



Sunnis fill rebel ranks, but also prop up Assad regime

Many Sunnis are backing the dictatorship to preserve their livelihoods, or believe the uprising is doomed or ruthless.

By: Michael Pizzi and Nuha Shabaan – August 1, 2013

One explanation of the Syrian civil war is that it is at its heart a conflict of the two strains of Islam that have warred for centuries: Sunni Muslims against the minority Shiite Muslim Alawites, the sect of dictator Bashar Assad.

But the reality is more complex and helps explain why more than two years into the fighting that has killed more than 100,000 people Syrian President Assad has defied predictions of his demise

Sunni Muslims make up 70% of Syria's 25 million people and it is they who fill the ranks of the rebellion against Assad's minority Alawite regime, considered apostates by Sunni clerics. Yet one reason why Assad remains in power despite being outnumbered by a rival sect is that many Sunnis are on his side, and their support is aiding his survival, say analysts and rebels.

"If Sunnis were united behind the rebels, trust me, Bashar would've fallen within days," says Abu Qays, an anti-regime Syrian activist in the eastern city of Deir e-Zor who uses a nickname for security reasons. "Do you think those who are committing (these) massacres are all Alawites?"

Assad on Thursday said he is "sure of victory" over the rebels following victories in former rebel strongholds in Homs and outside the capital of Damascus.

"If we in Syria were not sure of victory, we would not have had the will to resist nor been able to persevere in the face of more than two years of aggression," he said in a message to his army.

If he is right, the Sunnis backing his regime will be one reason for his survival.

Some Sunnis say they are repulsed by the anti-regime revolutionaries, some of whom are imported al-Qaeda terrorists. Others occupy privileged positions in Syrian society and do not want to abandon their livelihoods. Some believe the uprising is doomed to fail and do not wish to go down with it.

As the rebels persist despite setbacks and unrelenting military bombardment, these pro-regime Sunnis are facing increasing pressure to abandon the Syrian president. Should Assad fall, the lives of his Sunni collaborators will be worthless, say rebels.

"They continue to be loyal to the regime so that they're rewarded with positions if it survives – if the regime falls, they think they'll just leave Syria," says Um Raghad, an anti-Assad activist in the west-central Syrian city of Hama. "What they don't know is that we're going to go after them wherever they go."

Sunnis supporting Assad range throughout Syrian society. Ali Mamlouk, a Sunni, heads the Syrian National Security Bureau, while Vice President Farouq al-Sharaa, a Sunni, has been a fixture in Assad circles for decades. Sunni Walid Muallem is foreign minister.

Many Sunni business people have close ties to the Assad regime as well.

"The money of traders and businessmen is prolonging the regime's life," says Wael al-Khatib, the general coordinator of a Free Officers group – composed of defected officers from the Syrian military – in Homs. His unit includes about 450 Syrian army officers who abandoned the regime and now fight with the Free Syrian Army.

"Their support is unlimited," he says.

A particular target of rebel hatred is Sunni businessman Talal al-Dakkak, who is accused of having close ties to Maher al Assad, Assad's brother and the head of the government's Republican Guard.

Al-Dakkak made his fortune in the ceramics and medical supplies industry and has been implicated in official Free Syrian Army documents as an informant for Syrian Air Force Intelligence, a central branch of the regime's security apparatus. The Free Syrian Army called him a "traitor and the number one regime informant in Hama."

Other significant Sunni Assad-backers include Emad Ghraiwait, Fares Chehabi and Tarif Akhras, who were hit with European Union sanctions in 2011 for "providing economic support to the Syrian regime." Among the largest exporters in Syria, Akhras is related to Asma al-Assad, Syria's first lady.

Al-Khatib, who served as an army captain with the regime for 13 years before defecting in January 2012, says he has a long list of Sunni business people who back the regime.

"They belong to the sect of money," he says.

One is Rama Tarabishi, 26, a Sunni woman from Damascus

The rebel Free Syrian Army, specifically the aligned Jabhet Al Nusra fighters, are "nothing more than lunatics who kill everyone who disagrees with them," Tarabishi says, while noting that the Assad regime is a secular one that tolerates diversity.

"President Assad is surely better than the political vacuum, religious hegemony, brutal, sectarian domination which would occasion on his downfall," she says. "I believe anybody who took the time to monitor, absorb, and analyze the situation, especially given the recent deterioration on the ground, would logically stick to and support the government."

Tarabishi blames Western intervention for her nation's unraveling – a counterpoint to the rebels' claims that Iran, Russia and Lebanon's Hezbollah fighters are propping up the Syrian regime.

But she admits that United Nations-backed economic sanctions meant to spur dissent against Assad's regime, and the attacks of the Free Syrian Army, are taking their toll.

"Previously in Syria, even the poorest individual was able to survive," Tarabishi says. "However, now, 90% of the middle-class people find that hard."

According to the Syria Report, an independent Paris-based publication that focuses on business, the country's economy has suffered. Syria's hospitality sector revenues have plummeted by 95% since 2011, it says. Syrian investors have fled the country.

According to Steve Hanke of the Washington-based Cato Institute, Syria has reached a 92% monthly inflation rate as of July.

"Trade and industry have fallen," says anti-Assad activist Raghad, who holds an economics degree from Damascus University. "Some factories in isolated areas continue to operate but generally, business has been negatively impacted," Raghad says, adding that business and infrastructure projects have skidded to a halt as a result of the violence.

The economic sanctions are forcing some Sunni business people to leave and others to rethink their allegiances, say analysts.

"For months the opposition and Western diplomats have been talking about the need to split the Sunni merchant class from the regime," Joshua Landis, professor of Middle East studies at the University of Oklahoma wrote on his Syria Comment blog. "These measures are designed to do just that."

Naser Abu Anis, a Sunni from Damascus, is one of the estimated 1.7 million refugees who fled Syria after losing his plastics manufacturing operation because of the civil war.

"I lost business and stopped work there on the whole," says Abu Anis who now lives in Cairo.

While he laments a substantial loss of revenue, he says he supports the revolution because "the reason behind all of these losses is the criminal, cutthroat, corrupt regime."

Sunnis also have a long history of service in Syria's powerful air force. The air force is the most important branch of Syrian intelligence, dating back to the regime of Hafez al-Assad, the current president's father.

Assad al Zu'bi, a Sunni pilot from Damascus who served in the air force from 1974 until he defected in August 2012, says Sunnis comprise 30% of the force. He says many of those officers would like to defect but are held back.

"There is communication between the defected and non-defected officers," al Zu'bi says. "The non-defected officers are afraid to lose their financial status, their ability to support their families, if they join the revolution."

And although there has been an ongoing stream of defections, for those who want to leave, it is a risky act. Every defecting or captured soldier must stand for an ad hoc trial in a Free Syrian Army military court.

A big reason why Sunnis who are in the regime but don't turn against it is fear.

Khaled al-Khawaldi, a Sunni from Daraa who worked for Syrian intelligence in Damascus, says he was involved in leaking top-secret information to the Free Syrian Army on a regular basis early on in the revolution.

He since defected to the FSA but one of his cohorts, a man named Basel Adnan Arafat, was not so lucky. He was "detected by the regime and killed," Khaled says.

However, pro-regime soldiers continue to defect and the rebels still have powerful allies in Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Coupled with the announcement that the United States is going to arm the Syrian rebels, some believe pro-regime Sunnis will succumb to pressure to abandon Assad for their sect brothers.

"We will hold everyone accountable who assisted the regime," says Wael Al-Khatib. "They will be severely punished, and Sunnis will come first."