The Alawites and the Labyrinthine Routes of Peace in Syria

Michal Prokop

For the past six years, Syria has been trapped in a deep political turmoil, which has had a grave impact on peace and stability in the Middle East. Amid the rising atrocities committed on the Syrian population by the Syrian government, the rebels and the Islamic state, the Russian Federation decided in September 2015 to provide a military solution while supporting one side of the conflict. The increased use of force in Syria by foreign powers like the US, the UK, France and Turkey as well as the influx of material support from major regional actors including Saudi Arabia and Iran, however, cannot be a substitution for a political process based on diplomacy, negotiation and dialogue. Given that the Alawite community represents the backbone of President Bashar al-Assad's popular support inside Syria, this article analyses the Alawite perspective on the Syrian conflict and proposes a strategy of political engagement between the international community and the Syrian minority group. Cooperation with the Alawites could represent a crucial step for building lasting peace in Syria because the Assad's followers might reconsider their support for the regime in Damascus in exchange for future autonomy and military protection.

Keywords: Syria, civil war, Alawites, engagement, peacebuilding

Evasive Peace in Syria

As the civil war in Syria marks its sixth anniversary this year, peace in the Middle Eastern country is nowhere to be found. Starting in March 2011 as a peaceful popular protest of Syrian people, including Sunni,

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Shia and Christians, against the authoritarian system headed by the Assad family, the Syrian uprising eventually transformed into a bloody civil war characterized by sectarian bloodshed, mass atrocities, displacement of civilians and destruction of Syrian cultural heritage. The Syrian conflict has drawn the attention of global and regional powers, which directly or through various proxies compete over influence in the Middle East. Despite several rounds of negotiations in Geneva, Moscow and Astana as well as the admirable efforts of renowned UN diplomats such as Kofi Annan, Lakhdar Brahimi and Staffan de Mistura, it appears Syria has moved, for the time being, beyond the reach of a comprehensive peaceful settlement.[1]

For several years, a considerable question has been frequently asked: How is Bashar al-Assad able to maintain his grip on power in Damascus? The political, material, and military backing of the Russian Federation, Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah, the emergence and the territorial gains of the Islamic State (*Daesh*, Arabic: داعش) and Assad's ability vis-á-vis his domestic and international supporters to portray his regime as 'the only alternative to chaos'[2] can partially, but not exclusively, explain the government's capacity to survive. Another mostly omitted reason behind the government's endurance is the contribution of the prominent Syrian minority group, the Alawites (French: *Alaouites*, Arabic: علوي), who remain loyal to the regime's leadership.[3] In contrast to the contemporary deliberation on Syria, which largely focuses on the stunning inability of Washington and Moscow to reach a compromise solution to the Syrian conflict, this paper argues that reaching a sustainable peace in Syria also essentially requires diplomats to acknowledge the key minority groups' interests and their incorporation within the post-war structure of government that respects the principles of secularism, religious tolerance and human rights.

In today's catastrophic turmoil in Syria, political analysts often neglect the important role the Alawites might play in leading the country through the labyrinth of conflicts and diverging interests in Syria. This paper investigates two major issues. Firstly, what the Alawites' perspective on the civil war is and secondly, whether and under what conditions the Alawites' influence could contribute to the peace process in Syria. The article aims to move beyond the conventional and simplistic narrative that depicts the Alawites as 'a dominant minority, which universally supports the Assad regime'[4] and to provide a deeper understanding of the Syrian Alawite community, which has been the

original determining political and ideological force behind the foundation of the Assad's ruling dynasty. The article departs from the following premises: (1) the Syrian government as one of many participants involved in the conflict is not a unitary actor but rather a mixed coalition of the regime's supporters; (2) the Alawites' interests have been poorly reflected in the political discourse on Syria; (3) the inclusion of the Alawites in the Syrian peace process can be an important factor in achieving and maintaining stability in Syria.

The case study of Alawites was chosen not only because of their political leverage over Damascus, but most importantly they also represent a potential way out of the enormously complicated maze that characterizes the current political situation within Syria. Regardless of the future military outcome on the Syrian battlefield, the Alawites will always represent a vital component and formidable power, both economically and politically, within Syrian society. Additionally, inclusive dialogue between the wider international community and the minority groups is a necessary element in reaching a political settlement within a diverse country such as Syria. The international community, particularly the US, European nations and the Russian Federation as the most potent global actors involved in the Syrian civil war, is obliged to learn from the mistakes of the past. The lesson of Iraq after 2003 clearly demonstrated the crucial necessity of incorporating religious minorities in a process of political transition. The lack of interest with respect to the issue of minorities that were once the backbone of the authoritarian regimes, whether Sunni in Iraq or Shia, Alawites and others in Syria, may have fatal consequences on peace and stability in the Middle East. A similar claim was presented, for example, in the Report of the Iraq Inquiry in July 2016 that examined the UK's involvement in toppling the regime of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent occupation of Iraq.[5]

As this article seeks to shed light on the subject of an important minority group in Syria, the Alawites, in the current civil war, it is organized into four parts and a conclusion. The first section puts the option of diplomatic and material assistance to the Alawite community in Syria within the context of the existing theory of civil wars with a special emphasis on the concepts of veto players in multiparty conflicts. The second part then briefly describes the Alawites' background and analyses their role in the Syrian society and governance prior and after the Arab Revolutions of 2011. Finally, the third and fourth sections ex-

plore challenges the Alawite community currently faces and what can be achieved by the political engagement and Track II diplomacy with the Alawites as a considerable element in a comprehensive solution to the present situation and future social cohesiveness of Syria.

Multiparty Civil Wars and the Concept of Veto Players

A civil war can be defined as "large scale violence among geographically contiguous people concerned about possibly having to live with one another in the same political unit after the conflict".[6] Every civil war generally starts as an internal dyadic process in which an opposition violently challenges the authority of government.[7] The rate of hostility between the two contested sides rapidly increases when the challenged government is not capable of effectively deterring or quickly suppressing the military opposition.[8] Civil wars tend not to be usually restricted to the boundaries of a particular state where the conflict originates. As in the cases of the Democratic Republic of Congo, El Salvador, Angola or Syria, transnational factors such as instability in neighbouring countries, history of interstate adversarial behaviour, ethnic cross-border relations, and migration increase the risk of wide regional destabilization that incentivizes external actors to consider choosing whether to intervene in the conflict.[9]

Moreover, the expansion of a number of parties being directly or indirectly engaged in the civil war changes the dynamics of a conflict. Academic research conducted by Salehyan, Gleditsch and Cunningham shows that 'civil wars with outside involvement typically last longer, cause more fatalities, and are more difficult to resolve through negotiations'.[10] This happens because additional participants promote their own specific agenda, influence both the costs of continued fighting and the benefits of reaching a settlement, and attach their national interests to the preferred end-result of the conflict.[11] As occurred during the US support for the Contras in Nicaragua in the 1980s or the recent involvement of the Russian Federation, Turkey, Iran and others in Syria, the multiplication of external actors, which support one side of the conflict, logically contributes to the deepening of a civil war.

Besides the number of parties involved in a conflict, another factor that has a great effect on the peace process is the phenomenon of a veto player. Veto players are, according to George Tsebelis, 'individual or collective actors whose agreement is necessary for a change of the

status quo'.[12] Veto players possess enormous leverage as their consent is a principal condition for reaching peace in civil wars. In order for an internal or external participant to be a veto player, it must fulfil three particular conditions: (1) having a specific unshared preferences for the result of the war, (2) maintaining a cohesive organization that guarantees the support of the player's constituencies, and (3) possessing the ability to continue the war unilaterally even if the other parties decide to reach an accord and end the conflict. The theory states that if there are many veto players in a civil war, then the duration of the war is longer and a successful solution is more difficult to find because veto players use their capabilities on the battlefield and at the negotiation table to obtain get the best deal possible for their own self-interests.[13]

Due to the complexity of the crisis in Syria and multiparty character of the conflict, many actors could be considered as veto players. For the purposes of this paper, however, it is necessary to primarily clarify whether or not the Assad regime has the veto power capacity. The decision of the Russian Federation and Iran to financially and militarily back the government in Damascus is often cast by conservative commentators in the US like Jay Sekulow as a proof of "unholy alliance"[14] between Moscow, Tehran and Damascus that seeks to become the hegemonic power in the Middle East. Unfortunately, such derogatory labels do not provide any explanation of perspectives and policies behind the military interventions that occurred in Syria. Despite the fact that Russian Federation and Iran most likely prevented the downfall of Assad, the three allies are motivated by a different set of goals and none of them share the same vision of how Syria should be governed in the future. In reality, the regime in Damascus is not a pawn in a larger game of great powers. Assad qualifies to be a veto player because he follows his own ambition, which is to achieve victory for his own army of followers and become once again the sole leader of Syria. For instance, Assad himself stated in the recent interviews that his forces will continue fighting until 'every inch of the Syrian land'[15] is liberated from the hands of the so-called terrorists.

On the other hand, the actions of Russian Federation and Iran in Syria are motivated by strategic objectives. For Iran, the Assad regime represents an important regional ally. Yet the relationship between Iran and Syria was once described as a 'marriage of convenience with little substance'[16] that is based on pragmatism and geopolitical circumstances rather than ideological or religious considerations. Iran actual-

ly praised protesters in Syria back in March 2011 and advised Assad to extend an olive branch to the opposition. Soon after the war broke out, Iran realized that the new Sunni majority government in Syria would probably join ranks with Iran's major adversaries (Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States) thus putting Iran in an unfavourable position in the Middle East's political matrix. Toppling Assad would also impede the support that Tehran provides to Hezbollah, the organization through which Iran extends its own influence into Lebanon. Because Iran witnessed many foreign attempts to interfere with its internal politics in its past, for example the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953, material assistance and intelligence given to Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war or the threat of Israel to launch a military attack against Iran's nuclear installations, the political establishment in Tehran understands that it cannot afford to spare the few allies it has in the region for the sake of its own national security and independence.[17]

Furthermore, the Russian Federation with much more robust military deployment in Syria than Iran primarily wants to preserve the patron-client relationship between Moscow and Damascus that has endured for decades. This partnership is strongly embedded in Russian foreign policy makers' strategic thinking. Having the Assad regime as a partner is a relevant diplomatic and political asset for the Russian Federation since the Syrian government is still recognized *de jure* by many countries as a legitimate authority in Syria. On the other side, the fragmented opposition does not provide the same sense of reliability. The possible fall of the government in Damascus would seriously impact the Russian political influence and military capabilities in the Middle East. The Russian Federation also realizes that the potential victory of the Islamists in Syria could as well inspire insurgents in the Northern Caucasus to start a military uprising.[18]

As the Russian Federation attempts to organize peace talks between the Assad regime and some of the rebel groups, Moscow is in principle not opposed to substantial constitutional reforms in Syria that would provide the opposition with the power sharing institutional mechanisms.[19] Even though the Russian air force contributed to the tipping of the balance in Assad's favour, the Russian Federation does not have the resources to rebuild Syria and it is certainly not willing to be dragged into Assad's endless quest for total victory. Nonetheless, the possible scaling down of Russian military personnel in Syria surely

will not discourage Assad from continuing the fight in order to re-establish his former rule over the whole country. The Syrian army and its estimated strength of 25 000 soldiers, a small fraction of its former strength but still considerable fighting force, combined with the numerous armed militia clearly grant Assad a veto player status in Syria.[20]

The end of violence in Syria requires the government in Damascus and Assad's opponents to adopt a compromise peace agreement. The prospect of finding the common ground between the Assad regime and the opposition is, however, very much unlikely, because the Assad regime will never consent to the opposition's fundamental demand, which is the departure of Assad's ruling elite from Syrian politics.[21] If a military intervention against Assad is currently out of the question, then the only possible way of compelling the Syrian government to change its reckless behaviour is to disrupt Assad's internal structure of power and to engage with those who support the Syrian regime. In the next three chapters, such strategy is presented with a particular focus on the Alawite community and its role in the past and contemporary Syria.

Alawites in the Syrian Society and Governance

Syria is the home of many cultures, communities and religious groups. According to the pre-war statistics, Syria as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious heterogeneous society consists of Sunni-Arabs (65 percent), Arab-Alawites, Ismailia and Shia (13 percent), Kurds and non-Arab Sunnis (15 percent), Orthodox-Armenian Christians (nine percent) and Arab-Druze (three percent).[22] The historical origin of Alawites, also known as *Nusairis*, a name derived from their religious leader Muhammad Ibn Nusayr, can be traced back to the 10th century AD. This religious sect is seen by the mainstream Sunni as "heretics"[23] (*kafer*) due to their eclectic acceptance of Neo-Platonism, Shia, Judaism and Christian practices and beliefs such as the worship of Ali, prophet Muhammad's proper successor as Caliph, pilgrimages to tombs (*ziyārat*), baptismal rituals near water and ceremonial use of wine.[24] The Alawites themselves, however, consider their identity to be based on specific cultural and social behaviours rather than religious adherence.[25] However, unlike Sunni, Shia and Abadism, the last one of which exists mostly in Oman, Alawism is not clearly delineated in contrast to other schools of Islam. No Alawite clergy have issued opinions (*fatwas*) con-

cerning the Amman Message of 2005 and consequently they are not perceived as an independent branch of Islam.[26] As of 2002, there are approximately two and half million Alawites in the Middle East, out of which the great majority lives in Syria mainly in the coastal region of Latakia and the city of Homs.[27]

Furthermore, throughout history the Alawites had been regarded as a separate community because of their complex spiritual system and also their autonomous way of life in the An-Nusayriyah *Mountains* (*Jabal Ansariyya).* Based on the principle divide and rule, the French imperial occupation of Syria legally provided the Alawites in 1924 with their own autonomous status and the opportunity to form the core of the French auxiliary forces in Syria.[28] The short-lived Alawite State (French: *État des Alaouites*) was in 1936 incorporated back into Syria, but this short episode of relative independence strongly influenced the Alawite tribes in their desire to promote their own interests in the mainstream Syrian politics.[29] This culminated in the 1970 coup d'état and subsequently elevated Hafez al-Assad to the position of total control of Syria through the ideology of Arab nationalism and Ba'athism on one hand and through the system of autocratic "repu-monarchism" (*jamlaka*) as well as the increased Alawite control over security and intelligence apparatus (*mukhabarat*) on the other hand.[30] While constituting a relatively small minority group, the Alawites reached an unprecedented level of influence as Hafez al-Assad positioned his fellow Alawites in key places within the Ba'ath party and the Syrian army.[31]

The emergence of Alawites from the mountains of Latakia and their incorporation into al-Assad's structures of power created a mutually beneficent relationship. The Syrian regime enjoyed the loyal support of a significant portion of the Syrian population while the minority group entrusted Hafez al-Assad to protect them from the reprisal of extremist Sunni groups. Additionally, this close bond between the Alawites and the state institutions has been also characterized by the system of corruption and economic privileges. Some of the Alawite families managed to build massive fortune thanks to their association with the Assad regime. Among the largest recipients of financial benefits has been, for example, the Makhlouf family. Rami Makhlouf, Bashar al-Assad's cousin and owner the Syrian communications firm Syriatel, is considered the wealthiest businessman in Syria with control of up to 60 percent of the pre-war Syrian economy.[32] Other families, notably the Mualla, Kherbek and Mohanna, all of whom come from Hafez

al-Assad's birthplace Qardaha, were granted similar privileges in the country's public sector. Not surprisingly, those Alawites, who have decided not to enter the nepotistic structures of power, were left behind in the Jableh and Tartus regions without basic services or infrastructure. Suffering from extreme poverty, joining the Syrian army meant for many Alawites the only way how to escape economic hardship and political exclusion.[33]

Shortly after Bashar al-Assad, Hafez al-Assad' son, was inaugurated as President of Syria in 2000, Mordechai Nisan, an Israeli scholar and the author of the *Minorities in the Middle East: A History of Struggle and Self-Expression*, wrote that 'it may be that the Alawites engineered an encompassing and evolving Syrian nationality in which they are its architects without becoming its victims. Time will tell'.[34] Looking at today's atrocious conditions in Syria, it is evident that the Alawite attempt to guide the destiny of Syria has obviously failed and whatever 'goodwill many in the broad mass of the Syrian public may have still felt for Assad as an individual melted away'.[35] But the Alawites have continued supporting Assad. Why is that? When the Arab revolution erupted in Syria in 2011, the obsession with the threat of a Sunni-led Islamic government has led the Alawites to believe the 'gory stories about the inevitability of destruction, ruin and even civil war in the event of any significant protest'.[36]

Unfortunately, the government's brutal suppression of non-violent demonstrations resulted in the radicalization of Syrian society. In the wake of the armed struggle in Syria, Assad brilliantly managed to present the democratic uprising as a sectarian conflict, thus preventing the Alawites from joining the Sunni democratic opposition. As the Syrian army was able to "protect" the Alawites in 1982 following the brutal suppression of Muslim Brotherhood's revolt in Hama, the contemporary Alawite community pragmatically has calculated that the government have kept them "safe" in the past against the Sunni majority so the government can succeed in the future as well.[37] With the constant fear of the possible Sunni reprisals, as proposed by Sunni radicals like Adnan al-Aroor, who openly calls for 'extermination of minorities'[38] supporting the Syrian regime, the Alawites have bound their existence in Syria to the corrupt Assad regime.[39]

The current situation in Syria offers nothing but sorrow and distress whilst the future is equally bleak. The years of fighting have turned most of Syria into a pile of rubble and the end of suffering is anywhere

but near. The Alawites remain deeply entrapped between the sides of the conflict. On one hand, Assad, the man who is originally responsible for bringing Syria into chaos, still represent them as their leader. On the other hand, the Syrian opposition has never offered the Alawites any political concessions in exchange for support. Despite having prominent Alawites among their ranks such as Monzer Makhous, a former representative of the Syrian National Coalition in France and the High Negotiations Committee spokesperson, the Syrian opposition did not present any concrete scheme of future coexistence between various centres of political power within Syria. With the growing frustration within the Alawite community, the greatest challenge the Alawites are facing today is whether or not they are able to make an attempt to separate themselves from Assad's regime and promote their own interests.[40]

The Vested Stakes in Syria's Alawites

The War in Syria is one of the most complex and severe crises today and will remain so in the distant future. In the last six years, the war has not only shattered the lives and decent existence of millions of Syrians, but the violence has proliferated into neighbouring regions as far as Libya, Afghanistan and Europe. The Syrian crisis has also principally contributed to the massive refugee crisis and rise of terror attacks in France, Lebanon, Turkey and elsewhere. The necessity of a successful resolution of the Syrian conflict therefore requires a very careful act of balancing the political interests of the local, regional and international actors, as well as a creative mixture of double track diplomacy. In combination with the top-down approach of UN-mediated negotiations about Syria in Vienna in 2015 and Geneva in 2014 and 2016, lasting peace in the country can be reached indirectly through the bottom-up method of organized grassroots movements that would include Syrian minorities. This would involve political engagement with the Syrian minorities, particularly the Alawites, who represent a large segment of Syria's population and also a relevant part of the remaining internal popular support of the Assad regime. As the Alawites and other minorities have been engaged in the fierce civil war in Syria, they are a considerable part of the conflict's solution as well as future stability in the country. In the spirit of Dag Hammarskjöld's innovative concept of

preventive diplomacy, it is essential to agree on peace now but also to think of forestalling the emergence of future conflicts in Syria.

Looking at the contemporary political map of Syria, one is not surprised that four years of sporadic negotiations, which were diligently brokered by the UN, have not led anywhere close to the establishment of lasting peace in Syria. Besides the reluctance of the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition to form a government of national unity, the country's gradual fragmentation is another obstacle for pragmatic negotiations. As of 2017, Syria is practically divided among four warring parties – the Syrian government in Damascus, the Kurdish forces, the Islamic State and the Syrian opposition, which consists of approximately 7000 armed factions.[41] The Syrian rebels, both moderate and radical, might have a common interest to topple Assad, but the ideological and political differences prevent them from forming a cohesive organized unit, not to mention the fact that groups such as Jabhat Ansar al-Din, Ghuraba al-Shamand and Jabhat al-Nusra openly associate themselves with jihadist organizations like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Despite the adoption of the Terms for a Cessation of Hostilities in Syria on 27 February 2016 in Geneva, Syria remains trapped in an unending war as the intense fighting in Aleppo, Idlib and the Wadi Barrada areas has demonstrated in the past year.[42] The international community has also not been particularly successful in guaranteeing the protection of Syrian minorities. During the international peace conference for Syria in June 2012, the participants adopted the Geneva Communiqué, the six point plan that was laid down as a road map for political transition in Syria. The road map for Syria also counts on the establishment of a transitional governing body, which can create a neutral environment for the transition to take place. Although the Geneva Communiqué recognizes that 'there is no room for sectarianism or discrimination on ethnic, religious, linguistic or any other grounds'[43] in the Syrian peace process, the document does not propose any specific mechanism that would aim to protect the pro-government minorities from acts of revenge. Nor does the Geneva Communiqué persuade the parties to the conflict to guarantee the safety of areas in Syria where the minorities are concentrated.

Moreover, the protection of Syrian minorities is an issue that should not be underestimated. There are serious indications that the Alaw-

ites and other minorities might face possible reprisals by the Sunni extremists, who have repeatedly called for an extermination of Alawites and Shia in Syria. In November 2015, the sectarian acts of revenge already occurred in suburbs of Damascus against the Alawites living there. In order to stop the shelling by the government forces, the Army of Islam (*Jaysh al-Islam*), the dominant rebel group in the region, captured the Alawite army officers and their families and used them as living shields. The captives were put in dozens of cages and paraded in the streets throughout the rebel-controlled territory, so they could 'taste the misery'[44] of their captives. These prisoners were subsequently displaced in the square with the intention of stopping the aerial bombardment. Similar acts, which are considered under international law as war crimes, also occurred in the city of Doume in Eastern Ghouta, where Alawite civilians were abducted by Syrian rebel commanders like Abu Muhammad al-Julani, and Zahran Alloush, and employed as human shields to deflect Russian airstrikes.[45]

Due to various historical and cultural reasons, many Alawites believe that the fall of Assad's dynasty will lead to their downfall. Yet, the Alawites might be the key to solving the conundrum of the Syrian peace process that is the role of Assad in the future Syrian politics. Although the Alawite community is deeply entrenched in the mountains of Western Syria, six years of civil war have taken its toll on the Syrian minority. Most of the villages in Latakia are already decorated with the pictures of killed Alawite soldiers who sacrificed their lives for the Syrian regime. Notwithstanding that Damascus does not provide any official list of casualties, it is estimated that up to 90 000 Alawite combatants or more have died while fighting on behalf of Assad. Taking into consideration the Alawite population in Syria reaches slightly over 2 million people, the scale of human losses is absolutely devastating.[46] Naturally, there is a growing frustration among the Alawite population due to its role in the war and what its position would be in post-conflict Syrian society. This element of constructive outrage can be effectively utilized to encourage the peace process and stabilization in Syria.

The increasing dissatisfaction with the Syrian regime has already generated the first public expression of the Alawite religious identity and political self-awareness independent from Assad's regime. In April 2016, religious Alawite leaders published through a prominent European media outlet a document called the Declaration of an Identity

Reform. In its preamble, it stated: 'whereas we, the Alawites, furthermore concede that we have been, for far too long, defined with the words of others rather than our own'. Many international observers have concluded that the document asserts that the Alawites are ready and willing to make political choices without Assad's approval. Not only did the Alawites disassociate themselves from the regime in Damascus by declaring 'the ruling political power, whoever embodies it, does not represent us nor does it shape our identity or preserves our safety and reputation…nor do we, the Alawites, substantiate it or generate its power', but their description of "Alawism as a third model of and within Islam" other than Sunni and Shia also challenges Assad's credibility among his closest allies, namely Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iran.[47] By declaring that the Alawites are a 'third model', they make a political statement that they are not clients of foreign powers, henceforth cracking the image of the Assad regime as one of the closest allies of Tehran in the Middle East.

Additionally, the Declaration of an Identity Reform can also be considered as an open invitation for dialogue and reconciliation between the Alawites and the Sunni majority. The document rejects Assad's brutal methods of silencing the political opponents and asserts that 'political command shall not, and under no circumstances, exert oppression out of fear of losing power or legitimacy'.[48] With the hope of avoiding further bloodshed, the document declares that 'for the sake of peaceful and prosperous coexistence, we want to embrace a New Era of the Alawites…in a religiously diverse society such as Syria our faith shall imbue our daily life with decency and morality…we shall not use our own beliefs to dictate the way of life or others'.[49] However, it is unknown from where the document originated and who exactly the authors were. The declaration was most probably written by the Alawite community members who have connections outside Syria, and they also constitute the core of Alawite opposition movement. Yet it is difficult for now to assess how much influence the Alawite dissent currently possesses or to what degree the declaration actually resonated among the majority of Alawites and overall within Syria. Nevertheless, if the document is authentic and expresses the sincere desire to promote changes for the Alawites, it could have far-reaching effects on the Syrian political landscape for many years to come.[50]

From a historical perspective, the publication of the Declaration of an Identity Reform is a remarkable event for the Alawites, but it is

not the first time the Alawite community actually formulated its own policies. When in 1936 the short-lived Alawite state was supposed to be absorbed by Syria, the Alawite leaders at that time sent several letters to the French Prime Minister Léon Blum and requested France to grant them freedom and independence. The authors of the letter, for example Sulayman al-Assad (Bashar al-Assad's grandfather) stated that 'Alawites refuse to be joined to Syria, for it is a Sunni state and Sunnis consider them unbelievers; ending the mandate would expose the Alawites to mortal danger'.[51] Three months later, in September more than four hundred and fifty thousand Alawites as well as many Druze and Christians signed a petition asking France to protect them from the Alawites' 'traditional and hereditary enemies'.[52] The expressions of political consciousness like the petition of 1936 or the declaration of 2016 showed that the Alawites have been capable of making decisions collectively and they are willing, if necessary, to cooperate with anyone who can help them to secure their own self-rule and religious rights.

The willingness of the Alawite community to decide their own future should be of concern for the international community. The frequent talks on Syria between the US, the Russia Federation, Europe and the Middle Eastern countries still represents an excellent opportunity to mitigate this shortcoming in relation to Syrian minorities. The double-track diplomacy in Syria can be divided into two phases. Firstly, it is essential for the future stability in Syria to recognize the necessity of addressing the issue of minorities in Syria as a vital competent of the transitional process. In these present negotiations, the formal assurance of respecting minorities' rights and a promise of restraining possible reprisals against them is not a major waiver for the Syrian opposition or any other party to the conflict. Thus, a clause can be easily inserted in the Geneva Communiqué, which states that 'all parties that are committed to the sovereignty, independence, national unity and territorial integrity of Syria will abstain from the use of violence or any kind form of discrimination against any ethnic or religious community, notably the Alawites, Druze, Shia and Christians, that might have directly or indirectly supported the Assad regime'. Secondly, even though this diplomatic statement cannot realistically guarantee the safety of the above mentioned segments of population, it can be used as political leverage during the direct UN political engagement with the Alawite community. Based on the UN-brokered commitment to protect the minorities, the Alawites might be incentivized to stop col-

laborating with the regime in Damascus in exchange for future autonomous status within Syria that is comparable to Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Political Engagement with the Alawite Community

Even though the focus of the international community has temporally shifted to containing the Islamic State and its barbaric activities in Syria and Iraq and also preventing the Russian air force from targeting Assad's moderate opponents, the international community continues neglecting the possibility of direct diplomatic engagement with the Alawite community in Latakia. Because of the lack of external incentive for the Alawites to reconsider their support for Damascus, Assad at this moment is not pressured to negotiate even with the moderate opposition and continues to blame the war on "foreign agents" and "terrorists."[53] Indeed, the Russian direct military intervention in Syria might have enabled Assad to shift the balance in his favour or at least to give him time to wait for more a favourable position in future negotiations. Currently, the Syrian opposition is unable to win militarily against Assad and his Russian and Iranian allies. However, there is another way of pushing the Syrian government to the negotiation table or even of neutralising Assad's ruling circle. The possible establishment of a communication channel between the international community and the Alawite tribes followed then by the successful promotion of policy based on incentives might result in turning the tide away from Damascus.

Contrary to widespread belief, the Alawites are not a monolithic political group that unanimously supports the government in Damascus. The reason why the Alawites support Assad historically originates from political pragmatism and the fear of government dominated by the Sunni extremists. Inside today's Syria, many political dissidents and military opponents of the Assad regime appear among the four Alawite tribes, namely Kalbiyya, Khaiyatin, Haddadin, and Matawirah. The defections of high ranking officers such as Major General Mohammed Khallouf, Colonel Zubayda Almiqi and many others, who claimed that Assad has been deliberately provoking an Alawite-Sunni sectarian war, illustrate that a real Alawite opposition against the Assad political establishment truly exists. Also, the Free Alawite Front (*Jabhat al-`Alawiyyin al-Ahrar*) has been formed in 2012 and at this moment individual soldiers operate sporadically as part of the Syrian Free Army. Among

the Alawite opposition, distinguished figures such as Mazen Darwish, former director of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression who spent more than three years in prison, and Abdel-Aziz Al Khayyer, a centrist politician who has advocated peaceful transition to democratic rule, stand out. Undoubtedly, these individuals can serve as intermediaries between the international community and the local Alawite leaders, who would like to make an attempt to distance themselves from the government and openly convey their own commitment to peace and democratic reforms in Syria.[54]

Moreover, if the biggest concern of the Alawite community is the reprisals from the Sunni majority rule, then an appropriate offer by the international community to Alawites could be a creation of the Alawite autonomous territory in Latakia. This modern Alawite autonomous region, which existed once for a short period of time 90 years ago, could be relatively easily protected by UN peacekeeping forces due to the mountainous terrain and the access to the sea. The peacekeepers would also make sure no ethnic cleansing takes place against Sunni areas in Latakia. The benefit of the autonomous status within Syria for the Alawites under the aegis of the international community might not only prevent possible atrocities on the Syrian minority group, which could reach such an extent like those in Rwanda in 1994, but also the elimination of Assad's internal centre of support could disrupt his confidence in staying in Damascus. Although currently there is no demand for creation of an independent state, Alawites have always desired to run their own affairs. As such, the international community should explore whether or not in the midst of increasing casualties in the Alawite sect one of the four Alawite tribes can now produce a movement for Alawite semi-autonomy within the future Syrian constitutional arrangement.[55]

Another argument for the establishment of the Alawite autonomy is Damascus' constant refusal to share more power with the Alawites, who are well aware that Assad's survival depends on the cohesion and sacrifices of the Syrian people. Even if the Syrian government will be able to secure some sort of victory over the opposition, there is no guarantee that the regime will eventually reward the loyal Alawites and other Syrians for their support. Unlike Hafez al-Assad, who was well-known as a shrewd leader and a cunning political strategist, his son did not inherit the father's Machiavellian qualities and remains

more rigid in response to the new circumstances.[56] Assad and his circle of trusted advisers have not only managed to survive largely thanks to the muscle of the Syrian army and the Russian air force, but also because of the cohesion and dedication of the fellow Alawite community, whose members disproportionately serve in the Syrian security apparatus. Being shaken by the mounting war losses and irritated with the president's policies and authoritarian style of government, many have begun to express their rightful demand for more power, wealth and opportunities. The failure to provide the Alawites with sufficient compensation might be a cause of a new conflict in Syria, but this time between the Alawites and whoever holds the power in Damascus.[57]

Last but not least, it is in the interest of the Alawite community in Latakia and Tartus to reconsider backing the Syrian leadership. If a new strong opposition movement emerges among such crucial supporters such as the Alawite tribes in Latakia and Tartus, Assad will not be able to crush it with force and the government will be obliged to make substantial concessions to its followers as well as to the rest of Syrian society. The absence of Assad as a veto player could encourage the Syrian moderate opposition to make up their mind and in the spirit of the 2012 Geneva Communiqué start considering peace with Damascus and the Alawites as an option.[58] That is when the real democratic transition in Syria can begin.

Conclusion

As the Russian Federation directly stepped into the conflict in September 2015 in order to support the Syrian government's crumbling military, Syria has witnessed more violence suffered by its already decimated population. Like in the cases of the US involvement in Vietnam (1965-73), the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-89), the US war in Iraq (2003-11) and the European intervention in Libya (2011), the incursions of Russian troops into Syria will inevitably hinder a political resolution to the civil war. The airstrikes conducted by the nations operating on the Syrian battlefield will without doubt fail to produce any tangible result. Even if the Syrian regime manages to get the upper hand vis-à-vis the numerous opposition, the peace will not last due to the rigidity of the political system that governed in Damascus for almost a half a century. On the other hand, Assad's opponents currently

do not have the capacity to achieve victory, nor the ability to present a viable political alternative acceptable to all segments of the Syrian population.

If the application of military force is not a solution, then how to deal with the Assad regime, which acts as a veto player in the Syrian civil war and continues its policy of violence and destruction? By focusing on the Alawite minority, the article proposes that the international community should utilize its diplomatic resources and skills in order to establish dialogue with this prominent minority group in the Latakia region, which represents the core of Assad's internal popular support in Syria. Although the engagement with the Alawite community does not provide a comprehensive and immediate solution to the situation in Syria, it can have a long-term positive effect on the political environment in the country.

The proper use of incentives like a promise of future autonomy in Syria and the protection against the potential violence from the Sunni majority might be a convincing argument for the Alawites to stop supporting Assad's strategy of defeating the opposition by any means including chemical weapons, aerial attacks on civilians, cluster bombs, incendiary weapons and Scud missiles. The international community must finally assume its moral duty and devise an intelligent strategy to the problem of instabilities both in Syria and Iraq. The indifference and the avoidance of responsibility to act will only prolong the humanitarian catastrophe. At the same time, ignorance and simplistic solutions that are not backed by the deep knowledge of the Middle East failed so many times in the past. The question remains whether or not in Washington, Paris or Berlin there is enough political will to start bringing concrete pragmatic political proposals, which might finally break the endless status quo in Syria and also reinforce the prospects of long-lasting peace in a war-torn country.

MICHAL PROKOP is a graduate of the University of New York in Prague, State University of New York – Empire State College and the University of Economics, Prague majoring in international and diplomatic studies master program. He may be reached at:
michal.vprokop@gmail.com

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