

Cosmopolitanism in Retreat? The Crisis of Syrian Identity in Post-Arab Spring

by

Noureddin Mahmoud Zaamout

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Department of Political Science
University of Alberta

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ABSTRACT

This research project examines the following central question: *what does Syrian identity mean in the eyes of contending groups in the current Syrian crisis (2011-2017)?* In answering this question, the project engages in original research, shedding light on the ‘identity’ dimension of the war in Syria. It challenges primordialist and/or Orientalist approaches to identity, which shadow the cosmopolitan components of the Middle East, confining the region’s identity-politics to notions of sectarianism and conservative militant Islamism resistant to modernity. Through employing Hamid Dabashi’s critical postcolonial cosmopolitan framework of analysis, the research historicizes the crisis of Syrian identity, focusing on critical periods ranging from the 1920s, up to the contemporary crisis (2011-2017). It demonstrates that the country’s postcolonial state-imposed national identity projects have for years been exclusionary, and either have been shaped by, or have encountered, three ideological formations: those are, anti-colonial nationalism, third-world socialism, and Islamism. These formations emerged in conversation with, and in response to, European colonialism and were conveniently deployed by the ruling regimes to legitimize their position. Through a discourse and content analysis, based on Dabashi’s analytical framework, the research argues that the 2011 Syrian Uprising was an attempt to bring an inclusive meaning to ‘Syrianism’ and to retrieve the repressed cosmopolitan worldliness. Protestors were committed to a unified Syria, as a political entity and a source of identity. They were not seeking an Islamist, a pan-‘Arabist’, a separatist, a Ba’athist socialist or a sectarian vision, but were rather united by prospects of creating a locally produced alternative that would maintain national harmony and retrieve the country’s cosmopolitanism. The research argues that the prolonging of the Syrian conflict has resulted in the deterioration of an inclusive, cosmopolitan ‘Syrianism’, as various actors have risen with conflicting ideas about national identity. Using archival primary and secondary sources, the research problematizes the identity discourse of the conflicting groups and to compare where they place ‘Syria’ in their ideologies. The research findings suggest that the ideologies of the studied combatant groups embody counter-revolutionary exclusionary notions of identity, which are not based on the cosmopolitan worldliness, but rather reinforce the suppressed, reactionary and exclusionary post-colonial ideological dichotomies.

DEDICATION

*To my dear parents, Professor **Mahmoud and Amal Zaamout**, who gave me the gift of life and raised me into the person that I am. They have been a source of inspiration pushing me to excel and realize my full potential. Their endless love and support has given me the confidence to achieve the impossible. I appreciate all that they have done for me throughout the years, and I owe them my deepest gratitude and sincere love.*

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INTRODUCTION

A 2015 report by the Centre for Syrian Policy Research has found that since 2011, over 470,000 Syrians have lost their lives while another 1.9 million are wounded, which accounts for 11.5% of the country's total population.¹ The country is in ruins, with heavy destruction in residential areas, a torn social fabric, shattered economy, obliterated healthcare system, and diminished state institutions. Today, there are over 4.8 million registered refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan, with another 10 million internally displaced, totaling 15 million in need of immediate humanitarian assistance.² This catastrophe has unfolded over the last six years, as the crisis evolved from peaceful protests, in which demonstrators called for 'freedom' and 'dignity', into an all-out proxy/civil war. Due in large reason to international intervention, the country has become increasingly polarized and divided. There are hundreds of groups operating in the country under different flags, and driven by conflicting ideologies. Such groups seek to cement their respective power and enforce their exclusionary ideological positions in the areas in which they control.

This research is an attempt to examine the following central question: *what does Syrian identity mean in the eyes of contending groups in the current Syrian crisis (2011-2017)?* In answering this question, the research investigates the transformation in the ways in which the country's national identity has been imagined, since coming into existence in the 1920s and in light of the contemporary crisis (2011-2017). It will examine the progression, fragility and deterioration of the ways in which Syrian national identity had been articulated. More specifically, the research will (1) analyze how the country's post-colonial identity had been shaped by exclusionary discourses of identity politics, which emerged in the encounters with European colonialism but continued to dominate following independence; (2) discuss how the 2011 Syrian uprising demonstrated an opportunity for the materialization of a cosmopolitan, pluralistic identity, away from top-down, exclusionary, and state-imposed notions of national identity; (3) problematize the identity discourse of conflicting groups and outline where they place 'Syria' in their ideologies.

¹ Centre for Syrian Policy Research "Syria: Confronting Fragmentation: Impact of the Syrian Crisis Report 2015" *Centre for Syrian Policy Research* (2015), 68.

² UNHCR "Syria Regional Refugee Response" *The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, 2016.

In answering the proposed question this research employs a critical post-colonial analysis to historicize the ways in which Syria's national identity has been imagined. Advanced by Hamid Dabashi, this approach asserts that the post-colonial identity formation process has been shaped by three exclusionary ideological dichotomies (anti-colonial nationalism, third-world socialism and Islamism), which emerged in a combative conversation with European colonialism.³ Dabashi's approach sheds light on how the Arab Spring was an attempt by the people to move beyond the entrapment of these ideological formations towards the retrieval of a repressed cosmopolitan worldliness. This study uses archival primary sources (including interviews, published materials/doctrines, propaganda, websites and books) and secondary sources to answer the research question. Given the importance of language in constructing identity, this research will conduct a discourse/content analysis of the aforementioned materials in Arabic and English, to analyze and problematize the identity discourse of the conflicting groups and outline where they place 'Syria' in their ideologies. Analyzing these sources offers an important window into the identity dimension of the Syrian crisis, shedding light on a relatively unexplored area of research.

This research is divided into four chapters. Following the introduction, the first chapter, "A Critical Cosmopolitan Postcolonial Approach to Identity," will outline the research's theoretical framework. Through problematizing primordial/essentialist approaches to questions of identity, ethnicity and race, the research will outline an alternative critical post-colonial cosmopolitan framework of analysis. Such a framework recognizes the complexity of how identities are imagined, while addressing the role colonialism has played in transforming this process. The second chapter, "A Fragile History of National Identity-Building," will provide a historical survey of the country's process of identity building. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the top-down and exclusionary process by which Syrian national identity has been imagined. In so doing, it will outline the debates regarding identity and modernity, which emerged within Ottoman territory in the 1860s in light of the Empire's decline, discuss the fall of the Empire and subsequent French colonialism, and outline the crisis of identity-building following independence. The third chapter, "From Syrian Spring to Proxy/Civil War," will discuss the Syrian uprising within the context of the Arab Spring. It will demonstrate how the Syrian Uprising was a grassroots attempt to bring an inclusive meaning to 'Syrianism', consistent with the country's boundaries and reflective of its ethnic and religious cosmopolitanism. Furthermore, the chapter will discuss how the once peaceful uprising

³ Hamid Dabashi, *Iran without Borders: Towards a Critique of the Post-Colonial Nation* (London, UK: Verso Books, 2016) and Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Post-colonialism* (New York, USA: Zed Books, 2012).

transformed into a proxy war, with various competing groups on the ground. The fourth chapter, "Syria in the Eyes of the Contending Groups," will examine a sample of different groups operating in the country, including many militant Islamists, the Assad regime and Kurdish forces. Given that there are hundreds of armed groups in the country, the selected sample will provide a representative overview, capturing the diversity and complexity of the conflicting groups. Through analyzing their published materials, interviews, and websites, the research will analyze what Syria means in the eyes of the contending groups. The conclusion will summarize the arguments and shed light on the findings. It will highlight that protestors throughout the Syrian uprising were driven by cosmopolitan notions of identity, away from the entrapment of Islamist, nationalist or third-world socialist ideologies. Contrary to this, the various combatant groups showed no commitment to a cosmopolitan Syrian identity, but are rather driven by exclusionary counterrevolutionary or limited notions of identity.

Chapter 1

A CRITICAL COSMOPOLITAN POSTCOLONIAL APPROACH TO IDENTITY

1.0 Introduction

The concept of identity occupies a central role in the field of political science, cutting through its various subfields and spurring considerable debate about the role it plays in politics. For example, scholars in the field of Canadian politics “have devoted much research to the identity politics of race, gender and sexuality.”⁴ In the field of international relations, “the idea of state identity is at the heart of constructivist critiques of realism and analyses of state sovereignty.”⁵ In the field of comparative politics, “identity plays a central role in research on nationalism and ethnic conflict.”⁶ Moreover, identity has been discussed primarily through the binary of primordial and constructivist approaches. This chapter will problematize primordial and essentialist approaches and will employ an alternative critical post-colonial cosmopolitan framework of analysis, as articulated by Hamid Dabashi.⁷ Such perspective defines identity as being multilayered, shaped by a wide variety of factors such as ethnicity, gender, economic status, politics, age etc.⁸ It stresses identities are constructed, fluid and dynamic. They are also hybrids, in that they are shaped by centuries of cosmopolitan human interactions and exchanges, which allow for the rise of shared experiences, culture, arts, literature, poetry etc. Through this lens of analysis, the research will examine the complex process in which Syria’s national identity has been constructed, shaped, and altered in light of the ongoing crisis in the country.

1.1 Primordial/Essentialist Approaches to Identity

Primordial perspectives assert that ethnic groups and nations are rooted in “human evolutionary psychology”, where they have prehistoric origin and “therefore are unlikely to be superseded.”⁹ Ethnic and national memberships are argued to be fixed and determined at birth

⁴ James Fearon “What Is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?” *Stanford University* (1999): 1.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Dabashi, *Iran without Borders*.

⁸ Dabashi, *Iran without Borders* and Dabashi, *The Arab Spring*.

⁹ Eric Kaufmann, “Primordialists and Constructionists: A Typology of Theories of Religion.” *Religion, Brain and Behavior*, Vol. 2 Iss. 2 (2012).

and are based on deep attachments to a group, culture or religion.¹⁰ Pierre van den Berghe, a proponent of such primordial approach, asserts that human behaviour has evolved along three interrelated levels.¹¹ Those are genetic, ecological and cultural. The first stresses that humans have evolved biologically “through natural selection.”¹² The second stresses that humans “evolved in adaptive response to a multitude of environmental conditions.”¹³ The third is rooted in the idea that “culture is part of our environment, but it differs from the rest of it in being created and transmitted by our own species according to mechanisms fundamentally different from genetic natural selection.”¹⁴ These three levels are intertwined and allow ethnic and national bonds to emerge and persist. He reasons that genes “are selected through environmental pressures, and they impose limits on culture. Culture grows out of biological evolution and responds to multiple environmental forces, but it also shapes the ecology and therefore the biological evolution of our entire planet.”¹⁵ Consistent with this approach, a body of literature has emerged describing Middle Eastern identity politics through the prism of sectarianism. This “narrative is often underpinned by a primordial understanding of political identity”, where religious sects and sectarianism are described in such terms.¹⁶ For example, in his analysis of the complexity of Iraqi politics, Fanar Haddad asserts that Sunni-Shia’ conflict emerged out of primordial identities rooted in a history of animosity.¹⁷ Similarly, in his analysis of the fragility of state making in Iraq, Khalil Osman argues that centuries of “inter-communal [Sunni-Shia’] conflict provided a reservoir of past seminal experiences, events, mass sufferings and sometimes festering emotional wounds that burdened and became sacred in collective secret memories.”¹⁸ This, he reasons, fostered the persistence of sectarian tensions in the country. In the case of Syria, similar arguments have emerged explaining the Syrian crisis from this prism of deeply rooted sectarian hatred. For example, Genevieve Abdo argues that the Syrian crisis has reawakened sectarian tensions in the country, which have been deeply rooted in a history of hatred among the different groups.¹⁹ The battle over Syria, from her perspective,

¹⁰ Enoch Wan and Mark Vanderwerf “A Review of the Literature on Ethnicity, National Identity and Related Missiological Studies” *Global Missiology*, 2009.

¹¹ Van den Berghe, *The Ethnic Phenomenon* (United States: Greenwood Press, 1987), 2.

¹² *Ibid*, 3.

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 3-7.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁶ Christopher Philips, “Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria” *Third World Quarterly* Vol. 36, Iss. 2 (2015): 357.

¹⁷ Johan Franzén, “Review of Haddad Fanar, Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* Vol 44, Iss 3 (2012), 589-592.

¹⁸ Khalil Osman, *Sectarianism in Iraq: the making of state and nation since 1920*. (New York, USA: Routledge 2015), 59-61.

¹⁹ Genevieve Abdo “Salafists and Sectarianism: Twitter and Communal Conflict in the Middle East” *Centre for Middle Eastern Policy*, 2015, discussed in Philips, “Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria”.

is nothing more than a continuation of a historically rooted sectarian conflict.²⁰ She suggests that uprising in Syria was not driven by socio-economic and political reasons, but rather by deeply rooted sectarian tensions.

Similarly, there are a number of theories, which account for identity through the prism of civilizational essentialism. This approach is associated with Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis. Such individuals divide the world along different civilizations, each bounded exclusively by deeply rooted identities, specific to their civilization. This is most clearly articulated in Samuel Huntington's infamous *Clash of Civilizations*, where he argues the world is divided between "Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African civilizations."²¹ Such civilizations, he argues, are differentiated "from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and, most importantly religion."²² Civilizational "identities will be increasingly important in the future, and the world will be shaped in large measure by the interactions among the aforementioned civilizations", according to Huntington.²³ Conflict "along the fault lines separating civilizations", is therefore inevitable.²⁴ Huntington writes this is especially the case between Islamic and Western civilizations, given their 1300 years of animosity. He suggests that the West is currently at the "peak of power" and western modernity is dominant "in relation to other civilizations."²⁵ He stresses, because of this, "the central axis of world politics in the future is likely to be the conflict between 'the West and the Rest' and the responses of non-Western civilizations to Western power and values."²⁶ In the case of the Middle East, Huntington argues that while "in Islam, God is Caesar," in the West "God and Caesar, church and state, spiritual and temporal authority have been a prevailing dualism."²⁷ Because of this, "the underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and obsessed with the inferiority of their power."²⁸ Such a

²⁰ Abdo "Salafists and Sectarianism: Twitter and Communal Conflict in the Middle East".

²¹ Samuel Huntington "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.72, No. 3 (1993): 25.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, 39.

²⁶ Ibid, 41.

²⁷ Samuel Huntington. *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the Modern World* (New York, USA: Simon & Schuster, 1996) discussed in Mojtava Mahdavi, "Muslims and Modernities: From Islamism to Post-Islamism" *Religious Studies and Theology*, Vol.32, No. 1 (2013).

²⁸ Ibid.

perspective, as will be argued, reduces Middle East identity to a singular frame, essentializing Islam as a static cultural norm.²⁹

Likewise, Bernard Lewis asserts that in the last two centuries, tension between Islam and secular forces has been central to the identity-politics of the Middle East.³⁰ The first consists of those who seek a return to Islam as a remedy for political ills and as a response to the appeal of Western culture.³¹ The latter consists of those in favour of Western values.³² Secular nationalists, he writes, have been unable to influence Muslims for “they never corresponded to the deeper instincts of the Muslim masses, which found an outlet in programs and organizations of a different kind – led by religious leaders and formulated in religious language and aspiration.”³³ In his article, “The Return of Islam”, Lewis stresses the universality of religion is an important factor “in the lives of the Muslim peoples.”³⁴ For centuries, “religion and state had been intertwined in Islam, and that remained the case today.”³⁵ In other words, Islam “was the state, and the identity of religion and government is indelibly stamped on the memories and awareness of the faithful from their own sacred writings, history, and experience.”³⁶ Zachary Lockman asserts that Lewis stresses “Muslims cannot accept the Western notion of the separation of religion and state.”³⁷ That is because “Islam is not conceived as a religion in the limited Western sense but as a community, a loyalty, a way of life – and that Islamic community is still recovering from the traumatic era when Muslim governments and empires were overthrown and Muslim people forcibly subjected to alien, infidel rule.”³⁸ In his analysis of Lewis’s work, Lockman argues that Lewis regards Islam as a more or less unchanging and monolithic civilization which continues to govern the minds of its adherents” who are brought together by a sense of “religious solidarity.”³⁹ While Lewis regards Western civilization as being modern, secular and rational, Muslims are presented as a collectivity surfing through darkness, struggling in their resistance to the superiority of Western modernity. The re-emergence of Islam, according to Lewis, stems from a fragile Muslim psyche “gravely damaged by its

²⁹ Mahdavi, “Muslims and Modernities: From Islamism to Post-Islamism”.

³⁰ Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1993) 110-115.

³¹ Bernard Lewis, *The End of Modern History in the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9-10.

³² Lewis, *The End of Modern History in the Middle East*, 8.

³³ Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³⁴ Bernard Lewis “The Return of Islam” *Commentary* (1976).

³⁵ Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism*, 174, discussing Bernard Lewis “The Return of Islam” *Commentary* (1976).

³⁶ *Ibid*, 170-172.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 175.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 174.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 176 and 216.

encounters with Western modernity”⁴⁰ As nicely summarized by Lockman, according to Lewis, contemporary problems in the Middle East are not caused by what the “West might have done or were doing; it was due largely or even solely to a profound defect in Islamic civilization, a wound which remained unhealed and indeed could not really heal unless, apparently, Muslims stopped being Muslims.”⁴¹

Edward Said critiques such essentialist perspectives stressing that they reductively manufacture “unifying rubrics like The West or Islam”, inventing “collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse.”⁴² In a 2003 lecture, Said adds that both Lewis and Huntington “define Islamic civilization strictly through an us versus them frame, as “if what most matters about [such civilization] is its supposed anti-Westernism.”⁴³ Similarly, Hamid Dabashi argues that such perspectives are rooted in outdated Orientalist regimes of knowledge that underestimates the role colonialism has played in shaping the process in which post-colonial identities have been imagined.⁴⁴ He adds that Orientalists such as Huntington and Lewis box Middle Eastern identity politics into a singular explanatory frame, reducing the complexity of identity to an exclusive emphasis on religion.⁴⁵ Socio-economic and political factors (such as gender, class, politics, race etc.) are completely dismissed and not taken into consideration. Furthermore, Lewis’s assertion that the region’s contemporary crisis stems from tensions between a modern progressive Western civilization and a backward Islamic civilization (one that is resistant to and incapable of modernizing) confines modernity to a linear teleological path, only attainable through Western values.⁴⁶ This reasserts Middle Eastern exceptionalism as a mode of thought, suggesting that the region is immune from modernizing and democratizing through “reinterpreting local tradition.”⁴⁷ Approaches that confine identity politics within the prism of sectarianism Dabashi writes, also fail to take into account the complexity of the ways in which identities are constructed. They provide simplistic explanations, based on notions of primordial rivalries, presenting Sunni and Shia’ sects as monolithic

⁴⁰ Ibid, 176.

⁴¹ Ibid, 118.

⁴² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, USA: Pantheon, 1978) and Edward Said “Orientalism” *Counterpunch Commentary*, 2003.

⁴³ Edward Said, and Jhally Sut. *The Myth of The Clash of Civilizations: Professor Edward Said In Lecture*. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2002.

⁴⁴ Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Post-colonialism*.

⁴⁵ Mojtaba Mahdavi “Introduction: East Meets the West? The Unfinished Project of Contemporary Social Movements in the Middle East and Beyond” *Journal of Sociology of Islam*, Vol.2, No. 3-4 (2014): 104.

⁴⁶ Edmund Burke III “Orientalism and World History: Representing Middle Eastern Nationalism and Islamism in the Twentieth Century” *Journal of Theory & Society*, Vol. 27, Iss. 4 (1998).

⁴⁷ Mojtaba Mahdavi and Andy Knight, *Towards the Dignity of Difference? : Neither 'End of History' nor 'Clash of Civilizations'* (United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 5.

historically continuous social units that operate collectively.⁴⁸ People, according to such view, are born into either of these social units, and function in accordance with their respective sectarian identities. Mojtaba Mahdavi challenges such view, arguing that it reduces identity politics of the region into a singular frame, failing to “account for the complex network of economic and political factors in international relations.”⁴⁹ He points out that there is nothing primordial/essentialist about the conflicts in the Middle East. What “we have is a politicization of sect/religion in the context of contemporary conflict in the region, which leads to violent politicization of sectarianism not the other way around.”⁵⁰ As will be demonstrated, Dabashi’s approach falsifies such perspectives by demonstrating the cosmopolitan richness of the Middle East, which he describes beyond the confinement of primordial/essentialist binary.⁵¹ This cosmopolitanism has been shadowed by post-colonial ideological formations, but has surfaced through the Arab Spring movements.

1.2 *Postcolonial Cosmopolitan Perspective*

Given the aforementioned Orientalist disposition of primordial/essentialist approaches, in this section, the research will outline an alternative view, i.e. a critical cosmopolitan post-colonial perspective that stresses the role colonialism has played in influencing and even shaping identity-politics in the context of the Middle East.

The term post-colonialism is an umbrella term, used to describe a set of literatures that sheds light on political, economic and social experiences and consequences faced by colonized societies.⁵² Such literature aims to challenge the euro-centric character of fields such as political science, anthropology, sociology and history, and to bring in the voices of the subaltern into academia.⁵³ Questions of identity have been central to discussions within the post-colonial literature. For example, in his ground-breaking book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said sheds light on the way in which European colonialists articulated Eastern societies.⁵⁴ The East was presented as inferior, lacking, incompatible with modernity. It was sexualized and exoticized. He argues

⁴⁸ Ibrahim Marashi, “Reconceptualising Sectarianism in the Middle East and Asia” *California State University* 2014.

⁴⁹ Mojtaba Mahdavi, “Post-Revolutionary Iran: Resisting Global and Regional Hegemony” in *The International Relations of the Contemporary Middle East*, edited Tareq Ismael and Glenn Perry (Florence, GB: Routledge, 2013), 163.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Post-colonialism*.

⁵² The term ‘post-colonialism’ itself has been challenged by a number of scholars for implying that we are in a period of ‘post’ or after colonialism. Loomba stresses that this definition fails to capture the ‘neo’ continuation of the colonial legacies, embodied in the inherited institutions and enforced social, political, and economic changes. Other critics point to the fact that such a broad term boxes various conflicting approaches as being unitary and consistent. For more on this discussion see: Ania Loomba. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*.

⁵³ Kanu, Yatta. *Curriculum as Cultural Practices: Postcolonial Imagination*. University of Toronto Press: Toronto, Canada (2009).

⁵⁴ Said, *Orientalism*.

that the way in which the West articulated the East allowed for the rise of a collective European identity, defined in relation to the inferior East. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha develops the “concept of hybridity from literary and cultural theory to describe the construction of culture and identity within conditions of colonial antagonism and inequity.”⁵⁵ For Bhabha, “hybridity is the process by which the colonial governing authority undertakes to translate the identity of the colonised (the other) within a singular universal framework, but then fails producing something familiar but new.”⁵⁶ According to this perspective, post-colonial identity reflects a mixture of local tradition and influences, which results in the emergence of a new cosmopolitan cultural form. In *Colonialism/ Postcolonialism*, Ania Loomba stresses the role colonial regimes have played in manipulating and creating “racial, ethnic, tribal and caste groups [which] are social constructions that have served to oppress colonial subjects. The persistence of these structures influenced the way in which the post-colonial identity formation process has been shaped.”⁵⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak takes a more deconstructionist approach in her analysis of post-colonial identity.⁵⁸ She questions the ways in which identities are constructed and used to justify oppression. More specifically, she is critical of the ways in which post-colonial identities have been shaped by anti-colonial discourses, asserting that this often results in the rise of oppressive and exclusionary cultural conservatism.⁵⁹ Collectively, post-colonial scholarship rejects primordial/essentialist theories, while accepting some of constructivism’s basic assumptions.⁶⁰ For example, a post-colonial approach recognizes that identities are fluid and are shaped by political, economic and social processes and highlights the role political interests play in influencing the ways in which national identities are forged.

⁵⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, UK: Routledge, 2004).

⁵⁶ Paul Meredith, “Hybridity in the Third Space” *Massey University*, 1998.

⁵⁷ Ania Loomba. *Colonialism/ Postcolonialism*. Third Edition (Routledge: Milton Park, USA, 2015).

⁵⁸ Gayatri C. Spivak et al. *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Constructivist approaches to identity assert that ‘nations’ and ‘ethnic groups’ are relatively modern creations. They are not fixed, but are rather fluid and that they develop and evolve over time. This perspective stresses that national identities are influenced by historical processes and are constructed in particular ways for political or economic reasons. Benedict Anderson defines the ‘nation’ as an imagined community. Imagined, because although people of the collectivity “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them”, yet in their minds “lives the image of their communion.” Such communities are typically limited to specific boundaries and beyond them, others exist. Furthermore, they are communities because nations are conceived by deep “horizontal comradeship” and solidarity. Anderson argues, “nationalism invents nations where they do not exist.” This perspective therefore, rejects notions of nationhood “built on biological substrate” such as ethnicity, race or genetics. Hence, a constructivist approach is concerned with tracing the imagination process. It stresses that identities are fluid and continuously changing. They are affected by various historical, social, political and economic processes, which affect and reinforce the production and reproduction of everyday identities. While constructivist approaches can provide important insight into understanding how national identities form, they nevertheless fail to elaborate on the role colonialism has played in affecting this process. Such perspectives are traditionally centred on European experiences, rather on the experiences of the colonized. For more see - Roger Brubaker. *Ground for Difference* (Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 2015), Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections in the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, UK: Verso Publishing, 1983) and Eric Kaufmann, “Primordialists and Constructionists: A Typology of Theories of Religion.” *Religion, Brain and Behavior*, Vol. 2 Iss. 2 (2012).

Given the diversity of post-colonial literature, this research will specifically rely on Hamid Dabashi's cosmopolitan perspective on nations, state and identities.⁶¹ This approach stresses that identities are fluid, dynamic, and multilayered/multiple. It challenges reductionist tendencies of primordial and/or essentialist approaches, which confine identity into singular frames based on factors such as religion, as demonstrated earlier. While religion certainly does play a role in influencing one's identity, it is only one among many different factors. Religion itself is represented by many diverse voices and is not static; it evolves and changes overtime. In addition, socio-political factors such as politics, gender, race, class shape our identity. Through this frame of analysis, the research will analyze how Syria's national identity has been imagined over time, since coming into existence as a post-colonial modern nation-state.

Repressed Cosmopolitanism

Hamid Dabashi articulates what he calls a cosmopolitan perspective on nations and identity, to capture the interconnectedness of Middle Eastern societies and demonstrate how cosmopolitanism has been suppressed over the years by exclusionary projects, imposed by the post-colonial state. In his book, *Iran with Borders*, Dabashi argues that in order to understand this cosmopolitan interconnectedness, it is important to dissect post-colonial societies, beyond "their current manufactured borders."⁶² The Middle East, he writes, "inherited a colonial geography", defined by contradictions; it embodies the fate of post-colonial nations "determined by turbulent force entirely outside the purview of any national consciousness, to the degree that this consciousness remains decidedly nativist, domestic, and falsely localized, against the grain of its transitional, transregional and global origin."⁶³

Cosmopolitanism refers to the political, social and economic interconnectedness of different communities, which is embedded in a history of human interactions and "variety of imperial experiences", ranging from the Umayyad to Abbasid to Ottoman to contemporary eras.⁶⁴ Such interactions were not exclusively regional, but extended beyond the scope of the Middle East. For thousands of years, people moved from one region to another, sharing ideas, learning from each other and influencing one another. This is manifested in the arts and literature, and expressed through poetry, music and architecture.⁶⁵ The complex and long

⁶¹ Hamid Dabashi, *Iran without Borders: Towards a Critique of the Post-Colonial Nation* (London, UK: Verso Books, 2016).

⁶² Dabashi, *Iran without Borders: Towards a Critique of the Post-Colonial Nation*.

⁶³ Ibid, 233.

⁶⁴ Dabashi, *The Arab Spring*, 115-116.

⁶⁵ Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York, USA: New Press, 2007).

history of human interactions has allowed for the emergence of shared experiences that are limitless and not confined to contemporary post-colonial borders.

In other words, cosmopolitan worldliness is a fluid, dynamic, multi-layered and pluralistic culture that emerges out of a complex history of human interactions and movements.⁶⁶ Dabashi stresses one can be part of a nation and appreciate this inclusive multi-layered cosmopolitanism; the two are not mutually exclusive. In his book, *Being a Muslim in the World*, Dabashi suggests that within the context of the Middle East, this culture is cosmopolitan in the sense that it combines different traditions and transcends geographic, racial and ethnic divides.⁶⁷ Islamic expansion since the seventh century allowed for a multicultural exposure and exchanges between “Arab, Iranian, Indian, and even Chinese and Greek traditions.”⁶⁸ Such exchanges enabled the rise of “specific kind of urban intellectuals, comfortable and conversant in a number of cultural traditions.”⁶⁹ Their interaction allowed for emergence of shared experiences and history, manifested in *Adab* [literarily] humanism, poetry and folkloric imagination. It resulted in the imagination of a cosmopolitan culture, “far beyond the absolutist claims of any particular faith” and extending beyond the confinement of geographic boundaries.⁷⁰ This “expansive geographical imagination that included Muslim lands, but was not limited to them, is the locus classicus of Muslim consciousness and worldliness.”⁷¹

The post-colonial experience, according to Dabashi, has denied people their cosmopolitan identity formation.⁷² This resulted in the rise of ideological forms of defiance that “imprisoned the fate of peoples of the “Middle East within frames of reference that confine and control their liberation movements.”⁷³ The nation itself became “trapped within its manufactured postcolonial borders” and suppressed by “the systematic function of violence” in the state.⁷⁴ Therefore, Dabashi argues that it is necessary to “map out a typography of the nation beyond its colonially imposed frontiers”, distinguishing between the nation and the state.⁷⁵ This “liberates the nation from its fixed cartography of domination, in which domestic tyranny feeds on a fear of foreign domination.”⁷⁶ He concludes that the nation “remembers and reauthorizes

⁶⁶ Hamid Dabashi. *Being a Muslim in the World*, (New York, USA: Palgrave MacMillian, 2013).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Dabashi, *Iran without Borders*, 233.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 233.

its transnational, cosmopolitan origin and seeks to defy the self-enclosed barbarity of domestic tyranny and imperial domination, which have fed on each other to perpetuate a cycle of state violence and national disenfranchisement.”⁷⁷

Postcolonial Identity

Dabashi argues that postcolonial nations articulate themselves in “conversation or contestation” with colonialism.⁷⁸ The postcolonial “subject, which was none other than the colonial subject multiplied by the illusion of emancipation, was thus released into the force field of that very same colonial history on a wild goose chase of ideological certainty before and after political convictions.”⁷⁹ Through this goose-chase, the cosmopolitan worldliness became “overridden and camouflaged by heavy ideological autonormativity.”⁸⁰ This ideological autonormativity is embodied in three ideological formations of anti-colonial nationalism, Third World socialism, and Islamism, which have dominated the politics of the Middle East.⁸¹ Such formations were invented in “combative conversation against a colonial modernity.”⁸² They emerged as a byproduct or side effect of decades of confrontation and contestation with European colonialism and colonial modernity.⁸³ They were “only transient, politically expedient manifestations of the cosmopolitan worldliness.”⁸⁴

Thus, the aforementioned ideological formations were reactionary and did not reflect or capture the cosmopolitanism worldliness of the Middle East, but rather reflected a response to the colonially imposed political, economic, geographic and social changes. These formations dominated identity-politics of the post-colonial Middle Eastern state, as ruling elites deployed them in order to legitimize their positions. The result was the formation of state-sponsored identities that are exclusionary and monolithic. As will be argued in the next section (and at length in Chapter 3), Dabashi stresses that the Arab Spring was an attempt by the people of the Middle East to challenge the entrapment of these ideologies, which have dominated the “political geography for decades”, and seek an alternative locally produced political system that retrieves this cosmopolitan worldliness.⁸⁵

The Arab Spring: the End of Post-Colonialism?

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 195.

⁷⁹ Dabashi, *The Arab Spring*, xxi.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 115-116.

⁸¹ Dabashi, *Iran without Borders*, 233.

⁸² Ibid, 195.

⁸³ Hamid Dabashi, *The Rebirth of a Nation*. (USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 195.

⁸⁴ Dabashi, *Iran without Borders*, 10.

⁸⁵ Dabashi, *The Arab Spring*, xx.

Dabashi stresses that cosmopolitanism “always existed in multivariate forms, but it becomes more evident in moment of large-scale social crisis – such as coups, revolutions etc. – when the nation retrieves and reactivates its aesthetic intuition of transcendence. This is a retrieval of the multiple worlds, which always existed, but been shadowed” by dominance of the aforementioned ideological formations.⁸⁶ The Arab Spring was a “sporadic but consistent expression of this cosmopolitanism.”⁸⁷ It posed “serious challenges to division within Islamic and among racial (Arab, Turks, Iranians), ethnic (Kurds, Baluchs, etc.) or sectarian (Sunni and Shi’i in particular) agitating and discrediting them.”⁸⁸ The revolutions “are collective acts of overcoming. They are crafting new identities, forging new solidities, both within and without the Islam and the West binary – overcoming once and for all the thick (material and moral) colonial divide.”⁸⁹

The cosmopolitanism can be seen through the rhetoric of the protestors, who represented diverse segments of the population, from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, who collectively called for freedom, social justice and dignity.⁹⁰ The Arab Spring represented a delayed defiance that has built up momentum throughout decades of oppression.⁹¹ The revolutions, therefore, aimed to “restore a repressed and denied cosmopolitan culture, rejecting not just the “inherited colonial oppression”, but exclusionary and “oppressive post-colonial ideologies.”⁹²

In summary, Dabashi is advocating a critical cosmopolitan approach with elements of critical decoloniality. This approach is critical of the exhausted and apologetic aforementioned anti-colonial ideological dichotomies, which dominated identity-politics of the region at the expense of suppressing the cosmopolitanism of the nation. The Arab Spring, according to Dabashi, signals a “paradigm shift” away from these exhausted dichotomies.⁹³ It “put an end to politics of despair” and ideological absolutism.⁹⁴ The Arab Spring revolutions, he argues, are post-ideological, “meaning that they are no longer fighting according to terms dictated by their

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid, xix.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Dabashi, *The Arab Spring*, xix.

⁹³ Ibid, 5-10.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 11.

condition of coloniality, codenamed post-colonial.”⁹⁵ Such formations “fetishized colonialism” and became an important tool for authoritarian leader to “distort the cosmopolitanism.”⁹⁶

1.3 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the question of identity from a critical post-colonial cosmopolitan perspective, challenging primordial/essentialist approaches, which simplify politics of the region to notions of deeply embedded historical hatred, manifested in sectarian divisions. Various religious and ethnic groups are presented as unitary primordial blocs that function collectively and engage in an endless cycles of conflict among one another. In the case of Syria, such theories assert that the conflict is driven by such sectarian tensions; post-colonial politics and the 2011 uprisings are explained through the prism of Sunni desire to escape the Shi’ite crescent, while international intervention in the country is held to reflect this pattern. Such a lens orientalises Middle Eastern societies as being unexplainable outside the prism of religion, reducing the complexity of the region’s geo-politics and failing to recognize the role colonialism has played in leaving behind fragile states, struggling to define themselves in a post-colonial era. A post-colonial cosmopolitan approach allows for the separation between nation and state, and accounts for the ways in which nations are manufactured by elites who control the state in ways that serves their particular interests. Cosmopolitanism sheds light on centuries of human interactions and exchanges, which brought people together, allowing for the rise of distinctive cultures united by arts and literature. Through this perspective, we could highlight the ways in which politics has been shaped by the colonial legacy, demonstrating how the reactionary anti-colonial ideologies became merely a way to reinforce oppression and define the nation away from its cosmopolitanism disposition.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 10.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Chapter 2

A FRAGILE HISTORY OF NATIONAL IDENTITY-BUILDING

2.0 Introduction

In the 1920s, the French and British carved Syria out of former Ottoman territory, drawing artificial borders and combining diverse groups of people into this cosmopolitan entity.⁹⁷ The Syria that resulted therefore, did not reflect any historical, social or political realities, but rather the will of the colonizing power.⁹⁸ This chapter will historicize the process of Syria's national identity-formation. In so doing, it will shed light on important factors, both internal and external, that influenced and shaped the ways in which Syrianism has been defined. The purpose of this chapter is to problematize this process and demonstrate how the identity crisis of modern Syria has been driven by state-sponsored autocratic politics of identity, which have been shaped by exclusionary ideological dichotomies that emerged in the immediate post-colonial period.

This chapter will be divided into four subsections discussing critical periods in the history of the country's national identity formation process. The first will outline the debate, which emerged within Ottoman territory in the 1860s. Many thinkers during this period reflected on questions of modernity and identity, hoping to address and reverse the Empire's rapid decline. Within this context, we see the emergence of critical Islamic thinkers whose ideas continue to influence movements in Syria and across the Middle East. The second will discuss the fall of the Ottoman Empire and subsequent French colonialism. During this period, the French essentially carved modern Syria out of Ottoman territory and implemented a divide and rule system of governance obscuring the formation of a national identity, defined to geographic Syria. The third will analyze the crisis in national identity building, since the country gained independence. The fourth will discuss the rise of the Assad dynasty and its identity-building initiatives. It will demonstrate how the regime enforced an artificial exclusionary identity, defining the nation through Ba'athist discourse, centred on the President's cult of personality.

⁹⁷ Eyal Zisser, "Who's Afraid of Syrian Nationalism? National and State Identity in Syria" *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No.2, (2006): 183.

⁹⁸ Eugene Rogan, "The Emergence of the Middle East into the Modern State System" in *International Relations of the Middle East*. Edited by Tareq Ismael and Glenn Perry (Florence, KY: Taylor and Francis 2013), 37.

2.1 *The Last Decades of the Ottoman Empire*

The Empire's Decline and Search for Modernity

From approximately the years 1299 to 1923, the Ottoman Empire ruled most of the Middle East and at its height stretched geographically from the Maghreb region to al-Hijaz and the Levant. Arab lands were provinces of a common Ottoman state, with no distinct boundaries.⁹⁹ Present-day Syria was part of what was known as the *Bilad Al-Sham* region, which also consisted of Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and parts of Iraq.¹⁰⁰ People across the Arab world, including Syria, identified with the larger Empire despite their local allegiances.¹⁰¹ There was no Syria, Jordan, or Palestine in the sense of nation-states, but rather provinces or *pashaliqs* that centered on ancient cities, such as Damascus and Aleppo.¹⁰² Administratively, the Ottoman Empire implemented the *Millet System* (*millet* derives from Arabic meaning nation), which guaranteed state protection of the different groups within the Empire and their freedom of religion.¹⁰³ It also permitted a considerable level of self-governance to the various ethnic and religious groups within the Empire.¹⁰⁴ Fatih Ozturk asserts that communities “were seen in the eyes of the [Ottoman] State not on the basis of ethnicity or language, but religion.”¹⁰⁵ The system also permitted freedom of mobility, as inhabitants “of the various parts of the Empire could move without feeling or being considered alien from one province to the next.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, the decentralization permitted by the *Millet* system catered to the Empire’s cosmopolitan nature, and allowed different communities to retain and develop localized identities; people identified as Ottoman subjects, but also with the religious or ethnic community to which they belonged and/or the “city or village where they paid their taxes.”¹⁰⁷

Since 1699, the Ottoman Empire had gradually declined politically, militarily and economically. In the late 1800s, after a number of military defeats and political crisis, the

⁹⁹ Raymond Hinebusch, “The Middle East in the World Hierarchy: Imperialism and Resistance” *Journal of International Relations*, Vol.14, No.2 (2011).

¹⁰⁰ Eugene Rogan, “The Emergence of the Middle East into the Modern State System”, 37.

¹⁰¹ William Haddad, and Rostam-Kolay Jasamin, “Imperialism and its Manifestations in the Middle East” in *International Relations of the Middle East*. Edited by Tareq Ismael and Glenn Perry (Florence, KY: Taylor and Francis 2013).

¹⁰² William Polk, “Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad” *The Atlantic*, 2013.

¹⁰³ Fatih Ozturk, “The Ottoman Millet System” in *Essays in Turkish and Comparative Law*. Edited by Fatih Ozturk (Istanbul, Turkey: Filiz Kitabevi, 2013), 71.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 74.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 72.

¹⁰⁶ Polk, “Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad.”

¹⁰⁷ Ozturk, “The Ottoman Millet System”, 72-74.

Empire implemented as series of reforms, known as the *Tanzimat*, hoping to curtail this decline.¹⁰⁸ The reforms came too late, however, as the Empire's future was in clear jeopardy. Within this context, internal debates among the Muslim Salafi reformers emerged, as they contemplated questions of identity, modernity and the future of the Empire.¹⁰⁹ As argued by Dabashi, when examining the works of these thinkers, it is necessary to historicize the context from which they emerged.¹¹⁰ At a time when the Muslim *Umma* was declining, Salafism emerged in response to European colonialism, as thinkers reflected on questions of modernity and identity from an alternative Islamic perspective, stressing that Islam is an inseparable component of Arab identity.¹¹¹ They challenged both Western intellectual secularism and traditional Ulamas.¹¹² They sought to address these complex questions through reinterpreting local tradition and providing a framework for reform away from the traditionalist - secular binary.¹¹³ Traditionalism, they saw, as reflecting a static conservatism with a "non-modern vision of the world", while secular intellectualism was rooted in Western orientalist visions, failing to provide "a satisfactory tie to the cultural foundations of the Muslim intellectual identity."¹¹⁴ Within this context, Muslim reformers were interested in studying European political, military and economic advancements, while at the same time challenging notions that being civilized was tied to a particular race and religion.¹¹⁵ They were not interested in following a European path of modernity, but were rather interested in reforming the waning Ottoman state, based on the idea of a pan-Islamic identity.¹¹⁶ In other words, they were not interested in consuming Western ideals of modernity, but challenged such ideas in light of their religious and cultural contexts, while attempting to trace reasons for Western advancements.¹¹⁷ Many of these thinkers believed that modernity was compatible with Islam, a religion they viewed as a source of civilization, identity, ethics and culture.

¹⁰⁸ Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War In the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

¹⁰⁹ Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York, USA: Columbia University Press: 2007), 4-8.

¹¹⁰ Dabashi, *Iran without Borders*.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 232.

¹¹² John Esposito and John Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam* (New York, USA: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 17-18.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 17.

¹¹⁵ Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia*, 4-8.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹¹⁷ Cemil Aydin points out, the "emergence of the idea of a "universal West" in non-western intellectual histories emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century, when the "intellectual elite began to conceptualize a holistic image of Europe as a model for reform" of the waning Ottoman Empire. However, European colonialism, which was premised on notions of Western superiority, shattered the legitimacy of the discourse around Western modernity. This triggered an alternative search by the Ottoman elites who wanted to challenge such ideas, and reform the Empire through reinterpreting local tradition. For more on this, see: Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia*.

Ibid.

The most influential of these reformers is Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897), who advocated what John Esposito calls Islamic Modernism, a “synthesis of modern Western and Islamic intellectual traditions.”¹¹⁸ Al-Afghani, who has also been described as the father of “Muslim nationalism,”¹¹⁹ travelled “across the Muslim world, calling for the creation of Pan-Islamic unity in opposition to Western imperialism” calling for “a modern-style rationalist interpretation of Islam.”¹²⁰ He called upon “Muslims to resist imperialism, seek political liberation and undertake an intellectual reawakening rooted in a return to Islam.”¹²¹ Inspired by al-Afghani, other Islamic modernists such as Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) and Ismael Gasprinski (1851-1914) worked to “develop programs of modern and authentically Islamic education and interpretations” in the late nineteenth century.¹²² Following the death of these major figures, Islamic modernism developed “in two different and contradictory directions.”¹²³ The first, shaped by Rasheed Rida (1865-1935), emphasized and evolved through a traditionalist direction. The second, influenced by Qasim Amin (1863-1908), “stressed the modern element of this [Islamic modernism]” essentially evolving into secular intellectualism.¹²⁴

Within this context, *Salafi* thought emerged in the Middle East during the early 1900s.¹²⁵ The term *Salafism* “in modern times is ambiguous and in many ways confusing.”¹²⁶ Many *Salafis* themselves “are not entirely clear as to what *Salafism* entails, assuming that it is simply to follow the Quran and Sunnah [the Tradition of Prophet Mohamad] — a problematic definition since it implies that others do not.”¹²⁷ *Salafism* is not, as is often argued, a “movement or an organization with a structural hierarchy, and does not operate under the leadership of a particular figure in a highly structured organization.”¹²⁸ Neither is it a “separate school of thought like Hanbalism, Hanafism, Shafi’ism and Malikism in the Sunni schools of *fiqh*.”¹²⁹ Rather, as defined by Mohamed Bin Ali, it is a “religious inclination or tendency towards a set of

¹¹⁸ Esposito and Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, 18.

¹¹⁹ John Esposito, “Introduction: Islam and Muslim Politics”, in *Voices of Resurgent Islam*. Edited by John Esposito (New York, USA: Oxford University Press, 1983), 6.

¹²⁰ Esposito and Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, 18-19.

¹²¹ Esposito, “Introduction: Islam and Muslim Politics”, 6.

¹²² Esposito and Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, 18-19.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Aron Lund, “Syria’s Salafi insurgents: The rise of the Syrian Islamic Front” *Swedish Institute of International Affairs*, No.13 (2013).

¹²⁶ Mohamed Bin Ali, *The Roots of Religious Extremism: Understanding the Salafi Doctrine of Al-Wala' Wal Bara'*, (London, UK: Imperial College Press Insurgency and Terrorism Series, 2016), 50.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

ideas and identity.”¹³⁰ In this context, identity refers to “a belief system (ideology), thoughts, values and meanings that reflect moral, social and political interests and commitments of the *Salafis*, and that constitute their ideology of how the world and its system should work.”¹³¹ *Salafi* belief system is rooted “in a pure, undiluted teaching of the Quran, the Sunnah of the Prophet, and practices of the *Salaf al-Saleh*.”¹³² *Al-Salaf Al-Saleh* can be translated as the righteous predecessors and refers to the companions of the Prophet Mohammed throughout his journey, including the first four Caliphs Abu-Bakar al-Sidiq (573-634), Omar Bin Al-Khattab (583-644), Ottoman ibn Affan (576-656) and Ali ibn Abi-Taleb (601-661), and others such as Abu-Obidah Al-Jarah (583-639), Sa’ad ibn Aba Al-Waqas (595-674), Khalid ibn Al-Walid (585-642), Abdul-Rahman ibn Aouf (580-652).¹³³ It has been argued that it is not always easy to make the distinction between Islamist and modernist, as it is “sometimes difficult to distinguish between Salafis and Islamists.”¹³⁴ Salafi “orientation is an important part of the genealogy of both modernism and Salafism.”¹³⁵ As discussed, prominent Salafi reformer Muhammad Abduh, who had been influenced by al-Afghani, was a key figure in the development of Islamic modernism. While some of his followers developed his ideas along a secular path, others like Rasheed Rida took on a more conservative approach.¹³⁶ It is important to make this distinction clear, and not confuse Islamist reformers with contemporary Wahhabi-Salafi Jihadists. Furthermore, Salafism has also developed differently by country (Saudi Salafism is different from Egyptian Salafism). The next section will specifically discuss the history of Syrian Salafism, within this larger context.

Syrian Salafism

In the case of Syria, *Salafism* as an ideology emerged in the early 1900s, primarily in major metropolitan cities like Aleppo and Damascus.¹³⁷ It was predominantly associated with Abdul-Rahman Al-Kawakibi (1849-1902), Jamaldedin Al-Qassmi (1914-1966), Mohammed Rasheed Reda (1865-1935).¹³⁸ These individuals were critical of the decline of the Islamic *umma*

¹³⁰ Ibid, 52.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Hussein Al-Afani, *Tathkeer Al-Nafas Bi-Hadeeth Al-Qudus wa Aqdasih*, (Cairo, Egypt: Al-Asir Publishing, 2001), 52.

¹³⁴ Roxanne Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman “Introduction” in *Princeton Reading in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from Al-Banna to Bin Laden*. Edited by Roxanne Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton, USA: Princeton University Press, 2009), 19.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Abdul-Rahman Al-Hajj, “as-Salafiyah wa As-salafiyoon fee Souria: Min al-Islah ela Al-Jihad” *Aljazeera Centre for Studies*, 2013).

¹³⁸ Ibid.

and sought reform along traditional values and the principles of *al-salaf al-saleh*. In his influential book *The Nature of Oppression*, Abdul-Rahman Al-Kawakibi argues that the Islamic world was plagued with tyrannical absolutist governments, which were bound by no laws and ruled contrary to the will of the people.¹³⁹ Tyranny, which he defines as arrogance that causes individuals to refuse to accept advice on matters related to public good, had caused rulers to deviate from Islamic values and principles of *al-Salaf al-Saleh* towards despotic and oppressive forms of governance.¹⁴⁰ He asserts that reform along Islamic principles was necessary, stressing the need to “decentralize the primacy of the Ottoman Turks.”¹⁴¹ To him, religion is an important tool for political reform, as it allows for the preservation of basic rights and freedoms as well as for political, economic and military advancements. He also stresses that Islam was a critical component of the Arab identity and could not be divorced from it.¹⁴²

Like Al-Kawakibi, Jamaledin Al-Qassmi asserts that the abandonment of the Qur’anic principles and values, which guided the *al-Salaf al-Saleh*’s daily conduct, is a key reason for the decline of the Islamic *umma*.¹⁴³ He stresses that Islamic laws possess “methods and principles, particularly the principle of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), that allow for the adoption of new technology.”¹⁴⁴ Hence, according to his logic, Islam provides guidelines and principles from which society could remedy much of its problems. The salvation of the waning Islamic *umma*, he stresses, could only be achieved through a return to Islam. He also stresses throughout his book that Islam is an inseparable component of Arab identity.

A conservative Salafi thinker, Mohammed Rasheed Rida, takes a political approach, calling for revolutionary change. In his book *The Caliphate*, he argues that Islam provides spiritual, social, political and civic guidance and establishes a social system for humanity.¹⁴⁵ He asserts that through adhering to the principles of *al-Salaf al-Saleh*, the Muslim *umma* could rise once again, and be saved from its decline. He writes, the Muslim world can only be saved by virtue, and virtue cannot be achieved without religion. In the introduction chapter of his book, he calls upon the Turkish people to rise and overthrow corruption and tyranny, and renew the

¹³⁹ Itzchak Weismann, *Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi: Islamic Reform and Arab Revival* (London, UK: Oneworld Publishing, 2015), 105.

¹⁴⁰ Abdul-Rahman Al-Kawakibi. *Tabaea’ al-Istibdad wa Masra’ al-Ista’bad* (Cario, Egypt: Kalimat Arabia, 2011), 11.

¹⁴¹ Charles Kurzman, *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940: A Sourcebook* (New York, USA: Oxford University Press 2002), 152.

¹⁴² Al-Kawakibi, *Tabaea’ al-Istibdad wa Masra’ al-Ista’bad*, 11.

¹⁴³ Kurzman, *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940: A Sourcebook*, 181.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Mohammed Rasheed Reda, *Al-Khilafa* (Cairo, Egypt: Hindawi Foundation for Education and Culture, 2015), 9-13.

Islamic caliphate. He proceeds through the book providing guidelines for the establishment of a renewed caliphate along the principles and values of *al-Salaf al-Saleh*.

The writings of Al-Kawkabi, Al-Qassmi and Reda had considerable influence on major political figures in Syria.¹⁴⁶ In the 1920s, the ideas of *Salafism* began to surface on the political landscape, with the rise of various parties and organizations.¹⁴⁷ Among them the *Al-Ghra'a* Organization, created by Abdul-Ghani Al-Daqir (1917-2002), which quickly was able to gain societal support through its various activities. Another significant organization was the Islamic Urbanization, which was created in 1930 by Ahmad Mothir Al-Admah (1909-1982) and Bahjat Al-Bitar (1894-1976) (who was Al-Qassimi's student). The organization launched a magazine in 1946, which allowed them to gain popularity. It became an important source for Syrian reform *Salafism* until it was shut down after the Hama Massacre of 1982.¹⁴⁸ However, as will be discussed, Salafi thinking gained limited support following the period of independence, in which pan-Arabist ideologies were more dominant. Undeniably, *Salafism* continued to have considerable influence on some segments of the population. The suppression of this ideology by Hafez al-Assad (1930-2000) and Bashar al-Assad (1965-), and the Syrian regime's violent response to the 2011 uprising, has allowed for the reemergence of a more militant Salafi-Jihadi groups committed not to Syria, but to the goal of establishing Islamic caliphates, as will be discussed.¹⁴⁹

2.2 *The Fall of the Empire and Colonization*

In the 1900s, discontent grew within the Ottoman Empire. This resulted in the rise of various movements seeking self-determination.¹⁵⁰ In the 1910s, Hussain Bin Ali (1854-1931) Sharif of Hijaz was promised an Arab State by the British, if he led a rebellion against the

¹⁴⁶ Abdul-Rahman Al-Hajj, "as-Salafiyah wa As-salafiyoon fee Souria: Min al-Islah ela Al-Jihad" *Aljazeera Centre for Studies*, 2013.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ The Hama Massacre occurred in 1982, following a failed uprising against the Syrian regime. The Muslim Brotherhood played a critical role in leading rebellions against the Hafez al-Assad. For more on the Hama Massacre, see: Brynjar Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976–82: The History and Legacy of a Failed Revolt" *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 43, no. 4 (2016).

¹⁴⁹ It is important to stress that modern Salafism in Syria is not identical to the one in the past, which took on a more intellectual/reform nature. Contemporary Salafism in Syria is difficult to map out, given the way in which it has evolved. Wahhabism has been critical in influencing segments of the Salafi groups in Syria. In particular, Fattih al-Sham which consider itself as evolving out of the long-tradition of global Jihadism. For more on contemporary Salafism in Syria see: Abdul-Rahman Al-Hajj, "as-Salafiyah wa As-salafiyoon fee Souria: Min al-Islah ela Al-Jihad."

¹⁵⁰ Anwar Alam, "Introduction: Making Sense of the Arab Spring" in *Arab Spring: Reflections on Political Changes in the Arab World and its Future*. Edited by Anwar Alam (New Delhi, India: New Century Publication, 2014), p.xix.

Empire.¹⁵¹ Motivated by this, he spearheaded what became known as the Great Arab Revolt of 1916, which took the Ottoman state by surprise. The Empire was involved in Europe, supporting its German Ally (during the First World War) and was unable to withdraw troops to contain the revolts.¹⁵² This weakened the Empire, ultimately leading to its subsequent demise. Ironically, the revolts that took place in the name of Arab Independence “soon relapsed into suzerainty of British and French power”, as it became clear that both powers were not willing to allow for an independent Arab state.¹⁵³ The colonial powers ultimately carved Ottoman provinces into smaller mandates with largely artificial borders, ruled directly by London and Paris.¹⁵⁴ The famous Sykes–Picot Agreement of 1916 between Great Britain and France set the stage for the division of the Middle East based on areas of control and spheres of influence.¹⁵⁵ Paul Kitching argues that the “problem with the Sykes-Picot Agreement was not just that it ignored previous agreements with promises of independence. It was the manner in which it divided up the areas of control and created the new countries.”¹⁵⁶ The agreement, he adds, resulted in the creation of boundaries reflecting the desire of the colonial powers, “rather than practicalities.”¹⁵⁷ Ethnic, religious and cultural differences were all ignored as different communities were lumped together into artificial boundaries.

In the case of Syria, the French formally created the country in early 1924, combining a number of “different geographic regions and minority communities each with distinctive demographic and socio-economic patterns.”¹⁵⁸ Those included “Jabal Druze, the Alwailite region, the Jazira region, the Damascus area and the Aleppo area.”¹⁵⁹ The borders of the newly established state were largely artificial and did not reflect any historical realities. The communities living within such borders traditionally enjoyed self-rule under the Ottoman *Millet System* and developed localized identities overtime. Because of this, there was no imagined collective Syrian identity to allow these communities to connect at a national level. In fact, such communities, across the country, opposed the creation of the Syrian state by the French. They

¹⁵¹ Haddad and Rostam-Kolayi “Imperialism and its Manifestations in the Middle East.”

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Alam, “Introduction: Making Sense of the Arab Spring”, xx.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Lamia Rustum Shehadeh, “The Name of Syria in Ancient and Modern” in *The Origins of Syrian Nationhood: Histories, Pioneers and Identity*. Edited by Adel Beshara (USA: Routledge, 2011), 23-24 .

¹⁵⁶ Paul Kitching, “The Sykes-Picot agreement and Lines in the Sand” *Historian*, Iss. 128 (2016): 20.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Zisser, “Who’s Afraid of Syrian Nationalism? National and State Identity in Syria”, 183.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

viewed this “as part of the Western powers effort to formulate a new regional order in the Middle East that would ensure their hegemony over the region.”¹⁶⁰

In governing Syria, the French pursued a “policy of divide and rule, splitting the territory along regional and ethnic lines.”¹⁶¹ In pursuing this policy, the French “claimed to be bowing to political reality and popular feeling.”¹⁶² Ayse Tekdal Fildis argues this policy was “designed to obstruct the progress of the Syrian national identity.”¹⁶³ He adds, the French “created the two separate states of Aleppo and Damascus, which included the districts of Homs and Hama, the two next-largest urban centers in the mandate. Both of these states were ruled by a local governor supported by a French adviser.”¹⁶⁴ This was followed by further fragmentation, with the creation of separate Druze and Alawites regions in 1922, which the French justified under the grounds that both minorities were distinctively different.¹⁶⁵ Ayse Fildis argues

the Alawite and Druze states were [kept] administratively separate. Nationalist pressure and expenses forced France to unite Damascus and Aleppo. The Alawite and Jabal al-Druze territories were kept in shifting degrees of administrative isolation and political insulation from these centers for the better part of France's tenure in Syria. French policy was clear: if the mandate authority could not break the back of the nationalist movement, the next best alternative was to contain it in its heartland. Some of Syria's religious and ethnic minorities, such as Kurds, Armenians, Jews and various Christian sects, were widely dispersed and did not have a geographical base to give rise to political unity, whereas the Alawites and Druze were compact regional minorities with considerable political unity. However, in the end, 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. By the end of the mandate, Alawite and Druze areas were incorporated into the larger Syrian state by the French. Nonetheless, minority consciousness, reinforced by a combination of geography, religious differences, communal segregation and regional separatism, had a damaging impact on Syrian political life even long after the mandate.¹⁶⁶

Because of all these efforts, doubts “by the population about the legitimacy of the country’s national identity and viability of their state” dominated throughout the period of French occupation and persisted even after the country gained independence.¹⁶⁷ The French policy of divide and rule left Syria deeply fragmented, and struggling to define itself. In the years that followed, Syrians continued to struggle with questions of identity as “reflected in the

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ayse Tekdal Fildis “The Troubles in Syria: Spawned by French Divide and Rule” *Middle East Policy Council*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2011)

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

performance of the governments throughout the 1950s and 60s.”¹⁶⁸ As will be argued, different regimes failed in maintaining political stability and in promoting a collective Syrian identity.¹⁶⁹ They also unsuccessfully experimented for years with different identity-building formulas, based on the exclusionary anti-colonial ideological formations.

2.3 *Independence and Identity Crisis*

Upon gaining independence in 1946, Syrian politicians saw themselves faced with a fragmented *Bilad al-Sham*, new security threats to the north (Turkey) and east (Iraq) and the rise of a new Israeli state out of Palestinian lands.¹⁷⁰ The country, as a modern nation-state, was a colonial invention, with no prior experience functioning as an independent entity, and in dealing with other Arab states in that manner.¹⁷¹ Internally, the country lacked recognition and legitimacy in the eyes of the people.¹⁷² It was also politically diverse; there were socialists, communists, nationalists and religiously inspired political parties.¹⁷³ Each had specific ideas to what Syria meant to them, and what it represented.

External actors heavily influenced the politics of the newly created nation-state, supporting different parties based on patterns of geopolitical interests. More specifically, the United States played a critical role engineering coups, jeopardizing the country’s nation-building process. In the late 1940s, the CIA had hoped to remould the country’s political system to reflect US interests.¹⁷⁴ In so doing, a political action team was set up to plan and execute a coup against Syria’s first elected post-independence President, Shukri al-Quwatli (1891-1967).¹⁷⁵ The political action team identified Husni al-Za’im (1897-1949), a prominent Syrian brigadier-general, as the right person to spearhead this coup. CIA officials met with Za’im and according to former CIA agent Miles Copeland “the political action team suggested the idea of a coup d’état to Za’im and advised him how to go about it, guided him through the intricate preparations in laying the groundwork for it...Za’im was the American boy.”¹⁷⁶ In 1949, backed by the CIA, Za’im orchestrated the carefully planned coup, opening the door to what Adam Curtis describes as “the

¹⁶⁸ Zisser, “Who’s Afraid of Syrian Nationalism? National and State Identity in Syria”, 183.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Raymond Hinnebusch, “The Foreign Policy of Syria,” in *The Foreign Policies of the Middle East States*, 2nd. Edited by Raymond Hinnebusch & Anoushirvan Ehteshami (Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 2014).

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 37.

¹⁷² Ibid, 37.

¹⁷³ Christopher Philips, *Everyday Arab Identity: The Daily Reproduction of the Arab World*. (London, UK: Routledge, 2013), 43.

¹⁷⁴ Adam Curtis, “The Baby and the Baath Water” *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 2013.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

Dark Ages” in Syria.¹⁷⁷ Following the 1949 coup, the country faced a series of political crises and successive coups.¹⁷⁸ Just months after taking over power, Za’im was overthrown in another coup by Hashim al-Atassi (1875-1960) in 1949. Al-Atassi’s presidency was short-lived, as Fawzi Selu (1905-1972) overthrew him two years later in 1951. Three years later, Adib Shishakli (1909-1964) overthrew Selu in 1954. Months later, Hashim al-Atassi overthrew Shishakli and returned to politics in 1954. In 1955, supported by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Shukri al-Quwatli returned to power through an election, but his presidency was short-lived, as the country united with Egypt in 1958, as will be discussed later.¹⁷⁹ Therefore, the politics of post-colonial Syria had been faced with never-ending crises, exacerbated by foreign intervention, which complicated the identity-formation process.

Supplementing the discussed history of military coups and political crises, Syrian politicians were faced with further challenges. Arab defeats in the 1948 and 1956 Arab-Israeli wars presented a serious blow to the legitimacy of the Arab state system. This contributed to the consolidation of pan-Arabism as an ideology and discourse of anti-colonialism nationalism and the rise of exclusionary politics of identity in Syria. The political elites gravitated towards exclusionary pan-Arab ideologies (which were prevalent among the majority of Syrians) hoping to garner popular support internally.¹⁸⁰ Within this context, questions of Arab unity and the ‘liberation of Palestine’ dominated the framework of the identity imagination process.¹⁸¹ Raymond Hinnebusch argues that Syrian leaders saw themselves faced with the difficult mission of trying to balance against the various geo-political threats, while championing Arab causes.¹⁸² They disagreed on how to achieve this; some believed unity with Iraq would be an important step, while others sought closer relations with Egypt.¹⁸³

Islamists played a limited role in politics, as they were not able to permeate the political landscape. Zisser asserts that they virtually played no “role in the debate over Syrian identity” as it was primarily confined between Arab Syrianist and Syrian Arabist ideologists.¹⁸⁴ The first consisted of those who “gave priority to the Arab identity and thus to the vision of Arab unity,

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Sami Moubayed, *Syria and the USA: Washington's Relations with Damascus from Wilson to Eisenhower* (London, UK: I.B.Tauris, 2012).

¹⁷⁹ Curtis, “The Baby and the Baath Water.”

¹⁸⁰ Eugene Rogan, “The Emergence of the Middle East into the Modern State System” in *International Relations of the Middle East*. Edited by Tareq Ismael and Glenn Perry (Florence, KY: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 37.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Hinnebusch, “The Foreign Policy of Syria”.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Zisser, “Who’s Afraid of Syrian Nationalism? National and State Identity in Syria”, 183.

although they did show a readiness to come to terms, for lack of choice, with the existence of a separate Syrian state on the condition that it have an Arab colouration.”¹⁸⁵ The latter consisted of those who were in “essence the majority, gave priority to an authentic Syrian identity and Syrian state, while enveloping it, for political convenience and perhaps because of true emotional commitment, in the cloak of Arabism.”¹⁸⁶ Absent from these dichotomies were non-Arab minorities such as the Kurds or Turkmen, which developed localized identities throughout the Ottoman period.¹⁸⁷ More specifically, Kurdish communities developed localized identities which were defined by their tribes and land, far from the centres of power and economic heartlands of the Syrian state.”¹⁸⁸ They had little “sense of belonging to a Syrian state or identity” and were committed to prospects of an independent Kurdistan.¹⁸⁹

Questions of identity were not exclusive to Syria, but occupied the Arab world. Given legitimacy and identity crises across the Arab world, pan-Arabism emerged in the 1950s, as a discourse of anti-colonialism, calling for the unity of the Arab *Umma* and the liberation of Palestine.¹⁹⁰ It was based in a political struggle against “European powers in order to achieve freedom and independence in the name of pan-Arabism.”¹⁹¹ It also aimed at “preserving Arab culture and identity from Western influence” and challenging the artificially imposed borders.¹⁹² Pan-Arabism gained momentum under the leadership of Egypt’s Gamal Abdul Nasser (1918-1970) who rose in prominence and gained wide fame across the Arab world, from the 1950s-1970s. He was seen as a progressive leader, committed to national liberation and the reunification of the Arab world.¹⁹³ His version of nationalism, sometimes referred to as Nasserism, was the dominant ideology of the Arab world between the years 1952 to late 1970s.¹⁹⁴ Paul Eid argues that under Nasser, pan-Arabism was the “only ideology that almost succeeded in gaining social consensus as the framework defining a collective post-colonial Arab identity.”¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Harriet Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East* (London, UK: I.B. Tauris Publishing, 2014), 47-48.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, p.48

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Alam, “Introduction: Making Sense of the Arab Spring”.

¹⁹² Paul Eid, *Being Arab: Ethnic and Religious Identity Building among Second Generation Youth in Montreal* (Montriel, QC: McGill-Queen’s University Press 2007), 13.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

With the rise of Nasser, Syrian politicians saw an opportunity to remedy political chaos at home by seeking unity with Egypt.¹⁹⁶ Pan-Arab sentiments in Syria were particularly strong as Nasser's popularity in the country and across the Arab world continued to gain momentum.¹⁹⁷ In 1958, Syria and Egypt formally merged giving rise to the United Arab Republic (UAR), under the leadership of Nasser. Under the new Republic, Nasser dismantled all political parties and implemented a series of economic policies and nationalization programs, which antagonized many in Syria.¹⁹⁸ It became clear that Nasser's authoritarian leadership rendered Syria as a "colony of Egypt."¹⁹⁹

Three years into the union, nationalist forces in Syria gained support among the elites and were successfully able to orchestrate the 1961 military coup, which formally ended the UAR. In the period following the coup, political instability dominated the political landscape, as competing elites jostled for power.²⁰⁰ The army became a tool used by competing elites in hopes of gaining political power, allowing for the rise of various factions and clans, reflecting pragmatic alliances, within the military establishment. Among them was the Military Committee, led by Salah Jadid (1926-1993) and Hafez al-Assad (1930-2000), which possessed the most power and influence within the military.²⁰¹ As rivalries intensified, the Military Committee saw an opportunity to seize power orchestrating the 1963 coup. This "only promoted two further coups: by leftist Ba'athists²⁰² in 1966 and by Hafez al-Assad in 1970."²⁰³ Ideologically, the Ba'ath Party was centered on a combination of Arab nationalism and third world socialism. It stressed the importance of upholding Arab causes such as combating

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Robin Yassin-Kasseb and Leila Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (USA: Pluto Press, 2016), 10.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 10-13.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Given the impact of European colonialism, which disrupted traditional patterns of human movement and exchanges, dividing communities and creating artificial nation-states, Arab nationalism emerged as a discourse of anti-colonialism, dominating the process in which state-imposed national identity projects were being imagined, across the Arab world. In light of this, the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party was founded in 1942, by Syrian nationalists, Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din Bitar. Ideologically, the party's platform is premised on three main principles: Arab Unity, Freedom and Socialism. It stresses the importance of upholding Arab causes such as combating imperialism, liberating Palestine and preserving Arab identity. The party rose in prominence throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, branching into Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan. When the charismatic leader Gamal Abdul-Nasser rose to power in 1954, the Ba'ath party agreed to work with him on a union project between Syria and Egypt, after initial reluctance. In 1958, Syria and Egypt declared merger, giving rise to the United Arab Republic under Nasser's presidency. This garnered great enthusiasm within the Ba'ath party establishment. Aflaq and Bitar were confident with Nasser to the point where they decided to dissolve the party. This raised controversy within the party; dividing it among its members and leading to its subsequent collapse. The party began to reorganize in the late 1950s early 1960s, given Nasser's growing authoritarian policies. Ba'athists were quickly dominating the Syrian army allowing them to eventually orchestrate the 1966 and 1970 coups. For more on Ba'athism See: John Devlin "The Baath Party: Rise and Metamorphosis." *American Historical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 5 (1991).

²⁰³ Christopher Philips, *Everyday Arab Identity: The Daily Reproduction of the Arab World*, 43

imperialism, liberating Palestine, preserving Arab identity and achieving unity. Throughout the 1960s, the country was faced with political instability, driven by external and internal driving factors, which contributed to the crisis of identity as will be argued. Under the aegis of ‘Arabism’ and Syrianism respectively, different factions competed for power and influence. As will be shown, pan-Arabism suffered major setbacks during the 1960 and 1970s, which ushered in a new direction in the identity imagination process.

Political instability and questions of identity were exacerbated by serious challenges to pan-Arabism in the 1960s, given the humiliating Arab defeat against Israel during the 1967 six-day war, and the death of Nasser in 1970.²⁰⁴ These events represented a major setback for pan-Arabism for three reasons:²⁰⁵ First, the defeat was a major setback given the ideology’s commitment to the liberation of Palestine. Second, Nasser’s charisma allowed him to personify the ideology; in other words, he was the face of pan-Arabism. Third, Nasser’s successor Anwar Al-Sadat lacked the necessary charisma to carry on the legacy of his predecessor. The failure of pan-Arabism in providing “the principles needed to shape post-colonial identity” triggered “the search for new normative ground that might give new meaning to the idea of “Arab-ness.”²⁰⁶ Given this vacuum, new religious nationalism began to emerge in the late 1960s, resulting in increasingly “politicized and militarized movements advocating for the Islamization of social structures” which will be discussed in further details.²⁰⁷ As this was occurring, “the post-colonial nation building process” in Syria and across the Arab world increasingly “gravitated away from pan-Arabism as a state ideology, towards centralized, authoritarian state systems – personified by strong individual leadership and the dominance of military institutions.”²⁰⁸ Arab nationalism continued to be deployed by the ruling elites to legitimize their regimes, but was now taking on a different form, as will be discussed in the coming paragraphs.²⁰⁹

2.4 *The Rise of the ‘Assadism’*

After a history of over nine coups in a period of only 17 years (1949-1966), Hafez Al-Assad orchestrated the tenth and last coup in 1970. Assad was determined to cement his grip on the country and prevent further political instability; his ultimate purpose was to ensure the

²⁰⁴ Yassin-Kasseb and Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 15.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Alam, “Introduction: Making Sense of the Arab Spring”, xxii.

²⁰⁹ Philips, *Everyday Arab Identity: The Daily Reproduction of the Arab World*, 41.

survival of the regime.²¹⁰ In so doing, he expanded state institutions, centralized power, assigned key positions to trusted individuals and increased the role of security, police and military apparatuses in controlling the country.²¹¹ These changes were supplemented by extensive identity-building initiatives, which aimed at securing loyalty to territorial Syria. Christopher Philips argues that the regime adopted what he calls multi-layered identity-building initiatives, combining both pan-Syrianism and pan-Arabism.²¹² This entailed “the creation of a cultural Arab/Islamic-orientated pan-Arab identity by highlighting Syria’s role as the cradle of Arab nationalism, while also encompassing a territorial identity that allowed the regime to claim lineage from past civilizations that emerged in or occupied Syrian soil.”²¹³ This narrative was reproduced in everyday propaganda, by the media and in schools.²¹⁴ The regime also attempted to “reinforce a Syrian identity based not only on the Arab or Muslim past but by drawing on Syria’s existence as a modern state, both during the French mandate period and mainly as an independent state.”²¹⁵

The regime’s attempt to create a Syrian-Arabist identity was rooted in a number of historical struggles, which highlight the uniqueness of Syria within the Arab world.²¹⁶ The country was depicted as the heir to *bilad al-sham*, a central protector of key Arab causes (including Palestinian cause) and the heart of “Arab nationalism as an ideology and political movement.”²¹⁷ The country was also presented as the seat of ancient civilizations and a source of modernity.²¹⁸ This claim was reinforced through the regime’s portrayal of Syria and Syrians as the successors of the Palmyrene Empire (270-273), Umayyad Empire (661-750) and the Ayyubid dynasty (1171-1260), and through stressing affinity to famous historical figures like Queen Zenobia of Palmyra and General Salaheddin of the Ayyubi dynasty (1174-1193).²¹⁹

Supplementing these initiatives, the Syrian regime focused on creating a cult of personality, around the President, which was communicated through the media, and in reproduction of everyday propaganda through statues, pictures, murals and slogans.²²⁰ At the

²¹⁰ Yassin-Kasseb and Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*.

²¹¹ Philips, *Everyday Arab Identity: The Daily Reproduction of the Arab World*, 186-187.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 41-43.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 49-52.

²¹⁵ Zisser, “Who’s Afraid of Syrian Nationalism? National and State Identity in Syria”, 187-188

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 185-186.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 186-187.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ Philips, *Everyday Arab Identity: The Daily Reproduction of the Arab World*, 51.

core of this, Hafez al-Assad was presented as the protector and saviour of Arab causes and the country's multi-layered official identity.²²¹ Citizens were also compelled "to bend their talents to the service of state propaganda."²²² For example, the youth were "ritualistically enlisted to assemble at rallies orchestrated by popular organizations" while poets, professors, artists and playwright were "periodically called upon to help produce the public spectacles to maintain the Assad cult; the confederation of peasants and workers and the professional syndicates of journalists, lawyers, teachers and doctors, among others were all required at one time or another to conjure up slogans and imagery representing their idealized connection to the party and president."²²³ In producing and re-producing this cult, Christopher Philips asserts that it primarily consisted of various themes emphasizing the importance of the family unit, the military, Arabism and the Ba'ath Party version of socialism.²²⁴ Through these themes, Assad was presented as the father of the nation, the successor of Nassir, the protector of the Syrian nation, the champion of Arab causes and as the man of the people.²²⁵ Militarism was the most communicated theme, as Hafez al-Assad and his sons Basil and Bashar were frequently portrayed in military uniform with slogans stressing their role as champions and saviours of the country and the Arab causes.²²⁶ This discourse was in part a consequence of the Israeli occupation of Syria's Golan Heights as well as the Palestinian territories. Hence, as summarized by Philips, the "cult's widespread reproduction of such everyday institutions" (such as Arabism, militarism etc.) served to "strengthen state identity in a way not seen before."²²⁷ Given the daily reproduction of Assad's cult of personality, the distinction between state and regime became unclear.²²⁸ The regime, "to a considerable extent, transformed and created state institutions in its own image."²²⁹ The nation in this sense, "extended as far as the cult [did]."²³⁰

The Ba'ath Party "was transformed and restructured to fit into the authoritarian format of Assad's system, causing it to lose its avant-garde character and become an instrument for generating mass support and political control."²³¹ The regime's cult of personality was merged with Ba'athism, allowing for the rise of a hybrid Assadist ideology. Officially, the party's

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, United States 2nd Edition (2015), 2.

²²³ Ibid., p.2

²²⁴ Philips, *Everyday Arab Identity: The Daily Reproduction of the Arab World*, 52.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Annette Buchs, "The Resilience of Authoritarian Rule in Syria under Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad" *German Institute of Global and Area Studies*, No.9 (2009): 7-9.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Philips, *Everyday Arab Identity: The Daily Reproduction of the Arab World*, 52.

²³¹ Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread Nor Freedom* (New York, USA: Zed Books, 2003), 70.

discourse centred on the themes of Arab nationalism and third-world socialism, while Assad was presented as the protector of the Party and its core Socialist and Arab causes.²³² The president's cult of personality was regularly communicated and reinforced throughout party functions. For example, the 1985 Party Congress declared, "loyalty to [Assad] is loyalty to the party and to the people and their causes and disloyalty [to Assad] in whatever form constitutes a grave deviation."²³³

Assad's cult, however, had not "captured the hearts or the minds" of the people, but rather produced "anxiety-inducing simulacrum" in which the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour were determined by the security apparatus.²³⁴ Lisa Wedeen argues that the "cult was a strategy of domination based on compliance rather than legitimacy" which was produced through enforcing popular "participation in rituals of obedience that are transparently phony both to those who orchestrate them and to those who consume them."²³⁵ The President's cult also "operated as a disciplinary device, generating a politics of public dissimulation in which citizens act as if they revere their leader. A politics of "as if," while it may appear irrational or even foolish at first glance, actually proves politically effective."²³⁶ It also

produced guidelines for acceptable speech and behaviour; it defined and generalized a specific type of national membership; it occasioned the enforcement of obedience; it induced complicity by creating practices in which citizens are themselves "accomplices," upholding the norms constitutive of Assad's domination; it isolated Syrian from one another; and it cluttered public space with monotonous slogans and empty gestures, which tire the minds and bodies of producers and consumers alike.²³⁷

The official state identity, which centred on Assad's cult of personality, was enforced with sheer authoritarianism. The regime maintained an extensive security apparatus and brutally crushed opposition. Surveillance was extensive, as the regime sought to ensure popular conformity and eliminate any potential challengers.

As discussed, in the 1970s pan-Arabism was faced with a crisis, having failed to deliver on the promise of Arab unity and the liberation of Palestine, which inspired people across the Arab world.²³⁸ The humiliating Arab defeat against Israel in the six-day war, coupled with the

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid, 70-71.

²³⁴ Buchs "The Resilience of Authoritarian Rule in Syria under Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad", 26.

²³⁵ Ibid, 6.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Yassin-Kasseb and Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 15.

death of Gamal Abdel-Nasser, resulted in the resurgence of conservative Islamist groups, driven by an Islamic, rather than Arabist, identity.²³⁹ In Syria, this allowed for the emergence of the *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimeen*, or the Muslim Brotherhood movement, as an important anti-regime opposition force. The movement was formally created in 1945, as an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.²⁴⁰ Since its inception and up to the late 1960s, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood played a minimal role in politics, as their activities were confined to religious proselytizing, spreading community awareness and running educational programs.²⁴¹ In politics, the movement participated in parliamentary elections and was able to gain limited seats.²⁴² They sought to influence the political process in hopes of remoulding the state along the values of the Islamic Sharai'a.²⁴³ However, in light of the crisis of Arab nationalism, discussed above, coupled with the regime's increasing repressiveness, the Muslim Brotherhood began to take on a more confrontational anti-regime stance. In mid-1970s, two somewhat distinct branches of the Muslim Brotherhood formed in the country. The first was based in Damascus and led by Issam al-Attar (1927-), the second in Hama and Aleppo and led by Adnan Sa'd al-Din (1929-2010).²⁴⁴ Both branches opposed the regime but differed in the way in which they expressed their opposition. The first was in favour of peaceful change, while the latter favoured a military option. Over the years, tensions grew as the state began to antagonize Islamists by passing regulations constraining their freedoms, as well as purging those who were deemed a threat.²⁴⁵ In 1976, a series of attacks on "regime institutions, party officials and army officers occurred

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ In 1928, Hasan al-Banna founded the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt. The organization was created in light of unending political crises and controversies in the country. Despite gaining independence in the 1920s, the country was still under heavy influence and control by the British. It is within this context, Muslim Brotherhood emerged seeking an 'Islamic revival', calling for the liberation of the Muslim world from Western domination and the establishment of political systems along the principle of Islamic Sharia. In the 1930s, the organization gained ground and branched throughout "the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and beyond and has directly or indirectly inspired virtually every Sunni Islamist group now in existence." In the 1940s-1950s, the Muslim Brotherhood played a limited grassroot role in various countries in these regions, providing social services and partaking in political activism. The Islamist identity advocated by the Muslim brotherhood was shadowed in 1950s, 1960s and 1970s by the dominance pan-Arab nationalism. This was further exacerbated by Gamal Abdul-Nasser's violent suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt Nasser implemented a series of purges and executions against key Muslim Brotherhood figures, including Sayyid Qutub. However, In light of the crisis of the secular Arab nationalism (caused by factors such as Nasser's death and humiliating Arab defeat in the six-day war) allowed for the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the Arab world and in Syria. For more information on the history of the Muslim Brotherhood, see: Barry Rubin. *The Muslim Brotherhood: The Organization and Policies of a Global Islamist Movement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and Raphaë Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (New York, USA: Oxford University Press, 2013)

²⁴¹ Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, 1-5.

²⁴² Barry Rubin. *The Muslim Brotherhood*, 1-4.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria 1976-82", 544.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

throughout the country”, which marked the beginning of a six-year period of sporadic protests and violence.²⁴⁶

In March of 1980, a series of protests swept a number of cities across the country, the largest of which were in Aleppo and Hama. This was coupled with the emergence of a network of Muslim Brotherhood insurgents throughout the country.²⁴⁷ The regime moved quickly to suppress dissent. “Regular army units were sent into cities, together with Special Forces and other pro-regime forces to suppress the unrest, conducting large-scale searches of city quarters suspected of hosting opposition members.”²⁴⁸ Furthermore, “heavy weapons such as artillery, tanks, helicopters and combat aircraft were used against Islamist hotspots, whenever deemed necessary.”²⁴⁹ After a failed assassination attempt on Hafez Al-Assad in July of 1980, the regime decided to crush dissent once and for all, passing Law 49, which “imposed a death penalty on anyone, found to be a member of the Muslim brotherhood.”²⁵⁰ This move paved the ground for a series of large-scale massacres throughout the country. Among the most prominent was the Tadmur (Palmyra) prison massacre, where regime forces killed thousands of prisoners suspected of posing a threat to the regime. Collective “punishments became more common, involving not only family members of suspects, but entire city quarters and towns.”²⁵¹

In 1982, a large scale uprising took place in the city of Hama. Thousands took to the streets to oppose the regime, while the Muslim brotherhood used violence in targeting government institutions.²⁵² The regime was unable to contain the situation and was essentially driven out of the city. In responding to this crisis, the regime deployed 6000-8000 soldiers equipped with over 100 tanks and heavy artillery. Hama was besieged and barraged with heavy fire for weeks, which resulted in the death of tens of thousands.²⁵³ After a period of prolonged bombardment, regime forces retook the city. Thousands more were arrested and killed for being suspected anti-regime sympathizers. The Hama Massacre of 1982 marked the end of a period of instability, as the regime was successfully able to cement its hold on the country and eliminate rivals. For the years to follow, the regime continued to consolidate its power and propagate its official identity discourse as people were forced to accept its indoctrination. The regime’s

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 545.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 550.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 551.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid, 554.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid.

suppression of the primarily Islamist-led uprising served as a reminder of its brutality. It also served to inspire Islamist groups to return and re-organize against the regime once again in the events following the 2011 uprising.²⁵⁴

In the year 2000, Bashar Al-Assad (1965-) inherited the presidency, following the death of his father Hafez. His ascent to power brought some optimism, as people were hopeful of political reform.²⁵⁵ Initially, the regime implemented limited reforms from 2000 to 2001, in a period often referred to as the “Damascus Spring.”²⁵⁶ However, these reforms were short-lived, as the regime and Party-establishment reverted to the old policies, in a period described by George Alan as the “Damascus Winter.”²⁵⁷ Under Bashar’s presidency, the regime continued to disseminate a Syrian-Arabist identity, centred on his cult of personality and notions of the country’s role as a protector of Arab causes.²⁵⁸ State propaganda continued to propagate Bashar’s role as the eternal saviour of the country. Portraits and posters of Bashar were displayed on large buildings in famous squares and popular destinations, communicating phrases that glorify Bashar like Syria the Assad, we pledge our blood to you [Bashar] for eternity, we are with you [Bashar], Syria: God is her protector and Assad is her Shepherd.²⁵⁹ Through conducting a content and discourse analysis, Christopher Philips asserts that under Bashar, the regime “played up the Arab identity of Syrians by referring to them as the beating heart of Arabism and as the Syrian Arab People.”²⁶⁰ In doing so, he suggests that the regime was in effect creating a “national myth for Syrians: that they are more Arabist than other Arabs.”²⁶¹ In numerous speeches, Bashar asserted that “pan-Arabism is one of the crucial springs from which he and the Syrian people drink.”²⁶² He consistently highlighted the primacy of the Syrian nation in defending and upholding Arab causes. By stressing the primacy of the Syrian nation and its role in protecting Arab causes, Bashar was in “effect promoting a mystical bond between people and territory.”²⁶³

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 558-559.

²⁵⁵ Ismael, Tareq Y., and Jacqueline S Ismael. *Government and Politics of the Contemporary Middle East: Continuity and Change* (London, UK: Routledge, 2011).

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread Nor Freedom*, 30.

²⁵⁸ Philips, *Everyday Arab Identity: The Daily Reproduction of the Arab World*, 59-61.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid.

A number of international events played an important role in influencing the regime's identity building initiatives.²⁶⁴ The attacks on the twin towers in New York in 2001 and President George Bush's subsequent war on terror had placed tremendous pressure on the Syrian regime. Faced with such pressures, the regime sought to increase ties with Iran (a country which had been declared by Bush as part of the axis of evil) and increase support for organizations like Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon.²⁶⁵ The regime propagated these alignments as being part of the axis of resistance or *moqawma*, stressing the centrality of Syria's role in supporting Arab causes under the leadership of Bashar in this axis. Furthermore, the ongoing Israeli occupation of Golan Heights and the regime's inability to "liberate the occupied territory had in many ways forced the regime to ally with Iran (and the axis of resistance)."²⁶⁶ More specifically, the US invasion of Iraq, the Hezbollah-Israel war in 2006, and the Israeli war on Gaza in 2008 were "used to simultaneously reproduce Arab identity as a supra-state identity and to reinforce the state identity. This move can be said to have acted on Syrians' collective sense of pride in their national identity in relation to their Iraqi, Lebanese and Palestinian counterparts."²⁶⁷ The idea of *moqawma* and membership in the so-called axis of resistance dominated state propaganda and its narrative throughout the rule of Bashar. The regime pragmatically deployed the discourse of *moqawma*, as a pretext to consolidate its authoritarianism.²⁶⁸ As will be discussed, this narrative was relied on by the regime in discrediting the protestors throughout the 2011 Syrian uprising.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, the research has aimed to highlight the crisis of Syria's post-colonial national identity. As demonstrated, the country was born into artificial boundaries, reflecting the will of the colonizing powers. Post-colonial Syria struggled with questions of identity as various regimes tried their own formula of identity-building initiatives, in hopes of garnering intra-state harmony. Such regimes did not appeal to a sense of the cosmopolitan nature of Syrian society, instead enforcing exclusionary notions of national identity, based on constructed ideas of Arabism or the state's rhetoric of Syrianism, and centred around cult of personalities, i.e. Assadism. Echoing Hamid Dabashi's cosmopolitan perspective on identity, Syrian poet Ali

²⁶⁴ Rifai, Ola "The Identity balance during the Syrian uprising: a vehement reconstruction?" *Centre for Syrian Studies: University of St. Andrews* (2014).

²⁶⁵ Mahdavi, "Post-Revolutionary Iran: Resisting Global and Regional Hegemony".

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Philips, *Everyday Arab Identity: The Daily Reproduction of the Arab World*, 59-61.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

Ahmad Said Esber (Adonis) argues that such regimes have reduced “the human richness of the Middle East to a single linguistic, cultural, racial, and religious totalitarianism; a uniform, monolithic, one-dimensional Arab culture obsessed and consumed by a need for oneness in thought, opinions, language, and belief.”²⁶⁹ The excessive deployment of notions like Arabism or Syrianism, and emphasis on the cult of individual leaders confined concepts like the nation to “a narrow, regurgitant, exclusivist culture, built solely on negating apostatizing, marginalizing, and obviating the other—that is in addition to incessantly accusing the other of treason should that other dare stand up to the one-culture chauvinism.”²⁷⁰ From this perspective, it is important to stress that throughout Syria’s modern history, the three ideological formations, Arab nationalism, Third World socialism, and Islamism (outlined by Dabashi) have dominated political or public discourse. These formations, which emerged in response to, and in conversation with, European colonialism, reflect outdated and exhausted exclusionary dichotomies deployed by the regimes in power, or segments of the opposition, in hopes of cementing political control.²⁷¹ As will be demonstrated in the coming section, based on Dabashi’s framework, the Syrian Uprising of 2011 was an attempt by the people to break away from the entrapment and oppressiveness of these formations, and to revive and liberate a repressed cosmopolitan worldliness. In other words, protestors were committed to the unity of Syria and sought to liberate their country from the entrapments of the old and exhausted post-colonial ideological dichotomies.

²⁶⁹ Franck Salameh, “Adonis, the Syrian Crisis, and the Question of Pluralism in the Levant” *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review*, Vol.36, Iss. 61, (2012): 38-39.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Post-colonialism*.

Chapter 3

FROM SYRIAN SPRING TO PROXY/CIVIL WAR

3.0 Introduction

On December 17, 2010, Muhammed Bouazazi (1984-2011) went down to the marketplace in his hometown of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia to sell fruits and vegetables, in hopes of earning enough money to support his mother and siblings.²⁷² Shortly after setting up in the marketplace, he was approached by a police officer, who ordered him to leave the premise, asserting that he had no legal permits to sell his produce. Bouazazi tried to negotiate a compromise and explain his position to the officer, hoping she would sympathize with him. However, she insisted that he must leave the premises. When Bouazazi resisted, the situation escalated. The police officer assaulted him physically and verbally and confiscated his scale. Feeling humiliated, Bouazazi went to the governor's office to voice his complaint, but was asked to leave. He threatened the governor, "if you don't see me, I'll burn myself."²⁷³ When the governor ignored his plea, he rushed to a nearby gas station and acquired a can of gasoline. He then returned to the governor's office, shouting outside its entrance in the middle of traffic "how do you expect me to make a living?" while soaking himself with gasoline.²⁷⁴ Moments later, he set himself on fire. This powerful act of protest sparked outrage in Tunisia and in the days that followed, hundreds of thousands of protestors took to the streets demanding freedom and social justice.²⁷⁵ President Zein Al-Abiden Bin Ali (1936-) tried to contain the situation by promising reforms, but was unable to sway the protestors. After over three weeks of demonstrations, Bin Ali fled the country, marking an end to his twenty-two years in power. The fall of Bin Ali inspired revolutionary movements throughout the Arab world. Rising unemployment, diminishing economic opportunities, and the increasing authoritarianism of state structures created the necessary conditions to allow for this type of mass revolutions to exist. In quick succession, protests swept across the Arab world, from Egypt to Libya to Bahrain to Syria to Yemen.

In the case of Syria, popular protests occupied the streets across the country, starting in March of 2011. Six years later, the once peaceful uprising has transformed into a grim proxy/civil war in which death and destruction have become inescapable realities. Through

²⁷² Joseph Pugliese, "Permanent Revolution: Mohamed Bouazizi's Incendiary Ethics of Revolt" *Journal of Law, Culture and the Humanities*, Vol. 10, Iss. 3 (2012): 409.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

engaging with the works of critical post-colonial scholars, this chapter will discuss the Syrian uprising within the context of the Arab Spring and will analyze how the once peaceful uprising transformed into a proxy civil war, with various competing states and groups on the ground. It will argue that the Syrian Uprising was a grassroots attempt to bring new meaning to Syrian national identity, consistent with the country's boundaries and reflective of its cosmopolitanism. Furthermore, the chapter will discuss how the once peaceful uprising transformed into a proxy civil war.

3.1 *Understanding the Arab Spring*

Misconceptions of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring caught observers and scholars by surprise, given how it began and spontaneously spread across the Arab world. There are a number of misconceptions about the Arab Spring: The first stresses that the Arab Spring was in reality part of a Western-imperial project, aiming to destabilize the Middle East.²⁷⁶ The second accounts for the uprisings through the prism of Islamic fundamentalism and sectarianism.²⁷⁷ The third stresses that such Spring was part of a third phase of global democratization, in which values of Western liberal democracies have triumphed.²⁷⁸ These approaches will be critiqued respectively in the coming paragraphs.

Many authoritarian regimes have deployed anti-colonial rhetoric, arguing that the Arab Spring was a foreign-inspired conspiracy that aimed at toppling local governments for their anti-imperial positions.²⁷⁹ Such regimes, framed the Arab Spring as being part of a Western-project aiming to destabilize the Middle East. For example, President Bashar al-Assad has made it clear at numerous occasions that there was no uprising in the country, stressing that Syria was facing a global conspiracy, carried out by Islamist extremists who aimed to destabilize the country because of its anti-Zionist positions of resistance.²⁸⁰ This perspective presents a flawed account by suggesting that the regimes of the Middle East are actually anti-colonial, anti-imperial regimes of resistance. In her article "Occidentalism as Counter Discourse", Xiaomai

²⁷⁶ For a critique of this idea see, Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Post-colonialism*.

²⁷⁷ John Bradley, *After the Arab Spring: How Islamist Hijacked the Middle East Revolts*, (United States: Palgrave MacMillian, 2012)

²⁷⁸ Ewan Harrison and Sara McLaughlin. *The Triumph of Democracy and the Eclipse of the West* (United States: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

²⁷⁹ For a critique of this idea see, Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Post-colonialism*, 233-236.

²⁸⁰ Carsten Wieland, "Asad's Decade of Lost Chances" in *The Syrian Uprising*. Edited by Carsten Wieland et al. (Scotland, UK: University of St. Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2014), 34.

Chen raises the point that many authoritarian regimes will often deploy anti-imperial rhetoric to justify their oppressive policies.²⁸¹ She writes, “If it is imperialistic for the Occident to misrepresent the Orient, then, the Orient can also anti-imperialistically use the Occident to achieve its own political aims at home.”²⁸² Furthermore, this narrative fails to take into account human agency. Around the Arab world, millions of ordinary people took to the streets to express their dissatisfaction and demand change. The link between the protest movements and Western conspiracy is non-existent. To be fair, though, global and regional powers have been involved in supporting different counter revolutionary forces in Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and Egypt, in hopes of cementing their political control. However, they did not cause the uprisings, but rather tried to shift the balance in their favour.²⁸³

In his book *After the Arab Spring*, John Bradley argues that the Arab Spring was an incomplete project, hijacked by the Islamist extremists, whose aim was to destabilize the “secular and progressive regimes of the Middle East.”²⁸⁴ He asserts that Arab regimes, in places such as Syria, Tunisia and Egypt, were not driven by a need to morally subjugate people, which is what drives Islamists. The Arab regimes were rather solely driven by the wish to retain power. He stresses that in the case of Tunisia, the regime “achieved this not through brutal repression, as the world came to believe, but rather by dramatically decreasing the living standards of the middle class.”²⁸⁵ From this perspective, he argues that it is a mistake to view the “revolts through the rose-tinted prism of either pan-Arab or Western ideals.”²⁸⁶ In the Arab world, he adds, “when the gift of democracy is unwrapped, it is the Islamists who spring out of the box” to hijack it.²⁸⁷ He cautiously takes a step back, arguing that Arabs welcome representative democracy, but that their uprisings are doomed to be hijacked by Islamists. He accounts for the Syrian and Bahraini cases based on a sectarian perspective, asserting that they embody a clash between Wahhabi counter-revolutionary forces and the Shiite axis.²⁸⁸

Mojtaba Mahdavi challenges such perspectives for orientalising Middle Eastern societies by reducing the region’s cultural, political and historical richness into this narrow perspective,

²⁸¹ Xiaomei Chen, “Occidentalism as Counter discourse: “He Shang” in Post-Mao China” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1992).

²⁸² *Ibid*, 710.

²⁸³ For example, in Bahrain, members of the Gulf Corporation Council, headed by Saudi Arabia, intervened militarily to dismantle the peaceful protest movement, with Western silence and support. In Egypt, the US along with its regional allies, played a critical role in prompting the 2013 coup against Egypt’s first democratically elected president Mohammed Morsi. In Libya, Western intervention under the pretense of “responsibility to protect”, extended beyond its mandate, became a project of regime change - see James Petras, *The Arab Revolt and the Imperialist Counterattack*, (2nd ed. Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, 2012)

²⁸⁴ Bradley, John. *After the Arab Spring: How Islamist Hijacked the Middle East Revolts*, 1-3.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid*.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 12.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 135-138.

where religious groups are boxed as fixed, united and uniform groups that operate collectively against one another.²⁸⁹ Such perspectives “contribute to the revival of an old discourse of Middle East exceptionalism, implying that the region is exceptionally immune to democratic movements, values and institutions.”²⁹⁰ He adds, while Arab Spring democratic forces “may appear, for the moment, largely repressed [they] will most likely return and recapture their social position. The quest for human dignity, social justice and freedom will continue to give rise to new democratic social movements in the region.”²⁹¹ These movements have resulted in a profound impact on post-colonial societies.²⁹² They “brought together secular and religious individuals, Muslims and non-Muslims, men and women, poor and middle class, transcending ethnic, religious, gender, class and ideological divides in these societies.”²⁹³ Mahdavi stresses that they “symbolized a potential paradigm shift towards a post-ideological, post-nationalist and post-Islamist discourse in the region.”²⁹⁴

Bradly’s focus on sectarianism as a factor to explain rivalry in Syria, fails to take into account the complexity of interstate political interests and the agency of actors, presenting a simplistic and on-the-surface analysis. As argued by Hakim Khatib, “in an ethnolinguistically and religiously fractionalized region such as the Middle East, religion is an effective means to mobilize the masses, preserve power for the ruling elites, keep the public in check etc.”²⁹⁵ Hence, religion becomes a way to legitimize different actions, not cause them. Lastly, his argument that Arab regimes (unlike Islamists) are not driven by a need to subjugate people is fundamentally inaccurate. The humiliation endured by Mohammed Bouazizi, his strong act of protest, and subsequent demonstrations are sufficient to falsify claims that such regimes were not seeking to subjugate the populace.²⁹⁶ Furthermore, by labeling some Arab regimes as progressive for being secular, he is in effect reducing the complexity of politics into a false secular-Islamist dichotomy, suggesting that progress is tied to state-sponsored secularism.²⁹⁷ This perspective fails to account for how Middle Eastern regimes have oppressed people in the name of secularism and suggests that Islam is inherently incapable of producing moderate views.

²⁸⁹ Mahdavi, “Post-Revolutionary Iran: Resisting Global and Regional Hegemony”.

²⁹⁰ Mojtaba Mahdavi “The Old is Dying” *India Seminar*, 2016.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁴ Mahdavi “Introduction: East Meets the West? The Unfinished Project of Contemporary Social Movements in the Middle East and Beyond”, 104.

²⁹⁵ Hakim Khatib, “Rivalry Between Saudi Arabia and Iran Is Not About the Victim but the Aggressor” *International Policy*, Vol.3, Iss. 1 (2016): 87

²⁹⁶ Abdulkhaleq Abdullah, “Repercussions of the Arab Spring on GCC States” *Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies*, 2012.

²⁹⁷ Mojtaba Mahdavi, “Muslims and Modernities: From Islamism to Post-Islamism”.

In their book *The Triumph of Democracy and the Eclipse of the West*, Ewan Harrison and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell examine the Arab Spring movement in light of Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" argument.²⁹⁸ In the 1990s, Fukuyama was widely criticized for arguing that with the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent democratization of Eastern European states, the world was progressing towards the "End of History", as values of Western liberal democracies have triumphed.²⁹⁹ He asserts that eventually all states will progress towards this path. In light of this thesis, Harrison and Mitchell assert that, "the Arab Spring vindicates the essence of Fukuyama's claim that an evolutionary dynamic is occurring in world politics that favours liberal democratic regimes over authoritarian models. The revolutions of 2011 reflect a powerful process of socialization through which democracy is spreading in the international system."³⁰⁰ They reason "with the end of the Cold War, a critical mass of democratic states emerged at a global level, creating a potent mix of moral and material pressures encouraging the spread of democracy."³⁰¹ This, they stress, "establishes a virtuous cycle or positive feedback loop in which the spread of democracy further strengthens the democratic community, thereby increasing pressures for democratization."³⁰² They conclude that the same "dynamics that lay behind the revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe caused the revolutions in the Middle East in 2011. Through a convergence of global forces, authoritarian states across the Arab world have come under pressure to liberalize."³⁰³ Hence, in other words, they argued that the Arab Spring was not locally produced, but rather reflects the triumph of neo-liberal notions of democracy. This account provides a flawed approach, suggesting that the Arab Spring emanated from Eastern desire to achieve Western values. This suggests the existence of a singular path of modernity, which can only be reached through European values.³⁰⁴ Based on this perspective, modernity and progress become associated with a superior West, while Eastern societies are exoticized and presented as inferior and lacking.³⁰⁵ Furthermore, Eastern societies become defined "not in terms of what they are but what they lack."³⁰⁶ This creates the West as a point of reference, discounting "the possibility that societies can modernize themselves by reinterpreting their own tradition and culture."³⁰⁷ Mojtaba Mahdavi and Andy Knight argue that this line of argument is typical with "Orientalist notion of

²⁹⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1st Edition, New York, USA: Free Press, 2006).

²⁹⁹ Harrison and McLaughlin, *The Triumph of Democracy and the Eclipse of the West*, 3.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 2-6.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p.2-6

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁰⁴ Mahdavi and Knight, *Towards the Dignity of Difference?*, 5.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

Muslim/Arab Exceptionalism – that is, the notion that Muslims/Arabs are exceptionally immune to democratic and civil rights movements.”³⁰⁸ This view has been utilized by “politicians and scholars” in the previous eras to “justify Western colonialism and paternalism; arguing that it was the civilizing mission of the West, and the white man’s burden to introduce Western values and institutions to so-called inferior and less advanced societies.”³⁰⁹ In contemporary time, the West presented itself as the “only society/civilization capable of adequately defending democracy and human rights” while the rest of the world is presented as being “incapable of adhering to, or resistant to, such noble modern, enlightenment values.”³¹⁰ Adding to Mahdavi and Knight’s argument, Hamid Dabashi problematizes in his book, *Can non-Europeans Think?*, such Orientalist views, stressing that non-Europeans have produced complex ideas, which are often widely ignored in the West.³¹¹ To him, the Arab Spring is a project, influenced and constructed locally, towards the creation of a uniquely local form of governance. Lastly, this approach presents a generous way of looking at Western powers as promoters of modernity and enlightenment, rather than instability in the region. Countries such as the US have for decades engineered coups and supported illiberal regimes around the world. In the context of the Arab Spring, Western powers, supported by their autocratic regional allies, played a critical role in supporting counter-revolutionary forces in places like Bahrain and Egypt.

Conceptualizing the Arab Spring: A Critical Post-Colonial Approach

Having outlined some common misconceptions, in this section the research will provide a survey of the literature on a critical study of the Arab Spring, outlining how the Arab Spring is conceptualized in the field. Through engaging with the works of Jacqueline and Shereen Ismael, Hamid Dabashi, Abdulkhaleq Abdullah, Mojtaba Mahdavi, Sadik Al-Azm, Asef Bayat, and Fawaz Gerges, the research will demonstrate how the Arab Spring was a locally produced phenomenon, driven by what Dabashi argues is a popular desire to liberate the nation from the post-colonial geography of domination.

Jacqueline and Shereen Ismael argue that there are two main ways in which the Arab Spring has been understood. The first suggests that it was an attempt by the masses to “chart a path independent of their colonial past, and strive for a politics and statehood that is

³⁰⁸ *Ibid*, xxi.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid*, xxii.

³¹⁰ *Ibid*.

³¹¹ Dabashi, *Can non-Europeans Think?* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2015).

disconnected from the legacy of the uncivil state.”³¹² The second highlights the “convergence of factors like demographic changes, structural factors, and the emergence of new technologies of dissent.”³¹³ They conclude that while the second set of factors has been extensively covered and studied, the underlying post-colonial civilizational project requires more attention. To them, the Arab Spring movement is a popular rejection of “the uncivil Arab State, which represents the historically-discontinuous and colonially-imposed oppressive state apparatus.”³¹⁴ They add that the oppressive regimes of the Middle East were constructed by colonial powers, and passed down to local post-colonial indigenous military rulers, where they were refined to withstand the test of time and persist in the decades to follow. The mass rejection of this “uncivil state represented not only a struggle for democracy, but an attempt to create an indigenous—authentic—new politics that represents the popular will.”³¹⁵

Hamid Dabashi argues that the Arab Spring was a non-violent “civil rights movement.”³¹⁶ It has been brought about by a transformation in consciousness, resulting in what he calls a *new* “geography of liberation”, which is “no longer mapped on colonial or cast upon postcolonial structures of domination.”³¹⁷ This, he stresses, requires us to break away from traditional modes of thought, rethink common terminologies, and come up with new metaphors. He asserts that the Arab Spring was not only an attempt to break from the uncivil state, but to challenge the very basis of the post-colonial state system.³¹⁸ He adds, this was not only an attempt to escape the colonial state imposed institutions and legacies, but also an attempt to escape the entrapment of the anti-colonial ideologies (which have oppressed the populations of the region in the name of anti-imperialism) and retrieve the repressed cosmopolitan worldliness.³¹⁹ This means a “second phase of decolonization and collective assertion of self-dignity, aiming to end the regime of knowledge production, which was fundamentally euro-centric in terms of its categories, terminologies and intellectual frame of reference.”³²⁰ Such regime of knowledge production “was a by-product of a colonial mindset, which was totally disconnected with the

³¹² Jacqueline Ismael and Shereen Ismael, “The Arab Spring and the Uncivil State” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol.35, Iss. 3 (2013): 230.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 232.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 231.

³¹⁶ Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Post-colonialism*, xviii

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

³²⁰ Alam, “Introduction: Making Sense of the Arab Spring”, xxi.

lives of common Arabs and sustained an authoritarian political order that was oppressive, abusive, arrogant and insensitive to dignity and aspiration of its own people.”³²¹

Similarly, Sadik Al-Azm argues that the Arab Spring movements represent the process of civil-societies in the making. ³²² They are an outcome of a “major epistemological, ideological and political breaks with a generally despotic, stagnant and arbitrary post-colonial political condition.”³²³ They aimed to go beyond the Arabist or Islamist dichotomies towards the production of a new civil society, reflecting popular desire for freedom and dignity.

Consistent with Dabashi’s cosmopolitan perspective, Mojtaba Mahdavi argues that the Arab Spring is a grassroots popular struggle that seeks to liberate the ‘nation’ from the dominance of the exclusionary Islamist-secular dichotomy. ³²⁴ Such an ideological dichotomy emerged in conversation with European colonialism, confining the political space to this exclusionary and false binary, which fails to account for the cosmopolitanism of Middle Eastern societies. However, Mahdavi stresses that the Arab Spring was not a rejection of the “public role of religion”, but rather challenges “the false dichotomy of religion and secularism”, ushering in a period of post-Islamism.³²⁵ He reasons that throughout the protest movements, there were no calls for religious governments by protestors, but their demands were rather rooted in a cosmopolitan tendency, focused on ‘freedom’ and ‘dignity’.

Abdulkhaleq Abdullallah argues that the Arab Spring represents a rupture from an era classified by “stasis, surrender, frustration and misery”, which extended for over four decades.³²⁶ This was not merely a struggle for democracy, but rather an attempt to break away from the past towards a future in which human *karama* (dignity) is respected. He adds, “it is an individualized state of being itself and a collective Arab consciousness that arises in the form of Arab Spring to rekindle the historical moments in the present and move the history forward.”³²⁷ Adding to this argument, Bessma Momani stresses the role the youth in the Middle East played in such movements, inspired by prospects of building brighter futures.³²⁸

³²¹ Ibid, xxiv.

³²² Sadik Al-Azm, “Arab Nationalism, Islamism and the Arab Uprisings” in *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*. Edited by Fawaz Gerges (New York, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 284.

³²³ Ibid, 284-285.

³²⁴ Mahdavi, “Muslims and Modernities: From Islamism to Post-Islamism”.

³²⁵ Ibid, 67.

³²⁶ Abdulkhaleq Abdullallah, “Repercussions of the Arab Spring on GCC States” *Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies*, 2012.

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ Bessma Momani, *Arab dawn: Arab Youth and the Demographic Dividend They Will Bring* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

Similar to Dabashi's, Mahdavi's and Ismael's approaches, Fawaz Gerges asserts that the Arab Spring is an outcome of a "psychological and epistemological rupture" which has "shaken the authoritarian order to its very foundation and introduced a new language and a new era of contentious politics and revolutions."³²⁹ Such revolutions sought "political emancipation and self-determination", challenging "dominant thinking about the resilience of authoritarianism" in the region.³³⁰ He adds, this revolutionary wave is unfolding, despite the backlash of counterrevolutionary movement.³³¹ In other words, he argues that the Arab Spring is a project of liberation, which will continue to unfold in the coming years.

Similar to the previously discussed arguments, Asef Bayat demonstrates in his book, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, that the Arab Spring movement was a locally produced phenomenon, emanating out of societal dissatisfaction with increasingly authoritarian state structures, coupled with rising unemployment and diminishing economic opportunities.³³² This allowed for the growth of a 'middle-class poor', which "played a key role in the Arab revolts of 2011."³³³ The middle-class poor consists of those who enjoy "college degrees, know about the world, use new media, and expect a middle-class lifestyle."³³⁴ However, they are "pushed by economic deprivation and marginalization to live the life of the traditional urban dispossessed in slums and squatter settlements and to undertake jobs in the largely precarious and low-status parallel economy— as taxi drivers, fruit sellers, street vendors, or messengers."³³⁵ The "lack of electoral power to express dissatisfaction" has transformed public spaces into arenas, where through a complex process of interactions and socialization, people communicated and shared their discontent.³³⁶ This cultivated a commonplace of shared grievances, permitting a sense of solidarity among the different and fragmented social groups (such as the poor, students, youth, workers, women). These public spaces became central to the Arab Spring movements as people from different religious, ethnic, social and economic backgrounds came together to express their dissatisfaction, voicing their common shared grievances.³³⁷ Bayat's argument captures the intricacy and dynamism of human agency and the

³²⁹ Fawaz Gerges, *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World* (New York, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1.

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Ibid, 1-2.

³³² Asef Bayat, *Life As Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (2nd ed. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), 1-4.

³³³ Ibid, 264.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Ibid, 12.

³³⁶ Ibid, 12-13.

³³⁷ Ibid, 13-14.

process in which common shared grievances paved for societal mobilization against the oppressive regimes of the Middle East.

The experience of Mohammed Bouazizi, as shown above, demonstrates that the Arab Spring is a locally produced phenomenon. He symbolized what Bayat calls the “middle class poor”, frustrated by the lack of economic opportunities and faced with increasingly authoritarian state structures.³³⁸ The solidarity people had with Bouazizi (in Tunisia and across the Arab world) and “with the personal indignity he suffered” demonstrates the commonality of frustration as people were simply fed up with the corrupt state institutions and desired a bright new future in which the ‘human’ is respected and treated with dignity.³³⁹ Hence, this research argues that the Arab Spring was a locally produced phenomenon, which emanated out of deep societal resentments, as the states of the Middle East became more authoritarian, failing to secure prospects for a brighter future. The uprisings aimed to break away from the colonial past and, as Dabashi put it, “the entrapment” of the exclusionary post-colonial ideologies, which are a product of a period of reactionary confrontation with European colonialism. It was an attempt to move away from the uncivil state system and establish an indigenous, inclusive political system, which retrieves the cosmopolitan worldliness of the Middle East.³⁴⁰ Within this context, this research will demonstrate in the next section how the Syrian Spring can be explained through this perspective. I will argue that it was a popular attempt to liberate ‘Syria’ from authoritarian repression and redefine ‘Syrianism’ in way consistent with a cosmopolitan worldliness, away from the entrapment of post-colonial ideologies.

3.2 *The Syrian Uprising*

Inspired by the revolutionary momentum throughout the Arab world, the Syrian uprising began to take shape in March 2011. On the sixth of that month, security forces arrested a group of schoolchildren for allegedly spray-painting anti-government graffiti in the southern city of Dara’a.³⁴¹ Among them was 13-year old Hamza Al-Khatib (1997-2011), who days after his arrest, perished at the hands of security forces after enduring tremendous torture. His corpse was returned to his parents, severely swollen and showing “bullet wounds on his arms, black eyes, cuts, marks consistent with electric shock devices, bruises and whip marks.” Furthermore,

³³⁸ Ibid, 264.

³³⁹ Gerges, *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*.

³⁴⁰ Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Post-colonialism*, 11.

³⁴¹ Shiv Malik et al. “Teenage victim becomes a symbol for Syria's revolution” *The Guardian*, 2011.

“his neck had been broken and his penis cut off.”³⁴² Pictures of Khatib quickly circulated across social media, enraging people and igniting calls for protest.³⁴³ The regime asserted that security forces did not kill or torture Hamza, insisting that conspirators killed him and “created the marks on his body, trying to give the people a Syrian equivalent to Bouazizi in order to agitate them.”³⁴⁴ This sparked outrage and resulted in subsequent protests across the country.

As events unfolded, on March 30, President Bashar Al-Assad addressed the nation. This was a “critical speech, eagerly awaited by Syrians.”³⁴⁵ Many people at this point “remained on the fence”, waiting to hear what the president had to say; they expected an apology and promise of political reform.³⁴⁶ However, to their disappointment, President Assad was defiant, and “absolutely refused to acknowledge reality.”³⁴⁷ He stressed that Syria was facing a global conspiracy and warned “Syria’s enemies work every day in an organized, systemic and scientific manner in order to undermine” the country’s stability.³⁴⁸ This was a clear indication that the regime was not willing to compromise. In the days that followed, thousands of protesters took to the streets in Dara’a chanting “God, Syria, Freedom and that’s all” and “Selmiyyeh, Selmiyyeh” or “Peaceful, Peaceful.”³⁴⁹ In responding to demonstrators, security forces utilized violence, killing and arresting protestors. By March, protests had intensified across Syria, increasing in size and scope. They were met with non-proportional government violence, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands.³⁵⁰ In July 2011, regime forces arrested, tortured and killed the popular singer Ibrahim Qashoush, who sang songs of defiance, reflecting “the anger that has been driving Syrians in almost every corner of the country onto the streets and in front of the bullets of the security forces.”³⁵¹ Appendix A, provides the translated lyrics of one of his most famous songs, “Down with Bashar and the Ba’ath Party.” The lyrics combine satire and demands for freedom and dignity. They emphasize the unity of the ‘Syrian nation’ in the fight for freedom, citing the illegitimacy of President Assad. This emphasis is demonstrated through a direct reference to the unity of the Syrian nation, from the Allawi majority cities of Baniyas and Lattika, to Jabel al-Druze in southern Syria, to Dara’a, Deir al-Zour and Hama etc. The song also declares the determination and willingness of protesters to sacrifice their lives for freedom.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Wieland, “Asad’s Decade of Lost Chances”, 30-34.

³⁴⁵ Yassin-Kasseb and Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 41.

³⁴⁶ Ibid, 40-41.

³⁴⁷ Ibid, 41.

³⁴⁸ Ibid, 41-42.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Wieland, “Asad’s Decade of Lost Chances”, 30-34.

³⁵¹ Elie Chalala, “Silencing the Singer” *Al Jadid*, Vol. 16, no. 63 (2011).

Qashoush became another symbol of the uprising as his songs were repeated in various protests across the country.³⁵² His death only fuelled the motivation of protesters, as demonstration quickly spanned all across Syria from Aleppo to Deir Al Zour, to Homs, to Hama, to Damascus and Dara'a.

It is important to lay out the regime's position clearly before proceeding with the discussion. The Syrian regime refused to acknowledge the existence of peaceful protests, insisting that the country was facing a global conspiracy, carried out by Salafi-Wahhabi extremists supported by foreign powers, because of the Syrian Government's anti-Zionist positions of resistance (*mumana'a*).³⁵³ State media consistently deployed conspiracy theories, supporting the "regime's narrative of victimhood."³⁵⁴ As far as the Syrian media was concerned, there were no anti-government protests. Videos and pictures of protests, which were emerging out of Syria, were said to be staged outside the country. Al-Dounia television, one of the regime's official network, insisted that Al-Jazeera News Agency had constructed model towns of Syrian cities in Qatar's dessert to stage weekly demonstrations and discredit the regime.³⁵⁵ Al-Dounia also claimed that conspirators staged the numerous pictures and videos showing regime violence against protesters, as part of their plot to destabilize Syria. The media also played a critical role in deifying Assad; he was endlessly praised in songs, pro-Assad protests and nationalist anti-imperial rhetoric.³⁵⁶ He was presented as the saviour of nation, who is loved by all Syrians. Such denial of reality and deification of Assad heightened popular discontent, intensifying the gap between regime and people.

The labeling of protestors as Wahhabi terrorists and the regime's reliance on militias such as the *shabbiha* aggravated Syrians and contributed to the disconnect between government and people.³⁵⁷ The *shabbiha* forces, consisting of volunteer pro-government individuals, had committed considerable massacres against protesters since the beginning of the crisis.³⁵⁸ Among the most notable was the 2012 Houla massacre in which Syrian forces backed by *shabbiha* entered the village of Houla and massacred all 108 inhabitants.³⁵⁹ The UN confirmed that "many of the victims had been killed by close-range gunfire or knife attacks."³⁶⁰

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Post-colonialism*, 232.

³⁵⁴ Yassin-Kasseb and Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 41.

³⁵⁵ Ibid, 40.

³⁵⁶ Ibid, 40-41.

³⁵⁷ Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (USA: University of California Press, 2013).

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ BBC "Syria crisis: Most Houla victims 'were executed'" *British Broadcasting Corporation*, May 29, 2012.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

While continuing to deploy nationalist, anti-colonial, pan-Arabist rhetoric, the response of the regime's militias to protestors contained a sectarian tone.³⁶¹ This intensified the sectarian dynamics of the conflict.³⁶² Gilbert Achcar argues that the "regime's increasingly blind, deadly violence and the accumulation of sectarian massacres perpetrated by its special forces or its *shabbiha*" provoked "reactions of the same general sort from Sunni fighters, who are, moreover, being egged on by the Saudi Wahhabis' sectarian propaganda."³⁶³ Adding to this argument Fawaz Gerges asserts that the regime mobilized supporters by using sectarian rhetoric, which allowed "ultraconservative Salafist ideology to form" and gain influence in the country.³⁶⁴

However, despite the regime's efforts, the uprising remained peaceful early on, and maintained a non-sectarian tone. Protestors were committed to a free and democratic Syria. This can be observed through analyzing the naming of the weekly protests. Every week, "the main Syrian Revolution Facebook page posts a poll and calls on Syrians to choose among different slogans submitted by the major activist groups."³⁶⁵ The slogans or names would represent specific demands or a guiding theme of the protests in the respective week.³⁶⁶ The table in Appendix B includes the titles of all weekly protests for the years 2011-2012. Through examining these themes, and videos of the subsequent demonstrations (posted on the Syrian Revolution 2011 page), the research has found that during the early weeks of the uprising, the demands of the protesters were confined to freedom, social justice and dignity. As evident, the first Friday of protest was titled "uprising of dignity", the second "pride", the fourth "defiance", the fifth "determination", the tenth "freedom", the seventieth "no dialogue, we demand freedom", the twenty-second "we will not kneel", the twenty-fourth "patience and fortitude" etc. Furthermore, the naming of the weekly protests reflected the country's diversity. For example, the sixth week of demonstrations was named "Good Friday" paralleling the suffering of Jesus Christ to the Syrian people. The tenth week was named "Azadi", Kurdish for freedom. The fourteenth week was named after Saleh al-Ali, a famous anti-colonial Allawi revolutionary. Furthermore, other weeks were dedicated to the tribes, women, and children.

In the examined sample of protest footage, posted on the Syrian Revolution 2011 page, the research has found a remarkable consistency in message.³⁶⁷ In addition to calling for freedom, social justice and dignity, protestors chanted slogans such as "one, one, one, the Syrian

³⁶¹ Wieland, "Asad's Decade of Lost Chances", 34.

³⁶² Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, 185.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Fawaz Gerges. *ISIS: A History* (New Jersey, USA: Princeton University Press 2016), 15.

³⁶⁵ Basma Atassi and Cajsa Wikstrom "The battle to name Syria's Friday protests" *Aljazeera News Network*, April 30, 2012.

³⁶⁶ Syrian Revolution Network "Syrian Revolution Network" *Syrian Revolution Network Facebook*, accessed [Jan 20, 2017].

³⁶⁷ Syrian Revolution Network "Syrian Revolution Network".

people are one”, “Syria is ours and not for the house of Assad”, “death over living in humiliation”, “long live Syria, and down with Bashar al-Assad”, “We will remove the Baathists”, “the Syrian nation will not be humiliated”, and “the People want to topple the regime” (See Appendix C, for a list of Most Common Protest Slogans during the Syrian Uprising). Such slogans demonstrate a commitment to a free Syria, away from the Ba’athist regime of Bashar al-Assad.

Based on the analysis, this research argues that protestors were committed to a unified Syria, as a political entity and a source of identity. They were not seeking an Islamist, a pan-Arabist, a separatist, a Ba’athist socialist or a sectarian vision, but were rather united by prospects of creating a locally produced alternative that would maintain national harmony and retrieve the country’s cosmopolitanism. The spontaneity and leaderless character of Syria uprising, where people from very different social, economic, religious, gender and ethnic backgrounds came to demand freedom, social justice and dignity is evidence of the cosmopolitan worldliness sought by protestors. In other words, the cosmopolitan character of the uprising is consistent within the Syria’s geographic boundaries. The regime’s criminalization of the protest movements and personification of Syrian identity with Assad warranted the rise of conflicting notions of Syria: one synonymous with Assad as the saviour of Syria, the other being a cosmopolitan alternative to Assadism.

3.3 The Rise of the Militant Opposition

From approximately May until July of 2011, the Syrian Uprising remained peaceful. As the regime’s violence continued to wreak havoc on protestors, the uprising began to militarize. Yassin-Kasseb argues the militarization of resistance became inevitable, given that “residential [neighbourhoods] were subjected to military attacks”, neighbourhoods “experienced the horror of children tortured to death”, and “young men were randomly picked up and beaten.”³⁶⁸ Furthermore, Assaad al-Achi stresses that the threat of sexual violence in particular pushed people towards arms.”³⁶⁹ He reasons, that in a conservative society like Syria, sexual violence results in considerable emotional reactions. The regime’s reliance on sexual violence became standard practice since December of 2011. Al-Achi stresses, “every time the army went into towns, the first thing soldiers did was go into homes and start raping women in front” of their families.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁸ Yassin-Kasseb and Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 79.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 79.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid*.

Consequently, as evident in Appendix B, the themes of the weekly protests began to take on a new form by the seventh month, as calls for international protection and intervention began to permeate the rhetoric of protestors. For example, during the protests of the 26th week (which was named “international protection”) hundreds of thousands of protestors chanted for international assistance and called for action against the regime’s brutality.³⁷¹ In the 33rd week (which was named “No Fly Zone”) protestors called for the implementation of a No-Fly Zone, similar to the Libyan case, citing the illegitimacy of the Assad regime.³⁷² In the 38th week (which was named “A no-fly buffer zone is our demand”) protesters called on the international community to intervene and create a buffer zone, which would allow civilians and army defectors escape to without fear of Syrian military activity.³⁷³

As the Syrian regime’s oppressive apparatus continued to wreak havoc across the country, the Syrian Army began to face the problem of defections.³⁷⁴ The first officer to defect was Lieutenant-Colonel Hussein Harmoosh, who published his defection video on YouTube on June 9th, 2011.³⁷⁵ His defection was not only the first, but also “was the most widely noticed and influential of all, introducing a new vocabulary of resistance, specifically the Free Syrian Army label.”³⁷⁶ In the YouTube video he

held his ID card towards the screen and declared his defection from the regime’s army to the ‘ranks of Syrian youth, alongside a number of the Free Syrian Arab Army’. He gave as the new army’s purpose ‘the protection of the unarmed protestors demanding freedom and democracy’, and condemned the mass killing of civilians, ‘particularly the massacre at Jisr al-Shughour’. After reminding Assad’s soldiers that ‘We have sworn in the army to point weapons only at the enemy, and not at our people,’ he appealed ‘to all the free people of the world: the people of Syria intend to board the boat of freedom and democracy with bare chests and olive branches, so help them achieve this.’ He ended his statement by repeating the anti-sectarian slogan ‘One, One, One, the Syrian People are One’.³⁷⁷

Weeks later, he appeared in another video announcing the creation of the *Liwa’ el-Zubat al-Ahrar* (Free Officers Brigade) and calling on military officers to abandon the Syrian regime and protect the protestors.³⁷⁸ On July 4th, 2011 Colonel Riyad al-As’ad, from the Syrian Air force defected and joined Harmoosh.³⁷⁹ Days later, Harmoosh and Al-As’ad jointly announced the

³⁷¹ Aljazeera News Network “13 Qateel Bijommat el-Himaya El-Daaliyah” *Aljazeera News Arabic* (2011)

³⁷² Aljazeera News Network “Entilaq Jum’at El-Hadir El-Jawi” *Aljazeera News Arabic* (2011)

³⁷³ Russia Today “Nashitoun Souriyoon: 14 Qateel fi Jum’at el-Mantiqa el-Azela Matlabona” *Russia Today Arabic* (2011)

³⁷⁴ Aljazeera Report “al-Mo’arada al-Souriyah el-Mosalaha” *Aljazeera News Agency Arabic* (2016)

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Robin Yassin-Kasseb and Leila Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 83-84.

³⁷⁷ Ibid, 84.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ Aljazeera Report “al-Mo’arada al-Souriyah el-Mosalaha” *Aljazeera News Agency Arabic* (2016)

creation of *el-Jaysh el-Souri al-Hor* (the Free Syrian Army (FSA)).³⁸⁰ This was a turning point in the Syrian crisis, signalling early militarization of the uprising. In the months that followed, tens of thousands defected and formed decentralized local anti-government groups, under the umbrella of the FSA.³⁸¹ The FSA was of course “an umbrella term”; it “was never a unified army, but a collection of militias, some mobile, most are local and defensive”, unified by the goal of “destroying the regime and establishing a democratic state.”³⁸² Initially, such militias confined their activities to protecting protesters from regime violence, but later began to take on a more offensive form. Robin Yassin-Kasseb and Leila al-Shami argue that

Army defectors formed the core of the growing anti-Assad force. Very often they acted as the civilians did – they returned to their home towns, where they organised with their neighbours. These soldiers had been ordered to shoot protestors, and very often did, lest they themselves were shot by the intelligence officers at their rear. A combination of guilt, horror and fury propelled many to escape when they could, but perhaps most were killed in the attempt or hunted down in the following days. Usually they took only one weapon with them; sometimes they managed to break weapons out of stores. In every case they had to be prepared to fight to resist capture. Those who sheltered them had to face the fury too.³⁸³

Gilbert Achcar argues, the regime’s “monopoly of air power” has “provided the regime with the most decisive military edge. The regime felt safe enough to indulge in cheaper and more murderous low altitude strikes using helicopters as bombers.”³⁸⁴ He adds that the opposition had asked endlessly for portable missile defense systems to “curtail the regime’s advantage”, but such requests were vetoed by the US despite the willingness of countries such as Turkey and Qatar.³⁸⁵ Therefore, despite the militarization of the conflict, it remained a “one-sided regime assault against a civilian population only occasionally defended by poorly armed and uncoordinated militias.”³⁸⁶ This created a sense of frustration in Syria, as people were increasingly convinced that international support for their cause was unattainable. While the conflict was militarizing, it is important to highlight that “Syrian revolutionaries didn’t make a formal collective decision to pick up arms - quite the opposite; rather, a million individual decisions were made under fire.”³⁸⁷ It was not that suddenly protestors decided to combat the state. This was part of a larger process of militarization, which gradually took form as a response

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Yassin-Kasseb and Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 85.

³⁸² Ibid, 85-86.

³⁸³ Ibid, 87.

³⁸⁴ Achcar, *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising*. 19.

³⁸⁵ Ibid, 19.

³⁸⁶ Yassin-Kasseb and Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 78.

³⁸⁷ Ibid, 79.

to the regime's violent policies, coupled with increasing international intervention in support of Assad.

It is worth mentioning that early army defectors that joined the FSA were not driven by any secular, nationalist or Islamist ideologies. Their defections came as a response to the regime's policies. Among the early defectors were Riyadh al-As'ad, Abdul-Razak Tlas, Maher al-Ni'ami, Malik Kurdi and Ammar al-Wawi and Yosif Yahya. Tlas justified his defection as a response to the Syrian Army's "violent policies against protestors".³⁸⁸ In his defection video, posted on YouTube, Tlas stated "I joined the Syrian Arab Army to protect the people, not the Assad regime", urging officers to defect and "resist the tyrannical regime".³⁸⁹ A-Ni'ami declared his "defection from the Republican Guard and the murderous Syrian Army in protest of the illegitimate regime's violent policies."³⁹⁰ He called on his colleagues in the Syrian Army "to join the ranks of the Syrian people and stand against the regime's oppressiveness".³⁹¹ Kurdi announced his "defection from the Syrian Navy" and decision to "join the Free Syrian Army", citing his opposition to the regime's "indiscriminate violence against peaceful demonstrators".³⁹² He urged the international community "to stop the flood of blood in Syria" and "members of the Syria army to defect and stand on the side of the people".³⁹³ Similar to the aforementioned examples, al-Wawi declared that his "defection from the Syrian Army" was "in responses to its mass atrocities against those calling for freedom" urging others "to join the ranks of defectors and defend the protestors."³⁹⁴

However, by late 2012, the FSA as a military opposition began to lose ground, given its failure to act as one unified army.³⁹⁵ Filling this void, various groups began to emerge, driven by specific ideologies, which as will be argued were quite contrary to the revolutionary principles. The rise of such groups would not have been possible, if it was not for the geopolitical struggle over Syria, where different countries resorted to the sporadic arming of different groups in hopes of cementing their political positions.³⁹⁶ This resulted in the decentralization of the

³⁸⁸ MrBassammo "Enshiqaq al-Batal al-Thabit Abdul-Razzak Tlas" Published [Sept 9, 2011] YouTube Video, 1:01. Accessed [Apr 9, 2017].

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

³⁹⁰ Freedom Aleppo "Enshiqaq Maher Ismael al-Rahoon al-Ni'ami" Published [Jul 4, 2011] YouTube Video, 3:50. Accessed [Apr 9, 2017].

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² MC Center "Enshiqaq al-Aqeed Malik Kurdi min al-Bahriya al-Souriyyah wa Endemamih Lil-Jayish al-Souri al-Hor" Published [Aug 29, 2011] YouTube Video, 2:10. Accessed [Apr 9, 2017]

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Al-Naqeeb Ammar al-Wawi "al-Naqeeb Ammar al-Wawi wa Majmo'a min al-Monshaqeen" Published [Dec 3, 2012] YouTube Video, 1:55. Accessed [Apr 9, 2017]

³⁹⁵ Ibid, 85-86.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

conflict and allowed for the rise of numerous militias. Given the importance of the geopolitical context, the next section will provide a brief overview discussing the complexity of the geopolitical disputes over Syria, focusing primarily on the main actors.

While it is important to keep in mind the rationale behind the decision of those who resorted to military means, to combat the state, it is equally important to assess whether the militarization of the Uprising (by the opposition forces) retrieved and revived Syria's repressed cosmopolitanism. By resorting to military means, the opposition played a critical role in derailing the revolution, away from its popular base and cosmopolitan objectives. The regime responded with horrific violence, and under the pretenses of fighting "terrorism", it shelled entire cities causing unending suffering and misery. Six years after the uprising, it is clear that militarization of the legitimate resistance did not serve the objective sought by protestors, as the country is torn in a destructive civil war.³⁹⁷ The failure of early militarization and the regime's increasing violence precipitated the ground for the rise of counterrevolutionary forces as will be discussed in chapter 4.

3.4 *Towards a Geopolitical Proxy/Civil War*

International response to the Syrian crisis has evolved since 2011, as the country slipped into a prolonged geo-political proxy/civil war. The US's vague approach to the Syrian crisis under President Obama infuriated regional allies like Saudi Arabia³⁹⁸, Turkey³⁹⁹ and Qatar who

³⁹⁷ Stephen Zunes "Supporting Non-Violence in Syria" *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 8, 2013.

³⁹⁸ The ongoing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran stems primarily "from Saudi perception of the Iranian 'threat'." The "fall of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the war in Iraq" have resulted in "sweeping changes in the strategic landscape of the Middle East, radically shifting the regional balance of power." Furthermore, the 2006 Hezbollah war against Israel "put the al-Saud in the awkward position of being upstaged on the Israeli-Palestinian issue by a non-Arab power." There was a "particular concern in Riyadh of Iran's ability to challenge the legitimacy of the al-Saud before regional and domestic audiences by upstaging them on pan-Arab issues such as Palestine." Hence faced with a more powerful and popular Iran, Saudi Arabia has been heavily investing in building up its capabilities to counter its nemesis's growing influence. Given its tense relations with Tehran, Saudi Arabia saw a window of opportunity to shift the balance of power in its favor, by stepping up its support of anti-Assad forces. For more on Saudi's position see Frederic Wehrey, et al. "Saudi-Iranian Relations since the Fall of Saddam." *RAND* (2009) and Mohammed Al Kawaz, *Al-Alqat El Souodiya El-Iraniah 2011-1979: Dirsah Estratigeia* (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Ghida'a Publishing, 2014)

³⁹⁹ Semra Sevi argues, "Since 2008, Turkey has gone from supporting the Bashar al-Assad regime, to encouraging Assad to undertake democratic reforms, to shifting to a policy of regime change, a full 180-degree turn in less than three years." Initially, Ankara tried to persuade Bashar Al-Assad to stop cracking down on protestors and initiate a national dialogue. However, Assad was not willing to compromise or acknowledge the existence of an anti-government uprising, claiming that terrorists are targeting his country. Frustrated by Assad's inflexibility, and hoping to extend its geo-political influence in the region, Ankara began to play a more active role in Syria, supporting various anti-Assad militias throughout the conflict. Semra Sevi argues that in President Erdogan's view, "the greatest challenge to Turkey's national interest is the threat from Syria's Kurds, who have taken control of territory in northern Syria and established an alignment with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey." For more on Turkey's Foreign policy, see Ziya Öniş "Turkey and the Arab Spring: Between Ethics and Self-Interest" *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 14, No.3, (2012) and Philip Robins, "The Foreign Policy of Turkey" in *The Foreign Policies of the Middle East States*, 2nd ed. Edited by Raymond Hinnebusch & Anoushirvan Ehteshami (Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 2014) and Semra Sevi "Turkey's Twists And Turns On Syria" *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2014)

were determined to topple Assad through any means necessary.⁴⁰⁰ They resorted to a sporadic arming of various groups declaring hostility to Assad, contributing to the rise of various separatist and Islamist groups, driven by specific political aspirations.⁴⁰¹ On the other hand, Russia⁴⁰² and Iran⁴⁰³ provided all necessary support to the Syrian regime, which allowed it to persist and become more violent. Israel has also played a critical role throughout the crisis raiding Syria over twenty-one times from from 2012-2017.⁴⁰⁴ This is arguably among the most direct airstrikes conducted into the country, after Russian and the US totals.⁴⁰⁵ The ultimate aim is to ensure Syria, a historical rival, would never constitute a security threat again.⁴⁰⁶

In his book, *The Battle for Syria*, Christopher Philips argues that regional funding and support of militant Islamist groups contributed to the “division, radicalization and failure of the opposition” to act as a unified entity.⁴⁰⁷ Qatar, followed by Turkey and Saudi Arabia, have quickly and sporadically armed various anti-Assad groups on the ground.⁴⁰⁸ This polarized the conflict, allowing for the rise of conflicting and ideologically incompatible factions, paving the

⁴⁰⁰ Achcar. *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising*.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid, 19.

⁴⁰² Russia has increasingly adopted assertive policies in recent years, aiming to cement its position in the international system. To the surprise of the world, Moscow militarily intervened in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014. In the latter intervention, Russia formally annexed Crimea. In 2015, the world was caught off guard once again when Russia deployed its military in Syria in support of the Assad regime. Angela Stent argues that Russia’s position is driven by a desire “to replace what it sees as a coercive U.S.-led global order with one in which the West respects Russia’s interests.” She adds that Putin’s decision to intervene in Syria is rooted in concerns about Russian power and influence in the region.” Given the chaos in Libya, Syria and Iraq, Putin is convinced of Western failure to comprehend “consequences of removing the ruling authoritarian regimes.” Lastly, she adds that by intervening in Syria, Russia aims to prompt up the regime of Bashar al-Assad and cement its position as a decisive player in determining the future of Syria. For more on Russia’s foreign policy, see Stenet, Angela “Putin’s Power Play in Syria” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 95, Iss.1 (2016).

⁴⁰³ The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran resulted in the ouster of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlav, who was an important US ally, constituted a major challenge to the existing balance of power. The new regime of Ruhallah Khomeini was perceived as a threat to America’s allies in the region, particularly Israel. Aiming to cripple the newly established Islamic regime of Ayatollah Khomeini, Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, backed by Persian Gulf Arab states and the US. This ushered in a violent period in Middle Eastern history, as the two countries fought for over eight years and neither side was able to achieve victory. Given the tense relations between Syria and Iraq, Hafez Al-Assad sought closer relationship with Tehran, fearing a victorious Iraq would emerge dominantly in the Arab world. Furthermore, Assad saw Iran as a reliable ally against Israel, which had occupied the Syrian Golan Heights since 1967. Relations between both countries proposed and warmed throughout the years. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 respectively, and George’s placement of Iran and Syria as part of the Axis of Evil, brought both countries together as they cooperated economically, militaristically and politically, supporting various groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, in hopes of cementing their position in the Middle East. Given the long history of warm relations and strategic alliance between both states, Tehran quickly stepped in early in the crisis in the support of President Assad. For more on Iran’s foreign policy, see Mahdavi, Mojtaba “Post-Revolutionary Iran: Resisting Global and Regional Hegemony” in *The International Relations of the Contemporary Middle East*, edited Tareq Ismael and Glenn Perry. Florence, GB: Routledge, 2013.

⁴⁰⁴ Israel Today “Syria [News Profile]” *Israel Today News Agency*, accessed [May 10, 2017] .

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Larry Hanauer argues that Israel has five core objectives in Syria. Those are: (1) containing the Iranian ‘threat’ by constraining “Tehran’s ability to operate freely in Syria” and preventing it from “transferring weapons to Hezbollah”; (2) “minimizing Russian political and military influence”; (3) “promote a weak Assad regime”; (4) “delegitimize Syrian claims to the Golan Heights”; and (5) “constrain Sunni militants but not necessarily ISIS.” This position combines between pragmatism and political realism. For more on Israel’s Syria policy – see Larry Hanauer, “Israel’s Interests and Options in Syria” *RAND Corporation*, 2016.

⁴⁰⁷ Christopher Philips, *The Battle for Syria* (New Haven, USA: Yale University Press, 2016).

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

way for the rise of various Jihadi Islamist groups. Because of their funding/support to Islamist groups, the Free Syrian Army began to crumple as an opposition force only to be replaced by such conservative factions, driven by the desire to establish Islamic Caliphates. Adding to this argument, Gilbert Achcar argues that the conflict today is “caught between the hammer of an increasingly murderous regime, backed by increasingly sectarian Lebanese and Iraqi fundamentalist proxies of Iran and the anvil of increasingly sectarian and fanatical Sunni-fundamentalist anti-Assad regime forces.”⁴⁰⁹

On the ground today, there are “as many as 1,000 armed opposition groups in Syria”, commanding tens of thousands of fighters.⁴¹⁰ They differ on the ideological scale and can be grouped into four main categories. Those include regime forces and allies, the secular rebels, Islamist Jihadi groups, and Kurdish factions. Within each of these categories, there are numerous groups ranging in size and position on the ideological scale.⁴¹¹ The Assad regime and its allies include the Iranian revolutionary guards, Russian forces and a collection of militias including Tho’il Fiqr Birgade, Liwa’ Abo Fadil Al-Abbas, Al-Najba’ Movement, Hezbollah, Badr Organization, League of the Righteous, Ashab Ahil Al-Haq, al-Ba’ath Brigades and the Syrian National Defence Forces.⁴¹² Among the secular rebels, numerous groups pledge allegiance to the idea of Free Syrian Army like Al-Jibha al Janobiyah, the Northern Storm Brigade and Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyah, backed by Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.⁴¹³ There are numerous Jihadi groups ranging on the ideological scale and level of extremism. Those include Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, Suqour al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Liwa al-Haqq, Kataib Ansar al-Sham, Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades, Fattih al-Sham Front, ISIS, Tajammu Ansar al-Islam, Yarmouk Martyrs' Brigade, Kurdish Islamic Front and Jaysh al-Muhajirin wa al-Ansar.⁴¹⁴ Many of these Islamist groups have received funding/support from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, as well as from private donors in the Gulf.⁴¹⁵ Finally, Kurdish groups include the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People’s Protection Units (YPG). Such groups are primarily supported, armed and funded by the United States.⁴¹⁶

Given the diversity and scope of the groups operating in Syria, the next chapter will confine the analysis to a representative sample of the most prominent groups from the specified

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ BBC “Guide to the Syrian rebels” *British Broadcasting Corporation*, Dec.13, 2013.

⁴¹¹ Stanford University “Mapping out Militants: Syria” *Stanford University*, accessed [April 3, 2017].

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

categories. It will do the following: (1) discuss their history, source of funding/support and organization, and (2) analyse what Syrian identity means in the eyes of the contending groups.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the contemporary Syrian crisis, tracing its evolution from a peaceful uprising in which protestors called for freedom, dignity and social justice towards a prolonged geo-political proxy civil war. The chapter demonstrated that the uprising was a popular attempt to retrieve a repressed cosmopolitan worldliness that has been shadowed by the dominance of exhausted ideological dichotomies, which emerged in conversation with European colonialism and dominated discourse on identity for the decades that followed. Protestors from different social, economic, ethnic/religious backgrounds came together calling to demand freedom, social justice and dignity. As argued by Dabashi, they were seeking to liberate the nation from the entrapment of the aforementioned ideological formations.

The militarization of the conflict complicated matters on the ground, and shadowed the revolutionary sentiments sought by protestors.⁴¹⁷ The regime became more confident, resorting to increasingly violent methods to crush dissent. Stephen Zunes argues that violence has only resulted in an endless cycles of death and destruction.⁴¹⁸ It did not retrieve cosmopolitan, and it only resulted in an unwinnable war. International intervention in Syria has sidetracked the uprising, allowing for the rise of various incompatible groups on the ground. As discussed, there are over 1,000-armed factions operating throughout country. They radically differ on the ideological scale. The next chapter will conduct analyze what Syrian identity means in the eyes of these groups.

⁴¹⁷ Zunes "Supporting Non-Violence in Syria" Foreign Policy".

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

Chapter 4

SYRIA IN THE EYES OF THE CONTENDING GROUPS

4.0 Introduction

The once peaceful Syrian uprising has transformed into a bitter geo-political proxy war with various groups operating on the ground, ranging across the ideological spectrum. Syria's secular FSA rebels have continued to lose ground since 2013 to hardened "better financed fighters with ties to networks that provide them with superior weapons to take on the regime."⁴¹⁹ It is important to note that given the incompatibility of the different groups in Syria, inter-rebel clashes have been common throughout the crisis. The patterns of these clashes are complex, but can be summarized as follows: The FSA has clashed with almost all of the Jihadi and Kurdish groups, while Jihadi groups have clashed among each other, and with Kurdish factions. The majority of these groups have also clashed with the Assad regime. Just recently, in the province of Idlib, Fateh al-Sham launched a large scale attack on FSA positions accusing the group of "conspiring against it."⁴²⁰ This resulted in a response from other Islamist factions including Ahrar al-Sham, which vowed to fight back. The irony is that Ahrar al-Sham and the FSA had themselves clashed at numerous occasions, more recently in the city of Azaz.⁴²¹ This example demonstrates the politics and complexities behind inter-rebel disputes

This chapter will analyze primary and secondary sources to examine what Syrian identity means in the eyes of contending groups. This chapter will analyze and problematize the identity discourse of conflicting groups and outline where they place Syria in their ideologies. In so doing, the research will confine the analysis to a representative sample, reflecting the ideological diversity of the groups operating in the country. The sample will consist of the major groups, which can be summarized into three main categories. Those are (1) Syrian regime forces and allies, (2) militant Islamist groups and (3) Kurdish factions. This chapter will demonstrate that the analyzed groups subscribe to ideologies and notions of identity, which have traditionally been excluded from the official regime discourse on identity. The crisis in the country was an opportunity for such ideologies to resurface more dominantly and cement their respective positions throughout the Syrian geography. More specifically, the research will argue the

⁴¹⁹ Bessma Momani, "Is Syria a Terminal Case?" *OpenCanada*, 2013.

⁴²⁰ Tom Perry, "Jihadists Crush Syria Rebel Group, in a Blow to Diplomacy" *Reuters*, 2017,

⁴²¹ Tom Perry, "Syrian Rebels Clash with Each other North of Aleppo" *The Globe and Mail*, 2016.

following: (1) groups supporting the regime have increasingly become committed to an Assadist, rather than a cosmopolitan Syrian identity; (2) Islamist groups are not necessarily and entirely committed to Syria, but are dedicated to the establishment of varying Islamist systems of governance; (3) Kurdish factions are driven by a desire to achieve national autonomy, and are not necessarily committed to a unified Syria.

4.1 *Regime Forces and Allies*

The Syrian regime has relied on a network of allies and militias throughout the crisis. They can be classified into three main components: (1) local Syrian militias such as the Ba'ath Brigade, National Defense Forces and Desert Eagles (Suqur al-Sahara), (2) foreign militias such as Tho'il Fiqar Birgade, Liwa' Abo Fadil Al-Abbas, Al-Najba' Movement, Hezbollah, Badr Organization, League of the Righteous, and Asaib Ahil Al-Haq; and (3) foreign powers such as Russia and Iran. This section will analyze a sample of the Syrian militias to demonstrate that such groups are committed to Assad and/or to their own political interests, but not necessarily to Syria. Assad, in their rhetoric, is presented as the saviour and the protector of the country, who is defying all odds and global conspiracies.

The Ba'ath Brigades

Among the militias fighting for Assad is the Al-Ba'ath Brigades, led by Hilal Hilal. Such Brigades root their ideology in Ba'athist Arab nationalism. In a 2014 interview with Al-Miadeen TV, Hilal blamed a "foreign conspiracy for destabilising Syria, stressing that Syrians of all socio-economic and religious backgrounds are unanimously united by their endless love for the great commander President Bashar al-Assad."⁴²² He adds that the great leader, Bashar al-Assad, has "earned this unconditional love of the people for his resilience in standing in the face of worldly conspiracies."⁴²³ He asserts, the "Syrian nation is united by this love for the great leader, which is visible in the people's slogan on the street."⁴²⁴ He cites Assad's 2014 election "victory" as evidence of his popular support. Consistent with the regime's rhetoric, throughout the interview, Hilal stresses the role of Arab nationalism in the fight against global dominance. He reasons, "the state of the Arab world has become chaotic as Western powers continue to divide and destroy Arab identity. Under the leadership of Assad, he adds, "the country will continue to fight

⁴²² Hilal Hilal "Hadeeth Dimashiq: Liqa' ma' Hilal Hilal" Interview by Kamal Khalaf. *Al-Mayadeen News Network*, 2014. Accessed [Mar 23, 2017].

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

for, and uphold, Arab causes and the right of the workers and farmers.”⁴²⁵ He concludes his interview by stressing that “Assad is the pride of the Ba’ath party and a national symbol for Arab nationalism.”⁴²⁶

National Defense Forces (NDF)

The National Defense forces (NDF) are local militias created by the regime in 2012 to offset rising defections. In a 2014 interview with Sama TV, prominent NDF commander Mowffaq Ghazal stressed that the SDF is “a resistance group, forged by the people not regime, to protect the country.”⁴²⁷ It was created to fulfill the “call of the great leader President Assad for the defense of the nation.”⁴²⁸ He strongly criticized the Turkish government, asserting that their goal is to humiliate “the Syrian nation and destroy Arab nationalism, as part of the global imperialist campaign against the country.”⁴²⁹

In 2013 the pro-regime Al-Mayadeen network created a documentary about the National Defense forces (NDF).⁴³⁰ The documentary interviews a number of commanders of the NDF. The consistent message across the different interviews was that the NDF was created as a force to defend Syria, under the leadership of Assad, against foreign conspiracy. One of the interviewed commanders equated the NDF to Castro’s Cuban Resistance, asserting “that the NDF aims to curtail and fight back against global western domination.”⁴³¹ Another commander stressed that the NDF’s “ultimate goal is to protect the Syrian Arab Republic and its great leader Bashar Al-Assad.”⁴³² What was clearly visible throughout the documentary were pictures and slogans in support of Assad. This suggests that membership in Syria was based on unfettered loyalty to President Assad, communicated through Ba’athist anti-colonial discourse, suggesting loyalty not to the state but Assadism.

4.2 Militant Islamist Groups

There are numerous Islamist groups operating on the ground in Syria. The largest are the Islamic State (ISIS), the Fatih Al-Sham Front (formally Al-Nusra Front), Jaysh Al-Islam

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Ghazal, Mowffaq “Kalam Siyasi: Liqa’ ma’ Mowffaq Ghazal” Interview by Nizar Al-Farra. *Sama News Network*, 2014. Accessed [Mar 23, 2017].

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

⁴³⁰ Al-Mayadeen “Min Al-Arid: Quwat al-Difa’ Al-Wattani” *Al-Mayadeen Network*, 2013. Accessed [Mar 23, 2017].

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² Ibid.

(Army of Islam) and the Ahrar Al-Sham Islamic Movement. As will be demonstrated, while they all subscribe to some form of Salafi-Jihadism, they differ in outlook and orthodoxy.

The Islamic State (ISIS)

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria emerged in 2014 as a self-proclaimed caliphate, led by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. Ideologically, the group is influenced by radical ultra-conservative Wahhabi Salafi Jihadism.⁴³³ ISIS emerged out of the ashes of al-Qaida, a group that “suffered crippling setbacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Saudi Arabia with a diminished operational capacity and constant bleeding” during the early 2000s.⁴³⁴ It was “near its breaking point” by the end of 2002.⁴³⁵ Fawaz Gerges argues that the “US’s war in Iraq resuscitated” al-Qaida “and gave it a new life.”⁴³⁶ He adds, “by destroying state institutions and establishing a sectarian-based political system, the 2003 US-led invasion polarized Iraq along Sunni-Shia lines and set the stage for a fierce prolonged struggle driven by identity politics.”⁴³⁷ More specifically, following the fall of Baghdad in 2003, the US dissolved the Iraqi army, and oversaw the implementation of a “de-ba’athification campaign”, which “dismissed people based on rank and affiliation not behaviour.”⁴³⁸ This “was mainly seen as a punitive and discriminatory policy against Sunnis by Iraq’s newly installed Shia rulers, [which] left widespread feeling of injustice and bitterness within the Sunni community.”⁴³⁹ As a result, “many Iraqis sought restitution by taking up arms in the name of resistance to the American occupation of their country.”⁴⁴⁰ Within the chaos of this resistance, al-Qaida emerged in the country, led by Abu-Mos’ab al-Zarqawi in 2004.⁴⁴¹ The group was able to establish itself in the country and cement its position during the mid-2000s. However, by 2006, al-Qaida suffered major military defeats and its position was nearly eradicated.⁴⁴² Its leader, al-Zarqawi, was also killed, leaving behind a weak group, which

⁴³³ Backed by the United States, a network of Jihadists, influenced by radical Wahhabi interpretations of Islam, emerged to combat the Soviets in the 1980s-1990s. They were armed and supported by President Ronald Reagan, who saw this as an opportunity to drag the Soviets into a protracted and costly war. This set the stage for the emergence of a global radical militant Jihadi Salafism, as an ideology committed to fanatical and sectarian forms of Islamic governance, for more information: see Fawaz Gerges, *ISIS: A History*.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*

eventually was driven out of most Iraqi cities.⁴⁴³ Starting in 2010, Abu-Baker al-Baghdadi, the group's new leader, began to rebuild the organization, "turning it into a lethal weapon capable of controlling large part of Iraq and Syria."⁴⁴⁴ Following the power vacuum left by the 2011 Iraqi Uprising, al-Qaida members were re-emerging once again under a new mandate, seeking to establish an Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.⁴⁴⁵ Given the vacuum left by the crisis in Syria, the group quickly spread into Syria, initially operating as al-Qaida. In 2014, ISIS was formally established, splitting away from al-Qaida. ISIS has been able to sustain itself and grow tremendously, due in large part to funding from "foreign donors, including the fighters that come to join it, and earned money through crimes like kidnapping and smuggling."⁴⁴⁶ Through analyzing a 2014 leaked document titled "Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State", this research will shed light on where Syria is placed in the group's ideology and highlight how such ideology informs the group's notions of identity.⁴⁴⁷

The analyzed document decrees that the 2014 proclamation of ISIS as the "renewal of the 'Caliphate' based on Islamic values and principles."⁴⁴⁸ This was presented as a return to the Muslim past, in hopes of building a community of believers based on the precedence set by *al-Salaf al-Saleh*. Building on this point, the document declares its lack of recognition to the boundaries and localized identities of modern Islamic states, reasoning that they are an outcome of colonialism and must be overturned. There is no mention of Syria in the document, but the country is rather described within the larger context of the Levant region, *al-Sham*.

The document claims that ISIS was founded to provide a framework to unify the migrating Jihadis, referred to in the document as *al-Muhajireen*, with local Jihadis, referred to as *al-Ansar*.⁴⁴⁹ The purpose of this unity is to orient the so-called sacrifice of Jihadis towards meaningful action for the sake and glory of Islam. In this context, the use of the terminologies *al-Muhajireen* and *al-Ansar* aims to parallel the experience of Muslims during the early history of Islam, when the followers of the Prophet Mohammed were forced out of their home in Mecca, due to prosecution, and moved to the city of Medina (Yathrib formally), where they were

⁴⁴³ Ibid,70-73.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid, 97.

⁴⁴⁵ In the wake of US withdrawal from Iraq, Prime Minister Anwar al-Maliki's government was increasingly becoming more authoritarian, indiscriminately imprisoning and prosecuting in the name of combating terror. This further aggravated people in Sunni areas of Iraq. In 2011, inspired by the revolutionary momentum throughout the Arab world, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis took to the street to protest the corrupt policies of Anwar al-Maliki, calling for freedom and social justice. Unable to contain the situation, the crisis in Iraq began to take on a military form. For more information: see Fawaz Gerges, *ISIS: A History*.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷ Islamic State "Mabad' Fi Al-Dawola Al-Islammiyah" Document published by *the Guardian*, 2014.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

welcome by fellow believers. The migrants from Mecca were called *al-Muhajireen* or the migrators, while those in Medina who assisted them were referred as *Al-Ansar* or the helpers.

The document criticizes most rebel groups, both secular and Islamist, and collectively labels them “as forces of apostasy” for refusing to adhere to “proper Islamic values and principles”⁴⁵⁰ More specifically, it criticizes the Free Syrian Army for allegedly adhering to exclusionary identities, based on un-Islamic interpretations, away from the principles of the *Umma*. The document also condemns Abu-Mohammed Al-Gholnai, leader of Fattih al-Sham, labeling him as a traitor for refusing to declare allegiance to the Caliphate and breaking up the unity of the *Mujahdeen*.

The document clearly outlines ISIS’s identity building projects.⁴⁵¹ It asserts that following the Sykes-Picot agreement, the Sunni Muslims *umma* was deliberately divided by colonial powers in order to fragment the Muslim identity and impede Sunni populations from progressing or uniting. The document adds that Western powers aimed to “humiliate and oppress the Sunni populations by empowering the Shiites and Kurds in the region.”⁴⁵² As a result, the document reasons that the Islamic State project aims to “redraw the manufactured borders and create a pan-Islamic caliphate, with a unified Sunni identity.”⁴⁵³ In creating this identity, the document stresses the importance of stripping inhabitants of their colonial identities and fostering in them an alternative Islamic identity based on their membership to the Caliphate’s community of believers. The document claims that by stripping foreigners and locals alike of their ‘manufactured colonial identities’ and implementing a unified Islamic identity, the Caliphate will “prosper by the power of this unity and will be able to revive former Islamic glory.”⁴⁵⁴

Hence, as is evident, the Islamic State (ISIS) seeks to enforce a pan-Islamist exclusionary Sunni identity. Membership is extended to those who declare alliance to the Caliphate and are of the Sunni faith. Shiites, Christians, Druze and other sects are excluded from this project. This research argues that ISIS manufactured a primordial identity, rooted in notions of embedded sectarian hatred. The objective is to redraw the colonially inherited borders and establish a so-called Sunni Caliphate along the principles of *al-Salaf al-Saleh*. It is clear from this perspective, they are not committed to notions of identity confined to Syria’s borders but are seeking an

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

alternative project that extends across the Muslim world. They are also not seeking to revive cosmopolitanism, but are rather seeking to enforce exclusionism.

Fatih Al-Sham Front

The Fatih Al-Sham Front, formally known Jabhat Al-Nusra, was created in late 2011 by Abo Mohammed Al-Golani. The group was formed “when Al Qaeda in Iraq emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sent operative Abu Muhammad al-Jolani to Syria to organize regional jihadist cells.”⁴⁵⁵ In April 2013, “Al-Nusra came into conflict with Al Qaeda in Iraq’s leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi”, who without consulting with Al-Nusra, declared the group to be part of “the Islamic State of Iraq.”⁴⁵⁶ In June 2013, al-Qaida “commander Ayman al-Zawahiri insisted that Al-Qaida in Iraq and Al-Nusra had not merged, claiming that Baghdadi had ‘made a mistake on the merger announcement.’”⁴⁵⁷ Al-Nusra leader Julani also denied the merger maintained Al-Nusra’s independence and reaffirmed his allegiance to Zawahiri.”⁴⁵⁸ The group has been able to sustain itself throughout the conflict, primarily due to funding from foreign donors, such as Kuwaiti Hamid Hamad Hamid al-Ali.⁴⁵⁹ Through analyzing archival interviews with the group’s leader, al-Golani, this research sheds light on where Syria is placed in the group’s ideology and highlight how such ideology informs the group’s notions of identity.

In an interview in 2013, al-Golani asserted that al-Nusra Front was not born out of a new ideology but rather emanated out of a long tradition of Jihad.⁴⁶⁰ He adds that this “tradition first surfaced after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, as many voices began to call for a return to Islamic rule.”⁴⁶¹ Starting in the 1960s, and particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, militant Jihadism began to take shape especially during the war in Afghanistan, according to him. The gathering of the “Mujahedeen in Afghanistan has allowed them to organize themselves and articulate their ideological standing.”⁴⁶² After the defeat of the Soviets, Salafi-Jihadism persisted and transferred across the Arab and Islamic worlds.

⁴⁵⁵ Stanford University “Mapping Militant Organizations: Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (Formerly Jabhat al-Nusra)” *Stanford University*, accessed [Mar 23, 2017]

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁰ Abo Mohammed Al-Golani, “Liqa’ al-Yom: Abu Mohammed al-Golani. Al Nusra wa Mostqbal Souria” Interview by Tayseer Alloni. *Aljazeera News Agency*, 2013.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*

In another interview in May 2015, al-Gholani stresses that Al-Nusra's ultimate goal is to implement "the Sharia of God in the Levant region."⁴⁶³ He adds that they aim to establish an Islamic Caliphate, which rules through Islamic law and the values of al-Salaf Al Saleh. In the same interview, he declares the group's allegiance to Al-Qaida by emphasizing that "Ayman Al-Zawahiri instructed Al-Nusra to the overthrow the Syrian regime and establish Islamic rule in the Al-Sham region."⁴⁶⁴

In a third interview in June 2015, al-Golani declared that the regimes of the Middle East are corrupt, tyrannical and imposed by Western powers on the people of the Middle East.⁴⁶⁵ The armies of such "regimes are a source of oppression", he stresses, and the "only way for people to "liberate" themselves is to establish local armies and fight back with violence."⁴⁶⁶ He downplays the role peaceful protests can play in achieving political change. To him, military means are the only valid means to achieve national liberation, suggesting the need for a 'militant Islamic Spring' throughout the Middle East. He went as far as to suggest that people of the Middle East would "only be able to liberate themselves through violence."⁴⁶⁷

Throughout the interview al-Golani criticized groups like the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and Egypt. He began by criticizing former President Mohammed Morsi of Egypt for "combating the Mujahedeen in Sinai, accepting the Camp David Accord, being involved at the UN, not ruling through the Sharia of God, accepting ideas like elections and parliaments, and complying to US interests."⁴⁶⁸ He claims that the path the Muslim Brotherhood has taken is wrong and they must go "back to their original ways and resort to a military Jihad to achieve political change."⁴⁶⁹ He concludes that Fatih al-Sham does not seek political rule, but only the "implementation of Sharia and the establishment of an Islamic caliphate based on the Quran, Sunnah and values of al-Salaf al-Saleh."⁴⁷⁰

Through these interviews, it is clear that al-Nusra does not subscribe to ideas or values of the revolutionary wave in Syria. They subscribe to a particular Jihadi ideology, which as argued earlier, emanated out of a long tradition of Salafi thought. To add to this, it is important to stress that there was absolutely no reference to Syria in all three interviews. Instead, al-Gholani would

⁴⁶³ Abo Mohammed Al-Golani, "Bila Hodood: Al-Golani, al-Ekhwani Enharafa was Tanzim al-Dawla Khawarij" Interview by Ahmed Mansour. *Aljazeera News Agency*, 2015.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁵ Al-Golani, "Bila Hodood: Abu Mohammed al-Golani: Amir Jabhat al-Nusra."

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

identify with the larger Levant region or *al-Sham* by stressing a duty for Jihadi groups to work together in establishing a larger Islamic entity. By criticizing political solutions and the establishment of parliamentary, presidential and electoral systems, it is clear that al-Nusra's thought deviates from what Syrian protestors demanded in the early phase of the uprising. It further demonstrates that Fatih al-Sham is not committed to an idea of Syria, but is rather driven by a Salafi-Jihadi identity that seeks to establish an Islamist form of governance, which extends beyond contemporary post-colonial boundaries. Such a project is ultimately rooted in the goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate, based explicitly on their narrowly defined scope of membership.

Jiyash al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham

Jiyash al-Islam (the Army of Islam) and Ahrar al-Sham are both among the most powerful rebel groups operating in Syria, collectively commanding nearly 50,000 militants.⁴⁷¹ Zahran Alloush founded the Army of Islam in 2013, "through a merger of about fifty Damascus-based opposition groups, including Liwa al-Islam, which remains one of the best-armed organizations and most powerful brigades within Jaysh al-Islam in the Ghouta agricultural belt."⁴⁷² The movement has successfully replaced the Free Syrian Army as an opposition force in the Damascus region, and has been able to cement its control over vast territories in that region. Their primary targets are "the Assad Regime, the Islamic State, and select Kurdish forces."⁴⁷³ The Army of Islam "has received funding from Saudi Arabia since its inception in 2013, and currently receives funding from Qatar and Turkey as well."⁴⁷⁴ Hassan Abboud founded Ahrar al-Sham in December of 2011.⁴⁷⁵ Initially, "the group was based in the Idlib but quickly expanded throughout Syria and today is among the most powerful groups on the ground."⁴⁷⁶ Ahrar al-Sham "makes most of its money by charging trucks a toll to cross the Bab al-Hawa border with Turkey, but it also receives funding from sources outside of Syria."⁴⁷⁷ Ahrar al-Sham "first received foreign funding from Islamist networks in the Persian Gulf that were reportedly linked to the Qatari government."⁴⁷⁸ Saudi Arabia and Turkey "began funding Ahrar al-Sham in 2015 in a joint effort to bolster Syrian opposition forces."⁴⁷⁹ Ideologically, as will be demonstrated, both

⁴⁷¹ Stanford University "Mapping Militant Organizations: Jaysh al-Islam" *Stanford University*, accessed [Mar 23, 2017] and Stanford University "Mapping Militant Organizations: Ahrar al-Sham" *Stanford University*, accessed [Mar 23, 2017].

⁴⁷² Stanford University "Mapping Militant Organizations: Jaysh al-Islam".

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁵ Stanford "Mapping Militant Organizations: Ahrar al-Sham".

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

movements trace their history to continuation of a Salafist project aiming to establish Islamist forms of governance.

In a 2013 interview with Aljazeera, Alloush declared that the ultimate enemy of Jiyash al-Islam is “the Syrian regime of President Assad.”⁴⁸⁰ He claims that the Syrian people have been oppressed for years, and were stripped of their religious identity. The Syrian revolution, in his view, was partly motivated by a desire of the people to see a return of Islam and ensure the preservation of their religious freedom. He stresses, “Islam is foundational to Syria’s civilization, culture and identity”, adding, “republican and parliamentary systems have been tried in Middle East, and they have been unsuccessful. They have constituted a source of oppression.”⁴⁸¹ Islam, he asserts, provides justice and fairness like no other religion. He asserts that the Jiyash al-Islam’s political project is to “ensure the implementation of an Islamic constitution, which would allow for the organization of post-conflict Syria along Islamic laws.”

In 2015, Alloush was killed in suburb of Damascus, following a Russian airstrike.⁴⁸² Essam Buwaydhani succeeded him as the leader of Jiyash al-Islam. In a 2015 video, Buwaydhani laments the death of Alloush and vows to carry his vision forward.⁴⁸³ He reaffirms the Army of Islam’s goal of “uniting Muslims in the fight against injustice,” stressing “the army is driven by a moderate – centrist ideology, and is empowered by its fight for justice.”⁴⁸⁴ He concludes by stressing that throughout its operational history, the army of Islam has sacrificed martyrs for the sake of the nation, and that sacrifice will go on until justice has been established.⁴⁸⁵ In a 2016 talk, delivered in a Mosque in Syria, Buwaydhani criticizes secular and extremist elements of the Syrian opposition for taking an incorrect approach, stressing “the Army of Islam’s moderate views have raised opposition among hardliners and seculars alike.”⁴⁸⁶ He asserts that since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, people have sought for a return to an Islamic form of governance.⁴⁸⁷ They were united by the goal of setting up Islamic rule, but diverged on method between those who favoured the path of Jihad and others who preferred political means (through parties, parliaments and elections). He criticizes both approaches, stressing that they contradict the path

⁴⁸⁰ Zahran Alloush, “Liqa’ al-Yom: Zahran Alloush” Interview by Tayseer Alloni. *Aljazeera News Agency*, 2013.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸² Aljazeera “Prominent Syrian Rebel Commander Killed in Air Strike” Aljazeera News Agency, Decemeber 26, 2015.

⁴⁸³ Essam Buwaydhani, “Essam Buwaydhani Fi Awal Thouhoor E’lami Lah... Qa’ed Jaysh al-Islam al-Jadeed Yad’o al-Fasa’el Litawahod” Posted [Dec 26, 2015]. YouTube Video 4:49. Accessed [Mar 23, 2016].

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁶ Essam Buwaydhani, “Qa’ed Jiyash al-Islam Essam Buwaydhani Yudih Asbab Tafaroq al-Fasa’il wa ma Hiya al-Hoolool al-Mottaba’a Li-nabd At-tafriqah” Posted [May 2, 2016]. YouTube Video 20:07. Accessed [Mar 23, 2016].

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

of the Prophet Mohammed who established the “state of Islam through educating the people on the basis of monotheism and the real meaning of Islam.”⁴⁸⁸

In speaking about the group’s ideology, Buwaydhani claims, “our jihad is a jihad of defense, not to establish a caliphate... we don’t establish a state with Jihad, but through education.”⁴⁸⁹ He criticizes Islamist groups such as Fatih al-Sham and ISIS for “distorting the meaning of jihad”, adding “yes, we can establish an Islamic state that judges with justice, but this state cannot be established by the way those people want... through jihad.”⁴⁹⁰ He elaborates on the nature of disagreement with the secular rebel groups, claiming that Free Syrian Army (FSA) commanders have prevented the Army of Islam from its proselytizing activities and preaching Islamic morals and values.⁴⁹¹ He stresses the importance of entrenching these values in morals and society, as they form the essence of the nation’s identity.

Ahrar al-Sham Front was founded by Hassan Abboud in 2013.⁴⁹² In an interview with Aljazeera of that year, Abboud claims that Ahrar al-Sham’s main objective is to bring down “the regime of President Assad and replace it with an Islamic state governed by the Shari’a.”⁴⁹³ He adds that Islamic Sharia provides “people with guidance in their daily conduct and establishes a system of justice within society.”⁴⁹⁴ When questioned about the scope of their project, Abboud stressed that they do not seek to establish an Islamic caliphate (similar to al-Nusra or ISIS) and that their project is confined to territorial Syria.⁴⁹⁵ He adds “Islamic values provide Syrians with the foundations from which they can build their society and nationhood.”⁴⁹⁶

In November 2016, Ali al-Omar was selected as the new leader of Ahrar al-Islam. In a speech posted on YouTube, al-Omar declares the Syrian Uprising “against the tyrannical sectarian regime of President” was ignited out of popular desire for dignity.⁴⁹⁷ The regime’s oppressive response has transformed the uprising from a “peaceful struggle into a holy Jihad” for justice.⁴⁹⁸ He asserts that from within the shadows of chaos, “ISIS arose to oppress and

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² Hassan Abboud, “Talk to Aljazeera: Hassan Abboud” Interview by Sami Zeidan *Aljazeera News Agency*, 2014.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Hassan Abboud, “Liqa’ al-Yom: Hassan Abboud” Interview by Tayseer Alloni. *Aljazeera News Agency*, 2013.

⁴⁹⁵ Abboud, “Talk to Aljazeera: Hassan Abboud”

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ Ali Al-Omar, “Kalimat Ali al-Omar al-Qa’ed Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamish” Posted [Jan 29, 2017]. YouTube Video 7.25.

Accessed [Mar 23, 2017].

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

divide the people, taint their revolution and allow the regime to persist longer.”⁴⁹⁹ He proceeds throughout the video stressing the group’s commitment to the revolution and criticizing Fatih al-Sham Front. In a public lecture, al-Omar asserts that the demise of the Ottoman Empire was partly caused by the influence of European notions of nationalism, which played a critical role in allowing for the emergence of secularists, such as Mustapha Kamal Atturk.⁵⁰⁰ Nationalism, he adds, deteriorated “the Muslim identity”, resulting in the rise of Islamic thinkers seeking to revive the “glory days of the caliphate.”⁵⁰¹ Ideologically, he reasons, those thinkers can be grouped into four groups: (1) those who favor the revival of the Caliphate through political change (through elections and parties) such as the Muslim brotherhood; (2) those who seek change through proselytizing ordinary people in hopes of drawing them to Islam and setting a foundation for an Islamic Caliphate; (3) those who advocate proselytizing the ruling elites, in order to purify their hearts and bring them towards Islam; (4) those who strictly argue that only through Jihad as Islamic Caliphate can be established. He argues that Ahrar al-Sham is focused on a fifth category, which pragmatically combines the approaches of the aforementioned categories. He reasons “We are Mujahedeen not Jihadis... we took up Jihad as method to defend ourselves and religion.”⁵⁰² That means, “we also engage in other forms of Jihads such as intellectual, political, developmental, educational and religious proselytizing.”⁵⁰³ “Our goal is to establish an Islamic form of governance which respects the right of people and maintains popular support.”⁵⁰⁴ He concludes, “we differ from Jihadi groups such as ISIS and al-Qaida.”⁵⁰⁵ They have failed in their endeavors “because they alienated and oppressed people, instead of focusing on garnering popular support.”⁵⁰⁶

As evident, both the Army of Islam and Ahrar are ideologically similar, as they both ultimately aim to create an Islamist form of governance. They stress that their Jihad is defensive and confined to Syria’s borders. This research argues that ideologically they are a Salafi-Muslim Brotherhood hybrid. They reject being labeled either Salafis or Muslim Brotherhood, stressing that their approach combines multiple ideologies. However, it is important to stress that both groups have received funding and support from Salafi networks⁵⁰⁷ and individuals associated

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁰ Ali Al-Omar, “Mohadart al-Na’eb al-’Am Li Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyah” Posted [May 25, 2016]. YouTube Video 55:56. Accessed [Mar 23, 2017].

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

⁵⁰² Ibid

⁵⁰³ Ibid

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid

⁵⁰⁷ Stanford “Mapping Militant Organizations: Jaysh al-Islam” and Stanford “Mapping Militant Organizations: Ahrar al-Sham”.

with the exiled Muslim Brotherhood.⁵⁰⁸ Their emphasis on the establishment of a political polity, specifically along their narrowly defined Sunni interpretation of Islam, is incompatible with the revolutionary sentiments to retrieve a repressed cosmopolitan worldliness.

4.3 *Kurdish Groups*

In 2003, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) was created in Syria following heightened tensions between the Syrian regime and Kurdish opposition.⁵⁰⁹ The organization remained relatively excluded from politics, with little to no influence in the country at that time. However, given the “power vacuum left in the Kurdish regions” as a result of the 2011 uprising, the PYD was able to quickly organize and emerge as a significant political military in northern Syria. The Party aims to put into practice Abdullah Öcalan’s theories of democratic autonomy and confederation.”⁵¹⁰ In doing so, the PYD played a critical role in the establishment “of ‘civil defense forces’ to protect the democratic autonomy project as a new form of self-governance and philosophy of life.”⁵¹¹ Around mid-2011, the party’s military wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG), was formally created and began to operate on the ground, serving the PYD’s political project. Today, the YPD and PYD have become critical players in the Syrian conflict, controlling militarily most of northern Syria. This success is partly due to the substantial support they have received from the United States, which has been a source of concern for regional states like Turkey.⁵¹² In expanding their areas of control, both groups have been accused by Amnesty International of committing war crimes by “deliberately demolishing civilian homes... razing and burning entire villages and displacing their inhabitants with no justifiable military grounds.”⁵¹³ Through analyzing the PYD’s and YPG’s websites, policy-papers, statements, constitutions and other materials, this research will shed light on where Syria is placed in their ideology and highlight how such ideology informs their notions of identity.

In 2016, the PYD and YPG published on their website the framework for their political autonomy project. The document asserts that ideologically, both the YPG and PYD’s political project is rooted in Abdullah Öcalan’s theory of democratic autonomy and confederation. Öcalan is seen as the founding father of the Kurdish Worker’s Party (PKK), established in 1984. The party has relied on violence since its inception to achieve political objectives and is classified by Turkey as a terrorist organization. Öcalan has been in captivity since 1999, but his ideas

⁵⁰⁸ Hassan Hassan, “How the Muslim Brotherhood Hijacked Syria’s Revolution” *Foreign Affairs*, March 13, 2013.

⁵⁰⁹ Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East*, 208.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*

⁵¹² *Ibid.*

⁵¹³ Amnesty International “Syria: US ally’s razing of villages amounts to war crimes” *Amnesty International*, 2015.

continue to have a significant impact on Kurdish movements throughout the Middle East. In his book *Democratic Confederation*, Öcalan acknowledges that the PKK's ideology has evolved over time in order to "fit the situation of the Middle East."⁵¹⁴ Traditionally, the PKK's ideology addressed the Kurdish question through notions of ethnicity and nationhood, seeking for "the creation of a [Kurdish] nation-state."⁵¹⁵ This position, he asserts, is problematic because the nation-state is born out of Western capitalist modernity in which the masses are subordinated and the state is controlled and arranged by "bourgeoisie or the ruling class" in order to serve their interest.⁵¹⁶ Hence, the creation of a Kurdish nation-state will only create additional layers of oppression. From this premise, he stresses that the only solution to the Kurdish question must be rooted in an approach that weakens capitalist modernity."⁵¹⁷ He proposes an alternative system of Democratic Confederalism, which he defines as "a non-state social paradigm... based on grassroots participation where decision-making lies at the community level."⁵¹⁸ Such confederalism is strictly based on what he calls a system of democracy without a state.⁵¹⁹ While the state continuously orients itself towards the centralization of power "in order to pursue the interests of [elitist] power monopolies", democratic confederalism is the opposite, as it allows peoples to form local "autonomous communities with federal qualities."⁵²⁰ Through this, societies are able to express and develop "their cultural, ethnic or national identity."⁵²¹ In other words, such political project allows for political self-determination enabling different communities to "express and preserve their cultural identities."⁵²² Öcalan concludes that democratic confederalism can be described as a system of self-administration, which aims at "realizing the right of self-determination" and defense of the Kurdish people.⁵²³ The goal is to establish "federal structures in Iran, Turkey, Syria and Iraq that are open for all Kurds and at the same time form an umbrella confederation for all four parts of Kurdistan."⁵²⁴

Based on this framework, in a 2016 document titled the "Autonomous Region Project", the PYD declares that the uprising in Syria emanated out of the "failure of nationalistic-state model, which enforced exclusionary and singular notions of identity on Syrians for over five

⁵¹⁴ Abdullāh Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism* (London, UK: Transmedia Publishing, 2011), 7.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵²² *Ibid.*

⁵²³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*

decades”, shadowing the country’s multicultural richness.⁵²⁵ Such policies have stripped the Kurdish people in Syria of “their identity and classified them as outsiders in their own home.”⁵²⁶ The document stresses, the PYD is committed to the establishment of a democratic federal state, which allows for the preservation of Kurdish populations and their identity.⁵²⁷ In another document titled “Internal Organization”, the PYD claims that its ideology is rooted in upholding and supporting the struggle for democratic liberation in all areas of Kurdistan (encompassing Syria, Turkey, Iran and Iraq) with the goal of promoting a federal Kurdish national unity.⁵²⁸ More specifically, the document decrees: “one of the central goals of the PYD is to support and uphold the democratic liberation struggle in all parts of Kurdistan and to achieve the Kurdish national unity and consolidate it on the principle of democratic community confederation.”⁵²⁹ The document takes a step back by claiming that such a project is not committed to the “redrawing the political borders of the Middle East”, raising a contradiction between supporting a Kurdish national unity, while claiming respect to the established political boundaries.⁵³⁰

Both Kurdish parties are suspicious of State structures, and stress the necessity of establishing a decentralized autonomous Kurdish region. According to their view, Syria as a modern nation-state has only left deep scars, alienating, displacing and excluding Kurdish people from the political, economic and social spheres. The state, which lacks historical legitimacy, has systemically undertaken various projects in order to diminish Kurdish sense of identity. Post-colonial Syria is culturally diverse, but this richness diversity has been shadowed by the exclusionary, nationalist-state model. Therefore, in order to ensure the protection and preservation of Kurdish identity, the document declares that it is necessary to establish an autonomous region, with its own protection method and system of governance. This entails the retreat of state structures (which are an oppressive outcome of capitalist-modernity), allowing people to prosper and live in harmony.

As evident, the YPG and PYD’s ideology emanates out of an anarchist position, which seeks to develop localized autonomous Kurdish regions, away from state structures of the Middle East. Their project radically challenges the very basis of contemporary political structures, seeking an alternative, stateless, political form of governance. Both groups’ ideologies are rooted in the conviction that post-colonial Syria had been illegitimately born out

⁵²⁵ Democratic Union Party “Mahsroo’ Al-Idara Al-Thateiyah” *Democratic Union Party*, accessed [Mar 23, 2017].

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁸ Democratic Union Party “Al-Nizam Al-Dakhili” *Democratic Union Party*, accessed [Mar 23, 2017].

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*

of the colonial project. The emerging state was exclusionary and oppressive, stripping the Kurds out of their identity. Both parties, while cautiously demonstrate their willingness to remain as part of Syria, they nevertheless stress the importance of achieving Kurdish autonomy. They seek to preserve and uphold a Kurdish national identity primarily beyond the colonially imposed boundaries of the Middle East. The aim here is to create a unified national identity among all four parts of Kurdistan. Hence, this demonstrates a commitment not to Syria, but to a larger project aiming to preserve and promote Kurdish identity.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a comparison of a sample of the different groups operating in Syria. It demonstrated how the ideologies informing such groups are confined to ideas that are contrary to those sought by the revolutionaries during the uprising. As argued by Hamid Dabashi and Mojtaba Mahdavi, the Arab Spring was an attempt to liberate the nation from post-colonial regimes and ideologies. It was an attempt to move beyond the secular-Islamic dichotomy, and the entrapment of Third World socialist, Islamist and anti-colonial nationalist discourses. This research argues that the Syrian Spring was an attempt to bring a new meaning to 'Syrianism' through a movement involving people of different socio-economic and religious backgrounds. Their project was therefore rooted in a desire to retrieve the cosmopolitan worldliness, which has been shadowed by the dominance of post-colonial ideologies. However, contrary to this project, the prolonging of the conflict, coupled with foreign intervention, has allowed for the re-emergence of counter-revolutionary exclusionary post-colonial ideologies.⁵³¹ Such ideologies are radically incompatible with the cosmopolitan nature of the uprising and embody a return to the post-colonial ideological formations that have confined identity-politics to narrowly defined exclusionary parameters.

The Syrian regime's deployment of anti-colonial nationalistic rhetoric and deification of President Assad, as the saviour and the protector of Arab nationalism continues to reinforce the traditionally fragile state-driven identity project. Such a project has for years confined the cosmopolitan richness of Syria into an Assadist, rather than an inclusive Syrian identity. As demonstrated in the rhetoric of the pro-regime militias, Assad is presented as the sole protector of the country's anti-colonial and Arabist identity, suggesting that without Assad, Syria will not exist. Faced with the Syrian uprising, and unwilling to accept its reality, the regime's Assadist identity has even become more polarized. Membership to Assad's Syria has become exclusively

⁵³¹ Mahdavi Mojtaba, "The Crisis in Syria" *Political Science 571 Lecture: University of Alberta* (2016).

conditioned on absolute love and commitment to the President. Through pledging allegiance to Assad, not Syria, one can achieve membership into such community. Islamist Jihadi groups, on the other hand, are driven by a commitment not to Syria but to their specific ideologies, which evolved in response to Ottoman collapse, European colonialism and the crisis of the postcolonial nation-building process. While such groups approach the question of identity from a similar tradition, they nevertheless disagree on the scope and criteria for membership into their sought communities. From ISIS, to Fatih al-Sham to Jaysh al-Islam to Ahrar al-Sham, the common thread is a return to an exclusionary Islamist Sunni identity, which excludes not only minorities, but also Sunnis who fail to pledge the necessary political allegiance. For example, a member who declares allegiance to ISIS will not be accepted by Fatih al-Sham, or any of the other groups, and vice versa. The confinement of membership to such exclusionary criteria contrasts with the values, goals and aspiration sought by the protesters for a 'Syria' for all 'Syrians'. Lastly, Kurdish groups such as the PYD and the YPG have emerged as powerful actors committed to the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region, not a unified Syria. Their project is rooted in a radical anarchist position that seeks the establishment of a decentralized autonomous region. Such projects aim primarily to foster a uniquely Kurdish rather than a 'Syrianist' national identity. Membership into this community is narrowly defined to those who identify with the Kurdish nation.

CONCLUSION

Project Overview

This study examined the question of identity in the context of Political Science and Middle Eastern and Islamic studies. It challenged primordial/essentialist approaches while offering a critical alternative, influenced by postcolonial scholarship. The research has focused on this core question: *what does Syrian identity mean in the eyes of contending groups in the current Syrian crisis (2011-2017)?* In answering this question, the research employed a post-colonial cosmopolitan approach to historicize the contemporary crisis of identity in Syria. Furthermore, it utilized a discourse/content analysis of primary (including interviews, published materials/doctrines, propaganda, websites and books) and secondary sources, to examine the ways in which the identity discourse has evolved throughout the crisis.

In building up to the central argument, this project has been divided into four main chapters. *Chapter 1: A Critical Cosmopolitan Postcolonial Approach* outlined the project's cosmopolitan postcolonial lens of analysis, challenging Orientalist literature, which confine the region's identity-politics to a binary of sectarian and religious struggles. Such frame of analysis goes beyond the reductionist tendencies of primordial and/or essentialist theories by stressing that identities are fluid, dynamic, multi-layered and pluralistic which emerge out of a complex history of human interactions and movements. The post-colonial experience "denied people their national formations" and resulted in the rise of ideological forms of defiance that "imprisoned the fate of peoples of the Middle East within frames of reference that confine and control their liberation movements."⁵³² The nation became "trapped within its manufactured postcolonial borders" and suppressed by "the systematic function of violence" in the state.⁵³³ Hence, by making a distinction between nation and state, the postcolonial cosmopolitan frame of analysis "liberates the nation from its fixed cartography of domination, in which domestic tyranny feeds on a fear of foreign domination."⁵³⁴ *Chapter 2: A Fragile History of National Identity-Building*, highlighted the crisis of Syria's post-colonial national identity. It argued that French colonial rule over Syria has left behind a series of contradictions. The country was born into artificially imposed boundaries, which lacked historical precedence. Adding to this, French

⁵³² Dabashi, *Iran without Borders*, 233.

⁵³³ *Ibid*, 232.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid*, 233.

reliance on the policy of divide and conquer obscured the formation of a Syrian national identity, specific to newly enforced boundaries. The national identity formation process was further jeopardized following a CIA-engineered coup on the country's first democratically elected post-colonial president in 1949. Within the shadows of this complexity, various ruling elites competed for power enforcing top-to-bottom discourses of Arabism, anti-colonialism and third world socialism which emphasized the cult of individual leaders, in order to legitimize their positions. This process was consolidated with the rise of the Assadist regime, which for over four decades, confined the 'nation' to such exclusivist discourses, suppressing the country's cosmopolitan richness. *Chapter 3: From Syrian Spring to Proxy/Civil War*, traced the evolution of the contemporary Syrian crisis, from a peaceful uprising in which protestors called for freedom, dignity and social justice towards a prolonged geo-political proxy civil war. The chapter argued that the Syrian uprising was a popular attempt to retrieve a repressed cosmopolitan worldliness that has been shadowed by the dominance of the exhausted ideological dichotomies. It was an attempt to redefine Syrian identity in a way that captures the cosmopolitanism. The analysis demonstrated that protestors were not seeking an Islamist, a pan-Arabist, a separatist, a Ba'athist socialist or a sectarian vision, but were rather united by prospects of creating a locally produced alternative that would maintain national harmony. The chapter also demonstrated how foreign intervention has played a critical role in sidetracking the peaceful uprising and cultivating an environment that allowed for the rise of various counterrevolutionary forces, with conflicting notions on identity. *Chapter 4: Syria in the Eyes of the Contending Groups*, analyzed a representative sample of the groups operating on the ground. It found that such groups are not committed to a cosmopolitan Syrian identity, but are rather driven by exclusionary counterrevolutionary, or limited notions of identity. The research has found that some groups (such as Fatih al-Sham and ISIS) have vacated the idea of Syria altogether, as evident in their discourse. Such projects embody a reinforcement of the post-colonial ideological formations.

The central thesis of this research is, in sum, post-colonial Syria was born into artificial boundaries, which did not reflect historical realities, but rather the will of the colonizing powers. The country struggled with the question of identity, as various regimes tried their own formulas of identity-building initiatives, in hopes of garnering intra-state harmony. Such regimes failed to comprehend or accommodate the cosmopolitan nature of Syrian society, enforcing exclusionary notions of national identity, based on exhausted dichotomies, which emerged as a by-product of a period of interactions with European colonialism. The Syrian uprising was a turn in the

opposite direction as people sought to liberate the ‘nation’ from the entrapment of such ideologies, and to create a political system consistent with the country’s cosmopolitan nature. The failure of the Syrian Spring to retrieve this cosmopolitan worldliness, has allowed for the re-emergence of the reactionary post-colonial ideological formations, manifested in the various groups on the ground. Salafi-Jihadi groups are not committed to Syria, but to prospects of creating Islamic Caliphates, sometimes extending beyond the country’s borders. Kurdish groups are driven by nationalist aspirations, aiming to create an autonomous region, away from the state. The regime’s already fragile post-colonial identity-building projects have become more exclusionary and Assadist. Membership in the nation, from this perspective, is extended to those who demonstrate unfettered loyalty to the President.

Limitations/Further Research

It is worth acknowledging the limitations of this project, in that it relies primarily on documentary sources to address a complex question, rather than conducting on the ground interviews and surveys. Given the challenges surrounding the latter approach, the adopted method of analysis is nevertheless invaluable in that it sheds light on important perspectives through a careful reading/analysis of primary sources. This allowed the research to provide an important comparative overview of the ways in which Syria and Syrianism have been articulated, in light of the ongoing crisis. Building on the findings of this project, further research analyzing the ways in which ordinary Syrians define themselves (in light of the aforementioned complexities) can provide important comparative insights. While this research demonstrated how popular desire to retrieve the cosmopolitan worldliness has been shadowed by the re-emergence of counter revolutionary forces that are driven by reactionary and exclusionary anti-colonial ideologies, the question that remains is in what ways has this cosmopolitanism been affected by all that has happened on the ground. Given the destruction, displacement and deaths inflicted on the country, coupled with the rise of groups driven by exclusionary approaches to identity, what is left of this cosmopolitanism?

The Future of ‘Syria’ and ‘Syrianism’

Today, Syria is deeply divided, heavily destroyed and depopulated. The majority of the country’s population has been displaced (internally and externally), and major metropolitan centres such as Aleppo, Homs, Dier al-Zour, Raqqa, and Dara’a are severely under-inhabited.

Entire towns and villages are reduced to rubble, as the war machine continues to rage havoc. The country's social fabric is torn and the wounds left behind continue to deepen. The war has caused deep physical and psychological scars on the country's population, as children grow up in camps with no education, and diminished prospects for a bright future. To add to all this, the country is torn between hundreds of armed factions operating on the ground that continue to wage war in hopes of promoting their ideal imagined communities.

In light of these complexities, with hundreds of armed factions operating on the ground, creating national consensus will prove to be difficult. This deteriorates the possibility of creating an inclusive national identity, able to uphold the cosmopolitan nature of the country. As a result, post-conflict reconciliation will prove to be a challenge, raising questions about what will be left of Syria. Because the conflict has been so prolonged, the various groups have been able to cement their positions and should not be expected to wither away anytime in the foreseen future.

However, while there are clear difficulties in the road ahead, it is important to note that the various groups operating in Syria have risen as a symptom of a complex geopolitical war. They emerged within the shadows of chaos, driven by counterrevolutionary ideologies that do not represent those who took to the streets to oppose the regime and demand freedom and dignity. Their ideologies do not have a legitimate political claim on the people of Syria, and are rather enforced through violence. As Hamid Dabashi put it, the Arab Spring has resulted in a new regime of knowledge, dismantling the formerly produced and imposed colonial and post-colonial systems of knowledge production.⁵³⁵ He stresses that the uprisings throughout the Middle East allowed for the articulation of a new language, rooted in a "geography of liberation" that challenges the very essence of the post-colonial ideological formations.⁵³⁶ The old ideologies have been exhausted, and the emerging alternative will motivate people throughout the Arab world to continue what Mojtaba Mahdavi describes as their unfinished project.⁵³⁷ Therefore, this unfinished project will continue to unfold, especially given the persistence of the structural factors, which have caused the uprisings in the first place.

Based on these approaches, this MA thesis argues that the Syrian Spring has not ended but transformed into a bitter winter. The Syrian case study provides us with an example of a

⁵³⁵ Dabashi, *The Arab Spring*.

⁵³⁶ Dabashi, *The Arab Spring*.

⁵³⁷ Mojtaba Mahdavi "The Old is Dying".

nation struggling to liberate and redefine itself, away from authoritarianism. Despite all the aforementioned difficulties, hundreds of years of shared experiences and histories, reflected in the arts, culture and literature will continue to bring people together and create common grounds despite differences. Therefore, while the cosmopolitan worldliness (which Dabashi locates in the history of shared experiences, arts, culture and literature) has been over-shadowed once again, it will nevertheless persist, as the struggle for national liberation will continue in the years to come.

This is not to suggest that post-conflict reconciliation will be easy. It certainly will be difficult the longer the conflict persists. However, identity discourses centred on Arabism, Islamism, Assadism or Third World Socialism will no longer be able to provide legitimate grounds from which to construct a post-conflict identity. It is important to note, that no matter what the future holds, the question of identity, in the context of Syria, will continue to be one of absolute importance.

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APPENDIX A

Down with this regime and the Ba'ath Party

One... One... One
The Syrian nation is one
One... One... One
The Syrian nation is one
Down with down with this regime and down with the Ba'ath Party
Oh Bashar you coward, to hell with you and this reform
You are the enemy of the masses and enemy humanity
Down with down with this regime and down with the Ba'ath Party
Oh Bashar you are a murder, to hell with you and this reform
The Syrian nation will not rest until it gets freedom
Down with down with this regime and down with the Ba'ath Party
Dara'a, Hama, Dier al-Zour and our Sham is not for you to visit
And Idlib has implode and we swear to remove the criminals [from power]
Down with down with this regime and down with the Ba'ath Party
And Baniyas has made us proud and the Shabihha in Homs will be stepped on.
Lattaika is our backbone and our eyes are the people of the Jabil (Reference to Jabil al-Drouze)
Down with down with this regime and down with the Ba'ath Party
We are the Free Syrians and we want to remove you oh Bashar
Oh dear martyrs... rest assured
We will continue fill the squares with our blood
We will sacrifice everything, even our parents, and would never sell out our cause.
Down with down with this regime and down with the Ba'ath Party

يسقط النظام و حزب البعثية

واحد... واحد... واحد
الشعب السوري واحد
واحد... واحد... واحد
الشعب السوري واحد
يسقط يسقط النظام ويسقط حزب البعثية
ويا بشار ويا حقير تضرب انت وهالتغيير
ياعدو الجماهير وعدو الإنسانية
يسقط يسقط النظام ويسقط حزب البعثية
يا بشار ويا سفاح تضرب انت وهالإصلاح
الشعب السوري مايرتاح... وحتى ينال الحرية
يسقط يسقط النظام ويسقط حزب البعثية
درعا وحماة ودير الزور وشامنا ماعاد تزور
والله إدلب فارت فور ووالله لنشيل الحرامية
يسقط يسقط النظام ويسقط حزب البعثية
بانياس بترفع الراس والشبيحة بحمص بتنداس
اللاذنية هي الأساس وعيني على الجبلابية

يسقط يسقط النظام ويسقط حزب البعثية
ونحن السورية الأحرار وبدنا نشيلك يا بشار
ويا شهيد لا تهتم وبدنا نعبي الساحة دم
وينضحى بالأب والأم ومامنبيع التضية
يسقط يسقط النظام ويسقط حزب البعثية

Note: Translated by Nouredin Zaamout, from raw protest videos.⁵³⁸

⁵³⁸Kamal Abo al-Majd "Ahla Zajil Bisaout Qasoosh al-Thowrah al-Souriyah" Posted [July 21, 2011]. YouTube Video 5:20. Accessed [Apr 7, 2017].

APPENDIX B

Names of Weekly Friday Protests in Syria from (2011-2012)

1. Friday, 18 March 2011: **Uprising of dignity**
2. Friday, 25 March 2011: **Uprising of pride**
3. Friday, April 1, 2011: **Week of the martyrs**
4. Friday April 8, 2011: **Week of defiance/resilience**
5. Friday, April 15, 2011: **Friday of Determination/insistence**
6. Friday April 22, 2011: **Good Friday**
7. Friday April 29, 2011: **National anger**
8. Friday May 6, 2011: **The challenge**
9. Friday, May 13, 2011: **Syrian Women**
10. Friday, May 20, 2011: **“Azadi” (Kurdish word for freedom)**
11. Friday, May 27, 2011: **The Syrian Army, protectors of the country**
12. Friday, June 3, 2011: **Children of freedom**
13. Friday, June 10, 2011: **Tribes of freedom**
14. Friday, June 17, 2011: **The revolutionary Saleh al-Ali**
15. Friday June 24 2011: **The fall of legitimacy**
16. Friday, July 1, 2011: **Get out Assad**
17. Friday, July 8, 2011: **No dialogue, we demand freedom**
18. Friday, July 15, 2011: **Prisoners of war**
19. Friday, July 22, 2011: **The descendants of Khalid bin Al-Walid**
20. Friday, July 29, 2011: **Your silence is killing us**
21. Friday, August 5, 2011: **God with us**
22. Friday, 12 August 2011: **We will not kneel**
23. Friday, 19 August 2011: **The promise of victory**
24. Friday, August 26, 2011: **Patience and fortitude**
25. Friday, September 2, 2011: **Death or humiliation**
26. Friday, September 9, 2011: **International protection**
27. Friday, September 16, 2011: **We will not give up**
28. Friday, September 23, 2011: **The unity of the Opposition**
29. Friday, September 30, 2011: **Victory to the great Syria**
30. Friday, October 7, 2011: **The Syrian National Council represents me**
31. Friday, October 14, 2011: **The Free Syrian Army**
32. Friday, October 21, 2011: **The martyrs of Arab deadline**
33. Friday, October 28, 2011: **No-Fly Zone**
34. Friday, November 4, 2011: **God is great**
35. Friday, November 11, 2011: **Suspend the Regime’s membership in the Arab League**
36. Friday, November 18, 2011: **Demanding the expulsion of the regime’s ambassadors**
37. Friday, November 25, 2011: **FSA protect me**
38. Friday, December 2, 2011: **Demanding a no-fly buffer zone**
39. Friday, December 9, 2011: **National strike dignity**
40. Friday, December 16, 2011: **Arab League is killing us**
41. Friday, December 23, 2011: **Protocol of death**
42. Friday, December 30, 2011: **Crawling to the squares of freedom**

43. Friday, January 6, 2012: **If you Glorify God, He will grant you glory**
44. Friday, January 13, 2012: **Support the Free Syrian Army**
45. Friday, January 20, 2012: **The detainees of the revolution**
46. Friday, January 27, 2012: **The right of self-defence**
47. Friday, February 3, 2012: **Sorry Hama, forgive us**
48. Friday, February 10, 2012: **Russia kills our children**
49. Friday, February 17, 2012: **Popular Resistance**
50. Friday, February 24, 2012: **We will rise of Bab-Amr**
51. Friday, March 2 2012: **Arm the Free Syrian Army**
52. Friday, March 9, 2012: **The anniversary of the Kurdish uprising**
53. Friday, March 16, 2012: **Immediate military intervention**
54. Friday, March 23, 2012: **We are coming, Damascus**
55. Friday, March 30, 2012: **The Arabs and Muslims have failed us**
56. Friday, April 6, 2012: **Who arms an invaders, has invaded**
57. Friday, April 13, 2012: **Revolution for all Syrians**
58. Friday, April 20, 2012: **Victory will prevail and Assad will be defeated**
59. Friday, April 27, 2012: **The will of God has arrived, so do not rush it**
60. Friday, May 5, 2012: **Our resilience is our salvation**
61. Friday, May 11, 2012: **Victory from God, and conquest**
62. Friday, May 18, 2012: **Heroes of the University of Aleppo**
63. Friday, May 25, 2012: **Damascus our union is near**
64. Friday, June 1, 2012: **The Children of Houla ... flares of victory**
65. Friday, June 8, 2012: **Revolutionaries and merchants hand in hand until victory**
66. Friday, June 15, 2012: **Russia enemy of the Syrian people**
67. Friday, June 22, 2012: **If rulers are oppressive ... Where are the people?**
68. Friday, June 29, 2012: **Confidence in victory of God**
69. Friday, July 6, 2012: **People's Liberation War**
70. Friday, July 13, 2012: **Drop Kofi Annan, the custodian of Assad and Iran**
71. Friday, July 20, 2012: **Ramadan, victory will be written in Damascus**
72. Friday, July 27, 2012: **Friday uprising two capitals**
73. Friday, August 3, 2012: **Deir al-Zour victory is coming from the east**
74. Friday, August 10, 2012: **Equip us with anti-air missiles**
75. Friday, August 17, 2012: **Through the unity of our Free Army, victory will be achieved**
76. Friday, August 24, 2012: **Do not be upset Dara'a, God is with us**

أسماء مظاهرات الجمع الاسبوعية في سوريا (2011-2012)

- 1 - الجمعة 18 آذار 2011 الكرامة
- 2 - الجمعة 25 آذار 2011 العزة
- 3 - الجمعة 1 نيسان 2011 الشهداء
- 4 - الجمعة 8 نيسان 2011 الصمود
- 5 - الجمعة 15 نيسان 2011 الإصرار
- 6 - الجمعة 22 نيسان 2011 العظيمة
- 7 - الجمعة 29 نيسان 2011 الغضب
- 8 - الجمعة 6 أيار 2011 التحدي
- 9 - الجمعة 13 أيار 2011 الحرائر
- 10 - الجمعة 20 أيار 2011 آزادي
- 11 - الجمعة 27 أيار 2011 حماة الديار

- 12 - الجمعة 3 حزيران 2011 أطفال الحرية
- 13 - الجمعة 10 حزيران 2011 العشائر
- 14 - الجمعة 17 حزيران 2011 صالح العلي - الشرفاء
- 15 - الجمعة 24 حزيران 2011 سقوط الشرعية
- 16 - الجمعة 1 تموز 2011 ارحل
- 17 - الجمعة 8 تموز 2011 لا للحوار
- 18 - الجمعة 15 تموز 2011 أسرى الحرية
- 19 - الجمعة 22 تموز 2011 أحفاد خالد
- 20 - الجمعة 29 تموز 2011 صمتكم يقتلنا
- 21 - الجمعة 5 آب 2011 الله معنا
- 22 - الجمعة 12 آب 2011 لن نركع
- 23 - الجمعة 19 آب 2011 بشائر النصر
- 24 - الجمعة 26 آب 2011 الصبر والثبات
- 25 - الجمعة 2 أيلول 2011 الموت ولا المذلة
- 26 - الجمعة 9 أيلول 2011 الحماية الدولية
- 27 - الجمعة 16 أيلول 2011 ماضون
- 28 - الجمعة 23 أيلول 2011 وحدة المعارضة
- 29 - الجمعة 30 أيلول 2011 النصر لشامنا وبيمننا
- 30 - الجمعة 7 تشرين الأول 2011 المجلس الوطني يمثلني
- 31 - الجمعة 14 تشرين الأول 2011 أحرار الجيش
- 32 - الجمعة 21 تشرين الأول 2011 شهداء المهلة العربية
- 33 - الجمعة 28 تشرين الأول 2011 الحظر الجوي
- 34 - الجمعة 4 تشرين الثاني 2011 الله أكبر
- 35 - الجمعة 11 تشرين الثاني 2011 تجميد العضوية مطلبنا
- 36 - الجمعة 18 تشرين الثاني 2011 جمعة طرد السفراء
- 37 - الجمعة 25 تشرين الثاني 2011 الجيش الحر يحميننا
- 38 - الجمعة 2 كانون الأول 2011 المنطقة العازلة مطلبنا
- 39 - الجمعة 9 كانون الأول 2011 اضراب الكرامة
- 40 - الجمعة 16 كانون الأول 2011 الجامعة العربية تقتلنا
- 41 - الجمعة 23 كانون الأول 2011 بروتوكول الموت
- 42 - الجمعة 30 كانون الأول 2011 الزحف الى ساحات الحرية
- 43 - الجمعة 6 كانون الثاني 2012 إن تنصروا الله ينصركم
- 44 - الجمعة 13 كانون الثاني 2012 دعم الجيش السوري الحر
- 45 - الجمعة 20 كانون الثاني 2012 معتقلي الثورة
- 46 - الجمعة 27 كانون الثاني 2012 حق الدفاع عن النفس
- 47 - الجمعة 3 شباط 2012 عذرا حماة سامحيننا
- 48 - الجمعة 10 شباط 2012 النفي العام - روسيا تقتل أطفالنا
- 49 - الجمعة 17 شباط 2012 المقاومة الشعبية
- 50 - الجمعة 24 شباط 2012 سننتفض لأجلك بابا عمرو
- 51 - الجمعة 2 آذار 2012 تسليح الجيش الحر
- 52 - الجمعة 9 آذار 2012 ذكرى الانتفاضة الكردي
- 53 - الجمعة 16/3/2012 جمعة التدخل العسكري الفوري
- 54 - الجمعة 23/3/2012 جمعة قادمون يا دمشق
- 55 - الجمعة 30/3/2012 جمعة خذنا العرب والمسلمون
- 56 - الجمعة 6/4/2012 جمعة من جهاز غازياً فقد غزا
- 57 - الجمعة 13/4/2012 جمعة ثورة لكل السوريين
- 58 - الجمعة 20/4/2012 جمعة سننتصر ويهزم الاسد
- 59 - الجمعة 27/4/2012 جمعة اتى امر الله فلا تستعجلوه

- 60- الجمعة 2012/5/4 جمعة اخلاصنا خلاصنا
61- الجمعة 2012/5/11 جمعة نصر من الله وفتح قريب
62- الجمعة 2012/5/18 جمعة ابطال جامعة حلب
63- الجمعة 2012/5/25 جمعة دمشق موعدنا القريب
64- الجمعة 2012/6/1 جمعة أطفال الحولة...مشاعل النصر
65- الجمعة 2012/6/8 جمعة ثوار وتجار يدا بيد حتى الانتصار
66- الجمعة 2012/6/15 جمعة الاستعداد التام للتغير العام .. روسيا عدوة الشعب السوري
67- الجمعة 2012/6/22 جمعة إذا كان الحكام متخاذلين ... فأين الشعوب؟؟؟
68- الجمعة 2012/6/29 جمعة واثقون بنصر الله
69- الجمعة 2012/7/6 جمعة حرب التحرير الشعبية
70- الجمعة 2012/7/13 جمعة إسقاط عنان خادم الأسد و إيران (جمعة الغضب لشهداء التريمسة)
71- الجمعة 2012/7/20 جمعة رمضان النصر سيكتب في دمشق
72- الجمعة 2012/7/27 جمعة انتفاضة العاصمة
73- الجمعة 2012/8/3 جمعة دير الزور النصر قادم من الشرق
74- الجمعة 2012/8/10 جمعة سلحونا بمضادات الطيران
75- الجمعة 2012/8/17 جمعة بوحدة جيشنا الحر يتحقق النصر
76- الجمعة 2012/8/24 جمعة لا تحزني درعا إن الله معنا

Note: The names of the weekly protests for the year 2011. Retrieved from the Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook page.⁵³⁹ Translated by Nouredin Zaamout with some use of Google Translate.

⁵³⁹ Syrian Revolution Network "Syrian Revolution Network" <https://www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution/?fref=ts>

APPENDIX C

Most Common Protest Slogans during the Syrian Uprising

1. The people want to overthrow the regime
2. Syria is ours and not for the house of Assad
3. Get out, Get out
4. With God's will we will be victorious
5. What does not share what is in the law
6. One, one, one, the Syrian nation is on
7. Untruthful, untruthful, untruthful, the Syrian media is untruthful
8. We will remove the Baathists
9. We will not accept your rule forever, get out Bashar al-Assad
10. We don't like you, we don't like you, take your party and get out [of power]
11. To heaven, millions of martyrs will go
12. For God Sake oh Syrian, let's rise
13. Death over living in humiliation
14. Oh Bashar, you are the foreign agent. Take your party and leave us
15. Oh Dara'a, we are with you until death
16. Long live Syria, and down with Bashar al-Assad
17. We are not scared, we are not scared... God is with us
18. In strike, In strike, until the regime falls
19. Oh Hasoun, you are damned, the Syrian people are not traitors
20. Oh Buthaina Sha'ban, the Syrian people will not be humiliated
21. With our blood and soul, we sacrifice for you oh Hamza [al-Khatib]
22. Open your doors oh heaven, a martyr is coming to you from us
23. Oh dear martyr, rest in peace, we will carry on the struggle.
24. Hear us, hear us, oh son/daughter of my country, the mother of the martyr is calling the Shabiha killed my children
25. Hear us, hear us oh dear martyr, freedom is calling
26. Oh precious freedom where are you, where are you. They put the army between you and me
27. We don't want cheaper fuel, we want eternal freedom
28. Oh Syria, don't be afraid, Bashar will leave before Qaddafi
29. Written on our foreheads, we scarify our lives for our country

معظم شعارات الثورة السورية

1. الشعب يريد اسقاط النظام
2. سوريا لنا وما هي لبيت الأسد
3. ارحل ارحل هو هو... ارحل ارحل هو هو
4. هي يالله وهي يالله منصورين بعون الله
5. اللي ما بيشارك ما في ناموس
6. واحد واحد واحد الشعب السوري واحد

7. كاذب كاذب كاذب الإعلام السوري كاذب
8. بدنا نشيل البعثية
9. ما في للأبد ما في للأبد ... ارحل ارحل يا بشار الاسد
10. ما منحك ما منحك ارحل عنا انت وحزبك
11. عالجنة رايجين شهداء بالملايين
12. من شان الله يا سوري يلا يلا
13. الموت ولا المذلة
14. يابشار يا مندرس ارحل انت وحزب البعث
15. يا درعا حنا معاكي للموت
16. عاشت سوريا ويسقط بشار الاسد
17. مش خايفين مش خايفين الله معنا
18. اعتصام اعتصام حتى يسقط النظام
19. يا حسون يا ملعون الشعب السوري ما بيخون
20. يا بثينة يا شعبان الشعب السوري ما بينهان
21. بالروح بالدم نفديك يا حمزة
22. فتحي بوابك يا جنة جاكى شهيد من عنا
23. يا شهيد نام وارتاح والله لنكمل كفاح
24. اسمع اسمع يا بن بلادي ام الشهيد عم بتنادي الشبيحة قتلوا ولادي
25. اسمع اسمع يا شهيد الحرية عم بتنادي
26. يا حرية وينيك وينيك حطوا الجيش بيني وبينك
27. ما بدنا يرخص مازوت بدنا الحرية حتى الموت
28. يا سوريا لا تخافي الأسد قبل القذافي
29. مكتوب على جباهنا نفدي الوطن بأرواحنا

This list was accumulated through careful examination of over one hundred protest videos, posted on the Syria Revolution 2011 Facebook page and using the Syrian Free Press list of “most popular slogans in the Syrian Revolution.”⁵⁴⁰

⁵⁴⁰ Syrian Revolution Network “Syrian Revolution Network” *Syrian Revolution Network Facebook*, accessed [May 10, 2017] and Syrian Free Press “Ajmal Hotafat al-Mozahrrat fi al-Thowra al-Souriya” *Syrian Free Press Facebook page*, June 7, 2011.