



المركز السوري
Syrian Center For
Policy
لبحوث
Research
السياسات

KnowWar

Identity Politics

in Syria

A Background Paper

ABOUT SCPR:

The Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) is an independent non-governmental and non-for-profit policy research center that works to bridge the gap between research and the policymaking process. It also focuses on public policy-oriented research based on participatory evidence-based policy dialogue. Since 2012, SCPR has published studies, discussion papers, policy briefs addressing key social, economic, and development challenges for Syria and the region.



The Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) serves as an essential reference for all aspects of development sectors in Syria, including economic, institutional, and social affairs, to support society and policymakers. SCPR's research is based on an in-depth understanding of the social, economic and development challenges facing Syria and the region, diagnosing conflict dynamics, providing policy alternatives to confront the root causes of conflict and injustice, and establishing inclusive and representative institutions.

ABOUT KNOWWAR

The research project KnowWar (Knowledge Production in Times of Flight and War – Developing Common Grounds for Research in/on Syria) is a cooperative project between the Syrian Center for Policy Research, the Department of Development Studies at the University of Vienna, the NGO Mousawat, the Centre for Development Studies at Birzeit University, and the Centre for Peace Research and Peace Education at the Alps-Adriatic University of Klagenfurt.



DISCLAIMER

Vienna, 2022 © KnowWar, All Rights Reserved

KnowWar Publication Series

The views expressed herein are solely those of the author(s) (Basileus Zeno – Zafer Nahhas – Rabie Nasser)

Design: Anas Abedrabo

Translation: Hazem Ibrahim

Editor: Keri Jones



Identity Politics in Syria: A Background Paper

ABSTRACT

The bloody conflict that has been going on for the past 11 years entailed systematic processes aimed at mobilising individual and collective identities and turning them into an instrument in the conflict, thereby forcing cultural affiliations and identities onto the battlefield. This was achieved through different practices and policies, including intimidation, incitement, hatred, fanaticism, demonisation, and dehumanisation, as well as amplification of sectarian, ethnic, political, social, regional and class differences.

This paper builds on the following main questions: why focus on 'Identity politics' and how has this concept been employed by warring parties in Syria? Why has the description of the armed conflict after the Syrian uprising as a sectarian-based and/or ethnic-based conflict become dominant in many academic and political studies or even in activists' testimonies?

This background paper first presents an overview of the impact of the Syrian war and the massive destruction it has caused, both economically and socially, over the past decade. Secondly, a theoretical and conceptual background will be presented. It briefly addresses the concept of 'Identity Politics' and the differences among the theoretical schools regarding the relationship between identity, culture and politics, particularly the relationship between 'Identity Politics' and conflicts within some countries after the end of the Cold War. Third, the concept of 'Identity Politics' will be used to analyse rhetorical and actual sectarianisation, especially the fact that many warring forces adopted an exclusionist discourse, and carried out violent acts based on an explicit sectarian or ethnic basis. Finally, the conclusion proposes a theoretical framework and an approach to analyse the impact of employment of 'Identity Politics' in the Syrian conflict, which takes into account the necessity of analysing current local solidarity mechanisms, and their role in addressing the divisions imposed by the conflict, on the one hand, and linking them to the political economy and challenges imposed by the lack of justice and accountability, and the sustainable plans to address the impacts of the war, on the other.

KEYWORDS

violence,
identity politics,
sectarianisation,
sectarianism,
Syria, civil war,
uprising,
revolution.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. The Impact of the Conflict in Syria: The Bloody Decade
3. Identity Politics: The Concept
4. Sectarianism and Ethnicity and their Role in Conflicts: Three Social Sciences Approaches
5. Conclusion: Towards a Framework for Understanding the Identity Dimension of the Conflict in Syria
6. References

Introduction

The war that has been raging in Syria in the last decade has depleted the resources of the state and society. In fact, the warring forces have been relentlessly attempting to confiscate the material and non-material resources to use them to serve hegemony and conflicting violence-centred agendas. Indeed, the resources and wealth of the Syrian people have been constantly deteriorating because they have been the target of attack and confiscation by the subjugating powers. This depletion and waste went beyond economic and material resources and wealth to include intangible and non-material resources such as social safety nets and social relationships. This was also accompanied by sharp polarisation among Syrians. Human capital incurred huge losses, including loss of life, while millions of people have been injured. Half a million children and adolescents have been deprived of education, while those who have been lucky enough to access to education received low quality education. Millions of Syrians lost their accumulated work and life experiences because many people lost their jobs or were involved in conflict-related activities. The most dangerous consequence of the conflict lies in the fact that official and unofficial institutions transformed from an authoritarian governance to a tyrannical one. Accountability has become absent and public institutions were leveraged to be at the service of the dynamics of violence, exclusion and displacement. Internal and external political powers engaged in fueling societal divisions, using multiple strategies, most notably Identity Politics.

The decrease in the level of direct violence, i.e., battles and use of military force, in the last two years, did not lead to a reduction in the potentiality and the catastrophic effects of the conflict. In fact, group solidarity or *al-Asabiyya* was one of the main potentialities that all warring parties were keen to invest in in order to prolong the conflict. The loss in values and social bonds was further aggravated as those bonds were used to fuel hatred and rejection of the other, and to mobilise social components to fight each other. Indeed, vital social services sectors such as education, health and food were politicised so as to be used against revolting areas. This was manifested in discriminatory policies, collective punishment, widespread use of military force and the targeting of civilians, siege and displacement, among other tactics.

The bloody conflict that has been going on for the past 11 years entailed systematic processes aimed at mobilising individual and collective identities and turning them into an instrument in the conflict, thereby forcing cultural affiliations and identities onto the battlefield. This was achieved through different practices and policies, including intimidation, incitement, hatred, fanaticism, demonisation and dehumanisation, as well as the amplification of sectarian, ethnic, political, social, regional and class differences. Furthermore, authoritarian regimes managed diversity in such a way that deepened social schisms and forced social relationships into the conflict, benefiting from a suitable regional and international context. For example, following the American invasion of Iraq, regional states such as Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, instrumentalised religious and ethnic affiliations to gain political and geographic spheres of influence beyond their boundaries, leading to the further aggravation of identity divisions in countries like Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

Since the collapse of central authority in Iraq, and the spread of sectarian violence and transnational Jihadist movements, particularly in the most violent years between 2006 and 2008, there has been a proliferation of academic studies and policy research that focused on the causes and consequences of the employment of 'identity politics' in the struggles and conflicts in the Middle East. These studies peaked during the last decade and have dealt with the factors that increased the salience of group identities during the conflicts in countries that witnessed popular uprisings (such as Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Iraq and Saudi Arabia), as well as the relationship between violence, identity, and the internal and external parties that played a role in the mobilisation of imagined identities.

Although the use of identities in conflicts is not something new, the use of the concept of 'Identity Politics' in academic research and studies and political reports has increased recently. The term itself was used initially to refer to the political activism of queer, Black feminist socialists, and later to describe the activism of persons with disabilities who aimed at changing individual and societal views towards them in the late 1970s in the United States. The term, however, later expanded to examine the relationship between identity, politics and violence, particularly in the context of social movements, popular uprisings, and civil wars.

This background paper presents a theoretical and conceptual framework that puts the ongoing argument regarding the reasons for the dominant description of the Syrian conflict as a sectarian or ethnic one in a comparative context. It does so by reviewing the most notable academic schools that theorised the question of the relationship between individual and collective identities, and the conflicts and structures that reinforce or impede the crystallisation of divisions in many other countries during critical junctures, such as revolutions, coups d'état, economic collapses, or civil wars. This paper attempts to establish a comparative theoretical approach that aims at deconstructing the discourse which uses essentialising and reductive terms to describe certain determinants of identity such as sect, ethnicity, or gender as if they were natural reasons for the conflict. It also reviews some problematic approaches that treat identities and their politicisation as inherent and inevitable, which relieves stakeholders and actors of their responsibility, and presupposes certain results that are not the product of research and examination, on the one hand, and imposes orientalist views on the region in general, on the other.

This paper builds on the following main questions: why focus on 'Identity politics' and how has this concept been employed by warring parties in Syria? Why has the description of the armed conflict after the Syrian uprising as being a sectarian-based and/or ethnic-based conflict become dominant in many academic and political studies or even in activists' testimonies?

This paper will attempt to address these questions by presenting a theoretical background study and an analytical framework that forms the basis for the next stage of the research. The next stage will be based on analysing the information and data that will be collected later by a team of field researchers in order to attempt to answer in more detail a number of other questions: what are the tools, mechanisms and dynamics that have been used to mobilise group solidarity (*al-Asabiyya*) and fuel identity-based conflict? Who used identity politics?

And how? What identities and determinants were targeted and why? How has the historical and political context been used and how have regional and political balances impacted that? What forms of (positive or negative) social solidarity have become visible in the context of the popular uprising or the war that followed? What exit strategies can be formulated from the identity-based divisions?

In the following paragraphs, this paper will first present an overview of the impact of the Syrian war and the massive destruction it has caused economically and socially over the past decade. Secondly, a theoretical and conceptual background will be presented. It will briefly address the concept of 'Identity Politics' and the differences among the theoretical schools regarding the relationship between identity, culture, and politics, particularly the relationship between 'Identity Politics' and conflicts within some countries after the end of the Cold War, while this paper will focus on the case of Syria. Third, the concept of 'Identity Politics' will be used to analyse rhetorical and actual sectarianisation, especially the fact that many warring forces adopted an exclusionist discourse, and carried out violent acts based on an explicit sectarian or ethnic basis. Finally, the conclusion proposes a theoretical framework and an approach with which to analyse the impact of employment of 'Identity Politics' in the Syrian conflict, which takes into account the necessity of analysing current local solidarity mechanisms, and their role in addressing the divisions imposed by the conflict, on the one hand, and linking them to the political economy and challenges imposed by the lack of justice and accountability, and the sustainable plans to address the impacts of the war, on the other.

The Impact of the Conflict in Syria: The Bloody Decade

The general scene in the different areas of influence in Syria is headed towards ostensible stability after more than 10 years of one of the most destructive and brutal wars in the world after World War II. This stability hides underneath it unprecedented levels of destruction, fragility and fragmentation at various social, economic, political and environmental levels. It is characterised by contradiction and conflict of interests between regional and international actors regarding the situation in Syria. In addition, this situation is characterised by the aggravation of the direct and indirect impacts of the conflict as a result of the political impasse and continued repressive practices and injustice in the different regions of influence, as well as the aggravation of the cumulative impacts of grievances across time, which do not seem likely to be resolved in the foreseeable future, such as the issues of prisoners, the forcibly disappeared persons, displaced people, and refugees.

The scene becomes even bleaker when considering losses. The Determinants of Forced Displacement in the Syrian Conflict study carried out by the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) in 2021 shows that more than half of Syria's population are displaced from their homes, either inside or outside Syria. The Human Status Index (HuDI), consisting of five main dimensions that measure demographic, economic, human development, social and institutional performance, which was introduced in Syria: Justice to Transcend Conflict,

issued by SCPR in 2021, shows that HuDI deteriorated by 42 per cent between 2010 and 2019, across all sub-indices. The extent of deterioration in the HuDI varies across time, regions, and communities, and has been driven by violence, insecurity, the policies of subjugating actors, conflict economy, social degradation, and external interventions, among other factors. After 2019, many other factors emerged, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Since March 2020, the pandemic put more pressure on the already strained and crumbling health system and accelerated the deterioration of public health components, which had been suffering already because of the conflict. The pandemic was accompanied by grave socio-economic consequences. In fact, the precautionary measures taken by all dominant parties in the different regions were characterised by inconsistency and lacked effectiveness. Full or partial lockdowns locally and abroad have led to a deterioration in production, decline in the provision of public services and main commodities, higher inflation, higher unemployment, lower imports and exports, and disruption in the educational process, which meant that the remaining children who are enrolled in schools were outside the educational process for long periods of time (SCPR, 2021).

Regionally, as tensions in the region grew, and as the role and influence of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey increased, the investment by those countries in the sectarian and ethnic identities of Syria increased, since Syria constitutes a strategic depth for those countries because of its geostrategic location and diversity. In fact, the 2011 uprising and the ensuing disruption created an opportunity for mobilisation and interference.

In addition to political and social fragmentation, Syria suffers from direct and indirect interference by regional and international powers, which takes the form of military presence and control of the political and economic decisions. This situation varies between the different areas of influence. Local political powers rely organically on political, military and financial regional and international support, which weakens their abilities to take independent decisions.

Identity Politics: The Concept

The term 'Identity Politics' appeared for the first time in the 1977 manifesto of the Combahee River Collective, which was an organisation formed by marginalised queer, Black feminist socialists to foster solidarity and collaboration with their movement (Táiwò, 2022). Then it appeared in academic studies in 1979, when it was used by sociologist Renee Anspach to describe the social movements that seek to change the personal and societal concepts of the participants within those movements. Anspach focused at that time on the political activism of persons with disability and former mental patients who demonstrated and were politically active in fighting prevailing social concepts and perceptions about them as helpless people, and which treats them as if they carry a certain stigma. In contrast, these persons sought to reaffirm their self-perceptions of themselves, their abilities and identities. However, the term 'Identity Politics' as an analytical concept was only used in a few academic articles in the

next decades and was not generally used in the studies addressing violent ethnic and nationalist conflicts until the mid-1990s, particularly after the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the bloody conflicts that erupted between Croats, Serbs and Bosnians, as well as the ensuing narratives and civil violence that witnessed the mobilisation of imagined nationalist and ethnic identities to redraw the social and political boundaries. 'Identity Politics' means the belief that identity itself, or more accurately some of its determinants, should be the primary driver for political action. Hence, certain aspects of daily life are politicised in the public sphere, although they had not been defined in a politicised manner before. This not only pertains to religious, ethnic, or sectarian identity, but also includes "sexuality, interpersonal relations, lifestyle, and culture" (Kauffman, 2001 [1990], 23).

In her comprehensive review of the evolution of the concept of 'Identity Politics', and the several schools of thought that have emerged later and which have differed in how they addressed the issue of relationship between culture, identity and political economy, Mary Bernstein (2005) emphasised the importance of examining the relationship between subjective experience, political position, and the processes that lead to the rise of a specific identity of the social movement, particularly when it is imposed from the outside and becomes a basis for expressing grievances. She also criticised the tendency of some approaches, such as the focus of Neo-Marxism on power at the macro level, as this considers class inequality as the single most important source of abuse and injustice, and considers activists who target class structures for the purpose of alleviating the acuteness of economic inequality as bearers of fundamental social change (Bernstein, 2005).

The approaches of the New Social Movements have contributed to transcending the Marxist reductivist approach, and have indirectly pushed for analysing the role of identities in social movements and treating the objectives of Identity Politics as serious demands, rather than just a mere cultural, symbolic or psychological affair. They have also developed their research tools in an attempt to understand the social movements that have appeared in the mid-1960s and 1970s, such as the civil rights movement in the USA, movements that were not ostensibly organised based on social class considerations, which are central to theoretical Neo-Marxist approaches. New Social Movements theories, however, continued in a problematic way to separate culture and identity from political economy, and have ignored conservative social movements whose objectives and slogans have revolved around values, identity, and culture. They have also failed to answer basic questions related to the issue of how to understand identities, the reason for employing them in a primordialist or constructivist manner, and the causal relationship between organising on the basis of identities and the diversity of results achieved by social movements in different contexts. Feminist studies have deepened our understanding of the different dimensions of identity and the necessity of analysing them intersectionally, taking into account ethnic, religious, class, and gender differences within the context of power networks and unequal distribution of power, which, in turn, impacts on the experience of groups and individuals, and the way their ideas are formed, even within the group itself, whether this group belongs to a certain race, ethnicity, religion, or sect, or whether it is a group that has been formed accidentally

because of social, political, environmental, or economic circumstances (such as refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs), and immigrants) (Alhayek, 2018; Crenshaw 1989; Montoya, 2021).

SCPR is seeking to examine the mechanisms and dynamics used to politicise some identity determinants in the context of the conflict that followed the social movement in Syria, and the parties that have invested in this sphere in order to produce identity politics, either to serve their own special interests, or as a reaction to violence and its framing in identitarian terms that do not necessarily have to do with the motives for that violence. SCPR is also exploring how Syrians, both as individuals and groups, are interacting with these policies, either by drifting along, accepting, or rejecting them. SCPR uses an operational definition of 'Identity Politics' as a set of policies, discourses, and practices aimed at harnessing affiliations and determinants of individuals' and groups' identities to mobilise group solidarities and force them into conflicts or societal polarisation by reducing complex identities to a primary determinant defined as essentially different and irreconcilable with the determinants of the identity of the other. These policies interact with culture and societal forces, and are either adopted, surrendered to, or resisted.

Politicising identity, according to this concept, requires influencing civil, political, social, cultural, and economic spheres in order to redraw the boundaries of the imagined group, to shape the image of the 'other' as an enemy, and to focus on the radicality of the struggle with them by evoking selective aspects or events from the past, history or memory, or by instigating provocative events aimed at stirring enraged group solidarities.

Before reviewing the main schools that have addressed the politicisation of identity, and the relationship between ethnic and sectarian identities and violence in the Syrian case, in particular, it is important to define such concepts as 'sectarianism', which is being dealt with in the literature as if it is a non-problematic axiom. It is also worth noting that the use of the concept 'Identity' itself was and still is swinging between two radically different poles in terms of their approach to identity determinants, its meanings, and the conditions for politicising or changing them. For example, in describing the conflicts and violent events in the Middle East, there prevails a reductive description that tends to consider the sectarian or ethnic identity as being either robust and deeply rooted in the region (the primordialist/ essentialist approach), or as flexible and subject to manipulation and employment in ideological struggles (the instrumentalist and constructivist approaches). In other words, ethnic and sectarian identities are depicted as a special cultural problem in the MENA region that impedes the formation of inclusive national identities (Hinnebusch, 2016).

The difficulty in studying any aspect of identity determinants and the conditions for politicising identity stems from the prevalent and continuing mainstream confusion between "folk and analytical notions", which are being used interchangeably as if they are synonymous, or, in other words, the uncontrolled confusion between "social and sociological" forms of understanding of concepts such as 'ethnicity', 'sect' or 'race' and the phenomena related to them (Wacquant, 1997, 222). According to Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000), the

concept of 'Identity' cannot be considered as a useful unit of analysis by itself because it carries several meanings, in addition to the conceptual vagueness associated with 'Identity' in many humanist and social fields. Brubaker and Cooper urge scholars to avoid reinforcing the "reification" of ethnic or sectarian group, which is a social practice used by ethno-political entrepreneurs to foster a "powerful crystallisation of group feeling" (p.10). Therefore, when using concepts such as ethnicity, race, nationalism, or class, one should differentiate as much as possible between 'categories of practice' and 'categories of analysis', despite the interchangeable relationship and mutual influence between these units. Categories of practice refer to the common and popular concepts or the daily practices related to the identity that people use in their life to describe or understand their experiences, cultures and their relationships with each other, and the limit of similarities with and differences from their wider surroundings. Moreover, they are also used by politicians who invest in these concepts to convince people that they represent their interests and grievances, so they try to mobilise them to justify forms of collective action (including violent conflicts or peaceful conflicts through elections) and to assert their social, political, ethical, and even human distinction from the 'other' (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Ozkirimli, 2017).

Categories of analysis, on the other hand, are used by researchers and social scientists to analyse specific phenomena and dynamics and understand their causes and impacts. They are, as such, concerned with 'how' concepts are used and developed, 'how' their meanings change, and 'how' they are employed in daily life or political struggles, without presupposing a priori the existence of studied categories, whether they are 'nations', 'sects' or 'ethnicities', as externally bounded and internally homogeneous substantial entities (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). In analysing, one should also differentiate between 'identification' or 'categorisation', and 'identity'. While the first two concepts refer to the 'processes' that produce identities and their categorisation, the connotation of 'identity' assumes easy identification between the individual and the group.

This distinction helps us to distinguish between 'subjective understanding' and identification mechanisms, on the one hand, and the reactions that emerge as a result of politicising identity by the warring actors who have succeeded in mobilising segments of society on the basis of identity, on the other. It also helps us to carefully examine the acuteness of identity-based contradictions/ disputes after controlling for the role of political powers that are investing in identity politics to make political or economic gains.

Sectarianism and Ethnicity and their Role in Conflicts: Three Social Sciences Approaches

The concept of 'Sectarianism' emerged in tandem with the spread of nationalistic ideas towards the end of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of nation-states in the Levant, which had quickly fallen under the domination of the French and British colonial forces. These forces and their local allies built civil and military institutions, drew modern arbitrary borders

and distributed privileges and punishments according to orientalist approaches to the region, which was seen as merely aggregations of warring and different sects and ethnicities. Therefore, it is not surprising that the term “al-ta’ifiyya” الطائفية (Arabic for ‘Sectarianism’) did not become popularised in the Arabic language until the early twentieth century. In fact, leaders of the nationalistic movements referred to “sectarianism” as being a form of colonial legacy and as a threat to national identity in newly independent Arab states and to the Arab nationalism that had enjoyed wide political and popular support, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s (Makdisi, 2017). While local leaders in Lebanon managed to create a state that was based on sectarian-based consociationalism, under the pretext of the presumed idiosyncrasy of the Lebanese society, with the support of the French Mandate (1920-1946), yet this ‘consociationalism’ proved to be fragile when the Lebanese Civil War broke out. Furthermore, Zionism succeeded in creating the state of Israel with support from the West at the expense of Arabs and Palestinians, which led to the destruction of historical religious and cultural diversity and the alienation of Arabs Jews from their surroundings. Consequently, Israel imposed a national-religious identity that originally developed in response to antisemitism and the animosity against Jews in Europe, which led to the displacement of millions of Palestinians and the occupation of their lands (Shohat, 2017).

Despite the increased use of the concept of ‘Sectarianism’, whether by researchers or politicians, to describe the nature of political and social relations in the region in the last two decades, the term, is still generally ambiguous and is rarely defined. That is why we find it used very loosely to describe a wide range of phenomena and groups at the expense of factors and dynamics that could be more salient and revealing (such as class differences, local competition among warlords over resources, occasional clashes, and personal revenge, etc.). This means that the concept should be approached carefully and accurately, and that its meaning should be defined when mentioned (Dixon, 2017, 16; Haddad, 2017, 374; Hashimi and Poster, 2017, 4-5; Makdisi, 2017, 4; Pinto, 2017, 124; Zeno, 2022, 1034). Sectarianism can be defined as “political mobilization of religious differences as a framework for the distribution of rights, privilege, and/or violence among a certain population” (Pinto, 2017, 124). In this background paper and in the following research, we will focus on the ‘sectarianisation’ process and its dynamics as a form of identity politicisation that is being used as an ideology that seeks to politically mobilise religious and cultural differences to produce internal and external social boundaries between imagined sects. The form of mobilisation serves the political and economic interests of actors who invest in this type of conflict framing (Bishara, 2018, 268). Political sectarianisation or ethnicisation produces a discriminatory framework that leads to the unequal distribution of privileges, rights, and violence among various religious and ethnic communities, which leads to the fragmentation of citizenship within the state and the emergence of loyalties linked to external political entities on the basis of sectarian or ethnic commonalities.

Social scientists have identified at least three main approaches to analysing the causes and consequences of the politicisation of some identity determinants in the cases of ethnic and sectarian conflicts and violence, and the conditions that lead certain forms of social and

cultural affiliations to become politically salient. The first approach is known as the 'primordialist' approach, which also includes the ethno-nationalist movements. This approach treats the nation, the sect, the ethnic group, or nationalism as a naturally formed group of people united by fixed and deeply rooted bondages that distinguish them from others (Demmers, 2016; Geertz, 1973).

We find many examples of this approach in the Syrian, Iraqi and Lebanese cases, as some researchers and journalists have used 'sectarianism' as a basic category of analysis in order to explain the internal dynamics of the struggle and the reasons for the explosion of sectarian narratives and genocidal violence that led to demographic reengineering in some regions. In fact, there is a tendency to simply use the attributes 'sectarian' or 'ethnic' to describe any act targeting the 'other' groups in certain regions, even when the motives or justifications for acts of violence are not sectarian or ethnic. Proponents of such an approach portray sects as if they were political entities with clear boundaries and a real essence that is fixed across time and space, while the history of their genesis and their presumed age-old conflicts are employed and projected onto modern struggles, as if this is a fixed innate aspect of the concerned communities (such as in the case of the regional competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran). Hence, the sectarian conflict is being treated as a natural threat that will remain and will impede the rise of secular modern states in the Arab world which have an identity that emphasises the rights of citizenship and freedom of belief (Abdo, 2017, 149; Tomass, 2016, xii, 5; Ajami, 2012, 116, 174). One of the most notable shortcomings of this approach is that it reduces identities to their primary determinants or one of them, and denies other determinants. It also assumes that identity is constant, while in reality identities are dynamic in nature and their attributes could change under contextual conditions. Finally, this approach conflates the group or the community (ethnicity or sect) and culture as if the concerned community has a distinct culture that distinguishes it from other communities, while culture is actually formed across communities due to multiple factors and conditions.

Despite the fact that primordialist and ethno-nationalist approaches have largely lost their credibility in academia, groupism¹, however, is still dominant in the daily writings and statements of activists, politicians and some NGOs that provide sectarian interpretations as 'commonsensical' or as a taken-for-granted common understanding with which to interpret political and economic struggles. This commonsensical understanding and the manufacturing of consent is reproduced ideologically on a daily basis on satellite TV channels and in social media and, in so doing, it divides society into sects to which it attributes unified collective interests, purposes and actions (Brubaker, 2004, 8; King, 2007, 71), which leads to mixing the popular with the sociological, thereby concealing the social dynamisms and the role of actors responsible for sectarianisation (Zeno, 2022).

¹ Groupism means "The tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis" (Brubaker, 2004, 166)

Contrary to the essentialist and ethno-nationalist approaches, instrumentalist and social constructivist approaches share three main assumptions: ethnic and sectarian identities “can be multiple, can be fluid, and can change endogenously to human processes” (Chandra, 2012, 132).

The instrumentalist approach is agency-oriented and does not deal with determinants of the ethnic or sectarian identity as something with an essential value or as being rooted in the human psyche. In fact, ‘sectarianism’ is generally understood to be a mere form of ideology, while ‘sectarian’ definitions are viewed as a means to an end and as a kind of superstructure that conceals the political and economic interests of politicians (Malmvig, 2017, 10). Political elites try to increase in-group cohesion and to “foment ethnic (or sectarian) violence to build political support” through a process “that has the effect of constructing more antagonistic identities, which favors more violence” (Fearon and Laitin, 2000, 853).

Many researchers and political scientists adopt this approach (Abboud, 2017; Al-Haj Saleh, 2017; Dahi and Munif, 2012; Hashemi, 2016; Heydemann and Leenders, 2011; Heydemann, 2013; Lynch, 2013) and reject cultural and ahistorical reductionist interpretations of the rise of political sectarianism as an ideology that is targeted against an imagined religious community (Bishara, 2018, 468). They also emphasise the destructive role of the subjugating powers, such as ruling authoritarian regimes, regional powers, warlords and sectarian entrepreneurs, in manipulating and aggravating ethnic and sectarian polarisation in the region as a fundamental strategy for the survival of their regimes or for making political and economic gains through consociationalism or replacing the ruling regimes.

The main weakness of the instrumentalist approach lies in its individualistic tendency, as it tends to focus on top-down interpretations. For example, the Syrian regime or regional powers are being treated as rational active actors which have exploited diversity and sectarian and ethnic differences to consolidate their political objectives, while perpetrators of sectarian or ethnic violence and local and cross-border promoters of hate speech are treated as mere passive recipients who are simply reactive. The “evil politicians/ dictators” interpretation (Dixon, 2017; Leenders, 2016; Mohsen, 2014) assumes that agency lies only at the level of elites, and it ignores or underestimates the importance of the role of local instigateses “whose participation is essential to transform animosity into violence” (Kalyvas, 2003, 482). This approach also underestimates the role and contribution of society to resisting attempts by politicians, regional powers, and local actors to politicise identity and to use violence to redraw the boundaries of communities, in some contexts, and, in other contexts, the propensity of society to adopt or succumb to these policies due to fear, the need for protection, and ideological conformity.

The third approach, namely the social constructivist one, takes a middle ground between the instrumentalist and the primordialist approaches by realising that while ethnic/ sectarian/ national identities are not natural or substantial entities but rather imagined or socially constructed (Anderson, 1983), yet the identities of the group might be so strong that it impedes the ability of political elites to manipulate social identities to serve their interests

(Valbjørn and Hinnebusch, 2019). Constructivists argue that each modern society has historically created a narrative around a 'master cleavage' and that political entrepreneurs are able to incite violence and manipulate the situation in specific historical moments and contexts when they link local incidents to 'the master narrative'. Although such an approach provides a more careful reading compared with the aforementioned approaches, yet it is problematic, in its own right, because it assumes that the 'master cleavage' exists at the national level and that political entrepreneurs and those who invest in the conflict are readily available throughout the country, whereas sectarian and ethnic violence and its acuteness tend to be very local or centred in a specific region or governate due to specific historical, social and economic circumstances and contexts (Varshney, 2007, 287-288). Furthermore, one should distinguish analytically, on the one hand, between political and sectarian entrepreneurs whose active role is a function of the political circumstances during crises and who might exist inside or outside the country, and, on the other hand, the ruling subjugating powers which are institutionally entrenched and generally use nationalist discourses or security discourses (such as the war on terror or fighting foreign conspiracies) within official state apparatuses. The ruling subjugating powers do not mobilise their supporters publicly based on ethnic or sectarian or racial identities; however, there is a possibility for the emergence of entrepreneurs who seek to employ this mobilisation in an unofficial manner or to use it as an unofficial framework to create auxiliary forces or local organisations that are based on forms of negative solidarity.

In the study of the Syrian case, many studies and policy reports were published alongside ethnic-and-sectarian-coloured maps that resemble colonial orientalist maps which impose a master narrative that presupposes a vertical sectarian division at the national, regional and local levels in an attempt to explain the motives behind violence and destructive policies used by the subjugating powers. For example, the French geographer Fabrice Balanche (2018) provides a large set of conflict maps that divide Syrian geographic regions into sectarian and ethnic axes and fault lines, and he emphasises "the role of sectarianism" as a core cause of the conflict and violence, but he claims that the point behind this emphasis is "not to encourage a future partition of Syria based on these divisions, but simply to describe the reality of a protracted civil war" (xvi). This interpretation and these kinds of maps, however, attribute the destructive consequences of deliberate discriminatory policies that aim at controlling and commanding the masses to subjective factors in the affected population and assume that conflict and hatred are innate because of robust, fixed and contradictory determinants. The danger of this kind of projection lies in its ability to reshape reality and the social fabric in post-conflict phases if it is adopted by international and regional powers, as well as local actors, as a basis for the political solution in a country that has suffered from a civil war. As was the case in Lebanon and Iraq, the political solution becomes ethnicised and sectarianised under the labels of consociational democracy and power sharing, which might lead to the institutionalisation of social and cultural identities and the transformation of such identities into political identities that can be mobilised and invested in future conflicts, on the one hand, and rewards perpetrators of violence and promoters of hate speech and

otherness, and marginalises the demands of national, secular and rights groups, on the other (Majed, 2020; Zeno, 2022; Bishara, 2018).

Our approach is based on the social constructivist approach, but it investigates the mechanisms and dynamics of sectarianisation and ethnicisation, not only top-down (the policies of the elite and political entrepreneurs), but also bottom-up (the policies of some local subjugating powers and warlords) (Pinto, 2017; Zeno, 2022). It also investigates how local communities have responded to attempts to politicise identities, and the overlap between these mechanisms and other determinants of identity, such as gender and class. Our approach stresses the importance of addressing phenomena in their historical context and the fact that politicising sectarian and ethnic differences in the Levant is a modernist phenomenon par excellence that came into being in the age of nationalisms and colonial hegemony, and also coincided with the emergence of intellectual movements and secular parties (Makdisi, 2017). At a later stage, the situation was aggravated after the failure of nationalist projects and the increased influence of the “fierce state”, as well as the subjugating powers dominating it, which are free from constitutional limits and at odds with society, as Nazih Ayubi puts it (Ayubi, 1995).

Conclusion: Towards a Framework for Understanding the Identity Dimension of the Conflict in Syria

It suffices to say that the conflict in Syria today has an identitarian dimension. However, the way and approach used to understand and interpret this ostensible identitarian manifestation directly affects the proposals for dealing with this dimension, especially that identity politics approaches could be interpreted in a culturally reductionist way that portrays the conflict in Syria, Iraq or Yemen as if it were ‘between identities’. Hence, the peril of this interpretation lies in superimposing political solutions that are based on the assumption that the consequences are the root causes of the problem and that assume that the conflict should be solved by institutionalising the sociological, religious, and cultural differences, and appointing representatives of each imagined identitarian community in the post-conflict governance system.

Therefore, the methodology of our research is primarily based on political economy as an analytical framework and uses a participatory society-based approach which stresses that identity is complex and relational and cannot be isolated from the social, cultural, and material structures within specific spatial and temporal contexts. As an analytical framework, political economy seeks to understand conflict by observing the role of the forces that contribute to the creation of social, economic, or political phenomena, and the knowledge produced around them. Therefore, the different phenomena are studied through a critical reading that involves identifying indicators of understanding and analysis; and then through identifying actors and their policies that influence the phenomenon, as well as the direct and indirect impacts of those policies on society, in addition to identifying those negatively affected by, and beneficiaries of, those policies.

This background paper has looked at some of the basic problems of the 'Identity Politics' approaches, and briefly reviewed the evolution of this concept in academic studies, while focusing on the politicisation of sectarian and ethnic identities. The second stage of our research will focus on analysing the direct deployment of identity politics, i.e. the policies aimed at mobilising and weaponising some identity determinants for the purpose of implicating social forces in the conflict (politicising identity). This analysis will include, but will not be limited to, reading the official statements and discourses of the involved actors. It will go beyond that to include their actual policies and practices. We will also analyse the overlap between religious, ethnic, and local determinants and the impact of their politicisation on gender determinants in the different areas of control, and how local communities interact with these changes.

Our approach aims at analysing the factors and conditions that have led to the selective politicisation of some identity determinants to be used as an element of mobilisation of (human and material) resources in some specific contexts in such a way that would serve the interests of local and regional subjugating powers, and how the society has interacted with these policies across time and space.

The methodology is based on a multidisciplinary framework that relies on the active participation of broad segments of society. It uses political economy in analysing and understanding social phenomena in the context of the structure of power and authority in the context of the armed conflict. Furthermore, it seeks to diagnose the phenomenon and identify the roles and policies of actors, and their impact on institutions, society and the economy, as well as the development of alternatives in a participatory manner, while laying the groundwork for creating a dialogue at the societal level in order to develop options and look into potential implementation/change.

Within the framework of this methodology, the research adopts a number of qualitative and quantitative research methods, including critical literature review, in-depth personal interviews with key informants from the local communities, focus groups, textual and content analysis of political discourses and newspapers and influential social media, and conversations with local stakeholders and partners to discuss research results and the ability to implement them.

The research will be conducted by a research team that is composed of a central team that will be responsible for designing, overseeing, writing, and follow-up on compliance with research ethics and conditions, and a research team that will be on the ground in the study areas, in addition to a team devoted to analysing texts and content, as well as the local community, which is represented by the key interlocutors and participants in the research dialogues.

The geographical scope will include Syrians inside and outside Syria. The studied areas will be selected based on geographical distribution, number of population, and the variation in the impacts of the conflict.

References

- الحايك، كاتي. (2018). النسوية التقاطعية وكيف يمكن تطبيقها على الوضع السوري. جدلية، 10 نيسان، <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/36423> /النسوية-التقاطعية-وكيف-يمكن-تطبيقها-على-الوضع-السوري
- باروت، محمد جمال. (2011). العقد الأخير في تاريخ سورية: جدلية الجمودة والإصلاح. المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات.
- بشارة، عزمي. (2013). سورية: درب الآلام نحو الحرية. محاولة في التاريخ الراهن. المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات.
- بشارة، عزمي. (2018). "الطائفة، الطائفية، الطوائف المتخيلة". المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات.
- ساتيك، نيروز. (2013). الحالة الطائفية في الانتفاضة السورية: المسارات والأنماط (ص.ص. 373-426)، خلفيات الثورة دراسات سورية، المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات.
- شعبو، راتب (2015). دراسات ميدانية في أثر الصراع في سوريا على المجتمع: العلويون والثورة السورية. مركز دراسات الجمهورية الديمقراطية. <http://drsc-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/rateb1.pdf>
- قنوت، لمى (2016). *المشاركة السياسية للمرأة السورية بين المتن والهامش*. اللوبي النسوي السوري. <https://docs.euromedwomen.foundation/files/ermwf-documents/7294-السورية-بين-المتن-والهامش.pdf>
- المصطفى، حمزة (2015). المجال العام الافتراضي في الثورة السورية: الخصائص، الاتجاهات، آليات صناعة الرأي العام. المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات.
- Abdo, G. (2017). *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Abboud, S. (2016). *Syria*. New York: Polity.
- Ajami, F. (2012). *The Syrian rebellion*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Aldoughli, R. (2021). Securitization as a tool of regime survival: The deployment of religious rhetoric in Bashar al-Asad's speeches. *The Middle East Journal*, 75(1), 9-32.
- Al-Haj Saleh, Y. (2017). *The impossible revolution. Making sense of the Syrian tragedy*. Hurst and Company.
- Alhayek K (2015) Untold stories of Syrian women surviving war. *Syria Studies* 7(1): 1–30.

-
- Alhayek, K. (2015) 'I must save my life and not risk my family's safety!': untold stories of Syrian women surviving war. *Syria Studies* 7(1), pp. 1–30.
- Alsaba, K., & Kapilashrami, A. (2016). Understanding women's experience of violence and the political economy of gender in conflict: the case of Syria. *Reproductive health matters*, 24(47), 5-17.
- Anspach, R. R. (1979). From stigma to identity politics: Political activism among the physically disabled and former mental patients. *Social Science & Medicine. Part A: Medical Psychology & Medical Sociology*, 13, 765-773.
- Ayubi, N. (1995). *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Balanche, F. (2018). Sectarianism in Syria's civil war. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01702640/document>
- Bernstein, M. (2005). Identity politics. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 31, 47-74.
- Batatu, Hanna. 1999. *Syria's peasantry, the descendants of its lesser rural notables, and their politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bishara, A. (2022). *Sectarianism without sects*. Oxford University Press.
- Brubaker, R & Cooper, F. (2000). "Beyond" identity"." *Theory and society* 29(1): 1-47.
- Brubaker, R. (2004). *Ethnicity without groups*. Harvard university press.
- Chandra, K. (Ed.) (2012). *Constructivist theories of ethnic politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1):139–168
- Dahi, O. S., & Munif, Y. (2012). Revolts in Syria: Tracking the convergence between authoritarianism and neoliberalism. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 47(4), 323–332.
- Daher, J. (2019). *Syria after the uprisings: The political economy of state resilience*. Haymarket Books.
- Demmers, J. (2016). *Theories of violent conflict: An introduction*. Second Edition. Routledge.
- Dixon, P. (2017). Beyond sectarianism in the Middle East? Comparative perspectives on group conflict. In F. Wehrey (Ed.), *Beyond Sunni and Shia: The roots of sectarianism in a changing Middle East* (pp. 11–36). Oxford University Press.
- Dickinson, Elizabeth. 2013. *Playing with Fire: Why Private Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution.

-
- Dukhan, H. (2021b) The Politics of Tribalization in Syria. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53, (3) 502–506.
- Fearon, James D., and David D. Laitin. 2000. "Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity." *International Organization* 54(4): 845-77.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Haddad, B. S. (2011). *Business networks in Syria*. In *Business Networks in Syria*. Stanford University Press.
- Haddad, Fanar. 2017. "'Sectarianism' and Its Discontents in the Study of the Middle East." *The Middle East Journal* 71(3): 363-382.
- Haddad, F. (2020). Sectarian identity and national identity in the Middle East. *Nations and Nationalism*, 26(1), 123–113.
- Hadaya, S. (2020). Sectarianisation in Syria: The disintegration of a popular struggle. *Conflict, Security and Development*, 20(5), 607–629.
- Hashemi, N., & Postel, D. (2017). In N. Hashemi & D. Postel (Eds.), *Sectarianization: Mapping the new politics of the Middle East* (Vol. 15) (pp. 1–13). C. Hurst and Co.
- Heydemann, S., & Leenders, R. (2011). Authoritarian learning and authoritarian resilience: Regime responses to the 'Arab Awakening'. *Globalizations*, 8(5), 647–653.
- Hinnebusch, R. (2016). The sectarian revolution in the Middle East. *R/evolutions: Global Trends and Regional Issues*, 4(1), 120–152.
- Hinnebusch, R. (2019) *Sectarianism and Governance in Syria*. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 19, (1) 41–66.
- Kalyvas, Stathis. N. 2003. "The ontology of "political violence": action and identity in civil wars." *Perspectives on Politics* 1(03): 475-494.
- Kaufman, S. J. (2001). *Modern hatreds: The symbolic politics of ethnic war*. Cornell University Press.
- Kauffman, L.A. (2001 [1990]). *The Anti-Politics of Identity*. In *Identity Politics in the Women's Movement*. Barbara Ryan, ed. Pp. 23-34. New York: New York University Press.
- Khaddour, K. (2013). *The Alawite Dilemma*, (Homs 2013). In F. Stolleis (Ed.), *Playing the sectarian card identities and affiliations of local communities in Syria* (pp. 11–26). Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/12320.pdf>

King, C. (2007). "Scots to Chechens: How " Ethnic" is Ethnic Conflict?" *Harvard International Review* 28(4): 68-72.

Lynch, M., Freelon, D. & Aday, S. (2014a). "Syria's socially mediated civil war." *United States Institute of Peace, Peace work* 91: 1–35.

Lynch, M., Freelon, D., & Aday, S. (2014b). Syria in the Arab spring: The integration of Syria's conflict with the Arab uprisings, 2011–2013. *Research and Politics*, 1(3), 1–7.

Majed, R. (2020). For a sociology of sectarianism: Bridging the disciplinary gaps beyond the "deeply divided societies" paradigm. In A. Salvatore, S. Hanafi & O. Kieko (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of the sociology of the Middle East*. Online Publication.

Makdisi, U. (2017). "The mythology of the sectarian Middle East". Center for the Middle East, Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, February .
<https://www.bakerinstitute.org/media/files/files/5a20626a/CME-pub-Sectarianism-021317.pdf>

Makdisi, U. (2019). *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Makdisi, U. (2019). *Age of coexistence: The ecumenical frame and the making of the modern Arab world*. University of California Press.

Malmvig, H. (2015). "Coming in from the Cold: How We May Take Sectarian Identity Politics Seriously in the Middle East without Playing to the Tunes of Regional Power Elites." In *POMEPS Briefing 28: The Gulf's Escalating Sectarianism*, 8-12. Washington D.C.

https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/POMEPS_BriefBooklet28_Sectarianism_Web.pdf

Mazur, K. (2021). *Revolution in Syria: Identity, Networks, and Repression*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ozkirimli, U. (2017). *Theories of nationalism: A critical introduction*. Third edition. Palgrave: Red Globe Press.

Phillips, C. (2015). Sectarianism and conflict in Syria. *Third World Quarterly*, 36(2), 357–376.

Pinto, P. G. H. (2017). Shattered nation: The sectarianization of the Syrian conflict. In N. Hashemi & D. Postel (Eds.), *Sectarianization: Mapping the new politics of the Middle East* (pp. 123–142). C. Hurst and Co.

Sen, A. (2007). *Identity and violence: The illusion of destiny*. Penguin Books India.

-
- Shohat, E. (2017). *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements: Selected Writings of Ella Shohat*. London: Pluto Press.
- Tomass, M. (2016). *The Religious Roots of the Syrian Conflict*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Varshney, A. (2007). "Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict." In *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, ed. Carles Boix and Susan Stokes, 274–296. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Valbjørn, M. (2019). What's so Sectarian about Sectarian Politics? Identity Politics and Authoritarianism in a New Middle East. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 19, (1) 127–149. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12289>
- Valbjørn, M., & Hinnebusch, R. (2019). Exploring the Nexus between sectarianism and regime formation in a new Middle East: Theoretical points of departure. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 19(1), 2–22.
- Watkins, J. (2019). Satellite sectarianisation or plain old partisanship? Inciting violence in the Arab mainstream media. LSE Middle East Centre. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100536/1/Watkins_J_Satellite_Sectarianisation_Author_2019.pdf
- Wacquant, L (1997). "For an Analytic of Racial Domination." (Symposium on "Rethinking Race" with Ann Laura Stoler, Patricia Dominguez, David Roediger, and Uday Singh Mehta): *Political Power and Social Theory* 11: 221-234.
- Watkins, J. (2019). Satellite sectarianisation or plain old partisanship? Inciting violence in the Arab mainstream media. LSE Middle East Centre.
- Wedeen, L. (2019). *Authoritarian apprehensions: Ideology, judgment, and mourning in Syria*. University of Chicago Press
- Wimmen, H. (2017). The sectarianization of the Syrian War. In F. Wehrey (Ed.), *Beyond Sunni and Shia: The roots of sectarianism in a changing Middle East* (pp. 61–86). Oxford University Press.
- Zeno, B. (2022). The making of sects: Boundary making and the sectarianisation of the Syrian uprising, 2011–2013. *Nations and Nationalism*.