



Bashar al-Assad, August 2011 (Fabio Rodrigues Pozzebom/Agência Brasil)

# Asadism and Legitimacy in Syria

By Nathaniel Kahler

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On July 11, 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asserted that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had lost his “legitimacy,” pre-empting a U.S. policy favoring regime change in Syria.<sup>1</sup> In August 2011, President Barack Obama stated that the

“future of Syria must be determined by its people, but [Asad] is standing in their way. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for [Asad] to step aside.”<sup>2</sup> However, nearly 6 years later, Obama has left office, while Asad rules a contiguous stretch of population centers and the majority of Syrians left in Syria. Mainstream analysis explains Asad’s resilience as a result of external factors, namely Russian and Iranian support, lack of alignment of foreign aid to opposition forces, and a subdued U.S. response to Asad and prioritization of fighting the so-called Islamic State. Likewise, analysis on the internal factors focuses the narrow but loyal support the regime enjoys from the ruling Alawite sect.<sup>3</sup> The illegitimacy of the regime is assumed.

Has the Syrian regime indeed lost its legitimacy? Scholarship on the concept of legitimacy has offered a variety of typologies for measuring a state’s domestic legitimacy—external legitimacy being an entirely separate concept. A survey of this scholarship reveals two general themes. First, *legitimacy*, or the right to rule, is in the eyes of the ruled.<sup>4</sup> Second, the concept of legitimacy is fluid, and the factors that constitute legitimacy depend on the unique context of the state being assessed.<sup>5</sup> While in Western democracies legitimacy is conferred at the ballot box and measured by a government’s ability to provide political goods like security or the rule of law, such legitimacy is a historic aberration.<sup>6</sup> For most of history, a ruler’s heredity, religious credentials, or military strength have conferred legitimacy.

If legitimacy is the right to rule as perceived by those who are ruled, an assessment of Asad’s legitimacy must be informed by Syrian history and society. But who is a Syrian? Historically, Syria has no national identity; it is, rather, a society of overlapping and competing identities—those of tribe, class, region, ethnicity, and creed—each vying for the loyalty of the people.<sup>7</sup> In 1945, the French Mandate ended, and the people living in a group of Levantine cities and their hinterlands sharing no national identity were proclaimed, by outside

powers, to be Syrians. The new country lurched from coup to coup until Hafez al-Asad, Bashar al-Asad's father, consolidated his rule over Syria in 1970.<sup>8</sup> Hafez al-Asad offered a new identity and bargain through a secular ideology of pan-Arab socialism called Ba'athism. Today, the regime's bargain remains. In exchange for absolute loyalty, Asad provides an ideological veneer of solidarity and unification that is the *only* hope for security and stability in Syria.

This bargain could be termed *Asadism*, and it redefined the diverse people of Syria as part a broader shared national identity. Indeed, it is the only uniting identity that modern Syria has ever known. The resilience of this identity seems at first strange; the Alawite Asad rules over a state that is perhaps 60 percent Sunni Arab.<sup>9</sup> However, the regime's bargain is predicated on understanding that Syria is a majority-minority country. That is, while Sunnis are a religious majority, this is not their only identity.<sup>10</sup> They also belong to a minority: the urban elite, the military or Ba'ath party bureaucracy, a favored tribe, a regional identity—each identity adds complexity to the question of identity in Syria. In a land of minority identities, Asad's legitimacy is rooted in his ability to offer a veneer of cohesion that binds them together.

Moreover, Asad's legitimacy is not created or sustained in a vacuum. The inability of the opposition to offer a viable and broadly appealing identity in Syria confers legitimacy upon Asad. Asadism is the guarantee against the internal threat, *fitna*, which is societal discord and sedition. Political Islam and nonsecular ideologies have disastrously failed to present an alternative to Asadism. Likewise, alone in the Arab world, the Asad regime has maintained what can be termed a populist foreign policy by publicly rebuffing the machinations of Western imperialism and Zionism.<sup>11</sup> When the regime is charged with the Islamist label of *kefir*, or with the Western label of "illegitimate," it plays into the regime's narrative.<sup>12</sup> Both confer legitimacy on Asad.

Asadism and the legitimacy of the regime are at least as much a symptom of U.S. regional policy and of *takfiri Islam*

as antagonistic to them. This is not to blame the United States or Islamism for the perpetuation of Arab autocracies such as that of Asad. Rather, it is to recognize that the strong continuing appeal of Asadism is rooted in both a failure of political Islam to offer a viable ideology to a pluralistic society and a history of U.S. and broader Western imperialism, Central Intelligence Agency coups, support for military dictatorships, or disregard for Palestinians and "hypocrisy" that never matched U.S. rhetoric.

The myth of a stalwart and strong Asad regime (both father and son) that led Syria to stand against the forces of imperialism, Zionism, and Islamist *fitna* is, like so much of the regime narrative, a partial truth manufactured into an ethos of resistance that grows stronger as long as Asad faces down challenges. It may be that Secretary Clinton declared that Asad lost his legitimacy out of wishful thinking. Either Asad still has substantial legitimacy derived from factors unique to the Syrian context, or, alternatively, a new concept for the basis of Asad's resiliency is required. If legitimacy means that "the United States does not deem your government to be good, ethical, or in the U.S. interest," or some combination of these attributes, it ceases to be a useful concept. If Syrians have grown to understand that this is what is meant when a Western leader states "legitimacy," the concept itself has become illegitimate.

How, then, can the United States deal with a regime that is demonstrably "bad" but also maintains its legitimacy through a narrative that fits any U.S. move to counter it into a narrative of foreign conspiracy against the Syrian people? There is no clear path forward, but the United States must understand the Syrian conflict is not a 6-year war but rather an ongoing half-century conflict in which the United States has been a sometimes active, and sometimes unwitting, belligerent.

Justifications for U.S. intervention pursue two tracks of logic that are alternatively conflated and emphasized when convenient: ridding Syria of Asad is in U.S. strategic interest and/or a humanitarian imperative. Proponents of

U.S. intervention as a strategic interest argue that the United States and the rebels' various backers are, through their support for the opposition, changing the Asad camp's calculus. Intervention, it is argued, can encourage the regime to negotiate, somewhat preserving the international norms against Asad's brutal tactics, or weakening Iranian or Russian positions in the Middle East.<sup>13</sup> However, the U.S. stake in Asad's departure will never be commensurate with the regime's interest in holding on; even if it were and the United States helped to force Asad from power, the installed government would be deemed illegitimate by virtue of having U.S. support.

Likewise, the United States may have a responsibility to protect Syrian civilians, and Asad has forfeited Syrian sovereignty by failing to protect his people from gross human rights abuses.<sup>14</sup> However, a responsibility to protect divorced of legitimacy is a short-term effort to alleviate suffering that does little to build the long-term stability and security of the civilian population. Delaying regime victory can only further the suffering. If it is safe zones that the United States wants, there are plenty in Syria: in regime-controlled territory.

Even if the United States saw fit to invest the means to overpower the regime and its backers, this suggests no way to build governance in Asad's absence—a U.S.-installed government would be tasked with ruling without legitimacy in a splintered society. Modern Syria has not known stability except under Asad. It is impossible to know the extent to which the Syrian people view Asad as legitimate; accurate opinion polls do not exist, and elections are dubious measures. However, Syrian history and the continued resilience of the regime indicate that the United States may have prematurely discounted the sources of Asad's legitimacy.

This is not to overlook or undervalue the tragedy and suffering of Syria over the last 6 years. Rather, it is to argue that the U.S. policy of oscillating between strategic intervention to bring down a dictator, targeted actions against nonstate actors, and humanitarian intervention to prevent



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further atrocities ignores the sources of regime legitimacy and prolongs the conflict. In short, the last 6 years have demonstrated that the battle over legitimacy in Syria matters, but this is not a battle the United States can win. JFQ

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Reid J. Epstein, "Clinton: Assad Has 'Lost Legitimacy,'" *Politico.com*, July 12, 2011, available at <[www.politico.com/story/2011/07/clinton-assad-has-lost-legitimacy-058766](http://www.politico.com/story/2011/07/clinton-assad-has-lost-legitimacy-058766)>.

<sup>2</sup> Macon Phillips, "President Obama: 'The Future of Syria Must Be Determined by Its People, but President Bashar Al-Assad Is Standing in Their Way,'" White House blog, August 18, 2011, available at <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/08/18/president-obama-future-syria-must-be-determined-its-people-president-bashar-al-assad>>.

<sup>3</sup> Omar M. Dajani, "The Middle East's Majority Problems: Minoritarian Regimes and the Threat of Democracy," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38, no. 14 (2015), 2516–2533.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Gilley, *The Right to Rule: How States Win and Lose Legitimacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Kalevi J. Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 94–97.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>7</sup> Philip K. Hitti, *Syria: A Short History* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 31–250.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Fabrice Balanche, "Ethnic Cleansing Threatens Syria's Unity," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 3, 2015, available at <[www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/ethnic-cleansing-threatens-syrias-unity](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/ethnic-cleansing-threatens-syrias-unity)>.

<sup>10</sup> Chris Zambelis, "Syria's Sunnis and the Regime's Resilience," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 28, 2015, available at <[www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/syrias-sunnis-and-the-regimes-resilience](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/syrias-sunnis-and-the-regimes-resilience)>.

<sup>11</sup> John Allen and Charles R. Lister, "Bring Syria's Assad and His Backers to Account Now," *Washington Post*, October 21, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, "Supporting Resistance, Not Regime," *Al Akhbar English*, July 5, 2012, available at <<http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/supporting-resistance-not-regime>>.

<sup>13</sup> Allen and Lister.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Abramowitz, "Does the United States Have a 'Responsibility to Protect' the Syrian People?" *Washington Post*, September 6, 2013.