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# A Perspective on Identity and Conflict

## *The Ba'athist State's Sectarianizing Imperatives in Syria*

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Hamza Badsha

**Abstract:** With the outbreak of conflict in 2011, the Syrian predicament became of great interest not only to the actors and people directly affected, but also to a global audience that mostly understands the region from a reductionist, essentialist perspective. While acknowledging elements of this conflict had sectarian undertones, this paper departs from popular civilizational discourse that seeks to paint the MENA in sectarian terms. By exploring the role Bashar Al-Assad's government played in "sectarianizing" the Syrian conflict, this analysis will look at the ways in which Bashar's government engages with actors across confessional divides in some instances, and shores up sectarian tensions in others. I argue that the Syrian state implicitly demonstrates that cleavages need to be exploited, and sects mobilized, and that MENA conflict is not inherently about asserting sectarian primacy. Taking guidance from the theoretical framework laid out by Danny Postel and Nader Hashemi, I argue the Syrian state's sectarianizing and self-preservationist behaviour, is reflective of a regional power struggle and political preservation. Instead, Syrian civil society in 2011 overwhelmingly represented notions of political empowerment, reform, and agency, and not agitation to worsen existing sectarian cleavages.

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The March 2011 non-violent protests in the Syrian city of Daraa, following the jailing and torture of several teenage boys, soon led to a brutal military crackdown. What began as a sincere push for reforms by the Syrian people, frustrated with government repression and corruption, soon turned into an increasingly violent conflict that continues to impact the political, economic, and social life of the Syrian people in tremendous ways. At the time of writing, the ongoing discord is not relegated to Syria but has spilled over its borders and gravely impacted all of its neighbours. What started out as a non-violent protest movement from civil society activists from a large cross-section of Syrian society has evolved into a struggle for control between state loyalists, their allies, and militant opposition groups, the latter acting either independently or as clients of external regional actors.

The Syrian conflict sees multiple actors vying to secure their regional influence through the conflict, and it has long surpassed being a domestic movement fuelled by the citizenry's call for political reform. Various groups, from religious extremists like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Al-Nusra Front to state, sub-state, and non-state actors with overtly religious identities such as Turkey, and Iran, and Hezbollah, exploit existing sectarian differences among the populace to mobilize support and justify their prerogatives. As a result, much of the violence has sectarian overtones and ostensibly pits groups against each other along sectarian lines. We must consider, however, the role that certain actors play in fuelling this sectarian discord, and how sectarian identity can be mobilized for political gain.

This paper will examine the Assad government's role in what Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel would term 'sectarianizing' the Syrian civil war. Considering the multiple cases in which the Syrian state participated in alliances that went beyond sectarian affiliation, this paper will assess how the state engaged in sectarianizing rhetoric and efforts to further their interests. By considering the state as a sectarianizing actor, this paper argues that the Syrian conflict cannot be viewed solely in essentialist terms as a conflagration of long-standing hostilities between different sects. By observing how the state formed alliances that do not subscribe to notions of sectarian solidarity in some cases, and how it exploits sectarian concerns in others, it will be shown that the Syrian state consciously played a part in inducing the sectarianized nature of the conflict in Syria, and that the Syrian conflict is not essentially about sectarian divides but instead about the state sectarianizing the conflict for its self-preservationist ends.

Hashemi and Postel provide three schools of thought — Primordialism, Instrumentalism, and Constructivism — that help explain ethno-nationalist identity and how there is a basis for mobilizing individuals along these lines. Applying a Primordialist lens to sectarian tensions sees conflict arising between group identities “based on a set of intangible elements rooted in biology, history, and tradition that bind the individual to a larger collectivity.”<sup>1</sup> Hashemi and Postel write that while Primordialism is useful “in identifying where ethno-religious ties are prevalent, it does not tell us how it can be a factor in mobilizing identity during times of conflict.”<sup>2</sup> It explains why ethno-religious identity is prevalent in countries with weak social institutions revolving around gender, labour, and class, but it does not explain why this necessarily mobilizes groups towards conflict with each other on this basis.<sup>3</sup> Instrumentalism sees “ethno-religious mobilization [as] a tool in the service of actors who are able to advance their political and economic interests by acting as political entrepreneurs,”<sup>4</sup> with ethno-religious leaders doing so by “emphasizing in-group similarities and out-group differences, as well as invoking the fear of assimilation, domination, or annihilation.”<sup>5</sup> While Instrumentalism is useful in understanding how actors with authority can mobilize populations along ethno-religious lines, Hashemi and Postel suggest that disagreement can arise over “the degree to which these identities can be manipulated.”<sup>6</sup>

Constructivism synthesizes Primordialist and Instrumentalist views regarding the nature of ethno-religious identity. Based on Hashemi and Postel’s definition, Constructivists argue that ethno-religious identity “is not fixed but is rather a political construct based on a dense web of social relationships that form in the context of modernity.”<sup>7</sup> Constructivists

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<sup>1</sup> Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, “Sectarianization: Mapping the new Politics of the Middle East,” *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 15, no. 3 (2017): 4. Hashemi and Postel’s article quoted here is adapted from the introductory chapter to their book, *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, (New York: Oxford University Press and London: Hurst, 2017). Their “sectarianization thesis” explores how authoritarian regimes deliberately manipulate pre-existing sectarian identities. This paper borrows heavily from Hashemi and Postel, and working with their theoretical framework, seeks to demonstrate how the Syrian state under Bashar al-Assad behaves as a sectarianizing force. 3 (2017): 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

would acknowledge both the existence of distinct identities centring around religion and ethnicity and the capacity for actors to capitalize on these divides. Hashemi and Postel tend to agree with this lens when arguing their Sectarianization thesis, which seeks to establish that the current sectarian discord in the Middle East is due to “an active process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve the mobilization of popular sentiments around particular identity markers.”<sup>8</sup>

These perspectives are valuable when considering the Syrian conflict, as sectarianization appropriately describes the Assad state’s conspicuous role in fomenting sectarian anxieties among sections of its populace to bolster support and gain legitimacy. Hashemi and Postel draw on Vali Nasr’s insights on how state actors are not relegated to having merely political influence, but also see political gain in exploiting and entrenching what Nasr describes as “identity cleavages”<sup>9</sup> between different social groups. Nasr suggests that state actors act externally upon these different communities, and unlike societal elites or community actors, do not emerge from within the communities they manipulate through divide and rule tactics.<sup>10</sup> Constructivism does not “believe that ethnicity/religion is inherently conflictual, but rather that conflict flows from ‘pathological social systems’ and ‘political opportunity structures’ that breed conflict from multiple social cleavages beyond the control of the individual.”<sup>11</sup> This is a crucial aspect of the Syrian predicament, as the widespread escalation of conflict in the region forced and continues to force those affected to identify with groups ordered around previously existing and deepening sectarian cleavages. These perspectives shift the focus from a purely essentialist view of the seemingly sectarian violence in Syria to one that considers the relationship between the Syrian state and society, insofar as the regime has acted to exploit these sectarian divides to maintain its rule.

Bashar’s sectarianization tactics and its implicit divide and rule has its antecedent in his father Hafez Al-Assad’s governance. Hafez assumed power as head of the Ba’ath party and of the Syrian state in 1970. Syrian society under Hafez was diverse, with Sunni Muslims forming the overwhelming majority, Alawis and Christians being significant minorities similar in number, while Druze and other Muslim sects accounted for

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Vali Nasr quoted in Hashemi and Postel, “Sectarianization,” 5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 4.

a small minority, around 6% of the population.<sup>12</sup> Syrian Kurds would become increasingly important actors as the 2011 conflict progressed, with the state and Kurdish People's Protection Units becoming de facto allies in the face of Islamist and a Turkish-supported armed opposition. By the late 1990s under Hafez, "An informal, Alawi-dominated core [controlled] the main levers of power in the military and security services; over 90% of the key commands in the armed forces and security apparatus [were] held by Alawis."<sup>13</sup> As Risa Brooks points out, "Appointees with a shared background help to ensure that the military's preferences are similar to those of the regime. Privileging these interests also creates a constituency with a vested interest in the status quo."<sup>14</sup> However, appointment based on similar ethno-religious background was not the singular concern of Hafez's strategy, however, as evidenced by how the military exploited an urban-rural divide by tending to draw Sunni officers from the rural lower classes.

Organization in Hafez's military is an example of how the Ba'athist state was cognizant of existing social cleavages – ethnic, sectarian, or socio-economic – and exploited those to secure their political stability. Sectarian affiliation and primacy in the military has not been the party's primary motivation, evidenced by the presence of strong non-Alawi figureheads like the Sunni Minister of Defense Mustafa Tlass under Hafez and the Greek Orthodox Minister of Defense Daoud Rajiha under Bashar. These existing cleavages accentuated in an institution such as the military were convenient for the purposes of later sectarianization, as we will see in the case of Alawite officers and the 2011 conflict in this paper. The military example is part of the structural legacy Bashar inherited from his father, and the latter's government was able to capitalize on this. By 2011, Syria remained a diverse society, one stacked in favour of Ba'athist functionaries and beneficiaries, whether from the military or civil society. Bashar's government deployed their sectarianizing tactics in this context, making self-preservationist moves and only playing along sectarian dynamics when it achieved this end.

The dynamics between the Syrian state and leading Sunni religious establishment figures in Syria such as Said Ramadan al-Bouti are an example of how sectarian divides have been used in this regard. Al-Bouti's close relationship with the Syrian state and his position as a

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<sup>12</sup> Risa Brooks, *Political-military Relations and the Stability of Arab Regimes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1998), 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

spokesperson for state legitimacy was one such opportunistic alliance formed during the conflict that went beyond sectarian affiliation. Assad co-opted the Sunni establishment in the form of figures like Al-Bouti to make his government appear asecarian and legitimate to the majority of Syria's citizenry, who happened to be Sunni. Al-Bouti denounced protests against the state as being foreign-sponsored Zionist machinations, utilizing such anti-Semitic rhetoric to dismiss the problems Syrian demonstrators had with the government.<sup>15</sup> He was vocal in his defence, claiming "his stance was dictated by 'godly inspiration'."<sup>16</sup> Al-Bouti's position of immense religious authority and influence was a clear asset to the Assad government, and he was appointed as the spokesperson announcing Bashar al-Assad's second presidential address following his first address to the People's Council on March 30, 2011. Al-Bouti announced the lifting of the Law of Emergency, hailing the reforms that the Ba'ath party planned to initiate as an increase in freedoms for the Syrian people. However, the Anti-Terrorist Law that replaced the Law of Emergency was equally restrictive and the first draft constitution released in February 2012 was unpopular with the opposition.<sup>17</sup>

Al-Bouti's ready endorsement of these government prerogatives indicated his disconnect from the Syrian protestors and willingness to toe the Ba'ath party's line. Al-Bouti, in fact, had his own motives driving his desire for closer association with the state, apparent in the decisions he announced to reinstate "face-veiled teachers and Islamic-leaning members of the Governorate Council of Damascus,"<sup>18</sup> to close casinos, launch the Islamic satellite channel Nur al-Sham, and establish the Al-Sham Higher Institute for Religious Sciences.<sup>19</sup> These religious prerogatives certainly motivated Al-Bouti to cultivate close ties to the state, and enabled Al-Bouti "to preserve for himself a political role, which a democratic system would not grant him without requiring that he first acquire electoral legitimacy."<sup>20</sup>

No doubt, the Assad government also regarded Al-Bouti as a valuable ally, granting him the political and religious agency he sought while mobilizing his authority as a leading Sunni religious figure for their

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 218.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 219.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 220.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, The Al-Sham institute would overlook accrediting and nationalizing both Sunni and Shia religious curricula.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*.

own purposes. This crucial intersection between the state's and Al-Bouti's interests pointed to the pragmatic approach that Assad's government took regarding religious matters. The Alawi-headed government saw great value in propping up a leading Sunni scholar, and through this symbiotic relationship Al-Bouti was a legitimating figure for the government, utilizing his position to denounce anti-Assad sentiments and support the state in the name of stability. Rather than thinking of religious leaders like Al-Bouti as apolitical gatekeepers of certain confessional communities, we can instead understand that their actions were largely based on pursuing their own political and religious aims.

The conduct on the part of Islamic scholars like Al-Bouti reinforces the notion that the conflict was not essentially sectarian, and sectarian divides did not result in action from one group against the other. Therefore, framing the conflict as inherently sectarian would be disingenuous. The state allowed this close political alliance to develop, and the fact that Al-Bouti was a Sunni figurehead deferring to an Alawi-led government did not seem to matter to both parties and their support bases. This indicates that sects did not matter and preserving the Syrian state was the key issue, and that alliances had to be built to this end.

Not long after fighting began in Syria, the International Crisis Group (ICG) released a report in November 2011 that examined the various dynamics in Syrian political and civil society that would determine how the conflict would unfold. The report also discussed the historical ways in which the Syrian state ensured that a section of the Alawite community was sufficiently sectarianized by the time conflict broke out, stating that:

the [Syrian] state in effect took the Alawite minority hostage, linking its fate to its own. It did so deliberately and cynically, not least in order to ensure the loyalty of the security services which, far from being a privileged, praetorian elite corps, are predominantly composed of underpaid and overworked Alawites hailing from villages the state has left in a state of abject underdevelopment.<sup>21</sup>

While rural Alawites lived in a state of abject poverty, the same could not be said of Alawite officers in the military who were favoured and regarded as political assets by the Assad regime. Indeed, the military acted as the regime's main support base to uphold state legitimacy, and it was for this reason that the state cultivated a close relationship with them, not merely on the basis of their shared religious ties with the Assad family. When protests broke out, the state manufactured anxieties among

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<sup>21</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), *Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria's Dynamics*, 24 November 2011, 2.



Alawite communities in rural areas, exaggerating or fabricating “stories of the protesters’ alleged sectarian barbarism.”<sup>22</sup> Security forces then distributed weapons and fortified Alawite villages — playing to Alawite concerns that stemmed from being a historically marginalized minority — to mobilize these communities to put down local anti-government protests and voice their support for the government. ICG’s report also described anti-Alawite sentiments as being “initially latent and largely repressed,”<sup>23</sup> but then exacerbated by the very visible role that these communities had in putting down early protests in rural Syria. With their sectarianizing efforts finding expression, the Syrian state under Assad was complicit in antagonizing the dynamic between certain Alawite communities and sections of the protest movement. Due to their long association with the state, Alawite officers at this early stage may have served the state’s ends out of self-interest. However, as the conflict became more grave and drawn out, they also found themselves doing so because their fate was tied to the state due to the latter’s deliberate historical process of sectarianization.<sup>24</sup> While there existed real cause for concern over targeted sectarian violence, Assad’s government contributed to this climate of instability in how they patronized the Alawite military community, keeping them as partially empowered political allies by positioning them favourably in the military. As mentioned previously, this was a continuation of the military predicament under Hafez which made Alawi officers beholden to the state, further otherizing them in the eyes of any hostile Sunni elements.

Examining Assad’s alliances with foreign governments from a realist perspective, we see that the Syrian state engages in pragmatic, geo-strategic foreign relations that take on sectarianized optics. A key issue is the support that Iran lent to the Syrian government. Indeed, Assad became an important ally in the region and a crucial link to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and through the latter a proxy that deterred Israel from carrying out strikes on Iran’s nuclear program. From Jackson Diehl’s observations, it is apparent that the close alliance between Assad, Iran, and Hezbollah was borne out of geo-strategic and military pragmatism rather than through emphasis on Shi’i religious ties.<sup>25</sup> The religious identities of such state and sub-state actors may have endeared them to certain sections of their populaces, but their engagement with a sectarian line of association has less to do with the actors’ personal belief systems than with the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Jackson Diehl, “Lines in the Sand: Assad Plays the Sectarian Card,” *World Affairs* 175, no. 1 (May/June 2012): 10.



political clout, either domestic and international, that capitalizing on this posturing gives them. Paulo Pinto points out how this invited confusion and division among the protesters, with the anti-government protests in Daraa eventually incorporating anti-Hezbollah and anti-Iranian slogans “which targeted the international allies of the Assad state [and] was seen as anti-Shi’a sectarianism by many pro-state Alawis.”<sup>26</sup> The strategic alliance between Assad, Iran, and Hezbollah also served to evoke sectarian reactions from some elements of the Syrian protest bloc, and so their sectarian posturing endeared them to any minority communities who were understandably concerned over their fate in an environment in which Assad’s government fell.<sup>27</sup>

The Syrian state, aware of the pragmatism in going beyond sectarian identity, has established mutually beneficial relationships with multiple Sunni actors from business and military sectors. In her recent study of the sectarianization of the Syrian conflict, Line Khatib identified a broad trend in the region in which “the politicization and intensification of [sectarian] divides are a result of moves and manipulations by state actors to reinforce the incumbent authoritarian states in the face of the threat of mass-politics.”<sup>28</sup> She further explained that in a case such as Syria, sectarian divisions are important mobilizers for certain groups and are by no means constructed by state actors, but that they are more damaging and noticeable during times in which authoritarian rule is challenged.<sup>29</sup> Khatib also pointed to how the Syrian National Defense Forces, the Ba’ath Brigades, and actors backed by the Iranian Quds Brigade were all predominantly Sunni organizations, providing substantial support to the state and funded by Sunni businessmen such as the Ghreiwati family and Muhammad Hamsho.<sup>30</sup>

The existence of such a crucial pro-regime support network within Syria sustained overwhelmingly by Sunni actors calls into

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<sup>26</sup> Paulo G. H. Pinto, “The Shattered Nation: The Sectarianization of the Syrian Conflict,” in *Sectarianization: Mapping the new Politics of the Middle East*, ed. Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 132.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, Pinto mentions how through his interactions with Christian and Alawite interlocutors these concerns were very much alive among these communities and that the rumours that the regime was spreading were effectively taking root.

<sup>28</sup> Line Khatib, “Syria, Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E. and Qatar: the ‘sectarianization’ of the Syrian Conflict and Undermining of Democratization in the Region,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 3 (2019): 386.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 387.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 389. Ibid, 389, Hamsho is noted for having close business ties to Bashar’s brother Maher al-Assad.

question a narrative that seeks to explain the conflict in solely sectarian terms. It shows that sectarian identities within the Syrian population were less important compared to political and economic concerns if the Assad government were to fail. This reinforces Khatib's observation that primordial identities "are fluid, situational and changing,"<sup>31</sup> and do not command unyielding adherence from individuals and actors to their respective religious groups when choosing who to side with. Samer Abboud, like Khatib, also argued against the essentialism of reducing this conflict to one centred on sectarian divides. The Ba'ath party historically legitimated their rule in the name of fostering Syrian national unity while simultaneously and cynically deepening sectarian divides through positioning Alawites in "positions of political and security power."<sup>32</sup> Abboud frames this practise as one of political utility rather than stemming from ideological motivations, stating that this "had not come at the complete exclusion of other communities"<sup>33</sup> and therefore did not preclude establishing beneficial relationships with actors from other political or social groups. The state could not afford to cultivate support among a populace solely based on sectarian criteria, as Alawites were and still are a minority in Syria and also because there exist numerous more divides among the Syrian populace that go beyond sectarian ones. Abboud also noted that "Regional differences as well as urban/rural divides and class divisions have similarly contributed to Syria's social mosaic. The stratification of society along sectarian, geographic, and class lines further complicates reducing Syrian identity to sect."<sup>34</sup>

Reducing the conflict to merely sectarian terms, therefore, ignores the other interactions between different identity markers in Syrian society. The state recognizes this need for alliances spanning a cross section of Syrian political and civil society. Those established through familial ties such as Rami Makhlouf's relation to Bashar (brothers in law through Asma Al-Akhras) indicate that the state itself understands that their ambitions and the conflict they help perpetuate to preserve such ambitions go far beyond matters of sectarian identity. The profitable relationship that Assad's government has with figures such as Rami Makhlouf and other Sunni businesspeople, the favouritism afforded to Maher and Bashar's

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 387.

<sup>32</sup> Samer N. Abboud, *Syria* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 183.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 183 – 184.

in-laws due to their familial ties, and the many young Sunni men who fight in the army are all examples of how beneficial relationships persist without being threatened by the fact that Assad and his support network belong to different religious communities.<sup>35</sup>

The Syrian state attempted to characterize the early-stage protesters as religious extremists — and so sectarianize the issue — while disingenuous to the fact that economic malaise was an important factor driving this segment of Syrian civil society. An ICG report released in July 2011 pointed to “the pauperisation of the countryside”<sup>36</sup> and how economic hardship combined with drought pushed rural Syrians to urban centres such as Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs. Rural migrant workers found themselves still neglected, without proper services and amenities in the suburbs that emerged around urban centres to which they moved to find work in. The report also pointed to the growing conditions of poverty and crime that people faced in these communities. However, as the report further noted it was not an economically compromised middle class and the underprivileged section of Syrian society that gave rise “to an illiterate and fanatical youth with which any rational dialogue would prove elusive”.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the state hoped to characterize the protesters in such terms in order to dismiss their concerns. In actuality, the protestors came from a section of Syrian society that had access to education and thus the tools to express their discontent given the absence of good governance and government excesses. The report suggested that when protests did break out, the state’s attempts to point out parallels between the protestors’ conservatism and the Muslim Brotherhood’s ideological outlook was misguided. At the time, the Brotherhood’s support base in the form of urban elites in Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo had no interest in joining the protests.<sup>38</sup> Attempting to draw parallels between them and the protestors was pure misdirection. In January of 2012, Assad similarly conflated the protesters with groups such as Al-Qaeda in an attempt to use sectarian rhetoric to invalidate their demands and play to any fears that such a conflation might evoke within minority and moderate groups of the Syrian populace. As Pinto observed:

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<sup>35</sup> Khatib, “Syria, Saudi Arabi, the UAE, and Qatar,” 389-390.

<sup>36</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People’s Slow Motion Revolution*, 6 July 2011, 16.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

From the outset, the state aimed to present the protesters as violent jihadists, isolating them from other groups in Syrian society and legitimizing the brutal repression through the international narrative of the American-led “War on Terror.” Also, by presenting terrorism or the state as only possible choices, Assad’s discourse made clear that the state would in no way take the political demands of the protests into account.<sup>39</sup>

The state’s efforts to insinuate that the protests were a Salafi conspiracy, Pinto added, were inconsistent with the reality of Islamist participation at the time, as the only politically active Salafi group in Syria, Hizb al-Tahrir, was not a jihadist group and the remainder of the Salafi groups in Syria adhered to Nasiruddin Al-Albani’s form of political quietism. This early attempt at sectarianizing the protests prompted reactions from the protesters themselves, who pointed to the non-Sunni and non-Muslim presences in their movement, evoking the memory of a Christian martyr Hatim Hanna to demonstrate inter-sectarian and national unity.<sup>40</sup>

From the analyses and commentaries this paper considers, the Syrian state’s conspicuous role in adding to the sectarianized nature of the Syrian conflict was clear. Hashemi and Postel’s theoretical framework helps us understand the political utility that state actors such as the Assad government saw in manipulating existing societal divides along sectarian lines. In particular, as a government under threat, the Ba’ath party saw an opportunity in mobilizing fear around sectarian concerns to mobilize groups against each other. We see how the Syrian state under Assad co-opted the traditional Sunni establishment by courting political alliances with Al-Bouti. This points to how the state itself did not see sectarian divide as something that necessarily positioned one group in conflict with the other and Al-Bouti saw mutual benefits and opportunity in his alliance with the state. Diehl pointed to the geo-strategic imperatives that the Syria-Iran-Hezbollah bloc safeguards, with their ultimate concern being political and military influence in the region, not ideological primacy. Khatib further pointed to the extensive network of mutually beneficial relationships the state enjoyed with Sunni civil society and the business community, and the significant support Assad received from his Syrian militias composed of Sunni troops. The ICG reports also provided insight into the early days of unrest in Syria, and how these civil society elements resented the state not out of sectarian biases but because of the economic, social, and political neglect they suffered.

<sup>39</sup> Pinto, “Shattered Nation,” in *Sectarianization*, 127.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 128.

Regional and socioeconomic identities tied more prevalently into the backgrounds of these protestors, and not the issue of them being Sunni, Shi'a, or Christian. These reports and Pinto's analysis point to the damaging campaign of sectarianization that Assad's government engaged in during the outset of the uprising. The state fomented paranoia and dismissed the political demands of the early, non-violent elements of the opposition, immediately framing them in sectarian and religious extremist terms. This widened social cleavage that took root in Syrian society. The Assad government's manoeuvres in playing to sectarian concerns when necessary to rally support and bolster their legitimacy had the double effect of isolating sections of Syrian society from each other, helping to frame their views in "us versus them" terms. However, sectarian differences were not the root cause behind the uprising and instead it was poor political and economic conditions that drove a cross-section of Syrians to take to the streets in anger. The ensuing conflict still played out functionally in sectarian terms because of actors, like the Syrian state, actively manipulating these existing divides.

The Syrian state's asectarian network of alliances, in some instances, pointed to their cognizance that maintaining domestic and regional power was not about establishing sectarian influence. Their sectarianization efforts targeting sections of Syrian civil society were effective in mobilizing groups against each other and were cynically carried out to preserve their ruling position. From the cases and insights considered, we can understand that the Syrian conflict is heavily sectarianized and is not essentially about sectarian differences. This is confirmed by the state's own attitude toward sect, in that it holds no doctrinal sway over them as their primary concern is securing political control of Syria. Functionally, their course of action, whether reaching across the sectarian divide or playing to sectarian fears, has been to secure this end. This paper makes the case that viewing the hardship in Syria in solely essentialist terms, as some teleological conclusion to longstanding sectarian cleavages, is disingenuous. It would be a mischaracterization that ignored how the Syrian state under Bashar al-Assad functioned as a sectarianizing actor that mobilized different groups along these lines, this done with the sole aim of preserving its power. Implicit in the state's sectarianizing and self-preservationist behaviour, is a recognition that this conflict is not about essentialist sectarian divides, but about the pragmatics of a power struggle and political preservation.

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