

## Alawite heartland on Syria's coast remains loyal to Assad regime



ANWAR AMRO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES - Two men with the fingers painted in the colors of the Syrian flag show the V-sign as they pose in front of a huge image of President Bashar al-Assad during a rally in this 2011 file photo. The Alawite coast remains loyal to Assad regime.

By Abigail Fielding-Smith | Financial Times,

TARTOUS, Syria — On the floor of a printing shop in the port city of Tartous lie half a dozen billboard-size photos of young men superimposed on various configurations of Syria's flag, its president, Bashar al-Assad, and sometimes his father, Hafez.

These are “martyr posters” for young men killed fighting rebels, and they can be seen plastered all over Tartous: outside homes, on roundabouts, and even in the rear windows of cars. According to Lammah, the shop's owner, at least seven people come in every day asking him to make a poster for a friend or relative.

Tartous is on Syria's Mediterranean coast, the homeland of the country's minority Alawite population from which the regime and its fiercest fighters is drawn. Further from the Turkish border than the neighboring province of Latakia, from which the Assad family hails, Tartous has remained almost surreally isolated from the turmoil and destruction engulfing the country — apart from the funerals.

As this besieged outpost of regime supporters confronts the rising death toll, the battle lines deepen between them and what they say are the forces of foreign-backed extremism.

Outside a military hospital, three coffins with the Syrian flag stapled to their lids are carried past a line of soldiers and loaded into an ambulance that will take them to families. One soldier wipes his eyes as another starts shouting, "This is the army! The people are giving themselves for the country!" Seconds later, the small crowd of comrades erupt in chants of, "We will sacrifice ourselves for you, Bashar."

In another part of town, Samira is unable to stop tears spilling down her cheeks as she looks at a picture of her son Ali, who was killed in the Damascus suburbs in November.

To the rebels, Ali was a fighter for a regime that had unleashed unthinkable destruction on Sunni civilian neighborhoods, killing and torturing with impunity.

To Samira, he was a loving son doing his patriotic duty. Her one consoling thought is that his death “wasn’t cheap,” she says. “He was fighting against rebels, armed people who don’t care about people or civilians. These people don’t want peace, they don’t want freedom or democracy, they just want to destroy this country.”

A commemorative video of Ali’s funeral has been produced by one of his friends, who does a lot of this kind of thing these days. It starts with a recording of Hafez al-Assad describing martyrs as the “fire of the light,” then fades to slow-motion footage of his coffin being lifted in a crowd of thousands.

Beneath this public exaltation of sacrifice, frustration is starting to build in the Alawite community at the regime’s lack of progress in vanquishing the rebellion as the death toll mounts, says Peter Harling of the International Crisis Group. This can be heard in a grumbling refrain voiced by some: “You get the palaces. We get the coffins.”

But fear of the outside enemy, and its fifth columns, is a galvanizing force here in the regime’s coastal heartlands. A woman in Lattakia describes how people delete pan-Arab TV channels al-Arabiya and al-Jazeera from their satellite menus for being pro-opposition. Instead, state media’s version of events, in which the rebels are all foreign Islamist extremists, predominates.

One member of the irregular, mainly Alawite forces known as the shabbiha admits it is wrong to kill fellow Syrians but insists, “They are not our friends. They are Salafists.”



