the State of Latakia was established in July 1922. The Alawis enjoyed low taxation and received financial support from the French. What is more, they also gained legal autonomy. Sunni control of legal cases was handed on to Alawi jurists.

Within their own state, Alawis were still economically and socially inferior to Sunnis. They could only overcome this and feel equal by having a jurisdiction of their own. In Ottoman times, Sunni Hanafi law regulated everything through Sunni courts. The Ottomans did not interfere in Alawi custom, which had prevailed over their civil matters, but it did not have legal authority. Under the new order of the French Mandate the Alawis needed the recognised status of a community, with their own courts and judges. This, however, was not easy to achieve, because Alawi custom was dependent on social authority: it could not be codified and applied to the courts. The solution found in 1922 was the establishment of separate religious Alawi courts that would rule according to the Twelver Shia (Jafari) school of law. This law and its judges were imported from Lebanon, since there were no Alawi experts in this school of jurisprudence.

COALITION OF THE ALAWIS AND THE FRENCH

The Alawis were pleased with these changes in their favour. The partition of the country was a blessing for them during the rebellions for Syrian independence and unity that followed.

When France supported elections in January 1926, most Syrians boycotted them, but the Alawis participated in great numbers. They provided the government with most of its soldiers, served as police, and supplied intelligence. These steps were taken by the Alawis to help maintain French rule, which they publicly favoured. They assisted in the suppression of Sunni demonstrations, strikes and rebellions and did everything in their power to ensure the continuation of French rule in Syria, because they feared that otherwise the Sunnis would reassert their power over them. As an Alawi politician put it, ‘We succeeded in making more progress in three or four years than we had in three or four centuries. Leave us, therefore, in our present situation.’

When, in 1936, the Alawi State was temporarily incorporated into Syria, Alawis protested and expressed pro-French sentiment. A petition that same year called a union with the Sunnis ‘slavery’, and another Alawi leader wrote that incorporation would be tantamount to a ‘disastrous catastrophe’. Six Alawi leaders – among them Ali Sulayman, the father (some say the grandfather) of Hafiz al-Assad, who seized power in Syria in 1970 through a military coup – also wrote to the French government, referring to Syria as a Sunni state and saying that the latter regarded the Alawis as infidels. Ending the Mandate would, they said, expose them to ‘mortal danger’. France should stay in Syria in order to guarantee the Alawis’ freedom and independence. Alawi leaders also assured France that they were not ‘beasts ready for slaughter’ by the Sunnis, their arch-enemies, who would put them under their yoke. Were France to abandon the Alawis, the letter said, they would truly ‘regret the loss of their friendship and loyal attachment to noble France.’

Despite the Alawis’ appeals, France ended the autonomy of Latakia in 1936 and integrated it into the Damascus administration. However, the region continued to profit from a special administration and French financial support. In 1939 the Alawis regained their independence after the armed rebellion by Sulayman al-Murshid, a self-proclaimed ‘messiah’ and ‘miracle-working god’, who gathered around him thousands of followers. He succeeded in preventing Damascus from extending its authority to the Alawis.

The Alawis continued to petition France right up until Syrian independence in 1946. In 1945 they requested French protection and arbitration in legal issues between themselves and Damascus, and called for Alawi soldiers to stay in the French army. The events that followed 1946 were crucial for their seizure of power in Syria in 1970. The urban Sunni elite inherited the government when the French left Syria, thereby ending the Mandate. The Alawi State was absorbed into Syria, not only for nationalistic but also for strategic reasons, namely because it offered the only passage to the Mediterranean.

There were also several other reasons for reabsorbing the Alawi State into Syria. To begin with, the Alawi district could not become an independent state because it lacked economic advantages, such as infrastructure. Simply being a gateway to Europe by virtue of its Mediterranean coast was not enough to support economic development. Only a merger with Syria could offer this. Secondly, because the Alawi region lacked economic and therefore also political importance, most European powers were not interested in it. Furthermore, unlike the Druze, the Alawis did not constitute an absolute majority even in their own region: in some coastal locations, regarded as their economic and political centre, they were in fact in the minority. Lastly, when Turkey came to an agreement with France and annexed Hatay in 1939, this resulted in hostility towards Turkey, and a great many Alawis left the area as they feared that the Turks would spread further south along the Mediterranean coast.

There seem to be two other important factors that led to the Alawis’ unification with Syria. The first was that no Western power really supported the Alawis during the late Ottoman period, unlike the Druze and the Maronites who had a special relationship with Western states. The Alawis had a weak social structure and no internal cohesion. Nor did they did have organised religious and educational establishments, and they had been too isolated as to be under the influence of Western ideologies. As we have seen above, even the American missionary influence was not strong enough to persuade the Alawis to convert, despite offering the chance of escape from Ottoman oppression. The second factor was that being part of Syria meant benefiting from various aspects of modernity, such as education at Syrian schools. This, in turn, brought about an improvement in social status, cultural enrichment, material wealth, and emancipation and influence – and thus also power – in the sphere of politics.

ARMY AND PARTY

Although the urban Sunnis dominated the country until 1970, two key institutions assisted the rise of the Alawis. The first was the armed forces; the second was the pan-Arab and secular Ba‘ath Party. In both institutions, Alawis were disproportionately represented. The army offered them upward mobility, as it did other minorities, as well as rural Sunnis. All these similarly underprivileged groups found in it a common language and medium for their fight against social and economic discrimination. Also, in contrast to Sunni officers, who dominated the army but plotted against each other, the group of Alawi officers was more cohesive and coordinated. Whereas Sunnis entered the army as individuals, Alawis emphasised ethnic solidarity, which offered a more stable foundation of cooperation than the shifting alliances of the Sunni officers. Several military coups from 1949 to 1963 by senior Sunni officers resulted in power struggles and a decrease in their number. The Alawis, of course, benefited from this, increasingly taking their place in senior positions and bringing in their own kinsmen. This advantage led to the rise of Alawis to upper echelons of the military.

In general, rich urban Sunnis tended to belittle the army. For them, army service between the two World Wars had meant serving the French. These nationalistic Sunni families saw it as a place for the socially underprivileged, the uncultured and the rebellious. The Sunni leaders in Damascus accorded little importance to the army as a tool of the state, either. They feared its power in internal politics, kept its funds low, and made a career in the military appear unattractive. They believed it was sufficient for them to occupy the top military positions in order to control the army. For a long time Alawis did not rise within the military, but the above-mentioned power struggle among the Sunni officers changed this. It was as a result of this historic mistake that the Alawis became the masters of Syria.

As for the Ba‘ath Party, its secular and socialist ideology appealed to the Alawis and similar poor, rural minorities. From its inception the Ba‘ath attracted the children of migrants from rural areas who had gone to Damascus for their education. They constituted the majority of the Ba‘ath Party membership in the capital, as well as in cities such Aleppo and Latakia. Zaki al-Arsuzi, one of the founders of the party, was himself an Alawi, and persuaded many of his co-religionists to join. The socialism of the Ba‘ath, which was especially clearly defined after the 1960s, offered economic opportunities for poor Alawis; and secularism united – at least in theory – different groups under the umbrella of the party with less attention to religious and sectarian differences. The Alawis consolidated their position during the years 1963–1970 through three military coups. The first was in March 1963, in which they played a major role and took over important positions in the Ba‘ath Party and in government. In 1966, Sunnis were ousted by the minorities – Alawis, Ismailis and Druze – following sectarian battles in the party and the military. Hafiz al-Assad, who had by then achieved his rise through the ranks of the military, pursued a sectarian policy, and finally, in 1970, he instigated his own coup d’état and installed himself as president. His one-man rule lasted until his death in June 2000, after which his son Bashar was ‘elected’ to succeed him.

Even though the Alawi Ba‘athist regime created a strong and stable Syrian nation-state that became a power to be reckoned with in the region, the Alawi dynasty of the Assads has always been challenged. The Alawis were once a wretched people, oppressed by their Sunni overlords: slaves without rights. They may have become the lords of Syria and, to this day, maintained their grip on power, but many still regard them as a despised minority. In the 1980s and 1990s Middle East specialists analysing Syria’s Alawi regime surmised firstly that the Assad government would be brought down by conflicts between the Sunnis and Alawis – a regional revolt, for example – and secondly that the Alawi integration with Syria could be reversed. Recent events have proved them right. Given the bloody civil war that has raged in Syria since 2011, the question is not if but how and when the Assad regime will be replaced.

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