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Why the US Far Right Loves Bashar al-Assad

**Ideological affinities and a long intellectual history
lie behind the curious reverence for the Syrian
dictator among fascists and white nationalists**

Leila Al Shami and Shon Meckfessel

1 August 2023

On April 1, 2023, a conference was held in Lyon, France, under the title “Syria and Its Allies on the March Towards a Multipolar World.” It was held by Egalite et Reconciliation (Equality and Reconciliation), a think tank founded by Alain Soral, a former member of France’s right-wing National Front party (rebranded in 2018 as the “National Rally”). Soral was imprisoned in 2019 for racism, antisemitism and Holocaust denial. The syncretic think tank he founded, whose motto is “left-wing on labor, right-wing on values,” combines social and economic ideas from the left with values around family and nation traditionally associated with the right.

The conference brought together members of the far right to update them on the current situation in Syria and thank the country for “its war on terrorism.” At first sight, it may seem strange that European fascists are organizing to stand in solidarity with an Arab dictator. But in fact, President Bashar al-

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Assad's war on the Syrian people who rose up against him appeals to fascist sensibilities across the globe.

James Alex Fields Jr. was 20 years old when he drove his car into a crowd in Charlottesville, Virginia, on Aug. 12, 2017, killing the 32-year-old protester Heather Heyer and injuring numerous others. Fields had long been public with his far-right views, and efforts by his alleged colleagues in the fascist group Vanguard America to disavow his allegiance were unconvincing. In seeking to understand Fields' motives, the many journalists and others who checked his Facebook account were greeted by an image of Assad with the word "Undefeated." Why, they found themselves asking, would an American white nationalist celebrate an Arab leader from a majority-Muslim country, and what might this say about the movement from which he emerged?

Fields is not the only far-right activist to display admiration for Assad. A number of other attendees of the "Unite the Right" rally expressed similar sympathies. One protester boasted a T-shirt emblazoned with the words, "Bashar's Barrel Delivery Co.," in reference to the improvised bombs that have caused thousands of civilian deaths and turned whole Syrian cities into rubble. Another declared, "Support the Syrian Arab Army ... fight against the globalists!" to which the alt-right YouTuber Baked Alaska responded, "Assad did nothing wrong, right?"

Far-right figures expressing common cause with the Syrian dictator long predates this rally. As far back as 2005, the Klansman-cum-state legislator David Duke visited Damascus and declared in a speech aired on Syrian state television that "part of my country is occupied by Zionists, just as part of your country, the Golan Heights, is occupied by Zionists. The Zionists occupy most of the American media and now control much of the American government." Assad's regime has only increased in popularity with the far right since.

Adoration of Assad is, indeed, widespread among the far right. Some of this support mirrors more commonly held no-

of the fascistic Third Position movement also advocated the simultaneous fight against capitalism and communism, including calling for alliance with the far left. And let us not forget the Third Positionists in the U.K., who were supportive of Libya's dictator Moammar Gadhafi as well as the Islamic Republic of Iran and Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam. What we see today is merely a continuation of a long and deeply held tradition among the far right and fascism, no matter the geography or ethno-racial details.

tions about Assad: that he is the only force effectively fighting the Islamic State group, that he is somehow holding the country and region together or that he is protecting Christians and other religious minorities. (This is the basis on which one far-right Christian nongovernmental organization, known as SOS Chretiens d'Orient, has supported the Syrian dictator. It is now under investigation in France, where it is based, after *NewLines* published an expose of its activities.) Many other groups, however, demonstrate clearly fascist motives.

On March 3, 2018, Justin Burger, a "major" in the now-defunct Traditionalist Worker Party in Georgia, and "Rock," one of his comrades, had a conversation on the #tradworker Discord channel, subsequently leaked by Unicorn Riot (a non-profit media collective that reports on far-right organizations). In the conversation, Burger takes offense at a meme showing a swastika among other symbols opposed to Assad:

JUSTIN BURGER: Assad is a Ba'athist, the closest still living incarnation to NATSOC. ... Cyprian Blamires claims that "Ba'athism may have been a Middle Eastern variant of fascism." According to him, the Ba'ath movement shared several characteristics with the European fascist movements such as "the attempt to synthesize radical, illiberal nationalism and non-Marxist socialism, a romantic, mythopoetic, and elitist 'revolutionary' vision, the desire both to create a 'new man' and to restore past greatness, a centralised authoritarian party divided into 'Right Wing' and 'left-wing' factions and so forth; several close associates later admitted that Aflaq had been directly inspired by certain fascist and Nazi theorists."

ROCK: Can we just admit that Assad is our guy
Hecc they even get sworn in by doing the Roman salute I believe.

Burger's claim that the Baath Party manifests a historical continuity with National Socialism contains a kernel of truth. The Syrian regime's authoritarianism and cult of personality around the president reflect in many ways the totalitarian

regimes (both fascist and communist) of the 20th century. This, coupled with the Syrian regime's strong nationalist identity, holds appeal for many on the contemporary far right.

The Arab Socialist Baath Party came to power in 1963 through a military coup. It was founded on an ideology incorporating elements of Arab nationalism and Arab socialism, both witnessing a popular resurgence in the wave of decolonization. Its early ideologues — Michel Aflaq (a Christian), Salah al-Din al-Bitar (a Sunni Muslim) and Zaki al-Arsuzi (an Alawite) — advocated a renaissance of Arab culture and values and the unification of the Arab countries into one Arab state led by a Baath revolutionary vanguard. Syria's 1973 constitution declared the Baath Party to be "the leading party in the society and the state," indicating a level of consolidation of state power under the party reminiscent of the model of Vladimir Lenin or, equally, that of Benito Mussolini.

From the outset, Baathist ideology sought to mythologize the "Arab Nation," a notion imbued with a romantic vision of past greatness, which would both counter the humiliations wrought by French and British colonial rule and help to build a new nationalist identity. A fiercely secular movement in many respects, which attracted the support of minority groups, the Baathists reworked religious symbolism in service to Arab nationalist goals. They paid tribute to the role of Islam in Arab society — especially its contributions to Arab culture, values and thought. The slogan of the Baath Party — "One Arab Nation, Bearing an Eternal Message" — has obvious religious connotations, particularly the play on the word "message" (risala), the term used for the message revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, as well as the word "nation" (umma), which is usually used to refer to the global Muslim community. Aflaq envisioned a sublimation of religion into a more modern, nationalist identity: "Europe is as fearful of Islam today as she has been in the past. She knows that the strength of Islam, which in the past

poor proletarian nations against rich plutocratic nations on the international plane." The formulation is strikingly similar to Lenin's maxim that "under imperialism the division of nations into oppressing and oppressed ones is a fundamental, most important and inevitable fact." However, whereas Lenin was clearly advocating for colonized and economically exploited lands to determine their own fates against the colonizing and exploitative habits of empires, an idea which itself never ultimately superseded class struggle, Corradini was arguing for the "right" of less-developed European nations to their own respective plunder of presumably non-European nations — particularly Italy's "right" to plunder Libya and Ethiopia — and that such national priorities supplanted internal social conflict. This interpretation of "class struggle" in nationalist and geopolitical terms, with all its ambiguities, became a foundational move for Baathism.

The mutual admiration between Assad and the far right in the West was perhaps inevitable. After all, within the Nazi Party of the 1930s, Gregor and Otto Strasser proposed to unite with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics against imperial Britain and France, and the party later worked with both Indian and Arab independence movements to undermine imperial British rule. After World War II, Johann von Leers, who had worked in Joseph Goebbels's Nazi Propaganda Ministry, moved to Egypt along with thousands of other Nazi Party members. In 1958, he wrote: "One thing is clear — more and more patriot Germans join the great Arab revolution against beastly imperialism. ... Our place as an oppressed nation under the execrable Western colonialist Bonn government must be on the side of the Arab nationalist revolt against the West." The American fascist Francis Parker Yockey determined that, under Cold War conditions, the U.S. had become the primary opponent of the fascist movement and advocated that fascists join with the USSR and Third World liberation movements as the most effective means of fighting American power. In Italy, members

and Persian and Moor, before we become engulfed in a limitless foreign sea.

Lindbergh went on to blame Jewish ownership of media and control of government for the U.S. interest in intervention.

The mistaken belief that any opposition to foreign policy entanglements is somehow leftist leads to the view that any right-wing talk of “anti-imperialism” is only an insincere ploy meant to infiltrate left spaces and discourse. However, this reading does not tell the whole story. As much as the far right does sometimes poach from the far left to bolster its rhetoric and numbers, criticism of and opposition to imperialism per se has a long — and authentic — history on the far right. As Matthew N. Lyons says in his book “Insurgent Supremacists: The U.S. Far Right’s Challenge to State and Empire” (2018):

Far Right anti-imperialism doesn’t fit old school leftist assumptions that opposition to empire is inherently liberatory or progressive, that Far Rightists always promote military expansionism, or that fascists are basically tools of the ruling class. These assumptions weren’t true in the 1930s or the 1960s, and they’re certainly not true now. As the 9–11 attacks in 2001 made clear, some of the most committed and important opponents of U.S. global power are on the Far Right.

Fascists have long proffered strong criticism of imperialist military ventures as imperial ventures. Notably, when fascists came to power in Italy and Germany, these countries had come to exist as states only decades earlier, and their imperial power had been short-lived and limited when compared with that of Spain, France or Britain, for example. As they tried to catch up with their own colonial projects, they were quick to claim their colonialism as “anti-imperialist.” Enrico Corradini, the author of the fascist geopolitical approach that formed the basis of Mussolini’s foreign policy, borrowed from left theories of class and adapted them to fascism’s ultranationalism: “The class struggle,” said Corradini, “was real enough, but it pitted not workers against capitalists within the nation, but

expressed that of the Arabs, has been reborn and has appeared in a new form: Arab nationalism.”

The Baath Party advocated socialist economics but rejected the Marxist conception of class struggle. Aflaq believed that all classes among the Arabs were united in opposing capitalist domination by imperial powers, proposing that nations themselves, rather than social groups within and across nations, constituted the real subjects of struggle against domination. On coming to power, the Baath Party pursued top-down economic planning based on the Soviet model. It nationalized major industries, engaged in large infrastructural modernization that contributed to building the nation-state, redistributed land away from the landowning class, and improved rural conditions. These populist policies brought the party a measure of cross-sectarian peasant support. At the same time, leftists were purged from the Baath Party early on, and later all leftist opposition would be either co-opted or crushed. Following the corporatist model, independent associations of workers, students and producers were repressed and new parastatal organizations said to represent their interests emerged.

Hafez al-Assad rose from modest origins to become the state personified. He came to power in 1970 in an internal coup directed against the left-wing faction of the Baath Party. Under his rule, Syria became a totalitarian police state based on the tripartite control of the party, security apparatus and military, yet power was centralized in the presidency. He reigned supreme as “the Eternal Leader” or “the Sanctified One.” His portrait and statues decorated buildings and the main squares of cities and towns. From schools to national events, carefully choreographed spectacles of public worship were used to reinforce the cult of the president and enforce the conformity and submission of the populace, without ever needing to win over individuals’ private thoughts or convictions.

In an article for the publication SyriaUntold, Rahaf Aldoughli, a lecturer in Middle East and North African studies at Lancaster University, argues that nationalism and the “cult of Baathism” formed part of the indoctrination of the Syrian citizen from an early age and went hand in hand with the normalization of militarism, enforcing both masculinity and physical power as key markers of identity and constructing the image of the heroic Arab man as the ideal citizen. Schoolchildren — both boys and girls, and without exception — faced compulsory conscription into two Baath-affiliated organizations: the Baath Vanguard Organization (during primary school) and the Revolutionary Youth Union (during secondary school). Aldoughli argues that these “two organizations mobilize children through enforced training and membership in paramilitary groups that perpetuate ideals of masculinist militarism, conceptualizing them as expressions of nationhood.” During enforced mass marches, schoolchildren were taught to chant, “With blood and soul, we sacrifice ourselves for you, Hafez.” Today, the same slogan is chanted in support of his son.

In Hafez al-Assad’s Syria, all political expression and opposition were severely repressed, to the extent that the country became, in the words of the leftist dissident Riad al-Turk, “a kingdom of silence.” The prison system and the entire security apparatus acted as the primary means of social control through both the perpetuation of fear and the delivery of punishment for acts of transgression. The brutalization of political opponents through the system of incarceration is powerfully portrayed in prison memoirs such as “The Shell” by Mustafa Khalifa — a haunting presentation of unimaginable physical and emotional suffering — and accounts by the poet Faraj Bayrakdar and leftist dissident Yassin al-Haj Saleh. For political prisoners, torture was a key feature of detention. In 2017, it emerged that the Syrian leadership had gained some of its interrogation and torture techniques from the former Schutzstaffel com-

a very beautiful and sophisticated woman as well.” Spencer’s mention of Assad’s wife Asma al-Assad is telling: As a former financial services professional with a computer science degree, born and raised in London, England, she was once featured in a Vogue magazine article titled “A Rose in the Desert.” As Spencer notes, she presents a promising example for anyone hoping to make murderous politics respectable.

In February 2013, at a march in support of the Assad regime in Sacramento, California, one of the attendees, the French far-right leader Serge Ayoub, was asked why he was pro-Assad. He replied:

Of course, it is our duty to support their cause! Syria is a nation, a homeland, a socialist country with national supremacy. They are fighting for secularism, and they are subject to an attack by imperialist America, globalization and its salafist servants and Qatari and Saudi mercenaries. The purpose is to destroy the state.

At first glance, Ayoub’s analysis might seem uncharacteristic of fascist discourse and more typical of its political opposite. Aren’t leftists usually the ones to protest against “an attack by imperialist America” on “a socialist country”?

Yet objections to “Western imperialism” have never been exclusive to the radical left. Historically, and up to the present, far-right opposition to “globalism” and the entanglements of empire has been foundational, often serving to separate the far right from establishment conservatives. It is important to remember that the largest pro-fascist organization in U.S. history, the America First Committee, which counted nearly 1 million members, existed for the sole purpose of opposing U.S. military intervention in World War II. As the America First spokesman and famed aviator Charles Lindbergh made clear at the time, the far right can have its own reasons to oppose empire:

It is time to turn from our quarrels and to build our White ramparts again. This alliance with foreign races means nothing but death to us. It is our turn to guard our heritage from Mongol

haircut and tailored suit. Yet if many people can still only recognize Nazis as boneheads screaming “Sieg Heil” from trembling necks laden with 1488 tattoos, then this suggests that polite, groomed, articulate young men and women couldn’t possibly harbor fascist beliefs.

Respectability politics within the U.S. far right did not begin with Spencer and the alt-right. In 1989, the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK, or simply “Klan”) leader Duke won a seat in the Louisiana state legislature by leaving his swastikas and Klan robes in the dresser. Fresh out of prison for tax fraud, Duke convened a 2004 meeting around the “New Orleans Protocol,” which a number of prominent far-right leaders signed up to, consisting of the following three points: “1) Zero tolerance for violence. 2) Honorable and ethical behavior in relations with other signatory groups. ... 3) Maintaining a high tone in our arguments and public presentations.” By playing down the inevitable violent consequences of fascist politics, the far right presents a more palatable face to the broader public, denying fascist violence while normalizing the discourse that inspires it.

Assad presents a remarkably successful model for emulation for movements that seek to shift the “Overton window” and reframe the politics of cruelty as a reasonable option within mainstream discourse. According to al-Haj Saleh, Syrians fighting for liberation and survival are forced to fight simultaneously against two guises of fascism: “Against the Assadist necktie fascists and against the Islamist long-bearded fascists.” The tie-wearing variety have gained much more sympathy in the West because of their apparent containment of fascists of the bearded variety — even if the regime is actually responsible for much greater mass violence and destruction, not to mention the cultivation and enabling of many of the Islamist terrorists it purports to fight. Spencer, enthused by Assad’s necktie presentability, notes that he was educated in the West and offers “a civilized variant of Islam. ... His wife is

mander Alois Brunner, the man described by Adolf Eichmann as the architect of the “Final Solution.” The Nazi war criminal was given safe haven by the Assad regime and died in Damascus in 2001. Unmitigated brutality was used by the military to crush uprisings against the Baathists in 1963, 1964, 1965, 1967, 1980 and 1982, culminating in the massacre in Hama, where between 20,000 and 40,000 citizens were killed and much of the ancient Old City was leveled by the air force.

When Bashar al-Assad inherited the dictatorship from his father in 2000, the few changes were cosmetic and rhetorical. The arbitrary detention, torture and summary execution of dissidents continued, while prisons were filled with leftists, communists, Kurdish opposition protesters, Muslim Brotherhood members and human rights activists. The economic situation worsened because of the increasing neoliberalization of the economy, which continued to concentrate wealth in the hands of the crony-capitalist class of those loyal to, or related to, the president — a feature of his father’s rule.

For example, Assad’s maternal cousin Rami Makhlof was known to wield substantial control of the Syrian economy for many years through extensive business ventures, including mobile phone monopolies, tourism, real estate, banking and construction. Meanwhile, ordinary Syrians became increasingly impoverished as subsidies and welfare were dismantled and unemployment rates soared, particularly among the youth. It was both political repression and this desperate socioeconomic situation that led to the uprising in 2011, which arrived in the context of a transnational revolutionary wave sweeping the wider region.

Assad’s response to the uprising was to wage what the United Nations has termed a state policy of “extermination” against those who demanded democracy and dignity. Since 2011, Syrians have been bombed, gassed, raped, starved, tortured and driven from their homes. Some 400,000 people had been killed by 2016, according to a U.N. estimate, and

many more will have died since then, given the scale of ongoing violence. Tens of thousands have been imprisoned, suffering the most sadistic forms of torture, practiced on an industrial scale. More than half of the Syrian people no longer live in their own homes, having fled barrel bombs, chemical massacres and starvation sieges carried out by the regime with the assistance of its allies, Russia and Iran. Herein lies a key appeal for the international far right: an authoritarian strongman prepared to unleash violence on an unimaginable scale to crush dissent, while avoiding any accountability.

If there is one characteristic that distinguishes historical fascism from other political ideologies, it is the explicit embrace of mass violence as a means to achieve political goals, particularly the systematic implementation of mass murder of internal populations. Although both capitalist and state-communist regimes have repeatedly employed mass murder as a political tool, fascism has been unique in ideologically defining itself through its reliance on internal mass violence, even as an end in itself. As the fascism scholar Robert Paxton explains in his book *"The Anatomy of Fascism"* (2004):

The legitimation of violence against a demonized internal enemy brings us close to the heart of fascism. ... It was the genius of fascism to wager that many an orderly bourgeois (or even bourgeoisie) would take some vicarious satisfaction in a carefully selective violence, directed only against "terrorists" and "enemies of the people."

Whereas Josef Stalin's followers long denied his mass murder campaigns, Adolf Hitler's followers have been more likely to embrace their history of mass violence as justified and emblematic of their beliefs.

The scale of violence in Syria is shocking, even by the dismal standards of our day: casualties number well over half a million. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, 93% of civilians killed in the conflict were killed by regime forces. The large majority of these deaths have been due to the

"The spectrum of violence starts with the fear of being arbitrarily arrested and subjugated to torture. It includes sieges and subsequent starvation. It involves the various ways Syrians are tortured and indiscriminately killed. In many of these cases, torture is not performed to gain information, but rather to actualize state power," Munif writes in *"The Syrian Revolution."* Such systematicity is often very purposefully utilized to shape the social imaginary, making social alternatives unthinkable, for example by crushing areas where autonomous self-organization (through the establishment of local councils and independent civil society networks) is the strongest. According to Munif:

There is often a strong correlation between a neighborhood or village's ability to develop successful grassroots politics and the level of punishment it receives. The more inhabitants are able to produce autonomous politics, the more they are perceived as a threat to sovereign power, and as a result, are punished.

As the Syrian regime has made use of such ruthless means to crush alternatives and retain its hold on power, it has also provided the U.S. far right with a promising precedent. Justifying its systemic mass violence by appropriating the American discourse of an ongoing War on Terror, the Assad regime has succeeded, for the most part, in deflecting serious criticism, and has shown that systematic practices of thanatocracy can be enacted in our day with relative impunity. It is no wonder that those aiming to institute such practices find his precedent inspiring.

Not all current proponents of far-right politics openly embrace murderous violence. The alt-right, as a movement, has defined itself by embracing a veneer of respectability, especially by disavowing the swastika-sporting neo-Nazi crowd and the mass violence they openly advocate. Readers may recognize the alt-right activist Richard Spencer's talk of "peaceful ethnic cleansing" as an oxymoron and not be fooled by his hipster

ness works to qualify him as effectively white in the eyes of his Western fascist followers.

It can be argued that, in fascism, individuals seek to achieve “freedom” through complete identification with a state unfettered in its exercise of violence. The Syrian state, even before its repression of the uprising, has been exemplary in this regard. One blogger by the name Jules Etjim explains the state-constituting role of transgression in the widespread use of torture in the 1970s and early 1980s. Not only were potential opponents terrified into submission; complicit subjects were invited into a sort of freedom-through-the-state by identifying with this transgression of “long established social boundaries”:

The “lesson” of torture was intended to be internalised by everyone including the torturer who was transformed into a willing instrument of the “torture state.” The transition to exterminatory torture — in our terms, the transition to thanatocracy — was part of a genocidal continuum that disclosed the state had obtained “absolute freedom” to overstep human standards and boundaries without any normative or ethical limit other than the practical limit.

Such “absolute freedom” of the state, realized by transcending all normative and ethical limits, presents an unparalleled fantasy fulfillment for those who identify their own desires with the exercise of state violence.

The purposeful, instrumental, systematic application of extreme violence is central to our cultural memory of fascism, and Nazism in particular. This memory finds chilling rejuvenation in Assad’s state. Munif relays the account of one former prisoner, who “explains that every prison is required to deliver, on a weekly basis, a specific number of corpses. If on a given week the Branch does not meet the required number of dead prisoners, then some individuals are selected to receive an air injection in their arterial lines and die quickly.” Although such cruel practices may seem arbitrary, the entire range of violence serves directly to solidify and reproduce the thanatocratic state.

intensive, yearslong shelling of cramped residential neighborhoods, hunger sieges and the targeting of schools and medical and other survival infrastructure. However, a notable proportion was caused by the industrial-scale implementation of torture within Syria’s extensive incarceration network. Although many supporters of Assad attempt to deny or minimize these crimes against humanity, it is precisely this cruelty that appeals to so much of the far right and likely lies behind much of its support.

In his book “The Syrian Revolution: Between the Politics of Life and the Geopolitics of Death” (2020), the sociologist Yasser Munif describes how the Assad regime has instrumentalized violence to the extent that it has actually created an innovative system of governance. Munif builds on Achille Mbembe’s notion of “necropolitics,” which “operates by deploying its lethal power and making decisions about who can live and who must die.” However, in Munif’s reading, the concept of necropolitics (which Mbembe was applying to the practices of postcolonial violence) focuses too much on diffuse, often nonstate violence used to exploit and enslave, which he feels fails to encapsulate the Syrian situation. Munif introduces the category of “thanatocracy” as a subset of necropolitics, which emanates predominantly from a state or sovereign power seeking to preserve its position, and which has more interest in the extermination of those who threaten the survival of the despotic order than exploitation. Assad’s regime has, by this definition, been exemplary, and indeed its murderous conduct in successfully preserving its position throughout the Syrian conflict has opened space globally for the politics of thanatocracy. In addition, the asymmetric nature of Assad’s thanatocracy satisfies fascist fantasies of complete state power, as in its “absolute control over vertical power. ... Their air forces can hit any target anywhere in Syria and cause immediate death.”

A further appeal for the international far right may lie in Assad’s successful demonizing of his opponents as the “other,”

whether foreign agents or Islamist terrorists, to legitimize their liquidation in the eyes of his supporters. From the first days of the uprising, the regime attempted to portray a diverse, popular protest movement calling for democracy and social justice as a conspiracy against Syria, directed by outside countries and religious extremists who worked to undermine the stability of the country. In Duke's view, "Assad is a modern day hero standing up to demonic forces seeking to destroy his people and nation." One post on the white supremacist site Stormfront affirms Assad's rhetoric that the uprising is simply a state-sponsored Islamic fundamentalist conspiracy, whatever its liberatory claims: "Al-Assad has done a good job keeping out the muslim [sic] extremists. The current uprising is orchestrated by muslim extremism and disguised as a 'fight for freedom and democracy,' funded by Saudi Arabia scum."

Ironically, Assad himself is at least partly responsible for the rise of Islamist extremism used to dismiss his opponents, and not only due to the chaos and trauma he unleashed upon the country, which provided a fertile breeding ground for extremism to thrive. As the regime was rounding up thousands of pro-democracy protesters for probable death by torture, it released numerous Islamist extremists from detention — many of them former state-sponsored saboteurs sent into Iraq by Assad in the early and mid-2000s to undermine the U.S. invasion there. Following their release, they went on to establish some of the most hardline militant groups, which came to dominate the field of battle. Assad hoped that the specter of Islamist extremism would both frighten Syrian minority communities into loyalty and silence the West's opposition to what the regime would now frame as part of the global "War on Terror," a term that Assad had been attempting to appropriate ever since the Bush administration introduced it in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. It is a strategy that has had considerable success.

As al-Haj Saleh argues, the U.S.-led global prioritization of the War on Terror and the "securitization of politics" became

very useful for the Syrian regime in its counterrevolutionary war. He argues that this "priority given to terrorism isn't merely a function of the genuine security threat it poses, but also its usefulness in consolidating the prevailing system, and indeed uniting the ranks behind its leading elites in confronting a formless menace." It also serves to mobilize the public against the "terrorist enemy," which is equated both in Syria and globally with Islam. This "combined genocratic effect of the securitization of politics and the Islamization of terrorism" makes Western leaders "liable to cooperate with, or at least tolerate genocidal regimes that exclusively murder their Muslim subjects." State violence is seen as the antidote to anything labeled as Islamic terrorism, whether real or imagined, conferring legitimacy on the existing state and "paving the path for genocide," while "by contrast, all resistance to tyranny or genocidal states is relegated to illegitimacy." This legitimization of state violence against any dissent or resistance provides an ideal precedent for fascist politics, even in quite different contexts.

The deeply Islamophobic far right has certainly embraced the War on Terror narrative and its acceptance of mass violence against Muslims. That Assad himself is a Muslim (from the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam) is only occasionally a cause for passing consternation. For example, "Flaxxer" (on the Traditionalist Worker Discord channel) explains, using derogatory slang, that "Shias are typically less Muzzie. Assad is a Shia." Others prefer to envisage Assad as a secular leader fighting Islamic extremists who pose a threat to the (white) Christian world. As the far-right Twitter user @iWillRedPillYou (account suspended at the time of writing) claimed in an interview, "Without Assad Muslims would conquer and likely decimate those remaining Christians." Assad's own racial and religious affiliations matter less than his willingness to use racialized dehumanization as a justification for murder; this willing-