THE SALIENCE OF SECTARIANISM: MAKING SECT STICK IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in Arab Studies

By

Craig McCrea Browne, B.A.

Washington, DC
April 13, 2015
THE SALIENCE OF SECTARIANISM: MAKING SECT STICK IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

Craig McCrea Browne, BA

Thesis Advisor: Joseph Sassoon, Ph.D.
Thesis Reader: Yonatan Morse, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

How did a call for peaceful protests citing political and socio-economic grievances come to be overshadowed by brutal sectarian violence? This thesis uses process tracing to argue that the increased sectarianization of the Syrian conflict was due to the increased dominance of opposition organizations that were willing to compete with the regime’s sectarian discourse and behavior. These organizations came from abroad and were supported from abroad. In other words, the regime set the scene and the dominant opposition groups wrote the story. While sectarian identities existed in Syria and Iraq before their respective conflicts, these social categories waxed and waned depending on context. Once conflict broke out, governing authorities were quick to use sectarian tactics. Though both governments faced resistance early on, it took some time for open conflict to break out. When this happened, well-organized, well-trained, and well-financed organizations flooded both countries and met the authorities head-on in struggles that became increasingly sectarian. As such, the increased sectarianization of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq is due to the organizations inclined towards sectarianism becoming militarily dominant amongst opposition to the already sectarianizing authorities.
I’m grateful to everyone who helped throughout the process of writing this thesis. Thanks to Erica Vásquez, Lindsey Cummings, Gareth Smail, Sacha Robehmed, and Vicki Valosik for their feedback and support in our thesis group. Thanks to Andrew Bennett for discussing the potential pitfalls of process tracing. Thanks to Joseph Sassoon and Yonatan Morse for their guidance along the way. Most of all, thanks to my parents, Hazel and Andrew Browne, and to my uncle, Denis McCrea. Without all of them I would never have made it this far.

Craig M. Browne
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter I: The History of Sectarianism in Syria ..................................................................... 12

Chapter II: Sectarianism in the Syria Conflict ................................................................. 34

Chapter III: Sectarianism in the Iraq Conflict ................................................................. 56

Conclusion .............................................................................................................................. 74

Bibliography ............................................................................................................................. 77
Note on Transliteration

I have used the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* system to transliterate words from Modern Standard Arabic. ‘ represents the consonant *ayn*, and ’ represents the *hamza* glottal stop. If an English term exists for a word, I have used it. If there are words with accepted English spellings, I have used them. All technical terms from Arabic are italicized and transliterated with diacritical marks, for example *Bilād al-Shām*. A technical term is defined as a word for which there is no English equivalent and that is not found in Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary. Italics and diacritics are not added to personal names, place names, or names of political parties and organizations unless otherwise suggested by the IJMES system. Following this system, ’Alawi and Shi‘i function as singular nouns and adjectives while ‘Alawites and Shi‘a function as plural nouns.
Timeline of modern Syrian history

1516: Ottoman Empire invades and conquers Syria
1864: Provinces created in Syria under Tanzimat reforms
1919: So-called 'Alawi revolt led by Saleh al-'Ali in North West Syria
1920: League of Nations puts Syria under a French Mandate
1930: *Troupes Spéciales du Levant* created
1944: Syrian independence recognized by France with Shukri al-Quwatli, a Sunni, as president.
1949: March military coup d'état led by Colonel Husni al-Za'im, a Sunni; August counter-coup led by Colonel Sami al-Hinnawi, a Sunni; December counter-coup led by Adib al-Shishakli, a Sunni
1954: Hashem al-Atassi, a Sunni, becomes president for the third time
1958: Adib al-Shishakli, now president, announces merger with Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser, forming the United Arab Republic
1961: Syria secedes from the United Arab Republic
1963: Ba’th party coup planned and carried out by three 'Alawi officers – Muhammad 'Umran, Saleh al-Jadid, and Hafiz al-Asad; Amin al-Hafiz, a Sunni, becomes president
1966: Saleh al-Jadid becomes de facto ruler of Syria
1970: Hafiz al-Asad becomes president after his ‘Corrective Movement’
1976: Syria enters Lebanese conflict which proves unpopular for President al-Asad
1982: Fighting between the Syrian army and the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama leads to the massacre of over 10,000 civilians
2000: Hafiz al-Asad dies and his son Bashar, also an 'Alawi, becomes president
2011: First calls for protest emerge in February, discontent spreads during the month of March
2012: Jabhat al-Nusra joins the conflict in Syria, eventually splitting from the Islamic state of Iraq
2015: 220,000 dead, 4 million refugees, 7.6 million Internally Displaced Persons since March 2011
Timeline of modern Iraqi history

1920: Modern borders of Iraq demarcated by the Treaty of Sèvres and placed under British control
1921: Iraq becomes a monarchy led by Faisal with a rebellion being quelled by the British in cooperation with Sunni elites
1932: Iraq gains independence from Great Britain
1935: Najaf Charter signed, outlines Shi’i grievances throughout the country
1941: Coup led by Rashid 'Ali al-Gaylani, a Sunni, overthrows the monarchy
1947: Seven year British occupation of Iraq ends with restoration of monarchy and installation of Nuri al-Sa’id, a Sunni
1958: Coup brings Brigadier ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim, a secular Sunni, to power
1963: Colonel 'Abd al-Salam ‘Arif, a Sunni, leads a coup and becomes second president of Iraq
1966: 'Arif dies and is succeeded by his brother 'Abd al-Rahman ‘Arif
1968: Ba’th party coup brings Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr, a Sunni, to the presidency
1979: Saddam Hussein, a Sunni, becomes president having gradually acquired power over the previous ten years; Islamic revolution in neighboring Iran eventually convinces Saddam to invade
1990: Iraq invades and annexes Kuwait
1991: Shi’a and Kurdish uprisings are crushed by the Iraqi authorities
2002: Shi’i politicians and activists in exile sign the ‘Declaration of the Shi’a of Iraq,’ outlining discrimination of Shi’a and vision for the future of the country
2003: United States military invades Iraq and overthrows Ba’thist government; Entire Iraqi military is disbanded; Those in the highest levels of the Iraqi civil service are fired; Mahdi Army created by Muqtada al-Sadr; Antecedent of the Islamic State of Iraq, Jamaʿat al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad, set up by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi
2004: First interim Iraqi government put in place, led by Iyad ‘Alawi, a Shi’i; Sectarian tensions rise as attacks increase
2005: Elections take place in January and December, with the Shi’a-dominated United Iraqi Alliance taking power
2006: Sectarian violence continues to rise; ‘Askari Shrine bombed in February
2007: US President George W. Bush announces a surge in troop numbers
Introduction

Undoubtedly inspired by popular revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, limited protests in Syria started in February 2011 around issues such as rural poverty, corruption, freedom of expression, democratic rights, and the release of political prisoners. Over time, public demonstrations demanded far-reaching economic, legal, and political reforms.¹ Widespread unrest began in the middle of March with the detention and torture of more than a dozen young boys in Der‘a, a city in southern Syria. Having lived through the toppling of Egyptian President Husni Mubarak and Tunisian President Zayn al-‘Abadin ben Ali, one of the boys scrawled ‘It’s your turn, doctor’ on a public building, in reference to the Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, a trained ophthalmologist.² Relatives and neighbors of the boys protested about the boys’ treatment but this was only met with derision and disinterest by local authorities. Confrontations between demonstrators and security forces escalated, leading to the deaths of several civilians after Friday prayers on March 18, 2011. By the following Monday, fifteen civilians were dead and the local Ba‘th Party headquarters had been burned down.³

Throughout much of 2011, the conflict in Syria mirrored the dynamics of the early events in Der‘a; peaceful protest and dissent begot a violent crackdown by security forces. Such ruthless responses fanned anger amongst protestors and steadily encouraged the militarization of the opposition in Syria. It is the focus of this thesis to understand how and why sectarianism became such an important dynamic in the conflict. Sectarianism was not just an omnipresent identity throughout Syrian history; its importance came and went depending on context, be that context political, social, or economic. By the end of 2012

and the beginning of 2013, sectarian rhetoric and violence was very much in the ascendancy. In December 2012, armed men could be seen outside a mosque in the northern town of Jisr al-Shughur celebrating the destruction of the ‘dens of the Shi’a and rejecters.’ Standing behind the fighters is the mosque, engulfed in flames.

How did a call for peaceful protests citing political and socio-economic grievances come to be overshadowed by brutal sectarian violence? This thesis argues that the increased sectarianization of the Syrian conflict was due to the increased dominance of opposition organizations that were willing to compete with the regime’s sectarian discourse and behavior. These organizations came from abroad and were supported from abroad. In other words, the regime set the scene and the dominant opposition groups wrote the story. The thesis then tests the conclusions from the Syria case study with the case of Iraq.

While sectarian identities existed in Syria and Iraq before their respective conflicts, these social categories waxed and waned depending on context. Once conflict broke out, governing authorities were quick to use sectarian tactics. Though both governments faced resistance early on, it took some time for open conflict to break out. When this happened, well-organized, well-trained, and well-financed organizations flooded both countries and met the authorities head-on in struggles that became increasingly sectarian. As such, the increased sectarianization of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq is because organizations inclined towards sectarianism became militarily dominant amongst opposition to the already sectarianizing authorities.

At this stage it is important to raise the issue of regional effects upon ostensibly domestic conflicts. Much is often made of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq as being the catalyst for current sectarian trends throughout the region. While this development was important, in both Syria and Iraq, it did not directly shift the dynamics of conflict in each country. What followed the invasion was not inevitable. Similarly,

---

5 Rāfīda, or rejecter, is a derogatory term for Shi’a meaning those who reject.
the geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is often seen through a sectarian frame, with Saudi Arabia at the forefront of Sunni politics and Iran as the vanguard of Shi’a all over the world. While this rivalry, which in its current form dates back to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, has undoubtedly played a role in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, it should not be seen as the defining feature. Saudi Arabia and Iran certainly used proxies to further their interests in both conflicts, but this has not defined either war. The authorities in Syria and Iraq used sectarian frames in the early stages of these conflicts because it was beneficial to them. The outside organizations that came to dominate got most of their support from private individuals, indeed the idea that these radical organizations are supported by other states are often illogical; the Saudi Arabian regime often being seen as illegitimate by jihadis, for example. Therefore, any proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran is largely a symptom rather than a cause of sectarianizing authorities.

**Theoretical Debate**

This thesis aims to make two contributions to existing academic literature. The first is theoretical and the second is methodological. The theoretical debate is within the political science sub-field of ethnic conflict. Although the field is known as ethnic conflict, it should be seen more as a field analyzing identities. An identity here refers to a social category – Syrian, Arab, Sunni, ‘Alawi, Shi’i, Iraqi-Kurd - and in particular to a social category that an individual member either takes a special pride in or views as a more-or-less unchangeable and socially consequential attribute.7 This discussion revolves around identities that people give to themselves and label others with. Additionally this thesis contributes to the literature on civil wars, specifically how international factors affect identity dynamics within conflicts. Primordialist accounts of sects and nations regard such communities as ‘enduring historical entities’ whilst ethnic conflict is grounded in real disputes over political power, economic resources, or cultural

---

Though sect is usually an inherited identity, it should not be seen as an enduring historical entity that imposes homogeneity upon its followers. The importance of sectarian identities can and does change depending on context and this thesis shows how and why in certain Syrian and Iraqi contexts. This view of a fluctuating identity is known as constructivism, based on the idea that identities are ‘social’ categories that are ‘socially’ constructed. This thesis goes further by deconstructing the primordial ideas that survive in constructivist work. For example, the importance of being 'Alawi in Syria may vary depending on context, particularly if 'Alawites are being threatened, but what it means to be 'Alawi also varies from person to person. This could be a religious, political, or familial attachment. By breaking down what it means to be from a certain sect, this thesis makes a contribution to the academic literature. Much has been written about how civil wars start, deteriorate, or end. An important starting point for this study is the hypothesis put forward by Fearon and Laitin: ‘financially, organizationally, and politically weak central governments render insurgency more feasible and attractive due to weak local policing or inept and corrupt counterinsurgency practices.’ This hypothesis is certainly supported by the evidence from conflicts in Syria and Iraq; however, it does not account for how conflicts proceed once they start. David Malet’s work on foreign fighters also has important implications for this thesis. Malet argues that ‘insurgencies try to recruit foreign fighters by framing distant civil conflicts as posing a dire threat to all members of a transnational community of which both the foreign recruits and local insurgents are members.’ This was an important factor in internationalizing conflicts in both Syria and Iraq. Malet’s work is one of very few academic studies that analyze the re-framing of conflict and this thesis aims to contribute to that. According to theories of ethnic outbidding, ‘the politicization of ethnic divisions

---

inevitably gives rise to one or more ethnic parties. The emergence of even a single ethnic party, in turn, “infects” the political system, leading to a spiral of extreme bids that destroys competitive politics altogether.12 This primordial understanding of identity groups as constant and unchanging will be challenged in order to show that the sectarianization of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq was not inevitable. Instead of witnessing groups that tried to outbid one another in terms of sectarian credentials, these conflicts saw the introduction of different groups from abroad that helped to sectarianize the conflicts.

**Research Design**

The dependent variable for this study is the increased sectarianization of conflict. Sectarianization refers to using rhetoric or acting in defense of a particular sect or religious group, or in targeting others due to their sect or religious group. Furthermore, such rhetoric and action can be either real or perceived. For this study, it is not particularly important whether there were genuine sectarian motivations behind certain actions, whether claims of sectarian victimization were incorrect, or whether elites were using sectarian rhetoric instrumentally. What is important, is that actors in the conflict felt they could increasingly use or fall back on sectarian rhetoric and action if they thought it was either necessary or effective, real or perceived. The measurement of increased sectarianization is based on a combination of prior knowledge, the expertise from observers such as the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, and the analysis in this thesis. Of course, this is not perfect. It is impossible to know what is going on inside the head of the likes of Bashar al-Asad. Likewise, it is impossible to gain access to many internal documents and messages within the most radical opposition movements. However, the public statements and traceable actions of leaders and organizations are more than sufficient because perceptions are just as important as facts when it comes to the sectarianization of conflict.

The efficacy of different methodological approaches is a topic of substantial debate within political science and the methodological contribution of this thesis is to the process tracing methodology. Process

---

tracing is ‘the analysis of evidence on processes, sequences, and conjunctures of events within a case for the purposes of either developing or testing hypotheses about causal mechanisms that might causally explain the case.’ A key aspect of process tracing is figuring out what happened when and so this accounts for endogeneity concerns. The standardized form of process tracing put forward by the likes of Bennett and Collier has had limited impact within political science. While many studies routinely utilize the method in some form, it is still rare for evidence to be systematically tested through the process outlined in this thesis. With that in mind, this study contributes to the steadily growing literature that explicitly uses process tracing for inferring causal relationships in political science.

Of particular interest when considering process tracing, are King, Keohane, and Verba’s requirements for good theory: choose theories that are falsifiable, can generate as many observable implications as possible, and are parsimonious. They state that ‘each time we develop a new theory or hypothesis, it is productive to list all the implications of the theory that could, in principle, be observed.’ Rather than merely increasing the number of observable implications of a theory, process tracing focuses on the quality, rather than the quantity of the data. This is because one strong piece of evidence can have far greater implications for a hypothesis than several weaker pieces. While King, Keohane, and Verba’s suggestions are useful, they reflect an attempt to transpose important aspects of statistical work onto qualitative work. Barbara Geddes has a similar approach to selection bias when she argues that ‘the only things that can actually be explained using a sample selected on the dependent variable are differences

15 King, Keohane, Verba, 47.
among the selected cases. However, this claim does not reduce the strength of this study, which is more interested reframing analyses of sectarianization and is merely a stepping stone towards building academic research on an increasingly prominent identity in the Middle East. That said, this study still aims to be parsimonious and generalizable, and so the theory-generating aspect of process tracing means that the original case selection on the dependent variable is irrelevant for the explanatory power of the thesis. Despite the robustness of process tracing in the face of many criticisms, there are certainly limitations to the method. When claiming that a variable is either necessary or sufficient in a particular historical case for a particular outcome to have occurred, one should note that there are no infallible means of testing such claims counterfactually. We cannot replay history while modifying one factor or another. Furthermore, when a complex explanation identifies a number of contributing causes, it may be difficult to offer a convincing argument that one condition or another was necessary to the outcome. A challenge for process tracing is in adequately accounting for confounding variables, in the form of rival hypotheses. This is where clear definitions, and careful description and analysis are key.

Ultimately, process tracing the Syrian conflict leads to what Michael Coppedge terms thickness: histories and case studies are thick as they are multifaceted, detailed, conceptually rich, and multidimensional. Second, case studies analyze change over time in a way that makes especially solid causal inferences possible. This enables assertions to be made about how the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts became increasingly sectarian with more confidence.

There are two independent variables that are tested in the Syrian case study. For the Regime hypothesis this is the international actors involved in Syria. For the Opposition hypothesis the independent variable is the regime itself. The main analysis for this study looks at the period between the first days of civil unrest

18 George and Bennett, 26.
19 George and Bennett, 27.
in March 2011, and December 2012 because this is the period in which events in Syria became increasingly sectarian. Internationalization and regime culpability will be observed through speeches and interviews by leaders, video and document evidence, and data on deaths in Syria during the observed period, and both local and international reports. Having looked at the dependent and independent variables, it is the diagnostic evidence and their observable implications that will be under closest analysis in this study.

**Process Tracing**

With process tracing, what matters is not the amount of evidence, but its contribution to adjudicating among alternative hypotheses.\(^1\) Here, process tracing will help to adjudicate between the Regime hypothesis and the Opposition hypothesis. The Regime hypothesis reflects the president’s claim that international actors have caused the sectarianization of the Syrian conflict.\(^2\) The Opposition hypothesis refers to the widespread claims amongst opposition groups, no matter the language or location, that the al-Asad regime is responsible for the sectarianization of the conflict.\(^3\) The claim here is not that all uses of sectarianization are equal. Indeed, process tracing helps to figure out just how convincing different pieces of evidence are.

Before proceeding with the study, it is necessary to elaborate upon what is meant by looking at the Syrian conflict as a case. George and Bennett define a case as a class of events. The term “class of events” refers here to a phenomenon of scientific interest that the investigator chooses to study with the aim of developing theory regarding the causes of similarities or differences among instances (cases) of that class of events. Questions such as “what is the Syrian conflict a case of?” and “is the Syrian conflict a designated phenomenon?” are integral to selecting cases for study and designing, and implementing


\(^2\) For example, see the speeches and interviews with Asad cited in the bibliography.

\(^3\) For example, see the announcement of the formation of the Free Syrian Army.
research of these cases.\textsuperscript{24} Thus, this study is looking at the Syrian conflict as a case of an insurgency against an incumbent regime with the phenomenon of scientific interest being how sectarianism comes to play increasingly important roles within conflicts. With this definition, it is clear that Iraq between 2005 and 2007 is a similar case.

The rival hypotheses will be tested alongside each other by looking at diagnostic evidence that illustrates how and when sectarianism came to play a role in the Syrian conflict through use of the President’s speeches and interviews, an analysis of the Fourth Armored Division, use of the Shabiha militias, and the portrayal of the opposing sides as fomenting sectarianism. The Fourth Armored Division recruits from ‘Alawi communities, is headed by the President’s brother, works with sectarian militias, and seconds officers to monitor military forces that are not ‘Alawi-dominated. The Shabiha militias originally referred to gangs of young ‘Alawi men, though recruitment has broadened somewhat. They are responsible for numerous atrocities since March 2011 and have been key instigators in sectarian violence. This study therefore relies upon the prior knowledge that all actors have utilized sectarian rhetoric or violence in some way during the conflict. The main question here is how the conflict got to this point. Is the Regime hypothesis closer to the truth in arguing that internationalization of the conflict lead to its sectarianization? Or is the Opposition hypothesis, which claims that regime rhetoric and violence caused sectarianization, a more accurate argument? Or do both hypotheses contribute to a broader understanding of how the Syrian conflict became increasingly sectarian?

Each piece of diagnostic evidence will build up a case to argue that the Regime hypothesis is somewhat false whilst the Opposition hypothesis is somewhat true. The sectarianization of the conflict has been a regime strategy from the beginning, while opposition to the regime became increasingly sectarian as groups espousing such rhetoric and action became more successful than those espousing other ideologies.

These more successful groups have tended to originate outside of Syria. Sectarianization of the conflict, as the dependent variable, therefore depended upon international backers, group ideologies, and the administrative and military strength of sectarian organizations. With this in mind, the Regime and Opposition hypotheses are congruent of one another. Irrespective of timing, it is important to note that calling others sectarian is itself a sectarianizing act within the conflict.

Tests

Process tracing entails the application of any of four different tests to evidence within a case study. The tests are classified according to whether passing the test is necessary and/or sufficient for accepting the inference. These tests are straw-in-the-wind tests, hoop tests, smoking-gun tests, and doubly-decisive tests and they are useful for testing rival hypotheses. It is worth noting that usage of each type of test is somewhat subjective and so this thesis tries to make a strong argument for why it uses certain tests. Straw-in-the-wind tests can increase the plausibility of a given hypothesis or raise doubts about it, but are not decisive by themselves. Straw-in-the-wind tests thus provide neither a necessary nor a sufficient criterion for accepting or rejecting a hypothesis, and they only slightly weaken rival hypotheses. Hoop tests set a more demanding standard. The hypothesis must “jump through the hoop” to remain under consideration, but passing the test does not by itself affirm the hypothesis. Failure to “jump through the hoop” means a failure of the hypothesis. Therefore, hoop tests do not confirm a hypothesis, but they can eliminate it. The metaphor of a “smoking gun” conveys the idea that a suspect who is caught holding a smoking gun is presumed guilty. However, those with no smoking gun may not be innocent. In other words, this provides a sufficient but not necessary criterion for accepting the causal inference. It can strongly support a given hypothesis, but failure to pass does not reject it. If a given hypothesis passes, it substantially weakens rival hypotheses. Doubly decisive tests provide strong inferential leverage that confirms one hypothesis and eliminates all others. Single tests that accomplish this are rare in social

science, but this leverage may be achieved by combining multiple tests, which together support one explanation and eliminate all others. Combining tests in this way poses important challenges.\textsuperscript{26} Sherry Zaks contends that rival hypotheses relate to one another in diverse ways that give rise to diverse inferences. Mutually exclusive hypotheses exist when the piece of evidence under examination simultaneously validates a hypothesis, yet would be impossible under a rival hypothesis. This situation occurs when the presence of a piece of evidence is a sufficient condition for one hypothesis and the absence of that same piece of evidence is a necessary condition for a rival hypothesis to hold.\textsuperscript{27} When nothing stops one hypothesis and a rival hypothesis from coexisting, yet they are unrelated to one another, the hypothesis and the rival hypothesis are coincident hypotheses. In this case, both hypotheses may be valid in contributing to the outcome.\textsuperscript{28} Finally, it is possible to have two or more hypotheses for which some amalgamation of evidence is sufficient to verify the contribution of both explanations. These are termed congruent hypotheses.\textsuperscript{29}

Despite the treacherous conditions within Syria and Iraq, and the opaque nature of much information surrounding the conflict there, this study is certainly feasible. Personal data collection on the ground inside Syria is not necessary as data that could prove or disprove the rival hypotheses within this study are publically available. While there are likely to be classified internal documents and diplomatic cables that could strengthen any arguments within this study, these are not necessarily the only ways that hypotheses can be affirmed or rejected.

Chapter I: The History of Sectarianism in Syria

The main aim of this chapter is to argue that the political salience of sectarianism is contingent upon instrumentalization by elites and the public. Despite the sectarian morass Syria found itself in after 2012, there is little evidence to suggest that the majority of ‘Alawites were privileged over other Syrians after Hafiz al-Asad came to power. Much of the focus in the following pages is on ‘Alawi-Sunni relations, simply because these relations are a key part of the increased sectarianism in the current conflict in Syria. Throughout this chapter, the history of sectarianism in Syria will be theoretically supported by literature on ethnic conflict and nationalism. This aims to generate analyses that are in discussion with historical and theoretical arguments. Rogers Brubaker’s framework for understanding group identities is invaluable in understanding sectarianism.

Sectarian labels have become so pervasive in the Middle East, that people often believe, mistakenly, that such social categories are natural, inevitable, and unchanging facts about the social world. This is what Fearon and Laitin term ‘everyday primordialism.’ Indeed, the individuals who construct ethnic identities need not be political or other elites. Social identities are produced and reproduced through the everyday actions of ordinary people. Individuals think of themselves in terms of a particular set of social categories, which lead them to act in ways that collectively confirm, reinforce, and propagate these identities. These are points that must be considered in a study of sectarianism as sectarian entrepreneurs require public acquiescence to successfully mobilize around sectarian rhetoric.

The sect as a category

In part due to a storied history of repression and misinformation from non-‘Alawites, accounts of ‘Alawi history and theology are often tainted by orientalist slurs or intra-religious slander. The ‘Alawites are claimed to be ‘notorious not only for their internal strife, but also for their disobedient and turbulent behavior. Not only were they reluctant to pay taxes and submit to Ottoman rule, but they were also

frequently engaged in acts of murder and robbery against neighboring villages and passing caravans.'

Such sweeping generalizations have proven to be effective political tools throughout Syrian history however, as analytical assertions they are as lazy as they are fatuous. These claims reify 'Alawites, giving them the appearance of an internally homogeneous, externally bounded group. It takes 'Alawites as a substantial entity to which interests and agency can be attributed. Rogers Brubaker calls this reifying process 'groupism.' Such attribution can be extremely effective in social and political struggles, as will be shown throughout the history of sectarianism in Syria. For analysis, it is more productive to think of the sect, whether 'Alawi or Sunni, as a category rather than a group. If they are thought of as groups, one is led to ask what they want, demand, or aspire towards; how they think of themselves and others; and how they act in relation to other groups. If we consider 'Alawi and Sunni as categories, it is easier to specify how people and organizations do things with, and to, sectarian categories, and how such categories are used to channel and organize processes and relations. Treating sects as categories invites us to ask how, why, and in what contexts sectarian categories are used, or not used, to make sense of problems, to articulate affiliations, to identify commonalities, or to frame stories and self-understanding. The challenge is to work against the tendency to rehash sectarian frames in academia, the media, and the arena of conflict. The sectarian frame is so well-established in the Middle East that observers tend to see conflict in sectarian and groupist terms. This is because viewing conflict as between Sunni and Shi 'i is powerfully resonant and widely understood as legitimate. This is not to say that sects do not play any role. Rather, it is to state that the reality of a sect does not depend on the existence of a sect. With regards to the ideas about the dominance of 'Alawites in Syria, it has often been 'the perception of reality,

34 Brubaker, Ethnicity without Groups, 24.
35 Brubaker, Ethnicity without Groups, 16-17.
36 Brubaker, Ethnicity without Groups, 11.
rather than reality itself, which guides political behavior.\textsuperscript{37} Being aware of negative cases, where groupness did not take place, can help to correct the distorted representation of Syria, Iraq, and the Middle East more generally, as a ‘seething cauldron’ of sectarian tension.\textsuperscript{38} This also helps us to account for the fact that group crystallization and polarization are often the result of violence, rather than the cause.\textsuperscript{39}

**Genesis**

The first recorded use of the name ‘Syria’ is found in the *Histories* of Herodotus, the Greek historian. Likely a variant of Assyria, the Bronze and Iron Age kingdom, the lands of ancient Syria retained a high degree of ethnic and cultural homogeneity, despite periodic influxes of immigrants into its communities and cities.\textsuperscript{40} The most important influx in the area’s history undoubtedly came in the seventh century when Muslim Arabs from further south conquered the area, which was henceforth called *Bilād al-Shām*. This area encompassed much of modern-day Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine. Only during the mid-nineteenth century did the Arabs adopt the term Syria as a reflection of local patriotism.\textsuperscript{41}

The Muslim conquest of the area began during the reign of the first caliph Abu Bakr around 634. Over the following decades the Muslims would see repeated military successes in the region, allowing for the meteoric spread of their religion, Islam. However, these halcyon days met an abrupt end after the death of the second caliph 'Umar. Dissention rose under the third caliph 'Uthman, apparently for two main reasons. The first was a tapering off in the ready supply of conquest booty. The second included perceptions that 'Uthman was favoring his relatives when making important and sometimes lucrative appointments, of diverting monies from the treasury, and of other transgressions, some fiscal, some moral. This dissention developed into a violent uprising which culminated in 'Uthman’s assassination in

\textsuperscript{38} Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, 12.
\textsuperscript{39} Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, 14.
\textsuperscript{41} 'Moshe Ma’oz, Joseph Ginat, and Onn Winckler, ‘Introduction: The Emergence of Modern Syria,’ in *Modern Syria: From Ottoman Rule to Pivotal Role in the Middle East*, (eds.) Moshe Ma’oz, Joseph Ginat, and Onn Winckler, (Brighton: Sussex UP, 1999), 1.
656. ‘Ali subsequently became caliph during a time known as the First Civil War, which was a struggle for leadership of the Muslims. The people of Medina recognized ‘Ali as the next caliph as he was from the Prophet Muhammad’s clan, the Hashim.\(^\text{42}\) However, his elevation to this position was opposed by significant segments of the Muslim community, particularly ‘Uthman’s clan, the Umayyad. The following five years were dominated by skirmishes between the Umayyads and their supporters, and the followers of ‘Ali, known as Shi‘at Ali, or Shi‘i. The First Civil War came to an end when ‘Ali was assassinated and the majority of Muslims agreed to recognize Mu‘awiyya, head of the Umayyad clan, as caliph. This issue of succession is yet to be reconciled: Shi‘i supporters argue that leadership legitimacy is genealogical whilst others, now known as Sunnis, argue that the consensus of the Muslim community is most important. All members of each Islamic subgroup justify their particular identity on the basis of their different readings of the events of early Islamic history.\(^\text{43}\)

**‘Alawi history and theology**

In spite of historical accounts riddled with inaccuracies and bias, it is possible to outline some key features of ‘Alawi history and theology without claiming that all ‘Alawites share exactly the same beliefs to the same extent. Until the 1920s followers of the ‘Alawi sect were known in Arabic as Nusayriyya. The term originated from the name of Muhammad ibn Nusayr al-Bakri al-Namiri (d. 873 or 883) who lived in Samarra’ in Iraq. Sunni Muslim scholars and chroniclers describe ibn Nusayr as a Shi‘i extremist whose ideas place him outside the formal Shi‘i doctrine.\(^\text{44}\) Ibn Nusayr related himself to the twelfth Shi‘i imam as the door through which his followers among the Shi‘a could reach the inner meaning of true faith. By adding the central role of the door to Shi‘a Islam, the followers of ibn Nusayr claimed that such doors were the representatives of the true faith.

\(^{42}\) This was one of several clans within the Prophet’s tribe, known as the Quraysh.


'Ali, the Prophet’s son-in-law represents the meaning of the divinity while Muhammad, the Prophet, represents the name that surrounds the meaning in the form of a house. To enter this house one needs a door, which is embodied by Salman al-Farisi, one of the Prophet’s companions, through whom believers obtain access to the inner meaning of the divinity. The apparent influence of Christianity’s holy trinity and the elevation of others to divine status have led to a widespread belief throughout the Middle East that 'Alawites are heretics. It appears that 'Alawi leaders and intellectuals were cognizant of this perception and so since 1920 leaders and followers have referred to themselves as 'Alawiyya instead of Nusayriyya. By adopting this new name, they stressed their connection to Shi‘i doctrine, claiming that it is related to 'Ali, the Prophet’s son-in-law and the first imam of the Shi‘i. For these beliefs, 'Alawites were denounced in the fourteenth century by noted Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyya as non-Muslims who could justifiably be killed. In spite of such hostility, it is useful to recall the idea of sect as a category rather than a group. This helps us to recognize that there have been many other social forces at work throughout Syrian history. Ibn Taymiyya’s denunciation of an entire community, or groupism, is a notable example of open hostility. Rather than claim that hostility and groupism were rare throughout Syrian history, it is more productive to note how sectarianism in Syria waxed and waned like any other form of identification or categorization depending on context.

'Alawites and Ottomans

Under Ottoman rule, Syria was not a separate political entity, but was divided into several provinces with the central authority in Istanbul. Although for centuries the basic allegiance of the majority Sunni-Muslim population was to the Ottoman –Islamic state, several regions developed into socio-political autonomies and maintained their communal identities, notably 'Alawi, Druze, and Christians. Indeed, an important identity of the vast majority of the Syrian population was with the tribe, the religious sect, or the place of

45 Firro, 'Metamorphosis of the Nation,' 100.
46 Firro, 'Metamorphosis of the Nation,' 104.
residence, rather than with the country.\textsuperscript{47} By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the \textit{millet} system was firmly entrenched in the Ottoman political imagination. This system allowed religious communities to manage their own affairs with regards to personal law. It is important to note that the emergence of the politics of the \textit{millet}s was powered by the ambitions of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. He wanted to secure ecclesiastical authority over all of the Orthodox people in the Ottoman Empire.\textsuperscript{48} The same applied to Muslim communities such as the \textsc{‘}Alawites. The communal identities were not primordial, rather they were utilized in a variety of ways, in this case instrumentally as tools of legitimacy for ambitious religious leaders. As such, although the various \textit{millet}s within the Ottoman Empire were officially constituted as religious communities, a particular community’s own sense of distinctiveness, and hence need for recognition, arose more often out of a nascent ‘proto-nationalism’ than from questions of religious dogma.\textsuperscript{49} These designations came at a similar time to other reforms in the Ottoman Empire, known as the Tanzimat, which developed from within the Ottoman tradition and sought to respond to the competitive world system of the time.\textsuperscript{50} Although they were still seen as non-Muslims by Ottoman authorities, \textsc{‘}Alawi communities were generally left to their own accord in this era. The authorities would periodically attempt to impose upon these communities, leading to moments of communal solidarity amongst \textsc{‘}Alawites, such as the revolt of 1854.\textsuperscript{51} This also came at a time of weakness for the central Ottoman authority, which was involved in the ongoing Crimean war. Daniel Byman notes that a key factor in abetting the rise of sectarianism is weakness of central authorities. While he is discussing events of over a century later, his point that the opening up of political space allows ‘religious chauvinists to make their play for power and influence’ is still insightful. Byman also points to the importance of new

\textsuperscript{47} Ma’oz, Ginat, and Winckler, ‘Introduction: The Emergence of Modern Syria,’ 1.
\textsuperscript{49} Masters, ‘The Establishment of the Melkite Catholic Millet,’ 455.
\textsuperscript{50} Martha Mundy, \textit{Governing property, making the modern state law, administration and production in Ottoman Syria}, (London: I.B.Tauris, 2007), 4.
\textsuperscript{51} Ma’oz, \textit{Ottoman reform in Syria and Palestine}, 110.
technologies in allowing sectarian processes, such as mobilization of ’Alawites, to accelerate. This reflects the impact of the rapid industrial, transportation, and communication developments of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{52}

This general atmosphere of mostly benign exclusion of ’Alawites enabled ’Alawi communities, which were mostly in the area that comprises the north west of modern-day Syria, to be separated from growing nationalist sentiments in parts of a declining Ottoman Empire. In the 1860s, notions of Syrian territorial identity and Arab cultural consciousness emerged amongst Christian intellectuals. These notions subsequently merged into a Syrian-Arab national ideology, notably under the rule of Emir Faysal in Syria between 1918 and 1920.\textsuperscript{53} With defeat in the First World War came the collapse and dismembering of the Ottoman Empire and an explosion of nationalism. However, because of the weakness of both the Ottoman government and the Arab government of King Faisal, and because of the range of the economic and political transformation that occurred, no single dominant nationalist discourse could be either ’coaxed or coerced.’\textsuperscript{54} In addition, cleavages amongst communities prevented the successful amalgamation of nationalist visions, as did the widespread desire within elites to maintain their commercial and social statuses. Finally, Syrian nationalist movements had been confined to secrecy during the repressive final years of the Ottoman Empire and this limited the wider distribution of nationalist ideas to the larger population of Bilād al-Shām.\textsuperscript{55} This lack of unity made it easier for the French Mandate to be imposed upon much of the area of modern-day Syria after the San Remo conference of 1920. Amid this historic period of upheaval, the imagined community of ’Alawites started to solidify.

**Sectarianism under the French Mandate**

\textsuperscript{52} Daniel Byman, ‘Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East,’ *Survival*, 56:1, 2014, 79.
\textsuperscript{53} Ma’az, Ginat, and Winckler, ‘Introduction: The Emergence of Modern Syria,’ 2.
\textsuperscript{54} James L. Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1998), 143.
The arrival of the French Mandate was the start of perhaps the most important phase for sectarianism related to ’Alawites. For both ’Alawites and Syrians more generally it was the pivotal era for what Anderson terms ‘imagined communities.’ Such communities are imagined ‘because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.’ These developments were made possible, as in other parts of the world at different times, by the destroyed legitimacy of divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realms, in this case the Ottoman Empire. It is at this time that ’Alawites started referring to themselves as ’Alawiyya, rather than Nusayriyya. This charge was led by ’Alawi intellectuals, who were growing up while nationalist discourses and ideologies were being spread through print and the educational system.

The French authorities discouraged the development of a Syrian national community, while adopting two major methods by which to control Syria and Lebanon. The first was to achieve cooperation with the traditional elite, mainly the Sunni-Muslim urban upper class, which consisted of a few hundred families and constituted the political, as well as the socio-economic, elite. The second method was to “divide and rule” – the aim being to weaken the Syrian-Arab national movement. In order to achieve this aim, the Mandate authorities divided Syria into several administrative and political units, notably the Territories of the ’Alawites and the Druze, as well as the region of Alexandretta and al-Jazîra. Throughout the Mandate period, ’Alawi leaders were both the victims and protagonists in manipulating notions of separatism and nationalism, both inside and outside of ’Alawi communities. This was the case with the revolt of Saleh al-’Ali that erupted in 1919 in the Jabal al-Nusayri area of Syria.

---

57 Anderson, _Imagined Communities_, 7.
58 Firro, ‘Metamorphosis of the Nation,’ 118.
60 Firro, ‘Metamorphosis of the Nation,’ 107.
Despite this intense moment of groupism, there were still factions that divided the ʿAlawites into four tribes: the Khayatin, Haddadin, Kalbiyya and Matawira. These intra-ʿAlawi divisions undermine the notion of sectarianism as a unified, primordial form of identity politics. However, it is the lingering perception of primordialism that informed the politics of the French Mandate. French visions of a mosaic society productively informed the strategies by which the Mandatory Power consciously sought to govern the Levant. The internal borders of the Mandate were in part drawn in perceived accommodation with the ostensibly ‘natural’ religio-ethnic communities of Syria.

Although the ʿAlawites were internally divided, when they were threatened with domination by a more powerful ‘urban absentee Sunni landowning class’ which supported unity with Damascus, they responded with unity. The ʿAlawites were capable of putting up fierce resistance to external interference in their communal affairs. This they did between the Saleh al-ʿAli revolt in 1919 and 1921 when the French tried to establish hegemony over ʿAlawi areas.

The French strengthened the rural-based ʿAlawi elite and played it against the Sunni elite of the towns, while they administratively insulated the entire province from the national independence movement. In June 1922 General Giraud of France proclaimed the establishment of the Syrian Federation in which the autonomous ʿAlawi area bore the name “the State of the ʿAlawites,” although there were Sunnis and Christians among its administrators and representatives. Encouraged by French officers in the area, ʿAlawi notables, until 1924, would send petitions against any possibility of annexing their area to

---

61 Firro, ‘Metamorphosis of the Nation,’ 108.
63 Neep, Occupying Syria, 31.
Damascus.\textsuperscript{65} At this time the configuration of the French Mandate shifted again. The ‘Alawi State was not included in this new arrangement and was only united with the state of Syria in 1936.\textsuperscript{66} French treachery and a lust for political power from elites do not capture the whole story of sectarianism under the French Mandate. The First World War enriched an urban middle-class that shunned the communal ties that had once bound rich and poor in the cities. City communities were further disrupted with the arrival of peasants fleeing the effects of dislocated and neglected agriculture. As the disruption of households during and after World War I spread the demand for girls’ education beyond the elite classes, and as more women took jobs as factory workers, household maids, and schoolteachers to supplement family income, male authority in the family and the urban public were challenged. As a result, the civic order was destabilized. Syrian and Lebanese came to define their relationship with the state simultaneously as individual citizens and as members of a group – as male breadwinners, as patriotic mothers of families, as members of a sect guaranteed a certain number of seats in parliament. Those who relied primarily on family or sectarian support systems also came to demand rights from the state, for schooling, for healthcare, for better wages, for bread.\textsuperscript{67} Sectarian and nationalist ties therefore both strengthened and weakened during these times of monumental economic change depending on whether sectarian entrepreneurs or nationalists were able to pull people from the misery of socio-economic decline. Such changing allegiances reflect the bottom-up aspect of sectarianism, which at this time waxed and waned in terms of its appeal. Patriarchs of the ‘Alawi community were finding it increasingly difficult to justify loyalty to the imagined ‘Alawi community. Deteriorating living conditions, which scarcely improved under the French Mandate or in the post-independence period, drove the ‘Alawites to

\textsuperscript{65} Firro, ‘Metamorphosis of the Nation,’ 108.
\textsuperscript{66} Neep, \textit{Occupying Syria}, 31.
enroll in great numbers in the state’s armed forces.\textsuperscript{68} Efforts were made by the French authorities to recruit a local force, called the Troupes Spéciales du Levant in 1930. Although relatively unimportant in terms of the overall colonial security posture, the Troupes Spéciales disproportionately drew on minority communities, especially Christians, Circassians, 'Alawis, Isma‘ilis, Druze, and Armenians, establishing recruitment patterns that would have profound implications for Syria after independence in 1946.\textsuperscript{69} 'Alawis’ service in the Troupes Spéciales, the fact that they owed their first step up in the world to French colonial patronage, bred suspicion of them in other Syrians, widening even further the breach between 'Alawites and Sunnis.\textsuperscript{70} That said, most 'Alawites were ‘probably neither Syrian nationalists nor collaborators with France, wanting only to run their own affairs as they had for centuries.'\textsuperscript{71}

At the Homs Congress of November 1932, nationalists officially declared the National Bloc, a political organization standing for the complete unity, territorial integrity, and independence of Syria.\textsuperscript{72} However, it failed to provide a compelling nationalist vision as an alternative to sub-national identities, such as those within 'Alawi communities.\textsuperscript{73} It was not until January 12, 1942 that General Catroux of France issued a decree proclaiming the unity of Syria and the reintegration of the 'Alawi region, though there had been an 'Alawi minister since the formation of the Syrian government in September 1941.\textsuperscript{74} It was under the French Mandate that sectarian relations between 'Alawites and Sunni nationalists became increasingly intense. French repression would strengthen 'Alawi groupism whereas deteriorating living conditions and recruitment into the Troupes Spéciales would weaken sectarian loyalties. Likewise, hostility to the French authorities strengthened Syrian nationalism, whereas inter-elite politics weakened the reach of

\textsuperscript{69} Neep, \textit{Occupying Syria}, 34.
\textsuperscript{70} Patrick Seale, \textit{Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East}, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 23.
\textsuperscript{71} Seale, \textit{Asad of Syria}, 18.
\textsuperscript{72} Khoury, \textit{Syria and the French Mandate}, 263.
\textsuperscript{73} Khoury, \textit{Syria and the French Mandate}, 266.
\textsuperscript{74} Salma Mardam Bey, \textit{Syria's Quest for Independence}, (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1994), 54.
nationalism. Ussama Makdisi’s analysis of Lebanese sectarianism is applicable to Syria as well: ‘Without European colonial imagination, missionary activity, and Eastern Question diplomacy, there never would have been sectarianism. Indeed, without Ottoman reform, there never would have been sectarianism. But, most important, without local participation, beliefs, hopes, desires, and fantasies of the possible, there would never have been sectarianism.’

**Sectarianism in independent Syria**

The story of the first years of Syrian independence is one of shocking instability, international intrigue, and limited sectarianism. On 30 March 1949 the army Chief of Staff, Colonel Husni al-Za’im, seized power in Damascus. Supported by a handful of nationalist officers and radical politicians he overthrew the existing regime led by Syrian President Shukri al-Quwatli, to the general satisfaction of the public, thus introducing the young army to politics and the country to a troubled decade before the union with Egypt. After a coup four months later, led by Colonel Sami al-Hinnawi, Colonel Adib al-Shishakli came to power. Dominating Syrian politics for the next four years, Shishakli’s legacy was to give Syria a strong government during a period of transition in Middle East affairs. Under Shishakli’s regime, minority representation in the Syrian People’s Assembly was completely abolished in 1953. At the same time, public life and institutions were Arabized and Islamized. The Syrian regime attempted to overcome the military strength of the Druze and the ‘Alawites and to impose central authority. For young members of the minorities, the army continued to be the major avenue for socio-economic mobility. An important question here is why in contrast to the reaction to French repression, Syrian nationalist repression of ‘Alawi separatism did not lead to an intense moment of ‘Alawi unity. It would seem that many ‘Alawis, including political leaders, were content with being a part of an increasingly Islamic society. Furthermore,

---

77 Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 147.
78 Ma’oz, Ginat, and Winckler, ‘Introduction: The Emergence of Modern Syria,’ 3.
sectarian identities must be constantly engaged by sectarian entrepreneurs but the leadership simply was not there during the post-independence period. By the late summer of 1957 Syria was on the verge of disintegration as an organized political community. Not only was there no general agreement on the rules governing political behavior but, worse still, many Syrians had lost confidence in the future of their country as an independent entity.\textsuperscript{79} On 1 February 1958, at a session between the Syrian and Egyptian governments, union between Syria and Egypt was proclaimed.\textsuperscript{80} The United Arab Republic was to be led by the symbol of pan-Arab unity, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Egyptian president. Sectarianism as a frame for political mobilization reached its nadir during this period. Pan-Arabism offered the most compelling vision for a prosperous and dignified future and was the alternative many Syrians craved. Alas, the reality failed to amount to anything. A group of officers led by Lieutenant-Colonel ‘Abd al-Karim Nahlawi, backed by Jordan and Saudi Arabia, mounted a coup and announced Syria’s secession from the union on September 28, 1961.\textsuperscript{81}

\textbf{The Ba’th Party and the new ‘Alawi conspiracy}

The doctrine of the Ba’th Party was developed by Michel ‘Aflaq and Saleh al-Din al-Bitar, two Syrians, starting in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{82} They formed a political party in Syria in 1940 which became the Arab Ba’th Party in 1942. The key tenets of Ba’thism included Pan-Arabism, Arab socialism, and a secular ideology. It was in this environment that Hafiz al-Asad became inculcated. From his teens onwards, al-Asad rebelled against his ‘Alawi background, and joined the Ba’th Party. Nevertheless, despite his later nationalist credentials, the inescapable ‘Alawi label was to be his burden.\textsuperscript{83} After independence, the proportion of ‘Alawi officers in the military increased until it reached 42 percent in 1970. This was paralleled by a growth of ‘Alawi members in the senior echelons of the Ba’th Party, reaching nearly a quarter in the same

\textsuperscript{79} Seale, \textit{The Struggle for Syria}, 307.
\textsuperscript{80} Seale, \textit{The Struggle for Syria}, 323.
\textsuperscript{82} Seale, \textit{The Struggle for Syria}, 153.
\textsuperscript{83} Seale, \textit{Asad of Syria}, 23.
year. However, this was not a case of sectarianism in the sense of an attempt to recreate Syria as an 'Alawi nation or state, and certainly not a sectarian privileging of 'Alawites by law. Rather it was a very traditional use of patronage to extend the influence of the leaders and ensure their survival. Although the Ba’th Party was not the only political outlet for 'Alawites, the party’s vision of pan-Arab dignity and socialism gained substantial ground in 'Alawi communities. Suffering immensely from hardships in rural areas and from their disadvantaged class status, 'Alawites in particular stood to gain from virtually any change in the status quo, and were thus in the forefront of social change.

The number of 'Alawites, Druze, and Isma’ilis in the party and particularly in its Military Organization was swollen as these minority communities recruited friends and relatives following the coup of March 8, 1963. These trends dated back to recruitment patterns for the Troupes Spéciales in the 1930s. All this aggravated both religious and social prejudices traditionally held by urban Sunnis against the largely rural minorities. On February 8, 1964 Ba’thist and conservative students clashed in the coastal city of Banyas on the fringe of the 'Alawi region. The incident had strong sectarian overtones, as it seems that most Ba’thists involved in it were 'Alawites while their opponents were Sunni Muslims. The authorities were able to contain the incident and publicized it only when they realized that rumors based on information from outside sources were even more harmful to their interests. The official government version did not try to hide the sectarian aspect of the incident but rather chose to emphasize it in an attempt to prove the reactionary nature of the opposition.

The rivalry between Saleh al-Jadid, Assistant Regional Secretary of the Syrian Ba’th Party, and Hafiz al-Asad, Syrian Minister of Defense, became the prime issue of Syrian politics between 1966 and November 1970, when al-Asad took complete control. This conflict pointed to the complexity of the sectarian issue

---

as the two protagonists were 'Alawis.  

Of course, an inter-group rivalry such as this does not necessarily mean that sectarian tensions are precluded elsewhere.

Once al-Asad came to power, one could always find relatively large numbers of 'Alawites in the military and security forces. Yet, many in top positions were Sunni Muslims, such as Mustafa Tlas, the Minister of Defense, and the Vice President, 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam. Both men are examples of the fact that personal loyalty to al-Asad was the key requirement for a position in the President’s inner circle. The appointment of many Sunni Muslims to government bureaucracy in all ranks, including the top positions, contributed to enhancing the legitimacy of the central authority among both government employees and the public. Likewise, al-Asad endeavored to expand the ranks of the Ba‘th Party with Sunni-Muslim and working class members in order to portray the party as popular and representative of the entire Syrian society.

'Alawites and Islamists

The major challenge, sectarian or otherwise, to al-Asad’s regime was the Islamic opposition among large segments of the Sunni-Muslim population, who rejected the secular ideology of the Ba‘th and 'Alawi military rule. From his early days as ruler of Syria, al-Asad was aware of the dangers of large-scale Islamic opposition. In the Permanent Constitution of March 1973, al-Asad re-instated an article establishing Islam as the religion of the president, which had previously been removed from the 1969 Constitution. Also in 1973, al-Asad encouraged the Shi‘i Imam of Lebanon, Musa al-Sadr, to certify that the 'Alawites are Shi‘i Muslims.

One of the worst sectarian incidents of the 1970s in Syria occurred on June 16, 1979 at the Aleppo artillery school, when at least 32 cadets were murdered and 54 wounded. The majority of the victims were said to be 'Alawites. This was denied, however, by the Syrian minister of information, Ahmad Iskander.

---

88 Rabinovich, *Syria under the Ba‘th*, 216.
Ahmad, an ʿAlawi, who stated that Christians and Sunni Muslims also numbered amongst the dead. Though it may well have been true that those killed or wounded were not all ʿAlawites, it was more important that the general public thought that this was the case. In the words of a captured deputy leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, who was made to ‘confess’ on Damascus television: ‘these acts were bound to splinter the domestic front and to sow sectarianism similar to that in Lebanon.’\(^91\) Al-Asad’s avowedly secular approach to politics however, created a contradiction between the Baʿth Party’s stated project to rid Syria of sub-national distinctions, and the al-Asad regime’s policies that exacerbated them.\(^92\) This anti-ʿAlawi tension peaked in Hama in February 1982, when the Muslim Brotherhood tried to provoke sectarian polarization between ʿAlawites and Sunnis in the armed forces, hoping to win to their side the Sunnis who constituted a majority in the regular army. The confrontation between the regime and the Islamic fundamentalist opposition forces turned into an armed uprising involving a whole city and its population. The battles in Hama raged for almost a month and killed over 10,000 people, mainly victims from the population of Hama itself. The regime’s elite troops involved in the confrontation were, however, essentially ʿAlawi in composition, and with some exceptions they held firm.\(^93\) In an eerie echo of the sectarian tactics implemented decades later by the regime of Bashar al-Asad, Rifaʿt al-Asad called upon the 21\(^{st}\) Mechanized Brigade to join the battle in Hama. All the officers and soldiers in the 21\(^{st}\) who were from Hama were transferred out, before unit commander Fouad Ismail, an ʿAlawi, led the advance into the town along Said ibn al-ʿAṣas Street.\(^94\) Additional intelligence units and elements of the 47\(^{th}\) Independent Armored Brigade, commanded by ʿAlawi Colonel Nadim Abbas, with its T-62 tanks, were also stationed in and around the town.\(^95\) Thomas Friedman’s account of the events of February 1982 in

---


\(^{95}\) Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, 81.
Hama depicts a sectarian bloodbath; however, the ‘Hama Rules’ that the author coined reflect the underlying fact that any threats to the president’s authority would be mercilessly halted.  

Given the impression, whether true or false, of being threatened by the Sunni majority, many ‘Alawites, including many of the regime’s initial opponents, might well have felt forced to cluster together for self-preservation. This represented sectarian groupism at its peak under Hafiz al-Asad. In spite of the perception of sectarian favoritism, confession was not the criterion for membership in the president’s inner circle; loyalty to the president was. All strategic positions, particularly those of immediate relevance for regime security, were occupied by figures with strong personal ties to the al-Asad. Of course, members of al-Asad’s own family and tribe, and those from the ‘Alawi sect, could be said to have had a comparative advantage in this respect.

**Waning sectarianism**

The sectarian attitude of many Syrians appeared to change over time. Large segments of the Syrian population benefited from the regime and its socio-economic policies, among them Sunni Muslim peasants, the new middle class, blue collar workers, and residents of the remote provinces. The 18 years between the Hama uprising and the death of Hafiz al-Asad brought relative political stability and steady economic development. This indicated a shift in political culture: a breakdown in the traditional isolation and alienation of ‘Alawi society from the state. Al-Asad’s constituency spread to include influential members of the Sunni and Christian middle class, city dwellers, primarily but not exclusively ‘Alawites originating in the provinces, and wealthy working class citizens who benefited from the regime’s policies while continuing to reside in the countryside. This support, however, can be attributed to al-Asad’s ability to offer material gains, such as state services, and political privileges, rather than to the rhetoric’s ability

---

96 Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, 104.  
to cultivate belief or popularity among key groups.\textsuperscript{101} Of course, the regime was always eager to promote nationalist rhetoric and quash any talk of sectarian divisions.

As with the inter-war period, economic change bred social change. Capitalist developments substantially altered the tribal-sectarian base of a village society. The effects of education and economic independence on attitudes, eroded the patriarchal and sectarian authority. Tribal identities also declined as marrying within the tribe was no longer the rule. By the 1970s many youth did not even know to which tribe they belonged.\textsuperscript{102} Those ʿAlawites who migrated to Damascus, and their offspring, became as Damascene as other migrants to the capital. In a social environment which had little in common with their or their parents’ village of origin, that ʿAlawites made their living, no matter the extent to which they relied on regional ties and sectarian networks of patronage.\textsuperscript{103} The harmony between the ʿAlawi elite in Damascus and the Sunni middle class took precedence over ʿAlawi communal solidarity. ʿAlawi communities, no longer a despised minority, enjoyed greater income, security, and access to government than before, though political mobilization and social transformation remained limited.\textsuperscript{104} An example of the limited social transformation is that intermarriage between ʿAlawites and Sunnis remained somewhat rare.\textsuperscript{105} Although many ʿAlawites reached high ranks, and constituted a disproportionate segment of the elite, there is little to suggest that the majority of ʿAlawites were privileged over other Syrians.\textsuperscript{106} One possible area was in the disproportionate growth in educational access in two provinces, Latakia and Tartous, as evidence of a deliberate policy to ensure better access for ʿAlawites to elite recruitment pools.\textsuperscript{107} This debate does not intend to make a statement about the existence of sectarianism. Rather, as a category for

\textsuperscript{102} Hinnebusch, \textit{Authoritarian Power and State Formation}, 232.
\textsuperscript{103} Perthes, \textit{The Political Economy}, 185.
\textsuperscript{104} Hinnebusch, \textit{Authoritarian Power and State Formation}, 238.
\textsuperscript{106} McHugo, \textit{Syria}, 190.
identification, its salience waxes and wanes depending on context. Throughout this period of apparent sectarian harmony, Syrians were still very much aware of the sect as an identity marker. Intra-'Alawi and 'Alawi-state relations were depicted in Syrian movies and metaphors were used to comment on sectarian relations. Meanwhile, the search for a well-connected, often 'Alawi, patron not just to get exceptions or privileges, but to cut through the webs of bureaucratic red tape, was pervasive throughout the political system. That said, there was always a substantial measure of anti-regime opposition amongst 'Alawis, and most major political conflicts, within the regime elite and even between the regime and the opposition, transcended sectarian lines. The existence and extensive utilization of sectarian loyalties did not prevent the development of a strong sense of Syrian identity. Almost all societal groups who had a say in determining Syria’s political future, including the middle class and the military, were interested in maintaining the state, its stability, and if possible its regional role.

**Sectarianism in the lead up to war**

On June 10, 2000 Hafiz al-Asad died. Within a month, he had been replaced as the President of Syria by his son, Bashar al-Asad. Bashar soon decided Syria would pursue a middle way. Syria would buck the global neo-liberal trend by shrinking the public sector at the same time as growing the private sector, rather than before expanding the private sector. At the same time, joining the Euro-Med partnership would lower barriers to global integration and undermine vested interests obstructing a deepening of the market economy. The first priorities were to foster modernizing bureaucrats and to strengthen state institutions through administrative reform. Both Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad opened up the economy at various times, and to varying degrees; but the primary beneficiaries were usually those already tied into

---

109 Hinnebusch, *Peasant and Bureaucracy*, 63.
the regime through sectarian, business, or political connections. The business enriched itself further which resulted in a conspicuously unequal distribution of wealth, especially under Bashar. This also meant that the business elite was co-opted by the regime, in the sense that their socioeconomic status depended upon regime support; they could very rapidly lose that status if they displayed any sign of disloyalty or acted in any way that embarrassed the regime.\textsuperscript{113} This economic liberalization in lieu of political liberalization, a process that strengthened the regime, has been termed ‘upgrading authoritarianism.’\textsuperscript{114} All of this is not to say that sectarianism disappeared as a form of identity or frame for understanding Syrian politics. ‘Alawites in the regime elite invariably went into business with Sunni partners they could trust for a defined purpose. However, as a group that could potentially engage in collective action against the regime or its interests, Sunni businessmen were not trusted by the ‘Alawi-dominated leadership.\textsuperscript{115}

Under Bashar al-Asad, the influence of the clergy over Syrian society increased considerably. This situation results from the population’s growing religious fervor, and from official policies which, although still extremely repressive even by regional standards, nevertheless relaxed over time. The threat from religious leaders was largely limited because of their understandable fears of state repression and because of a gradual rapprochement between state and clergy. This deepening partnership was part of a broader trend whose consequences have unfolded since the current conflict started: the Ba’th has allied with its former enemies, the urban elites, which has led it to turn its back on its original social base, the poor. And it is the latter who have provided most of the manpower in the current uprising.\textsuperscript{116} Indeed, since Bashar al-Asad came to power, even the banned Muslim Brotherhood, which led the anti-regime struggle in the 1980s, has ceased to play on sectarian divisions, stressing instead human rights, the rule of law,

\textsuperscript{114} Steven Heydemann, \textit{Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World}, (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2007)
\textsuperscript{115} Haddad, \textit{Business Networks}, 38.
pluralism, and national unity.\textsuperscript{117} This continued to be the case despite a powerful sectarian frame being established throughout the region in the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

ʿAlawites, in particular, boasted no socioeconomic advantage over their Sunni Arab counterparts. They joined the security services en masse mostly for lack of better opportunities. Even there, not all positions gave status and affluence. Before the uprising, a majority put up with long hours, poor pay, social opprobrium and, in some cases, significant danger when fighting criminal or jihadi networks. Unless some rising star used his leverage within the system to provide cushy jobs for relatives and neighbors back home, ʿAlawi villages remained miserable. For their part, poor Sunni Arabs obtained state jobs, notably in the regular police force, or joined the military.\textsuperscript{118}

By neglect and by design, ʿAlawites’ ascent was never translated into integration. Due to a lack of urban planning, ʿAlawites congregated in informal neighborhoods such as Damascus’ Mezze 86, which stood out for its sectarian homogeneity. They relied to a greater extent than any other group on the regime. They assumed a conspicuous role in local administrations, in Homs for instance, state-run media outlets, such as al-Baʿth newspaper and al-Dunya television, and key state institutions, notably the officer corps of the army. They were most visible, and in the worst possible way, in sprawling security services that operated outside the law and outside formal state institutions. Although Bashar reached out to the Sunni Arab majority far more than his father did, he ushered in hereditary rule as a hallmark of the regime’s sectarian nature, and he abetted the uninhibited corruption of his immediate relatives, including the domination of the economy by his cousin Rami Makhlouf. The ruling al-Asad family established itself at the expense of ʿAlawi elites, whether tribal leaders, feudal landowners or insubordinate intellectuals, of whom there are many. Under Bashar, even strong figures within the military and security services were tossed aside in


favor of incompetent, interchangeable yes-men. 119 Rural ‘Alawites struggled as a result of cuts in fuel subsidies and laws restricting the sale of tobacco, their primary crop for centuries. Indeed, since the provision of basic services by Hafiz al-Asad in the 1970s and 1980s, many predominantly ‘Alawi villages, with the exception of Qardaha, the home of al-Asad’s tribe, the Kalbiyya, have developed little.120

The story of sectarianism throughout modern Syrian history is one of periods of near irrelevance alongside intense moments of group unity. While the latter has often been a result of violence or persecution, neither the presence nor the absence of sectarianized views of Syrian politics and society are inevitable. In spite of all this, the idea of ‘Alawites as a homogeneous community that supports Bashar al-Asad lingers.

---

119 Harling and Birke, The Syrian Heartbreak.
Chapter II: Sectarianism in the Syrian Conflict

Presidential Evidence

If internationalization of the conflict in Syria increased sectarianization of the conflict, it can be reasonably assumed that Bashar al-Asad would not himself be responsible for this sectarianization. Any references to sectarianism by the president would therefore be a response to external attempts to sectarianize the conflict. In this case, al-Asad’s rhetoric would reflect Malet’s thesis on transnational recruitment in civil conflicts. Malet argues that leaders and organizations can overcome collective action barriers by framing participation in conflicts as ‘a necessary defensive mobilization to individuals who are typically active in shared ethnic, religious, or ideological communities.’ Al-Asad would therefore only portray the Syrian conflict as sectarian in order to bolster support within the communities of fellow ‘Alawites or other minorities who might be threatened by sectarianism. The hypotheses must pass a smoking-gun test because if there is evidence that the President frames the conflict as sectarian before internationalization, the Opposition hypothesis passes the Presidential Variable test. However, the absence of such publicly available evidence would not necessarily prove the President’s innocence.

Therefore:

Presidential Evidence: Bashar al-Asad neither invokes sectarian language, nor sectarianizes the actions of those opposing his government and armed forces. If he does so, this is only as a necessary response to international sectarianism affecting Syria.

Presidential Evidence Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of Diagnostic Evidence</th>
<th>Regime Hypothesis</th>
<th>Opposition Hypothesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claim 122</td>
<td>Sectarianizing the enemy is a response to internationalization</td>
<td>The regime framed its enemies as sectarian from the start</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


122 The ‘claim’ pertains to the hypotheses rather than the actors. That is, the Asad hypothesis would make this claim, rather than Asad himself. For example, the regime has steadfastly denied the presence of the Shabiha militias.
After two weeks of widespread civil unrest in his country, President Bashar al-Assad finally made a public address on March 30, 2011. In his speech to parliament, the President claimed that conspirators were trying to incite sectarianism inside Syria. This statement came after two weeks of peaceful protest and there is no credible evidence of sectarian opposition to the regime at this stage. June 12, 2011 was the next public occasion in which al-Assad raised the specter of sectarianism. In only his second public speech since March 30, al-Assad told attendees of his speech at Damascus University that armed men ‘invoked detestable sectarian discourse which we have never endorsed,’ proudly adding that citizens ‘prevented all attempts of sectarian sedition.’ While there have been reports of slogans such as ‘Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the grave,’ such slogans were not widely reported at the time and so it seems unreasonable to state that a sectarian opposition was challenging the regime at that time.

Al-Assad made similar claims in his Army Day speech on August 1, 2011, when he claimed that there was a ‘conspiracy to fragment Syria.’ This statement came a week before the Arab League had even condemned the Syrian authorities, and before the Free Syrian Army had really taken shape, even with foreign backing. In an interview with Russian TV on September 30, 2011, al-Assad discussed sectarianism

---


as being one of many destabilizing factors across the region.\textsuperscript{127} In a more indirect nod to foreign sectarian interference inside Syria, these are two more examples of al-Asad framing the opposition in the country as sectarian. An interview with the British Sunday Times newspaper followed on November 20, 2011, in which al-Asad discussed civilian deaths in sectarian attacks.\textsuperscript{128} This interview did come after some international debates on Syria, including the United Nations Secretary General’s call for international action on September 15, and the Syrian National Council’s call for international intervention in Homs on November 7. By the end of 2011, the only non-regime report of external influence claimed that Turkish military intelligence had trained dissidents on its territory. These dissidents quickly formed an umbrella group called the Free Syrian Army.\textsuperscript{129}

Bashar al-Asad appeared at Damascus University on January 10, 2012 with a speech damning ‘external schemes’ that were trying to ‘dismantle and fragment unity through using the hideous sectarian weapon after masking it with the cover of holy religion.’\textsuperscript{130} This is the first time that the President’s framing of the opposition as sectarian can be linked to a preceding event: the entrance of an externally-resourced jihadi organization, Jabhat al-Nusra into the conflict on December 23, 2011.

Al-Asad’s sectarianizing of the opposition was reflected in the draft constitution presented for a referendum on February 26, 2012. Article 8, paragraph 4 states: ‘Carrying out any political activity or forming any political parties or groupings on the basis of religious, sectarian, tribal, regional, class-based,

professional, or on discrimination based on gender, origin, race or color may not be undertaken.’\(^{131}\) This is one of the clearest examples of what appears to have been al-Asad’s strategy; claim the opposition is fomenting sectarianism while publicly showing that the government is against such behavior. From this point on however, the al-Asad hypothesis appears to be a reasonable claim. In the wake of Saudi Arabian and Qatari pledges to arm the opposition, two Friends of Syria international summits, the confirmation of Iranian troops on Syrian soil, and public support for Syrian rebels from al-Qa’ida chief Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Asad attacked the ‘seditious, sectarian plot’ five times in one speech to his government.\(^{132}\) It seems that it was not until over nine months into the crisis in Syria, that Bashar al-Asad was justified in linking the ongoing events to international actors and sectarianism. As will be seen later, violence in Syria was steadily becoming more sectarian but such attacks post-date al-Asad’s earliest claims of external influence by almost a year. Therefore, when al-Asad claimed that ‘the essence of the crisis was to create sectarian strife amongst the Syrian people,’\(^{133}\) he appears ironically and inadvertently to be referring to his own policies.

By the time Bashar al-Asad states in a speech on January 6, 2013, that outsiders are sowing sectarian strife,\(^{134}\) there is likely a lot of truth to the statement. However, his own statements from the beginning of the conflict precede any reported presence of outside interference in Syria. While Bashar himself uses sectarian rhetoric defensively rather than offensively, he still framed opposition to his rule as sectarian from the start when that was not the case. In doing so, the President was surely trying to undermine the


national legitimacy of any opposition to his regime. By vilifying opposition to his rule as sectarian, he was trying to limit the appeal of opposition groups to broad swathes of Syrian society. After increased foreign intervention throughout 2012, his claims appear to be much closer to the truth. But, because al-Asad’s rhetoric precedes such interventions, the Regime hypothesis fails the Presidential Evidence smoking-gun test whilst the Opposition hypothesis passes it.

**Military Evidence**

It can be expected that, over time, with an influx of foreign militants and organizations fighting against Syrian forces, the regime would feel more threatened. A result of that would be closing rank, whereby the regime resorts to relying upon its most loyal coercive instruments in its defense, namely those with shared identities or familial backgrounds. In this case, use of the Fourth Armored Division of the Syrian Army would be the clearest example of a sectarianized military response. This is because it is headed by Maher al-Asad, Bashar’s brother, and recruits mostly from ʿAlawi communities. Whether a person is a practicing or devout ʿAlawi is irrelevant in this context. ʿAlawi identities in the military may have a religious aspect but this is dwarfed by the socio-political functions of the same identities. This test is a hoop test because strong evidence that the Fourth Armored Division was used irrespective of international involvement would reject the Regime hypothesis. On the other hand, the absence in a relative rise in deployments and secondments from the Fourth Division would mean the Regime hypothesis is affirmed. Therefore:

**Military Evidence Table**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Al-Asad Hypothesis</th>
<th>Opposition Hypothesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claim</td>
<td>Fourth Division deployed in response to international intervention</td>
<td>Fourth Division deployed and officers seconded from the start of the conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required Evidence</td>
<td>Increased deployments and secondments to other branches as a response to external intervention</td>
<td>Increased deployments and secondments irrespective of wider events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Result</td>
<td>Fails hoop test</td>
<td>Passes hoop test</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Fourth Armored Division of the Syria Army has perhaps been the most consequential weapon in the Syrian regime’s armory for several decades. It was formed out of the Defense Companies, themselves created in 1971 by the brother of then-President Hafiz al-Asad, Rifa’ı al-Asad. The soldiers and officers making up the Fourth Division always had loyalty and internal stability as their number one priority.135 Defense Company personnel were recruited independently of the regular armed forces and recruitment is predominantly among ’Alawis.136 For many years, Rifa’ı al-Asad and his and his men provided muscle and logistical support to the drug trafficking network centered on narcotics produced in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley.137 These forces also had military missions beyond the role of a praetorian guard. For example, they took part in Syria's first armed intervention in Lebanon, between June and October 1976. Defense Company units also were involved in internal security, such as carrying out house-to-house searches during the nationwide strikes and demonstrations in Aleppo in March 1980, and in June 1980 killing between 600 and 1,000 Tadmur Prison inmates suspected of belonging to the banned Muslim Brotherhood. In 1982, units were deployed in Hama during the armed uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood, and they participated in the massacre of 10,000 to 25,000 civilians there.138 Under President Bashar al-Asad, the Fourth Division has been led by his brother Maher al-Asad. According to one report, the Fourth Division is not loyal to Bashar, but to his brother Maher; their

---


military doctrine entails forming a cult around Maher’s leadership. Observers have also called this ‘the most politicized army in the Arab world,’ where loyalty to the regime often outweighs professional merit in determining who gets promoted. The 15,000 predominantly ʿAlawi soldiers in the Fourth Division represent the best paid, armed, and trained units of the Syrian military. In sum, ‘the Fourth Division is known for its brutality and it’s a symbol of the regime’s striking force.’ From its base just outside the capital it carefully protects, the Fourth Division has increasingly come to be used around the country, notwithstanding the fact that its primary mission is always to protect the regime and the capital, Damascus.

Soon after civil unrest started in Der’a in March 2011, Maher’s Fourth Division opened fire on unarmed demonstrators and killed as many as fifteen protestors in the two-day assault on the Omari Mosque in the city. Maher’s forces quickly came to play a leading role in anti-dissident operations in Der’a, the coastal city of Baniyas, the central province of Homs, and the northern province of Idlib, with activists reporting 1,400 people killed and 10,000 detained in the crackdown. By this stage, in order to curb dissent and bolster loyal forces, Bashar had lowered the age for military conscription from 21 to 18.

Over time, official Syrian conscription systems disintegrated as children under 18 years of age were

---

seized at checkpoints. The Fourth Division has also seconded officers to other divisions and brigades in the military, which are predominantly Sunni, in order to prevent defections. This meant that the division was stretched to its limits from the earliest days of the conflict. Indeed, the Annan peace plan, which came into play in March 2012, was an important resting period for the Fourth Division because its forces had been stretched across Syria for an entire year.

The Fourth Division’s presence was notable in part because of their tanks, which were recognizable for two reasons: they were the more recent T-72 models, as opposed to the T-62s that can be found more widely in the military, and they would often have “Fourth Division Monsters” ominously painted on them.

The Fourth Division was regularly used in conjunction with other forces. One soldier who defected from the Fourth Division relayed an account of such collaboration to Human Rights Watch:

“Hisham,” a soldier with the 555th Airborne Regiment, Fourth Division, said that his unit was deployed to conduct arrests in the Daraya neighborhood of Damascus in May 2011. He said: “We had batons, and the Shabiha had weapons; they wore black clothes. We were running after people, and those we grabbed wished they had died because of how badly we beat them. On that day, Captain Mohamed Harb was in charge. He used to shoot with his pistol at those we couldn’t catch. Then my unit and the Shabiha started breaking cars. The Shabiha said that these cars were used by protesters. We smashed them with stones and sticks. One of the guys in my unit didn’t want to participate, but one of the Shabiha put a gun to his head and said, “Do it, or I’ll kill you.””

---

149 Al-Jazeera, al-Firqa al-Rabî’ a fi al-Jaysh al-Sûrî [The Fourth Division in the Syrian Army], online, July 18, 2012, http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2012/7/18/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A, accessed February 6, 2015.
Shabiha were reported to have joined the Fourth Division in attacking civilians in the cities of Baniyas, Jableh, and Latakia around the same time as this event in May 2011.  

The Fourth Division’s involvement in quelling unrest started in the earliest days of the civil unrest, when demonstrations were still very much peaceful and free from international involvement. They were relied upon because they could be trusted with the difficult task of ruthlessly suppressing non-violent dissent. Because of the Division’s sectarian recruitment patterns, the popular perception that it is a sectarian division of the army, the secondment of ‘Alawi officers to predominantly non-‘Alawi branches of the military, the coordination with sectarian militias, and complicity in sectarian atrocities, it is reasonable to highlight the Fourth Division as a regime tool that has helped sectarianize the conflict in Syria. The heavy use of the Fourth Division before any international involvement negates the hoop test of the Military Evidence. This damages the Regime hypothesis, while strengthening the Opposition hypothesis.

**Militia Evidence**

An important aspect of regime defense has been the use of the Shabiha. While their make-up has come to encompass broader identities, they originally referred to groups of young ‘Alawi males from the Syrian coastal regions. These armed groups are notable for their loyalty to the Syrian regime and their wanton use of brutality. Their activities have been widely reported by activists, local organizations, the United Nations, and media, but denied by the Syrian authorities. While much Shabiha activity certainly reflects loyalty to the President, a substantial proportion of Shabiha behavior speaks to Stathis Kalyvas’ theory of the logic of violence in civil wars. Kalyvas argues that actions ‘on the ground’ often seem more related to local or private issues than to the war’s driving cleavage. This suggests that many Shabiha are perhaps participating in sectarianizing the conflict in order to enrich themselves through looting and bribery. In

---


addition, individual and local actors take advantage of the war to settle local or private conflicts often bearing little or no relation to the causes of the war or the goals of the belligerents. Evidence of Shabiha activity before international involvement in Syria would support the Opposition hypothesis and pass a hoop test. If there is such evidence, the Regime hypothesis categorically fails the Shabiha Evidence test. Therefore:

Militia Evidence: Shabiha militias were active from the start of the conflict in Syria and therefore provide evidence of the regime’s sectarian strategy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Regime Hypothesis</th>
<th>Opposition Hypothesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aspect of Diagnostic Evidence</td>
<td>Shabiha usage is only as a response to internationalization</td>
<td>Use of Shabiha militias sectarianized the conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claim</td>
<td>Shabiha used after external attempts to sectarianize the conflict</td>
<td>Shabiha accountable for violence irrespective of wider events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required Evidence</td>
<td>Fails hoop test</td>
<td>Passes hoop test</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The term Shabiha first became prevalent in the late 1970s, after Syria’s intervention in Lebanon in 1976 and the corresponding rise in smuggling from economically-open Lebanon to economically-isolated Syria. Up until the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, the term was used in a relatively narrow sense, to refer to groups of ’Alawi males from the Syrian coastal regions and their leaders, all of whom came from influential ’Alawi families. The term itself reflected the thuggish behavior that the Shabiha were known for. They made their living from smuggling electrical goods, tobacco, drugs, alcohol, antiquities, and extorting taxes at will. Noted for their brutality and cruelty, they were blindly devoted to their leaders, whom they usually referred to as mu’allim, teacher, or khāl, uncle. In this respect they were similar to

---

mafia organizations: they were well-known to both the central authorities, who turned a blind eye to their activities, and the local authorities, who collaborated with them and granted their leaders immunity from prosecution. Notably, the victims of the Shabiha were from all backgrounds, including many 'Alawis.\textsuperscript{157} However, as Syrian intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh notes: ‘Sectarianism is merely a facilitator to the fundamental goal of loyalty to the person of the leader. Indeed, the Shabiha have spread outside their original home and entered circles that are notable for the strength of their ties of personal loyalty, patronage and duty to the president.’\textsuperscript{158} Between the early 1990s and early 2011, the Shabiha’s activities were somewhat curtailed and kept under tighter regime control.

Throughout the Syrian conflict, the meaning of the term Shabiha has expanded. It has come to refer to the irregular militias which the regime uses to combat protestors across the country. In Aleppo, for example, the Shabiha is composed of powerful local families, the most famous of which is the Berri clan, known for its involvement in drugs and arms smuggling. Such families and their foot soldiers enjoy almost total control over their neighborhoods. They answer only to the regime and divide their profits with the regime’s local representatives.\textsuperscript{159} Sectarian affiliations ensure that the threshold for attaining their undying loyalty is lower than average. However, there is also an economic motive that must be taken into account. There are plenty who fight bravely for the regime because doing so costs them little and earns them much. One source claims that members of the Shabiha earn between 7,000 lira ($37) and 10,000 ($53) lira for working on Fridays and at least 2,000 lira ($11) for the others days of the week.\textsuperscript{160} Another source states that Shabiha leaders went into local markets and offered money to sales workers and cart owners, most of whom were teenagers, to join the Shabiha for 1,500 lira ($8) for every operation. One Shabiha fighter said

\textsuperscript{157} Saleh, ‘The Syrian Shabiha and their State,’ 1.
\textsuperscript{158} Saleh, ‘The Syrian Shabiha and their State,’ 2.
\textsuperscript{159} Saleh, ‘The Syrian Shabiha and their State,’ 4.
\textsuperscript{160} Saleh, ‘The Syrian Shabiha and their State,’ 5.
that this was nearly three times what he would usually make in a day. Shabiha leaders also offered to give these young men hashish and other drugs.\footnote{Akil Hussein, ‘A Shabiha visits with his mother,’ \textit{Syria Deeply}, online, November 21, 2013, \url{http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2013/11/2608/Shabiha-visits-mother/}, accessed February 8, 2015.}

The Shabiha’s numbers swelled with the release of hundreds of criminals from prison during a number of government amnesties before and during the early stages of the conflict. As such, the established Shabiha, those with close familial ties to the al-Asads, were positioned to command newly released criminals whose loyalty had been bought by the regime.\footnote{Stephen Starr, ‘Shabiha Militias and the Destruction of Syria,’ \textit{Combating Terrorism Center}, November 28, 2012, \url{https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/Shabiha-militias-and-the-destruction-of-syria}, accessed February 8, 2015.} In an interview with The Telegraph, a former intimate of Rami Makhlouf, the most prominent Syrian businessman, claimed that Makhlouf and Maher al-Asad were responsible for the Shabiha being given a new lease of life: "They told us they were worried that the army, in front of the world's media, couldn't use the necessary force to stop the protests. They couldn't be seen to be shooting the protestors. So their idea was: 'Let's keep our hands clean and create a paramilitary group to do the dirty work.'" The man continues: "Maher told us we could source Shabiha for our units from prisoners held in Homs and Tartous jails. Most 'Alawites who were on death row for their crimes were suddenly released. Once released, the ex-convicts did not have a choice; they were paid salaries but ordered to join the Shabiha."\footnote{Salwa Amor and Ruth Sherlock, ‘How Bashar al-Assad created the feared Shabiha militia: an insider speaks,’ \textit{The Telegraph}, online, March 23, 2014, \url{http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10716289/How-Bashar-al-Assad-created-the-feared-Shabiha-militia-an-insider-speaks.html}, accessed February 8, 2015.}

Another key feature binding the fate of Syria’s 'Alawites and Shabiha with the regime is the state-imposed segregation of 'Alawites in areas across the country. In the 1970s and 1980s, the state erected hundreds of enclosed military housing complexes to provide free housing to thousands of military officers, almost entirely 'Alawis, and their families. Areas such as Mezze 86 in southwest Damascus, a sea of poorly-constructed houses set upon a hill overlooking the city and located several hundred meters from the main presidential palace, are virtually inaccessible to outsiders. This area, built to house the
many thousands of ‘Alawites who moved to the capital to take up government jobs during Hafiz al-Asad’s presidency, was surrounded on all sides by Shabiha and checkpoints by mid-2012.¹⁶⁴ Such segregation only makes it easier for regime enemies to identify all ‘Alawites as regime supporters. Indeed, as happened during the war with the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s,¹⁶⁵ ‘Alawites are referred to as Nusayriyya by those who wanted to imply that ‘Alawites are non-Muslims. Considering recruitment strategies and actual tactics, and notwithstanding previously-mentioned motivations such as economic gain and Kalyvas’ theory of private grievances, there is certainly a dark perception of sectarianism that surrounds the Shabiha. It is this perception as much as the reality that makes the Shabiha a sectarian player in the conflict. Although Shabiha atrocities are only mentioned in 12% of the reports filed by the Local Coordination Committees in Syria between March 2011 and December 2012,¹⁶⁶ their presence was noted from the earliest days of peaceful protest in March 2011, alongside state security.¹⁶⁷ The massacre of 33 people at the hands of Shabiha was reported in April 2011 in Baniyas,¹⁶⁸ although a reminder that the Shabiha are not only motivated by sectarianism is shown in a report of Shabiha working alongside state security to loot shops and steal expensive equipment in Homs.¹⁶⁹ That the sectarian perception of the Shabiha does not always match reality is not necessarily important in studying sectarianism as perception can be as powerful as reality in such cases. An example of the non-sectarian violence inflicted by the Shabiha is the story of Malek Jandali.¹⁷⁰ In late July 2011, Syrian-

---

¹⁶⁴ Starr, ‘Shabiha Militias.’
¹⁶⁶ Own analysis of reports from: http://www.lccsyria.org
¹⁶⁸ Local Coordination Committees, Some of the Highlighted Abuses, 9.
¹⁶⁹ Local Coordination Committees, Some of the Highlighted Abuses, 18.
¹⁷⁰ Local Coordination Committees, Some of the Highlighted Abuses, 27.
American pianist Malek Jandali performed at a concert supporting the Syrian revolution in Lafayette Park, just a stone’s throw from the White House in Washington, DC. The efficiency and malice of the Shabiha would be revealed to him days later, when security forces and Shabiha broke into the Homs home of Jandali’s parents, Dr Mamoun Jandali, and Linah Droubi. They brutally beat the doctor, who had been carrying groceries into his home, and his wife, who was sleeping in bed, before locking them in a bathroom warning them: “this is a lesson to teach you how to raise your son Malek.” The intruders then smashed all of the furniture in the house before looting what they could.  

Other examples of Shabiha violence are more clearly immersed in a sectarian story: Eight children, aged eight months to nine years old, were among the 14 members of the Sunni Bahader family who were shot or hacked to death in a building in the mixed Karm al-Zeitoun neighborhood of Homs in January 2012 by Shabiha. Neighbors claimed that ‘Alawites who had remained in Karm al-Zeitoun mysteriously left four days before the attack, and the rumor was that they did so on the orders of the authorities. Other mass killings in the area around that time included ‘Alawites in micro-buses on the way to their villages near Homs, and Sunnis stopped at a roadblock while heading to work at a factory. Similar attacks were reported sporadically by the Local Coordination Committees throughout 2011 and 2012. The involvement of the Shabiha militias from the beginning of the conflict is well-documented, as is their planning and organization. As such this sectarianization of the conflict was not in response to internationalization and so the Regime hypothesis fails the Militia Evidence hoop test, heavily strengthening the Opposition hypothesis.

Anti-regime Evidence

Opposition groups have obviously played an important role in Syria since 2011. Such groups are so numerous, and so divided, that to conceive of the conflict in Syria as a civil war between government and opposition is misleading. As the bulk of this analysis looks at the process of sectarianization in Syria, it stops at the end of 2012. After this point, organizations espousing sectarian rhetoric and action dominated the fighting, no matter whom they were fighting against. As the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic stated at the start of 2013: ‘The dynamics of the conflict have become increasingly complex. The war has become colored by sectarianism, permeated by opportunistic criminality and aggravated by the presence of foreign fighters and extremist groups.’ The most prominent example of this is the Islamic State, formerly the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and before that the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI).

Before the start of 2013, opposition to the al-Asad regime steadily sectarianized and it is this process that is under investigation here. With that in mind, the Free Syrian Army, as the first opposition umbrella group, and Jabhat al-Nusra, as the leading jihadi organization at that time, will be discussed. It could be claimed that an element of ‘ethnic outbidding’ could be seen here, as attempts by different groups to show their sectarian credentials become increasingly extreme. If the Regime hypothesis is correct, non-Syrian and internationally-supported groups should bring increased sectarianism with them. Evidence of sectarian rhetoric and violence from non-Syrian groups, and the lack thereof from Syrian groups, would be a smoking-gun test as the evidence would be sufficient for the Regime hypothesis to pass the test. On the other hand, the absence of opposition sectarianism after greater international involvement would not mean it does not exist in private spheres. Therefore:

Anti-regime Evidence: The greater the influence of outside organizations on the fighting, the more sectarianized opposition to al-Asad will become. As sectarian groups become stronger relative to other opposition groups, the conflict becomes more sectarian.

"Anti-regime Evidence Table"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of Diagnostic Evidence</th>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Regime Hypothesis</th>
<th>Opposition Hypothesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claim</td>
<td>Greater external involvement cause the conflict to be sectarianized</td>
<td>Any sectarian responses are a result of regime behavior</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required Evidence</td>
<td>Opposition groups sectarianize conflict due to operational strength of sectarian groups</td>
<td>Opposition groups only utilize sectarianism as a response to the regime</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Result</td>
<td>Passes smoking-gun test</td>
<td>Fails smoking-gun test</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Syria’s armed opposition has always been a fractious array of rebel groups. From the summer of 2011, many groups referred to themselves as members of the Free Syrian Army, or FSA. This term, however, is not used in reference to a specific organization, but rather as a catch-all name referring to the Syrian armed opposition in general. In this way, the FSA label should be understood as a synonym for “the resistance,” similar to la resistance in France during WWII. The Free Syrian Army was originally formed by seven officers who had defected from the Syrian Army on July 29, 2011. In the video announcing their formation, the focus of the new organization was clearly on overthrowing the ‘criminal’ regime. From its formation the leaders of the Free Syrian Army also relied upon foreign support; its first commander, Colonel Riad al-As‘ad, was kept under close protection by Turkish intelligence. While the Turkish claimed throughout 2011 that it was only offering humanitarian space for the Free Syrian Army, there has been speculation that Turkish support went much deeper from the summer of 2011.

---

In addition, international funding for the Free Syrian Army reportedly came from across the region and into Turkey. By the end of 2011, Riad al-As’ad was publicly stating that the regime relied upon sectarian discrimination, whilst proclaiming that the Free Syrian Army was above such behavior. The major political opposition organizations took a similar approach to sectarianism. The claims of the opposition Syrian National Council, Syrian Revolutionary General Commission and Local Coordination Committees framed the regime as sectarian from the beginning, whilst at the same time consistently proclaimed their commitment to non-sectarianism while accusing the other side of instigating hatred. Najib Ghadbian, the Special Representative to the United States for the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, made comments similar to Riad al-As’ad, though this particular statement was admittedly in 2013. Ghadbian stated that the Coalition was ‘trying to create a Syria that is based on equal citizenship, respects all of its citizens, and in fact, celebrates the diversity that exists in Syria.’ This, again, shows a desire to appeal for support from all areas of Syrian society and not just one sect, which mirrors the discourse espoused by President al-Asad. This statement also implies that President al-Asad did not respect all citizens with the connotation being that the regime is dividing Syria along lines of identity. Accusing the al-Asad regime of fomenting sectarianism has been consistent since the start of the conflict, even if it is akin to calling a spade, a spade. As such, warnings of sectarianism have been an important part of opposition rhetoric throughout.

The opposition to the al-Asad regime was certainly not limited to exiled political groups and defected officers. Jabhat al-Nusra fighters started to filter into Syria towards the end of 2011, with the organization carrying out its first attack on December 23 in Damascus. It was created as a front for non-Iraqi members of al-Qa’ida in Iraq to get involved in the Syrian conflict, and headed by Abu Muhammad al-Golani.\(^{183}\) As the brain child of the sectarian ideologue Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who was killed in 2006, al-Qa’ida in Iraq, and by extension Jabhat al-Nusra, is steeped in a history of sectarian violence. It should therefore not come as a surprise that Jabhat al-Nusra’s leaders and fighters routinely refer to ‘Alawites as Nusayriyya, reflecting their belief that ‘Alawites are not Muslims. ‘Alawites are castigated for their mistreatment of Sunnis. That said, there has been an obvious effort to limit the amount of explicitly sectarian violence, in order to avoid putting off Syrians who might otherwise support them.\(^{184}\) While Jabhat al-Nusra limited their sectarian rhetoric and action, al-Qa’ida in Iraq, had no such qualms. Therefore, the stronger organizations that came into Syria from abroad often brought sectarian biases with them. Even non-sectarian groups such as the Free Syria Army used warnings of sectarianism to frame the regime as a threat. All of these organizations had strong links to abroad and, as they got more international support, sectarian violence and rhetoric began to flow more freely. However, the key reason for the rise in opposition sectarianism is that organizations based in the sectarian ideology of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi have been better organized and administered, just as well-funded as other organizations, and they have been able to call upon a larger pool of recruits through the transnational recruitment strategies highlighted by Malet’s theory.\(^{185}\) Essentially, more resources can be called upon when the group identifies as Sunni, than when a group identifies as solely Syrian. Added to the military experience and later Syrian successes of groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, these organizations have become increasingly powerful relative to


\(^{185}\) This is discussed earlier and in Malet’s Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts.
other actors involved in the conflict. This goes against the idea of ethnic outbidding because opposition to the regime did not become increasingly sectarian as groups tried to outbid each other in sectarian terms. Rather, increased sectarianization was brought in from sectarian-inclined organizations from outside the country. Therefore, the Regime hypothesis passes the Anti-regime Evidence smoking-gun test which strengthens the Regime hypothesis on internationalization leading to sectarianization.

Confirmation bias is always a concern in political science, particularly so when taking in evidence from a wide range of sources as this study does. Therefore, alternative explanations must always be considered when looking for the cause of a dependent variable. In this study of the Syrian conflict the dependent variable is the increased sectarianization of the conflict. The Regime and Opposition hypotheses were analyzed alongside one another and a more nuanced conclusion about the internationalized opposition was reached. However, there are other possible independent variables that could also explain the increased sectarianization of the conflict. The theory of ethnic outbidding could explain the process of sectarianization as opposition groups competed to show each was more anti-regime and its ʿAlawi supporters than the next. However, as explained earlier, this theory is based on the primordialist assumption that certain identities are enduring and unchanging. The Syrian conflict did not become increasingly sectarianized because different groups had a singular sectarian view of the regime. Rather, the opposition was overrun by a small number of powerful organizations from abroad that espoused sectarian rhetoric and violence, and met the regime head-on.

Another potential explanation for the increased sectarianization of the conflict is the general increase in violence that took place in Syria from the earliest days of civil unrest. If this was the case, we would expect to see at least some correlation between the increased violence of the conflict and the increased sectarianization of it. This did not happen. The regime used sectarian tactics and violence from March 2011. The opposition became militarized from late-2011 onwards. While claims were made by opposition groups and activists that the regime was sowing sectarian tension inside the country, the regime and its
supporters were not the victims of obvious sectarian attacks until late 2012. While violence increased throughout 2012, the conflict only rapidly sectarianized towards the end of that year.

Conclusions

The regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad has long claimed that the internationalization of the civil unrest in Syria led to the sectarianization of the unrest, and later conflict. This is the Regime hypothesis. Most opposition groups would argue the opposite; that the regime has been responsible for sectarianizing the conflict. This is the Opposition hypothesis. This analysis has used process tracing to show that the Regime hypothesis only holds for some opposition forces, ignoring the Syrian government’s pivotal role in making the conflict sectarian. Indeed, the regime’s claims of opposition sectarianism pre-date any actual opposition sectarianism. Meanwhile the Opposition hypothesis is correct but neglects the role of an increasingly foreign opposition in sectarianizing the conflict. There are certainly some mutually exclusive ideas between the two hypotheses, particularly around the basic premise of whether the regime or international actors are responsible for the Syrian conflict becoming increasingly sectarian. However, neither hypothesis accounts for the broader picture. Each hypothesis reflects a refusal to recognize the fact that calling others sectarian is itself a part of sectarianizing the conflict and strengthening groupism. With this in mind, the Regime and Opposition hypotheses do not entirely negate each other and are therefore congruent in forming a broader understanding of how sectarianism has come to dominate the Syrian conflict.

Syria Process Tracing Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Regime Hypothesis: (Internationalization – Sectarianization)</th>
<th>Opposition Hypothesis: (Regime – Sectarianization)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diagnostic Evidence</td>
<td>Presidential Evidence (Smoking-gun test)</td>
<td>Failed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Having observed the groupism that exists in the Syrian conflict, it can be seen how ‘Alawites are taken as a substantial entity to which interests and agency can be attributed.\textsuperscript{186} However, returning to Brubaker’s framework for considering ‘Alawites and Sunni as categories makes it easier to specify how people and organizations do things with, and to, sectarian categories. Treating sects as categories invites us to ask how, why, and in what contexts sectarian categories are used, or not used, to make sense of problems, to articulate affiliations, or to frame stories and self-understanding.\textsuperscript{187} Organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS have made the ‘Alawites in Syria appear to be a homogeneous block, united behind the president. The heightened threat of violence to ‘Alawites has therefore made this perception into more of a reality. Likewise, the sectarian recruitment to the Fourth Armored Division and the Shabiha, as well as their sectarian violence and coordination with each other, has cemented the perception of a sectarian regime.

The relationship between the internationalization of conflict and the sectarianization of conflict is partly indirect. On one hand, whether driven by fear or personal gain, sectarian strategies are a means to an end: loyalty. From the perspective of those not in the political or opposition elites, people will increasingly see their world through a sectarian lens if fear or personal gain reinforce such behavior. As such the internationalization of the conflict in Syria led to more violence, which led to the increased sectarianization of the conflict. On the other hand, internationalization appears to have a more direct

\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|}
\hline
Military Evidence (Hoop test) & Failed & Passed \\
\hline
Militia Evidence (Hoop test) & Failed & Passed \\
\hline
Anti-regime Evidence (Smoking-gun test) & Passed & Failed \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{186} Brubaker, Ethnicity without Groups, 8.  \\
\textsuperscript{187} Brubaker, Ethnicity without Groups, 24.
\end{flushright}
impact upon sectarianization as sectarian identities appeal to a broader audience than identities that are solely nationalist and for or against a regime. Without any sectarian history, or an established sectarian frame, the instrumental use of sectarian identities by either regimes or opposition figures simply won’t gain much support. Without militarily dominant opposition organizations buying into sectarian narratives, other identities and justifications will be used to threaten incumbent regimes. Without external support, regimes and opposition organizations will struggle to win the conflict. As such sectarian identities are a way of appealing to a broader pool of potential supporters and fighters. The increased sectarianization of the Syrian conflict is due to the increased dominance of opposition organizations that were willing to compete with the regime’s sectarian discourse and behavior. These organizations came from abroad and were supported from abroad. The regime’s sectarianism has also relied upon international backing but its sectarianism has existed since the conflict began.

While it has been popular in the media to discuss the creation of an ‘Alawi rump state, or even an “Alawitestan,” there is one important issue with this groupism: there seems to be no sign of a movement among ‘Alawites to set one up. While Bashar al-Asad still has the support he needs from key ‘Alawi families, it is likely fear of their fates in a rebel-controlled Syria that ensures this. While the most common perception both inside and outside of Syria is that ‘Alawites are one united block, intra-‘Alawi discontent is increasingly being reported, a reality that questions sectarian groupism in Syria.

Chapter III: Sectarianism in the Iraq Conflict

Just as sectarian identities have been mobilized in the Syrian conflict, extensive sectarianization of the conflict in Iraq took place between the beginning of 2005 and the beginning 2007. International involvement was important in these processes of sectarianization however, this is not to say that sectarianism did not exist through the Iraqi and Syrian history. Indeed, ‘one of the most widely peddled fallacies regarding Iraq and the Arab world is that they were strangers to sectarianism before 2003.’\(^{191}\) The Iraq case between 2005 and 2007 is suitable for testing the Syrian hypothesis because the cases are similar. Both are cases of an insurgency against an incumbent regime with the phenomenon of scientific interest being how sectarianism comes to play increasingly important roles within conflicts.

The story of sectarianism in Iraq is strikingly similar to the Syrian tale of inter-sect relations. While the contexts in Iraq and Syria are different, the dynamics of sectarianism are very much similar throughout the two countries’ histories; sometimes sect matters and sometimes it doesn’t. The purpose of this chapter is to implement the second key use of process tracing: testing hypotheses. Therefore, this chapter will test the findings of the Syria chapter. This chapter analyzes the sectarian history of modern Iraq using Brubaker’s framework. This framework highlights the fallacies of primordialism, and the strengths of constructivist and instrumentalist approaches to sectarianism. After tracking this history up to the outbreak of sectarianized conflict, process tracing will be used to look into competing claims about the causes of the increased sectarianization of conflict in Iraq.

Sectarianism in Iraqi History

A prized colonial asset since the Ottoman era, the area making up modern Iraq passed from Ottoman to British control during the first decades of the twentieth century. The British occupied Basra in November 1914, expanded their sphere of influence to include Baghdad in March 1917, and finally sealed control

over Mosul in November 1918. In April 1920, these three provinces were united under the Mandate for Iraq, which was assigned to Great Britain at the San Remo Conference. A revolt broke out between July and October 1920 and this threatened British authority in the area.\textsuperscript{192} In response, and in an attempt to cut their losses, the British authorities dissolved their direct military occupation government and devolved real power to a local Iraqi civil administration in which the British maintained the last word on state policies and decisions. A Council of State headed by ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Ghaylani was installed as the provisional government for two years. The initial make up of the Council of State favored Sunni notables. Six out of the eight ministers belonged to prominent Sunni families, one was Jewish, and one Shiʿi. The Shiʿi concerns were exacerbated by the fact that the British had appointed Sunnis to high profile positions, such as governors and local administrators, in predominantly Shiʿi areas throughout the central and southern Euphrates regions, whereas Shiʿa were mostly appointed in low-ranking bureaucratic and administrative posts.\textsuperscript{193} Although the Shiʿi may constitute the major part of the Iraqi population, they are not a single political community. However, the political activities of many Shiʿi could hardly be understood outside the context of a state dominated by small cliques drawn from the minority Sunni Arabs of Iraq, as Iraq had been since its inception.\textsuperscript{194} This marked Shiʿi politics in the 1920s and 1930s. The authority of the religious leaders of Najaf, Karbala, and al-Kazimiyya was linked to powerful rural, tribal interests in southern Iraq which provided a means of mobilizing large numbers of urban and rural Shiʿi. However, since that time, with the changes in the economic and social foundations of the state, different and sometimes opposing currents marked Shiʿi politics. Some identified with Arab nationalism, in the belief that this might bridge the gap with the Sunni Arabs and finally grant the Shiʿi of Iraq equality of opportunity. Others believed this could be achieved through a distinctly Iraqi nationalism. Many still

revered their leading religious leaders, but the increasingly dominant narrative of Arab nationalism meant that large numbers of Shi‘i were torn between their respect for their communal leaders, often Persian by origin, and their desire to play a full part in the life of an Iraqi state. If they moved too close to one side, they found themselves condemned by the other. These divisions within Shi‘i communities show what groupism and homogenizing Shi‘i identity would miss. For some people being Shi‘i had political implications for their support of the central government, for others it didn’t.

Such perceptions persisted after Iraq gained independence in 1932. In March 1935, a group of Shi‘i lawyers worked with Ayatollah Kashif al-Ghita‘ on drafting a 12-point manifesto addressed to King Ghazi. The document, known as the Najaf Charter, lamented sectarian discrimination against the Shi‘i majority, called for appointing Shi‘i judges in predominantly Shi‘i areas to the Iraqi Cassation Court, and demanded that development projects be evenly distributed across the country, especially in the south.

Throughout much of the 20th century, the political scene in Iraq was not too perturbed by sectarian identities. However, this should not be taken to mean that there was no “sectarian issue,” or that the past was simply “a-sectarian.” Instead, and particularly in the latter half of the century, this issue was easily marginalized because, in Iraq and the Arab world, it was an issue of the marginalized: namely, Shi‘a and more specifically those among them whose lives and identities were embedded in Shi‘i social and religious structures. What those who dwell on the supposedly a-sectarian past overlook is that while sectarian identities were indeed barely relevant for much of 20th century Iraq, there nevertheless existed a differentiated Shi‘i Iraqi identity that grated against the nation-state’s homogenizing tendencies and increasing authoritarianism.

Until the final Ba‘thist coup in 1968, Iraq remained somewhat politically unstable. The leader of the first military coup d’état, which took place in July 1958, was Brigadier ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim. During his

---

197 Haddad, ‘A Sectarian Awakening.’
short-lived rule, Qasim, who hailed from mixed Sunni-Shiʿi parentage, adopted policies that had the potential to undermine the bases of the dominance of the traditional power elite in Iraq. He abolished the conventional practice of greatly limiting the admission of Shiʿa into the military academy and military staff college. He pushed for instituting meritocratic criteria in the selection of appointees, regardless of their religious, sectarian, ethnic, tribal, or other background. Meanwhile, the Shiʿi clergy took offence at Personal Status Law No. 188 of January 1959 which gave women the right to initiate divorce, and banned polygamy except when authorized by a judge. Qasim was killed in a second military coup in February 1963, but such a-sectarian policies did not die with him.

In the 1970s, Saddam Hussein called for wide-ranging reforms that would enable women to study and become economically active. However, by the mid-1980s these opportunities were curtailed as a consequence of the war against Iran and Saddam Hussein’s obsessive fear of Khomeinism. He also reversed his policy on religion. Once the nationwide faith campaign had been launched to promote religiosity, women were encouraged to stay at home and produce children, in part to reduce Iran’s demographic superiority and to make up for the huge loss of life in the Iran-Iraq war. The façade of a faith campaign did not stop the continual repression of religious groups, be they Wahhabist or Shiʿi. Wahhabism was banned from the early 1990s, and the death penalty imposed on its followers. From the mid-1990s onwards Saddam injected Islamism into his party’s ruling ideology, although examples of the state using blatantly sectarian rhetoric were rare. However, this Islamism, based as it was on Arab nationalism, relied on a passive but nonetheless important affinity with Sunni Islam. In addition, it was Sunni Islam that was taught in state schools, and various aspects of Shiʿi religious practice were banned under the Baʿth regime. However, the Baʿth regime defined Iraqis not by their religion but by their support and loyalty to the party, unlike the situation after 2003. Kurds, Shiʿa, and Christians were all part

198 Osman, Sectarianism in Iraq, 75.
of the system and were involved in its operations and intelligence services. The centrality of loyalty for Saddam Hussein and the Ba’th Party led inevitably to a significant reliance on tribal, family, and kin associations. The intelligence services, for instance, recruited relatively large numbers from clans that owed total loyalty to Saddam Hussein.\footnote{Sassoon, \textit{Saddam Hussein’s Ba’th Party}, 11.} Thus, the increased sectarian entrenchment of post-2003 Iraq and the broader Middle East was in no small part the cumulative result of two legacy issues. The first was failed nation-building. The second, a counterproductive and ultimately futile attempt to negate sectarian identities in the name of enforced and restrictively defined notions of national unity.\footnote{Haddad, ‘A Sectarian Awakening.’} Despite official narratives that attempted to move beyond sectarianism, Shi’i islamiast organization became more active inside Iraq after the 1979 Iranian revolution.\footnote{Tripp, \textit{A History of Iraq}, x.} In part inspired by this period, Shi’i activists felt the need to mobilize, as Shi‘a, for Shi‘i rights and better Shi‘i representation since the establishment of the modern state. The execution of Shi‘i leader Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr exacerbated the existing anger of many in Shi‘i communities, as did the expelling of over 40,000 Iraqi Shi‘i to Iran, both of which took place in April 1980.\footnote{Tripp, \textit{A History of Iraq}, x.} The Iran-Iraq war began months later, further complicating Sunni-Shi‘i relations in the region. It was therefore unsurprising after the Gulf War of 1991 that a largely Shi‘i uprising took place in the south of Iraq, while Kurdish protests were taking place in the north of the country. In many ways, sectarianism in pre-2003 Iraq was an issue of state-Shi‘i relations rather than one of Sunni-Shi‘i relations. Put differently, prior to 2003, Iraqi governments never had to contend with a Sunni identity or autonomous Sunni social or religious structures simply because there was no such thing as an Iraqi Sunni identity in any meaningful sense. Given that Iraqis have been so thoroughly socialized into viewing sectarianism in irredeemably negative terms, the term’s association with Shi‘i activism lent Shi‘i identity an often apologetic flavor driven by the need to deflect accusations

\footnote{Sassoon, \textit{Saddam Hussein’s Ba’th Party}, 11.}
\footnote{Haddad, ‘A Sectarian Awakening.’}
\footnote{Tripp, \textit{A History of Iraq}, x.}
\footnote{Tripp, \textit{A History of Iraq}, x.}
of sectarianism. However, ‘when discussing sectarian identity with Iraqis, barring the ideologically committed extremists, the vacillation between assertions of sectarian harmony and criticism of the other are immediately obvious and reflect the fluidity of sectarian identity.’

**Beyond the Invasion**

At the outset of the US-led 2003 invasion of Iraq, the main opposition forces against Saddam Hussein were ethno-sectarian parties. Occupation forces and the promises that they pursued helped to enshrine identity politics as the key marker of Iraqi politics post-2003. A pertinent illustration comes by way of the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) appointed in July 2003, shortly after regime change. In the name of creating a representative Iraqi governing body, the composition of the IGC was strictly based on the assumed demographic weight of Iraq’s ethno-sectarian communities; therefore, 13 Shi’i Arabs, 5 Sunni Arabs, 5 Kurds, a Turkoman and a Christian were appointed. Regardless of intentions, this crystallized and reinforced identity politics as the basis for the new Iraq. However, this outcome was something that the sectarian parties, the ones who were the main opposition forces, advocated before 2003. From a Sunni Arab perspective, the Shi’i parties and personalities that came to power weren’t just politicians who happened to be Shi’i. They were politicians whose political outlook was firmly rooted in a Shi’i-centric, sect-centric view of things. The importance of sectarian identity to the Shi’i opposition in exile can be gauged through the ‘Declaration of the Shi’a of Iraq.’ Signed in London in January 2002, the document clearly strives for ‘full respect for the national, ethnic, religious, and sectarian identities of all Iraqis.’

What makes the Declaration important to a discussion of early post-2003 developments is that it shows the centrality of sectarian identity to many of those who were to gain political prominence after the fall of

---

205 Haddad, ‘A Sectarian Awakening.’
207 Haddad, ‘A Sectarian Awakening.’
the Ba’th Party. The Iraq Shi’i opposition in exile was so traumatized by what it regarded as sectarian discrimination and so focused on the sorrows of their group that their overriding ambitions were a mixture of righting sectarian wrongs, asserting the Shi’a’ majority status and ensuring that Iraqis would never again be victim to sectarian discrimination. By 2003, Iraq nationalism, despite being as emotive a sentiment as it had ever been, had become diffuse with the receding of the state in the 1990s and its concurrent loss of legitimacy. Receding state nationalism, such as that evident in the 1990s, leads to a diffusion of nationalist sentiment along communal lines as the state loses its ability to propagate an overarching and unifying national identity. Therefore, by 2003, the grounds for sectarian politics were already in place as a result of the salience of sectarian identities and the absence of clear political alternatives. However, the situation was exacerbated and the politicization of sectarian identity was propelled by the unrestrained assertion of sectarian identity, returning exiles, the occupation authorities and the political vacuum that Iraqis found themselves in after the Ba’th. Over time, Sunni Arabs were compelled to reinvent themselves as a sectarian group because of the empowerment of Shi’i-centric political actors, the institutionalization of identity politics, and the fixation of both the Coalition and most of its Iraqi interlocutors on ethnic or sectarian identities. In this environment, conflict and violence in Iraq steadily gathered pace. The ensuing spread of sectarian violence owed much to the disappearance of a centralized authority and the creation of a security vacuum. The withdrawal of institutional power from society created the space for both sectarian entrepreneurs to mobilize society and the purveyors of violence to exploit lawlessness. The initial causes of the security vacuum in Iraq lies in the lack of troops the invading forces brought with them, then the disbanding of the

---

210 Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 148-149.
212 Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 145.
213 Haddad, ‘A Sectarian Awakening.’
Iraqi army. Additionally, the de-Ba‘thification pursued by the US occupation purged the civil service of its top layer of management, making between 20,000 and 120,000 people unemployed.\textsuperscript{214} Leaving aside several specific spikes, the number of violent civilian deaths steadily increased from May 2003 until February 2006. Iraq Body Count estimates that the number of civilians killed daily rose steadily, peaking at 73 a day between March 2006 and March 2007.\textsuperscript{215} By the time Iraq’s first post-invasion national elections were held in 2005, the conflict undoubtedly met the widely-accepted scholarly definition of a civil war, which places the casualty threshold at 1,000 battlefield deaths per year in a primarily internal conflict pitting central government forces against an insurgent force capable of effective resistance.\textsuperscript{216} The rate of violent civilian deaths continued to steeply increase after February 22, 2006, when the ‘Askari Shrine in the northern Iraqi city of Samarra’, a site revered in Shi‘i Islam, was destroyed in an incident calculated to accelerate the sectarian murder rate.\textsuperscript{217} Throughout 2005 and 2006, this conflict took on an overtly sectarian tone as both sides increasingly deployed religious imagery to justify the struggle. Those now in charge of the state rallied their supporters and demonized their enemies through appeals to Shi‘i religious imagery and the defense of their community, defined in terms of religious exclusion. Those battling to remove them from power deployed a radicalized Sunni Islamism to justify their own use of violence, claiming to defend the community from those forces wishing to drive them into the political wilderness.\textsuperscript{218} By 2006, it was no longer possible to simply blame Arab fighters for sectarian attacks, nor was it possible to deny the existence of Iraqi Sunni and Iraqi Shi‘i militants and their involvement in sectarian violence. Street battles between rival Shi‘i and Sunni militias, forced expulsions of the sectarian other, the bombing of mosques on both sides of the sectarian divide and the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{214} Dodge, \textit{Iraq}, 36-38.
\bibitem{217} Dodge, \textit{Iraq}, 17.
\bibitem{218} Dodge, \textit{Iraq}, 53.
\end{thebibliography}
pervasive fear of the sectarian other hardened sectarian identity and fostered a distinctly aggressive sectarianism amongst many Sunnis and Shi’a. Calls for ecumenical peace and harmony persisted but did not change the on-the-ground facts of sectarian civil war where one’s sectarian identity became a death warrant in certain areas.\textsuperscript{219} It is this period that will now be analyzed through process tracing.

**Sectarianizing the Conflict**

While Iraq was already in a state of civil war by the end of 2005, it was the following 18 months that saw the most dramatic sectarianizing of the conflict there. Process tracing will be used to ascertain whether the conclusions from the Syrian case stand up to evidence from the Iraqi case. If the hypothesis from the Syria case is correct:

**Sectarianization Hypothesis:** The increased sectarianization of the Iraqi conflict is due to the increased dominance of opposition organizations that were willing to compete with the regime’s sectarian discourse and behavior. These organizations came from abroad and were supported from abroad.

It has already been shown how sectarian politics was institutionalized by the CPA and key Iraqi political figures who returned from exile after the 2003 invasion. As such, sectarianization of the political sphere had already taken place by the time conflict reached civil war levels. Indeed, the ethno-sectarian nature of the major oppositional forces that came to be empowered after 2003 affected views toward the legitimacy of the entire post-Saddam order.\textsuperscript{220}

Diagnostic evidence will now be analyzed to see whether the Sectarianization hypothesis holds. This evidence focuses on regime behavior, and the actions of key Sunni and Shi’i militias, and how international actors affected each of these. In testing the Syria hypothesis it is particularly important to avoid confirmation bias, whereby alternative variables or hypotheses are overlooked in favor of confirming the Syria hypothesis. Due consideration has been given to this throughout the following pages.

\textsuperscript{219} Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 185.
\textsuperscript{220} Haddad, ‘A Sectarian Awakening.’

64
Pro-regime Evidence

If the Syria hypothesis is correct, sectarianism on the part of the Iraqi government will pre-date the increased sectarianization of the conflict in Iraq. This is because the increased sectarianization accounts for the sectarian response by opposition organizations to the regime. Therefore, sectarianism should remain a consistent strategy on the part of the government after the first parliamentary elections in 2005. This should be irrespective of international support or interference. Evidence of government sectarianism before 2006 would confirm this hypothesis while an absence of this evidence would be a blow to the Sectarianization hypothesis. If there is evidence supporting the Sectarianization hypothesis, the relevance of part of the hypothesis is affirmed without being confirmed and so passes the hoop test. If such evidence is absent, the hypothesis is eliminated. Therefore:

Pro-regime Evidence: There should be evidence of sectarian policies or behavior on the part of the government before the 2005 to 2007 period, and such behavior should remain constant irrespective of international interference during this period.

Pro-regime Evidence Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of Diagnostic Evidence</th>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Sectarianization Hypothesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claim</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sectarianism used by government irrespective of opposition and international actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required Evidence</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sectarian policies and recruitment irrespective of opposition and international actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Result</td>
<td></td>
<td>Passes hoop test</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the run-up to the first set of post-invasion elections in January 2005, the Ministry of Defense and the Iraqi Army were perceived by Iraqi politicians in government to be under close American control. The Ministry of Interior, however, appeared to be independent of US scrutiny and controlled the Special
Police Commandos, later renamed the National Police.\(^{221}\) After its victory in the January 2005 elections, the United Iraqi Alliance appointed Baqir Jabr al-Zubeidi as interior minister. Al-Zubeidi was a former commander in the Badr Brigade. His first move to ‘spring clean’ the ministry consisted of widespread dismissals and then a frenetic hiring process, employing as many militiamen from his Badr Brigade as possible. Throughout 2005 and into 2006, the Special Police Commandos and National Police, controlled from the Ministry of Interior, acted as a major sectarian death squad, frequently resorting to extrajudicial execution and torture.\(^{222}\) The Badr Brigade was created, funded, and trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, who also comprised its officer corps until 2003.\(^{223}\)

The ties between the authorities and militias such as the Badr Brigade and the Mahdi Army have been widely reported. The police played a central part in the Mahdi Army’s strategy in several ways: providing legal cover to Mahdi Army fighters even when these clearly engaged in sectarian attacks; allowing the militia to operate with impunity; steering clear of Mahdi Army-controlled areas; and letting its militants pass through checkpoints unimpeded. In January 2007, a police colonel lamented: “Unfortunately, the police play no role in Mahdi Army-controlled neighborhoods. Sadr City police do virtually nothing. What happens defies all logic: Mahdi Army members punish the police, not the other way around.” Most egregiously, and until Muqtada al-Sadr’s call for a freeze in militia activities, the police appear to have taken an active part in the civil war in close coordination with the Mahdi Army. They purportedly retaliated against Sunni attacks even when they were not targeted and handed over Sunni detainees to Mahdi Army fighters who could arbitrarily execute them.\(^{224}\) That said, the relationship between the Mahdi Army and Iraqi authorities was complex. While the political wing of Muqtada al-Sadr’s movement took


\(^{222}\) Dodge, *Iraq*, 63.

\(^{223}\) Dodge, *Iraq*, 66.

29 seats in the December 2005 elections in Iraq, and joined the victorious United Iraqi Alliance coalition under Ibrahim al-Ja’afari, the military wing of his movement, known as the Mahdi Army, was often involved in fighting against the Iraqi military. On one occasion, 48 members of the Mahdi Army were arrested, including a public official from al-Sadr’s office.

Following the destruction of the ‘Askari Shrine, Shi’i militiamen went on the rampage for two days, killing dozens, even hundreds. The government’s failure to react and control the generalized violence was taken as further evidence of its partiality in a widening conflict. According to US General David Petraeus, former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Ja’afari was not only ineffective but also sectarian. He refused to impose a curfew to stop the retaliatory killing after the ‘Askari Shrine in Samara was bombed; he said the Shi’a needed to “let off steam.”

In 2005 and 2006, previously affluent suburbs on the western side of the Tigris, including Mansour and Yarmouk, were targeted for violent population transfers. By early 2007, these districts, including the neighborhoods of ‘Amiriyya and Ghazaliyya, had become largely deserted, their markets and shops closed and their remaining residents trapped in their homes. The militia campaigns of murder and intimidation coincided with the withdrawal of banking services and healthcare from the Sunni residential areas on the west bank of the river. Such evidence suggests that these services were withdrawn from targeted areas in coordination with the violent campaign to drive Sunnis from Baghdad.

In early 2006, Nouri al-Maliki was chosen as the new prime minister because of the strong backing he received from followers of Muqtada al-Sadr. The Sadrists were rewarded for their decisive support of al-Maliki with several ministerial portfolios, including health and transport. Mahdi Army fighters were employed in

---

227 Linda Robinson, Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way out of Iraq, (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2009), n.
228 Dodge, Iraq, 68.
large numbers in the Facilities Protections Service of the ministries they controlled. This allowed them to turn hospitals and other medical facilities into military outposts in the civil war. Doctors and senior officials opposing the Sadrists were murdered or driven out. More sinisterly, there is strong evidence that wounded or ill Sunni were murdered.\textsuperscript{229} One Mahdi Army commander even stated: “We don’t need orders to do this [kill Sunnis] because we have a very clear fatwa on this matter: ‘it is permissible to kill those who hate the Twelver Shi’i Imams.’”\textsuperscript{230}

Another manifestation of the increasingly sectarian fighting came on April 18, 2006, when the Sunni ‘Azamiyya neighborhood in Baghdad was surrounded by armed men from the ministry of the interior, which at the time was largely dominated by the Badr Brigade. Their attempt to enter was repelled. On July 9, 2006, however, the predominantly Sunni Jihad district of Baghdad was surrounded early in the morning by the Mahdi Army and was emptied of all inhabitants. At least seventy people were killed in the process, and many of the rest ended up in camps just outside their former neighborhood.\textsuperscript{231} Mahdi Army gunmen reportedly set up checkpoints, checked identification and then dragged Sunnis from their cars and shot them.\textsuperscript{232}

This evidence shows how the Iraqi authorities were linked to militias that carried out sectarian attacks. This appears to have originally been linked to policies of imposing a victor’s peace over Iraq for the political leaders who had a sectarianized view of what the post-Saddam order should look like in Iraq. Militias such as the Mahdi Army and the Badr Brigade were generally an extension of politics. Once in positions of power, while supported by international backers, Iraqi authorities consistently privileged sectarian allies and threatened sectarian enemies. Therefore, the Sectarianization hypothesis is affirmed and passes the Pro-regime hoop test. As with the Syria case, internationalization did not directly affect

\textsuperscript{229} Dodge, \textit{Iraq}, 68-69.
\textsuperscript{230} International Crisis Group, \textit{Iraq’s Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabilizer?}, July 11, 2006, accessed March 5, 2015, 22.
\textsuperscript{231} Al-Ali, \textit{The Struggle for Iraq’s Future}, 105.
\textsuperscript{232} International Crisis Group, \textit{Iraq’s Muqtadr al-Sadr}, 23.
sectarianism on the part of the government. Rather, international support was intimately linked with putting a sectarianized constitution, as well as the CPA, in place but not in sectarianizing conflict in the country.

**Anti-regime Evidence**

If the Sectarianization hypothesis is correct, sectarianism on the part of the insurgency should be closely tied to international intervention. This is because the strongest militias involved in the insurgency in Iraq at this time should have had substantial international support. These organizations should have had sectarian attitudes woven into their fabric while they shaped the conflict in 2005 and 2006. Therefore, it can be expected that al-Qa’ida in Iraq, as it was known after October 2005, carried out an increased number of attacks upon Shi’i targets. Notwithstanding the localized feuds which Kalyvas accounts for in civil conflicts, and that wanton Shabiha looting in Syria showed, if there are consistent attacks upon targets of a different sects it is highly likely that there is sectarian motivation behind such behavior. If such evidence is proven, it would support the Sectarianization hypothesis because it would show the increased dominance of organizations, supported from abroad, that were willing to compete with the regime’s sectarian discourse and behavior. This would be another hoop test as if the Sectarianization hypothesis passes the Anti-regime Evidence test part of it would be affirmed without being confirmed, whereas a failure would eliminate the hypothesis. Therefore:

Anti-regime Evidence: There should be an increase in attacks on sectarian targets by the militarily strongest organizations. These will be heavily supported from abroad.

**Anti-regime Evidence Table**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of Diagnostic Evidence</th>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Sectarianization Hypothesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claim</td>
<td><a href="#">Sectarianization of conflict increases as military dominance of militias supported from abroad increases</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From 2005 onwards, the insurgency began to consolidate around a smaller number of larger, better-organized and better-funded groups. Al-Qa’ida in Iraq was one of these organizations that justified political violence in terms of a militant, violent and sectarian political Islam. The increased ideological and organizational coherence of the insurgency allowed the Jordanian Islamist Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, the head of al-Qa’ida in Iraq, to gain influence over its radical Islamist wing. Al-Zarqawi’s superior financial backing, his organization’s propaganda skills, and its sheer brutality allowed it to shape the ideological direction of those fighting in the insurgency. During the first six months of 2005, an estimated 130 suicide bombs were detonated, the vast majority against sectarian targets.

There was a significant escalation in the conflict after the January 2005 parliamentary elections, which brought to power a number of political forces that were affiliated to violent militias. The political atmosphere at the time was so tense that many parties did not even conceal the fact that they had armed wings. After the constitutional referendum and the December 2005 elections, the conflict entered a new phase, bloodier than anything the country had witnessed in its modern history. The exact cause of the escalation is difficult to trace. Some argued that the real upsurge in violence came after the formation of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s first government in May 2006. There is significant evidence to support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Required Evidence</th>
<th>Increase in sectarian attacks by dominant organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Result</td>
<td>Passes hoop test</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

233 Dodge, *Iraq*, 60.
this view: Iraqi and US military deaths remained essentially stable from January to May 2006, but more than doubled from June 2006 onwards.\textsuperscript{236}

The sectarian bent of al-Qa’ida in Iraq is clear from the rhetoric of its original leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi: “We will not have victory over the original infidels, until we fight the apostate infidels, along with the original infidels. The Islamic conquests that occurred during the reign of the four rightly-guided Caliphs only occurred after the Arabian Peninsula was cleansed of apostates.”\textsuperscript{237} In an audio statement released on September 14, 2005, as U.S. and Iraqi forces were in the midst of an offensive against insurgents in Tal ‘Afar, a town in Ninawa governorate, Zarqawi railed against the attackers, whom he accused of having declared “a comprehensive war against the Sunni people” and announced in turn “a comprehensive war against the rejecters all over Iraq, wherever and whenever they are found”. Zarqawi’s use of the term rejecters is seen by some as an attempt to create the ideological justification for the killing of Shi’a.\textsuperscript{238} One Shi’i Iraqi told the International Crisis Group:

“The terrorists are targeting the Shi’a. This is a sectarian war against the Shi’a. Our government lied to us when it promised to protect us Shi’a. We were persecuted under Saddam, and we are still being attacked today. The Americans said they came to liberate us, but the situation is getting worse. It is because we are Shi’a that we are being attacked and beheaded. They say we are traitors and that we are with the Americans.”\textsuperscript{239}

The international influence on the organization is also clear as over 120 foreign fighters were joining each month.\textsuperscript{240} Zarqawi’s pledge of loyalty to al-Qa’ida leader Osama bin Laden in October 2004 merely underscores the international support for al-Qa’ida in Iraq. Al-Qa’ida in Iraq launched repeated mass-casualty attacks using car bombs or suicide bombers aimed at Shi’i neighborhoods and mosques. In the wake of these attacks, militias claiming to represent the Shi’i community would retaliate, abducting and

\textsuperscript{239} International Crisis Group, \textit{The Next Iraqi War?}, 17.
murdering Sunni men.\textsuperscript{241} The destruction of the ‘Askari Shrine in Samara’ on February 22, 2006 was possibly the single most important act in sectarianizing the conflict in Iraq. In retaliation for the attack on the ‘Askari Shrine, Sunni mosques across Baghdad became targets. By the end of 2006, Baghdad had been transformed into a series of fortified ghettos, where rising violence had reorganized the city’s population along sectarian lines.\textsuperscript{242} This violence reached new heights in November 2006 when over 200 people were killed and 250 were wounded in a series of bombings and mortar attacks on Sadr City in Baghdad, an area widely perceived to be a Shi`i stronghold.\textsuperscript{243}

After the January 2005 elections in Iraq, al-Qa`ida in Iraq became one of the militarily strongest organizations fighting in the conflict there. With its foreign support and sectarian ideology, it preceded to shape the insurgency in Iraq, with an increase in attacks on sectarian targets following behind. Iraqi Shi`i were perceived by al-Qa`ida in Iraq to have been anti-Sunni and supporting the US occupation. The organization therefore led a process that culminated in the ghetto-ization of parts of the country, particularly Baghdad. This affirms the Sectarianization hypothesis and so the Anti-regime Evidence hoop test is passed. As with the Syria case, internationalization of the opposition to Iraqi authorities installed by the US-led coalition enabled the conflict in Iraq to become increasingly sectarian.

**Conclusion**

Because the Pro-regime Evidence and Anti-regime Evidence hoop tests are both passed, the Sectarianization hypothesis appears to be affirmed. This hypothesis, deduced from the analysis of sectarianism in the Syrian conflict, asserts that the increased sectarianization of the Syria conflict is due to the increased dominance of opposition organizations that were willing to compete with the regime’s sectarian discourse and behavior. These organizations came from abroad and were supported from abroad. The regimes in both Iraq and Syria had long sought to suppress sectarian expression in favor of

\textsuperscript{241} Dodge, *Iraq*, 58.
\textsuperscript{242} Dodge, *Iraq*, 59.
nationalism. However, this led to latent feelings of victimization that could be asserted through well-established sectarian framing of conflict once state authority started to diminish. This turn was not inevitable, as a primordial understanding of identity might claim. Rather, it took sectarian entrepreneurs who were well-supported from abroad, and usually came from abroad, to stoke such tensions. An entirely instrumentalist view of sectarian identities misses the fact that sectarian identities have existed since the earliest days of Islamic history. However, the mobilization of such identities to justify recruitment and violence relies on facts, myths, symbols, and perceptions, all of which can be constructed and reconstructed depending on context.
Conclusion

This thesis has argued that the increased sectarianization of the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts was due to the increased dominance of international opposition organizations that were willing to compete with the regimes’ sectarian discourse and behavior. The governments set the scene and the strongest opposition groups wrote the story.

Sectarian identities are not primordial in the sense of being enduring, unchanging, and homogeneous. They are fluid social categories whose importance waxes and wanes depending on specific contexts. This thesis has shown, through a framework articulated by Rogers Brubaker, that violence causes groupism. That is, people feel a stronger affinity for an identity if they are being threatened due to that very identity.

In the Syrian and Iraqi cases analyzed in this thesis, the master cleavage has become along sectarian lines. Even so, many people have gone along with this cleavage for personal gain; Shabiha looting is a clear example of this.

While the governing authorities have been responsible for making a sectarian frame into a feasible framing of the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, sectarianism was never a consistently important feature in either country throughout the twentieth century. Shiʿi disdain for Sunni rulers throughout the twentieth century in Iraq was neither constant nor a singular unifying force. Some Shiʿi followed religious leaders devoutly whilst others were able to put state nationalism first. In Syria, Sunni hatred for ʿAlawi leaders was not a dominant theme after Hafiz al-Asad came to power. Rather, most sections of society, including different sects, were co-opted into military or political structures, even the president’s inner circle included people from various sects. Sectarian discontent peaked around the massacre in the city of Hama in 1982 but eventually subsided as such attitudes were discouraged in favor of loyalty to the president.

This thesis has significance because of its implications for external involvement in civil conflicts. By avoiding groupism, which would reify huge groups of people as simply ʿAlawis, for example, it becomes clearer that many ʿAlawites didn’t actually benefit from al-Asad family rule. Tribal, socio-economic, and
political splits among ʿAlawites in Syria meant that many Sunnis stood to gain more from Bashar al-Assad staying in power. Awareness of divisions such as this could encourage support from different international actors in favor of certain ʿAlawi communities. This would be a step towards dispelling the notion that all ʿAlawites support President Bashar al-Assad. Of course, as violence has rumbled on in Syria, more ʿAlawites have closed ranks behind Bashar al-Assad, whether out of fear, loyalty, or personal gain. Many ʿAlawites are still not supportive but a common perception is that the president is ʿAlawi and all ʿAlawites support him. This is where perceptions and myths become just as important as facts and reality.

That internationalization of the opposition led to sectarianization of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq has implications for border control in such cases. Flows of foreign fighters, organizations, and weapons, would have been inhibited had buffer zones been set up along border areas. This would have restricted the organizational capacities of groups that were able to dominate the opposition narrative of the conflicts. In the case of Syria, Russia and China would probably have vetoed any attempt to include buffer zones along the Turkish, Lebanese, Iraqi, or Jordanian borders with Syria. Indeed, as early as October 4, 2011 Russia and China vetoed a United Nations Security Council Resolution in order to uphold Syrian sovereignty and maintain an ostensibly neutral stance towards the conflict.244 As such, similar zones could have been set up when it became clear by the end of 2011 that the central Syrian government was unable to exercise full control over the entirety of the country.

There are certainly some avenues for further research related to this thesis. As was mentioned in the introduction, this thesis has contributed to the growing method of process tracing. More work needs to be done to improve the implementation of the methodology, although its strength in testing competing hypotheses has been shown by this study. A contribution has been made to constructivist knowledge of identities. However, the fact that many media reports continue to see sects as homogenous blocs of people

suggests that more work needs to be done in producing and disseminating constructivist research. Finally, a modest addition has been made to the civil war literature with regards to international factors influencing identity politics in civil conflicts. With the spread of transnational organizations such as the Islamic State, more research could certainly be done on international and regional influences upon more localized conflicts. Literature on collective action, cycles of contention, and social movements may provide a productive avenue for research, particularly as the sectarianization of conflict becomes entrenched as the sectarianization of politics in general.

While sectarian identities existed in Syria and Iraq before their respective conflicts, these social categories waxed and waned depending on context. Once conflict broke out, governing authorities were quick to use sectarian tactics. Though both governments faced resistance early on, it took some time for open conflict to break out. When this happened, well-organized, well-trained, and well-financed organizations flooded both countries and met the authorities head-on in struggles that became increasingly sectarian. As such, the increased sectarianization of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq is due to the organizations inclined towards sectarianism becoming militarily dominant amongst opposition to the already sectarianizing authorities.
Bibliography


http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2012/7/18/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A. Accessed February 6, 2015.


Kazimi, Nibras. ‘Zarqawi’s Anti-Shi’i Legacy: Original or Borrowed?’ *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology.* November 1, 2006.


