

Syria in the eyes of Islamic State

This short briefing paper discusses IS' view of the government of Syria. It surveys IS' newsletter, *al-Naba'*, and the magazines *Dābiq*, *Rumīyyah* and *Dār al-Islām*, to investigate the group's perceptions of the country.

In its discourse, IS paints a portrait of Syria with two faces. The first face is that of the country's leader, Bashar al-Assad. The personification of the regime under his attributes is interesting; Bashar al-Assad's individual background is assigned to all the country. It is then used by IS as a tool of delegitimization.

In the database surveyed, the group calls the Syrian president "Murtādd-Tāghut Bachar al-Assad". *Murtādd* refers to those who rejected Islam at the time of the first Caliph, Abu Bakr. It refers directly to al-Assad's belonging to the Alawite minority, a sect of the Twelver, *al-Ithnā'ashriyyah*, the largest branch of Shi'a Islam. In IS' rhetoric, Bashar al-Assad is not a Sunni Muslim; henceforth he is not considered as a 'true' Muslim and therefore Muslims should fight him.

In the same vein, IS attributes the adjective "Nusayrī" to the Syrian regime. Ibn Nuṣayr founded the Alawite sect in the 9th century but the name is today used as a derogative word for Shi'a. Here again, IS points to the religious background of Bashar al-Assad. IS bases its argument on the two fatwas of Ibn Taymīyyah's a 14th Century Islamic Scholar, who wrote, "[Nusayriyyah] are [kuffār] [disbelievers] according to the agreement of the Muslims" (*Dābiq* 10, p. 8) [...] "There is no doubt that [jihad] against these people and the implementation of the [hudūd] [punishments] upon them [are] from the greatest acts of obedience and obligations" (*Dābiq* 10, p. 9).

Tāghut in Arabic means 'tyrant'. In an article featured in *Dābiq*, the American journalist and captive of IS John Cantlie wrote: "There was never any legitimacy to his [Bashar al-Assad's] tyrannical rule" (8, p. 65).

The justification of the use of the word *tāghut* is Bashar al-Assad's enmity against Muslims. Indeed, IS accuses the Syrian president of perpetrating genocide against Muslims via "systematic massacres, chemical wars, rapes, as well as famines caused by sieges" (*Dābiq* 3, p. 35). In the 9th issue of *Dābiq*, IS explains: "Every time the Islamic State advances and inflicts severe losses on the [Nusayrī] army and militias, in revenge, the regime conducts random airstrikes on places where Muslims live" (9, p. 19). The discourse is similar in the French-language *Dār al-Islām* magazine. An article states: "The army of Bashar (May Allāh exterminate them) bombed 12 times the city of Raqqah, targeting ordinary Muslims with the sole goal to inflict a maximum of damages" (*Dār al-Islām*, 6, p. 41). In conclusion, for IS "His evil is so clear-cut it does not require a trial to prove his apostasy and crimes" (*Dābiq* 12, p. 13).



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In addition to al-Assad's religious background, IS repeatedly refers to his political identity and his belonging to the Ba'ath party. IS accuses the "Baathist [Nusayriyyah]" to have fought the mujāhidīn in Iraq and elsewhere. IS claims that while the *mujāhidīn* were "sacrificing blood" for Islam and Allah, Syria was cooperating with Russia and the US to fight them (*Dābiq* 11, p. 20). An issue of *Dābiq* emphasises the role of the Syrian Ba'ath party in the US' rendition programme mounted after the 9/11 attacks (*Ibid*, p. 20; 49). It continues: "Many mujāhidīn [were] sent to Syria only to be tortured at the hands of the Baathist [Nusayriyyah] on behalf of the Americans" (*Ibid*).

IS' delegitimization of Bashar al-Assad can be summed up by a sentence in *Dābiq* which states that "Bashar al-Assad is a [murtadd] tāghūt belonging to the apostate Nusayrī sect and apostate Baath party; it is an obligation to kill him even if he were never to have killed a single Muslim" (12, p. 13).

The second face given to Syria by IS is that of the ruling political regime and its alliances. The group refers to the "Crusader-Safawī- Nuṣayrī coalition" in its utterances, meaning the alliance between the Western countries, Iran and Syria (*al-Naba'* 13, p. 15; *Dābiq* 9, p. 19). IS focuses on Syria's ties with the United States, and Russia – the enemies of 'true Islam' – as evidence of the regime's anti-Islamic agenda. It also accuses the Syrian regime of taking part in the "crusade" airstrikes against "true Muslims" (*al-Naba'* 100, p. 15, *Dābiq* 4, p. 40; *Dār al-Islām* 6, p. 41).

In IS and other Salafi groups' narrative, Russia has been a historic enemy of Islam since the invasion of Afghanistan in the late 1970s, which gave birth to the first generation of mujāhidīn. IS stresses that Russia arms the Syrian regime "against the Muslims of [Shām]" (*Dābiq* 4, p. 40).

In addition, IS considers the United State as the main 'far enemy' since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and of Iraq in 2003 after the 9/11 attacks. The group mentions the passivity of the US towards Bashar al-Assad's brutal behaviour. *Dābiq* explains: "The US and its allies sat back and watched while Assad slaughtered more than 200,000 of the people of Syria" (6, p. 61). In a long article in *Dār al-Islām* IS argues that Syria used the US to gain financial support but then worked for its own sectarian interests (6, p. 41). Further, IS accuses Syria of relying on the US army in the fight against the Islamic State, mainly because Syria's army is leaderless, weak and "isn't very good at hitting targets accurately" (*Dābiq* 4, p. 40).

However, the group postulates that the Syrian regime is not only the ally of IS' far enemies (namely the US and Russian), but also the group's regional enemies, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in Syria, the *Sahwat* or the awakening forces in Iraq, and the PKK party (*al-Naba'* 13, p. 15). *Dābiq* stated, "You see Sahwat factions openly handing over territory to the [Nusayrī] regime" (9, p. 16; 11, p. 49).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, IS views the Syrian regime as a fierce enemy because of its alliance with Iran. IS refers to Syria as "agent of the Iranian government",

a “puppet”, and an essential actor of the Shi‘a Crescent and the Faqīh state which is believed to be at war against the Sunnah (*Dābiq* 3, p. 38).

To conclude, the Islamic State criminalises the Syrian regime. The group presents it as an enemy of the Sunni community. It depicts the Syrian regime as weak and dishonest and for that reason, the group offers an alternative form of government which is supposed to remedy those flaws by protecting the Sunni Muslims and governing them in accordance with original Islamic teachings.

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