

COMMENTARY

No. 73

Wednesday, 19 September 2012

The Terror of the Alawites becomes a Reality

Mordechai Kedar

Bar-Ilan University, Israel

I will begin on a personal note. Since the start of the pogroms in Syria a year and a half ago, I have written again and again in my articles that the Alawites will behave with cruelty and severity and with total insensitivity toward their opposition, because they are aware that they are fighting not only to keep control of the regime in their hands but also—and mainly—in order to keep their heads connected to their shoulders. My words were an assessment based on lengthy research on the Syrian domestic arena, that was published in the doctoral thesis that I wrote (1998) and in the book that was based on it (2005). From time to time I have heard and read harsh expressions of Muslims toward the Alawites, but I have never seen proof that the Alawites indeed fear that the Muslims might slaughter them if they had the opportunity.

In the background is the historical fact that modern Syria was borne on the knees of the French Mandate, which was imposed on Syria after the First World War, and ended in 1943. As with other Arab states in the Middle East, many of the genetic illnesses that Syria suffers from stem from errors that were committed by the states of the mandates, France and Great Britain. Italy, which controlled Libya, is responsible to a certain extent for the chaos in that state. The main mistake of the European states in the Middle East was creating states that included different ethnic, tribal, religious and sectarian groups that are antagonistic to each other, with the hope that the day will come when all of them will sit around the campfire and sing patriotic songs in perfect harmony. This did not happen, this is not happening now and this will also not happen in the foreseeable future.

On 30 August of this year a discussion was held in the Security Council of the UN on the civil war that is raging in Syria, that was responsible for about five thousand deaths in the month of August alone. One of the spokesmen in the discussion was the French Foreign minister, Laurent

Fabius, and the Syrian representative in the UN, Bashar al-Jafari. The Syrian representative attacked the Western states and primarily France for its support of the rebels. The French minister responded by saying: "You speak negatively about the French Mandate, and I must remind you that the grandfather of your president requested France not to depart from Syria and not to award it independence, and this is in an official document which he signed and is today in the French Foreign Ministry, and if you want I will give you a copy of it."

Fabius was referring to a document that the Alawite leaders, including Suleiman al-Assad, the grandfather of the president of Syria, wrote, which is in the archive of the French Foreign Ministry. The document has the date of receipt – 15 June 1936, and was written shortly prior to that date, to the French Prime Minister at the time, Leon Blum. In those days, there were contacts that were conducted between the government of France and a group of Syrian intellectuals who believed in the possibility of establishing a greater Syrian state that would include groups that are different from one another, as in Europe. This document was published in the past in the Lebanese newspaper *al-Nahar* and the Egyptian newspaper *al-Ahram*, but did not make the headlines. For the benefit of our dear readers we include here the document in its entirety, which should be read while keeping in mind what has been happening in Syria for the last year and a half. (My comments are in parenthesis, M.K.)

"Dear Mr. Leon Blum, Prime Minister of France.

In light of the negotiations that are being conducted between France and Syria, we - the Alawite leaders in Syria - respectfully draw the following points to your attention and to that of your party (the Socialists):

1. The Alawite nation (!!) which has maintained its independence over the years by dint of much zeal and many casualties, is a nation which is different from the Muslim Sunni nation in its religious faith , in its customs and in its history. It has never happened that the Alawite nation (which lives in the mountains on the Western coast of Syria) was under the rule of the (Muslims) who rule the inland cities of the land.

2. The Alawite nation refuses to be annexed to Muslim Syria, because the Islamic religion is thought of as the official religion of the country, and the Alawite nation is thought of as heretical by the Islamic religion. Therefore we ask you to consider the dreadful and terrible fate that awaits the Alawites if they are forced to be annexed to Syria, when it will be free from the oversight of the Mandate, and it will be in their power to implement the laws that stem from its religion. (According to Islam, the idol-worshipping heretic has a choice to convert to Islam or be slaughtered.)

3. Awarding independence to Syria and cancelling the mandate would be a good example of socialist principles in Syria, but the meaning of full independence will be the control by a few Muslim families on the Alawite nation in Cilicia, in Askadron (the Alexandretta

Strip that the French cut off from Syria and annexed to Turkey in 1939) and in the Ansaria Mountains (the mountains in the western part of Syria, the topographical continuation of the Lebanon Mountains). Even having a parliament and a constitutional government will not ensure personal freedom. This parliamentary control is only a facade, lacking any effective value, and the truth of the matter is that it will be controlled by religious fanaticism that will target the minorities. Do the leaders of France want the Muslims to control the Alawite nation and throw it into the bosom of misery?

4. The spirit of fanaticism and narrow-mindedness, whose roots are deep in the heart of the Arab Muslims toward all those who are not Muslim, is the spirit that continually feeds the Islamic religion, and therefore there is no hope that the situation will change. If the Mandate is cancelled, the danger of death and destruction will be a threat upon the minorities in Syria, even if the cancellation (of the Mandate) will decree freedom of thought and freedom of religion. Why, even today we see how the Muslim residents of Damascus force the Jews who live under their auspices to sign a document in which they are forbidden to send food to their Jewish brothers who are suffering from the disaster in Palestine (in the days of the great Arab rebellion), the situation of the Jews in Palestine being the strongest and most concrete proof of the importance of the religious problem among the Muslim Arabs toward anyone who does not belong to Islam. Those good Jews, who have brought to the Muslim Arabs civilization and peace, and have spread wealth and prosperity to the land of Palestine, have not hurt anyone and have not taken anything by force, and nevertheless the Muslims have declared holy war against them and have not hesitated to slaughter their children and their women despite the fact that England is in Palestine and France is in Syria. Therefore a black future awaits the Jews and the other minorities if the Mandate is cancelled and Muslim Syria is unified with Muslim Palestine. This union is the ultimate goal of the Muslim Arabs.

5. We appreciate your generosity of spirit in defending the Syrian people and your desire to realize their independence, but Syria at the present time is far from the lofty goal that you aspire for her, because she is still trapped in the spirit of religious feudalism. We do not think that the French government and the French socialist Party will agree to the Syrians' independence, since its implementation will cause the subjugation of the Alawite nation, placing the Alawite minority in danger of death and destruction.

It cannot be that you will agree to the (nationalist) Syrian request to annex the Alawite nation to Syria, because your lofty principles - if they support the idea of freedom - will not accept the situation in which one nation (the Muslims) try to stifle the freedom of another (the Alawite) by forcing its annexation.

6. You may see fit to assure the rights of the Alawites and other minorities in the wording of the treaty (The French-Syrian Treaty, which defines the relationships between the

states), but we emphasize to you that contracts have no value in the Syrian Islamic mentality. We have seen this in the past, with the pact that England signed with Iraq, which forbade the Iraqis to slaughter the Assyrians and the Yazidis.

The Alawite nation, which we, the undersigned, represent, cries out to the government of France and to the French Socialist Party, and requests them to ensure its freedom and independence within its small boundaries (an independent Alawite state!!). The Alawite nation places its well-being in the hands of the French Socialist leaders, and is sure that it will find strong and dependable support for the nation which is a faithful friend, who has rendered to France a great service, and now is under the threat of death and destruction.

(Signed by): Aziz Aya al-Huash, Mahmud Aya Jadid, Mahmud Bik Jadid, Suleiman Assad (the grandfather of Hafez), Suleiman al-Murshid, Mahmud Suleiman al-Ahmad."

This concludes the document, which was written 86 years ago, but could have been written yesterday. The document includes within it all of the ills of the Middle East that the peoples of the region suffer from until today: religious zealotry, violence, marginalization of anyone who does not belong to the dominant group, stereotypes that determine the group-think and Western ignorance and naiveté about anything regarding the regional problems and how to solve them.

And with all due respect to the writers of the document, they are not free of problems either. Despite the fact that they are Arabs and Arabic speakers, they differentiate themselves from the general Arab-Muslim scene and define themselves as the Alawite "nation", only because they are members of a different religion. It may be that the way they view themselves is based on the fact that they are separate tribes from the Muslim tribes, and they see themselves as the original natives of the mountains of western Syria, in contrast to the Arab Muslims who invaded the area in the seventh century from the Arabian Peninsula under the unsheathed sword of the second Muslim Caliph, Umar bin al-Khattab, who imposed Islam upon the conquered peoples.

Without doubt, the Alawites made the necessary conclusions from what is written in the document because they have ruled the Muslims since 1966 with a cruel and bloodthirsty iron fist, because they knew well what would happen if the Muslims ruled over them.

An interesting additional detail in the document is the fact that the Ottoman Empire is not mentioned at all, even though it tried to convert the Alawites to Islam and forced them to build mosques in their villages. It could be that the signatories refrained from relating to the Turks because of the Alawite minority that lived in Turkey, and the fear that if they openly relate to the Turks in a negative way, the Turks might take revenge on their Alawite brothers who live in Turkey.

But the most interesting detail in the document is the positive way in which the writers relate to the Jews in the Land of Israel. Who knows, perhaps in the future after the Alawites are forced to flee for their lives from the Muslim cities in Syria in order to escape the fate that is described in the document and in order to keep their heads on their shoulders, they will establish their independent state in their mountains, the Mountains of Ansuria, and perhaps then—as a persecuted minority state—in a historical irony, they will try to join hands with the "Zionist entity", which is still an illegitimate and despised entity in the eyes of the Arabs and the Muslims.

Note: This article was originally published in Hebrew in *Makor Rishon* and the English translation is reproduced here with permission of the author. Web link: <http://israelagainstterror.blogspot.co.il/2012/09/mordechai-kedar-terror-of-alawites.html>

Dr. Mordechai Kedar is a lecturer at Bar-Ilan University, Israel and the director of the forthcoming Center for the Study of the Middle East and Islam, Bar Ilan University. Email: Mordechai.Kedar@biu.ac.il

As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy