

<http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/work-fabrice-blanche-alawites-syrian-communitarianism-reviewed-nikolaos-van-dam/>

The Work of Fabrice Blanche on Alawites and Syrian Communitarianism reviewed by Nikolaos van Dam

Posted by Joshua on Saturday, November 30th, 2013

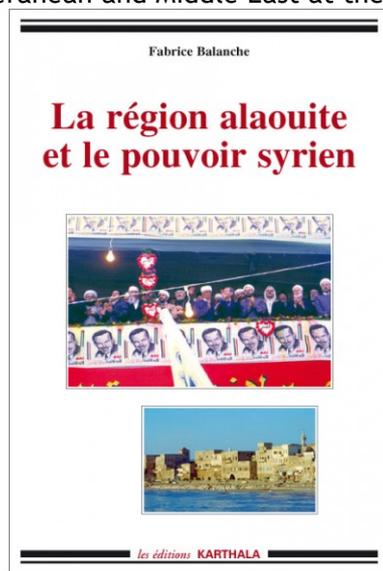


IMPRESSIVE SYRIA STUDIES BY FABRICE

BALANCHE

Reviewed by Nikolaos van Dam

[Fabrice Blanche](#) is a well-known French scholar who wrote a lot about Syria, mostly in French. His best-known books are [La région alaouite et le pouvoir syrien \[The Alawi Region and Power in Syria\]](#) (Paris 2006) and [Atlas du Proche-Orient Arabe \[Atlas of the Arab Near East\]](#) (Paris 2012), which is to be published also in Arabic and English. Blanche is presently the Director of the Research and Study Group dealing with the Mediterranean and Middle East at the University of Lyon 2.



On 29 November 2013 Blanche obtained his “habilitation à diriger des recherches” (a kind of super PhD) at the University of Lyon 2, France. His theme was « Le facteur communautaire dans l’analyse des espaces syriens et libanais » [The factor of communitarianism in the analysis of Syrian and Lebanese spaces]. As a member of the jury during the “habilitation” session, I made the following comments on his academic work.

Fabrice Balanche deserves to be complimented for his two decennia long studies on the Middle East and Syria in particular.

Balanche did not originally intend to write specifically about communitarianism (communautarisme), but the issue, more or less unavoidably, crossed his path, due to the social realities with which he was confronted during his field studies in Syria. Officially the existence of communitarianism in Syria was denied by the Syrian regime, and in practice it was (and is) a subject surrounded by taboos. According to the official ideology of the ruling Ba'th Party, communitarianism was not supposed to exist; and as far as it did exist, the phenomenon was considered to be no more than a negative residue of obsolete old traditions (rawasib taqlidiyah), which needed to be banned and disposed of. The reality was, however, completely different, as is clearly demonstrated in Balanche's studies.

Whereas communitarianism is officially a part of the Lebanese political system, its existence is officially denied in Syria's contemporary political system. Nevertheless, social realities are rather similar in both countries, as explained by Balanche.

Studying "the factor of communitarianism in the analysis of Syrian and Lebanese spaces" was considered a very sensitive issue in Syria. It is not surprising, therefore, that Balanche did not get the required cooperation in this respect from the Syrian authorities, or the requested support from French academic institutions inside Syria. The latter, according to Balanche, even worked against him, because the French institutions concerned were afraid that supporting Balanche's work could negatively affect their own positions vis-à-vis the Syrian authorities.

One could say that Balanche had a somewhat rough academic landing in Syria because of these sensitive circumstances, but he persevered and finally managed to achieve his aim through intensive and painstaking fieldwork. Balanche succeeded in penetrating deeply into Syrian society, at first mainly in Alawi circles. By becoming very close with their community he noticed how all kinds of doors within Alawi society were opened, providing him with an intimate look into its inner workings. Being close to one community had, however, as a side effect that his contacts with other communities, such as parts of Sunni society, were made more difficult, if not blocked altogether. Later on, Balanche made up for this by widening his Syrian social circuits outside the Alawi community, and entering into Sunni circles. When entering the "Sunni world" it appeared as if he stepped into "another Syria". Through informal channels Balanche was able to obtain a lot of essential information and insights. Having obtained a working knowledge of Syrian colloquial Arabic, Balanche had the necessary tools to get to the bottom of what was happening. Without this immersion into several different communities, he would not have come half as close to achieving the same high academic level. His fieldwork, not always appreciated by others, has turned out to be indispensable.

Whereas Volume 1 *Le facteur communautaire dans l'analyse des espaces syriens et libanais* (140 pp.) constitutes the central part of Balanche's studies discussed here, Volume 2 *Parcours personnel* (or large Curriculum Vitae) (139 pp.) should not be considered as less important, as it provides many highly valuable and detailed insights into the inner workings of Syrian society and into the many obstacles with which one may be confronted when doing field work there. Volumes 3 (536 pp.) and 4 (550 pp.) are an enormously rich and impressive collection of Balanche's numerous earlier publications, which he refers to wherever necessary, in the two first volumes. Next to these four volumes one should also consult Balanche's splendid *Atlas du Proche-Orient*

arabe (Paris: Sorbonne, 2012, 135 pp.), and take note of his earlier book *La région alaouite et le pouvoir syrien* (Paris: Karthala, 2006, 315 pp.), which provides many highly interesting details not included in Volumes 1 and 2. (All these works together comprise some 1800 pages).

Although I do agree with many, if not most of the points Balanche makes in his analysis of communitarianism, I think it is necessary to pose some questions and add some marginalia where parts of his conclusions and predictions for the future are concerned. Before I come to that, however, I want to note that certain predictions or observations made by Balanche in the past have turned out to be fully correct. The present-day bloody conflict in Syria is often judged on the basis of wishful thinking, by the general public, as well as among politicians and academics, and realism is not always appreciated if it does not fit into the wishful thought of those concerned. After the start of the Syrian Revolution in March 2011, many observers and politicians expected the regime of Bashar al-Asad to fall quickly. They were, apparently, not aware of the inner strength and coherence of the regime, as they were not burdened by any deep knowledge of it. Had they read Balanche's works, they might have known better. When Balanche during an interview in France in 2011 commented on the situation in Syria by saying that the regime was not "ripe" to fall and that the country was going straight into the direction of a civil war, he was categorized as a "defender of the Asad regime". When in mid-2012 he continued to declare that the regime should not be expected to fall soon, his interview was published under the title of "L'interview qui fâche" [The interview which makes you angry] (Volume 2, p. 78). His "realism" was clearly not appreciated. In an interview with *L'Hebdo Magazine* of 15 November 2013, Balanche predicted that the al-Asad regime is not going to fall. And during a symposium on 4 November 2013 Balanche said that he expected Bashar al-Asad to win the war, leaving open the question, however, "who will win the peace."

Since the Asad regime relies so heavily on people from its own Alawi community, its strength can be attributed, to a great extent, to the issue of communitarianism. As described by Balanche, however, the importance of communitarianism has been ignored or even denied in various academic circles because of prevailing ideological or idealistic motivations, on the basis of which, for instance, class, rural-urban and economic factors are considered much more important than communitarian ones. This phenomenon of denial has, according to Balanche, been stronger in France than in the Anglo-Saxon academic world, although it may have changed more recently.

Fifteen years ago (1998) Balanche already hinted that, if the Alawi-dominated Ba'th regime fell, the Alawi region might break away or separate from Syria proper (Volume 2, p. 33). In his *Thèse de Doctorat, L'intégration de la région côtière dans l'espace syrien: une intégration nationale ambiguë* [The integration of the coastal region in Syrian space: an ambiguous national integration] (Tours, 2000, 800 pp.), Balanche has argued that the potential for a separation of the Alawi region from Syria is well-founded, a view he repeated in his book (2006), as well as in the volumes which are being considered in this evaluation. Balanche even sees evidence of such a potential development in both the transport infrastructure and the presence of certain military bases in the Alawi region. He interprets these as having strategic importance for the defense of the Alawi territories within the Syrian internal context (Volume 1, p. 79).

Balanche compares the case of Syria with that of post-Tito Yugoslavia, which fell apart into several states. One should be careful, however, in making such a comparison. In the first place, the population of Yugoslavia was made up of various ethnic groups with different languages. The Syrian population is much more homogeneous in the ethnic

context, and the Alawis should, in principle, be considered as Arabs, like the majority of the Syrian population. Moreover, the Alawis would in general not at all want to separate from Syria. The only reason why they would wish to establish their own state, or autonomous region, is that the Alawis might feel threatened by the Sunni majority to such an extent, that they would, purely for security reasons, want to escape from radical Sunni anti-Alawi revanchism, which could explode after an eventual toppling of the regime of Bashar al-Asad. In such a scenario the Alawi population from Damascus and other cities might wish to flee to their original homeland, or that of their ancestors. But the Alawi community fleeing from Damascus sounds simpler than it is, because many Alawis have lived there (and in other Syrian cities) for several generations, including Bashar al-Asad himself, who, from that perspective, should be considered a Damascene (although it is clear that the local Sunni population considers him as an Alawi originating from the Alawi mountains). I could not really imagine the Alawi community being prepared to leave Damascus and its Alawi neighborhoods before losing their very last defensive lines and witnessing a major part of the city turned into ruins. This may be due, however, to my lack of imagination to see greater part of Damascus changed into rubble (as already happened in Aleppo).

One should, moreover, not underestimate the durability of colonial boundaries, however much these may have been rejected in the past. Additionally, if Alawi-dominated rule were to be replaced by Sunni-dominated rule, the successor regime in Damascus would, in my view, certainly try to regain control over the whole area of Syria, including the Alawi coastal region. When dealing with international boundaries, every inch of territory acquires an almost holy importance, because national sovereignty is at stake. Loss of even an inch of territory can lead to further claims, political instability, tensions in international relations, and sometimes to further wars.

Balanche notes that territorial partition may not bring peace at first, but that, in the long term, the bringing into practice of former US President Wilson's principle of "national self-determination" to the ethnic-confessional communities of the Middle East could bring stability and democracy. Some areas are, according to Balanche, already going through a phase of federalism (like in Lebanon), or semi-independence (like in Iraqi Kurdistan) (Volume 1, p. 126).

Where Syria is concerned, one should, however, not underestimate the force of Arabism and Arab identity. Balanche has correctly noted that Arab nationalism has not at all been a success, and that primordial loyalties have turned out to be stronger. He even cynically comments that "Les indices de la supercherie baathiste étaient pourtant clairs depuis des décennies pour celui qui connaissait réellement la société syrienne." [The indications of Ba'thist deception were clear for decades to those who really knew Syrian society] (Volume 1, p. 145). Regardless, that does not mean that the Syrian Alawis, after generations of Arab nationalist indoctrination, would not also feel they have a Syrian Arab identity, irrespective of the extremely negative Sunni anti-Alawi feelings which have increased during the many years of Alawi-dominated Ba'th rule and repression. In the past, many Alawis themselves already rejected the Alawi state that was created during the French Mandate.

The Ba'th regime in Syria has achieved exactly the dramatic opposite of the ideals it originally wanted to achieve. Half a century ago, it still declared that it wanted to abolish sectarianism and communitarianism, but by making communal loyalties the central key to their power, the Ba'thist rulers became prisoners of their own system and achieved the anti-thesis of their Ba'thist Arab nationalist ideology and ideals. They have thereby even endangered the very existence of Syria, with sectarianism stronger than ever before, as is demonstrated through the ongoing civil war.

Balanche has concluded in this respect that national integration in Syria constituted a danger for the power position of the regime, and has appropriately questioned whether durable territorial integration is possible without social integration (Volume 2, p. 35). Personally, I would have liked Balanche to give some additional insights into the opposition within the Alawi community against the Alawi dominated Ba'th regime. After all, many Alawi villages have their political prisoners, and the Syrian Ba'thist dictatorship applies to all Syrians. Balanche makes clear that the Alawis in general have taken the side of the regime, not out of positive conviction, but rather out of fear for the future, and what would happen if the regime of Bashar al-Asad were to fall. When reading Volume 1, I wondered whether one could really say, as Balanche does, that Hafiz al-Asad "a fait un monolithe d'une communauté alaouite divisée en multiples clans" [Hafiz al-Asad has made a monolith of the Alawite community that used to be divided into multiple clans] (Volume 1, p. 114), except in the sense that they seem to be united in their common fear for radical Sunni revanchism. A more detailed explanation can be found, however, outside Volume 1 and 2, in his book (2006, pp. 159-172).

Balanche presents a possible future break-up of Syria as an almost inevitable development (Volume 1, 146) when he concludes that: "Un divorce à l'amiable est alors préférable à une guerre civile communautaire qui aboutira au même résultat. Cela implique que les acteurs locaux et internationaux soient rationnels et raisonnables en privilégiant un scénario tchécoslovaque plutôt de yougoslave." [An amicable divorce is preferable to a communitarian civil war that leads to the same result. This would imply that local and international actors would be rational and reasonable by favoring a Czechoslovakian scenario rather a Yugoslav one]. I am afraid that the civil war has already progressed much too far to make a scenario similar to that of Czechoslovakia possible, and doubt whether this would ever have been a realistic option in the first place. After all, the Czechoslovakia case does not fit into the Syrian model since, like in former Yugoslavia, substantial different ethnic-linguistic groups were involved. Syria is much more homogeneous in this respect.

Balanche convincingly explains why the often-suggested existence of a Shi'i alliance or "Shi'i crescent" (consisting of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon) is a wrong (albeit increasingly popular) concept, as alliances are strategic and not ideological or religious (Volume 1, pp. 107, 124). Moreover, the areas inhabited by Shi'is do not constitute an uninterrupted geographical area.

Balanche uses the term "Syrian Arab nation" throughout his work. According to the ruling Ba'th Party's ideology there is, however, only an "Arab nation", of which the Syrian Arabs are one part. They don't say: "We are all Syrian Arabs", but rather "We are all Arabs". Only at a later stage of Ba'thist rule did the "Syrian identity" become a more accepted concept, even though it contradicts the Ba'thist ideology. Stressing the wider pan-Arab identity at the cost of the more restricted Syrian Arab identity did, in practice, not positively contribute to "nation building" in Syria, but rather achieved the opposite: a strengthening of communitarianism for lack of tangible results in the field of pan-Arabism and because of the discouragement, earlier on, of the Syrian identity.

Balanche describes Jordan as a "paradox" in the region. Jordan does not suffer from fragmentation on the basis of communitarianism like Syria and Lebanon, as it has a quasi ethnic-confessional population with a 95% Sunni Arab majority (Volume 1, p. 125). Elsewhere in his study, Balanche interestingly defines the Palestinians as a "quasi-ethnic group" (Volume 1, p. 26), which has developed as a result of their

political circumstances. He does not, however, hint at the potential consequences of the large Palestinian presence in Jordan for its supposed homogeneity. Balanche concludes that Jordan is paradoxically one of the most stable Middle Eastern countries because of its ethnic homogeneity, being, however, at the same time, the most artificial state in the region.

I want to end by pointing out some minor details.

Balanche notices that the isolated villages of the Alawi sect of the Murshidiyin in the remote Alawi Mountains were only given accessible asphalted roads in the early 1990s once they had clearly entered into the clientele of the Asad clan (Volume 1, p. 81). This is correct, except for the fact that the Murshidiyin had already shown their allegiance to the Asads much earlier on, as can be concluded from the fact that already in the first part of the 1980s the Murshidiyin constituted the backbone of Rif'at al-Asad's elite troops, the Defence Platoons (Saraya al-Difa'). When in 1984 Rif'at intended to take over power by force from his brother President Hafiz al-Asad, the Murshidiyin turned out to be completely unreliable towards Rif'at, as they all choose the side of the president, as a result of which Rif'at's revolt became toothless and failed completely.

The Murshidiyin, therefore, could already be considered loyal to President Hafiz al-Asad from 1984 onwards, and from that perspective might have been given their asphalted roads much earlier. On the other hand, it may have taken some years before the president really trusted the Murshidiyin, because they had switched sides so easily. In conclusion I wish to stress that Fabrice Balanche has produced excellent and impressive academic work. On that basis he strongly deserves to be supported for his Habilitation à Diriger des Recherches.

Nikolaos van Dam

Former Ambassador of the Netherlands to Iraq, Egypt, Turkey, Germany and Indonesia (1988-2010). Also served as a diplomat in Lebanon, Jordan, Palestinian occupied territories and Libya. Author of *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, 4th edition, London: I.B. Tauris 2011 (5th printing 2013). www.nikolaosvandam.com