

## Turkey and Syria: The Alawite Dimension

by Akin Unver | on March 18th, 2012 |

This following post is from **Nazim Can Cicektakan**, a PhD candidate at the University of Essex, Department of History, who recently returned back from a research province of Hatay, on the border of Syria. I asked him whether he could write a summary of his thoughts for the FPA blogs and he kindly responded with this article.

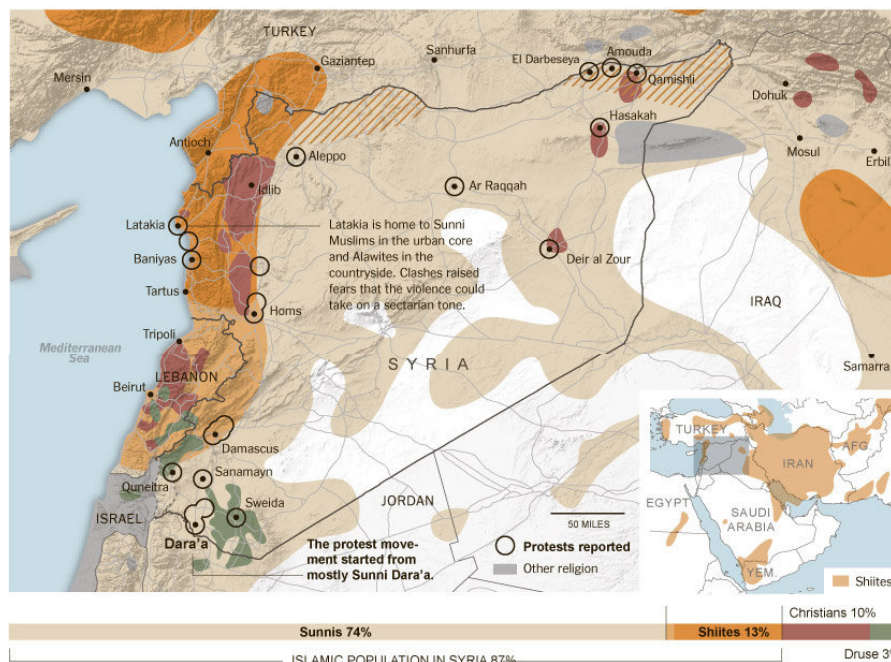
### Turkey and Syria: The Alawite dimension by Nazim Can Cicektakan\*

Namik Tan, the Turkish Ambassador to the United States, has recently stated in his interview that military solution was not on the Turkish agenda. His view of the Syrian conflict was in line with the dominant view of the events in the Western media; the responsibility of the massacres rested solely on the Syrian government, and because of this, Bashar Al-Assad should leave the office as soon as possible. Tan has noted that Assad turned a blind eye to his people's needs and it was no longer possible for Syria to continue the good relations with Turkey, because Assad was "reluctant to listen what Turkey asked him to do". Turkish official position may seem to be the "only" explanation for the Syrian massacres for the majority of the public, but in one Turkish city, there is an alternative view to this.

On 19 February, a crowd of a few thousands demonstrated in Antakya, the border city between Syria and Turkey. It was a pro-Assad and anti-USA demonstration which was banned at the last moment by the Turkish authorities. This was the second demonstration of the same kind in the city, which is populated by the Arabs of Christian, Sunni and Alawi belief as well as Turks. It is not only the demographics that make the city peculiar; historically it was a disputed place between Syria and Turkey following the demise of the Ottoman Empire. The city was firstly given an autonomous status within Syria under French mandate. It then acquired its independence in 1938 near the outbreak of the World War, and shortly after voted in favor of joining to Turkey with a disputed plebiscite. Syria continued to claim ownership of the city throughout the 20th century and it was Bashar Al-Assad who ended that claim with his rapprochement policy in early 2000s.

#### Protests Emerge From Many Corners of Syria's Diverse Population

- Shites  
Alawites, whose faith is an offshoot of Shiite Islam, are a minority, but hold most of the top positions in the government and military. President Bashar al-Assad's family is Alawite.
- Christians, who are largely supportive of President Assad, hold a number of senior government positions.
- The Druse population is generally considered supportive of the government, but protests have been reported in Druse areas.
- The majority of Syrians are Sunni. Tensions with Alawites have been made worse by four decades of Shiite control.
- Until recently, many Kurds were considered noncitizens and didn't have equal access to education, health services and legal protections. Protests have erupted in Qamishli, Amouda and Derabasiyeh.



I was in the city at the end of February, a week later the latest demonstration. I spoke with the members of the Alawi community to understand their views on the recent massacres in Syria and the Turkish foreign policy towards Syria. Alawites in Antakya are directly related to the Alawis in Syria who constitute approximately 12% of the population and is very active within the Baath movement. They are a much smaller minority in Turkey, but in Antakya they constitute approximately half of the population. The relations between the AKP government and the Alawis has been a relation of suspicion; majority of the people I have spoken with were angry both with the government's treatment of the Alawite minority in Turkey and their recent policy towards Syria.

Different from the stories depicted in the mainstream media differed from the widespread stories, which spread from ear to ear within the Alawi community, about murdered Alawis in Homs and Hama. People were not talking supportively of the Assad government or the military crackdown; however, they were worried about the silence on the murders committed by the "opposition forces".

The existing suspicion and lack of confidence towards the AKP government because of their domestic policies towards minorities seems to have a significant impact on their views on the current situation in Syria. The AKP government are accused with following a policy aiming to oust not only Bashar Al-Assad but the Alawis as a whole from the government and to replace them with the pro-AKP Sunni Ithwan movement.

The Syrian question, has thus a neglected sectarian aspect as well as the humanitarian aspect. Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan had already stated that he fears Syria may well slip into a sectarian conflict. It is clear that the Turkish government took this aspect into account when choosing the locations of the Syrian refugee camps formed in Antakya. The camps are located in Yayladagi, Altinozu and Reyhanli, three border districts populated entirely by Sunni Turks. The camps are heavily guarded and isolated from the other districts of Antakya where not only Turkish citizen Alawis but also Syrian nationals are living. There is no confirmed information about the inhabitants of the camps, but various sources noted that they are a mixture of civilians and military elite who defected from the Syrian Army. These camps had been formed exactly a year ago, in March 2011, and today it has been said that there are five camps spread in the region hosting approximately 10,000 refugees and some military personnel from Syria. Interestingly, although they are claimed to be civilian refugee camps, they are entirely under Turkish government control without UN or other international organization's involvement.

One of the main themes of the 19th February demonstration was the anger against a possible USA-NATO intervention. Anti-Imperialist slogans were chanted and protest was directed mainly against US. The invisible aspect of the demonstration was however, the anger towards the AKP who were perceived to be both as collaborators of the United States and the protector of the feared Ithwan movement. Prime Minister Erdogan was probably right in one way to declare that "Syria is our domestic problem". When combined with the current disorder in Libya, and long mistreatment of the Alawis in Turkey, foreign policy towards Syria indeed becomes a very risky domestic problem. In the city of Antakya, the idea of a military intervention to Syria is highly unpopular. For the inhabitants of the ancient city, it is clear that a quick and a peaceful resolution is the only way to both democratize Syria, and prevent the horrifying prospect of starting a full-blown sectarian/religious conflict in the region. Clearly, Syria is a very difficult gamble for the Turkish diplomacy. As the military conflict is prolonged and more powers are drawn into it, it becomes more difficult to pursue a policy which would not only stop the bloodshed at the moment, but also prevent further hostilities in the future.

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