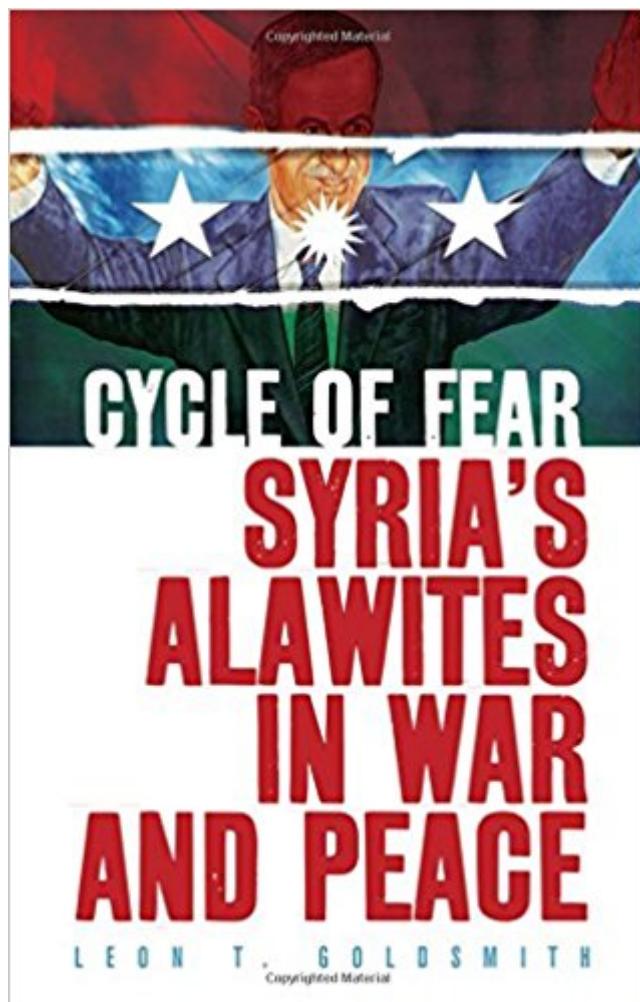


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Cycle Of Fear: Syria's Alawites In War And Peace



Synopsis

In early 2011 an elderly Alawite shaykh lamented the long history of oppression and aggression against his people. Against such collective memories the Syrian uprising was viewed by many Alawites, and observers, as a revanchist Sunni Muslim movement and the gravest threat yet to the unorthodox Shi'a sub-sect. This explained why the Alawites largely remained loyal to the Ba'athist regime of Bashar al-Assad. But was Alawite history really a constant tale of oppression and was the Syrian uprising of 2011 really an existential threat to the Alawites? This book surveys Alawite history from the sect's inception in Abbasid Iraq up to the start of the uprising in 2011. The book shows how Alawite identity and political behaviour have been shaped by a cycle of insecurity that has prevented the group from achieving either genuine social integration or long term security. Rather than being the gravest threat yet to the sect, the Syrian uprising, in the context of the Arab Spring, was quite possibly a historic opportunity for the Alawites to finally break free from their cycle of fear.

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Customer Reviews

"Cycle of Fear is based on an impressive amount of field research as well as interviews with hard-to-reach leading Alawite figures inside Syria and elsewhere. Goldsmith does a good job of unmasking much of the mystery surrounding this sect and places within its historical context the twentieth century rise of the Alawites and the decision by most Alawites in the current conflict to stick with the Assad regime. I highly recommend it." -- David W. Lesch, Ewing Halsell Distinguished Professor of Middle East History at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, and author of Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad"Leon Goldsmith makes a timely argument about the Alawite

community that has provided the main pillar of support for Assad's rule in Syria. He explains how the minority complex of this small but powerful sect has been shaped by centuries of persecution. Their internal solidarity and fear of the Sunni majority, Goldsmith argues, has convinced them that their present struggle is a matter of life and death. This brief and engaging interpretive essay helps us to understand the cycle of fear that grips all religious communities in Syria today and makes the civil war so intractable." -- Joshua Landis, Director, Center for Middle East Studies, University of Oklahoma, and author of SyriaComment.com "This valuable study usefully combines Ibn Khaldun's theory of cycles of rule, dependent on the changing assabiyyeh of the ruling group, with the impact of the security dilemma to explain the causes and consequences of the Alawite community's association with the Assad regime. It benefits from the author's exceptional access to the Alawite heartland to provide a convincing and sympathetic portrait of this community." -- Raymond Hinnebusch, Professor of International Relations and Director of the Centre for Syrian Studies, University of St. Andrews "A splendid, multi-faceted, and scrupulously fair survey of the Alawite community of Syria -- easily the best available in English. Based on courageous, thoroughly professional field work immediately before and amid the outbreak of the street uprising against Bashar al-Assad, Cycle of Fear not only provides an excellent historical background, but also gives a wonderful portrayal of the Alawites at a critical turning point in their modern affairs. The present Syrian crisis cannot be comprehended without understanding the Alawites, who are at once the lifeblood and the prisoners of the Assad regime, which has increasingly taken them for granted." -- William Harris, Professor in the Department of Politics, University of Otago and author of Lebanon: A History, 600-2011

Leon T. Goldsmith teaches in the Department of Political Science, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman.

Good summary but very dry, reads like a doctoral dissertation which it was.

Interesting book on an important part of the world

Excellent book that focuses of the geo-political history of the Alawite community in Syria (as opposed to the elements of the faith, which received more attention in past scholarship). The book clearly shows how sectarianism was instrumentalized by the Assad regime (father and son) to remain in power. The chapter that covers the economic hardship of the Alawite community prior to

the popular uprising in Syria in 2011 is crucial - it clearly demonstrates how the drought, neo-liberalism and corruption negatively affected this community, and yet the community chose not to join the uprising due to its fears, which were amplified and utilized by the Assad regime to remain in power. This book allows readers to view the Alawite community as victims of the regime, to an extent, and not just as a sect implicated in systematic mass murder. I hope many Syrians read it. I think the book would have benefited from a deeper examination of group psychology of minorities or of communities in conflict. Also, some of the points made in the book about the inner machinations of the Assad regimes prior to 2011 aren't backed by solid proof. This is understandable considering the secrecy that characterizes the Baath dictatorship, but I think the book would have benefited if those sections were simply not included.

Back in 2013, I had a memorable conversation with a Middle Eastern compadre about the Syrian Civil War. As a Westerner, I was especially baffled by the adoption of sectarian-based terrorism by some rebel groups that targeted Syrian religious minorities. I have always wondered, why would anyone turn away potential allies based on religious or sectarian differences or intentionally foment sectarian hatred that gives the Assad regime an opportunity to divide-and-conquer? My friend's answers was candor, "they [certain rebels groups] are trying to turn the war into a sectarian one so they could rally the Sunnis to their side." I did not quite understand it back then, and still have trouble today in grasping this concept since my Western mindset would rather opt for a united front of all religious groups when facing an opponent as powerful and intransigent as Assad. Lessons from that conversation continue to serve as a reminder of the difference in thought process between Westerners and Middle Easterners. Fast-forward to 2015, Syria is sinking deeper and deeper into the swamp of perpetual war, while the sectarian fault lines are more visible than ever, which makes the question of "why sectarianism instead of united front" more evident than ever. This is not a book that solely focuses on the Alawite faith; we have books like *The Nusayri-Alawi Religion: An Enquiry into Its Theology and Liturgy* by Bar-Asher and Kofsky for that purpose. Instead, Goldsmith succeeds in presenting a quality documentation of the Alawite's history that constitutes the main portion of the book. The long history of persecution endured by the Alawites since the 9th century at the hands of their Sunni overlords simply because of deviance from state-sanctioned orthodox Islam is a harrowing tale that made one understand why despite dissatisfaction with the Assad government the Alawites continue to firmly support the regime. The gut-wrenching images propagated by ISIS and other fundamentalist Sunni

groups celebrating beheadings, enslavement and mass murder based on sectarian identities must have reminded the Alawites of centuries of suffering at the hands of the Abbasids, Mamluks, Seljuks and Ottomans where entire communities of Alawites were slaughtered, beheaded, and their women carried away as slaves. The surprise of Goldsmith's book came when it was revealed that dissent aimed at the Assad family is quite prevalent among Alawites of the western Syrian mountains where the Assad clan hails from. But with the ongoing Civil War and the possibility of a return to the status of an underclass, or worse, genocide, forced the Alawites to rally in defense of Assad, a man who is the last line of defense against Sunni extremists that have made clear that gory episodes of history will be repeated once the Alawites allow themselves to be vanquished. Although the chronicle of Alawite history is impressive, Goldsmith's conclusion, where he believes ethnic and religious integration under a pluralist democratic framework is the future path for the Alawites of Syria is perhaps a far stretch given the present situation in the country, i.e. the "Afghanistanization" of Syria. Ironically, in Islamic theology, the land governed by "infidels" is labeled as dar-al-harb or "abode of war," while Muslim states are referred to as dar-al-Islam or "abode of peace." But in reality this is almost the exact opposite. One take-away from this book is that wars over religious and sectarian identity are an inseparable part of Islamic history, and conflicts of similar nature will likely continue into the future. Nevertheless, for anyone who might be interested in the story of the Alawites as well as sectarianism and politics in the Middle East, this is a fine book to peruse over.

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