

SILENCING SYRIA: THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS BY
THE HAFEZ AL-ASSAD REGIME (1970-2000)

by

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SILENCING SYRIA: THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO HUMAN RIGHTS
VIOLATIONS BY THE HAFEZ AL-ASSAD REGIME

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzes the international response, particularly of the United States, to human rights abuses in Syria under Hafez al-Assad's Ba'athist regime, in power from 1970-2000. The study focuses on the years between 1976 and 1982, known as the 'great repression,' when many of the regime's worst human rights offenses occurred. During his presidency, Assad consolidated Syria's national power within himself by implementing strict government control; often resorting to violence, terror, and intimidation to achieve his political and military objectives. This paper draws on numerous secondary and primary sources including academic journals, personal testimonies, government documents, and periodicals to create a comprehensive look at international community's understanding and response to the numerous human rights violations in Syria at the end of the twentieth century. The goal is to illustrate that the offenses that occurred throughout Assad's regime were often met with inconsistent criticism from the international community that rarely led to proactive action towards ending these atrocities against human rights in Syria.

INTRODUCTION

After Syria entered into civil war in 2011, Bashar al-Assad received tremendous criticism for his human rights abuses against the state's citizens. Violations of human rights emerged as a primary stated factor for United States intervention on behalf of rebels. However, the abuses Bashar al-Assad inflicts upon Syrian citizens are frequently based upon the actions of his father, Hafez al-Assad, who ruled the country with an iron fist for thirty years. Hafez al-Assad built an authoritarian regime rooted in strict compliance with government activities, and harsh sanctions against individuals and groups that deviated from Ba'athist authority. The United States and other international advocacy groups often reported on the human rights abuses under Hafez al-Assad; however, corrective action was rarely taken to rectify these violations or terminate the leadership of Assad.¹

Understanding the structure and practices of the regime Hafez al-Assad built is critical to comprehending the current situation plaguing the Levant. Furthermore, assessing the United States' historical involvement in modern Syria provides a framework through which one may assess the countries' contemporary relationship. Even so, little scholarship touches on how the United States' addressed human rights concerns during this era. This study analyzes to what extent was United States genuinely concerned with the human rights violations against the Syrian people; or rather, is their policy of strategic assertive intervention, in the name of human rights, rooted in ulterior foreign policy objectives. Primary focuses is placed on the years between 1976 and 1982,

¹ The singular surname 'Assad' is used frequently throughout this paper. It should be noted, that for the purpose of this study, 'Assad' is a reference to the father, Hafez al-Assad.

known as the ‘great repression,’ when many of the regime’s worst human rights offenses occurred.

CONSTRUCTING THE MODERN SYRIAN BORDERS

In the wake of World War I, the victorious Entente Powers carved the current Syrian borders out of the collapsed Ottoman Empire with little consideration for the political or social interests of the area’s inhabitants. In July of 1920, France forcibly invaded Syria’s capital city of Damascus and established control over the country as a Mandate under the League of Nations.² Many Syrians believed that the borders imposed upon them by French Occupiers were illegitimate in their imperialist construct; and instead, promoted the consolidation of many Eastern Mediterranean countries into a unified pan-Arab nation.³ Despite this desire, the French mandate effectively controlled the region until Syria legally gained its autonomy in 1946 after becoming a founding member of the United Nations.⁴ France’s tight control of Syria during the Mandate period, and abrupt subsequent departure from the Levant, created lasting political, economic, and social fragility within the country.⁵ The tumultuous period following Syrian independence is categorized by a large number of military coups and attempted coups, resulting in a series of short-lived leaders and widespread political instability.⁶ Then, on March 10, 1963, the Arab Ba’ath Socialist Party led a coup d’état that secured

² Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 18-19.

³ Jamal Wakim, *The Struggle of Major Powers over Syria* (Ithica: Ithica Press, 2013), 74-75.

⁴ Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 342.

⁵ John McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years* (New York: The New Press, 2014), 111.

⁶ Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 21-25.

control of the Syrian government and continued the party's rule of the country for over half a century.

THE BA'ATH PARTY

Ba'athism emerged in Syria towards the end of the nineteen thirties out of the collaborative ideas of Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din Bitar.⁷ Aflaq and Bitar recalled a glorious Arabic heritage of pervasive dominance within the large geographical area of the Fertile Crescent, otherwise known as Greater Syria, the Levant, or the Shaam. It was not until the twentieth century that foreign colonizers partitioned this region into modern day Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and Jordan, as well as part of Southern Turkey—resulting in the unnatural geographic and social fragmentation of the Arabic world.⁸ The Arabic word *ba'ath* means rebirth or revival, referencing the party's promotion of an Arabic renaissance—in which the countries of the Levant would reunite under a single pan-Arab nation, free from imperialist control.⁹ The Arab Ba'ath Party was officially founded in Damascus on November 29, 1940. The party's motto, "Unity, Freedom, Socialism," communicates the fundamental principles of Ba'athist ideology, which are so intrinsically linked together that they cannot be separated.¹⁰ Aflaq ultimately sought the abolition of Western-imposed political borders and the creation of a united Arab federation with a government that implemented a system of moderate socialism and the preservation of democratic freedoms. Unity, freedom, and socialism remain the

⁷ John McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years* (New York: The New Press, 2014), 119.

⁸ John McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years* (New York: The New Press, 2014), 35.

⁹ Hizb al-Ba'ath al-'Arabī al-Ishtirākī, *A Survey of the Ba'ath Party's Struggle 1947-1974* (Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party, 1978), 10.

¹⁰ Hizb al-Ba'ath al-'Arabī al-Ishtirākī, *A Survey of the Ba'ath Party's Struggle 1947-1974* (Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party, 1978), 10.

foundational principles of Ba'athism; however, the party's interpretation and implementation of these terms evolved, and often strayed from their original intended meanings, during the movement's historic progression.

In the 1940s and early 1950s, the Ba'ath party's membership remained small, comprised primarily of teachers, students, and military cadets. During this period, the party experienced relatively meager electoral successes. Syria's parliamentary elections of 1954 propelled the Ba'athist into the realm of prominent political movements, as sixteen of the party's thirty-two candidates secured parliamentary seats.¹¹ The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party strengthened during the final years of democracy in Syria, which continued until the country merged with Egypt on February 1, 1958, officially creating the United Arab Republic. This new state, led by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, formally abolished political parties until Syria regained its autonomy in 1961.¹² As the Ba'athist worked towards re-establishing its political presence in Syria—several factions emerged within the Ba'ath movement. The primary fission separated Michel Aflaq's civilian-backed faction that supported traditional Ba'athist ideology, against a military centered division, who were highly critical of Aflaq's support of Syrian-Egyptian unification, and promoted a more radicalized implementation of socialism.¹³

BA'ATH PARTY SCHISM: MILITARY AND CIVILIAN DIVIDE

A core group of Ba'athist officers led the military branch of the Ba'ath party, whom had earlier formed a secret organization within the army under the United Arab Republic. One of the lead officers was Hafez al-Assad, an army captain who joined the

¹¹ Sami al-Jundi, *al-Ba'ath* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1969), 68.

¹² John McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years* (New York: The New Press, 2014), 139.

¹³ Sami al-Jundi, *al-Ba'ath* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1969), 95-96.

Ba'ath party in the mid-forties while still a student at the Homz Military Academy in the air force division.¹⁴ The military committee capitalized on the fragility of the Syrian state in the wake of the United Arab Republic's disbandment, seizing control of the country through a relatively bloodless coup d'état on March 8, 1963.¹⁵ Members of the military committee, who had mastermind the coups, reinstated themselves as army officers. Hafez al-Assad, still in his thirties, became the de facto head of the Syrian air force.¹⁶ The coup leaders used Ba'athist ideology to justify their actions and gain supporters; however, tension and division amongst the Ba'athist themselves continued.

The growing split between the civilian Ba'athist and the party's military committee intensified as the army officers commandeered the party, and abandoned Aflaq's original populist ideology by establishing a military dictatorship. Members of the military committee selected civilian state leaders as figureheads, with the real power centralized within the armed forces. The lead military officers sought to restructure the Syrian state, economy, and society in its entirety. The officers banned political parties and movements deemed potentially threatening to authority, imposed martial law, and heavily censored or shut down some news outlets.¹⁷ Syria's new regime, led by the Ba'ath party, turned increasingly towards authoritarianism.

HAFEZ AL-ASSAD'S ASCENSION TO POWER

¹⁴ John McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years* (New York: The New Press, 2014), 180-181.

¹⁵ Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 44.

¹⁶ Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad: The Sphinx of Damascus* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), 32.

¹⁷ Jamal Wakim, *The Struggle of Major Powers over Syria* (Ithica: Ithica Press, 2013), 97-99.

As the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party gained influence, an intra-Ba'athist power struggle pitted officers within the inner circle of military influence against each other. These tensions culminated in a violent coup d'état in 1966, dissolving ties forged within the military committee and putting an end to the influence of Michel Aflaq's classical Ba'athist ideology. The new regime, led by Salah Jadid, gave primary control of the army to Hafez al-Assad, who was appointed the Minister of Defense. Fear of disloyalty to the new regime within the armed forces led to a crackdown on suspected opponents within the military. By June of 1967, at least a third of the officers within the Syrian army had been removed from their posts and replaced by reserves who were largely under-trained and under-qualified to protect a country in the midst of mass turmoil.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Assad utilized his powerful military position to remove supporters of Jadid from key military posts, and replaced them with his followers. Backed by the powerful loyalty of the army, Assad, and his supporters infiltrated the government offices of the Ba'ath party in the fall of 1970, terminating the rule of Jadid. With this strategic move, Hafez al-Assad commandeered the Ba'ath party beneath his personal authority on November 16, 1970. He propagated this event as *al-harakah al-tashihiyyah*, the corrective movement, which he claimed was necessary to rescue Syria from its tumultuous succession of leadership and restore and revive the goals of the Ba'athist revolution.¹⁹

From the moment Assad seized power in 1970, he sought to project an image of himself as an egalitarian leader of a democratic regime, whose power stemmed from the overwhelming support of his people. He emphasized nationalist principles in his

¹⁸ Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and their Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 157.

¹⁹ Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 164.

construction of strong government institutions that effectively stabilized the Syrian state into a respected regional player in the Middle East.²⁰ In reality, Assad achieved this stability through consolidating all of Syria's national power within himself, and implementing strict government control, often through force, that demanded explicit cooperation of all citizens.

THE CONSTITUTION OF 1973

Beneath a democratic façade, Assad's personalization of power pervaded all Syrian political institutions—beginning with the construction of a new Syrian constitution—enacted on March 14, 1973.²¹ The new document's rhetoric reflected a nation rooted in democratic ideals: committed to separating and balancing government's powers and protecting citizen's inherent human rights. The preamble boldly states that “freedom is a sacred right and popular democracy is the model which guarantees to the citizen the enjoyment of freedom.”²² Chapter 4 of the constitution, “Concerning Liberties, Rights, and Public Organizations,” outlines the fundamental rights of Syrian citizens in twenty-six Articles.²³ The section ensures many provisions including freedom of religion (Article 35), freedom of speech (Article 38), and freedom of assembly (Article 39).²⁴

²⁰ Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad: The Sphinx of Damascus* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), 48.

28 (1974): 53.

²² Peter B. Heller, “The Permanent Syrian Constitution of March 13, 1973,” *Middle East Journal* 28 (1974): 55.

²³ Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 44.

²³ Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad: The Sphinx of Damascus* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), 32.

²³ Jamal Wakim, *The Struggle of Major Powers over Syria* (Ithica: Ithica Press, 2013), 97-99.

²³ Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and their Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 157.

Within this projection of democratic ideals, the Constitution includes propagandas material, praising the Ba'ath party for liberating the Syrian people from political oppression and implementing a system of political democracy.²⁵ Article 8 establishes the Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party as "the vanguard party in the society and the state."²⁶ The document effectively legalized a one-party political system beneath the Ba'ath party, ultimately controlled by the authority of President Assad himself. Articles 83-114 outline the broad powers of the executive branch and place virtually no legal restraints on the president's control.²⁷ Despite the president's extensive powers enshrined in this document, it was not the constitution, but rather, enactment of a Syrian state of emergency lasting throughout Assad's reign that centralized authority within his single being.

THE STATE OF EMERGENCY

Political leaders may declare a state of emergency in their country, which allows the government to derogate, temporarily, some of their citizens' rights, as a means of maintaining order and safety in extreme circumstances including a period of civil unrest,

²³ Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 164.

²³ Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad: The Sphinx of Damascus* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), 48.

²³ Peter B. Heller, "The Permanent Syrian Constitution of March 13, 1973," *Middle East Journal*

²³ Peter B. Heller, "The Permanent Syrian Constitution of March 13, 1973," *Middle East Journal* 28 (1974): 57-58.

²⁴ Peter B. Heller, "The Permanent Syrian Constitution of March 13, 1973," *Middle East Journal* 28 (1974): 57.

²⁵ Peter B. Heller, "The Permanent Syrian Constitution of March 13, 1973," *Middle East Journal* 28 (1974): 54.

²⁶ Peter B. Heller, "The Permanent Syrian Constitution of March 13, 1973," *Middle East Journal* 28 (1974): 55.

²⁷ Peter B. Heller, "The Permanent Syrian Constitution of March 13, 1973," *Middle East Journal* 28 (1974): 61-63.

in the wake of a natural disaster, or after the declaration of war. Syria's state of emergency, based on Legislative Decree 51, was enacted immediately after the Ba'ath party seized control of the country in 1963. The law predates the presidency of Hafez al-Assad; however, when he came to power, Assad utilized the state of emergency as legal justification for his repressive political system.²⁸ The state of emergency allowed the Assad regime to disregard any laws created under the Constitution and permitted the government to act in virtually whatever manner they felt fit to ensure complete control over all Syrian citizens.

FORMAL POLITICAL STRUCTURE

Though Assad used the state of emergency to bypass the Syrian constitution, he put forth an immense effort towards orchestrating a façade of legality within his regime by creating a formal governmental system. The Ba'ath party anchored his new political structure and remained an important support system for Assad's legitimization of power. As previously noted, the Syrian constitution grants the Ba'ath party a leadership role in society, deeming it "the vanguard party in society and state."²⁹ The Ba'ath Party adopted a pyramidal structure of power with Hafez al-Assad positioned at the apex, leading the party as its General Secretary. Power percolated from the top through a series of branches, departments, and cells that diffused Ba'athist influence throughout the state.³⁰ To gain political loyalty, Assad encouraged Syrian's to join the Ba'ath Party, attaching political, social, and economic benefits to party membership. According to interviews of

²⁸ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 23.

²⁹ Peter B. Heller, "The Permanent Syrian Constitution of March 13, 1973," *Middle East Journal* 28 (1974): 55.

³⁰ Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 76.

Syrian professionals conducted by Middle East Watch in 1989, individuals who refused to join the party were routinely threatened, denied employment or career advancements, or demoted from current jobs without cause.³¹ As a result, membership in the Ba'ath Party dramatically escalated from only around one or two thousand members when Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970, to an estimated eight hundred thousand members at the time of his death in 2000.³² By this time, the party had transformed from its original ideological base to a political entity that existed in order to stabilize Assad's power.

THE NATIONAL PROGRESSIVE FRONT

The Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party was not the only political party permitted during the Assad regime. When Hafez al-Assad asserted power in Syria, he pledged to broaden the political base of the state by incorporating four oppositional parties in into a governing coalition with the Ba'ath. On March 23, 1972, the National Progressive Front was formed bringing together the primary parties of the secular left including, the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party, Syrian Communist Party, Arab Socialist Union, Arab Socialist Party, and Socialist Unionists.³³ An amendment to Article 8 of the Syrian constitution asserts that the Ba'ath as the prominent party of the National Progressive Front stating that the party "directs a national progressive front which strives to unify the potential of the popular masses and to press them into the service of the goals of the Arab nation."³⁴ Though the constitution promises a multi-party government, the Front primarily functions

³¹ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 31.

³² Spencer C. Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Political, Social, and Military History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 183-184.

³³ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 156.

³⁴ Peter B. Heller, "The Permanent Syrian Constitution of March 13, 1973," *Middle East Journal* 28 (1974): 55.

as an illusion of political pluralism within the Syrian state. The Assad regime placed a few leading members of the Front parties in figurehead political positions; however, these individuals and the parties they represented were excluded from actual political power or a role in forming policy. Furthermore, Front parties were unable to criticize the Ba'ath party, banned from selling their newspapers, prohibited from holding events or meetings, and widely discriminated against in employment decisions.³⁵

ELECTIONS

Hafez al-Assad's Corrective Movement promised a popular democracy driven by open and free elections. Elections, beginning in 1970, were frequent; however, the results garnered from these polls were largely an illegitimate representation of the desires of the Syrian public. The first election was held on March 1, 1971, in which Hafez al-Assad was ratified in a seven-year term as president by a 99.2 percent majority vote.³⁶ According to official figures reported by the Syrian government, Assad was re-elected four times during his rule, each time receiving over 99 percent of the vote.³⁷ Elisabeth Picard, a leading Middle East scholar in France eloquently summarized Syrian elections, writing: "By effectively eliminating opponents and tightly controlling the voting process, the regime has assured itself in most cases a nearly absolute victory. But the level of voter participation—sometimes less than ten percent and rarely more than fifty percent—shows

³⁵ Peter B. Heller, "The Permanent Syrian Constitution of March 13, 1973," *Middle East Journal* 28 (1974): 33-34.

³⁶ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 36.

³⁷ Dieter Nohlen, Florian Grotz and Christof Hartmann, *Elections in Asia and the Pacific: A Data Handbook: Volume 1: Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2004), 221.

the disaffection of the population toward electoral practices that fool no one.”³⁸ This voter apathy reflects the reality of Syria’s “free elections”, that were ultimately nothing more than a political charade.

THE MILITARY

These various legislative and executive institutions created a veil of democracy over the Assad regime, which covered the actual source of Syrian power, rooted in Hafez al-Assad himself and backed by force. Assad witnessed and occasionally involved himself in numerous army backed coups and counter-coups, before using military force to legitimize his power. He clearly understood the importance of the Syrian army’s allegiance, and pointedly ensured the military’s loyalty to himself early on in his regime. Under Article 103 of the Syrian Constitution, “The President is the supreme commander of the army and armed forces.”³⁹ Soon after Assad’s ascension to power, he sought a rapid diversification and expansion of the Syrian military. Before he assumed a role as head of the armed forces, Syria’s ground forces consisted of a single army of 60,500 soldiers, supported by a few lightly equipped militias. By 1982, on the eve of entering the Lebanese war, Syria’s army had increased nearly six-fold to some 350,000 soldiers organized within six fully equipped branches.⁴⁰ The leaders and commanders of these different security agencies reported directly to Assad, as ‘supreme commander of the army and armed forces.’ This consolidation of military power and loyalty within his

³⁸ Peter B. Heller, “The Permanent Syrian Constitution of March 13, 1973,” *Middle East Journal* 28 (1974): 37.

³⁹ Peter B. Heller, “The Permanent Syrian Constitution of March 13, 1973,” *Middle East Journal* 28 (1974): 62.

⁴⁰ Moshe Ma’oz, *Asad: The Sphinx of Damascus* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), 59.

single being increased Assad's far-reaching authority in a way no other individual in modern Syrian history had previously achieved.

To support the growing numbers within the armed forces, Assad prioritized an expansion of the Syrian military budget. In November of 1970, Assad publically asserted his re-budgeting plans to allocate seventy-one percent of Syria's national budget to the military, an unprecedented proportion that he boasted, "no other country in the world has reached."⁴¹ Although Assad never attained those levels of military spending, in the fiscal years following his acquisition of power, Syria showed a steady increase in its allocation of funds to the armed forces. According to annual reports conducted by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, Syrian military expenditure, in US dollars adjusted to a real terms constant of 2016, was approximately as follows: \$676 million in 1960, \$979 million in 1965, \$1.4 billion in 1970, \$1.6 billion in 1971, \$2.3 billion in 1974, \$4.1 billion in 1976, \$4.3 billion in 1978, \$7.4 billion in 1979, and \$11.6 billion in 1980.⁴² This immense increase in military spending illustrates the importance of the armed forces to the Assad regime as a major constituency and international and domestic power base.

SECURITY SERVICES, *MUKHABARAT*

Assad routinely deployed important military units near Damascus, Syria's capital city, to protect the regime against internal opposition. These most powerful of the security services were the *mukhabarat*. This system of police and intelligence agencies insured internal control, and was the cornerstone of Assad's power within Syria. Their

⁴¹ Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad: The Sphinx of Damascus* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), 58.

⁴² Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad: The Sphinx of Damascus* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), 58.

primary responsibility was monitoring political dissension from the regime, and stopping individuals who acted against the Ba'ath party. These arrests did occur individually; however, it was more common for the intelligence officers to make sweeping arrests of numerous individuals from the same dissenting political organization. As a result of the 1963 Emergency Law, the *mukhabarat* was exempt from any legal oversight; and in practice, could act in virtually whatever manner they felt appropriate.⁴³ These officers acquired the unprecedented power to detain people for as long as they wished with no explanation and without trial.

The majority of their arrests occurred in the late hours of the night between 10 P.M. and 5 A.M. to catch their arrestees off guard. The following testimony, told to Middle East Watch in the summer of 1989, recalls one man's frightening and unexpected arrest in his Damascus home:

I was fast asleep. At about two in the morning, I heard knocks. I went to the door and asked who was there. A voice said: "Your neighbor, I want to talk." Without thinking, I opened the door and saw about ten people from the mukhabarat, some with automatic weapons. They pushed their way inside. Some searched every room of the house. They tore the place apart, looking for incriminating papers and documents. But they didn't find anything. Then they said: "You come with us. We want to talk to you." They let me get dressed, shoved me into one of the cars, put on a blindfold and we drove away.⁴⁴

In practice, the Syrian security system operated with little regulation or regard for formal legal procedures. In most cases, security services did not tell detainees of a reason for their arrest, nor informed or granted any of their rights or statutory provisions.⁴⁵ After

⁴³ John McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years* (New York: The New Press, 2014), 185.

⁴⁴ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 47.

⁴⁵ Amnesty International, *Report from Amnesty International to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic* (Nottingham: Amnesty International Publications, 1983), 22.

an arrest, prisoners' families, friends, neighbors, and colleagues can never be certain what will happen to an individual in custody. Accounts warning of the *mukhabarat's* vicious treatment of prisoners circulated throughout Syria. This knowledge enhanced the uncertainty and fear of the detainee's family that compounded in an acute awareness of the powerlessness of the Syrian people against the state.

JUDICIAL SYSTEM

The State of Emergency and additional legislation eroded the Syrian court system until the tribunals operated almost entirely outside any formal judicial system. Article 4 of the Syrian Emergency Law grants the Military Governor the power to refer individuals violating his direction to military courts. Additionally, it asserts that the governor may “Impose restrictions on the freedom of persons in terms of holding meetings, residence, transport, movements, and detaining suspects or people threatening public security and order on a temporary basis, authorizing the conducting of investigations related to both persons and place at any time, and requesting any person to perform any task.”⁴⁶ The regime often grossly abused these broad powers, detaining people considered “threatening (to) public order and security” for arbitrary reasons, and for a period much longer than a reasonable “temporary basis.” Additionally, legislation, enacted on July 1, 1965, expanded the definition of political crimes, prohibiting virtually all opposition to the regime by law.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Moh'd Anjarini, *Oppressive Laws in Syria: Law of Emergency Issued Upon the Legislative Act No. 15 on 22.12.1962 by the Council of Ministers in Syria* (London: Syrian Human Rights Committee, 2003), 4.

⁴⁷ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 26.

Once detained, prisoners were typically not granted an ordinary court proceeding either. Decree Law 109 enacted in August of 1968 created a new kind of emergency court system known as military field tribunals. The proceedings of this tribunal remained confidential, frequently resulting in a summary judgment that lacked any formal defense representation. Judges were often selected amongst the ranks of military officers, and were not required to have any legal education; however, their rulings could not be overturned.⁴⁸ These tribunals, operated entirely outside of the ordinary judicial system, and became the normative court procedure throughout Assad's rule. At times no trial was administered for prisoners. In this case, security service personnel transferred the detainee to a prison where they could be held captive indefinitely.

PRISON CONDITIONS

Syrian prison conditions varied by detention center but shared many commonalities. Mass arrests by the *mukhabarat* led to a pervasive issue of overcrowded facilities. Twenty to fifty prisoners often shared one large, communal cell; and cells designed for a single individual frequently detained five to ten inmates. Some former detainees report of quarters so close that prisoners had to take shifts sleeping because there was not enough room for everyone to lay down simultaneously.⁴⁹ Overpopulation bred a myriad of issues within the Syrian penitentiaries including scarce provisions, poor hygiene, and widespread illness.

Physical conditions were terrible, amplified by corrupt penal officials who stole from the minimal available supplies. The insufficient food supplies prisoners were

⁴⁸ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 26-27.

⁴⁹ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 62.

provided often offered little nutritional benefits. Watery soup and bread constituted a typical meal, and guards sometimes deprived inmates of food altogether as punishment.⁵⁰ Prisons rarely had the resources to provide real bedding. A fortunate inmate received a thin cotton mattress as a protectant against the hard, damp floor; however, it was likely that he or she received one to four blankets that acted as both cushion and cover. This minimal protection is amplified in the winter months when temperatures can drop below freezing. A number of the penitentiaries were unheated, causing prisoners to develop colds, bronchitis, and pneumonia.⁵¹

Illness was compounded by abhorrent sanitary conditions. Crowded cells with little ventilation acted as Petri dishes for bacteria cultivation. Prisoners only bathed every few weeks and their clothes were rarely, if ever, laundered.⁵² Additionally, restroom facilities were minimal. Several cells lacked toilets entirely, and inmates were only permitted the use of the bathroom twice a day. At times, this deprivation resulted in prisoner incontinence, worsening the already prevalent sanitation problems.⁵³

Despite the repulsive conditions of communal cells littered with disease, unwashed bodies, infected wounds, and lice, it was unquestionably better than solitary confinement, a particularly cruel form of inmate punishment. Abominable accounts describe prisoners void of human contact, deprived of food, and trapped in cells one meter high filled with human excrement for days or even weeks. Authorities inflicting

⁵⁰ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 63.

⁵¹ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 62.

⁵² James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 63-64.

⁵³ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 63.

severe disciplinary measures could sanction inmates to months or even years of solitary confinement under marginally better circumstances.⁵⁴

TORTURE

Torture is illegal in Syria in accordance with the state's laws and numerous international covenants to which the country is a party. Article 28, section 3 of the Syrian Constitution prohibits torture declaring "No one may be subjected to physical or mental torture or be treated in a degrading manner."⁵⁵ Furthermore, on June 26, 1945, Syria became one of the founding members of the United Nations after signing the Charter of the United Nations and Statue of the International Court of Justice.⁵⁶ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, enacted on December 10, 1948, is the foundational document on which the United Nation's asserts as "a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations."⁵⁷ Article 5 of this decree patently states, "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment."⁵⁸ Despite this explicit restriction, numerous accounts report Syrian security services tortured and even murdered individuals in custody.

Security services routinely tortured detainees during interrogation, punishment, and as a means of instilling fear and order within the prisons. Authorities implemented a

⁵⁴ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 63.

⁵⁵ Peter B. Heller, "The Permanent Syrian Constitution of March 13, 1973," *Middle East Journal* 28 (1974): 57.

⁵⁶ United Nations, 1 UNTS XVI, "Charter of the United Nations," June 26, 1945, <http://www.un.org/en/charter-united-nations>.

⁵⁷ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 217/A, "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights," Dec. 10, 1948, <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>.

⁵⁸ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 217/A, "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights," Dec. 10, 1948, <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>.

vast range of torture methods throughout an inmate's incarceration. The most common form of torture reported were severe beatings in which prisoners were stricken with whips, chains, fists, and sticks, sometimes for hours at a time. Occasionally, these attacks would lead to permanent disability or death of a prisoner.⁵⁹

Inmates were commonly tortured upon arrival at a new prison. While every prison differed in their severity of abuse, this practice became so common it was known as *haflat al-itsqbal* or 'reception.'⁶⁰ The following is an account of one prisoners 'reception' to the Tadmor Military Prison, reported in a publication by Amnesty International in 1987:

The bus arrived at Tadmor Prison where the military police awaited us. The warders helped us off the bus, whipping us mercilessly and brutally until we were all out. They removed the handcuffs and blindfolds, and then we were taken into a courtyard overlooked by the prison's offices, where our names were registered. All the while we were being whipped from all sides. Then we were taken through a metal door into a courtyard, known as the torture courtyard. The military police searched our clothes. One by one we were put into a dullab (tire), and each person was beaten between 200 and 400 times on his feet. Other members of the military police were busy beating the rest of the prisoners on their backs and other parts of their bodies. When they had finished beating us, we were lined up in single file. Holding on to each other's clothes, blindfolded and with our heads lowered, we walked into the prison. We reached the fourth courtyard; a cell door was opened and we went in. Of course, until the cell door was closed we continued to be whipped from every direction. Everyone was in a bad condition, their legs bleeding and covered with wounds, as were other parts of their bodies. The pain was very intense, and none of the prisoners was able to stand up as a result. If a prisoner tried doing so, he would collapse from the intensity of the pain, and if he tried sleeping he could only do so on his side since his back was covered with wounds. Some of the prisoners died during the 'reception' ...⁶¹

⁵⁹ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 47.

⁶⁰ Amnesty International, *Syria: Torture by the Security Forces* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1987), 13.

⁶¹ Amnesty International, *Syria: Torture by the Security Forces* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1987), 13.

The reception was only the beginning of their potential abuse. A 1987 report titled *Syria: Torture by the Security Forces* lists thirty-eight different torture techniques former detainees described to Amnesty International. The *dullab*, mentioned in the testimony above, involved the victim bending at the waist, to confine him or her within the center of an automobile tire. The prisoner was then repetitively beaten on their exposed body parts with clubs, whips, cables, or sticks.

Other methods of torture included: the application of electric shock, crushed limbs, burning parts of the body with cigarettes, acid or electric boilers, sexual abuse, suspending prisoners from the air for extended periods of time, slashing with razor blades, applying salt and acid to open wounds, isolation, drowning, deprivation of food and water, extraction of fingernails and toenails, or psychological harassment.⁶²

Some of the most brutal forms of torture included *al-‘abd al-aswad*, *al-ghassala*, and *al-kursi al-Almani*. *Al-‘abd-aswad*, or ‘the black slave,’ involved strapping the prisoner to a machine that then forced a heated metal skewer into the sufferer’s anus.⁶³ During *al-ghassala*, or the washing machine, *mukhabarat* officers forced detainees arms into a hollow spinning drum, crushing or mangling the victim’s arms, hands, or fingers.⁶⁴ Perhaps the most notorious instrument of torture was *al-kursi al-Almani*, or the German chair. Prisoners would be strapped to a metal chair with movable parts, including a hinge at the intersection of the seat and backrest. The top of the chair would then be lowered backward, causing severe pain in the spine, neck, and limbs. Reports state that this caused

⁶² Amnesty International, *Syria: Torture by the Security Forces* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1987), 18-21.

⁶³ Amnesty International, *Syria: Torture by the Security Forces* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1987), 18.

⁶⁴ Amnesty International, *Syria: Torture by the Security Forces* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1987), 19.

difficulty breathing to the point of asphyxiation, lost consciousness, and fractured vertebrae. In a variation of this machine, referred to as *al-Kursi al-Suri*, or the Syrian chair, knives were attached to the legs of the chair that cut into the detainee's flesh as pressure was applied.⁶⁵

According to reports from former prisoners, it was not uncommon for inmates to die while in custody, though exact figures are unobtainable due to a lack of record keeping for obvious reasons. Many factors attribute to prisoners' deaths including relentless torture, appalling prison conditions, and even suicide. One ex-prisoner of Far' Falastin, located near Damascus, recalls the extreme torture of a cellmate resulting in fatality:

*They summoned him for interrogation. When he came back, he was in a terrible state. They interrogated him for about six or seven hours each time. We used to hear his screams undergoing torture, and on each occasion, he would be carried back to the cell, as he could no longer walk... He died one day. His body had become blue, and his chest and legs were swollen.*⁶⁶

The account continues asserting the body was not removed from the cell until several days later after the stench of the decaying corpse became unbearable.

SUNNI/SHI'I DIVIDE

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the Assad regime's opposition, it is important to address the Sunni-Shi'i divide in the Middle East. The Syrian people take pride in their religious, ethnic, and national identities. Arab Sunni Muslims were the largest religious group in Syria throughout the Assad regime, making up about sixty-six

⁶⁵ Amnesty International, *Syria: Torture by the Security Forces* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1987), 18-19.

⁶⁶ Amnesty International, *Syria: Torture by the Security Forces* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1987), 16

percent of the total population.⁶⁷ Hafez al-Assad and many of his affiliates were Alawis, a minority sect of the Shi'i branch of Islam that made up roughly twelve percent of the Syrian population.⁶⁸ When Assad came to power, he extended patronage to many fellow Alawis, especially in the armed forces, security services, and within the senior echelons Ba'ath Party. When Assad came to power in 1973, Alawi officers commanded two of the five branches of the regular army; however, by 1992, Alawi officers commanded seven of Syria's nine military divisions.⁶⁹ By the time of Assad died in 2000, almost ninety percent of the top ranking security service officers and military commanders were Alawis.⁷⁰

The high number of Alawis in the military and top ranking positions is not Assad's attempted to recreate Syria as an Alawi nation or state, nor did Alawis' receive explicit special privileges under Syrian law. Rather, this is a traditional use of patronage to expand the influence of the leader and ensure his dominance. Political control in Syria ultimately resided in the hands of a single individual, Hafez al-Assad, not an entire Islamic sect. In any event, Alawi favoritism became a rallying point for much of the Assad opposition—particularly from the Muslim Brotherhood—which quickly became

⁶⁷ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 25.

⁶⁸ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 90.

⁶⁹ John McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years* (New York: The New Press, 2014), 185.

⁷⁰ Eyal Zisser, *Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition* (London: Hurst & Company, 2001), 26.

the most potent threat to the regime.⁷¹ The Muslim Brotherhood was a conservative, religious based movement comprised of numerous Islamist factions.

Many members of the Muslim Brotherhood criticized Alawi's for their perceived lack of religious fervor. Emilie Hokayem, a scholar of current Middle Eastern affairs, explained this religious dynamic stating, "being Alawite is more about cultural and social behavior than adherence to a set of religious tenets and obedience to religious hierarchies. Indeed, power in the Alawite community resides in clans rather than in clerical institutions."⁷² The Muslim Brotherhood wanted to topple the Assad regime and establish, in Syria, a 'proper' Islamic state controlled by a system of Sunni orthodoxy. Although its various groups utilized different resistance tactics, many believed in non-violent opposition; however, some highly secretive, armed, and tightly organized factions emerged and adopted a system of guerilla warfare.⁷³ Ultimately, the Muslim Brotherhood would emerge as the largest threat to the Assad regime.

THE GREAT REPRESSION

Internal opposition to the Assad regime escalated in the late 1970s, as unrest with the corrupt government spread to every sector of Syrian society. Historians refer to the period between 1976 and 1982 as 'the great repression,' characterized by a series of serious challenges to the Assad regime, and a widespread practice of human rights violations by the Syrian government to suppress the internal opposition. Numerous

⁷¹ Itamar Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus: State Political Community and Foreign Relations in Modern and Contemporary Syria* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2011), 118-119.

⁷² John McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years* (New York: The New Press, 2014), 180.

⁷³ Fred H. Lawson, *Global Security Watch: Syria* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2013), 64-65.

grievances attributed to public dissatisfaction including domination of the Alawis, rampant inflation, Syrian military intervention in Lebanon, and official corruption.⁷⁴ In 1976, Islamist opposition forces began an attack campaign against the regime— assassinating prominent Alawi officials and bombing government targets that continued for many years. By 1978, it appeared as though the Assad regime was in its final days. Assad responded with a widespread crackdown on anyone who threatened his rule. The *mukhabarat* detained thousands of people suspected of dissenting from the regime. Teachers, military officials, and other state employees, considered enemies of the state, were fired in mass numbers. Assad questioned the loyalty of numerous commanders, and by the end of 1978, he had demoted some 460 army officers to nearly impotent positions.⁷⁵ On March 9, 1980, an editorial in *Tishrin*, one of Syria’s national newspapers and the mouthpiece for the regime, declared that the government would use “armed revolutionary violence to defeat the reactionary violence” and asserted that “those who used violence first” would be held responsible for the repercussions that followed.⁷⁶ That same day, rebel Islamists in the Idlib Governorate province began a protest, giving the Assad his first opportunity to defend his power.

JISR AL-SHUGHUR, MA’ARRA, AND IDLIB

On March 9, 1980, residents of Jisr al-Shughur, a small mountain town in northwestern Syria, invaded the Ba’ath Party headquarters, shouted anti-government rhetoric, and set the building on fire in protest of the government. A few activists

⁷⁴ Eyal Zisser, *Asad’s Legacy: Syria in Transition* (London: Hurst & Company, 2001), 10.

⁷⁵ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 9.

⁷⁶ Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 328.

infiltrated a nearby military barrack and commandeered arms and ammunition. The local police, unable to reestablish order, fled the town in fear.

Upon hearing of this chaos, military troops were helicoptered in from Damascus. The soldiers infiltrated the small town and used explosives as a means of restoring control. By the end of the day, Assad's troops had destroyed twenty homes and fifty commercial buildings in addition to wounding dozens of citizens, including many innocent nonparticipants. The commanders arrested at least two hundred individuals throughout the night and executed a handful of prominent rebels on the spot.⁷⁷

On March 10, Tawfiq Salha, one of Hafez al-Assad's top-ranking confidants, flew in from Damascus and held a military field tribunal for the accused rebels. The majority of the court proceedings remain unknown due to the secretive nature of the tribunal; however, many of the detainees were shot down shortly after the trial ended. By Thursday, March 10th, only a day after troops had arrived in Jisr Al-Shughur, commandos had killed an estimated one hundred fifty to three hundred townspeople.⁷⁸

Similar protests occurred on March 9th in the nearby cities of Idlib and Ma'arra. Security forces acted in a similar manner as they did in Jisr Al-Shughur, arresting dozens of citizens and opening fire in both towns. As a result, sixteen people were killed in Idlib and another thirty in Ma'arra. The official press made no mention of any of the incidents; however, news of Assad's severe restrictive measures spread throughout Syria.⁷⁹

DEIR AL-ZOR DISAPPEARANCES OF YOUTHS: APRIL 15, 1980

⁷⁷ Amnesty International, *Report from Amnesty International to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1983), 34.

⁷⁸ Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 327.

⁷⁹ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 13.

In Deir Al-Zor, the largest city in eastern Syria, a group of teenage protestors vandalized and set fire to the city's Ba'ath Party headquarters.⁸⁰ Hours after the incident, *mukhabarat* officials arrested thirty-eight boys for the crime, although it is presumable that many of the youths had no involvement with the demonstration. Three months after their detention, the teenagers were transferred to an unknown location. Despite futile efforts by the teenagers' families and friends to obtain their whereabouts, none of the captives were ever heard from again.⁸¹

ALEPPO: JUNE 1979-FEBRUARY 1981

Aleppo, Syria's largest city, was a hub for both peaceful democratic protesters and Islamist opposition to the regime. On June 16, 1979, a Sunni military captain and several co-conspirators associated with the Islamist resistance murdered eighty-three Alawite cadets at the Aleppo Artillery School. The government responded irrationally—groundlessly arresting an estimated six thousand people in the proceeding days.⁸²

Tensions heightened between the Ba'ath Party and its opposition in the following months. The non-violent democratic campaign seriously challenged the regime's ideology; however the most serious threat came from armed Islamist forces. Political animosity quickly turned violent, and daily protests, boycotts, and attacks on government buildings and Ba'athist officials characterized the city by the end of 1979.⁸³

⁸⁰ Amnesty International, *Report from Amnesty International to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1983), 32.

⁸¹ Amnesty International, *Syria: An Amnesty International Briefing* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1983), 4.

⁸² Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2014), 70.

⁸³ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 14.

Assad responded vengefully to the divergent assaults. Over thirty thousand troops surrounded Aleppo and infiltrated the city in waves beginning on April 1, 1980. Residential buildings were carelessly demolished, and the city was sealed off as troops searched for anyone in opposition to the regime. Over the next two weeks, hundreds of civilians were killed and detention centers overflowed with prisoners. One of Assad's highest-ranking generals is reported to have stood atop his tank and shouted to a crowd that he was "prepared to kill a thousand people a day to rid the city of the Muslim Brother vermin."⁸⁴ Within a month government forces occupied the city; however, tensions remained high.

Near the end of June 1980, Islamists attacked a patrol in the city. As a result, military forces invaded an Aleppo neighborhood, seizing male residents, at random, over the age of fifteen. Commandos marched over two hundred men to a nearby field, and opened indiscriminate fire into the crowd, killing forty-two people.⁸⁵ A similar incident occurred on August 11, 1980, in which male residents of a different Aleppo quarter were marched to a cemetery and subjected to open-fire. Security officers killed over eighty men, some of whom were later identified as regime supporters, government employees, and loyal members of the Ba'ath Party.⁸⁶ Throughout Aleppo's yearlong occupation,

⁸⁴ Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 328.

⁸⁵ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 15.

⁸⁶ Amnesty International, *Report from Amnesty International to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1983), 35-36.

military officers killed an estimated one to two thousand individuals and arrested over eight thousand more.⁸⁷

TADMOR PRISON MASSACRE: JUNE 27, 1980

On June 26, 1980, Islamist radicals nearly succeeded in an assassination attack against Hafez al-Assad. The regime attributed the strike to members of the Muslim Brotherhood and organized a counterblow against detainees at the Tadmor Military Prison, known for its large number of Islamist inmates.⁸⁸

On the morning of June 27, three hundred and fifty Syrian troops were helicoptered to Tadmor Prison compound, located in the Palmyra desert of eastern Syria. Eighty, heavily armed soldiers entered the building and opened fire on unsuspecting prisoners trapped in communal cells. One Alawi soldier later described what transpired inside the penitentiary:

*They opened the door of a communal cell for us. Six or seven of us went in and killed everyone inside—that is about sixty or seventy people. Personally, I must have machine gunned fifteen or so. All together, we must have killed about five hundred and fifty of those nasty Muslim Brothers.*⁸⁹

Though a conclusive death toll never surfaced, reliable evidence suggests that troops massacred anywhere from six hundred to over a thousand prisoners that day.⁹⁰ In the wake of this incident, the regime created a legal means of implementing the ruthless policies they pursued. On July 7, 1980, the National Assembly enacted Law 49

⁸⁷ Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 325.

⁸⁸ Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2014), 71.

⁸⁹ Raphael Lefevre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 114.

⁹⁰ Amnesty International, *Report from Amnesty International to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1983), 35.

stipulating, “each and every one belonging to the Muslim Brothers organization is considered a criminal who will receive a death punishment.”⁹¹

SARMADA: JULY 25, 1980

The night of July 24, 1980, six members of the Muslim Brotherhood fled *mukhabarat* officers, arriving in the town of Sarmada, near the Turkish border. Security forces reached the village at dawn the next morning. They promptly surrounded and sealed off the town, and conducted house-by-house searches for the runaways.

Commandos located and killed all six Islamists, suffering a few civilian casualties in the process. After the raid, security officers arrested approximately two hundred townspeople for supposedly harboring members of the Muslim Brotherhood. The arrestees were then publically interrogated, beat, and some shot. In total, around forty people were either killed or disappeared. Before leaving, commandos razed part of the village to the ground.⁹²

MUSLIM BROTHERS IN DAMASCUS: AUTUMN, 1981

In the autumn of 1981, the Muslim Brotherhood concentrated their terrorist activity in Damascus, Syria’s capital city and the center of the Ba’athist regime. Three car bombs, planted by Islamists between August and November, killed more than 282 people in Damascus. As a result, the state drastically increased security in the capital city, while

⁹¹ Raphael Lefevre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 115.

⁹² Amnesty International, *Report from Amnesty International to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1983), 35.

mukhabarat forces made mass arrests and conducted summary executions of suspected enemies of the regime.⁹³

HAMA: APRIL 23-26, 1981

The city of Hama, located in west-central Syria, was a stronghold for the Muslim Brotherhood and, more generally, Ba'athist opposition. As a result, the city received a brunt of the regime's reprisal attacks. On April 21, 1981, armed Islamists ambushed a security checkpoint near an Alawi village, and were then seen retreating towards Hama. Three days later, on April 24th, security services moved into the city and conducted house-to-house raids in search of the culprits. Residents of Hama resisted this intrusion, and street fights broke out as *mukhabarat* officers made their way through the city. On Friday, April 25th, security forces began forcing men from their homes and shooting them on the street, without even consulting victims' identities or political affiliations.⁹⁴ One Hama resident, who was able to escape Syria after the 1981 violence, retold his experience to French journalists. The following are excerpts from his testimony:

Towards 2:00 [in the morning] shooting began. They assaulted the houses. They broke down the doors and rounded up all the men. When they gathered fifteen or twenty, they took them into an alley or into the entrance of a house and executed them, then went on to others . . . By accident, they didn't come into our place. I had gotten dressed and prepared to go out, thinking that like last year it was just a matter of a short stint of four or five days [in prison] and after that we would be released . . . That's the way they did it last year: shooting in the air in every direction to terrorize the population . . . This time, we didn't understand right away what was going on. That's why there wasn't any resistance, at least not in our neighborhood. The shots lasted until 9:00 or 9:30 in the morning. All this time I heard from the apartment the wails of women . . . and the cries of men also, who must have been beaten before they were killed . . . I went downstairs and took just a few steps before coming into a pile of corpses, then another . . . I looked at

⁹³ John McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years* (New York: The New Press, 2014), 193.

⁹⁴ Amnesty International, *Report from Amnesty International to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1983), 36.

*them a long time without being able to believe my eyes. In each pile there were fifteen, twenty, thirty bodies . . . They were every age from fourteen on up, in pajamas or galabiyya, in sandals or barefoot.*⁹⁵

Within four days, security forces killed approximately 350 people and injured at least 600 more.⁹⁶

HAMA MASSACRE: FEBRUARY 2-MARCH 5, 1982

The culmination of tensions, built up over several years, between the Assad regime and its political opponents, climaxed in the city of Hama in February 1982. As previously mentioned, Hama was a citadel for Ba’athist resistance throughout periods of regime repression. Assad recognized the danger this city presented to his political rule and set out to put down the Sunni threat once and for all. On February 2, 1982, security services entered the city of Hama to confiscate weapons and arrest the opposition.⁹⁷ Resistance fighters realized the importance of this attack as a crucial test of their strength and did not back down.

An Islamist fundamentalists group called the Fighting Vanguard led the resistance, backed by the support of the Muslim Brotherhood. Anticipating the arrival of the *mukhabarat*, and utilizing their superior knowledge of the battlefield, Islamists forces put down security services early on and killed over seventy Ba’athist. Islamists declared victory over the regime, and appeals for ‘jihad,’ or Holy War against the Assad regime

⁹⁵ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 18.

⁹⁶ Amnesty International, *Report from Amnesty International to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1983), 36.

⁹⁷ John McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years* (New York: The New Press, 2014), 193.

were broadcast from the mosques.⁹⁸ Islamists' call for national insurrection echoed across Hama, only to be silenced by more than thirty thousand soldiers brought in to quell the revolt. Uprising did not spread, and by February 15, the regime had suppressed the rebellion in its entirety.

The subsequent punishment was one of the cruelest and most brutal acts of retribution in modern Middle Eastern history. The regime enforced a collective punishment over the people of Hama, considering all citizens accountable for the rebellion. Security services carried out mass executions to an unprecedented number. Troops pillaged homes and businesses. Cyanide gas containers were placed in the piping of buildings that housed Islamists and then turned on, killing everyone trapped inside.⁹⁹ Any building associated with the Muslim Brotherhood was blown up, sometimes with people still inside. By the end of the 27-day assault, the regime leveled more than a third of the city's residential buildings, displacing between sixty and seventy thousand newly homeless individuals. Tens of thousands of people fled the city, leaving their home and all possessions behind. Security forces arrested thousands of others attempting to flee and transported them to prisons.¹⁰⁰

Even after resistance efforts ceased, commandos continued leveling buildings. Virtually every structure in Hama was damaged, including numerous archeological, cultural, and religiously significant sights. Security forces bulldozed buildings damaged beyond repair. Steamrollers flattened remaining wreckage into the dirt, destroying any

⁹⁸ Thomas L. Friedman, "Hama Rules," in *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 81-82.

⁹⁹ Amnesty International, *Report from Amnesty International to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1983), 36.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas L. Friedman, "Hama Rules," in *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 81-82.

trace of the buildings that once stood.¹⁰¹ The message to potential Ba'athist threats is clear: the regime will put down any rebellion, reducing anyone standing in their opposition to dust.

The total number of fatalities resulting from this massacre remains unknown, but credible estimates center around twenty thousand people.¹⁰² The regime made few efforts to hide this enormous number from the public. In fact, an individual close to Rifaat al-Assad, brother of Hafez al-Assad and an important Ba'athist military figure, claims the general was dissatisfied with a report that estimated the Hama death toll, in his opinion, too low. "What are you talking about, 7,000?" Rifaat reportedly said. "No, no. We killed 38,000."¹⁰³

The Hama Massacre instilled a fear of the regime deep within the Syrian citizens, unparalleled to any other single event. This fear became critical to the survival of the Assad regime, neutralizing the threat of future insurgencies. A *New York Times* correspondent visiting Hama two months after the Islamist repression was horrified by the destruction and desolation of Syria's fourth largest city. Noting, "I am convinced that Assad wanted the Syrian people to see Hama raw, to listen closely to its silence and reflect on its pain."¹⁰⁴ It is unlikely that the people of Syria were quick to forget the undue suffering inflicted on their fellow citizens by Hafez al-Assad and his regime.

¹⁰¹ Thomas L. Friedman, "Hama Rules," in *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 85-86.

¹⁰² David Kenner, "Massacre City," *The Foreign Policy Group*, Aug. 5, 2011, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/08/05/massacre-city-2/>.

¹⁰³ Thomas L. Friedman, "Hama Rules," in *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 85-86.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas L. Friedman, "Hama Rules," in *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 76.

HUMAN RIGHTS' IMPACT ON U.S. AND SYRIAN RELATIONS

When Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970, he sought to improve Syria's diplomatic relations with the United States, previously severed in 1967 as a result of the Arab-Israeli War. When the war ended in 1973, the U.S and Syria restored their ties.

¹⁰⁵The next year, the World Bank authorized a loan of \$100 million U.S. dollars to Syria for numerous development projects. Over the next seven years, the Assad regime annually received \$60-\$100 million in U.S. economic aid.¹⁰⁶

By the end of 1975—a year and a half after the U.S. and Syria revived their diplomatic relations—the U.S turned to Assad for assistance in maintaining Israel's position in the Middle East. Lebanon had entered a civil war in 1975, and the U.S. promised their support in backing Syrian intervention against the leftist Lebanese forces and their Palestinian allies. Syrian military units entered Lebanon in May, and by July, an estimated thirteen thousand Syrian troops were in control of large parts of Lebanon.¹⁰⁷

Interestingly, this period coincides with the first annual report on human rights practices, published by the United States in 1977. In 1961, Congress passed the Foreign Assistance Act, requiring the State Department to submit annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for all countries receiving U.S. monetary or security assistance and all members of the United Nations.¹⁰⁸ The U.S. maintained the position that human rights were a pivotal factor when considering U.S. diplomacy. These reports were created

¹⁰⁵ Robert G. Rabil, *Syria: The United States, and the War on Terror in the Middle East* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 61.

¹⁰⁶ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 14.

¹⁰⁷ Jamal Wakim, *The Struggle for Major Powers over Syria* (Ithaca: Ithaca Press, 2013), 111.

¹⁰⁸ U.S. Department of State, "Human Rights Reports," <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/>.

to assist Congress in legislative decisions and foreign assistance fund allocation. Human rights violations under Assad were largely downplayed or underreported. Furthermore, there is little evidence to suggest that neither these reports, nor human rights practices in general, affected diplomatic relations between the United States and Syria during this period.

In these reports, the State Department frequently touched on concerning incidents of human rights violations under the Assad regime. Unfortunately, American action towards correcting these abuses remained minimal. U.S. diplomats maintained the stance that addressing human rights issues in public diplomacy was largely ineffective and advocated instead for private discussions.¹⁰⁹ Regrettably, there is little to no evidence suggesting the U.S. administrations addressed this issue in private. There were numerous methods for the U.S. subtly to address the Assad regime's numerous human rights abuses—such as through third-party news leaks, or in collaboration with the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. The United State's ambivalent attitude towards the Syrian government's flagrant human rights abuses ultimately sent a silent message to Hafez al-Assad that these actions were permissible to continue.

The first State Department report documented the year 1977. The opening paragraph boldly asserts, "The Assad Regime has markedly improved human rights standards."¹¹⁰ If you recall, this was only a year after Syria entered the Lebanese Civil War on the same side as the United States. The report addresses the enormous increase of political prisoners detained in Syria from an estimated 286 in 1976 to between 1,000 and

¹⁰⁹ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Assad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 14.

¹¹⁰ United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: 1977*, annual report (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1977), 410.

1,500 in 1977.¹¹¹ The U.S. State Department justifies these figures arguing “Syrian peace-keeping forces in Lebanon have detained substantial numbers of people, mostly Palestinians, who have either opposed the efforts of this force to re-establish security and stability, or tried to undermine the authority of the legitimate Lebanese government.”¹¹² These Syrian ‘peace-keeping’ forces were known for their appalling prison conditions and widespread use of torture. Furthermore, the report makes no mention of the 1,000-1,500 civilians massacred by Syrian forces at a Palestinian refugee camp in August 1976—an action that garnered heavy criticism against Hafez al-Assad and his regime from the Arab World.¹¹³

Throughout the 1970s, the U.S. continued monetarily supporting Syria’s involvement in the Lebanese Civil War. When Jimmy Carter became President in 1977, he asserted that protecting human rights was a principle component to his future foreign diplomacy. As far as Syria is concerned; however, they never materialized as a factor for administration’s interaction with the Assad regime. In reality, many of the worst instances of rights abuses took place in Syria during Carter’s term: including the disappearance of youths in Deir Al-Zor, widespread reports of torture, mass executions in Aleppo, and the Tadmor Prison Massacre of 1980.

Despite this inaction, the 1980 State Department report addressed many human rights issues in Syria for the first time. The opening paragraph explains “Syria has experienced considerable internal strife, which culminated in serious domestic violence

¹¹¹ United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: 1977*, annual report (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1977), 410.

¹¹² United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: 1977*, annual report (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1977), 410.

¹¹³ Robert G. Rabil, *Syria: The United States, and the War on Terror in the Middle East* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 61.

during 1979-80.”¹¹⁴ Though this is a short account of the widespread violations that occurred that year, the U.S.’ public assertion of internal strife within Syria marks a change in attitude towards the regime. The report references the Tadmor Prison massacre, stating, “Security forces reportedly killed 250-300 political detainees at a prison in eastern Syria.”¹¹⁵ While the number of deaths resulting from this atrocity is still unknown, the U.S. report is almost certainly an under-representation of the massacre, with commonly accepted numbers of those killed totaling at least six hundred. Numerous reliable analyses of the incident suggest that more than one thousand prisoners died that day.¹¹⁶ The 1977 and 1979 reports both claim that Syrian prisoners are not subject to cruel or inhuman punishment and that prison conditions are adequate regarding health care, food, and family access.¹¹⁷ The report for 1980 asserts that since “no international organizations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, are allowed access to detention facilities,” the previous assumptions surrounding the Syrian prison system could be unfounded, and in fact “little detailed information is available about Syrian prisons.”¹¹⁸ The report goes on to say that “Conditions at prisons where political and security prisoners are held are reported to be more severe. Visits by family members, for example, are not allowed, but health care and food are believed to be reasonably

¹¹⁴ United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: 1980*, annual report (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1980), 1099.

¹¹⁵ United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: 1980*, annual report (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1980), 1100.

¹¹⁶ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 16.

¹¹⁷ United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: 1977*, annual report (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1977), 410. or United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: 1979*, annual report (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1979), 829.

¹¹⁸ United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: 1980*, annual report (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1980), 1100.

adequate.”¹¹⁹ The report clearly fails to grasp the severity of the situation, as prohibiting visits from family members barely scratches the surface of improper treatment of detainees outlined earlier in the paper.

Washington’s diplomats never referenced these abuses in public communication with the Ba’athist government. In spite of evidence of Syria’s deplorable human rights practices, between 1977 and 1979 the Carter administration negotiated a new air transport policy with the Assad regime and fiscally supported new road construction projects and agricultural development. In 1978, Syria received \$90 million in U.S. economic aid, and the following year the regime was granted \$60 million.¹²⁰ U.S. policy towards Syria altered only after the Regan administration took office in 1981, and stressed the cold war factors that should contribute to international politics. The USSR and Syria had maintained a close political and economic relationship since the 1950s. The U.S. government now publically chastised Syria as a Soviet proxy and terrorist defender. The U.S. cut all financial aid to Syria and distanced itself from the Ba’athist regime. It is interesting to note, that despite the rocky U.S.-Syrian relationship, Washington officials never criticized Syrian human rights violations—despite condemning other countries for similar practices.¹²¹

Even after the infamous Hama Massacre of 1982, the Reagan administration made few comments. In fact, on March 3, while Assad’s regime murdered thousands of innocent civilians and leveled the city of Hama, U.S. policymakers discretely levitated

¹¹⁹ United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: 1980*, annual report (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1980), 1100.

¹²⁰ United States Department of State. *Department of State Bulletin*, 79(2025) (Washington, D.C.: USGPO), 1979.

¹²¹ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 143.

the Syrian government from previous export restrictions.¹²² Furthermore, coverage of the Hama insurgencies illustrates how underreported these instances of Syrian human rights violations were in the U.S. press. Even as the regime pillaged one of Syria's largest cities, there was no mention of the incident in the international media until February 11th, nine days after the initial revolt. By the time reporters covered the uprising, Assad and his troops had already quelled the rebellion and began their campaign of terror.¹²³ Moreover, U.S. reporters stationed in Hama either failed to grasp the scope of the situation in Hama or chose not to report on the actual atrocities that occurred. On Feb 24, 1982, the Associated Press quoted Western diplomatic sources saying that the fighting in Hama had "resulted in an estimated 2,000 casualties on both sides" A gross underrepresentation of the Hama death toll. In fact, it was not until a year and a half later that reports of the Hama massacre's true extent filtered into the international media. By that point, the fear resulting from the terror of Hama had disseminated throughout the country, solidifying Assad's rule in the terror of his people.

CONCLUSION

It appears that the United States consistently remained one of the most vocal advocates for promoting intervention on behalf of human rights, but routinely subordinates such concerns to strategic interest in the Middle East. While this paper only touched on a small period of the Ba'athist rule, an expanded study, analyzing human rights abuses of his entire time in office, would be interesting. Furthermore, comparing the relationship between human rights and diplomatic actions for other countries Assad

¹²² James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 144.

¹²³ James A. Paul, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 122.

negotiated with could create a more comprehensive assessment of how much human rights factors into political decisions. The United States admired Hafez al-Assad's position as a stabilizing force in the Middle East, a region plagued with pervasive instability. And for that reason, diplomats overlooked horrible atrocities committed by the Syrian government at the end of the twentieth century. It seems hypocritical of the United States to ultimately, the United States is incredibly vocal in its promotion of democratic ideals and a commitment to human rights; but its actions, or lack thereof, during the regime of Hafez al-Assad expose that human rights abuses is not always a primary diplomatic concern. As the Syrian civil war continues and innocent Syrians seek refuge, now is the time for the international community to step up and right the wrongs of the past by providing voices to the Syrian citizens who have been silenced by oppression for far too long.

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