
Reviewed by Matt Buchler

The beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011 brought the small, secretive religious minority that rules the country, the Alawites (sometimes spelled ‘Alawis’) into the global limelight. In his timely, well-written book, *Cycle of Fear: Syria’s Alawites in War and Peace*, Leon T. Goldsmith surveys the origins and evolution of this powerful sect that has dominated Syrian politics since the 1960s. His book provides an excellent overview of Syria’s political landscape while simultaneously furnishing a much-needed political history of the Alawites, as both an ethno-political group and a religious community. Goldsmith’s book argues that the Alawites have, historically speaking, held a position of sectarian insecurity that vacillates from absolute disenfranchisement to full integration within Syrian society. Indeed, he writes that the Alawites enjoy “long periods” of “relative security and interaction with wider society,” which “always give way to renewed conflict and persecution” (13). Thus, even though only some Alawites benefit directly from the Assad regime’s rule, and in fact many of them suffer materially as much as non-Alawite citizens, they continue to support Syria’s regime to mitigate the security dilemma they face vis-à-vis non-Alawite sects, most notably the Sunni majority. By security dilemma, Goldsmith borrows a concept from research on international conflict and its processes, which hypothesizes that different groups can never fully and credibly commit to not exploiting and oppressing each other, especially when the central state is weak and does not possess a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence.

The book is divided into five empirical chapters. Although authored by a political scientist, *Cycle of Fear* is refreshingly interdisciplinary. In chapters 1 and 2, Goldsmith surveys the historical, theological, and sociological origins and characteristics of the Alawites. He begins by discussing their origins as an urban movement based in Iraq, which fled to the mountainous area of northwestern Syria (outside Latakia) in search of refuge. A small Shia sect, often confused with the Ismailis (35), the Alawites developed theological beliefs and religious practices often deemed heretical by Sunni imams, which included permitting Alawites to consume alcohol, as well as avoid praying in mosques or wear the headscarf (hijab). They also developed a belief in metempsychosis—a type of reincarnation—and a tradition of secrecy to conceal their religion from non-Alawites (8). The Crusaders, who arrived in the Alawites’ region in 1098, provided a “cocoon” for them to consolidate their communities, grow their population, and practice their religion, since the two groups rarely fought (24). After the Crusaders’ withdrawal, and the reassertion of Sunni Arab (and later Ottoman) control over Syria, the Alawites again faced discrimination and repression. The 1305 fatwa of the Sunni imam Ahmed ibn Taymiyya justified these policies, which designated Alawites enemies of Islam and “more heretical than the Jews and Christians” (35). Because of intense sectarian insecurity during this period, as Goldsmith notes, the Alawites remained mountain tribes and eschewed migrating to urban areas—even nearby Latakia—until the 1940s (37, 61).

Chapter 3 explains how developments in the colonial and post-colonial periods reoriented politics favorably for the Alawites, culminating with Hafiz al-Assad’s ascension to power in 1970. During the French mandate, the Alawites received their own autonomous state, featuring a consociational elected council in which they held a wide majority (10 Alawites; 3 Sunnis; 3 Christians; 1 Ismaili) (61). Some Alawite elites opposed uniting the Alawite State with broader Syria, fearing—as Goldsmith writes, “insecurity about recommitting Alawites to a state dominated by their historic antagonists, Sunni Muslims” (65). Following Syria’s independence, Alawite elites became involved in secular Arab nationalist parties (especially the Ba’th Party) and the military. Whereas the latter became the “only real path to stable income for the economically disadvantaged Alawites”, the former opened opportunities for political leadership for the Alawites (68, 70). Hafiz al-Assad and other Alawite elites were attracted to
Ba’athism’s secular, pan-Arabist, and socialist ideology. However even as Hafiz al-Assad’s rule consolidated, Goldsmith shows how the Alawites continued to face sectarian insecurity. Numerous highly sectarian conflicts—including violent protests against the Syrian constitution’s proposed secularization (88), the Muslim Brotherhood’s rebellion (93-107), and the Lebanese civil war (93)—reminded Alawites that, even though one of their kinsmen was the ruler, Sunni Syrians saw his regime as “antithetical to Muslim causes” and with “suspect religious loyalties” (92).

The book’s remaining chapters and conclusion analyze the Alawites during the contemporary periods of revolution and civil war. After Bashar al-Assad’s ascension to power in 2000, the regime intensified its sectarianization. Already over 90 percent of military generals were Alawite, for example, in the year he became president (131). The intelligence services soon also became mostly Alawite (140). Despite the regime’s increasing sectarianization, Goldsmith argues that these developments did not benefit the Alawites broadly, but rather only specific Alawite families closest to the Assads. Indeed, as Goldsmith notes, “the size of the privileged Alawite elites shrank as Bashar al-Assad withdrew into greater reliance on his trusted inner core of family and close friends” (159). In fact, most Alawites—like other Syrians—suffered economically in the late 2000s, as the 2011 Arab uprisings approached. In particular, Syria’s drought of 2006-9 hurt Alawite small farmers and tobacco producers in the sect’s homeland around Latakia (165). Thus, when the uprisings began, Goldsmith suggests it was unclear if ordinary Alawites would continue to support Syria’s regime or turn against it (2-6). Yet, ultimately, Goldsmith concludes that ordinary Alawites’ continuing sectarian insecurity—fear of instability and violence in a post-revolutionary Syria—motivated them to “continue to cling to the regime of Bashar al-As[s]ad” (201). The Alawites’ loyalty further solidified as their situation became more precarious, as the Syrian regime descended into full-blown civil war and faced increasing conflict with Islamist extremists.

Drawing on considerable overseas research in Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey, original interviews with Alawite religious and political leaders, and extensive Arabic sources, Cycle of Fear makes an important contribution to the scholarly literature on sectarian politics in the Middle East and North Africa.

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