



Unrest spreads to Syria

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This note looks at the background to the recent unrest in Syria, and analyses briefly the threats to the regime and its sources of strength, and the position of western governments towards the regime.

- Violence is increasing in Syria as the uprising refuses to be put down and the government opts for brutal repression as the best way to handle it
- Western governments at first refrained from imposing sanctions personally on Bashar al-Assad in the hope that he could be coaxed towards choosing to open up the political system
- These hopes are fading fast and sanctions have now been imposed by both the US and the EU on Assad and members of his family
- The regime may last only as long as the armed forces remain loyal
- Syria has deep religious divisions; the Sunni Islamic majority resents rule by the Alawite minority, an offshoot of Shia Islam
- Both the west and Syria's neighbours fear the consequences of a collapse of the regime, given Syria's strategic location bordering Iraq, Lebanon and Israel and the Assad regime's friendly relations with Iran.

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1 Background

After independence from France in 1946, instability afflicted Syria and there was a series of military coups. A state of emergency has been in place since 1963.

The country has been ruled by the Assad family since 1970, when the present ruler's father, Hafez al-Assad, came to power in another military coup, at least the 7th since independence. He was the leader of the military wing of the Arab Socialist Renaissance (Ba'ath) Party.

The Assads are part of the Alawi sect, a branch of Shiite Islam, Alawis constitute a minority of less than 10% in Syria, which is largely a Sunni country. Many Sunnis consider Alawis to be heretics. Hafez stabilised the country, sometimes using brutal tactics. The Islamist Muslim Brotherhood led an armed insurgency against the regime from 1976 until February 1982, when the government crushed the Islamic fundamentalist movement centred in the city of Hama, levelling parts of the city with artillery fire and killing perhaps 20,000.

Hafez al-Assad remained in power until his death in 2000, when his son, Bashar al-Assad, assumed the presidency. Bashar was thought to be a reformer and western powers sought Syrian cooperation on counter-terrorism activities. Limited cooperation was achieved, but a visit in 2000 by Tony Blair to Damascus went badly wrong when the new Syrian president made some very critical remarks to Mr Blair's face on camera.

The political liberalisation that western powers hoped for did not materialise. Arbitrary arrests, intimidation, torture, travel bans, lack of freedom of expression, and oppression of

the Kurdish minority continued. The NGO Freedom House estimates that 2,000 to 2,500 political prisoners were held in 2010 and describing the regime as an “ossified dictatorship”.¹

Economic reforms were enacted, leading to the reduction in subsidies for some staple goods, but the economy is still dominated by the state and suffers from many of the same problems as its neighbours: stagnation, low productivity, corruption and high unemployment.

Syria’s difficult relationship with the west is connected to its relationships with Israel and Lebanon. It has dominated Lebanon militarily since the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990. In 2005, the former Lebanese president, Rafiq Hariri, was assassinated and the Syrian government was implicated. The resulting popular outrage led to Syria pulling its forces out of Lebanon, but the Assad regime has in recent months reasserted its powerful influence over the country, which it wields against the pro-western factions in Lebanon.

Syria’s dispute with Israel is centred on the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, Syrian territory that was conquered by Israel in 1967. In recent years, there have been talks between Syrians and Israelis, and some analysts have talked of the potential for a peace deal between Israel and Syria.

2 Unrest in 2011

At first Syria appeared immune to the disturbances affecting its neighbours and in January, President Assad told a western newspaper that Syria was more stable than Tunisia and Egypt, because his policies were more aligned with the beliefs of the people.²

Unrest is thought to have been sparked by the arrest of 15 children who had been writing anti-government slogans on a wall in the impoverished southern town of Dera’a, on the border with Jordan. The children were from an influential tribe, which then organised demonstrations to try to get the children released. The building housing the local branch of the Ba’ath Party was burnt, along with other government buildings and the local branch of the main telecommunications company, Syriatel, owned by the President’s cousin.

An official delegation was sent to Dera’a, promising the release of the 15 and an official investigation, but riots continued, leading the government to send tanks and helicopters to seal off the city on 22 March. The children were subsequently released, but the episode appeared to break the regime’s grip on the situation. By 15 and 16 March, demonstrations had been reported in Damascus, Aleppo, and then on the 19th, between 10,000 and 20,000 are reported to have demonstrated in other cities.

On 23 March, a final push to defeat the demonstrators in Dera’a led to what protesters called a “massacre.” Local human rights groups said that as many as 100 were killed by the security forces.³ On 25 March, protests were held in Damascus as well as in Hama and the southern town of Dera’a. Reports say that the protests were broken up by the security forces and that many were arrested.

On 24 March, the government ordered the release of many demonstrators who had been arrested in the previous days and said that those responsible for deaths of demonstrators would be brought to justice. It also said that it was considering the lifting of the state of emergency that had been in place since 1963 and reduced the length of compulsory military

¹ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2011*, 2011

² “[Interview With Syrian President Bashar al-Assad](#)”, *Wall Street Journal*, 31 January 2011

³ Tony Badran, “Syria’s Assad No Longer in Vogue”, *Foreign Affairs*, 25 March 2011

service from 21 to 18 months. At one point, the government announced an amnesty for all political prisoners, but the offer was later dropped and further arrests ensued, suggesting to some that the regime was seriously split on how to respond to the crisis.

On 25 and 26 March, security forces again used live ammunition against protesters, killing at least 26 people in Dera'a, bringing the death toll to at least 61 in Dera'a and 12 in Latakia, on the coast.⁴

On 28 March, the entire cabinet resigned, and it was reported that President Assad would announce imminently the lifting of the state of emergency and other limitations on civil liberties.⁵

The regime organised huge rallies of its supporters on 29 March, which, while not spontaneous, have shown that the regime does enjoy mass support in at least some regions, and is more popular than some long-lived Arab regimes. Some commentators have suggested that the regime is popular because of its defiance of Israel and support for the cause of the Palestinians.⁶

On 30 March, President Assad disappointed reformists. He spoke to the parliament, describing the unrest as the result of a "plot from outside", believed to be a reference to rumours of Saudi intervention.⁷ The state of emergency was not lifted, but vague promises to speed up reform were made. There were reports that live ammunition had been used against protesters in Latakia after the speech.⁸

More concessions were forthcoming however. On 7 April the government announced that it would grant citizenship to some of the country's Kurdish minority. Assad also sacked the governor of the central province of Homs, which had been the scene of violent clashes between demonstrators and the security forces.⁹ Reports of further unrest continued, with 20 protesters reportedly shot dead by official security forces in Dera'a on Friday 8 April.¹⁰

The violence in Deraa, the scene of the first disturbances, continued to grow over April. The city and neighbouring villages were besieged by government forces, with electricity and water supplies to the city cut off. Fighting as residents tried to break the siege led to the death of hundreds of people according to Human Rights Watch.¹¹

The military has also deployed tanks in Baniyas, on the coast, Homs, in central Syria, and Tafas, near Deraa. Hama, another central town, has been the scene of recent killings, with dozens reportedly killed recently. Certain suburbs of the capital, Damascus, have also been targeted by the security forces, with mass arrests and tanks occupying the streets.

In May, hundreds of Syrian and other demonstrators marched on the Israeli-controlled border of the Golan Heights, carrying Palestinian flags. Some managed to cross the border and Israeli troops opened fire, killing dozens.¹² Many analysts thought that it was likely that the demonstration was organised or at least permitted by the Syrian authorities, to distract

⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Security Forces Fire on Protesters", Press release, 28 March 2011

⁵ "Syrian cabinet resigns amid unrest, says state TV", *BBC News Online*, 29 March 2011

⁶ See for example "Syria: Assad regime looks to bolster itself", *BBC News Online*, 29 March 2011

⁷ "Syria's President Assad vows to defeat 'plot'", *BBC News Online*, 30 March 2011

⁸ "Witnesses say Syrian troops open fire during protest in Latakia" *Associated Press*, 30 March 2011

⁹ "Syria's Assad grants nationality to Hasaka Kurds", *BBC News Online*, 7 April 2011

¹⁰ "EU ministers to "deplore" Syria killing, threaten sanctions", *EUobserver*, 11 April 2011

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, [Syria: Crimes Against Humanity in Daraa](#), 1 June 2011

¹² "The direct approach" *Financial Times*, 27 May 2011

attention from domestic disruption. Later in May, stories of the arrest, torture and killing of a 13 year-old boy galvanized the opposition movement. Thousands demonstrated about the incident for several days afterwards.

In June, it was claimed by the government that 120 members of the armed forces had been killed by armed militants in the northern town of Jisr al-Shughour. The opposition denied this version of events, saying that soldiers had been shot because they had mutinied, refusing to fire on protesters. If the opposition's version of events is correct, it would be the first time that the pro-government unity of the armed forces had cracked. On 10 June, the Syrian army moved to restore control over Jisr al-Shughour, causing thousands of refugees to flee the area and head for the Turkish border.

The total number of deaths caused by the security forces is not clear, but estimates put the figure at more than one thousand.

3 Relations with Israel

Although the Occupied Territories most commonly referred to are Gaza and the West Bank, Israel also occupied the Syrian territory of the Golan Heights after the 1967 war. This territory is regarded as strategically important by Israel because not only does it provide a military vantage point, it also supplies a significant amount of Israel's water and agricultural production.

Syria and Israel remain in a state of war over the territory. Peace talks in 2000 came to nothing, as did another round in 2008, mediated this time by Turkey. The 2008 talks were reported to be progressing successfully, with one ex-official saying that they could have reached a deal.¹³ However, Israel's *Operation Cast Lead* attack on Hamas in the Gaza Strip during the winter of 2008-2009 derailed the talks.¹⁴

For the Assad regime, however, peace with Israel would be risky, undermining as it would one of the central claims to legitimacy of Assad's government- the regime's closeness to the ideological position of the population in opposing Israel. Syria and Israel have clashed militarily on a number of occasions and Bashar al-Assad supports Hamas and Hizbollah, and is perhaps Iran's closest ally. Syria has on occasions allowed Iran to supply Hizbollah through Syrian territory.

The hostility between the two countries is, however, limited and they have not clashed directly for some time. Although peace talks have broken down, newspaper reports suggest that army in the Israeli establishment would prefer the Assad regime to survive, rather than face an unknown alternative, which might be either chaos or a more Islamist regime. A former government advisor and Syria expert at an Israeli university said, "You want to work with the devil you know."¹⁵ Some in Israel have raised the possibility of a return to negotiations in the wake of the Arab uprisings of 2011.¹⁶

The recent unrest has affected the occupied parts of the Golan Heights, as about a thousand Syrian Druze (see below) demonstrated in favour of Bashar al-Assad in early April.¹⁷

¹³ "Ex-official: Direct Israel-Syria Talks Were Close", *Associated Press*, 6 February 2011

¹⁴ For more on *Operation Cast Lead*, see the Library Standard Note [Gaza: The conflict between Israel and Hamas](#), 23 January 2009

¹⁵ "Israel fears the alternative if Syria's Assad falls", *Los Angeles Times*, 30 March 2011

¹⁶ "Barak: Opportunity exists for peace talks with Syria", *Jerusalem Post*, 28 February 2011

¹⁷ "Israel uneasy over Syrian unrest in Golan Heights", *BBC News Online*, 5 April 2011

4 Religious sects in Syria

Sunni Muslims represent about 74% of the Syrian population.¹⁸ The remaining 26% are made up of various groups. Strands of Shiism, including Alawis, Ismailis, and Twelver Shi'a, together constitute 13 percent. The Druze, who profess a monotheistic religion that is not Islam, account for 3 percent of the population. Christian groups constitute the remaining 10 percent, although this number may be declining markedly.¹⁹

Although figures vary widely, Alawis probably constitute somewhere between six and nine per cent of the population. In these circumstances, democracy would open up the possibility of a government that reflected the Sunni Muslim majority in Syria.

The Sunni majority clearly has some reason to resent rule by members of such a small minority. It was not until 1966 that Alawis came to power in the country, having gradually moved to secure dominance over the armed forces.²⁰ With the arrival in the presidency of Hafez al-Assad, an increasingly narrow regime based on Alawis developed, while Alawi dominance of the armed forces persisted.

Although the narrowness of the regime's base can be seen as a weakness, the regime has been stable and the Alawi base may have served this stability in a number of ways.

- Recalling its socialist and Arab nationalist background, the regime uses the threat of inter-confessional conflict to gather support.
- Appealing to perceived radical opinions in the population, it makes much of its links to Shiite Hizbollah and Iran and its confrontational relationship with Israel. Other, Sunni regimes in neighbouring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon are largely in the pro-western camp.
- Most importantly, the concentration of Alawis in the command of the armed forces appears to have guaranteed their loyalty, as the fortunes of the Alawis are closely tied to survival of the Assad regime. The Assad family itself holds a number of important posts in the armed forces, particularly in the Republican Guard. Bashar's younger brother Maher al-Assad controls the Presidential Guard, the Republican Guard, and the Fourth Armoured Division of the army.²¹
- Other minorities, such as the Christians and the Druze, may have an interest in supporting the minority Allawi rule, rather than see a transition to rule by the Sunni majority, which might be less tolerant.

On 22 March, Dera'a protesters broke the taboo on sectarianism, chanting "No to Iran, no to Hizbollah, we want a God-fearing Muslim."²² This was a worrying sign for the Assad regime, since the ideological legitimisation of the regime was called into question, along with the rule of the minority Alawite sect.

¹⁸ CIA World Fact Book, Syria

¹⁹ US State Department, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010*, November 2010,

²⁰ Martin Kramer, "Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism," in *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, ed. Martin Kramer, pp237-54.

²¹ "Assad holds Syria army despite Sunni-Alawite divide", *Reuters*, 6 April 2011

²² Tony Badran, "Syria's Assad No Longer in Vogue", *Foreign Affairs*, 25 March 2011

5 Western reaction to the unrest

Western governments have criticised the conduct of the Syrian government and called for reforms. Foreign Office minister Lord Howell of Guildford said recently that the human rights situation in Syria was “deteriorating”:

Syria's human rights record continues to deteriorate. We remain deeply concerned about arbitrary arrests, detention, intimidation, torture, travel bans, lack of freedom of expression, and lack of respect for the rights of the Kurdish minority. We raise human rights regularly with the Syrian Government, as my right honourable friend the Foreign Secretary did with President Assad during

his visit on 27 January 2011.²³

On 31 March, the Foreign Secretary, William Hague, set out the government's position:

I continue to watch the evolving situation in Syria closely, and am deeply concerned by continuing deaths and violence in Deraa and Latakia. Ahead of possible protests on Friday, I call on the Syrian government to uphold its responsibility to protect protesters and to respect the right of peaceful protest and free speech. I call for restraint, particularly from the Syrian security forces.

I note the announcement of committees to study repeal of the Emergency Law, and to review the 1962 census that resulted in many Kurds in Syria being excluded from Syrian citizenship. I believe it is important for the Syrian government to address the legitimate demands of the Syrian people. I call for serious political reforms to be brought forward and implemented without delay.²⁴

On 12 April, EU foreign ministers discussed the situation in Syria. After the meeting, the EU threatened to “review” its policies towards Syria and called for “urgent implementation” of the reforms that have been suggested by the regime.²⁵ The language of the communiqué suggests that the Syria crisis is considered by the EU to have the same level of importance as the situation in Yemen.

In a press statement, the US State Department described the United States as “deeply troubled” by the violence:

The United States is deeply troubled by violence and civilian deaths in Dara'a at the hands of security forces. We are concerned by the Syrian Government's use of violence, intimidation and arbitrary arrests in Dara'a to hinder the ability of its people to freely exercise their universal rights. We condemn these actions and extend our deepest condolences to the families and friends of those who have been injured or lost their lives. We call on the Syrian Government to exercise restraint and refrain from violence against peaceful protesters.²⁶

None of the statements called for the resignation of President Assad, nor was military action threatened, leaving the impression that most western leaders think that direct western action to protect protesters in Syria is not likely.

Against this background, the comments of French President Sarkozy could be taken as being outside the consensus. Asked about the situation in Syria, he said:

²³ HL Deb 6 April 2011, c409WA

²⁴ FCO, “Foreign Secretary on violence in Syria”, News release, 31 March 2011

²⁵ “EU ministers to “deplore” Syria killing, threaten sanctions”, *EUobserver*, 11 April 2011

²⁶ US Department of State, “Violence in Syria”, Press statement, 23 March 2011

Every ruler should understand, and especially every Arab ruler should understand that the reaction of the international community and of Europe will from this moment on each time be the same: we will be on the side of peaceful protesters who must not be repressed with violence.²⁷

Western policy towards Syria and Bashar al-Assad hardened in May. Both US and EU sanctions imposed at the beginning of May had avoided imposing travel restrictions on Bashar al-Assad himself, although other members of his government had been affected. The hope was that it might be possible to work on al-Assad's reformist nature and encourage him to take on the more reactionary members of his government. In mid-May, the US administration changed its policy and included the Syrian president on the list of those affected by sanctions. The EU followed suit a week later, on 23 May 2011.²⁸

The government has also promised a number of concessions. On 19 April, the government announced an end to the state of emergency in place for 48 years. It is also increasing subsidies on essential goods and,²⁹ on 31 May, announced an amnesty on political prisoners. Syrian activists say that some 10,000 people have been arrested as a result of the disturbances³⁰ and Human Rights Watch say that torture of those arrested is "rampant".³¹ Protesters are reported to be unimpressed by the government's offers of reform, which they see as delaying tactics.

An opposition meeting in Turkey on 2 June formed a consultative council and invited foreign governments to discuss developments with it. The meeting announced the intention to form a democratic, secular state and rejected any foreign intervention in efforts to remove the Assad regime.

6 United Nations

The United Kingdom and France began preparations to table a Security Council motion at the end of May. An initial draft was circulated on the 29th. Encountering resistance from Brazil, China, India, South Africa and Russia, who reportedly fear that the resolution would pave the way for the launch of a military operation against the Assad regime, the EU countries toned down the language in a second draft circulated on 8 June.³² The new version added a clause saying "the only solution to the current crisis in Syria is through an inclusive and Syrian-led political process," with the intention of making it clear that a military solution was not intended. It also removed a line saying the UN was "determined to prevent an aggravation of the situation." The new draft regretted "violence against security forces" and called on "all sides to act with utmost restraint ... and refrain from reprisals."³³ The Security Council was due to vote on the draft resolution on 10 June.

7 Outlook

Some commentators think that the Baathist government has probably succeeded in suppressing the uprising, at least for the present.³⁴ While Syrian activists claim that Friday 3

²⁷ "Sarkozy warns Arab rulers about Libya precedent", *EUobserver*, 25 March 2011

²⁸ "EU sets sanctions to add to pressure on Assad", *Financial Times*, 24 May 2011

²⁹ "Syria cuts diesel price by 25 per cent", *Financial Times*, 26 May 2011

³⁰ "Syria offers amnesty to political prisoners", *Washington Post*, 1 June 2011

³¹ Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Rampant Torture of Protesters", News release, 15 April 2011

³² "EU softens Syria resolution in bid for UN support", *EUobserver*, 9 June 2011

³³ "EU softens Syria resolution in bid for UN support", *EUobserver*, 9 June 2011 (includes full text of the second draft resolution)

³⁴ See for example Mohammad Bazzi, "We Don't Want to Lose You, But We Think You Ought to Go", *London Review of Books*, June 2011

June's demonstrations across the county were the biggest yet,³⁵ there were only small and isolated incidents which might suggest that Syrian security forces are divided or hesitant in their loyalty to the regime.

The scenes of dead soldiers in Jisr al-Shughour spoke of a turning point, however. If the opposition's claims that these were deserting security forces are correct, that would represent the first serious challenge to the unity of the security forces. If, as the government says, the deaths were the result of organised and armed resistance, this would represent the first full frontal military challenge to the regime.

Activists are in no mood to give the regime the benefit of the doubt when it offers concessions. Massive violence in the campaign to retake Jisr al-Shughour would further reduce the chance of the regime deciding to choose the path of reform. Further violence is also likely to end hopes in western capitals of tempting Bashar al-Assad into taking that route.

It now remains to be seen how long the armed forces will remain largely loyal; they are, after all, mostly composed of conscripts.

Many observers have been surprised by the persistence of anti-government demonstrators, despite mass arrests and over a thousand dead. Perhaps most importantly, the regime's reputation for brutality does not appear to have deterred the uprising.

Nevertheless, the family and religious bonds among the leadership of the security forces are still strong,³⁶ while Syrians may genuinely fear the consequences for order if the present government falls. For this reason, the regime continues to enjoy considerable support among the Alawites and the influential Christian minority.³⁷

³⁵ "Activists claim dozens killed in Syria protests", *Financial Times*, 4 June 2011

³⁶ "Military loyalty to Assad stems from clan bonds", *Financial Times*, 1 June 2011

³⁷ "End of Days for Assad?", *Foreign Affairs*, 25 May 2011

8 Map of the region

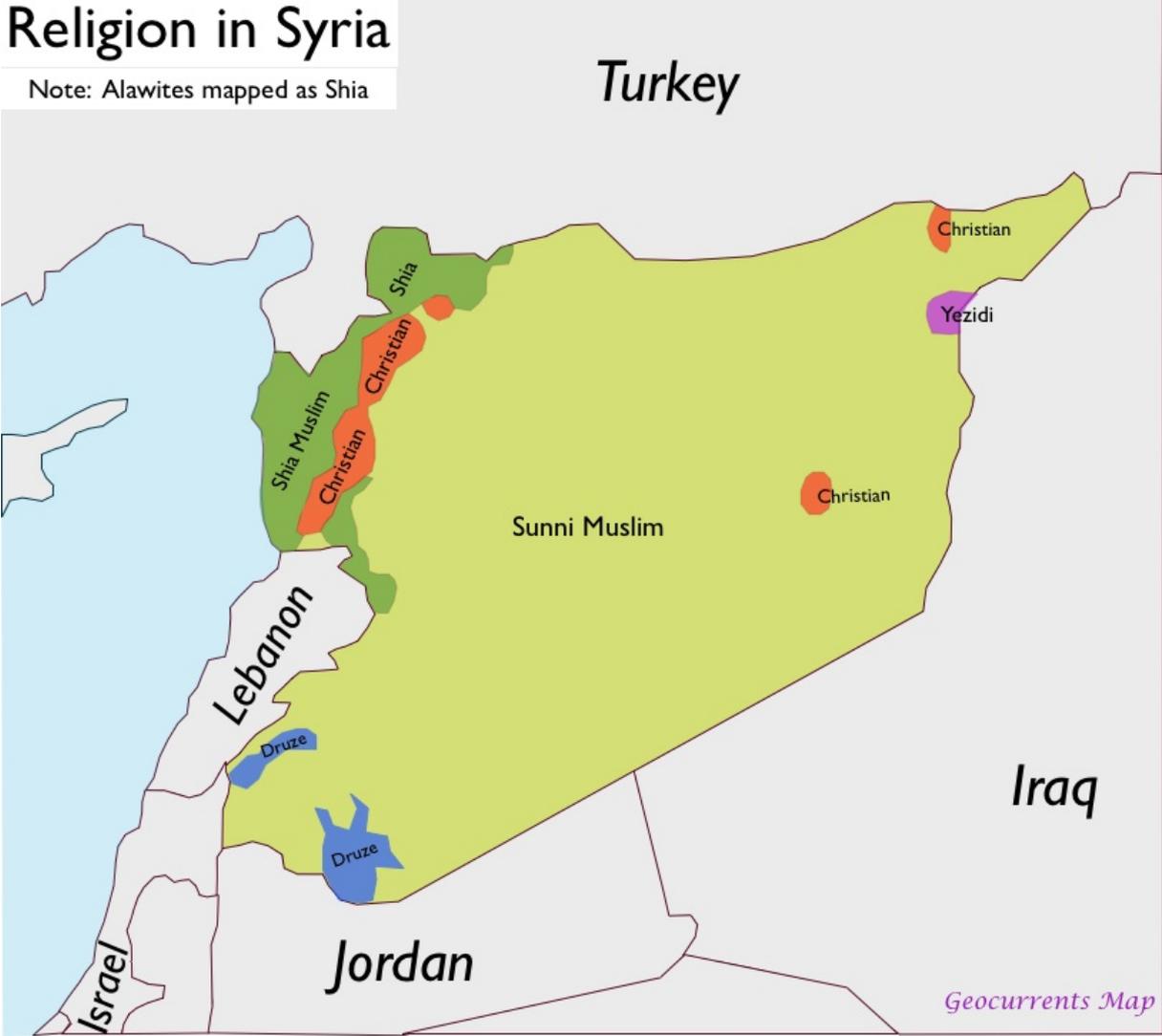


Source: Ministry of Defence

9 Map of religious groups in Syria

Religion in Syria

Note: Alawites mapped as Shia



Source: [Geocurrents](#)