

Panel 21: Syria's Alawites: From Domination To Survival?

Friday 18, 9-10.45, Coro di Notte

Convenors: **Leif Stenberg** (Lund University), **Matteo Legrenzi** (Ca' Foscari University of Venice)

Discussant: **Christa Salamandra** (City University of New York)

The conflict that rages over Syria and Iraq has had profound implications for the region. Apart from the disintegration of the respective states, and the immediate threat to the survival of the members of these societies, the modes of coexistence that had developed in these multi-confessional and multicultural societies have been severely tested. Taking its cue from the rather commonplace observation that the current crisis has accentuated communal differences within Syrian society and given rise to different survival strategies and explorations of post-conflict futures within different ethnic and/or confessional groups, this panel will focus on one of the embattled communities of Syria that has been traditionally associated to the ruling regime, the Alawites. It will seek to explore the transformations of the ways in which members of the Alawite community respond to the crisis and devise individual and communal strategies to ensure their physical and cultural survival in a perilous present and uncertain future. Furthermore, the panel will investigate whether and how these responses and strategies translate into particular imaginations of Alawite identities within Syria. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach that combines insights from a variety of literatures, in particular research on conflict and post-conflict studies, religious studies, collective action and nationalism, the speakers will try to shed light on (i) how the current political, security and humanitarian crisis affects Alawite repertoires of collective action and identity within and outside the theaters of conflict, (ii) whether and how these may affect the political/institutional architecture of post-conflict Syria and the region. Moreover, beyond its particular focus on the Alawite community, the panel will touch on the challenges and opportunities that the reconfiguration of the identities of different communities (including Syria's Kurds, Christians, Druze and, of course, Shi'a and Sunni Muslims) and their political articulation entail for Syria in the aftermath of the conflict.

Paper givers:

- 1) **Valentina Zecca** (Università della Calabria), *The Asad Regime and the Role of Sectarianism in the Political System*

This paper aims at presenting an analysis of sectarianism/communitarianism (Ta'ifiyya) in the modern Syrian political system and examines whether communitarian identities played a role in the political architecture of the national Syrian state. The emergence of the Ba'thist regime in the sixties was seen as a process of integration of the minorities into the Syrian state, but soon after its establishment, the regime and in particular Hafez al-Asad's regime, were charged with sectarianism/communitarianism. The objective of my intervention is to respond to the following questions: Was the Asad regime sectarian? Which role played communitarian-Alawite ties in his system of power? Which kind of relationship tied the Asad regime and the Alawite community? This paper analyzes the manipulation of religious

and communitarian identities in politics, which is reflected in the current communitarian polarization of the Syrian conflict.

2) **Umut Özkirimli** (Lund University), *An Alawite Nation? Rethinking Syria's Alawites in the Light of Theories of Nationalism*

As rapid change has been sweeping the MENA region several observers were quick to declare the end of the Sykes-Picot system, the dissolution of the borders artificially created by the British and French governments, and celebrate the birth of a transnational political community superseding the iron cage of the nation-state. The aim of this paper is to reflect on the resilience of nationalism in MENA focusing in particular on the case of Syria and the Alawites. It will be argued that partition is unlikely given the involvement of several regional and more distant powers in the conflict, and in any case, we do not know how a dismembered Iraq or Syria would look like if partition were to take place. In this context, the paper will also address the question of whether the Alawites of Syria can be regarded as a 'nation', in the sense in which the term is generally understood in the literature on nationalism, pursuing its own independent state or some form of autonomy.

3) **Spyros Sofos** (Lund University), *Alawite Mobilization: Repertoires of Collective Action, Theaters of Conflict*

This paper casts a broad look at Alawite repertoires of collective and political action in Syria. Drawing on literature and the conceptual tools developed in the fields of social movement research as well as of social and political anthropology, it examines the development of Alawite political identity 'in action' from the time of the French mandate to today. It explores the ways in which Syrian Alawites mobilized historically in order to articulate both their distinctiveness and their inclusion in Syrian society as well to address issues of their marginalization in the pre- and early independence period. However, the main emphasis of the paper is to explore in some detail the contemporary: the ways in which Alawite communities, having been (not always accurately) associated with the Assad regime have had to devise strategies of either distancing from Syria's precarious Ba'ath political establishment or further cooptation and entanglement with this. Finally, the paper assesses the opportunity structures that are open to the Alawite community to play a role in post conflict Syria given the current fragmentation of the political arena and increasing sectarianization of the conflict.

4) **Rafah Barhoum** (Lund University), **Leif Stenberg** (Lund University), *The Alawite Identity: Articulations of Identity, Religion and Language*

The proposed paper examines key aspects of Alawite identity and attempts, to the extent that this is possible, to situate these in a comparative social-historical context (before and in the course of the ongoing conflict). As the current civil and proxy war has engulfed Syria, Alawite identity has been politicized both by non-Alawites who point out to the links of the community to the Assad regime and often advocate violent action against them, and by Alawites themselves who respond in a variety of ways to such challenges. The paper will

thus look at aspects of their religious and linguistic distinctiveness both historically and in a contemporary context: it examines (i) key facets of the Alawite doctrine and rituals as well as other religious practices and (ii) linguistic particularities of Syria's Alawite communities and assesses the role they play (or may play) in the modes of their identification and of their inclusion or exclusion in Syrian society at a time where the importance of identity politics is accentuated.