

Syria: The Colonial Origins of the Assad regime's Intelligence Services

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Digging deep into the structure of pre-civil war Syrian society, one can observe an unfortunate peculiarity. Within the fabric of each neighbourhood, including mine of Al-Muhajirin on Mount Qasioun, lies an intricate network of intelligence officers.

They come in the form of siblings, neighbours, or the elderly man selling hummus on the corner of the alleyway. This network is referred to as the 'Mukhabarat' in Arabic. Their primary role is to maintain internal security through a system of reporting. Whenever they suspect an anti-government or immoral activity, they write a report that gets sent to a higher-up in the network.

It is easy to associate the Mukhabarat with the Assad regime as it is one of their most important tools of oppression. However, the origins of the Mukhabarat can be traced back to French and Ottoman rule. While the exact system and its intricacies did not come about [until Syria saw the rise of the Baath Party](#), it could be seen as a slow process that began during the Ottoman Empire and reached its final form in modern-day Syria.

What is the Mukhabarat?

To better grasp the features and elements of the Mukhabarat we want to explore, it's important to begin by examining present-day Syrian society and the involvement of the Mukhabarat within it.

The Mukhabarat is the most essential institution of internal security in Syria. It has four divisions: the Military Intelligence Directorate, which falls under the military; the General Intelligence Directorate and Political Security, which both fall under the Ministry of the Interior; and the Air Force Intelligence, which is focused more on external intelligence.

The General Intelligence Directorate is more relevant to civil society, and for this article, that will be the connotation of the 'Mukhabarat.' Additionally, this article will not focus on the reasons for which the Mukhabarat persecute or report – the reasons could vary from political dissent to immorality. The main aspects of modern-day Mukhabarat that I will discuss are the formation of an informant society and the policing responsibility of citizens.

A personal anecdote would help showcase these aspects. As a young child, I used to visit Syria in the summers. On each visit, conversations of politics at home would have to begin with the unplugging of the telephone line, an inspection of the neighbours' absence from the apartment building, and the assurance that our cousins are not coming over. Many people of various occupations are registered, mostly part-time, as 'tellers,' and it is hard for these people to resist the temptation of a commission - it is merely a report away. There is no discrimination when it comes to who can become a teller, and people of both genders and all ages can be registered. There is approximately 1 member per 153 adult Syrian citizens. This is [one of the highest intelligence-officer-to-citizen ratios in the world](#)."

The Ottoman Period

We can find characteristics of a proto-informant society all the way back in the Ottoman Empire. While this may not have directly led to the modern Mukhabarat, it does show the precedence of this particular societal structure. In an article by James B. Baldwin about Islamic Law and prostitution, particularly in the Ottoman states of Syria and Egypt, we can see this formation. It discusses the various ways in which prostitution was dealt with in the Empire in the context of Islamic Law between the 16th and 18th centuries.

What we observe is that instead of pursuing harsh punishment for prostitutes and pimps alike, there was a more self-policing society in place. People within a specific community had the role of ensuring their neighbourhood was free of immorality and sin. The government's role was not particularly significant in maintaining a moral community. Members of the neighbourhood watched out for immoral activities and handled them themselves. Baldwin writes: 'These concerns were primarily those of Ottoman subjects. Ottoman shari'a courts were essentially reactive; they did not actively prosecute but rather responded to the lawsuits brought by individuals. This was the case even with matters categorized by most modern legal systems as criminal, such as murder, theft, and other offences against persons and property.' This reflects the burden of policing placed on citizens and can be seen as groundwork for a 'teller' society.

It is important to clarify that during this period, there was no secret network of informers or spies. However, we can see where some of the origins of this societal structure lie. In certain periods of the empire, local agents sought to gauge the atmosphere of the population. They were relatively close to civilians and acted as internal spies. Additionally, normal civilians were able to report 'unusual activity' to authorities in exchange for benefits, [which is very reminiscent of the modern Mukhabarat](#).

Along with the formation of the informant society precedent, the presence of intelligence or detention centres could also be found in the Ottoman Empire. Below is a picture from Ottoman Medina of an intelligence centre. In Arabic, it reads, 'The Mukhabarat of Jihad.' Although this isn't modern-day Syria, it demonstrates that intelligence networks in the Ottoman Empire did progress and advance toward what would eventually look like the modern-day Syrian Mukhabarat.



The French Mandate

The French, as part of their colonial efforts to understand the geography, culture, and public sentiments of the Syrian territories, established the Sûreté Générale and the Special Branch. These institutions employed tribal specialists and local experts [of French origin](#). What is interesting is that these forces also relied on locally recruited populations.

Martin Thomas (2006) writes: 'Much of the most prized intelligence about public behaviour derived from locally recruited personnel who served security services in numerous ways as informants, interpreters, and covert operatives, or as soldiers and police deputies. European officials inevitably relied on indigenous elites and local bureaucracies to make sense of the cultural practices observed in colonial society.' This not only reveals the colonial background of the intelligence structure in Syria but also the characteristics of an informant society.

The second article of the French Mandate document also reinforces these practices. [It reads](#): 'The Mandatory may maintain its troops in the said territory for its defence. It shall further be empowered, until the entry into force of the organic law and the re-establishment of public security, to organize such local militia as may be necessary for the defence of the territory and to employ this militia for defence and also for the maintenance of order. These local forces may only be recruited from the inhabitants of the said territory. The said militia shall thereafter be under the local authorities, subject to the authority and the control which the Mandatory shall retain over these forces. It shall not be used for purposes other than those above specified, save with the consent of the Mandatory.'

After gaining independence, Syria adopted the French intelligence model to establish its own intelligence services. It was, in fact, the French who laid the groundwork for Syria's secret services.

Post-independence

From 1946 to 1963, the Mukhabarat was becoming more advanced, but the system as we know it today began taking shape in 1963 after the Ba'ath Party coup. The intelligence sector advanced and adapted to the increasingly autocratic regimes beginning with Hafez Al-Assad in 1970.

The formation and maintenance of the Syrian Mukhabarat cannot be ascribed solely to the Assads nor the Baath Party – although they play the biggest part. The Mukhabarat and the role it plays in forming the police state is somewhat inherited, borrowing characteristics from not only the French mandate but also the Ottoman rule under which Syria existed for centuries.

In understanding regional autocratic regimes, it's essential to highlight that their defining characteristics, including their intelligence services, can be seen as a distorted emulation of external dominance.

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