# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Chapter 1: Foundations of this Research ................................................................. 2  
1.1: Introduction ...................................................................................................... 2  
1.2: Background Information .................................................................................. 4  
1.3: Research Question .......................................................................................... 5  
1.4: Hypothesis ...................................................................................................... 5  
1.5: Methodology .................................................................................................. 5  
1.6: Discourses about Identity in the Middle East ................................................. 6  
1.7: Theoretical Framework .................................................................................... 21  
II. Chapter 2: Identity and the Study of Political Science ....................................... 25  
2.1: The Importance of Identity in Politics ............................................................ 25  
2.2: State Construction of Identity ....................................................................... 26  
2.3: Identity Construction, Politics in the Middle East ........................................ 32  
III. Chapter 3: Colonialism and the Construction of Syrian Identity ....................... 35  
3.1: Colonial Policies in Syria ................................................................................ 35  
3.2: The Consequences of French Colonialism .................................................... 42  
3.3: The Creation of the Ba’th Identity .................................................................. 44  
3.4: Hafiz Al-Assad and the Consolidation of Power ............................................ 47  
3.5: Hafiz Al-Assad and National Identity .............................................................. 51  
3.6: The Political Economy of Sectarianism ......................................................... 57  
V. Chapter 4: Identity and Bashar Al-Assad ............................................................ 65  
4.1: Secular Sectarianism under Bashar Al-Assad ................................................ 66  
4.2: Power Consolidation ...................................................................................... 67  
4.3: Tensions with the Sunnis .............................................................................. 69  
4.4: Tensions with the Druze .............................................................................. 78  
4.5: Tensions with the Kurds .............................................................................. 80  
4.6: Identity Politics .............................................................................................. 77  
4.7: The Political Economy of Sectarianism Under Bashar Al-Assad .................. 79  
4.8 Cracks within the Regime ............................................................................... 89  
VI. Chapter 5: Civil War .......................................................................................... 93  
5.1: Drivers of Civil War ...................................................................................... 93  
5.2: The Regime and Identity Politics .................................................................. 96  
5.3: Repercussions ............................................................................................... 100  
5.4: The International Dimension ....................................................................... 103  
5.5: Supporters of the Assad Regime .................................................................. 104  
5.6: Supporters of the Opposition ...................................................................... 107  
VIII. Chapter 6: Conclusion .................................................................................... 112  
VIII. Bibliography .................................................................................................. 115
Abstract
This research takes a social constructivist approach in order to analyze how identity is used as a political tool, leading to the current civil war in Syria. Identity plays a great role in the political scene in Syria ever since the French Mandate, in which the state was broken into an ethnofederal system. Subsequently the French employed a divide and conquer tactic in order to prevent the unity of Syria therefore making it easier to establish control. Later on, after multiple coups, Hafiz Al-Assad rose to power along with a select group of trusted individuals from his family, tribe, and sect. He then proceeded to create a system whereby the minority Alawites ruled the country. Despite his use of Pan-Arabism, as a means of uniting the country behind a Ba’th ideology which advocated equality amongst the sects, he ensured that the state’s coercive apparatuses remained loyal to the Alawite regime. His son, Bashar Al-Assad, did not change the system in place and he actually reinforced. Both Hafiz and Bashar used identity through framing the situation as either an Alawite regime or a radical Islamist regime, therefore gaining the support of other minorities. Furthermore, both used favoritism policies enabling a select few Sunnis and other sects to gain economic privileges even though such a tactic caused resentment within sects and between the different sects. The Arab Spring has provided an opportunity for the local identities to be reactivated. Years of political maneuvering have resulted in a conflict which evolved into a sectarian conflict driven by anger, fear and resentment. The collapse of the Syrian state has caused a fall of the patronage networks, thus reinforcing the individual reliance on the local identity for basic services. This conflict has been further exacerbated through the involvement of international powers fighting a proxy war as a means of furthering their own interests through aiding certain groups and thus creating an imbalance in the political scene.
Chapter 1: Foundations of this Research

1.1 Introduction

Samuel Huntington in his well-known work “Clash of Civilizations” contends that states with common identities are more likely to lead to cohesive behavior amongst its citizens. Yet scholars such as Michael Barnett have counter argued that the Middle East is proof of how even with common identities, identity can be a driving force of conflict. The question of identity in the Middle East has deep historical roots. Since the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the region was divided in accordance with the political decisions of the colonial powers which in effect forced people to conform to the groupings of the established borders. The colonial powers drew the boundaries of the Middle Eastern states with no consideration to the ethnic groupings which existed at the time. The colonial powers went about applying policies which reinforced their own political goals, while at the same time repressing nationalist movements.

The existence of multiple identities, forced into one state can lead to multiple political conflicts. There are supranational identities and sub-national identities. Supranational identities are identities that transcend the state borders and are based on common ties, which resonate with many people to and as such they form common ties. Such identities can fuel political ideologies such as pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism. The other kind of identity is sub-national identities, which can be potentially threatening to the political order. Sub-national identities can threaten the territorial integrity of a state; for example, the tribal system in countries such as Yemen and Libya threatens the power of the state. In Syria, the breakout of the civil

---

war has been underlined by a strong ethnic, sectarian factor which highlighted how identities can have a strong impact on the way a conflict evolves.

Identity has long been a determinant of political order. Identities can and have been used as a political tool to suit the position of those in power. The authoritarian regimes in Egypt from the post Nasser era used identity as a political tool to enhance regime power and, also, as a source of legitimacy. As such rulers including Nasser created a pan-Arab, socialist identity in order to gain the support of the people who were at the time living through very anti-British sentiments. Nasser used the context of colonialism and constructed an identity which helped him gain support and legitimacy therefore turning the identity as a unifying tool to enable authoritarian resilience.

Similarly in Syria, the ruling Arab Socialist Ba’th Party (ASBP), under Hafiz Al-Assad aimed to help protect the state from demise into ethnic civil war through unifying the people behind a common pan-Arab identity. In fact, pan-Arabism acquired an independent formal role in the political scene. Since the Syrian state is comprised of multiple identities, Hafiz Al-Assad was forced to emphasize a unifying identity in order to gain the support of the people and to prevent the demise of the entire state. He later on employed a tactic favoring one ethnic group, the Alawites, over the others, disrupting the social cohesion of the state.

As such, this thesis makes the key contention that the Arab Spring has given an opportunity for some of these identities, which were ostracized, to be reactivated, and in some cases this has threatened the political order by causing inner state conflict. While recognizing that identity is not the only factor which led to the civil war, identity and its use is a critical factor to the development of the situation. Through taking a social constructivist approach, I will examine how identity has been
a tool for use in Syria. The ramifications of using identity as a political tool will be assessed by examining nationalism and its affects on sectarianism. In Syria, the differences in identities have had political consequences as many of the Alawite community and other minorities have chosen to side with the Assad regime, and with the lack of socioeconomic cohesion in society has caused factions to break off and lead an armed rebellion against Assad. In Syria, due to loyalty to the sub-national identities the revolution caused society to fragment and threatened the political order by further causing fragmentation in the state. Throughout the scope of this identity will be regarded as a notion which is fluid and ever changing in context to the political climate at the time. There is no such notion as a “true identity” in the case of Syria, but identities have been subjected to political use which has helped evolve or construct these identities in a certain way through their use for the sake of personal ends.

1.2 Background Information

The events of the Arab Spring took many scholars by surprise as they toppled what was believed to be the most secure authoritarian regimes. Scholars such as Micelle Angrist who concluded that “nowhere in the region have opposition movements successfully built organizations and mobilized ideologically widely enough, or hit on the ‘right’ tactics to regime change”\(^2\). In 2011, a fruit vendor in Tunisia set himself aflame due to the injustices committed by the police forces. This set in motion events which would change the political order of the Middle East for the unforeseeable future. Through the domino effect, a process which works in both directions, countries within the Middle East continued to influence each other. In March of the same year, protestors marched in Syria calling for the fall of the Al-

Assad regime. In Syria, the military’s absolute loyalty to the regime caused it to shoot the protestors. However, in an attempt to control the protesting masses, eventually led the country on a path to a civil war between regime loyalists and opponents. In turn, this evolved into a sectarian conflict which effectively brought the Syrian situation to a stalemate.

1.3 Research Question

This research asks the main question of how has identity been used as a political tool in Syria under both Hafiz al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad? And what are the consequences?

1.4 Hypothesis

It is my contention that both Hafiz and Bashar Al-Assad were using identities in the Syrian context to consolidate and perpetuate the regime’s power. However, in the process, the politics of identity served to be divisive and precipitated the initial stages of the civil war.

On an international level, what has fueled this manifestation further is the Cold War being played out by the international powers who sought to pursue their own interests through using certain identities. By methods such as funding or propaganda aimed at framing the civil conflicts in their own favor.

1.5 Methodology

The study of Syria was chosen because it represents a case study which has different forms of identity. Throughout this research, a literature based approach in which secondary literature is used in order to draw on the history of how identity was formed in Syria as well as make analytical observations as to how identity has helped shape the post Arab Spring political order. A comparative approach is taken to also look at how the different rulers, namely Hafiz and Bashar Al Assad, framed identity
in order to further solidify their power and to gain their own interests. This approach is also applied to look at how different international powers use identity to achieve their own interests.

1.6 Discourses About Identity in the Middle East

One important characteristic that was evident of the Arab Spring is the versatile identities that were reactivated from the protests which highlighted the disparities between the different groups in society. In Syria, identity plays a critical role in the way political order has been shaped. Authors differ as to the extent of the effect the Arab Spring has had on these identities, but one cannot argue that these identities have had a prominent role as a result of the Arab Spring. The notion of identity being a point of contention is not a novel idea. This research attempts to analyze the reasons behind why identity has become a point of contention in Syria, and in the development of the civil war. Identity has been long used as a political tool in the hands of the regime, through cooptation of certain members of society as well as coopting the coercive apparatuses, turning them into a tool of the regime through exclusivity. In this research, identity politics used by both Hafiz and Bashar Al-Assad led, most importantly, to favoritism, causing resentment and alienation within society. Factors such as globalization also had an effect on the state’s capacity to provide patronage to citizens. Moreover, the rapid increase in the population between the eras of Hafiz and Bashar Al-Assad resulted in a large number of youth unemployment which eventually took their toll on the state and its patronage structure.

1.6.1: Identity as a Point of Contention

Richard D. Parker in his article “Five Theses on Identity Politics” contends that identity is part of politics because the field “involves making comparisons and choices among—and commitments to—values and interests and groups and
individuals (including choices not to choose among available choices). The choices and the commitments we make in politics are ones with which we mean to—or by which we cannot help but—identify ourselves. This is essential because it brings to attention the importance of associations with making political decisions as well as ethnic and socioeconomic identification. A link can be made between this analysis and the role identity plays within the Middle East in terms of political associations as well as loyalty towards the state. Marc Lynch furthers this notion by reinforcing the key argument that the scholar Benjamin Miller makes about the contending loyalties between the state and the nation can lead to violence and instability. While these works discuss how identities affect people, they do not discuss how individuals have different identities which are intertwined and how that affects the individual’s ability to make political decisions. This analysis can be applied to the study of identity in Syria, as there are varied ethnic and religious groups who associate themselves with their local identity, and this can often clash with the regime’s efforts to create a unified Syrian identity. The concentration on identity eventually led to violence as it emphasizes the differences as opposed to unifying people. These contending loyalties are a testament to the fragility of the Syrian state, and gives insight as to why it uses ideologies such as socialism as a means of unifying people so that citizens focus on issues other than their ethnic differences.

The issue of identity as a political is not exclusive to the Assad regimes, but in fact the policies which were set under the French mandate of Syria set the ground roots for the development of Syrian politics under Hafiz and Bashar Al-Assad. Many literary works discuss the policies which were in place when France was in control of

---

3 Parker, Richard D. *Five Theses on Identity Politics*, 2005.pg. 55
Syria. An essential precursor to this is the Sykes Picot Agreement which placed Syria in the hands of the French. While the borders which were drawn in the Sykes Picot agreement are different than the modern day borders of Syria, modern day Syria was under the sphere of influence of France. Marina Ottaway commented on the importance of the Sykes Picot Agreement in playing a role in the eventual conflicts in identity which exist today across the entire region. In her words, “the borders that were eventually established bear almost no resemblance to the lines drawn—in exquisite imperial fashion—by the two diplomats whose main concern was to decide how Britain and France would divide among themselves the Arab parts of the Ottoman Empire” 5. It is important to note that all states are inherently artificial since all borders are a man-made concept. A criticism that is often dealt towards the Sykes Picot Agreement is that the lines were drawn without any reflection to the ethnic make up of the entire region. This can be seen in the case of the Kurdish people in the region as they are separated across Syria, Iraq and Turkey. This resulted in the formation of states with multiple identities, which is relevant to some of the internal conflicts which occur within countries of the Middle East. This point is furthered by Beverly Milton Edwards and Peter Hinchcliffe in their book “Conflicts in the Middle East Since 1945” who argue that “the arbitrary nature of state creation following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of regimes striving to consolidate and maintain their authority within highly artificial borders has forced issues of ethnic identity underground without eradicating them”6. In states with multiple ethnic identities the result is a state with multiple nations. Benjamin Miller argues that the contestation between the “nation” and the “state” is “the most important driving force

behind the conflict and instability in the Middle East”\textsuperscript{7}. While such authors give credit to the Sykes Picot Agreement other authors disagree with this assessment. Authors such as Sara Pursley, make the argument that the current borders of the Middle East bear no resemblance to the ones drawn in the actual agreement. While many authors who credit this agreement for the bases of many of the ethnic conflict which is occurring today in the Middle East, they fail to discuss an alternative to this agreement. In the scope of this research, the area, which was designated as “Syria” in which the French began employing policies, will be used as a bases of analysis.

The literature on identity politics points towards that identity continues to play a key role in the way politics is structured and organized. After the wave of emancipation from the colonial powers, states began to enforce state identities in order to ensure state stability; Samuel Helot in his article “Post-Colonial States and the Struggle for Identity in the Middle East since World War Two” argues that “not only authoritarian states, but rather nation states in general have had to impose themselves on their societies”\textsuperscript{8}. This helps link between the colonial aftermath and helping understand how these identities were further reinforced through the state. This can be best seen in the case study of Syria, as Hoff and Simon point out the ethnic and religious breakdown of Syria is very diverse. Ethnically, about 90% of Syrians are Arabs and 9% are Kurds, with the remaining 1% comprising Assyrians, Armenians,

Circassians, and Turkmen. Religiously the breakdown is even more diverse with Sunni, Shia, Alawites, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox and Druze.9

1.6.2: Authoritarian Resilience and Sectarianism in Syria

Sectarianism is an essential tool for authoritarian regimes to maintain power. Authoritarian regimes such as Syria under both Hafiz and Bashar Al-Assad would be considered ideologically weak. Many of their policies are based on patronage as opposed to mass scale development and social cohesion, therefore they rely on sectarianism and identity politics in order to consolidate their own power and ensure the resilience of their own regime.

Joshua Stacher discusses the use of identity in Syria heavily in the book Adaptable Autocrats. According to the author, the state was forced to “create” an identity in order to prevent the state from demising into civil war. He makes the contention that Hafiz Al-Assad further empowered the pan-Arab identity and solidified it through the Baath Party in order to unify the state, “without a consolidated national identity, political elites continued to pay tribute to pan-Arabism as a means of holding their weak state and heterogeneous society together” 10. As such, Stacher connects this tactic to a form of authoritarian resilience. When a state is fragile due to the multiple ethnic identities the authoritarian regime must find a unifying factor, “the absence of a functional state and regional cleavages left Arab nationalism as the only unifying identity to bind and organize Syria’s then fractious polity” 11.

In addition, Stacher furthers his argument by making comparisons as to how

9 Hof, Frederic C., and Alex Simon. "Alex Simon. "Sectarian Violence in Syria’s Civil War." The Center for the Prevention of Genocide, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. pg. 4
11 Ibid., pg. 77
identity can be further used as a political tool by the state in order to maintain their authority

“Citizens’ ideas of what… “Syria” [is], as [a] nation, helped determine which state-builder constructed a system with centralized executive authority while the other settled for decentralized executive authority. National identity, therefore, contributed to the establishment of … Syria’s varying political orders by granting or precluding the leader’s autonomy from the state’s institutions” 12.

Domestic policies were also essential in the politics of identity in Syria. Under Hafiz Al-Assad, scholars such as Lisa Wadeen discuss tactics that Hafiz Al-Assad used in order to unify the people behind a common Syrian identity. Some of these tactics include, using strong nationalistic language in order to incite people to regard themselves as Syrian citizens. As the author points out “in countries such as Syria, the particular problems faced by successive regimes stem largely from this incongruity between felt membership and state authority, between "national" identification and political organization13”. By the end of his era, it could be argued that Hafiz Al-Assad was capable of forging near social cohesion through policies such as socialism which helped people set aside their differences in favor of a common Syrian identity. Lisa Wadeen while discussing how through these tools helped develop an ultra nationalistic mentality which was formed in order maintain the power of Hafiz Al-Assad, does not discuss how different, more radical groups such as the Kurdish people were able to maintain their own identity and even have it develop to the extent that some groups later on would call for autonomy.

Existing literature points towards a clash in policies that were applied by both

12 Ibid., pg. 48
Hafiz Al-Assad and Bashar Al-Assad. Despite using policies aimed at unifying Syrians, Hafiz Al-Assad employed sectarian policies which undermined them and they were enforced by Bashar Al-Assad. In order to gain more support within the country, authors such as Salwa Ismail argue that through forging economic ties with selected members of the Sunni sect, Hafiz Al-Assad was able to ensure that he had some support in some of the sects. This causes the rise of crony capitalism, whereby unorthodox economic practices of regime such as favoritism of certain members caused the rise of an elite who were coopted by the regime in order to extend their support bases within the Sunni sect. Under Bashar Al Assad, the liberalization efforts and the networks he set up in order to ensure support only resulted in further disparities in society as it led to corruption and bred a new elite that had an interest in maintaining the status quo thus highlighting the importance of crony capitalism within the regime.

Furthermore, research shows that the exclusiveness of the military helped create resentment between the different sects in Syria. Authors such as Barry Rubin content that this exclusiveness was essential as the regimes of both Hafiz and Bashar set up several ways to ensure their survival the most important being making sure a large number of Alawites are tied to the government and managing the armed forces. This exclusivity is essential because of a minority complex on behalf of the regime whereby any attacks against the regime are perceived as an attack on the minority, thus warranting mass violence. In both regimes, the army was treated as arm of the regime, that will do its bidding. These works are excellent in discussing how coercive

---


apparatus that are kept exclusive are an essential factor in order to maintain the strength of the regime. Since the regime would not be maintained through democratic means, they must rely on brute force in order to stay in power and therefore they must ensure the loyalty of the military. Furthermore, while these works discuss these tactics they do not discuss how outside factors can affect the regime. For example, the affect of issues such as globalization as well as the possible drawbacks of a regime relying so heavily on sectarian politics, are not discussed.

In the era of Bashar Al-Assad, scholars argue that despite being regarded as a reformer, Bashar Al-Assad did not change many of the sectarian policies which were employed by his father. Scholars such as Eyal Zisser describe the presidency of Bashar as greatly reliant on the system which was set up by his father, a one-man system that was dependent on the military for power. The book by Zisser took a more autobiographical approach to analyzing politics, which helped give insight into the way in which Bashar took decisions. Yet, still it does not mention the drawbacks of such identity politics. The drawbacks of such an approach towards politics and the use of identity politics will be elaborated on in this research.

Bashar Al-Assad stressed the importance of the Syrian identity (unifying factor) and at the same time used the grand rhetoric of the Arab identity which helped people unite even further. Through looking at the works of these scholars a trend appears whereby identity politics are employed as a means to ensure regime survival, but through the use of these policies, the regime in the last decade of Bashar Al-Assad’s rule appeared to be unraveling, eventually precipitating civil war and causing local identities to be reactivated.

Identity politics is seen as playing a critical role in Syrian politics, as it helped unify the different ethnicities under the common banner of Syrian nationalism and
Pan-Arabism. This helped Hafiz and Bashar maintain their system, as through unifying the people, Syrians would no longer focus on issues such as the exclusivity of the military and the under-representation of the other ethnic groups/sects in the political system. And instead view both father and son as Syrians ruling the Syrian people. Through these tactics, identity politics became a tool to ensure the maintenance of their power.

1.6.3: The Ramifications of Identity Politics

The missing link in the literature deals with how the use identity politics, which was aimed at maintaining the Assad regime, eventually became no longer viable and took their toll on the state. This research bridges tactics and factors in other forces such as globalization and internal factors such as unemployment and how they’ve had a drastic effect on the state. Under Hafiz Al-Assad the main social contract between the people and the state was that the state would provide economic privileges to the people and they would become politically obedient. This was successful under Hafiz Al-Assad, but the increase in population, and youth unemployment meant the state’s capacity to provide patronage weakened and eventually took its toll on the state. This factors only served to weaken the state’s legitimacy and as a result, the ramifications of identity politics began to surface, and the Arab Spring became to determining factor in the reactivation of local identities.

Furthermore, more contemporary literature does not adequately link past tactics used by both Assads to the current crisis. The Arab Spring gave an opportunity for some identities to be reactivated. With the weakening of authoritarianism, in combination with the favoritism policies towards a certain group which prevented the economic cohesion of the society, these local level identities were given the opportunity to re-emerge. The building of identities “represents a powerful means for
national elites to unite citizens within a territorially-bound political community and to win consent for their political leadership. The discourse of nationalism is constituted through the construction of an identity and culture that is exclusive and different from those of other nations. Furthermore, in Syria, the use of identity as argued by Pratt can be seen as a political tool for the elite to gain support of the people.

While the initial phase of the protests was calling for human rights, the situation quickly deteriorated into ethnic conflict. Further to the ways in which identity can be used as a political tool, Fearon and Latin in their article “Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity” argue that the use of ethnicity by political elite is the key aspect when analyzing the causes for ethnic violence. They argue that through “differentiating one’s self or one’s group from an Other, and that therefore identity construction necessarily entails the potential for a violent, antagonistic relationship with the Other.” This is essentially the use of the “we/they mentality”, in which people begin formulating their own identities and distinguishing themselves from other groups in society, this can create the notion as Hale explains of in-group favoritism.

In Syria this occurs through the favoritism of the Alawites which caused the in-group tensions within the Syrian society. Moreover, this is a tactic used by the regime to distinguish between the “moderate” Syrians vs. “radical” groups such as the Islamists. Fearon and Latin also argue that the political elite use ethnic violence “to hold or acquire power.” This argument would be agreed upon by Roger Petersen who elaborates in his book that the political elite play an important role in ethnic

---

18 Ibid., pg. 853
violence by “inflame[ing] and intensif[yng] the emotions”\textsuperscript{19}. The use of emotions is very important in ethnic conflict as the leader will need to advocate a certain ideology and may have to appeal to the public to justify their actions.

In Syria, the use of identity politics in the authoritarian system is seen to have caused ethnic conflict and eventually civil war. It is important to note that identity is not the only factor which lead to civil war, but is arguably one of the most important when trying to analyze the current events in Syria. The Syrian civil war is a product of years of identity politics which eventually took their toll on the state. Stathis N. Kalyvas argues that “civil wars are not binary conflicts but complex and ambiguous processes that foster an apparently massive, though variable, mix of identities and actions—to such a degree as to be defined by that mix”\textsuperscript{20}. There is varying literature about the role identity plays in violence with some scholars such as Roger Petersen who argue that it is an important issue. Others such as Fearon and Latin in their article “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War” point out that while it may be an important reason, it is not the main reason. This book, while discussing ethnic conflict in Europe discusses a key issue when looking at civil wars, which is the power of emotions in causing these conflicts. The argument of the book can be extended further to show the reasons behind the civil war in Syria. The three main emotions discussed are fear, hatred resentment. Through studying the Syrian case study, this literature can be applied as it can be argued that the identity politics that were used by the Assads, both father and son, to stay in power caused resentment, fear and hatred that compounded into ethnic conflict. The only difficulty within this point of view is the idea of


\textsuperscript{20}Stathis, Kalyvas N. "The Ontology of Political Violence: Action and Identity in Civil Wars." \textit{Perspectives on Politics} 1.03 (2003). JSTOR. pg, 475
quantifying abstract notions such as emotions. Nevertheless, the key argument in this book can help shed light on the current events in Syria and fill the gap of what happened when sectarianism and sectarian politics take their toll on authoritarian regimes.

One important issue within studying civil wars which is missing from the previous literature is the method by which authoritarian systems involve more citizens in the civil war to fight for the regime. In Syria, as the civil war escalated, the regime use of sectarian paramilitary forces to cause more fear within people. This is a method by which authoritarian systems can use sectarianism as a tool. Petersen addressed this question by taking an emotion-based approach, arguing that fear, hatred and resentment will cause people of an ethnic group to lash out against the other. This argument would be rejected by Fearon and Latin who argue that such a conclusion would be too quick. In their other article, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War” Fearon and Latin argue that ethnicity does play a role in civil wars, but it is not the main reason. In Syria, Alawite paramilitary forces fight on behalf of the regime in order to protect the “current way of life” which is regarded as in the “Syrian way of life” and will lash out against anyone who tries to change that. They argue “the root cause of these civil wars is seen as the nationalism of culturally distinct ethnic minorities who rebel either because they harbor grievances arising from discrimination by ethnic majorities… or cultural incompatibilities and nationalist aspirations” 21. They argue that these conditions that favor grievances lead to insurgency. The idea that grievances play an essential role in Syria is applicable, as grievances caused by the unequal treatment between the different minorities in Syria was one of the main factors that lead to the uprising.

1.6.4: Demise of the Patron Client Relationship

The patron-client relationship which was first instilled by Hafiz Al-Assad began deteriorating in the years of Bashar Al-Assad, but what is interesting is that the failure to provide services is a never ending cycle, as the with the continuation of the conflict the state cannot provide basic services and this causes a further demise of the state into ethnic and sectarian lines. The Iraqi case represents a very interesting example as it also represents a state whereby a ruler, Sadam Hussein, practiced identity politics. After his ouster by the US led intervention, sectarian conflict engulfed the state. Many of the articles written about Iraq can be also applied to Syria to demonstrate how the use of sectarianism in politics can have detrimental effects on the aftermath of the state. Multiple identities become a political problem and eventually lead to violence as a result of the maneuvering of identities for political interests. Author Faleh A. Jabar discusses how the Sadam Hussein regime used the tribal identities of Iraq in its favor in order to gain more regime loyalists. This analysis can be further applied to the Syrian case study. According to Jabar in state weakness the state will use identities in order for them to act as extensions of the state. This can be arguably applied to the Syrian case study whereby Hafiz Al-Assad, in the weakness of the Syrian state, used the Alawite identity in order to surround himself by loyalists to further solidify the power of the state. Furthermore, he makes the key argument that the need for kinship grows as the state ability to provide welfare, an argument which is applicable in the Syrian case study within the final years of Bashar Al-Assad where factors such as globalization created socioeconomic problems, eventually taking their toll on the regime. Furthermore, this can describe the system within the civil war in which the need for kinship continues to grow. This gives rise to a question of with the extent of the demise of the Syrian state, will this need for
kinship ever be reversed. This article highlights how authoritarian regimes can play a factor in the use of identity which can exacerbate political violence. But it is important to point out that there is no way to know if the development of the Iraqi case would have been different had the US never intervened.

1.6.5 Identity Politics and State Failure

Amongst the literature which can be used as indicators to what occurs when sectarian politics fail in authoritarian regimes and their consequences, is the study of state collapse. One of the key consequences of years of identity politics practiced in Syria is state failure. In Syria, this study takes the position that Syria is a failed state as it has lost its ability to provide basic goods and services. One common point of analysis between scholars Fearon, Latin, Kalyvas, Hale, and Petersen is that a precursor to the violence is some level of state collapse that results in mass violence. This is a valid point, because in order for this large-scale level of violence to occur, the state has to have lost control of the state apparatus and the ability to carry out its duty to protect citizens. This reverts back to the notion of legitimacy, as the Syrian civil war escalated and the state could no longer protect citizens, paramilitary forces which are based on sectarianism arose. The state lost its ability to provide basic services, thus losing its legitimacy in the eyes of the people. This highlights the ramifications of years of reliance on sectarianism on behalf of the Syrian regimes. As the civil war escalated, violence caused people to rely on their own exclusive sectarian groups thus further cementing the new social structure and undermining the work of Hafiz Al-Assad at creating a near cohesive state. Furthermore, the presence of sectarian paramilitary forces is an indication that the state has lost its ability to monopolize the use of force, further losing its legitimacy in the eyes of the people.
1.6.6: International Dimension and Conflict Exacerbation

Another important aspect that needs to be discussed when observing identity and politics is the role that international and regional powers play within the context of developing these identities and exacerbating the conflict. Looking into how international factors help use identity to further their own interests, effectively creating a proxy war is very important. Actors such as the Gulf, Iran, Russia, and the US need to be considered as they have a direct control over how some identities are empowered. Toby Matthiesen, in his article “The Gulf vs. The Arab Spring” by argues that the issue of foreign funding of certain sects in countries such as Syria has brought about the “breakdown of the cross-sectarian social fabric in the Gulf and beyond” 22. This would explain why when the Shi’a majority in Bahrain started protesting, the Gulf provided the resources to quell the protests. This avenue of research is important to analyze because identities do not develop in a vacuum, they evolve in accordance with other factors and are enabled accordingly.

The study of identity is essential when analyzing the events of the Arab Spring, this research argues that the Arab Spring gave an opportunity for local identities to be brought into the forefront. One key aspect of this topic that needs to be addressed is the fact that the Arab Spring is a very new phenomenon and the true effects it has on these identities will be observed decades later. There is somewhat of a gap in the research in linking how identity politics in Syria throughout the different eras from the French mandate until Bashar Al-Assad have a direct effect in the way the events unfolded and their breakdown into a sectarian conflict. This research analyzes literature which was written before the current events in order to show how

identity was used under the authoritarian regimes of Hafiz Al-Assad and Bashar Al-Assad as a means to stay in power, yet eventually they take their toll on the regimes causing the initial stages of the civil war.

1.7 Theoretical Framework

This research uses a social constructivist approach when analyzing politics. The merit of using such an approach stems from the fact that there is an emphasis on identities and the way they shape regional politics and dynamics within the Middle East, which is essential when looking into how identity is manifested. Marc Lynch discusses why the social constructivist approach is beneficial when analyzing identity in the Middle East. As he puts it, the Middle East, is a “region defined by a shared language, political culture, and institutions” 23. On this basis, renowned social constructivist Michael Barnett discusses the importance of identity in the analysis of the Middle East as “Arab states fought about defining the norms that should govern their relations; social processes, not social structures” 24.

The main focus of this research is analyzing the role identity plays in determining political order therefore it is critical to establish what is meant by the word identity. In the field of political science there is no accepted definition of the word identity. Scholar James D. Fearon argues that the “present idea of ‘identity’ is a fairly recent social construct, and a rather complicated one at that. Even though [the phrase is commonly used in] everyday discourse, it proves quite difficult to give a short and adequate summary statement that captures the range of its present meanings” 25. This represents the difficulty in establishing a set definition of a phrase

23Lynch, Marc. "Regional International Relations." In The Middle East, edited by Ellen Lust. CQ Press, 2010.pg, 322
24 Ibid.
25Fearon, James D. "What Is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?" Stanford University, November 1999.pg. 2
which is based on social norms and is very abstract. Jenkins attempts to define the phrase by establishing that it “refers to the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities” 26.

According to Fearon identity can be simply defined as the answer to the question of, “who am I?” In another work with scholar David D. Latin they propose, that identity includes “rules of membership that decide who is and is not a member of the category; and content, that is, sets of characteristics (such as beliefs, desires, moral commitments, and physical attributes) thought to be typical of members of the category, or behaviors expected or obliged of members in a certain situation” 27. Henry E. Hale, simply puts it, identity is “a kind of social radar” 28.

This study uses aspects of both definitions. Identity, in the scope of this research, is considered as the norms and values that are shared amongst a group of people who consider themselves distinctive from other groups, creating a sense of exclusivity. This allows that social entities be grouped into blocs that can be analyzed in Syria.

Another important consideration to bear in mind when looking into identity within politics is the different schools of thought that take part in the debate of what is identity that are the constructivist and the primordial schools of thought. Henry Hale critiques both schools by arguing that they “reduce [identity] to gross oversimplifications” 29. This is true to some extent as both schools of thought make generalizations regarding a topic as complicated as identity, but despite this

28 Hale, Henry E. "Divided We Stand: Institutional Sources of Ethnofederal State Survival and Collapse." World Politics, 2nd ser. 56 (2004) pg. 463
29 Ibid., pg. 459
observation these schools of thought do make key analysis which makes identity more clear. The first school is the primordial school of thought. This school of thought, according to Hale, believes that identity is constant. He likens their view on identity to a “stone wall” by which the different ethnic groups in the world constitute a “wall” in society, “each group has its particular constitutive features (cultures, traditions, histories, physical traits, language repertoires, religion, etc.)”30. Fearon and Latin argue that this school of thought argues, “mistakenly, that certain social categories are natural, inevitable, and unchanging facts about the social world”31. There is one inconsistency in Hale’s explanation of premordialism. In his work he explains that these features, “do not change”, yet this contradicts with a later argument in which he explains that the proponents of this school of thought “do not argue that the subjects of their studies are eternal… but once formed, groups tend to strongly endure”32. This is a contradiction within the explanation, but more importantly, this definition, which is largely based on primordialist Van Evara’s definition, shows how the school of thought does not take into account important issues such as globalization and the fact that identities today are not clear-cut. Hale also highlights that the school of thought relies on the key issue of perception of the individual of the group around them, which can be interpreted as a flaw of the primordial school of thought as people’s perceptions of identities can cause splinters from within identities themselves as differences in practice can be argued as based on perception of a certain ethnicity and its practices.

30 Ibid.,pg 460
This study focuses primarily on the second school of thought which is the constructivist school of thought that debates the issue of identity is constructivism. This school of thought according to Fearon and Latin argues, “identities are socially constructed”\textsuperscript{33}. This school of thought believes that over time identity has changed and is in fact “fluid and endogenous to human action” \textsuperscript{34}. This school of thought regarding the wall that is described by the primordialists as simply a façade and that the defining feature of identity is the fact that boundaries are created and persist\textsuperscript{35}. Some proponents of this school of thought would argue that once an identity is formed, they generally endure; yet still with modernization, people’s identity can ultimately change. This school of thought can be argued as more plausible, because it takes into consideration the important issue of globalization and how identities evolve over time with the freedom of movement. It also takes into consideration the modernization theory which argues that as people and society modernize they move away from notions such as culture\textsuperscript{36}.

These approaches are best to describe the different kinds of identity within Syria as they look at identity as a fluid notion, socially constructed, which can help set parameters making it possible to analyze how identity has been used as a political tool in Syria.

\textsuperscript{35}Hale, Henry E. "Divided We Stand: Institutional Sources of Ethnofederal State Survival and Collapse." \textit{World Pol. World Politics} 56, no. 02 (2004).pg. 461
\textsuperscript{36}Ibid.
Chapter 2: Identity and the Study of Political Science

The study of identity in the Middle East is an important element to understanding the events unfolding in Syria. Recently studies have shown that identity has become more important than mere biological decent or class. Studying identity as a factor in politics is the study of not only the formation of bonds between individuals within a community but also how these different communities interact with each other. Identity must be emphasized due to multiple reasons the most important being the fact that the identity of an individual is an important factor in shaping their cognitive thought and therefore has an effect on the way they make political decisions.

2.1: The importance of Identity in Politics

Amongst the most important theorists who argued in favor of identity being a consideration in the political decisions of an individual is Max Weber. He saw identity as a human groups who entertained the notion that they are bound by certain characteristics and what bonded them together was their subjective perception of these bonds and what these bonds entailed. The importance of identity in political action is the notion of the perception of these characteristics. The way a person sees themselves has a direct impact on their decisions as it can often translate to a group perception thus creating a “we vs. they” mentality which fuels action within an entire community. Furthermore, Weber specified that the what facilitates these bonds within a group formation is the political community. Therefore this translation of a bond on a group level creates a form of solidarity between members, which can create a political

community.

There are several reasons why studying identity is essential for the field of political science. The power a sense of identity holds on an individual is not to be underestimated. This sense of identity helps the individual “provide a definition, an interpretation of the self that establishes what and where the person is on both social and psychological terms”\(^{39}\). This helps the individual instil a sense of order within their lives through helping them place themselves within a larger social structure. This further reinforces the idea of solidarity within the group highlighting that they share a bond as well as a common fate therefore maintaining an interest in the future. The individual’s identity then becomes a driving force in their ability to make decisions.

2.2: State Construction of Identity

The construction of identities can occur in several ways. It is important to point out that some identities are symbolically constructed and predicated on the notion of that there exists characteristics which place differences between one group and the rest. In states, identities can be predicated on the existence of borders which helps separate one group from the rest. Yet the case becomes different when there are competing local identities, in which the state must find a unifying symbol that appeals to the groups in order to establish the sense of solidarity. States also have a very important role in constructing identities. In countries where there are multiple local identities the state will have to impose its authority through constructing a unified state identity. The state will employ different tools in order to help construct the identity of its citizens. Amongst these tools are emphasizing the minimal differences between the population in order to help enforce the grouping tools which help unite

people. Emphasizing such differences helps appeal to a wider range of people as well as instilling a sense of belonging between the different groups therefore giving them more cause to be part of the state enforced identity. While people may have multiple identities stemming from different roots, the state must find a way to connect between people to ensure that they set aside differences and bond through the common similarities with which to unify people for group action.

A state will use rhetoric in order to frame the society as a cohesive one essentially uniting people against the “other”. The idea of “othering” is an important political tool that is used by political leaders in order to establish a separate identity of one group from the rest. Often this will be build upon rhetoric which demonizes the other group essentially giving the group a common goal.

Sune Qvotrup Jensen notes that identities are “always situated within specific social contexts and conditioned by them”. This speaks to the idea that identities are often used as a political tool by the state in order to derive a certain reaction. The use of “othering” can be a means to such an end. He makes a further observation that this tool is explored by political thinkers such as Hegel and his theory of the self and other. The reasoning behind such a connection is that Hegel through his work makes the distinction between the individual and the other as two separate entities with their own characteristics. Essentially, the way one entity is defined is through juxtaposing it from the self. Furthermore, “othering” as a tool combines many of the aforementioned tactics in order to unify the people then further establish them as an entirely separate group from the rest. This ties into the argument of Weber who

---

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
contends that these characteristics, which set one group separate from the rest, must be subjectively perceived. The state can play a role in the way these messages are framed through the use of tools such as symbols, shared political memories, and nationalistic rhetoric in order to help construct the identity, and further enforce it through the use of “othering” in order to set one group distinct from the self.

Edward Said gave an example of “othering” on a more international level using the case of the West and the Orient. The West was able to distinguish itself from the Orient through applying basic reductionist tools. The use of reductionist tools such as stereotyping helps make the categorizations more memorable thus more probable that they will stay for long periods of time. The West would apply such reductionist tools which subsequently resulted in the categorization of the Orient as an alien being “as alien and to incorporate it schematically on a theatrical stage whose audience, managers and actors are for Europe, and only for Europe.”

Scholars such as Anthony D. Smith highlight rhetoric based tools which help establish a common identity employed by the state. He highlights the power in creating symbols in order to give people a sense of pride within being part of a certain group. Further tools include how political leaders will often highlight a common descent amongst a group which helps give an impression of unity amongst the different factions of a society. This tool is especially important as it highlights the notion of continuity with the past tying together nationalism and identity.

Furthermore, states will appeal to common political memories such as revolutions or wars in order to help give a sense of need for group action or even in times of social

---

44 Ibid., pg, 64
distress to create social cohesion. This becomes especially when advocating for group political action as it causes people to set aside differences and focus on commonalities which inflame a sense of nationalism. Also political leaders will often resort to appealing to the memories of an extinct political community in order to highlight the success and unity of the past in order to gain support for a common future further galvanizing group action  

Further to the rhetoric used by the state in order to construct identity, rulers will often use general linguistic tools such referring to the group as “the people”  

Such tools are intended to be very general as they help place people under a unifying heading. Such terms denote common identities between varying groups as well as invoking a sense of belonging to the state or nation. Furthermore, these tools are helping because according to Weber, no matter how loosely the groups are related, they are capable of uniting people because they imply the existence of a contemporary political community.

The ability of the state to help achieve this sense of unified identity through tools of construction speaks to the power to which a state holds. Any state needs to establish a common identity in order to enforce its power over its subjects. As Nazih N. Ayubi discusses, the state has a moral personality which is to oversee the affairs of the people in a specific territory with the rules of sovereignty in mind  

Therefore if a state is able to maintain its power, it must find a way to unify people otherwise there will be breakouts of violence due to a lack of social cohesion. Thus calling for the need to construct identities in the state in order to prevent the breakout of violence.

48 Ibid.
that can be based upon identity. In the article, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War” Fearon and Latin argue that while ethnicity plays a role in civil wars lead by ethnic minorities, it is not the main reason. Scholars such as Fearon and Latin point out that “the root cause of these civil wars is seen as the nationalism of culturally distinct ethnic minorities who rebel either because they harbor grievances arising from discrimination by ethnic majorities… or cultural incompatibilities and nationalist aspirations”\(^{50}\). Social cohesion is an essential factor to prevent civil wars, and as such states with a heterogeneous identities are often forced to use tools in order to emphasize the commonalities between the different people as well as to ensure that minorities feel like they belong, as part of a larger community otherwise they will descend into being more loyal towards their local identities.

The state’s exercise of influence when it comes to identity construction is a factor in Ayubi’s view of its ability to exercise power. According to Ayubi, the states power is rooted in three structural dimensions with the means of persuasion being the third structural component\(^{51}\). This entails the ability of a state to enforce an ideology as well as influence the identity and culture. A state and a political ruler ensures the stability of the country and its ability to be powerful through enforcing the means necessary to convince the people to set aside differences and adhere to one common identity that resonates with as many people as possible. Unifying identities also becomes very important especially in times of crisis where the state will appeal to the nationalist sentiment in people which can cause the rise of anger against those who

---

\(^{50}\) Fearon, James D., and David D. Laitin. "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War." *APSR American Political Science Review* 97, no. 01 (2003). JSTOR, pg 2

\(^{51}\) Ayubi, Nazih N. M. *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East.* London: I.B. Tauris, 1995.pg, 38
threaten the traditional or accepted lifestyle and identity. In order to gain more support, some leaders will often use the “othering” technique against citizens from within their own country in order to help maintain the status quo. Yet this becomes very dangerous because this can lead to ethnic violence such as genocide.

Often these contending identities can become a point of abuse for political elite in the pursuit of their own interest. Fearon and Latin in their article “Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity” argue that the use of ethnicity by political elite is the key aspect when analyzing the causes for ethnic violence. They discuss the idea of “othering” as an important tool in the process to frame a group as an enemy thus unifying people against them, “differentiating one’s self or one’s group from an Other, and that therefore identity construction necessarily entails the potential for a violent, antagonistic relationship with the Other”53. This is essentially the use of the “we/they mentality”, in which people begin formulating their own identities thus creating the notion of in-group favoritism.

Identity construction is a process which takes time and is constantly evolving and changing in accordance to the political times which the state goes through. As Weber contends, the original motives which drive the creation of these identities are forgotten over time and they become accepted as customs and the convention. But no matter the efforts that the state employs in order to unify the identity of its people, identities can often remain latent and will suddenly reemerge with unexpected force.

as a consequence of ideological vacuums\textsuperscript{55}.

2.3: Identity Construction, Politics in the Middle East

Identity plays an integral factor in shaping the cognition of individuals in the Middle East. People in the Middle East often are members of multiple identity groups which can be transnational such as the Islamic identity as well as members of local identities such as members of a certain tribe from a certain district. The Middle East as a region is defined “by a shared language, political culture, and institutions” \textsuperscript{56}. Yet despite these factors which unify people, there are many competing identities which often create a point of contention as they sometimes challenge the territorial integrity of the state when they call for separatism. Political elites will then use tools such as “othering” in order to frame these groups as unpatriotic, even further categorizing them as terrorists. Such is the case with the Kurds in Turkey.

Scholar David Siddhartha Patel gives an example when demonstrating the different identities with an individual who lives in the Middle East. Abbas is a member of the middle class in Iraq. He subscribes to the religion of Islam, specifically Shi’ism. He is from the Banu Tamim tribe in the district of Busra\textsuperscript{57}. These factors of his identity are essential and can be defining factors when making political decisions as an individual. Patel further goes on to explain that during elections, political parties often tell him to think of himself as first and foremost as an Iraqi and to not look into factionalist demands\textsuperscript{58}. Here it is evident that political parties will adhere to the enforced identity as a form of ensuring continuation of political power and to avoid

\textsuperscript{55}Guibernau, Montserrat, and John Rex. "Introduction." In \textit{The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration}. Cambridge: Polity, 2010 pg, 5
\textsuperscript{56}Lynch, Marc. "Regional International Relations." In \textit{The Middle East}, edited by Ellen Lust. CQ Press, 2010 pg, 322
\textsuperscript{58}Ibid.
the individual interests from dividing the state. Abbas’ local mosque tells him that he
is a member of an Islamic umma which is indicative of the transnational identity
which can also threaten the integrity of the state as it can be controlled by outside
factors such as the case with Nasser and Pan-Arabism. Abbas is also a member of the
Banu Tamim tribe, which is a more local identity. The tribal identity is an essential
one in the Middle East, as often tribes can become important political actors, with
members supporting a certain candidate in elections. Moreover, a ruler can favor his
own tribe thus beginning the favoritism policies which leads to disparities within the
society, disrupting social cohesion and ultimately violence. The example of Abbas is a
representation of the different identities which can exist in an individual. Often what
each identity calls for can be conflicting, but individuals find a way to avoid internal
conflict. The aforementioned characteristics are often shared with some individuals
but not others; this can create groups within the countries, causing the formation of
communities based on their shared characteristics. These characteristics become
very important as they can become determinants when he makes his political
decisions. One important issue is that through this it becomes apparent that identities
are not fixed and will interact with other identities, both local and international thus
shaping the way they evolve. One such example is Shi’ism and the grand Ayatollah of
Iran, here an identity was shaped into a political one with many members from
different countries. These identities are also subject to change through many factors
such as evolution and personal choice.

Identity politics is something that is done within the authoritarian systems of
the Middle East as a form of sustaining these authoritarian regimes. Faleh A. Jabar
discusses how states will construct and maneuver identities in order to ensure the

59 Ibid.
sustainability of the regime and the state. They will use shared political memories such as successful wars fought and revolutions to unite people and have them act a certain way. Furthermore they will construct separate groups through “othering” when one group poses a threat to either the regime or the territorial integrity of the state. Jabar furthers his argument by highlighting how weak states will use identities and have them act as extensions of the state. Furthermore, he makes the key argument that the need for kinship grows as the state becomes unable to provide welfare. The use and abuse of identities is a very delicate process and when not handled properly can cause the latent identities when they reemerge to do so with violence.

This chapter sought to discuss why the study of identity is integral to the study of political science in general and why it is essential to the study of the Middle East. Identities, within the scope of this study are constructed; they are ever evolving and are dependent on entities such as states. Identities have long been a tool for political use, for example in Syria, Hafiz Al-Assad used the Pan-Arab identity as a unifying factor between the different sects in Syria in order to avoid the demise of the state into an ethnic conflict and to help unite the Syrian people.

---

61 Ibid.
Chapter 3: Colonialism and the Construction of Syrian Identity

The first part of this chapter examines the roots of existing social structure, which will be analyzed later on in this research, which were heavily built upon the sociopolitical structure which was initially set up by the French colonial power. This left behind a legacy of ethnic fragmentation which would affect Syrian governments until this very day. The second part of this chapter analyzes the political system which was established since Syria achieved independence from the French colonial power and the consequences of colonialism on the establishment of a political system sectarian in nature. Furthermore, how the political powers that took control continued to maintain this system, even using the identity crisis and constructing a state identity to ensure the maintenance of Hafez Al-Assad’s regime.

3.1: Colonial Policies in Syria

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire colonial powers began pursuing their own interests within the region. Under the Ottoman Empire, France was considered a trading partner therefore it began setting up its own economic interests from very early on\(^\text{62}\). Therefore, after the fall of the Ottomans, it claimed “historic rights” to the land of Syria and Lebanon due to two main reasons. The first being that France felt responsible to protect the Christian minority in the Levant\(^\text{63}\). The second was that through their economic ties with the Ottoman Empire, France began building an infrastructure in order to support their own economic ventures such as railroads and silk production factories. These vested interests allowed France to give up their right to Mosul and Palestine in order to maintain control over Greater Syria which included Lebanon.


\(^\text{63}\) Ibid.
The bases for such an agreement stemmed from the Sykes Picot Agreement of 1916. During this agreement France and Britain came to a settlement over who will control which territories, this was later ratified by Russia. This agreement was secret in nature and ultimately would have placed Britain in a position where it would have had to turn its back on promises of independence made to Arabs. The colonial powers haphazardly drew borders in the Middle East in accordance to their own interest therefore completely disregarding the ethnic divide on the ground. In their agreement, these powers used the specific terminology: “territory that is now Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the occupied territories, Jordan and Iraq”\(^{64}\). The use of the term territory was on purpose to indicate the fact that these states were “created” by France and Britain\(^{65}\). This agreement left a legacy of instability in the region. Marina Ottaway commented on this agreement saying “the borders that were eventually established bear almost no resemblance to the lines drawn—in exquisite imperial fashion—by the two diplomats whose main concern was to decide how Britain and France would divide among themselves the Arab parts of the Ottoman Empire”\(^{66}\). Some scholars disagree with the extent to which the Sykes Picot agreement had an impact on the Middle East. Scholars such as Sara Pursley argue that the agreement was a reflection of the reality on the ground and that the present day map does not resemble the Sykes Picot map\(^{67}\). While this may be the case, this agreement was a political determinant to the development of nationalist movements in countries such as Syria. The colonial

\(^{64}\) Ibid., pg. 181


policies which were placed as a result of this agreement are a precursor to the way in which identities developed in Syria. The Sykes Picot Agreement placed Syria under the sphere of influence of France and the policies which implemented tactics aimed at disrupting nationalist movements and as it placed artificial barriers to Arab unity.68

This agreement was met with wide criticism from Arab nationalists who felt betrayed by the British despite the fact that they often led uprisings against the Ottomans in order to help Britain. Woodrow Wilson wrote the 14 points intended as principles in order to criticize the lack of inclusion of the Middle East in determining their own fate. The states were never consulted or given a choice in the manner regarding which power would ultimately oversee their transition to independence. Later on, the Syrian General Congress declared that it wanted an independent, unified Syria which included modern Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan and deemed France an unacceptable choice as the power which would oversee this transition. The Congress also demanded that, if given the option, they would choose the United States as a first option or Britain as a second.

After gaining control of Syria, France went about dividing the state into six different states. They were divided along the lines of Damascus, Aleppo and Lebanon. The north went to the Alawites, and the southern mountainous region went to the Druze as well as a Alexandretta which would later on be given to Turkey as many Turkish people were already living there. This tactic had many reasons behind such an implementation. Firstly, much to the anger of the nationalists in Syria, this tactic was seen as a divide and conquer policy which would cause even more separation of the already divided state. It also made it very difficult for them to be able to reach Syrians in other territories. This ethnofederal state, was in a sense a way to ensure that the

Syrian people could not unite in order to ask for a unified government which was their right as part of the Mandate Agreement.

Despite the League of Nations Charter pointing towards these states simply overseeing the affairs within each country they were mandating, each colonial power held absolute control within their state and as such France was able to set up a system which was based on a tight electoral system as they were acting under the auspices of the League of Nations. The process of gaining control of the territories was done through the use of mass education in order to help introduce a common system of Western education. The relationship of culture between Syria and France is not a new one, but rather built on years of an influx of French merchants and missionaries. Through their education polices, the French were capable of influencing the Syrian national identity. Later on, the Syrians were allowed to makes changes to the education system in which they sought to ensure the presence of Arabic as a language as well as including national pride within the curriculum in order to help revive the notion of a united Syrian nationalist sentiment.

The ethnofederal system which was enforced by the French while it was meant to control the state, it ended up failing and would prove to be a source of problem for Syrian governments until this very day. This ethnofederal system showed how “the arbitrary nature of state creation following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of regimes striving to consolidate and maintain their authority within highly artificial borders has forced issues of ethnic identity underground without eradicating them”69. Studies have been done on the ethnofederal system, Henry Hale establishes that this system is one “in which at least one constituent territorial

governance unit in intentionally associated with a specific ethnic category. He conditions that it must have at least minimal levels of democracy to succeed. Based on his research he concluded that ethnofederations which have had core led systems have collapsed because of the majority wanting independence, or the minority states feeling threatened all of which leads to the federation as a whole fragmenting or falling into civil war. He also makes the argument that an improved form ethnofederations without a core ethnic region tend to succeed and cause less tension between ethnicities. This case was not seen in Syria as eventually the ethnofederal system did not succeed because it was forced upon by the French colonial power.

This ethnofederal system left many legacies in the Syrian political future. The French also sought to create allies within the system they set up and looked towards the Alawites for aid. As a result they fostered both the Druze and Alawites as allies due to the fact that they were “were compact regional minorities with considerable political unity”. This choice seemed only logical considering the fact that many of the other ethnic minorities were minor and did not have enough of a geographic base in order to unite the Syrians in favor of the French. As Ayse Tekdal Fildis discusses that “even with French support, the Alawite and Druze communities were not viable as national entities. Their autonomy mainly had been fostered by the French in an attempt to break Syrian unity.” Yet through this tactic what the French succeeded in accomplishing is creating “, minority consciousness, reinforced by a combination of geography, religious differences, communal segregation and regional separatism, had

70Hale, Henry E. "Divided We Stand: Institutional Sources of Ethnofederal State Survival and Collapse." World Politics, 2nd ser. 56 (2004). pg, 167
a damaging impact on Syrian political life even long after the mandate”\textsuperscript{72}.

The time of the French helped display the extent to which a colonial power will go though to exercise control. The system that was created only succeeded in highlighting the existence of the multiple nations within one state in Syria. Michael Lynch cites Benjamin Miller again who argues that the contestation between the “nation” and the “state” as “the most important driving force behind the conflict and instability in the Middle East” \textsuperscript{73}. The mandate system failed in helping Syria instill the basic institutional power needed in order to help create a stable state. Even 20 years after colonial rule, Syria was left “without independence, without institutions of self-government and without territorial unity”\textsuperscript{74}.

All states are inherently artificial in the sense that they were man made. In the Middle East many states were built through decree and as such were divided up through the Sykes Picot Agreement. The divisions were representations of political intent on behalf of the colonial powers. Through the policies that were employed by the French, it becomes evident that they were acting in the best interest of their economic interests. The French had no sympathy for Arab nationalism and as such ruled Syria and split it into several smaller units as an attempt to weaken the movement. The French equated Arab nationalism with Islamic fundamentalism and sought to eradicate it as they saw it as obstructing the spread of Western civilization and economic interests; as such they preferred non-Sunni members\textsuperscript{75}.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{73}Lynch, Marc. "Regional International Relations." In \textit{The Middle East}, edited by Ellen Lust. CQ Press, 2010.pg, 325
Initially, the French considered themselves the guardians of the Maronites in Lebanon. By doing this they triggered off a sense of competition among various religious communities. While these communities lived side-by-side, when an assault was committed it was considered an affront to the entire community and there was no shortage on leaders willing to exploit these tensions. Colonial policies adopted by France only sought to secure their economic and political interests. When justifying their position they cited the fact that the people of Syria and Lebanon have called on the French to help protect them from the Turks, and in return the French have brought “order, freedom, honest finance, railroads, public works and hygiene”. Policy makers such as Robert de Caix, chief architect of the French policy in Syria, opposed a unified Syria, arguing that it would end up having an Arab and Muslim majority and would threaten French influence. The policies of the colonial period only sought to disrupt Arab nationalism and as such their best approach was to treat Syrians as separate communities. The policies only intensified divisions and differences and ended up elevating some minorities to preferred status at the expense of the majority.

Before the Sykes Picot Agreement, the French had an agreement with the Ottoman Empire. When in 1860, thousands of Maronites were killed by Druze in Damascus and Lebanon, the French, along with several other European powers, entered into a protocol with the Ottoman Empire in which the French would send

---

77 Ibid.,
12,000 troops to provide order, and despite finding the state in order they still occupied parts of Greater Syria and strategic port cities for a year.\(^{80}\)

### 3.2 The Consequences of French Colonialism

The French colonial power used identity as a political tool in order to establish its own power structure and maintain it. Under the French Mandate sectarian loyalists were chosen on purpose in order to prevent the rise of Arab nationalism. Minorities were allowed to create their own formally autonomous regions with their own governments, through this support they enabled the notions of separatist groups and further encouraged Syrian particularism. This further dented the ability to form a national identity, through enabling autonomy and encouraging it. Even within the military favoritism was even applied, whereby they favored certain groups in order to repress minority rebellions. This is further to empower one group against the others.

"The fact that these troops were largely composed of minorities increased the resentment among Arabic-speaking Sunnis. Discord between and within religious and ethnic minorities was also provoked by the fact that the French played off one tribal leader against another."\(^{81}\)

The use of identity as a political tool used by the French had a direct effect on the development political structure on Syria for decades to come. "The development of the political consciousness during the independence period showed the extent to which sub-national loyalties were stressed over commitment to the nation state as a whole."\(^{82}\) In this phase of the French plan, the encouragement of the subnational identities helped give a chance for these to establish a separate identity from that of

---


\(^{82}\) Ibid., 19
the Syrian identity. As opposed to being forced to be part of a larger “artificial” identity then being separated into a nation state, these states were forced to essentially place an artificial identity on a higher priority than their own, which is what occurred as France removed the idea for separate states within Syria. In addition to separating the Syrian state, “political efforts were continued in order to prevent any cohesive "or definable loyalty to a Syrian nation state." Furthermore, when Syria became independent it was in many ways a state without being a nation state, "a political entity without being a political community... national politics [was] often defined in terms of subnational regional, interests."

In the first few years since independence, attempts at developing a cohesive national sentiment and weakening the sectarian effects of the Mandate were accomplished through modernization such as railroads connecting the different regions. Syrian nationalists continued to change the education system in an attempt to help bring about a generation loyal to the idea of a Syrian nation. Furthermore, through education being nationalized students were brought up less reliant on their sectarian backgrounds. Author Nikolaos van Dam comments saying that during the 1960s a new generation were being brought up less religious thus deemphasizing the sectarian ties. Also, he points out that urbanization caused family ties to weaken.

This shows the different levels of loyalty that people have, which represent obstacles to a unified Syrian identity. Weakening, ethnic and family ties represents different levels of identity that cause divide amongst Syrians and therefore are considered obstacles for Syrian nationalists. Moreover, the establishment of trade between the different regions, as brought about by modernization was aimed at helping establish

---

83 Ibid.
84 Ibid., pg. 21
85 Ibid., pg. 30
The use of identity by the French affected the development of political opposition. The sectarian nature of Syrian politics is evident in the unfolding of the political scene in the direct aftermath of the independence of Syria; many of parties which were formed became based on regional, sectarian interests. And the connections to which they were developed were "build up through traditional social channels. The latter factor, in particular, was largely responsible for the continued existence in Syrian political life of sectarian, regional, and tribal loyalties. The traditional social channels were created based on the fact that as certain groups lived in the same area, they shared the same grievances and as such created political parties representing such. This is most evident in the rise of the Ba'th party.

3.3: The Creation of the Ba’th Party

The Ba'th Party was created in Syria in 1940 by Michel 'Afalaq and Salah al-Din Bitar. Even though it was created in Damascus, it spread to other Syrian districts, through the established trade routes between the different regions. The group heavily focused on “constructing” a “Syrian” identity. The appeal of the group stemmed from the appeal of the socialist ideology to poverty stricken areas. The party was particularly popular in the rural areas because that is were the poorer segment of the population lived, this coincided with where the minorities lived. Minorities were attracted to the Ba'th idea of nationalism whereby everyone was equal essentially “freeing themselves from their minority status and the narrow social frame of their sectarian, regional and tribal ties”. The ideology was contextually representative of the grievances which were occurring in Syria at the time. The Ba’th party advocated that socialism was a better ideology than capitalism, alignment with the Soviet bloc

---

86 Ibid., pg, 33
87 Ibid., pg, 33
was better than working with the imperialist West, secularism and modernization would create equality amongst all members of society\textsuperscript{88}. While the Ba’th ideology aimed at rebuilding the state’s identity it can be seen as representing a different kind of identity, which arguably came with its own consequences. The first issue is that this represents the use of identities in order to create a larger political movement, and when applied it became apparent that their calls for an identity based on equality would be idealistic and the emergence of the Alawites as the dominant elite. Moreover, while this was a different form of identity from that which previously based on the different local identities, it is still not focusing on forming a Syrian identity, due to the multitude of identities which existed in Syria and the different interests along with the potential for conflict. As such, the political elite arguably chose the Pan-Arab identity as a method of uniting Syrians behind an even more powerful, more stable identity which is the Pan-Arab identity. Furthermore, with the creation of Israel, it gave the perfect opportunity to unite Syrians behind a common enemy and unite them behind a common cause which is freeing Palestine.

While the Ba’th ideology did rely heavily on the Pan-Arab identity it still served the purpose of defining Syria and gave it a more “national” identity; moreover, it also defined its identity through its place as part of a larger group. The appeal of the Ba’th Party resonated with many segments in society. Within the Sunni sect, the rich landowners presumed a liberal democracy would bring stability as well as maintain the status quo, and with the poor disfranchised of the Sunni sect were hoping for change from the capitalist landowning elite who were taking advantage of them. The political calls of the group also included a more representative parliament which

meant that more minorities could be included in the decision making of the country. Yet despite these attempts the constructed identity was and remains very fragile. As Barry Rubin comments, many competing identities and ideologies all of which wanted “a total victory for itself”.

In 1963 a group of armed forces seize control of Syria through military coup and led the country in the name of the Arab Socialist Resurrection (Ba'th) Party. The party held appeal because of its "explicitly redistributive, populist platform, combined with the dynamics of military rule." Because they were so radical and attempted to re-enact a comprehensive program of taking properties and redistributing them set the platform for a more doctrinaire group to take over power. Yet despite advocating equality, many of the members were of minorities which due to the fact that the officers involved called upon help from officers which they knew through tribal, family, or regional ties. This demonstrates how the aforementioned social channels, which were created through the use of identity by the French, would still have a strong effect on the way politics would play out. Those who were most affected through the system were the minorities, and as such led a coup, and to call for supporters they recruited members of their own ethnicity and kin.

Despite being overthrown later on, the political structure which was brought about during this coup represented the political structure which currently shapes the political structure in Syria. The Alawites rose to power as they comprised the most of the numbers which were leading the coup, moreover they filled the gaps of the

---

89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 Schwedler, Jillian, and Deborah J. Gerner. Understanding the Contemporary Middle East. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008.pg, 412
92 Ibid.
officers which were replaced from the power struggle between the Sunni members of the coup. There was an attempt at a counter coup which was organized by predominantly Sunni members, this was violently suppressed and was exploited by the Sunni politicians to portray a sectarian conflict. The Alawite officers used this as an opportunity to purge the remaining mainly Sunni officers from the military. This would weaken the Sunni representation within the military and the overall political scene, but it also gave the opportunity for other minorities to be represented. The aftermath of such an event was deep mistrust between the Sunni and Alawi groups. Furthermore, there was discrimination against Sunni members when it came to applying to the military and armed forces and preferential treatment was given to minorities such as Alawis, Druzes and Isma’ils and Greek Orthodox Christians. In 1966 another more radical, more doctrine-based group of officers seize control again by coup and overthrew the government and applied a more radical version of the Ba’th ideology. Later on in 1970 Hafiz Al-Assad, amongst other officers took control again, in what was called the Corrective Movement in which he shifted the political scene to a more politically and economically pragmatic one.

3.4: Hafiz Al-Assad and the Consolidation of Power

Hafiz Al-Assad belonged to the Alawite sect and was born to a peasant family he was also a member of the Ba'th Party. The rise of Hafiz Al-Assad came after the short lived experiment with the United Arab Republic, in which he and other officers including most notably, Salah Jadid and eliminated the group in power for being too

---

94 Ibid 43
96 Schwedler, Jillian, and Deborah J. Gerner. *Understanding the Contemporary Middle East.* Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008. pg, 412
right winged. Later on during the events of Black September, Al-Assad refused to give air assistance to tanks helping the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)\textsuperscript{98}. Furthermore, through another coup on November 16, 1970 he was appointed as the Secretary General of the Ba'th Party and later the president of Syria\textsuperscript{99}.

It is with no doubt that the structure which was set up represented the deep ethic fragmentation which was present in the Syrian political system, whereby groups have a vested interest in setting up a system which would enable their own power. Despite helping form a common Syrian identity, the system that was created catered predominantly to a certain group. Acts such as excluding one group and purging the Sunni officials only caused more disparities amongst the society and cemented the sectarian cleavages. After gaining power Hafiz Al-Assad went about cementing his regime to ensure its resilience. This included the use of the main political party as an extension of the regime. Hafiz Al-Assad set up a system in which the power was shared amongst different institutions. This strategy is best seen through the empowerment of the ruling party, The Arab Socialist Ba’th Party (ASBP), which aimed to help protect the state from demise of ethnic civil war through unifying the people behind a common pan-Arab identity, and was given an independent formal role in political scene. This highlights the importance domestic conflict has in determining the political strategies used by an authoritarian regime. Ethnic divide can render a state weak, and as such Hafiz Al-Assad was incapable of “craft[ing] a regime that asymmetrically favored his office above all others”\textsuperscript{100}.

Hafiz used the party in order to expand the power of his own personal regime; through this tool he has essentially blurred the lines between party and government

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid.
therefore treating the party as an arm of the presidency. Hafiz Al- Assad also served the role to make sure that the power of the Ba'th party be limited, or used as a tool by the regime in the early days of its construction. This helped serve the role to make sure it never became more powerful than the office of the presidency. Al-Assad ensured that it served no role in internal security or army loyalty. Hafiz Al-Assad also ensured that the structure which was created in order to ensure the stability of the Alawites within the structure of the political system. Here it becomes evident that identity is a tool that can help determine the structure of the regime, whereby people can be chosen for positions based on their religious sect as a tool to ensure their loyalty. The sectarian nature of the regime was mostly predominant by the fact that the security apparatus was predominantly Alawite in order to ensure full support of the Assad regime. The Syrian regime set up several ways to ensure their survival the first being making sure a large number of Alawite are tied to the government, managing the armed forces, this is a form of enforcing sectarianism as way to ensure the survival of the regime. This is reminiscent to the tactic used by the French mandate in which they chose the minorities as part of the military in order to put down rebellions. This is a political decision to use the identity crisis, through favoritism. While this may be a tool to ensure the authoritarian resilience of the political elite, what it actually does is creates sectarian cleavages from within society. In which the state becomes associated with a certain sect and as such anger becomes directed to the sect which is seen as the entity controlling the apparatus. This can cause ethnic violence driven by a sense of anger and injustice.

Despite Hafiz Al-Assad ensuring that Sunnis remained out of the security apparatus as best as possible, he still used them in order to further solidify the status of his regime. Author Salwa Ismail argues that saying that the political scene in Syria
is one ruled by the Alawite is simplistic which she argues is because two of Hafiz Al-Assad's most trusted advisors were Sunni.\textsuperscript{101} Yet, despite this point, it is also important to point out that this is not representative of the ethnic make up of the society. Furthermore, she argues that there is a civilian decision making group in which Sunnis are represented\textsuperscript{102}. While this may be the case, in a personal authoritarian system such as the one enforced by Hafiz Al-Assad, these decision-making bodies are merely seen or regarded as puppets of the state in order to give the image of legitimacy and equality. Ismail offers the alternative that the system is “political Alawis”, in which the "authority and rule are Alawi, but that the Alawis do not rule. This situation can also be described as the sectarianism of authority but not the authority if the Alawis or the authority of the sect”\textsuperscript{103}. While this may be an interpretation of the system, the notion of an ethnic make up of the main apparatuses of the state comprised of a certain ethnicity and favoritism towards certain sects in order to promote loyalty this causing sectarian cleavages would give off the impression of a rather favoritism oriented state. While Ismail may argue that the sectarian characterization of Syria under Hafiz Al-Assad may be too simplistic, it becomes quite accurate when looking at the sects who are left out of the political structure. Through the use of identity politics, the Assad regime was able to alienate the Kurds, thus showing how the sectarian cleavages can have destructive aftermath.

The aftermath of the sectarian discrimination can be seen through the Kurdish case. Under the Hafiz Al-Assad era, the dominating trends include two movements, the first Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). These are the more radical one who

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
advocate for a separate state and have renounced their identity as Syrian Kurds. Another movement comprised of several groups calling for the end of discrimination and the incorporation of Kurds into Syrian society. Identity is a political connotation, it can change by personal and political choices, and ramifications of political use can shape it. What the followers of the PKK show is how the extreme use and abuse of identity can cause some by political choice to renounce their identity and essentially accept a new one. This is very dangerous for a state which has multiple identities, who have experience in self governance, and when the state does not give them equal rights, separatist movements began rising. The anger towards the Assad regime can be seen later on in 2004 whereby when the Kurds were mass protesting against Bashar Al-Assad, statues of his father were destroyed as a symbol of such anger.

3.5 Hafiz Al-Assad and National Identity

Hafiz Al-Assad worked on several fronts to try to unify the people under a common identity and prevent ethnic conflict. While ensuring the state is capable of controlling the different ethnicities, it also attempted to reconstruct the Syrian identity in order to have people look past their differences and focus on loyalty towards the state. This is within the ideology of the Ba’th, which initially advocated the notion of equality amongst all the members of the society without looking at individual identity. The notion of state building especially in the Middle East is very difficult because in many cases "nationalisms precede the state, and rather than foster state building, ardently opposed it. Colonial boundaries of states rarely coincided with the boundaries of preexisting communities. One aftermath of colonialism is the fact that

the Syrian state had to work quickly to build institutions which deliver basic goods and services would gain them allegiance. This speaks to the importance of goods and services in making sure the citizens have a vested interest in making sure the government is maintained. In the vacuum of a lack of government being able to provide the basic goods and services, citizens are less likely to stay loyal to the state. In countries such as Syria, the particular problems faced by successive regimes stem largely from this incongruity between felt membership, and state authority, between "national" identification and political organization". The Syrians under Hafiz Al-Assad regime clung to the idea of Arab nationalism which speaks of a greater Arab State, this further complicates the matter of artificial borders. One possible reason for this is widening the points of similarities with even more people even further to add a greater sense of belonging with more people.

Identity in a state such as Syria is essential as a political tool. It “represents a powerful means for national elites to unite citizens within a territorially-bound political community and to win consent for their political leadership. The discourse of nationalism is constituted through the construction of an identity and culture that is exclusive and different from those of other nations”.

Throughout his tenure as president Hafiz Al-Assad employed many tactics to gain loyalty of the citizens, going so far as institutionalizing identity. The Ba’th Party is a representation of how identity can become institutionalized as the party itself advocates a unified identity and as mentioned in previous chapters it becomes apparent that the multitude of identities have always existed within Syria, what made these multiple identities a point of contention is when they were forced to unite under a common border under the

---


auspices of state building. What further exacerbated these problems is the different political powers who use these identities to suit their own purposes through favoritism. Which leads to anger and animosity and consequently conflict due to a lack of social cohesion.

The notion of a unified identity is essential for a state such as Syria as “Citizens’ ideas of what… “Syria” [is], as [a] nation, helped determine which state-builder constructed a system with centralized executive authority while the other settled for decentralized executive authority. National identity, therefore, contributed to the establishment of … Syria’s varying political orders by granting or precluding the leader’s autonomy from the state’s institutions” 107. This was the first tactic used by Hafiz Al-Assad which is himself.

Furthermore, in Syria, the use of identity can be seen as a political tool for the elite to gain support of the people. Essentially through the creation of orchestrated spectacles the state has caused a form of regimen in the citizens in an "order that symbolizes and prepares for political obedience." 108. The regime used the symbols and rhetoric as powerful tools to help people define what the Syrian identity entails. Hafiz Al-Assad was able to construct his own image as part of the Syrian identity. Through the framing of certain symbols and images "they ground political thinking in the images and symbols the regime puts forth, framing ways people see themselves as citizens, much as advertising offers people a frame in which they imagine themselves as consumers"109. Essentially these tools when controlled by the state can have a powerful effect on the way citizens come to define themselves while simultaneously

109 Ibid.
giving the people something to feel pride in. The Syrian state under Hafiz Al-Assad was capable of ensuring that citizens have a sense of belonging as well as something to unite under. It was very common to use large spectacles to demonstrate the Syrian unity through imagery such as art. One such example is pictures of the Syrian flag and the Palestinian flag united together. This serves as imagery in order to reinforce the idea of Arab unity and Pan-Arabism. Other images include those of Hafiz Al-Assad himself.

In Syria, several images are set forth in order to unite people towards their love for the Hafiz Al-Assad who was continuously represented as the beloved ruler of the Syrian people. The Syrian state continued to construct the identity of Syria to revolve around Assad, in which he was glorified for his political actions. For example, national media glorified his participation in the October 1973 War, in which Assad was represented as one of “the people”, and praised him for being a hero in combat. The framing of this helped unify people to loyalty to not just the Syrian identity but to political obedience. When demonstrating the ruler as a member of “the people” it removes the emphasis over sectarian differences and demonstrates him as someone who has a vested interest in the “nation”. Furthermore, when the gap between the ruler and the nation is lessened and thus giving more loyalty to the ruler who has become more relatable. Hafiz used to approach of building the Syrian identity around loyalty towards the state and they became intertwined110. After the events in which the Assad regime suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama in 1982, members were required to give oaths of allegiance in order to demonstrate loyalty in the form of a public oath111. In the case of the women of Hama, the “women and mothers of Hama ‘contract with the leader to sacrifice everything for the sake of the citizen and

110 Ibid., pg. 35
111 Ibid.
defending him. The use of the term citizen is a very powerful one because it has an outstated notion of a state to be loyal to. This has institutionalized identity further in the sense of making it a public official oath to the state constructed identity. Furthermore, through making this a public, official oath, the state has also institutionalized obedience in order to make sure people remain loyal to the state which the “nation” must ensure its protection. The parameters of what the nation entails is based on the framing which is presented by the state.

Another important tactic that was used by the Assad regime in order to construct the state’s identity is uniting against a common enemy. In many cases Israel and the West would be used as a common enemy and political rhetoric would be used to show them as the reasons behind the failure of the unified Arab state. This serves as making people focus on an issue other than the problems which were occurring within the Syrian state.

The state integrated loyalty towards the ruler with loyalty towards the state was to ensure absolute loyalty towards the regime. Through constructing a common thread amongst all the different ethnicities in Syria it is able to avoid the trap of having people eventually succumb to their differences. The symbolic power of using familial metaphors to invoke feelings of kinship to the ruler and help weaken, or even change the dynamic of some of the loyalties which are considered a priority for the individual. In this chapter, the fact that loyalty towards kin, ethnicity and religion are considered priorities to the individual is an obstacle to the state’s enforced identity, and if a state is to overcome such a priority in order to ensure loyalty towards the state it must enforce a different narrative or at the very least give an alternative. Through demonstrating the ruler as a member of kin the state is able to extend on the

\[^{112}\text{Ibid.}\]
individual’s feeling of loyalty to the family to feeling the very same way with regards to Hafiz Al-Assad. Lisa Wadeen comments stating that this tactic is essential, as “political theorists and ideologues in various historical epochs and places have invoked metaphors of the family to define the terms of political membership. Political narratives often displace the emotionally charged, immediately meaningful relationship of family life onto the more impersonal, remote and abstract relations between rulers and ruled or among citizens”113. Therefore the state frames and constructs the relationship between the ruler and the ruled as a more sentimental one and essentially creating a level of loyalty which is similar to that of the family. It becomes evident that the state takes the local identities and reconstructs them on a grander scale in order to show a level of loyalty that can be shared by all. This is patriarchal connectivity and nation-building as Assad is the father figure114. The nation building techniques by the state here are evident in order to find a way to ensure that all members which have local loyalties become citizens to a Syrian nation. This must be done through the use of imagery and metaphors which can resonate with as many citizens as possible. Anthropologists have commented on the importance of the Gramscian notion of hegemony in order to “indicate the importance of ideas, signs, and images in producing dominant understandings that are taken for granted and perceived as natural and commonsensical115”. This may have persisted within the Hafiz Al-Assad era, yet the current events unfolding beg the question of the extent it was possible for a state to successfully use the identities and enforce a state identity.

113 Ibid., pg, 49
114 Ibid., pg, 53
115 Ibid., pg 11
By the end of his tenure as president, Hafiz Al-Assad through his policies aimed at unifying the people, was successful at helping people place aside their differences and achieve some level of cohesion. He was able to unify the people behind the Pan-Arab, socialist policies. Yet his efforts were severely undermined by the exclusivity of the military, which was necessary to ensure its loyalty to the regime. The coercive apparatus of the state was the only guarantee that the status quo in which the Alawites would stay in power.

3.6: The Political Economy of Sectarianism Under Hafiz Al-Assad

Authoritarian regimes, such as Syria, which are ideologically weak, their survival is contingent on two main factors. Firstly, having massive security forces which can guarantee the survival of the regime, and the second factor being the regime’s ability to economically fund their patronage efforts in order to prevent possible uprising\(^\text{116}\). In Syria, these two factors are evident in the political structure which was implemented under Hafiz Al-Assad. In the military, he ensured that those in power were from his sect and tribe as a means of ensuring absolute loyalty towards the regime. The military was dominated of Alawites who would follow the orders of the regime without question and acted as an arm of the regime.

Syria is what can be called a quasi-rentier state as it, “exhibit[s] the same behavioral and policy patterns as the classic rentier states in stressing the allocative function of the state and the circulation of rent throughout the economy over the productive economic sphere”\(^\text{117}\). The reason states such as Syria can be characterized as ideologically weak is because rentier states such as Syria, rely on ideologies such


as socialism as a form of legitimacy. They become weak as they promise to provide free services as a form of rent as opposed to taxing these services. Taxes, as opposed to rent, are an essential part of state building as it creates ties between people and the state and gives them an incentive to participate in the political arena. This fuses the society further; therefore, through capitalizing on rent, the regime essentially weakens the political development in Syria\textsuperscript{118}. States such as Syria, pursue certain foreign policy such as the return of the Golan Heights, in order to bind state and society in a common incentive, thus further legitimizing the regime\textsuperscript{119}.

Under the auspices of socialism, free services are an essential factor towards the duties of the government towards the people. The government provides free services such as health care and education and as such governmental authority, in states such as Syria, were based on decades of patronage in which the government provided basic needs such as education and health which is typical of quasi-rentier states\textsuperscript{120}. The patronage system which was initiated by Hafiz Al-Assad is what made the system so fragile.

Syria has minor oil revenues, but in fact its “rent” is mostly derived from foreign aid\textsuperscript{121}. This aid came from foreign policies initiatives such as its anti-Iraq position in operation Desert Storm. The problem with such tactics is that it becomes heavily reliant on foreign policy, for example, after it sided with Iran, the aid dropped significantly. The domestic policy of patronage within Syria was a form of “buying off” citizens, this forms a patron-client relationship between, that while ensuring

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., pg, 41
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., pg, 43
\textsuperscript{121} Robinson, Leonard. "Rentierism and Foreign Policy in Syria." \textit{The Arab Studies Journal} 4, no. 1 (April 01, 1996).pg, 36
acquiescence of some socioeconomic groups to the regime it does not “necessarily signal society's acceptance of the state's legitimacy”\textsuperscript{122}.

These unorthodox economic practices have an even larger affect on states which are based on sectarian policies. While Hafiz Al-Assad aimed for near social cohesion, the method by which avoiding ethnic conflict was through patronage of certain members within each sect. This had two main effects, the first being that it disrupted social cohesion through the fact that it created cleavages between those who were included in the economic privileges and those who were not, ultimately leading to resentment within groups. Also, it led to the rise of crony capitalism specifically within the Sunni sect.

While Hafiz Al-Assad maintained strict control of the security apparatus, he used the Sunni sect in order to further the economic power of the regime. This can be credited to a historical reasoning based on the creation of economic alliances between the Sunni and the Alawite sects. This causes the ruling coalition to expand and the creation of vested interests in ensuring the ruling elite continue their monopoly over power\textsuperscript{123}. The Ba'th Party during its more radical ways formed an alliance with the merchant class which were predominantly in the Damascus Sunni areas therefore expanding their power, furthermore eliminating and marginalizing the landowning elite from the political scene through liquidating their assets. This caused mass support because these "contributed to the rise of new social forces that provided the party with widespread support... peasants and workers were major beneficiaries of these policies. In turn, they gave their allegiance to the regime and constituted its social base. These forces were absorbed through corporatist structures organized and

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., pg, 38
\textsuperscript{123} Ismail, Salwa. "Changing Social Structure, Shifting Alliances and Authoritarianism in Syria." In \textit{Demystifying Syria}, by Fred Haley Lawson. London: Saqi in Association with the London Middle East Institute, 2009.pg, 45
managed by the party." Even when Hafiz Al- Assad rose to power and restructured the economy he used it to make new alliances to further extend the support of the ruling party. The alliance between the Sunni group and the Assad regime is a quintessential foundation for the regime. When looking into the importance it should be noted that these groups constitute an important bulk as they comprise the majority of the private businesses and employ a large section of the labor force.

Through the maneuvering of identity Hafiz Al-Assad ensured that the social groups that were most loyal to him controlled the most important state apparatuses such as the ruling party which was responsible for the ideology of the state, the security apparatuses which were responsible for ensuring the continuation of the regime, and even offering economic incentives to other sects such as the Sunnis so that they may have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. The aftermath of such events were apparent during the mass strikes in 1980 which were seemingly inevitable, the Sunni merchants were mostly in Damascus did not participate, which shows how to Assad regime had coopted them.

The use of identity is a critical tool that is used by the political elite in a society. Bearing in mind that they have interests, be they political or economic, these elites will ensure that the state avoids ideological vacuums as they have the potential of driving the state into civil conflicts and thus cause a crisis on legitimacy and risk their interests. Hafiz Al-Assad rose to power under the auspices of socialism. In addition to social equality being in the main platform, agrarian reform was critical to ensure the support of the masses. Hafiz Al-Assad was faced with the problem of alienating the landlords in the process of redistributing the land, but through placating

---

124 Ibid. 15
125 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
these elites he was able to gain their support and have them invest in the economy. This policy is in keeping with the patronage that was offered by Hafiz Al-Assad in an attempt to gain support from the masses who now felt a sense of debt towards Hafiz Al-Assad for alleviating them of their poverty. This also contributed in gaining legitimacy for the regime as it was seen as helping the people. With this level of support base, Hafiz Al-Assad was able to keep different groups content with maintaining the status quo. Already, globalization had caused some problems under Hafiz Al-Assad as he began opening Syrian markets to foreign goods. As a result, local tradesmen were left behind leaving a large segment of the working class feeling alienated and resentful from the regime’s socialist policies, eventually causing some to join militant Islamic groups. Conflict between the regime and workers over market mechanisms in dealing with suppliers and wholesalers eventually prompted discontent amongst a large sector of workers. But Hafiz Al-Assad was able to curb this discontent through policies aimed at helping improve the private sector in the economy, showing once again, his ability at avoiding potentially disrupting his attempts at unifying people. The “patron-client” relationship that had been formed between the state and selected members can be credited to the growth of the government, which causes it to act in an economically irrational manner, as it engages in with a considerable number of people to “ward off opposition... and thus are

---

superfluous and purely parasitic and, in effect, hamper the functioning of the administrative machine.\textsuperscript{130}

Under the reign of Hafiz Al-Assad sectarianism was politically relevant to the maintenance of his regime. In a political context, Hafiz Al-Assad used sectarian policies in order to ensure that the military was under the strict control of the regime, and the only way by which he could ensure this was through sectarian policies. The Syrian army under the time of Hafiz Al-Assad was a very exclusive institution which was comprised of Alawites. This exclusivity was brought about through several radical coups in which other sects such as the Sunnis and the Druze were completely removed from the regime. Hafiz Al-Assad relied mainly on his sect when it came to the military in order to consolidate his power and ensure the protection of his system. A coup within the military could mean a loss of power and the relegation of the Alawites to the outskirts of political power as they are a minority. This minority complex is what drove Hafiz Al-Assad to secure the military. While the military was the case in which he could not relent in, in society he took a different approach. Hafiz Al-Assad advocated both a unified Syrian identity and a Pan-Arab identity. Assad built this image based numerous factors such as highlighting Israel as the enemy which seeks to destroy Arabs and Palestinians, which helps people focus on issues other than their sectarian differences; therefore, as opposed to seeing each other as the enemy, Hafiz directed this sentiment towards Israel. This tactic, whereby Hafiz Al-Assad helped construct a Syrian identity and a highlighted the pan-Arab ideology, helped people set aside their differences and focus on their similarities, to the extent that he was successful in forming a near cohesive state.

This chapter sought to show the method in which the Syrian political structure was heavily rooted in the political maneuvering of the identity crisis. The structure which was set up by the French mandate created sectarian cleavages due to the political maneuvering of the different identities by the French causing mass discontent due to the favoritism policies. When Syria gained independence, it was left with an ideological vacuum and forced borders, which prompted the development of ideologies such as the Ba’th ideology which aimed at making Syrians look past their kinship, sectarian and ethnic identity in order to find a more unified identity. Despite that being the official discourse, the political structure was dominated by the minority Alawites and through the use of violence was able to suppress the opposition. The idea of ensuring loyalty through favoritism seems acceptable only on the level of the political elite in order to ensure their stay in power, but if allowed on a national level, can threaten the position of the ruling elite, and thus a state can advocate a national identity yet still practice unofficial sectarian policies. The Alawites then sought to dominate the state’s official apparatuses such as the security and even the presidency led by Hafiz Al-Assad, and through initiative to use identity he was able to gain an alliance with the Sunnis in order to give them a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Throughout the Al-Assad’s time the state sought to construct a unified Syrian identity in order to maintain unity and prevent ethnic violence through discourse, imagery and metaphors, yet this was still often met with resistance from groups and met with violence from the regime, highlighting the perks of having an ethnically loyal army to help maintain the status of the elite. This system is a very fragile one and requires multiple levels of political maneuvering and requires the state to be able to maintain its position as a provider in the eyes of the people. With the end of Hafiz Al-Assad’s regime, Bashar Al-Assad sought to enforce similar means, yet by
the end of his time the true fragility of the system became apparent.
Chapter 4: Identity under Bashar Al-Assad

This chapter looks into the tactics which were employed by Bashar Al-Assad which greatly resemble the tactics which were employed by his father aimed. This policies contained two main elements, the first being uniting the different identities under a unified umbrella, the second being ensuring that through the use of patronage to gain support from within each sect to have an element of support and ensuring control.

With the death of Hafiz Al-Assad, his son Bashar was quickly instated into power in what can be argued as a smooth transfer of power. While there may have been fundamental differences between the two rulers, such as the extent of military background as well as upbringing, Bashar employed many of the same tactics that his father used in order to ensure the domination of the Alawites as the political elite and therefore, ensuring his continuation in power. In order to ensure his stay in power Bashar was keen on reaffirming the secular nature of the state, yet at the same time reinforcing the ideals of pan-Arabism. The use of pan-Arabism is a tool which was used by his father in order to unite people under an umbrella which highlighted the looking past individual identities and fostering a sense of belonging as part of a larger identity. Bashar further promoted an Arab nationalist ideology in order to take the attention off the fact that his regime is comprised of minorities. According to him "Syria is diversity" this helps project the image of unity in order to gain legitimacy from within Syria as well as abroad 131. Further, he "blamed everything wrong with Syria, Arabs, and Muslims on America, Israel and the West" 132. This was an essential

aspect to the solidification of his power and the stability of the state, because had he advocated the identity of the state as pertaining to one certain sect or ethnicity, this would have caused resentment from the other religions.  

4.1: Secular Sectarianism under Bashar Al-Assad

In order to begin creating a support base for his own rule, Bashar used many of the same tactics which were employed by his father despite the fact that he did not have to rely on his Alawite identity in the first few years of power due to the relative smooth transition of power. He grew up in Damascus therefore was more "comfortable with his Syrian identity, which was more meaningful and actual for him than his Alawite identity". He went about using his own image in order to unite people. He did this through removing the pictures of his father from the streets and limiting the flattery directed at his father in the press. He greatly relied on the system which was set up by his father which is a one-man system that was dependent on the military for power. He stressed the importance of the Syrian identity as the main unifying factor between all citizens, yet at the same time used the grand rhetoric of the Arab identity which helped unite people even further. This tactic is similar to the one used by his father in order to ensure that people would overlook the differences between the different sects, religions, and ethnicities. Bashar Al- Assad used tactics such as uniting people against a common enemy and behind a certain conflict. In this case he used conflict was the Palestinian conflict which was used to rally people behind him, urging them to set aside their differences and to further solidify their belief in the Pan-Arab ideology. On a domestic level this achieved a

---

135Ibid. pg, 49
very important purpose which was achieved through rhetoric which framed the anger "within a state-centered nationalist rhetoric and finding common ground with Muslim activists".136

One of the most significant issues which Bashar inherited from his father was the sectarian strife which dominated the political scene. It required that he find a way to balance the very delicate issue. The reason this was a significant challenge to his rule was because of minority character of the regime. His father had the support of the minorities with his economic reforms. These reforms gave way to a network of patronage in which some felt loyal to the elder Assad due to their economic benefits.

4.2: Power Consolidation

Bashar Al-Assad inherited an authoritarian system which was build upon the tents of military rule. The system which was set in place by his father reflected the ethnic tensions that existed in Syria previously and as opposed to creating social cohesion through advocating a sense of common nationalism, the system only served to highlight the extent of the ethnic favoritism which only served to increase tensions between the different sects. The Alawites were a key player in Syrian politics through virtue of its power and its advantaged status within the political system. Hafiz Al-Assad ensured this through his control of the apparatuses which were essential to maintaining control as well as warding off any internal threats to the established system. The system that Bashar inherited reflected a personality based system where by Hafiz Al-Assad was seen as a father figure and a source of unity amongst the people. Furthermore, the system despite advocating equality was set up as a family-

---

run, ethnic, tribal system, whereby those who are in power were amongst the Alawite members as they were the most trusted. In an attempt to gain control on his own terms, Bashar retired old vanguard generals and promoted second rank Alawite officers who would be loyal to him. The regime reflected how the Alawite community went from being a minority to the ruling power in the Syrian state and continuously used propaganda to frame the political scene as such.

The system which he inherited was largely based on trusted members of the Alawite community who were senior officers in the military, and despite the fact that identity did not play as significant a role as it did his father in the early years of his presidency, he still did nothing to change the system in place. Bashar Al-Assad did not form any close relationships with people who were personally loyal to him, and instead chose to remain "dependent on the formal hierarchical command and perhaps on the tribal and communal solidarity fostered in his father's time, which was sustained by force of inertia." Hafiz Al-Assad's regime was built upon his reliance on himself, an inner circle of trusted members as well as the military, all of whom were comprised of either the Alawites, his family, and his tribe. A few exceptions were given to Sunnis who had grown up with Assad and therefore shared his political views. The Alawites were well compensated under the Hafiz regime, and this trend continued under his son, and as such even though many Sunnis were coopted in the regime it can only be explained as a two-way vested interest relationship where by the Assad regime was their best bet at maintaining their political, economic and social

141 Ibid., pg, 74
statuses. The cost of the approach of building a regime based on those closest to him from his family and the Alawites had a price. This cost is most reflected in the affect it had on some of the states key institutions, "the gradual deterioration into neopatrimonial rule: the party turned from an ideological movement into institutionalized clientalism, with key loyalists co-opted through various forms of patronage, corruption, and exceptions to the law that undermined economic development, enervated capital accumulation, and debilitated the fiscal capabilities of the state, and hence were unsustainable without continual access to various forms of rent".

While the upbringing of Bashar differed from that of his father, which is most evident through the role identity played in their policy formation, this chapter will show how he came to use the idea of identity within Syria for political purposes, and ultimately his use of identity sheds light on to the reasons behind the current civil war in Syria. In a very similar method to his father, despite him advocating in favor of secularism as well as national unity. The mechanisms Bashar Al-Assad set in place only cemented the fact that the regime was dominated by a minority and sought to ensure their consolidation of power.

4.3: Tension with the Sunnis

The Sunnis have consistently represented the most significant challenge to the predominantly Alawite regime. The Sunnis comprise the largest group in Syria and those most resentful towards the Assad regime. Under Hafiz Al-Assad he largely excluded them from the military and through economic appeasement and patronage,
he was able to keep a certain sector of the Sunnis loyal to his regime and as such was able to avoid a full rebellion. In an effort to appease the Sunni sect, Bashar Al-Assad took many decisions in order to help expand his loyalty base such as using religious symbolism in order to ward off criticisms that regime was trying to be rid of religion all together through the Assad regime’s advocacy of secularism. The idea of religious symbolism was used in order to gain the support of specifically the Sunnis. The Alawites, are considered a Shia’a sect, yet in order to project a certain image of piety, Hafiz al-Assad made regular, publically advertised pilgrimage, raised the salaries of religious clerics, as well as convinced clerics to highlight in their sermons that Alawites were still Muslims. Furthermore on an international level, Bashar Al-Assad became a supporter of Islamist movements abroad such as Hezbollah. His handling of the different religions shows how identity can be used as a political tool in order to gain more support.

Bashar Al-Assad would regularly exaggerate the fears that existed between the different sects and would convince other groups such as Christians and the Druze, that should his regime fail the ultimate replacement would be the radical Muslim Brotherhood, this helped solidify his regime's position. The tactic of using religion as a political tool worked in the twofold, first, in order to help gain support of the Sunnis and convince them that Muslim Brotherhood was a more radical group and therefore, as liberals, their best interest fell on the side of the regime. Secondly, emphasizing on the notion that despite the Alawites being a Shi’a sect they were still all Muslims. With the other groups he would emphasize how the Muslim Brotherhood in power would result in a more radical regime, therefore portraying his regime as the

---

145 Ibid.
146 Ibid.
lesser of two evils. He also had certain tactics in order to help keep the Sunni majority in check through "giving their religion more freedom of action and taking up Islamist causes abroad" 147.

The Alawite community enjoys special positions within the state. The political system was established in a way that would ensure the protection of the Alawite group through their occupation of the top military and intelligence positions. The biggest evidence of the ramifications of such a sectarian system would be found in the nature of opposition groups. The most notable being the Muslim Brotherhood who took advantage of the resentment towards the Alawites and formed their group in the 1940s.

They gained their support through providing goods and services to the community and as such gained popularity amongst urban Sunni traders. In general, Sunni hatred towards the Alawites was due to several reasons, the first being the fact that Sunnis did not consider them Muslims and as such declared them apostates. Furthermore the resentment grew from the fact that the Sunni majority felt that as they were in fact the majority they deserved better representation within the government. As the resentment grew and the support for the group increased in numbers, the group split into two distinct groups between those who advocated peaceful tactics to oppose the regimes tactics and those who advocated for armed struggle148.

4.3.1 Islamists as Political Opposition

The history of the tensions between the Islamists as a political force is one which has long been developing. The civil war in Syria, which is strongly framed

along sectarian roots, and the regime, frames the radicals in a certain way in order to generate more support. But, the Islamists during their earlier years, advocated their need for the destruction of the regime not because of their sectarian nature, but rather because they are an oppressive regime\textsuperscript{149}. As previously mentioned, "Assad's political strength... rests not upon his popular support but on his firm control of the armed forces and secret police"\textsuperscript{150}. This was essential in order to counteract popular uprisings that were led by the Muslim Brotherhood as well as the Sunni sect in general. The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria was very popular in the 1940s as they created welfare programs which helped gain them further popularity amongst the marginalized and the alienated. One of their most popular welfare programs was their educational, in which they sought to establish what was considered the true Islam and reform through education\textsuperscript{151}. The basic ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood is as Olivier Carré explains is that “the Muslim Brothers have seen their role as innovators, not by inventing a new Islam, but in creating a living, present-day Islam in the wake of a wave of Islamic reformism”\textsuperscript{152}. Its creator, Hassan al-Banna, saw that the Islamic world was in a state of weakness, to which he credited the West and their influence on the region. Al-Banna argued that there needs to be a removal of the influence of the West on areas such as education and the importance of the notion of the Shura Council which he advocated “should have thoroughly studied religious discipline”\textsuperscript{153}. It advocates the notion of “Islam is the solution” driving its influence from previous

\textsuperscript{149}Abd-Allah, Umar F. \textit{The Islamic Struggle in Syria}. Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1983.pg. 42.
\textsuperscript{150}Ibid. pg, 80.
\textsuperscript{151}Ibid. pg, 89.
\textsuperscript{153}Guidère, Mathieu. \textit{Historical Dictionary of Islamic Fundamentalism}. 2012.pg, 119.
reformists such as Mohamed Abduh and Gamal al-Din al-Afghani\textsuperscript{154}. The Muslim Brotherhood advocates the application of the teachings of the Quran and the Sunna to everyday life and politics as it is has an immediate effect on the individual’s life. The Muslim Brotherhood is a proponent of the Pan-Islamist ideology, and the application of Sharia. The application of these teachings, according to the Muslim Brotherhood should have a direct influence on the individual and essentially lead society back to the teachings of Islam and help improve society.

The Muslim Brotherhood as a political movement has been a threat to many regimes in the Middle East because of their support base due to their appeal to the Islamic identity in people as well as their ability to have loyal supporters through their welfare programs.

The Islamic Front is a vast organization comprised of several Islamic movements of which the Muslim Brotherhood encompasses a large portion\textsuperscript{155}. When calling for support under Hafiz, they tried to recruit the 'ulma through sending them letters calling for unity amongst the Muslim community referring to historical events such as the Prophet during the Battle of the Trench\textsuperscript{156}. By calling for unity amongst the Muslims, they are framing the situation along a sectarian framing. They are establishing a we vs. them complex which further causes ethnic divides and tensions. This helps show how the use of identity as a political tool in order to gain support. The regime uses identity as a political tool in order to consolidate their power and to create a support base. In this case, opposition such as the Muslim Brotherhood would use their Sunni identity to fuel support for their group and they use the tensions that exist between the sects to further validate their cause. Furthermore, the Islamists were

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid. pg, 263.
\textsuperscript{155} Abd-Allah, Umar F. \textit{The Islamic Struggle in Syria}. Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1983.pg, 114.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid. pg, 116.
advocating in their changes within the Syrian military which they felt needed to be strong in order to combat the regional threat of Israel. This posed a great challenge to the regime who survived based on their control of the military through employing a network of Alawites.

Many of the political decisions that he took were aimed at delegitimizing the criticisms dealt to him from Sunni groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood who would criticize the government for being infidels. To ensure that the Muslim Brotherhood did not gain support through their criticisms of the regime, Bashar Al-Assad overturned his father's decree that had forbidden women from wearing headscarves. He also passed a decree which allowed soldier’s to pray in military camps, went on several public pilgrimages, as well as built mosques which would help overturn the image that the Muslim Brotherhood wanted to advocate.

The history of Islamic opposition against the regime has been very violent on both ends. The areas of Aleppo and Hama were traditionally seen as pro militancy and in 1979 Islamic extremists attacked the Aleppo Artillery School killing 83 Alawite cadets and wounding many others. The Muslim Brotherhood blamed a splinter group called the Fighting Vanguard, but the government took advantage of the incident and launched a propaganda campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood and framing the incident as an attack against Alawites. While the group tried to frame the event as a victory against the Ba'th army, the government control of the media ensured that their framing would be the more dominant one. This framing is a representation of the political operation of events to show a certain political message; in this case it is the

---

157 Ibid. pg, 149.
fact that the Alawite minority are under threat and thus justifying the actions of the regime. Furthermore, this was a way to gain further support within the military in order to ensure that the Alawites maintained their power in the state through their control of the military.

In 1982, an uprising in the city of Hama started whereby the Brotherhood militants attacked and killed Ba'thist officials in their homes, and began to siege the city. This prompted a violent response from the government who gave citizens only hours to evacuate and shelled the city, killing over 10,000 people. The events in Hama, and the regime's violent actions incited a strong sense of needed retribution by the Muslim Brotherhood. All these events triggered what can only be labeled as a minority complex on behalf of the Alawites which prompted their responses towards both sectarian movements for separatism, or even challenges from other movements.

Other groups than the Muslim Brotherhood opposed the favoritism of the Assad regime towards only certain factions of Syrian society. While Bashar had some Sunni advisors, there is still fundamental political opposition over the fact that the government was never representative of the ethnic make up of the society. Moreover, these Sunni advisors benefitted directly from the Assad regime and therefore had a vested interest in maintaining the Alawites in power. They were a select few, therefore they were well compensated within the established structure. This lead to resentment on behalf of the opposition due to the fact that these select few would not advocate in favor of the cause of equality amongst the different ethnicities and

---

160 Ibid.
161 Ibid
religions in Syria.

When Bashar Al-Assad first took over power, activists were very optimistic under the impression that he, as a member of the seemingly liberal youth, by virtue of his education and age, would instigate pro-democratic reforms. Opposition members such as Riyad Sayf, the founder of the National Dialogue Club and one of the more independent members of parliament asked for permission to form a new party called the Civil Peace Movement. He criticized the government for its application of failed socialist policies under the auspices of Pan-Arabism\textsuperscript{163}. Moreover, these policies recommended by Sayf, a Sunni well known for being pious and for having good connections with both the liberal and more conservative members of the Sunni community, would transform Syria into a pluralist democracy which would "accommodate the county's different religions and ethnic groups"\textsuperscript{164}. This was met with huge criticism from the government who preferred a unitary state in which the Alawite group were in power and the method to unify Syrians and prevent an uprising is to advocate an Arab nationalist identity.

The reasons behind such opposition are very similar to the government opposing and change which would threaten the structure of the state. Should such a plan be implemented it placed the risk of the Sunni majority rising and overthrowing the Alawite system. While Bashar had some Sunni advisors, there were still fundamental political differences between the Sunnis in power and those who were not. His vice president, Abd al-Halim Khaddam, a Sunni who had criticized the Sayf plan as being a plot to overthrow the country into civil war as well as being instigated

by the West, defected and join the Muslim Brotherhood. The idea of using the West as a target to point towards any troubles is a method which was continuously used by the regime in order to unite the people. As mentioned earlier, the pan-Arab cause was upheld by the Assad regime in order to unify people behind a common identity and as part of the colonial legacy which was left, blaming the West for mistakes and times of trouble is often used to direct anger away from the regime towards a different entity. Should the anger at issues such as the economy be directed at the regime, the opposition would gain power and the regime would be directly threatened.

Moreover, what exacerbated the ethnic tensions in Syria in 2003 were the influx of refugees from Iraq. The Iraqi War had several implications towards the regime in Syria; it helped give credibility towards the anti-West sentiment which was widely used by the regime. Also, the opposition began thinking that it would pressure the regime take action for reform out of fear of American intervention. The war also had many socio-economic implications which strained the already fragile ethnic balance which existed in Syria. The first wave of Iraqi refugees were predominantly Sunni Arabs, later on refugees tended to be from the Shia'a sect, but they were from the poorer class. The Syrian regime permitted these refugees to seek medical attention in public hospitals and their children to public schools. This caused a problem because these institutions could not accommodate this influx and as a result their ability to provide services for Syrian citizens suffered. The refugees also seeking a place to live and food to eat specifically in Damascus caused a notable increase in prices of basic staples, combined with the increase in crime rates were among the reasons for increasing tensions between the Sunni community and the Shia'a

---

166 Ibid.
community\(^\text{167}\).

4.4: Tensions with the Druze

The Druze are one of the many different sects within Syria who have a minority status. Unlike the Sunnis, the Druze occupy a better position with the regime than the Sunnis, and this is because they rely on them as a secondary support group as a fellow minority. Hafiz Al-Assad stressed the importance of the Druze as a support group. The Druze were members of a coalition of minorities ensuring the power of Assad and the Alawites as they guaranteed their status as well as their personal and economic security\(^\text{168}\). Assad changed the political scene through framing the situation as either himself in power or the radical Islamists who were viewed as a threat to these minorities.

The regime, as with the Sunnis, employed in-group favoritism to ensure that there were a select loyal few within the support base. This patronage only highlighted that there is a weakness in the system because it relies on support through a form of bribery, therefore prompting the regime to continue providing patronage otherwise they may lose the support of these minorities. Favoritism was also used in within the Druze group. Bashar Al-Assad would develop ties with the prominent Druze Arslan family, “whom the Syrians promoted as a counterweight to the Jumblatt family, the historic rivals of the Arslans for primacy in the Druze community”\(^\text{169}\). Applying favoritism not only caused tensions within groups, it also created tensions across the different groups in Syria.

\(^{167}\) Ibid.


\(^{169}\) Ibid., pg, 184
Tensions between the different ethnicities seem prevalent which is seen between the Druze and the Sunnis. In November of 2000 a fight was started between Sunni Bedouins and Druze which can be credited to the growing economic difficulties. The fight engulfed several villages and it required armored vehicles and elite battalions in order for peace to be restored. These events resulted in the death of 20 people and the injury of hundreds. These events triggered mass protests in the Druze community, which prompted the interior ministry to release members who were detained in the protests. This signifies how economic difficulties can often escalate into ethnic tensions between the different groups. A Lebanese Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt, gave a very strongly worded speech regarding Bashar Al-Assad stating, "You yourself are an insignificant, criminal, and hostile minority... We want blood vengeance from Bashar. Oh ruler of Damascus, it is you who are the slave, and we are free". Analyzing this quote gives a direct insight into the level of resentment towards the regime. In this case, Jumblatt uses the word “minority”, this shows how efforts by the regime to promote equality amongst the different sects as to be failing. There is also a direct threat of violence, which speaks of the resentment which other groups feel towards not just the Assad regime, but through his actions towards the Druze, it transcended to hatred towards the entire Alawite minority. Furthermore his use of the words “slave” and “free” shows how this favoritism has lead to a feeling of inferiority within the social structure of the Syrian society. This quote indicates an attitude towards rebellion against the Assad regime driven by an inferiority complex.


4.5 Tensions with the Kurds

The Kurds are arguably the most mistreated group by the Alawite dominated regime. They are often treated as second-class citizens and are even denied the Syrian citizenship. While during the invasion of Iraq, the Kurds saw it was an opportunity for the Syrian regime to be overthrown, the regime was counteracting the Bush Doctrine through turning a blind eye to the insurgents that were crossing into the Iraqi border\textsuperscript{172}. The threat of the Kurdish movement is significant to the security of the regime, because the Kurds are a transnational identity with support in neighboring countries such as Iraq and Turkey. The Kurds have largely been a separatist movement which directly threatens the territorial integrity of the state highlighting the extent to which multiple ethnicities can fracture a state. Where as with the Sunnis and Druze there is selective favoritism leading to in-group as well as cross group resentment due to alienation, the Kurds have never accepted the Alawite dominated regime.

The Kurdish movement began gaining strength and emboldened as a result of the influence of the Kurdish Iraqi nationalist movement and began engaging in larger communal civic activism. In a soccer match, Kurdish fans taunted the opposing team by waving pro George W. Bush and Kurdish flags. The fans of the opposing team responded by shouting pro Saddam Hussein slogans\textsuperscript{173}. This taunting led to a clash in which hundreds of Kurds were arrested. "On the one year anniversary of the incident, Kurdish activists staged a sit in outside the High Court in Damascus demanded an end

\textsuperscript{172}Lesch, David W. \textit{Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad}. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012.pg, 14
to the long running state of emergency. This protest was broken up by club wielding cadres of the Ba'ath Party affiliated students\textsuperscript{174}.

For years the government’s approach to dealing with the Kurdish problem was through oppression by tactics such as denying the Kurds citizenship and justifying this through saying that they were actually Iraqi Kurds. Moreover while the regime dealt with the Kurds in an oppressive way, they still tried to pacify them through minor reforms in order to prevent an all rebellion which they feared would be fully supported by the Americans who supported the autonomy of the Kurds in Iraq\textsuperscript{175}.

Furthermore, when Jalal Talebani of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan was elected as president of Iraq in 2005, the Kurds of Syria celebrated and went so far as a leading Kurdish member, Shaikh Mohamed Ma'shuq al-Khanzawi, telling international reporters that the Syrian regime must change or it must be removed and credited his ability to speak against the regime to the Americans\textsuperscript{176}. The context of his speech must be taken into mind. During the time of his statements the Bush administrations were at war with Iraq, and this sparked fear across the dictators of the Middle East prompting efforts at liberalizing their regimes. Al-Khanzawi said that the American forces were going to "get rid of dictators and help the oppressed", he later disappeared which caused a new round of mass protests that were met with mass scale arrests by the security forces\textsuperscript{177}. This shows the extent of the affect transnational identities can escalate and develop in accordance to their development elsewhere. This would have a direct effect with Syria, due to the fact that they cannot be

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid.
contained through borders, because Bashar Al-Assad cannot isolate the Syrian Kurds from the Iraqi Kurds. The Kurdish separatist movement has long been a thorn on the side of the regime as they threaten the dominance of the Alawite, and also because they threaten the narrative that the regime wishes to promote a unified Syria where minority ethnicities are secondary to the Syrian identity, should the Kurds succeed in creating their own state, that would threaten the ideological foundation of the fragile state and have implications on the other minorities as well.

The regime has a tendency to get rid of any opposition that threatens its power. For example, Sayf was brutally beaten to send a certain message. Al-Khaznawi a prominent Kurdish activist who worked for the Kurdish cause with aid from secular groups and the Muslim Brotherhood was killed by the government.\textsuperscript{178} This political targeting of certain members in certain ethnic groups only serves to exacerbate the tensions between the different ethnic groups within the Syrian state.

4.6: Identity Politics

Both father and son have skillfully used the identities over the years to ensure that they had a strong loyal base to which they could rely on. They played on the fears of the potentiality of the repressive nature of a Sunni regime. He also had the support from the Sunni businessmen who were part of the military mercantile complex.

In addition to influencing identity from within Syria, Bashar Al-Assad would maneuver identities in neighboring countries such as Lebanon. After a policy of interference in Lebanon in order to empower the Shi'a group, the Syrian state assassinated Rafiq Hariri, a Prime Minister well known for his anti-Syrian stance. At the same time, Bashar's enemies within Syria were beginning to be more vocal about their oppression. "Militancy is the glue that holds Syria together and keeps Bashar

stuck to the throne. For other Arab countries... a more limited, largely verbal militancy suffices because they already have a more coherent identity to hold together their societies. In contrast, Syria... had a greater need to incite foreign conflicts in order to hold together ethnically and religiously diverse”179.

Furthermore, Bashar’s is also well known for the political use of the pan-Arab identity to his own need. Despite him advocating that pan-Arabism called for unity across the Middle East, he conducted his foreign policy in a much different manner. The Syrian regime was simultaneously able to benefit from Arab nationalism “even while violating its most cherished principle since it allied itself with Iran against most of the Arab-speaking world. With the Alawites identifying as Shia'a Muslims, like those in Iran, Bashar's strategy also put him on the wrong side of that divide from the standpoint of the Arab majority”180. His strong alliance with Iran shows how sectarianism is a cornerstone of his domestic policy. In addition to being a strong ally of Iran, he was also a strong supporter of Hezbollah thus highlighting their form of selective pan-Arabism as hypocritical.

The current civil war in Syria can be connected to multiple reasons, identity politics, implemented through the use of tactics the ethnic framing is what caused the resentment between the different groups. The reactivation of local identities can be credited to failures of the Syrian state that can be traced back to the beginnings of Bashar Al-Assad’s presidency. When the Arab Spring began it encouraged ethnic conflicts to implode and engulf the state, causing the Syrian state to ultimately be labeled as a failed state and people to resort to their local identities.

The failures can be seen in the Ba’th party, the ideological foundation of the Syrian state intended to unify the people. The ruling party, the Ba'ath party while may

179 Ibid., pg, 236
180 Ibid., pg. 203
have increased in number of members, it was only showing how weak the party was as people were beginning to join simply to gain access to the benefits and to ensure their own personal future.\textsuperscript{181} By the early 1990s it became apparent that the increase in Ba'th membership was indicative that it transformed into an all-inclusive mass party which meant that people joined for their own personal gain rather than the ideology.\textsuperscript{182} The decline of the party as a patronage network meant that the regime became susceptible to the counter insurgency of the Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood whose charity networks filled a gap in society which the government was incapable of filling. As time went about this decline led to the party losing many of its rural supporters such as the Sunnis, who at the rise of the civil war began abandoning the party all together. This shows how the party which was created to signify the secular, unified identity of the Syrian people was beginning to lose its legitimacy and appear more a representation of corruption and favoritism which was a policy of the Syrian state. In June of 2003 a historic decision was made to separate the "authority between the party and the governmental institutions of the state".\textsuperscript{183} While some members supported such a decisions, others did not and amongst those were Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam who opposed on the grounds that it would threaten identity.\textsuperscript{184}

The Ba'th ideology was very relevant for a while, which helped unify people under a common umbrella, and thus the ability to marginalize religious and ethnic identities became possible, but after the 1990s, there was a decline in Arab

\textsuperscript{182}Hinnebusch, Raymond. "President and Party in Post Baathist Syira." In \textit{Syria from Reform to Revolt}. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015.pg, 33
\textsuperscript{184}Ibid.
nationalism which caused an ideological vacuum. The response by the regime was to stress secularism. This ideological vacuum caused a rise in defensive religious opposition such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi movement. The tensions between the regime and the Sunni majority is not new, it stems from groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood never accepting the regime as legitimate.

4.7: The Political Economy of Sectarianism Under Bashar Al-Assad

Another important issue which highlights how Bashar Al-Assad implemented identity politics in order to ensure that the regime had a certain loyalty base was the way economic liberalization was handled. A certain amount of Sunnis had economic privileges under Hafiz Al-Assad and when met with demands that this pool expand, it was rejected by the regime. This was because the government feared it would help create an independent entrepreneurial class that would potentially change the political scene, as they would demand more change and thus strengthen their claim to govern as the majority. The strong possibility that in any democratic elections the Sunni majority, possibly Islamist, would seriously threaten the Alawite political structure is enough a deterrent for the regime to reject any liberalization reforms. The way Bashar Al-Assad overcame this challenge was through opening economic opportunities to a select group of Sunnis in order to expand his support base. This was very similar to a tactic which was used by his father, which reflected a military mercantile complex. Under Hafiz Al-Assad this complex ensured that he empowered a certain segment of the Sunni elite economically and as such, they supported him when he wanted to

---

186 Raphaeli, Nimrod. "Syria's Fragile Economy." Middle East Review of International Affairs 11, no. 2 (June 2007). pg, 41
overcome the Muslim Brotherhood\(^{188}\). This is a similar tactic used by the French to use identities in order to raise sect against the others. Furthermore, the opening of economic opportunities to a certain select group who they were related to through either familial, political, social connections and essentially coopting them led into an unequal distribution of the wealth across the state\(^{189}\).

The level of tension between the different ethnicities shows how fragile the state is. First, the Sunni majority felt bitter about the privileges which they felt were given to the Alawite elite, as well the fact they were being marginalized. Furthermore, this was exacerbated by the fact that only a select few Sunnis were granted economic privileges, which caused a sense of resentment amongst Sunnis as well, which groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood capitalized on. Bashar was able to secularize the political and social life in order to appeal to as many minorities as possible. He was able to gain support through patronage as a means to expand his popularity as much as possible\(^{190}\). This came through land reforms which benefited Sunnis, as well as appeasing some Sunni members\(^{191}\).

Under Hafiz Al-Assad, the economic policies that were introduced appeared to gain for the regime a lot of influence and strengthen the President’s appeal to various ethnic and religious groups including the Sunni merchants and peasantry. However, as the process of globalization under Bashar Al-Assad began to take its toll on the Syrian population, especially in the rural areas and poverty stricken quarters in Aleppo and Damascus, the appeal of the regime suffered gradual erosion.

Bashar Al-Assad was not as successful at managing the economic sector of the

\(^{188}\)Lesch, David, W. Syria the Fall of the House of Assad. London: Yale University Press. pg. 7

\(^{189}\)Ibid. pg, 8.


\(^{191}\)Ibid. pg, 25.
country; his policies eventually were the cause of great discontent in Syria. At the beginning of his presidency, one of the main criticisms he faced was the disproportionate allocation of public revenues towards state run enterprises. Furthermore, the distribution of investment money was unpredictable and often attributed to noneconomic factors, causing discontent. The liberalization efforts employed by Bashar Al-Assad and the networks he set up in order to ensure support only resulted in further disparities in society as it bred a new elite that had an interest in maintain the status quo thus highlighting the importance of the cronies within the regime. The influx of refugees in Syria from Iraq also caused economic problems as the state’s inability to provide services created tensions against the predominantly Sunni refugees. The influx of refugees has caused problems such as increasing rent, which represents a significant burden on the Syrian budget. It is also important to mention that with the fluctuating prices of oil and inflation rates and their direct effect on individuals, the tenants of socialism, which were a unifying aspect under the Hafiz Al-Assad regime, become less legitimate in the eyes of the people causing further tensions.

The Syrian economy has long been state controlled, policy makers fear complete liberalization as it would directly threaten the elite as they would lose grip of their economic privileges. Under Bashar Al-Assad, unemployment rates have risen exponentially, with the regime manipulating the statics in order not release the

---

192 Raphaeli, Nimrod. "Syria's Fragile Economy." Middle East Review of International Affairs 11, no. 2 (June 2007). pg, 41
194 Raphaeli, Nimrod. "Syria's Fragile Economy." Middle East Review of International Affairs 11, no. 2 (June 2007). pg, 37
195 Ibid., pg, 34
This aftermath can be linked to the patronage system which was set in motion by Hafiz Al-Assad. As a rentier state, Syria provided free education to everyone, this resulted in a large number of educated, consciousness youth who had access to the world through the internet, and as such the “patronage package” became unappealing. Under Hafiz Al-Assad, the patron-client relationship was much easier to maintain, by the time his son had assumed presidency, it was faced with an overwhelming increase in the population, and as such the state had lost its capacity to maintain the patron-client relationship.

Consequences on the environment have also caused discontent within the public, the unemployment problem has lead many poor rural workers to migrate to city centers coupled with the housing problem in Syria has caused many areas of Damascus to turn into slums. In the last few years, the economic hardships were taking a heavy toll especially on the rural areas of the north and south, areas which were considered strong supports of the Assad regime. Uneven development brought about many problems which are associated with liberal economic policies such as widening gaps between the rich and the poor and the continuance of crony capitalism, a defining feature of the Assad regime. The total effect of this economic deterioration had an impact on the near cohesion of society achieved under Hafiz. As a result of this society became “unstuck”. Which entails that different identity groups began to separate from Pan-Arabism and started taking refuge in their own exclusive

---

198 Raphaeli, Nimrod. "Syria's Fragile Economy." *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 11, no. 2 (June 2007), 47
identities.

4.8: Cracks within the Regime

Cracks appeared in the regime's loyalty to socialism under Bashar as he tried to advance peace talks with both Israel and the West. He justified this through explaining that "the Ba'th perceptions and ideologies have not become obsolete... Socialism is a flexible perception that cannot be confined to a frozen and definitive compartment, and for this reason it can be developed and promoted... The continuity of the party depends on its capacity to adjust to today's reality in Syria and to developments in the various areas of life in the state" 200.

The regime was progressively failing over the last few years in providing welfare and goods and services. While from the early 1990s the regime allocated a significant amount of money dedicated to welfare services, but the increase in population was something that caused these resources to dissipate. In the final years before the Arab Spring, the aftermath of globalization and modernization began highlighting the failures of the regime. Syrians suffered from problems such as poor infrastructure and frequent power cuts 201.

When Hafiz began gaining control Syria's population was around 6 million people and by 2006 it had become 20 million 202. This entailed that the rates of urbanization increased in cities such as Damascus and Aleppo, and thus turned the cities into slums where there were increased rates of unemployment and a general lack of services. This further delegitimized the image of the ruling party which aimed at "attracting and assimilating broad sectors of the disenfranchised, especially

201 Ibid., pg, 116
202 Ibid.
minorities and rural and peripheral populations. Under the leadership of the Alawites, these sectors formed a 'coalition of the underprivileged' which brought the Ba'th Party to power in 1963 and later enabled Hafiz Al-Assad to take over the government and retain control of the country for close to 30 years”\textsuperscript{203}. With this increase came a strong sense of alienation of the people who are in these cities and further delegitimized the image of the regime and by extension increasing the sectarian tensions between the groups. Furthermore, the influx of Iraqi refugees caused the situation to expedite even quicker with higher demand on a limited supply of goods. This is relevant to the argument made by Jabar in which he wrote about how, in times of weakness, the state will use identities to act as extensions of the state, and with the weakness of the state to provide goods and services, the need for local kinship increases.

It was only a matter of time before the selective use of Ba’th nationalism fails due to the tactics of both Hafiz and Bashar Al-Assad. For example, when it came time to unify the people it stressed Syrian nationalism and highlighted equality and unity. During the aftermath of the 1979 attack by Islamist extremist, it highlighted how the Alawites were in danger as they are a minority. This framing feeds into the fears that exist within minorities which as a result gains their reluctant support.

Bashar Al-Assad upgraded the authoritarian system which was set in place by his father, while at the same time keeping many of its essential features such as the nationalist rhetoric as keeper of the Arab cause against Israel\textsuperscript{204}. Removal of Assad from power is very difficult simply because he is protected by the system which was placed by his father. The security forces are interlinked with the political elite who are essentially his kin, tribesmen, as well as fellow Alawites. Therefore it becomes in

\textsuperscript{203} Ibid., pg, 12
their best interest to ensure that the regime survives\textsuperscript{205}. Also, this tactic is essential in order to ensure that there is no support base for coups. What held the Syrian state together was a flawed Pan-Arab, socialist ideology, which can be argued as successful right until the increase in the population which left many feeling marginalized, and even adding more numbers to the different causes. With the rise of the civil war, the regime lost its legitimacy with its monopoly over the use of violence, these deep tensions resurfaced and then it became obvious these ethnic tensions were reactivated and threatened the territorial integrity of the state\textsuperscript{206}. The hardliners on both sides become the more dominate voices with the rise of violence. As blood was spilled the opposition went from calling for international intervention to calling for revenge against the Alawites, and neither side can trust the other not to seek revenge and such each held on to their own positions\textsuperscript{207}.

The manipulative tactics of identity politics, which were used by Bashar Al-Assad, had implications into the state of political opposition in Syria. Even within the frame of bringing about change, the extent of long term sectarian division is evident within the nature of the political opposition, even when it comes time to pressuring the regime, getting the opposition to unite and make coalitions to overcome the internal disagreements sectarian differences hampered their ability to truly unify\textsuperscript{208}.

Bashar Al-Assad inherited a society which was in a state of near cohesion due to the unifying efforts of Hafiz Al-Assad geared towards getting people to focus on issues other than their sectarian divides. During the tenure of Bashar Al-Assad, he did not change the system which was set in place by his father. In fact, he relied on many

\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., pg, 294  
\textsuperscript{206} Ibid., pg, 309  
\textsuperscript{207} Ibid., pg, 301  
of the same tactics to further strengthen the system. The military was maintained as an exclusive apparatus in order to protect the regime, and Bashar built upon the ideology of Pan-Arabism and a nationalistic Syrian identity. One of the defining features of the Bashar Al-Assad regime was globalization. The effects of globalization caused socioeconomic problems such as a rising poverty. During difficult times of socioeconomic problems people begin to revert to their own exclusive identity, thus undoing much of the work which was done by his father. As these socioeconomic problems increased, so did people’s tendency to revert to their own exclusive identity. Eventually, these repercussions of globalization resulted in the discrediting of the socialist ideology the Ba’th party was famous for. Therefore, as the regime lost its legitimacy, an ideological vacuum was created and the societal bonds, that were enforced by Hafiz Al-Assad in order to avoid the country demising into civil war, weakened and eventually took its toll on the regime.

This chapter aimed at establishing connections between the implementation of identity politics used by Hafiz and Bashar Al-Assad. Hafiz Al-Assad laid the foundations for the modern Syrian state through constructing a system which would ensure the power and survival of the Alawite as the political elite and empowering some from within other sects and ethnicities through political and economic favoritism in order to turn them into tools of the state. This succeeded in causing a sense of alienation and resentment from other groups raising angry opposition. While Hafiz may have laid the foundations of such a system, Bashar further enforced and did nothing to change it, and arguably expanded on this system, ultimately causing failures and having a direct impact on the current civil war.
Chapter 5: Civil War

This chapter examines the causes of the civil war in Syria. It is important to establish a basic assumption that through these events the country can be labeled as a failed state. Moreover it will also examine the different ways in which identity was used by both the regime and opposition and evidence that the use of identity as a political tool which was used throughout Syrian history was a direct cause of the way in which these events unfolded. It will also examine how the international forces which sought to further their own interest contributed to the exacerbation of the downfall of the Syrian state and its sectarian fragmentation.

5.1 Drivers of Civil War

The phrase ethnic conflict must be defined in order to begin to explain civil war. Ethnic violence implies the conflict between two ethnically diverse groups or more over economic, political, or social reasons. There are several explanations for why civil wars happen some of them are systemic and some are international causes. In order for a state be vulnerable to such events, it becomes apparent though different conditions. The first condition is that two or more ethnic groups must live in close proximity. The second reason is that authorities are too weak to ensure security, leaving individuals to secure themselves209. These conditions are quite basic in order to have a conflict be labeled as an ethnic one, the multitude of ethnicities may not be the direct cause of civil war, in order for there to be conflict there must be tactics resulting in societal fragmentation of some form in order to cause a sense of resentment between the different groups.

The transition of these conflicts to civil wars can cause a state to fail as it no longer becomes the main monopolizer of force and has generally lost the control over

some areas within the state. These conditions are generated often when states collapse and ethnic groups have to provide their own security. As the state collapses, individuals must find means to protect themselves and as such the state loses legitimacy as it failed to provide basic services such as security. The state also loses its ability to perform certain tasks such as tax collection. Tax collection from citizens should be the basis for a responsive government, as it will, ultimately, give the taxpayers more say in the running of state affairs (compared to state revenue from rents from resources, tariffs or even development aid). As the state collapses it loses its ability to offer public services or goods, which causes these services to be given through informal channels. As such people’s motives become more complex than if the state is functioning. People will turn to whatever entity offers these goods and services be it militia or local identity which gives them the best chance at survival. When such a breakdown occurs, the polity is fractured, but the dependencies which were formulated before the state collapsed structure whatever system emerges next. In the case of Syria, the local identities become a bases for political organization. This process is quickly solidified as these political organizations begin ensuring these services and a certain level of stability. Accompanied with the collapse of the state, comes the collapse of institutions as they begin to lose control over their duties in some areas within the country. As Dodge points out, “the collapse of a state’s institutional capacity means the loss of national authority but also of the central focus for identity formation. In the aftermath of state failure, authoritative institutions, societal and political, quickly lose their capacity.” Because the state

---

210 Ibid.
212 Ibid.
has lost its coercive control, the geographical borders of the state become meaningless as decision-making leaks out into neighboring regions and international players are drawn into the conflict.

Structural changes within the state can often be a precursor to ethnic conflicts and eventually civil war. As the civil war unfolded, ethnic and identity conflicts became increasingly visible and conspicuous, however, beneath the façade of violence the economy of Syria seemed to be deteriorating so as to become a major cause for the disruption of the polity and the society. As the state became further incapable of providing services, people began relying on their local identities for services such as security. Modernization and urbanization can create “increasing perceptions of hierarchy”\textsuperscript{213}. These increasing perceptions of hierarchy are prevalent in Syria, for example, in some Alawite dominated areas, there is better infrastructure.

Furthermore, state failure driven by ethnic conflict often lead ethnic groups to resort to offense as opposed to defense due to a multitude of reasons, such as fear of antagonism of other ethnic groups. Emotions play a pivotal role in ethnic violence, emotions such as fear, hatred and resentment are essential in understanding ethnic violence as they can be drivers in causing seemingly rational human beings to abandon their rationality and commit mass violence. Fear, for example, can cause one group to attach another under the perception that it is a greater threat. Hatred and rage can cause people to attack a group which has been attacked before or frequently which shows how “ancient hate” can still be a driving force amongst the different

sects or groups. Resentment in which a group attacks another that is perceived as higher in society due to their ethnicity.

In addition to state collapse being a condition for ethnic conflicts, there are several causes which can lead to the exacerbation of these ethnic conflicts such as perceptual explanations in which authoritarian regimes will often frame events in order to create their own political myths in order to suit their own purposes. The loss of state control can entail the breakdown of law and order in the form of mass scale violence and secessionist movements. These can act as catalysts of state failure as the state can no longer provide services such as protection as resources are being directed towards combating crime and violence. For these reasons, armed conflict and politically motivated violence act as catalysts for state failure.

5.2 The Regime and Identity Politics

The civil war in Syria can be credited to the secularist policy the Ba’th regime perpetuated throughout many of its years, “the more sect-neutral a state appears, the more society can divorce sectarian identity from political interest thereby sapping the politicization of sectarian identities that has been underway for some time.” While Assad advocated secularism, his policies only served to reinforce the rule of a minority in a state which can only be labeled as a form of secular sectarianism. What fuels this form of political organization is the idea of victimization whereby

214 Ibid.
215 Ibid.
“competing forms of sectarian victimhood at play in several countries relating to contentious national historical memories and perceptions of sectarian oppression and entitlement”\textsuperscript{219}. Moreover without the resolution of such differences communal relations will always be a point of contention.

The regime as employed many tactics in order to ensure its resilience. Despite the fact that its use of identity politics being one of the main reasons this conflict turned into an ethnic conflict, the regime continued to use many of the same tactics. “The officers and men of the most sensitive and strategically important armed units were Alawis… and the regime realistically preferred to trust only these units with the task of dealing with popular disturbances… The regime proportioned the army in a way in which most of the soldiers were Alawite”\textsuperscript{220}. Comparisons can be drawn to the tactics which were employed by the French, in which the use of identity within the army only serves to raise ethnic tension, thus blurring the lines. Having a mostly Alawite army, causes people to associate the sect with the repression thus causing animosity between the different sects as one is seen as the perpetuator of this violence and bloodshed. With this tactic it causes a shift in motives and as opposed to people opposing the regime they become aggravated with a sect that is tasked with repressing them.

Assad relied on two types of paramilitary forces the first being the shabiha, who are made up of mostly Alawite criminal elements who evidence has shown are tied to the Syrian regime and are responsible for the worst of the brutality against the Sunni opposition in this current conflict. These groups were initially used as smuggling groups and were lead by two of Hafiz Al-Assad’s nephews and eventually began

\textsuperscript{219} \textit{Ibid.},

being used as an intimidation tactic by the regime. During this conflict when they were faced with a majority Sunni opposition, they loyalties fell behind Bashar Al-Assad. In an interview conducted the criteria for those chosen to join their ranks they are chosen based on “physical strength, lack of education and blind loyalty to the Alawite sect and the Assad family in particular”. Media is also a very important tool for the civil war in Syria with both the regime and the rebels attempting to gain the upper hand with regards to the message that is being sent abroad as well as domestically.

The propaganda has escalated tensions between the different groups in Syria. The paramilitary factions represent a tool used by the regime to terrorize the different sects. The regime would use these groups as an intimidation tactic in order to get the support of the other sects within the state in order to gain their support out of fear as well as intimidating Sunnis through crimes. This only serves to increase the hatred against the Alawites as they have come to represent the repression tool of the regime. Amongst their tactics of intimidation is the forced displacement of Sunnis from Alawite majority areas through terrorization tactics forcing Sunnis to flee to other Sunni majority areas. These paramilitary forces focus primarily on Sunni villages which only serves to increase tensions between the different groups which is reflected in narratives such as that of one of the Shabiba fighters who argued that “Sunni women are giving birth to babies who will fight us in the years to come, so we have the right to fight anyone who can hurt us in the future.”

\[\text{Ibid., pg, 12}\]
\[\text{Ibid., pg, 17}\]
\[\text{Ibid., pg, 22}\]
\[\text{Ibid., pg, 32}\]
Organized state violence and communal organization along ethnic lines is largely the by-product of the relentless repression of the Assad regime. The Syrian Civil war has only served to “empower sectarian and ethnic entrepreneurs to mobilize society along communalistic lines”. Deeper fractures have appeared as the rural areas have rebelled even further more than the city centers which reflects the regime’s overall negligence. This can be linked to the fact that the regime no longer provides welfare and as such people, begin to feel closer to their local identity as well as pointing towards a policy of favoritism within the regime towards Alawite dominated areas. The Alawites in Homs were largely seen as being favored through the fact that they receive better services, infrastructure, and employment and as such there most of the those who were protesting were of the Sunni sect.

Religion also serves important tool in the propaganda war of the regime. Religious framing of situations representation another form of the application of identity politics, as the regime gave ultimatums to the Sunni clerics essentially forcing them to include the legitimacy of the regime in the sermons. Some clerics included anti protester sentiments such as discussing how these protests were not aimed at reform, but at crippling Syria. One of Syria’s senior cleric said in his sermons that he had seen reports and documents regarding the protests and then in his sermons claimed, “they don’t want our Islamic civilization to flourish, they seek to destroy our Islamic culture” “Those who want to bring down the regime want to bring down Islam”. This only serves to create tensions between the different sects as well as

---

226 Ibid., pg, 18  
227 Ibid., pg, 19  
228 Ibid., pg, 44  
within the Sunni sect, as Sunnis feel resentment over the fact that these clerics are essentially supporting the violence as opposed to condemning it.

Assad had the support of other minorities such as the Druze, Christians and other Shiite sects and Sunnis who were part of the crony capitalists which he and his father had empowered in order to act like a support group for the Alawite regime. It claimed to uphold secularism in the face of extremism, yet actively worked to drive a wedge between the Sunnis and Shiites in the country to the extent to which at border control soldiers are wary and distrustful of Sunnis. The government framed the rebels as radical Sunni Muslims, and then used the fact that when the rebels fire missiles at residential areas as proof. There is an economic perception which drives conflict such as the perception that all Christians are rich, and when Christians are kidnapped, the ransom money asked is in dollars. Rebels are labeled as “takfiris” in order to incite fear and hatred on behalf of minorities who fear the rise of radicals who will curb their freedoms. This represents a form of “othering” aimed at establishing differences amongst the groups as well as framing the opposition in a negative light.

5.3 Repercussions

Both sides use identity or ethnicity as a political tool in order to generate support. Moderates “may seek to enflame ethnic passion to secure a wavering base of support and focus extreme action outward, aimed at another ethnic group. On the other hand, extremists will stoke ethnic violence and the larger ethnic community to force moderates to move toward a more extreme and/or violent position or risk losing

---

231 Ibid., pg, 125
232 Ibid., pg, 132
all credibility”\textsuperscript{233}. Extremists will seek to attack civilians in order to prompt a violent response from the state in order to gain credit to their claims that the state is in fact illegitimate and needs to be replaced.

As a result of the conflict, there has been a systemic breakdown of the state along sectarian lines. On the ground, groups comprised of minorities who seek to protect their own neighborhoods\textsuperscript{234}. While the regime may have been dominated by the Alawites, after the civil war, many have kept supporting the regime out of fear that they will be punished for the crimes that were committed by the Assad family for the past 40 years. As a result there has been movement of Alawite families to Alawite villages fearing the Sunni villages\textsuperscript{235}. These fears are not without base, while moderates may regard the Alawites as innocent victims of the House of Assad, many extremists disagree and as a result advocate mass violence. This has extended towards the Christian minority who have heard chants including “al-Alawi alataboot, wa al-Mashihiala Beirut” (the Alawi to the coffin and the Christian to Beirut)\textsuperscript{236}. This has placed many of these groups in a difficult choice between “the shield of the secular dictatorship, or the risks and rewards of democratic politics”\textsuperscript{237}. This atmosphere is creating a tension which drove tragedies such as the tragic event in Aqreb, in which the pro-regime paramilitary forces killed and slaughtered their own children, women, and men claiming that it was better than if the Free Syrian Army gotten to them first.

\textsuperscript{235} Ibid., pg, 22
\textsuperscript{237} Ibid., pg, 115
There are many lessons to be drawn from the situation in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Like Iraq, is dominated by sectarian politics which has been a deciding factor in politics. The Iraqi people much like the Syrians were dominated by a minority in an artificial Shia dominated system, and is comprised of minority groups\textsuperscript{238}. In Iraq the minority ruling (Sunnis) have been excluded from the decision making process through "the practice of de-Ba'athification... even through informal means, ultimately stigmatizing and alienating Ba'th party members, especially those who are Sunni" \textsuperscript{239}. Even until today the members of the Sunni community protest against the Maliki government because they suffer from high rates of unemployment, live under a permanent threat of arrest, and have been marginalized and treated as second-class citizens\textsuperscript{240}.

In regards to the Kurdish movements, they had a measure of mistrust towards the other opposition members regarding whether they would recognize their demands of equal citizenship and power sharing and calculated as follows “were Syria to experience a devastating civil war that would result in a weak and divided state, Kurdish interests would be better served by limited involvement with the revolutionary movement and by creating facts on the ground, namely de facto autonomy as their Iraqi kin have done”\textsuperscript{241}. As a result of this the regime has withdrawn from Kurdish areas counting on tensions between Kurds and opposition

\textsuperscript{239} Qaddour, Jomana. "Unlocking the Alawite Conundrum in Syria." The Washington Quarterly 36, no. 4 (Fall 2013) pg, 70
\textsuperscript{240} Ibid., pg, 70
\textsuperscript{241} Hokayem, Emile. Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant. New York, NY: Routledge, 2013.pg, 47
The Druze were politically smart and negotiated deals with both sides and as such avoiding the violence as much as possible.

There is no consensus regarding the Kurdish demands, yet many if not most seek a similar situation as the Kurds in Iraq whereby they create an autonomous region within a federal state, where they can “assert their distinct identity, lay claim to resources and cultivate external alliances”\textsuperscript{243}. Basic demands included, that people should have citizenship as Syrians, that they be taught in Kurdish and even be taught Kurdish history. The name of Syria should be changed to reflect that it has other ethnicities, from the Syrian Arab Republic to the Syrian Republic.

The Democratic Union Party, a more radical Kurdish movement deployed troops and took over government buildings. The Kurdish issue shows how the state’s repression can often lead to movements such as these developing. Bashar Al-Assad had later on offered the Kurds citizenship, but even this was a poly to drive a wedge between the radical and non radical Kurdish movements. Moreover, his withdrawal from the Kurdish regions is evidence of further indicates how Assad is counting on tensions between the Arabs and the Kurds to incite further violence which he can capitalize on. As of 2014, the Kurds declared autonomy in three provinces in Northern Syria\textsuperscript{244}.

5.4 The International Dimension

The events within the Syrian borders are not isolated and do not develop within a vacuum. Since the beginning of the events, the world watched with a sense of apprehension with regards to how these events would unfold. As they became more

\textsuperscript{242} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{243} Ibid., pg, 78
\textsuperscript{244} Erlich, Reese W. \textit{Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect}. Prometheus Books, 2014.pg, 187
violent, different regimes began intervening and further maneuvering the scene in order to achieve their own ends thus creating a Cold War fought through proxies being played out within Syria. The development of events in Syria seemed to launch what can only be called a Middle Eastern Cold War between, Saudi Arabia which is supported by the Gulf countries, the US and EU while another group is led by Iran which is supported by Hezbollah, Russia and China.

5.5 Supporters of the Assad Regime

Iran has been one of Syria’s closest allies and since Bashar rose to power, these ties have only strengthened. Syria has allied itself with Iran and relied on it even more during this conflict out of its sectarian affinity. Both countries thrive on their anti-Western rhetoric which has only served the purpose of creating hatred towards the West and gaining domestic support though uniting people against a common enemy. Despite the fact that they have opposing ideologies, with Syria advocating secularism and Iran a theocracy, both regimes allied over their mutual points of contention with Western powers such as the US and Israel. The Iranian Revolution had an impact across the Islamic world, polarizing opinions and mobilizing sectarian identities. Iran has been seen as a regional threat to the predominantly Sunni authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. As regional regimes felt threatened by the Islamic Revolution Iran, they sought to discredit the revolution in any way possible.

The location of Syria is essential in understanding why many countries have taken such interest to it. The fact that it shares borders with both Iraq and Lebanon has created fears over a spillover effect, essentially destabilizing the nearby counties. The violence within Syria is also amplified by the fact that it is close to other countries.

_Haddad, Fanar. _Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity._ London: Hurst, 2011.pg, 13_
with similar ethnic conflicts, thus threatening to fuel ethnic conflicts in neighboring countries such as Lebanon and Iraq. There are many reasons that Iran has supported the Assad regime since the initial phases of the protests. Iran and Hezbollah are backing the Assad regime out of sectarian loyalty. The alliance with Syria is very important for Iran as they share similar goals and strategies, such as blaming the West for the problems in the region. When the Arab Spring first began, Iran saw it as part of the great “Islamic awakening” and hailed the uprisings as countries rejecting the Western appointed autocrats. At first it began denying the uprising in Syria, but became very apprehensive as the events grew out of the control of the Syrian state. They began thwarting the events through providing support in the form of experts to help in internet and communication monitoring, experts in ways to circumvent the sanctions that would be placed on Syria, intelligence sharing and counter insurgency advisors, personnel and security forces as well as weaponry and artillery. They also took a propaganda role with advocating the uprising as part of a conspiracy by the West. It insisted that these events were a plot by the US and even painted them in a very anti nationalistic element by labeling protestors as “agents” and “mercenaries”. Furthermore, Iran trained mostly Shiite troops from Lebanon and Alawite troops in Syria. What this causes is an unfair advantage and creating further violence to create more tensions within the entire state. The unwavering support on behalf of Iran is based on the fact that Syria is one of its few remaining allies within the region and therefore through maneuvering the political scene on the

247 Ibid., pg, 125
248 Ibid.
249 Ibid., pg, 126
250 Ibid., pg, 127
ground through the use of weapons and even personnel such as Hezbollah it only seeks to advance its own interests.

Another country which is a strong supporter of Assad is Iraq. The irony of the Iraqi support is that Iraq has had a history of political use of identity under the Saddam Hussein regime and the fact that a Sunni minority ruled the Shi’a majority. Yet despite this, the Syrian civil war has threatened to reignite sectarian tensions in Iraq, with its then prime minister Nuri Al-Maliki who had just successfully managed to take control of the country by defeating Sunni as well as competing Shi’a groups. Syria still harbored members of the remnants of the Iraqi Ba’th party, thus causing tensions between both countries. The Iraqi position is a source of confusion due to the fact that despite the tense relationship between both countries, it maintained a relationship with Syria, offering moral support. Al-Maliki, now a Vice President in Iraq, feared that the success of a Sunni upheaval in Syria would cause a similar uprising in Iraq. Iraq helped Syria through providing oil and refusing to isolate Syria. There is also concern with the Kurdish movement which might threaten the control of Al-Maliki as well as further threaten the territorial integrity of the Iraqi state.

On a more international level, Russia and China have been staunch supporters of the Assad regime due to their economic interests within the state. Russia and Syria have had strong historic ties under the Soviet Union and more recently economic and military ties. Syria provides one of the few remaining areas where it can interject in Middle Eastern affairs. In addition to supporting Assad, both countries have gone through great lengths to block any resolutions in the Security Council. Neither country wants to see precedents passed which could possibly be used against them in the future. China’s support for Al-Assad stems from their economic interests that are

---

tied up within the country. Furthermore, the Chinese did not want to set a precedent to allow intervention as was allowed in Libya which eventually caused instability in the country.

The different supporters of Assad share a common characteristic; their use of pragmatism. Different scholars have pointed that while these members have been openly supporting Assad, some have spoken to the opposition in order to guarantee that no matter the outcome of the Assad regime, their interests are still secure.

5.6 Supporters of the Opposition

Early on in the conflict the Gulf powers tried to pressure Assad to conduct minor political concessions and lift restrictions on the Muslim Brotherhood which would allow for some inclusion of opposition without regime change\(^{253}\). Assad only responded with uncompromising resolve and the situation deteriorated very quickly. Even within the Gulf states there was competing interests to the way they prefer to see the Syrian situation play out\(^{254}\). The Sunni countries want Assad gone in order to curtail the strength of Hezbollah and Iran. Saudi Arabia saw Syria’s future in tribal groups who had a presence in both Syria and the Saudi Arabia, as well as groups who embraced Salafism\(^{255}\). The relationship between Syria and Saudi deteriorated after the assassination of Rafiq Hariri\(^{256}\). Once Assad began appearing like he would not last, Saudi Arabia embraced the idea of a reduced influence of Iran and then became more forceful in their calls for Assad to leave. And as the events deteriorated even further, Saudi Arabia, along with the other Gulf countries armed the more extreme Islamist rebels in an attempt to skewer the odds in their favor. Ultimately should Assad fall

\(^{253}\) Ibid., pg, 112
\(^{254}\) Ibid., pg, 122
\(^{255}\) Ibid.
and there be elections, the Sunni majority would surely take over government thus increasing the support of Saudi Arabia in the region. Qatar saw its support in the Muslim Brotherhood, and even furthered this by forceful propaganda through its channel Al Jazeera. Also, in 2009, Qatar wanted to build a pipeline which would transport its gas through Syria and eventually provided gas to Europe competing with Russia. Assad refused to sign this deal and signed one with Iran which would export gas to Lebanon. This irked the West as Syria would have another lucrative income. This declared him an enemy to US corporate interests. The UAE disagreed due to their hatred of the Muslim Brotherhood and saw their future with a stronger National Council which would help rule Syria.

The Lebanese government took a policy of dissociation from the entire conflict in fear of the fact that it would have a similar affect on its own fragile internal politics. From the Syrian perspective, it is essential that Lebanon is to remain within its sphere of influence as they have deep economic and political ties. Economically, Lebanon has provided jobs for over one million Syrians thus relieving the pressure on behalf of the government to provide jobs. This conflict only served to energize some of the detractors in Lebanon. Due to the fact that Lebanon shares a border with Syria, it has been causing tensions on both sides. As the events within Syria escalated, some of Assad’s allies in Lebanon were engaging in the events such as the Shi’a, Christian, and a notably small Alawite group. Within Lebanon, the Sunni community was still feeling bitter over the Syrian occupation and was seeking revenge. There is evidence that there has been a spillover effect, in a port city in Lebanon for example,

---

258 Ibid.
Sunni and Alawite combatants engaged in fighting that was eventually settled through the military. Another point of concern for the Lebanese government is the idea of opposition forces seeking to bring the battle to Lebanon to punish Hezbollah for its participation in the civil war.

On a more international level, the United States and the European Union have been the main powers that have been staunch supporters of the rebels. The irony was their support of protestors in Egypt and Tunisia, meanwhile trying to quell the protests in Bahrain. The unfolding situations in Iraq and Libya have only grown to show that intervention aimed at regime change rarely leads to positive results and even empowering more radical forces to take over the country. Their concern stems from the hostility of the Syrian regime; there is concern that in a last ditch effort to hold on to control it would initiate hostilities with Israel thus causing a regional war dragging the West into a ground assault. As a way to intervene without pushing towards an all ground assault, the US began overseeing a secret training program to the rebels by shipping weapons, thus further creating complications within the ground.

This chapter discussed two main points, the first being how the Syrian civil war represents a compilation of years of implementation of identity politics on behalf of the Assad regime. Through empowering some and not others they have created a sense of hostility and hatred towards the other sects, which has been capitalized on repeatedly by the regime. They fostered a sense of competition for economic benefits and state patronage, thus fostering feelings of “us” and a “them” this only serves to strengthen individual group identities and creating intergroup tensions, eventually

---

261 Ibid., pg. 136
263 Ibid., pg, 214
causing hatred, mistrust and animosity hampering any possibly negotiation between
the different groups. The violence that has broken out since the beginning of the civil
war has shown how ethnic mistrust can lead to hatred and eventually violence as a
means of revenge and appeasement. The response from the regime represents its core
security mentality of not tolerating dissent. The hate speech is further exacerbating the
tensions between groups. For example, Sunni clerics use hate speech and take
advantage of Sunni animosity towards the Shia’ people and he uses events such as
Banias massacre in which the regime killed hundreds in a Sunni village as revenge for
the death of troops 264. The regime was banking on an armed conflict in order to
solidify the position of the regime and make the opposition appear weak and divide
them 265. With the level of ethnic violence it is very unlikely that in years to come
there will be feelings of trust amongst the groups. There will be the creation of new
symbols of sectarian identity which will be built upon trauma and a sense of
victimhood that is now part of both the Sunni and Shia’ sects. The second part of this
chapter has sought to examine the breakdown the different interests of the different
world powers which are involved in the Syrian civil war. The support of each of these
countries to a certain group only exacerbates the conflicts in the political scene in
what can be labeled as a proxy war to achieve personal gains that can have
devastating results on the entire region. The support in the form of arms and artillery
only serve to create unfair advantages of the different groups and causing the rise of
extremists and sideling the moderates. And as such further fueling the ethnic violence
which has been unraveling. Civil wars which have international involvement typically

last longer, have more casualties, and are more difficult to resolve\textsuperscript{266}. In the context of
the Syrian case, the implementation of identity politics in order to achieve personal
gains, can only result in massive losses.

\textsuperscript{266}Zunes, Stephan. "Supporting Unarmed Civil Insurrection in Syria." In \textit{The Syria Dilemma}, edited by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2013.pg, 188
Chapter 6: Conclusion

In conclusion, identity plays a vital role in the way politics is practiced as it directly affects the cognitive process of an individual. Specifically in the Middle East, identity is a building block in the formations of groups, loyalties and is a determinant of mass movements. Through analyzing the role of identity in Syria, a state with heterogeneous identity groups, it is apparent that identity plays a critical role as it has been a tool of the different regimes for many years. This research uses a constructivist approach, but it should be mentioned that this study is limited in the fact that no ground research has been conducted due to the state of affairs in Syria. Under the French colonial period, in order to prevent the formation of a nationalist movement, separate ethnofederal states were formed. Furthermore, the French employed a divide and conquer technique in order to divide the Syrian people while simultaneously laying the seeds of sectarianism. This was done through through forming a military which was comprised primarily of minorities which created a sense of resentment from the Sunnis as well as pinning the different leaders of the ethnofederal state against each other. While this system of ethnofederalism was abolished, the consequences of such as system is maintained.

When Hafiz Al-Assad rose to power he trusted a select few who were members of his sect and tribe, and as such a primarily Alawite dominant regime was formed. In order to consolidate such a regime he ensured that the state’s main coercive apparatuses were controlled by those who had a vested interest in the maintenance of the Alawite dominant regime. In order to ensure that the state does not break up into civil war, he advocated secularism while at the same time reinforcing sectarianism through is favoritism policies towards the Alawites. Al-Assad also chose a select few from other sects and empowered them through patronage in order to
guarantee their support. This created resentment from the Sunnis who felt that they deserved more representation in the system, as well as resentment towards the Sunnis who were given preferential treatment.

The extent of the “secular sectarianism” employed by Hafiz is evident in the development of opposition groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood some of whom, advocated armed violence in order to overturn the predominantly Alawite system. With the death of Hafiz Al-Assad and the smooth transition of his son into power, people were optimistic that the young liberal would usher in an era of political change, yet Bashar Al-Assad did nothing to change the status quo. In fact, he reinforced secular sectarianism through more favoritism policies. This resulted in mistrust and resentment amongst the different sects. Throughout his term as president there have been problems in the regime’s ability to advocate its legitimacy as failures were beginning to compound, creating an ideological crisis within the party.

As Syrians began to demonstrate against the regime for its oppressive policies, the protestors were met with violence from an army which was formulated in a way to ensure the protection of a regime with a minority complex. The Arab Spring gave an opportunity for the local identities in Syria to be reactivated. Furthermore, as the state descended into a state of civil war, it became incapable of providing services and this resulted in people relying on their local identities to provide services such as security and welfare, and thus the reactivation of these local identities with the Arab Spring. Bashar Al-Assad capitalized on this violence through framing the conflict as a rise of radical Islamists in order to incite fear amongst the different minorities into supporting his regime.

The events of the Arab Spring in Syria have only caused a failure of the state and a strengthening of the local identities with some groups such as the Kurds seeking
autonomy and thus threatening the territorial integrity of the state leaving little hope of leaving a “unified” Syria intact.
Bibliography


Kumaraswamy, P.R. "Who Am I?: The Identity Crisis in the Middle East." *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 10, no. 1 (March 2006).


