ON THE RUN: Sawssan Abdelwahab, who fled Idlib with her children, outside a refugee camp near the Turkish-Syrian border in the southeastern Turkish city of Yayladagi in February 2012.

REUTERS/ZOHRA BENSEMRA

INSIDE REBEL SYRIA

As splits between communities and religious sects deepen, a new country is emerging

Syria’s great divide

BY ALEXANDER Dziadosz AND OLIVER HOLMES

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The villages that dot the valleys and terraced hills of Syria’s northwest used to epitomise the country’s diversity. Each one was dominated by a different religion or sect. The settlements coexisted – sometimes peacefully, sometimes less so – for centuries, a patchwork of distinct but interwoven communities that, for many Syrians, was central to the nation’s identity.

Over the past two years, that order has fallen apart.

In Zambaki, a concrete-block village in a valley near the border with Turkey, Sunni families have moved into homes abandoned by Alawite owners; Sunni instructors teach in the Alawite elementary school; and Sunni religious slogans in black paint mark the walls.

Mohamed Skafe, a 40-year-old Sunni maths instructor remembers how the Alawites began to flee nearly a year ago. As government troops withdrew and rebels took over, he phoned a friend in the village and pleaded with him to stay.

“He told me, ‘Can you protect me?’” Skafe recalled, holding his hands out, palms upward. “I said, ‘I have no guarantee.’”

As the revolt against Bashar al-Assad that began as a mostly secular call for democratic reform descended into civil war, communities have split along religious and ethnic lines. Majority Sunnis have come to dominate the opposition, while Shi’ites and Alawites, the offshoot sect of Shi’ite Islam that Assad belongs to, have largely sided with the government. Other minorities, such as the Christians, Druze and Kurds, have split or tried to stay neutral.

Across the country, violence and fear have emptied entire villages, forced millions of people to flee their homes, and transformed the social landscape.

The involvement of Shi’ite power Iran on one side and the ascendancy of hard-line Islamists, including groups linked to al Qaeda, on the other has accelerated the process. For some fighters, the war has taken on an apocalyptic overtone. For others, enmity is rooted in old resentments and suspicions.

During a 10-day journey through rebel-held territory, Reuters saw first-hand how the sectarian divisions are transforming the country. Those splits, and the risk of large-scale communal retribution, are one reason Western powers have hesitated to intervene.

Now, as the United States prepares to arm the rebels, it risks getting entangled in an intricate conflict that often pits neighbour against neighbour. As in Yugoslavia or in neighbouring Iraq, where conflicts were marked by sectarianism and ethnic cleansing, Syria is unlikely to go back to the way it was. Even when the war ends, the reordering of villages and towns will leave behind a very different country, a change which could reverberate through the region.

In Zambaki, in a house once owned by Alawites, a Sunni family of 10 has moved in after fleeing their own homes outside Hama, in central Syria. “The whole village was completely empty. We were in a Turkish camp, but it was so crowded. We decided to come back,” one man in the family said, asking not to be named.

“The regime is playing a big game, a very big game. We had Alawite neighbours and I swear we were living like brothers. But the regime played with their minds, and frightened them. We were neighbours.”

**THINGS FALL APART**

The Ammar bin Yassir mosque, a turquoise and white complex of Persian-style domes, minarets, arabesques and tile mosaics, stands out among the short brown-and-beige breezeblock buildings of Raqqa.

Now there are two teams (and) Syria is the ball.

_Homsi al-Hamada_  
Sunni Islamic law scholar
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“God’s Victors.”

Bearded men guard the front gate, next to what they say is the carcass of a Scud missile fired by President Assad’s army. Inside, rebels in camouflage fatigues with Kalashnikov rifles walk through the tiled courtyard, laughing and chatting. When they enter the mosque’s carpeted interior, they leave their shoes on, a sign of disrespect.

The rebels took over the mosque in March and smashed open tombs said to contain figures revered by Shi’ites, said Abu Hazem, a tall, chain-smoking leader of one of the brigade’s units. “They used to say there were important people in here,” he said. “But there was nothing. They’re empty.”

Raqqa, always overwhelmingly Sunni, is now all but empty of Alawites. Homsi al-Hamada, a 73-year-old Sunni Islamic law scholar, said recent developments, notably the intervention of Lebanese Shi’ite group Hezbollah on the government’s side, had “stoked the flames of sectarianism.” The feelings were always there, but they used to be “covered up,” he said, sitting in his home lined with bookcases packed with religious texts.

“At the beginning of the game, the ball was freedom and democracy. The protesters and the regime were playing with this ball,” Hamada said.

“Now there are two teams – the first is the regime, Russia, China, Iran, Hezbollah and the Shi’ites, the other is the rebels, the United States, Germany, France, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Sunnis. Syria has become the ball.”

Walking through Ammar bin Yassir, past rooms once used by pilgrims but now housing rebel fighters, Abu Ziad, a 23-year-old student at the university across the road, pointed to pictures of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s leader, on the floor of the mosque’s library.

He disappeared for a moment and re-emerged with a painting of a black-shroud figure slumped dead over a white horse, a depiction of Imam Hussein, a central figure in Shi’ite history whose death 1,300 years ago at the battle of Kerbala in Iraq is commemorated with an annual day of mourning.

“All of these pictures came from Iran,” Abu Ziad said.

A Sunni fighter standing nearby chimed in: “And they are lies.”

UNITY AND DIVISION

The question of identity has always been heated in the Levant, the land at the heart of the Middle East that includes modern Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan and parts of southern Turkey. French and British colonial administrators partitioned the region into nation-states after World War One and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which had ruled since the 16th century.

The division was traumatic. After Damascus gained independence from France in 1946, many Syrian politicians spoke of creating a “Greater Syria.” Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser called for Arab states from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Aden to unite. Syria and Egypt briefly did.

Modern Syria is an amalgam of diverse religious and ethnic groups. About three quarters of Syria’s roughly 23 million people are Sunni Muslim; the rest are Christians, Shi’ites, Alawites, and smaller, sometimes overlapping communities such as the Druze, Ismailis, Kurds, Armenians and Palestinians.

Historian Patrick Seale once wrote that the way Syria’s communities coexist described one of the essential puzzles of the Middle East. “Is that world a mosaic, a bewildering babble of ancient communities each at odds with the other? Or is it a unit, essentially one in way of life, language and aspirations?” he wrote in his biography of Assad’s father, Hafez, who was president from 1971 until his death in 2000.

Like his father, Assad exploited the threat of a violent breakup of the country to justify the continuation of an authoritarian police state. An overtly secular Alawite, Assad married a Sunni woman. References to sect were not included in censuses in an attempt to foster an inclusive Syrian identity.

When the revolt started, Sunni activists tried to reach out to minorities, framing the uprising as a collective move against oppression for all Syrians.

Opposition figures blame the failure of those efforts on government propaganda characterising the rebels as violent extremists and on the use of Alawite paramilitary militias known as “shabbiha” to harass, maim and kill unarmed protesters.

AN OPEN, BLOODY WAR

The threat of a sectarian war has been self fulfilling. Pro-government militias have massacred hundreds of Sunnis in villages from Damascus to the Mediterranean, which some analysts say could be intended to carve a corridor from the capital to the historical Alawite homeland near the coast.

In rebel-held regions, radical insurgents have desecrated Shi’ite holy places and
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speak of war against “infidels” and “apostates”. This month, Sunni rebels killed about 60 Shi’ites in an eastern town in the Deir al-Zor province. “This is a Sunni area, it does not belong to other groups,” one fighter shouted in a video purportedly of the attack in the town of Hatla.

The Sunni-led revolt has emboldened the Iraqi branch of al Qaeda, a radical Sunni militant group, to carry out attacks against Baghdad’s Shi’ite-led government in recent months. Sunni insurgents in Iraq are reclaiming former strongholds in the desert near Syria. Shi’ites in Gulf Arab countries have started to worry they will be blamed and targeted for Syria’s violence.

Lebanon, with its intertwined history, huge population of Sunni Syrian refugees, and dysfunctional central government, has been particularly vulnerable to the spread of sectarian fighting. Dozens have died in clashes between Alawite and Sunni factions in the coastal city of Tripoli, and missiles have been launched at Hezbollah strongholds in Baalbek and Hermel in the Bekaa valley.

Hezbollah’s intervention has embroiled Lebanon in the war and nourished sectarian hatreds. As fighters from the Iran-sponsored Shi’ite group joined a campaign to capture Quaïra, a Sunni town near Lebanon, Colonel Abdel-Hamid Zakaria, a Free Syrian Army spokesman, said on live television that Shi’ite and Alawite villages would be “wiped off the map” in retaliation if it fell.

“We don’t want this to happen at all, but it will be out of everyone’s control. It will be an open, bloody, global sectarian war until the end.”

Abdel-Hamid Zakaria
Free Syrian Army spokesman

rebels often shoot at the shrine, damaging minarets.

Near the shrine, one man, speaking with a clear Lebanese accent, sat in his office surrounded by pictures of Hezbollah leader Nasrallah and Iranian Shi’ite clerics. When asked if he was a member of Hezbollah, he smiled and said he could “neither deny nor confirm” it.

“The man, who asked not to be named, described a proxy war of ideologies between Iran and Saudi Arabia playing out in Syria, and blamed the influence of ultraconservative ideologues like Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabi school on violence against the shrine. “This is not a war between Sunnis and Shi’ites. It’s a war against extremism,” he said.

AFRAID TO TALK

Syria’s Christians occupy an uneasy middle ground in the shifting political and military landscape. Some Christians have fled to government-held territory, while others have stayed to take their chances with the rebels. Some have bought guns and joined the insurgency.

The dominance of al Qaeda-aligned Jabhat al-Nusra and other radical Islamist brigades has evoked memories of recent attacks on Christians in Egypt and Iraq. Still, there have been relatively few instances of violence by Sunni fighters against Christians, who the rebels see as less close to Assad than the Alawites and Shi’ites.

In Yaqubiyeh, a village of a few hundred people in Idlib province, Yacoub, an olive farmer, smiled and waved as bearded rebels drove by. “We’ve been living together for hundreds of years,” he said. “We have problems with theft. But what the media says about Jabhat al-Nusra is not true. They are good people. They are very religious, but that’s fine.”

Abu George, a Christian from the nearby village of Jdeide who farmed plums and olives before the revolt, now works with the Sunni-led Liwa al-Hurra battalion, mostly in the town. He said there were about 15 other Christians in the brigade, accounting for around 5 percent of the fighters. “Many Christians participate in the revolution. When the army left we joined the revolution,” he said.

Others in Yaqubiyeh, where thousands of displaced Sunnis have settled in recent months, were more circumspect. One woman, a 40-year-old Catholic, said Christians were mostly left alone, but were still nervous.

“We’re living normally, we go pray, we come back, no one bothers us,” she said, then leaned closer to a visiting journalist. “There is some theft on our land. They come and go, and none of us knows who does it. We’re afraid to talk. Christians can’t speak out. You understand me.”

AN AIR OF PERMANENCE

In war, such suspicions and resentments can harden quickly. Rebels do not always acknowledge acts of ethnic violence as such. Instead, some describe them as legitimate military actions, or righting historical wrongs.

When Alawites flee insurgent-held areas, rebels and non-fighters alike often say the sect only settled in the area over the past few decades as the result of state favouritism. In Raqqa, a university student described the province’s Alawites as “security families,” who came to staff Syria’s manifold intelligence and police agencies. In Idlib province, a doctor said Alawites were not “original residents,” and came because of government land reforms that encouraged them to move into the plains from the coast.

When asked about the destruction of the tombs at the Ammar bin Yassir mosque, Hamada, the Islamic law scholar, claimed Iran had set up Shi’ite centres with government help on what he called Sunni
Syria’s ethnic composition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Arabs</th>
<th>Alawites</th>
<th>Levantines</th>
<th>Kurds</th>
<th>Others</th>
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<td></td>
<td>59.1%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
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Arabs
- Sunni Muslim

Alawites
- Arab speaking

Levantines
- Arab speaking
- Christians

Kurds
- Mostly Sunni Muslim

Others

DISTRIBUTION
Colours reflect ethnic groups above

Source: M. Izady - Gulf/2000 Project; Columbia University
land and prevented Sunnis from studying their religion. “The economic and political interests of Shi’ites and Alawites require them to stand with the regime,” he said.

In Zambaki, the new arrangement has an air of permanence. Skafe, the maths instructor, teaches lessons to about a dozen Sunni children in the school, which doubles as a barracks for rebel fighters. Another man, the one living in the Alawite house, sells cigarettes, biscuits and soda out of the old pantry. Across the street, children play and a pregnant woman walks with a child. The man said he hoped the owners could return one day, and said a court should be set up to determine who worked with Assad and who did not.

“Some people should be allowed to return, the people who haven’t worked with the regime. But if you are a criminal, how could you return?” he said.

But Skafe says it would be impossible for any Alawite to come back soon. “Not now. If the circumstances change,” he said. What exactly? “I don’t know. Right now, I don’t know.”

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