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Syria: Who is to blame?

by GWYNNE DYER

?They kidnapped; they killed; they humiliated; they kicked people out of jobs,? explained an Alawite writer living in coastal Syria. ?One way or another, this was going to happen.?

?This' is the outbreak of violence in Syria that killed 745 civilians in 30 ?massacres' along Syria's Alawite-majority Mediterranean coast on Friday and Saturday, according to the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The SOHR also reported the deaths of 125 fighters linked to Syria's new Islamist-led government and 148 ?pro-Assad' fighters.

Break that down and try to make sense of it. Alawites are a Shia sect that makes up about 10% of the population in predominantly Sunni Syria. (Many Sunnis do not even regard them as real Muslims.) There are also Kurdish, Druze and Christian minorities in Syria, but for the past 50-odd years Alawites have dominated the army and the government.

Yet Alawites are not a particularly prosperous group. France, which got Syria in the carve-up of the Ottoman empire after the First World War, deliberately recruited Alawites for its new colonial army precisely because they were an impoverished and despised minority ? and therefore presumably less loyal to Syria's old Sunni elite.

Even in the army the Alawites ended up in the low-status infantry, not the better educated artillery and engineers ? but after the French left in 1946 and the military coups began, infantry was exactly what ambitious officers needed. The last of those coups in 1970 brought Hafiz al-Assad to power ? and he and his son Bashar then ruled Syria until three months ago.

The Assads needed reliable allies to run their tyrannical state, and Alawites needed jobs, so they ended up greatly over-represented in the lower ranks of the army and the government. (Not so much in the upper ranks, because the non-Alawite elites had to get their share of those desirable posts too).

The tragedy for the Alawites was that they were the single element of a brutal regime that the public was most likely to have contact with. The contact could involve mere harassment and bribe-taking, or jail, torture and murder ? but it was too often Alawites serving the Assads who were to blame. And they didn't even get rich out of it.

Then finally, last December, a Syrian Islamist militia, the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HST), got backing from Turkey and launched an offensive that rolled up the entire Syrian army in just a couple of weeks.

After a 14-year civil war, half the population displaced from their homes, and at least 300,000 dead, Syria was clearly ready for change and very little violence was needed. But there is no consensus on what that ?change' should involve, so the violence may just have been postponed.

There are no ?pro-Assad fighters.' There are just Alawites defending themselves from other Syrians who want vengeance for crimes committed by the old regime, and neither side is much troubled about whether they are killing the right people.

The Kurds in the northeast reject the authority of the new regime in Damascus and so do the Druze in the south. The Alawites trust the HST least of all since its Islamist leaders see them as heretics who have betrayed true Islam. Turkey, Iran, Israel, Russia and the United States all have troops or heavily armed allies in the country. There will certainly be more blood.

Rather than march straight into that swamp, let us devote the last few paragraphs of this article to dealing with the obvious question: how did things get so extraordinarily messy in the Middle East?

You can blame the European colonial powers for the last major redrawing of the borders in the region in 1918-20, after the collapse

of the Ottoman empire. The new borders paid little heed to the ethnic and religious boundaries of the various local communities, creating new territorial grievances on top of all the old ones.

But then the Ottoman empire had erred in the opposite direction, assigning people to their specific religious group regardless of where they live in that vast domain (which at one time extended from Morocco to Crimea). You were even expected to wear the headgear associated with your particular religious identity.

The West embarked on the project of creating national identities that rose above the particulars of ethnicity, religion and sometimes even language (Switzerland, Canada, Belgium) at least five centuries ago, and it's still a work in progress.

The Middle East only set out down the same road about one century ago, and even today the project doesn't command majority support beyond the cities in most countries. This doesn't mean the region has to wade through another four centuries of bloodshed to get there, but it will take at least another couple of generations.